



Glad Tidings

*Worship resources for the creative church
Advent / Christmastide 2013*

Sacred Seasons, a series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis,
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Sacred Seasons:



Worship Tools with an Attitude—Toward Justice, Peace & Food Security for All of God's People.

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Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates

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art by Rebecca S. Ward

to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. For 22 years, the group has sought 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

The Seeds of Hope ministry is housed by the community of faith at Seventh and James Baptist Church. The mailing address is: 602 James; Waco, TX 76706; Phone: 254/755-7745; Fax: 254/753-1909; E-mail: seedseditor@clearwire.net. Web address: www.seedspublishers.org. Copyright © 2013.

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A Word about This Packet

The theme of this packet, the 16th Seeds of Hope Advent/Christmastide worship packet, is "Glad Tidings," inspired by a Ken Sehested poem. (See page 5.) We have also used some excerpts from another Sehested poem as meditations for the liturgy pages.

We are grateful for Ken's continued generosity with his prophetic writings. (Some of you will remember that Ken was one of the original Seeds editors, back in Decatur, GA.)

If you like what you have read in our pages, you might be interested in his book, *In the Land of the Living: Prayers Personal and Public*. His email address is ken@circleofmercy.org.

You will also find writings in this packet from two other insightful and generous ministers. We have included a sermon and a meditation by Doug Donley, pastor of the University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. He has also contributed a number of insightful sermons and meditations to *Sacred Seasons* over the years.

The other is James Schwarzlose, a UCC minister who lives and works in the Atlanta, GA, area. James is a professed member of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans. Both of these men have worked hard in the struggle for justice for all people.

Our cover art is by Sally Lynn Askins, who also created four new angels for the weeks in Advent, which she accomplished in the middle of designing costumes for a major Baylor Theatre production. (All four of the new angels are on page 20. The ones on page 18 and 27 are from previous Advent sets by Sally.)

We are grateful for the almost 100 pieces of art she has designed for Seeds over the past 15 years. She also serves on the Council of Stewards.

We are also delighted to introduce the art of Jesse Manning, who is a junior at the Axtell/Bruceville-Eddy Learning Center in Waco and a member of the Seventh & James Baptist Church youth group.

We discovered Jesse's talent when he drew something to help promote the Heart of Texas CROP Hunger Walk, and he created the pieces you see here (pages 19, 22 and 24) in a very short time. We look forward to seeing more of his work in the upcoming Lenten packet.



We are deeply grateful for all of you who subscribe to *Sacred Seasons*, and who make use of these gifts in your worship and work. We are also grateful for the many people who continue to contribute their work and ideas to our worship resources.

We are once again grateful to Deborah Harris, also a member of the Council of Stewards, who proofreads almost everything that comes out of the Seeds office, and whose prayer you will find on page 28. Deborah is an acclaimed freelance writer and lyricist.

As always, we want you to feel free to play around with these liturgies and services, and adapt them to your congregation's needs and resources. If you come up with something creative and different, we would love to hear about it.

The contents of this packet are your congregation's to use freely and share with others as the need arises. We really do pray that our materials, and this packet in particular, will help you and your congregation to observe a holy and meaningful Advent and Christmastide.

—Gratefully,
The Seeds Staff and Council of Stewards

Glad Tidings

by Ken Sehested

Sisters and Brothers,
bend an ear
to the singing of angels.

Not that of seasonal
carolers who pause
at lace-curtained window::
offering familiar and favorite
tunes in delicious harmony
and frosted breath;
providing splendid distraction
from the agonized arias of the innocent.

But of angels, who,
in the midst of
Caesar's endless census,
erupt from darkest eclipse
with unnerving news—
startling—
interrupting
private patterns and sanctioned order
with the disruptive announcement
of a New Order: COMING SOON
TO A NEIGHBORHOOD
NEAR YOU!—
unsettling keepers of every flock
with the overture
of swaddling-wrapped revolt:
*Behold the light
for those who dwell
in the shadow of death!*

Those for whom
this "world" is "home"
will take offense
at the herald announcing
this manger marquee.
As with the shepherds,
they will "wonder" at your tale.

But fear not, for
these are glad tidings.
Blend your voices
with the heavenly chorus,
singing glory, and peace,
to God, and for the earth.

Sisters and Brothers,
Rejoice! For
unto us a child

art by Sally Lynn Askins

—Ken Sehested is copastor of the Circle of Mercy in Asheville, NC.
His writings have added grace and audacity to Seeds worship materials for many years.

Brainstorming for Advent



A Healing Tree

Almost all of us have experienced loss or illness during the past year, and Advent is often seen as a season in which to seek healing. Here's an idea for a time of prayer for peace and healing.

Lead your congregation or group in putting up a tree of paper cranes. Find a tree branch or a small tree and place it, upright, in the worship area. You might consider using a leafless branch or tree, and use colorful paper for the cranes. The heavier Christmas wrapping paper would work. You will need enough paper to make a crane for everyone in the congregation.

Next, find a congregant who knows how to fold paper cranes, or get hold of an origami book that gives instructions. Hold a folding party on a Saturday afternoon or after church on Wednesday evening. (This would also be a good activity for youth.)

Make sure that the folding party makes enough cranes for every worshiper to hold one. Attach string, wire, an ornament hanger or brightly colored ribbon to each one so that they can hang from the tree branches. Pass the cranes out as worshipers enter on the first Sunday of Advent. (It might add an extra dimension for the youth and/or children to meet the worshipers at the doors with the cranes.)

If your congregants do not know the story about Sadako Sasaki and the thousand cranes, share it briefly with them with a word about healing.*

Ask the people to come forward with the cranes during a hymn. (The lessons and hymns on page 7 incorporate this act of worship.) Ask the worshipers to place their cranes on the tree with a specific prayer for peace or healing. If it is a more informal time, you might invite a few individuals to share stories about their prayers.

Another idea, for a smaller group, is to find foldable paper that can be used for writing. Gather the group around a table and ask them to write on the squares of paper the name of a person or an area that

needs healing in their lives—or in the world. Then fold the squares into cranes and hang them on the tree as a sign of hope.

Angels on the Altar

With all of our traditional Advent decorations, we may not need much “window dressing” to go along with these readings and activities. But some “bringing them to their senses” is important.

John Ballenger—a longstanding creative consultant for Seeds—suggests a visual aid in which you collect objects that are often associated with angels and display them across the altar area.

You could bring harps, lutes, trumpets, and other musical instruments and place them across the front of your sanctuary. To remind the congregation of the “good news to the poor,” intersperse grocery bags with canned food, blankets, winter coats, etc.

Another display idea would be to gather (with your congregation’s help) all kinds of carvings and pictures of angels. It would be good to be able to represent different nationalities and different settings with these angels—to show visually that the messengers of God do not belong to any specific nation or ethnic group.

You could ask people to bring angels from their nativity sets or Christmas trees—or perhaps any representation of an angel that is special to them. Ask them to bring these to an early Advent service, and work into the service a time in which people bring them to the altar.

(Encourage them to think outside the box on this; someone may have a drawing he or she made as a child, or that a child made for him or her. Someone’s angel may be threadbare or missing a wing. Emphasize the fact that this should not deter them from bringing it.)

Leave the angels there until after Christmas. Schedule different times during the season for people to share stories about why these “angels” are meaningful. If you have congregants who are good at compiling written pieces, you might consider putting together a booklet of these stories, with photos of the various angels. —lkc

*Sadako was the girl from Hiroshima who became ill as a result of radiation from the atomic bomb that was dropped on her city. Because of an old story about the healing power of a thousand paper cranes, she began making them while she was in a nursing home. However, she died before she could make all of them. Her friends and family finished making them and buried them with her in 1955. Since then, paper cranes have become a sign of peace and healing all over the world. (See *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1997.)

Week One: Tidings of Hope



art by Sally Lynn Askins

*To the deafening and perilous
city streets,
To the scorched and parched
fields of famine,
Come, Emmanuel,
Bring us the hope of abundance.
-Katie Cook*

Tidings of Hope

Lessons & Hymns for the First Sunday in Advent

Lighting of the First Candle

*Reading from
the Prophets*
Isaiah 2:1-5

Meditation

Come, angelic envoys,
With renewed
announcement of
glory (to God) and
peace (for the earth).
Your people long for
Messiah's rejoinder,
through wombs made
welcome
to the news of reversal:
the annulment of enmity
and the Advent of promise.
—Ken Sehested, "Advent Longings"

Hymn

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"
Text: Charles Wesley, 1707-1788
Music: Rowland H. Pritchard;
harmony from *The English Hymnal*
Tune: HYFRYDOL
Chalice Hymnal #125

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 122

Meditation

We are God's creative works in process. God
alone knows what we shall become. What
might God have in store in the fullness of our



time? In the beginning,
God created Light. In
Mary, God became flesh.
What will God become
in us? Is there room in
us for God's seed to take
root and grow? God has
visited us with grace and
favor. Are we ready to
become Light?
—Thomas Hoffman, *A
Child in Winter*

Epistle Reading
Romans 13:8-14

Hymn

"Comfort, Comfort
You My People"
Text: Johannes G.

Olearius, 1671; tr. Catherine Winkworth,
1863, alt.

Music: Louis Bourgeois, 1551;
harm. Claude Goudimel, 1564

Tune: GENEVA
Chalice Hymnal #122

Offering of Peace Cranes

During this hymn, invite the worshipers to
bring their peace cranes and hang them on the
tree you have prepared for them. (See page for
instructions and ideas.)

Blessing of Peace Crane Offerings

Gospel Reading
Matthew 24: 36-44

Week Two: Tidings of Peace



*Where the valleys are so low
And the mountains so high,
Where oppressor and oppressed
Writhe in brokenness,
Come, Prince of Peace,
Bring healing in your wings.
-Katie Cook*

Tidings of Peace

Lessons & Hymns for the Second Sunday in Advent

Lighting of the First & Second Candles

Reading from the Prophets & Choral Response

"The Peaceful Realm"

Text: Isaiah 11:1-6, 8-9;

Response: German carol (15th century)

Tr. Theodore Baker, 1894

Music: Traditional Melody;

arr. Michael Praetorius, 1609

Chalice Hymnal #126

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72 or 72:1-8

Meditation

Oh Wondrous One,
Who rides the skies

And consorts with the earth—

Haunting the heavens,
Bounding mere mortals

With the expectation of ecstasy—

Come and rouse hungry hearts

Wandering this famined land

With the aroma of your presence.

—Ken Sehested,

"Advent Longings"

Epistle Reading

Romans 15:4-13

Meditation

From Jesse's ancient stump

Raise again a voice consonant

With hope's manger-laid disclosure,

Of delight with wolf and lamb alike,

And children marshalling the cavalcade

astride the Lion of Judah.

—Ken Sehested, "Advent
Longings"

Hymn

"People, Look East"

Text: Eleanor Farjeon, 1928

Music: Traditional French
carol,

harm. Martin Shaw, 1928

Tune: BESANÇON

Chalice Hymnal #142

Gospel Reading

Matthew 3:1-12



art by Jesse Manning

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings



It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race!

To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being a member of a race in which God became incarnate.

As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

—Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Advent is the perfect time to clear and prepare the Way. Advent is a winter training camp for those who desire peace. By reflection and prayer, by reading and meditation, we can make our hearts a place where a blessing of peace would desire to abide and where the birth of the Prince of Peace might take place.

Daily we can make an Advent examination. Are there any feelings of discrimination toward race, sex or religion? Is there a lingering resentment, an unforgiven injury living in our hearts? Do we look down upon others of lesser social standing or educational achievement?

Are we generous with the gifts that have been given to us, seeing ourselves as their stewards and not their owners? Are we reverent of others, their ideas and needs, and of creation? These and other questions become Advent lights by which we may search the deep, dark corners of our hearts.

—Edward Hayes, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*

During Advent, opportunities for works of charity abound, calling out for Christians from every side: a sack of food for a needy family, money dropped in a Salvation Army kettle, a donation to an Indian school, a toy for Toys-for-Tots, etc. Unfortunately, these works of charity so easily can assuage the Christian conscience, while doing nothing to bring about a solution to the root causes of the problem.

Works of justice, on the other hand, follow the road less traveled of Advent's hope to pursue solutions for difficult problems. Hope comes through works of justice rather than simply performing works of charity.

—Fr. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR

Truly wondrous

is the whole chronicle of the nativity.
For this day the ancient slavery is ended,
the devil confounded,
the demons take to flight,
the power of death is broken.

For this day paradise is unlocked,
the curse is taken away,
sin is removed,
error driven out,

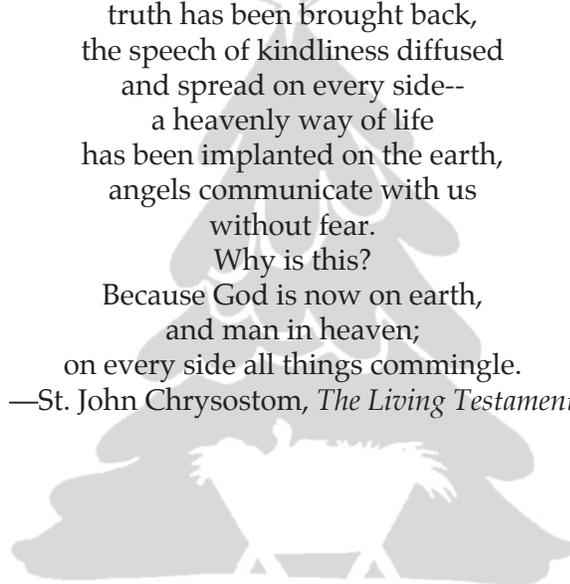
truth has been brought back,
the speech of kindness diffused
and spread on every side--
a heavenly way of life

has been implanted on the earth,
angels communicate with us
without fear.
Why is this?

Because God is now on earth,
and man in heaven;

on every side all things commingle.

—St. John Chrysostom, *The Living Testament*



Week Three: Tidings of Joy



art by Sally Lynn Askins

*Among the destitute,
Among the privileged,
Among the old and the young,
Among the male and the female,
Among people of all nations,
Come, Everlasting One,
and bring us joy.
-Katie Cook*

Tidings of Joy

Lessons & Hymns for the Third Sunday in Advent

*Lighting of the First, Second
& Third Candles*

Reading from the Prophets
Isaiah 35:1-10

Meditation

Joy is still present when life is hard. Christ comes for grieving people with broken homes and broken hearts. Christmas is the promise that God cares for children who hunger for food, the lonely who hunger for love, and all who hunger for peace. The word becomes flesh wherever there is sadness, fear or emptiness. God comes to be with us in our dark valleys, bind our broken hearts, and carry us when we're tired and weary.

—Brett Younger, "The Gift of Joy" (Sacred Seasons, Advent 2008: Extravagant Love)

Hymn

"Prepare the Royal Highway"

Text: Mikael Franzén;

transl. Philip M. Young, 2005 (Isa. 40:3-4)

Music: Swedish melody, 17th century;

harm. David W. Music, 1998

Tune: Bereden Väg För Herran

Celebrating Grace #95

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 146
or 146:4-9

Meditation

No matter how dark it seems, there is light. No matter how hurt we are, there is healing. No matter how abandoned we feel, there is someone there. Sorrow may come, but it cannot defeat God's joy. Sadness may bring tears, but Christ brings hope.

—Brett Younger, "The Gift of Joy" (Sacred Seasons, Advent 2008: Extravagant Love)

Epistle Reading

James 5:7-10

Hymn

"Now the Heavens Start to Whisper"

Text: Mary Louise Bringle, 2005

Music: Alexander Johnson's

Tennessee Harmony, 1818;

harm. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 1978

Tune: Jefferson, Meter: 8.7.8.7 D

Celebrating Grace #86

Gospel Reading

Matthew 11:2-11



Rivers of Joy

An Advent Sermon

by Douglas M. Donley

Baruch 5:1-9

art by Helen Siegl



O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy; O tidings of comfort and joy. That's a refrain we sing throughout the season as we prepare for Christmas. We sing for and we long for tidings of comfort and joy.

We think of the joy of this newborn baby born in a manger. We think of the joy on children's faces when they open their gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning.

We think of the smells of the holiday feast wafting through the house and getting all stuck in the upholstery so we can enjoy it for days to come. We remember those gone past with each ornament hung on the tree. We remember the faces and the good feelings that surround the hearth and the home at Christmas.

And we need that Christmas joy. We need that joy to flow like a river and wash over us. We need it in order to face the next 11 months.

For some of us the joy comes naturally. It comes as we make plans, as we anticipate time with family and friends, as we gently place packages under the tree. We feel it in our bones when the music plays, especially those carols that sing of Joy to the World. And we get all happy and giddy, like we are kids again.

The joy of Christmas does that to us. It suspends reality and reminds us of what is good and loving and hopeful and peaceful. And we have tidings of comfort and joy. It's wonderful.

This works for a lot of us. And yet, for others of us, this joy, this happiness, this hopefulness is too much for us to take. Maybe we are not wired to be joyful people.

Maybe there has been some kind of trauma that makes this Christmas especially challenging: we're without

a job, our finances are tight, we have lost someone close to us and we can't face it alone. A maudlin blue Christmas is more a reality than the joy of a white Christmas.

If we are not happy all the time and we dare let down our guard and say how we really feel, we get accused of being a Scrooge. This compulsory happiness keeps as many people away from church during the holiday season as it attracts.

You know, the commercial hijacking of Christmas doesn't really help. It might bring temporary happiness, along with debt and a sense of appreciation, but I'm not convinced it brings joy.

There's a difference, you know, between happiness and joy.

Happiness is a reaction to a specific event or series of events. It's a mood or an emotion. But it's not something that sustains.

Joy is a deeper feeling. It's something that comes from a wellspring of commitment, on the other side of trials, tribulations and terror. It's what sustains us when all hell is breaking loose. It's a vision for and connection to that power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity. Joy is not always happy, but it does see where we will go and it moves forward in a positive light.

Sisters and brothers, if we are to truly be people of joy, maybe we can bring joy to other people, not because we sing about it or because we have the surface happiness of the holiday season on our faces.

Think about what is a temporary happiness and what is a joy.

Happiness is piles of gift wrap on Christmas morning.

Joy is in remembering the story and believing that God gives you a gift each Christmas—and that gift taking hold of you and pointing you in a whole new direction.

Happiness is a really good and uplifting worship service, complete with bells and Christmas carols and even some gifts at the altar.

Joy is making a commitment to being a disciple of Jesus instead of simply an admirer.

Happiness is an electoral victory.

Joy is a sense that we are moving in the right direction and are making real progress.

Happiness is winning a ball game.

Joy is helping someone grow into a responsible person who can handle adversity with maturity and determination.

Happiness is a good diagnosis.

Joy is looking at the preciousness of life and making a commitment to making every moment count.

Happiness is getting a good grade.

Joy is a sense of satisfaction and confidence that spurs you on to continue to do good things.

Happiness is a good performance review.

Joy is a feeling of purpose behind and undergirding our work.

Happiness is a moment of fun or a good laugh.

Joy is a lightness of being that sees the world as a place of opportunity as opposed to simply a place of pain.

Happiness is a good holiday party.

Joy is long-term recovery where each relationship and encounter is healthy and feeds your sense of who God wants you to be.

I fear that we too often settle for fleeting surface happiness, when what we really need is joy. We need that sense of centeredness that comes from knowing who we are, what we are here for and where we are going. And when we can share all of that commitment and focus with others, like we seek to do in church, then we have some real opportunities for joy.

Today's scripture reading comes from the book of Baruch. This inter-testamental book was written to explain the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people as God's judgment on the people for their faithlessness and idolatry. Such a judgment did not elicit joy from the people.

And yet, the promise of God is that one action is never the final word. We always have the ability to make a new choice to turn our lives around to the way God would have us lead our lives. We get second, third and hundredth chances in God's economy.

Baruch 5 reminds the people of the joy that comes when they refocus their lives upon God's true work in the world. This work is characterized by justice, mercy and peace:

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on the beauty of the glory of God. Put on the robe of justice that comes from God, and only then are you worthy to put on the crown of the glory of God.

This means making the right choices. This means surrounding yourself with people who want the best for you and can bring the best out of you. This means letting mercy and justice and peace be your methods. And making righteousness your game plan.

When you do this, leveling the playing field for all people (symbolized by mountains and valleys disappearing and crooked streets made straight),

then you will be given a new name: "Justice-laden Peace, Godly Glory." And God will lead the people with joy. That's what real joy is about.

A few years ago, during Advent, a couple dozen sacred-harp singers gathered to sing for Charlie, who had lost his wife, Cindy, to cancer a couple of weeks before. We sang loud and long, until our throats gave out.

We sang in celebration of her life. We sang in support of Charlie. We sang to hold each other up. We sang, picturing in our mind's eyes her singing with us, as she had done for twenty-something years.

We pictured her singing on the other side of the veil with the angel choir. We sang about death and we sang about life. Charlie said he felt her there in the room.

He said he felt a confidence that, not only was she well taken care of in heaven, but that he was well taken care of here on earth. That sounds a bit like heaven to me too.

As we left that house that night, I had the sense that God had visited that room. I felt that God-with-us, Emmanuel, had shown up. And through the tears and the singing and the cacophony, there was joy.

Sisters and brothers, if we are to truly be people of joy, maybe we can bring joy to other people, not because we sing about it or because we have the surface happiness of the holiday season on our faces (along with cookie crumbs).

We can bring joy because we are reminded of who we are. We are reminded of whose we are. We are

reminded of our purpose in this world. And joy will flow out of us like a river.

And if we let it, it will point us not only to a manger scene, but also to a life sustained by God-with-us, Emmanuel. And whenever we feel like we're spiraling down to despair, maybe we'll remember that at the deepest valley there is a river.

*Take off the garment of your
sorrow and affliction,
O Jerusalem,*

and put on for ever the beauty
of the glory from God.

Put on the robe of the righteousness
that comes from God;

put on your head the diadem
of the glory of the Everlasting;

for God will show your splendour
everywhere under heaven.

For God will give you evermore the name,
"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look towards the east, and see your children

gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,

rejoicing that God has remembered them.

For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;

but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

For God has ordered that every high mountain
and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.

The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.

For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory, with the mercy and
righteousness that come from him.

—*Baruch 5:1-9 (Anglicized edition)*

The river started in Eden. It has merged with other rivers that we are bold to name Peace, Justice, Compassion, Remembrance. Even our own tears have danced on the waters. And if we see it, it's also a river of joy. For we never enter that river alone.

The river extends all over the world.

It will awaken our most maudlin of attitudes.

It will warm the cold and clothe the naked.

It will feed the hungry.

It will comfort the afflicted.

It will enter our hearts, if we let it.

It will hold us, sustain us and embolden us.

And, when the music plays, it will wash over us again and remind us to commit ourselves once again to the vision God has put onto our hearts. And it will be good.

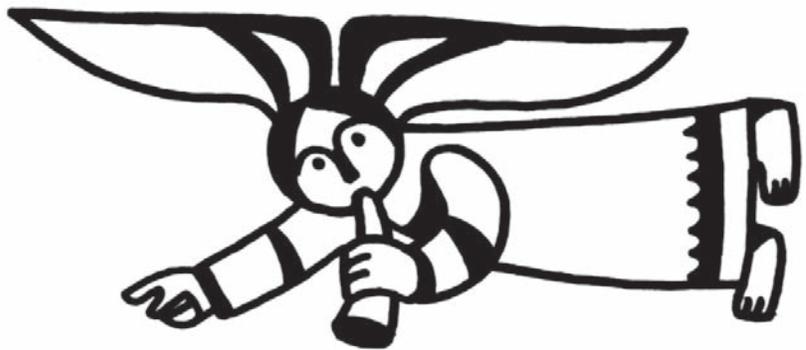
—Doug Donley is the pastor of University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. His words have graced the pages of Sacred Seasons many times.

The Mystery of Christmas

We struggle to describe the mystery of Christmas. We say God came. What came? Who came? There is no adequate name for God, only hints of God's Being, God's Reality. We say Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. All hint at something ineffable, beyond, infinite—that which we cannot grasp and know but have received intimations of, and a few times have even experienced directly.

This Beyond reality, whatever name and other descriptors we give it, is Love. We know it is Love because it wants to be close to us—to be deeply connected with all that has been created. The infinite galaxies, the endlessly fascinating space we call Earth, all the multiple expressions of Life, including what we call human life, was brought into being because that is what Love does. It is the nature of Love to beget, to become, to bring together.

Several minutes ago (or in human time, about 2,000 years) God said, "Love compels me to get closer. I must be amongst this life I've created and loved from the beginning. I must find a way to be even more deeply connected and let my people know me and enter more deeply into their true nature, which is deeper and deeper unity with one another. They are by nature ONE. I must let



art by Getrud Nelson

them know." The awesome claim of Christmas is that this ineffable Reality that brought it all into being wanted to be more deeply involved with the created, wanted to be with us, be one of us.

"I will make a new covenant with my people. I will remove the heart of stone that shuns this closeness, and I will replace it with a heart of flesh which wants no separateness. I will come into their midst, assuming total vulnerability alongside them and will establish this new covenant of union. Together my people and I will live in this ecstatic union and draw all creation toward the joy of it."

That's the culmination of the work of the Babe in Bethlehem's manger. Joyful union of all creation with the God of our beginning.

—From a sermon by the late N. Gordon Cosby, posted in *Inward/Outward* (inwardoutward.org).

Week Four: Tidings of Love



art by Sally Lynn Askins

*Among those who mistrust each other,
Those who hate each other,
Among us who do not know the way
Out of the chaos of our own making,
Come, Lord Jesus,
And teach us how to love.
-Katie Cook*

Tidings of Love

Lessons & Hymns for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Lighting of the Four Candles

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 7:10-16

Meditation

Oh, Majestic One,
whose passion spills
into flesh and blood,
set our hearts on the edge of our seats,
shivering in hope, longing,
longing for the age
when bitter memory
dissolves into magnificat.
—Ken Sehested, “Advent Longings”

Hymn

“All Earth is Waiting”

Text: Alberto Taulé, 1972;

tr. Gertruce C. Suppe, 1987, alt.

Music: Alberto Taulé, 1972;

harm. Skinner Chávez-Melo, 1988

Tune: TAULÉ

Chalice Hymnal #139

Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

Meditation

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

Epistle Reading

Romans 1:1-7

Hymn

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”

Text: Liturgy of St. James, (4th Century),

Adapted by Gerard Moultrie, 1864;

Music: 17th-century French;

harm. from the English Hymnal, 1906

Tune: PICARDY

Chalice Hymnal #124

Gospel Reading

Matthew 1:18-25



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Second Thoughts & Miracles

by James Schwarzlose, OEF

"...They laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7b)

Second thoughts can open the gate to generosity and miracles. Many who tell the Christmas story expand upon Joseph's search for shelter for the Holy Family-to-be.

Often the innkeeper is portrayed as first proclaiming, "There is no room!" and then having second thoughts: "Oh, but there is the stable out back." It was enough! Joseph and Mary gave thanks, and settled into the rude space in which the Star Child was born.

I saw similar, yet more ordinary, second thoughts in action in a Wal-Mart parking lot one cold day. A Romanian refugee was going from shopper to shopper, trailed by her thin daughter, asking each of us for help—using broken English and a handwritten card. She was without work; her refugee relief had long expired, but state aid had yet to come through.

She was not the first to seek help in this manner; but then, I am sure that Joseph and Mary were not the first to come to the innkeeper's door with pleas of extreme need.

At first the cynic in me took hold as it had before: I could not help everyone like this woman; besides, who knew if she were telling the truth! So she moved on to another man filling his truck with plastic bags; he also turned her away.

But then I had second thoughts! Of course I could help this one person! It may or may not have been a scam this time, but I, who work with folks such as her, knew all too well that there are many for whom her predicament is all too real and dire.

So I went to her and her daughter, and gave her what was barely enough for a meal for one of them! I hadn't made it back to my car with her expression of gratitude

when I noticed two other people stirring.

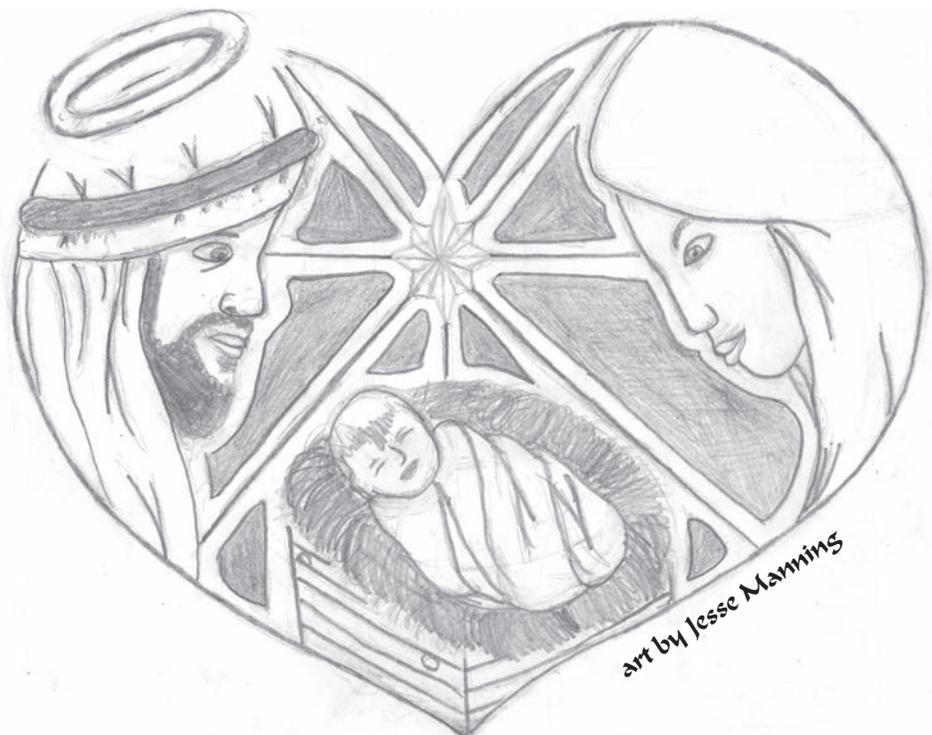
The other man must have had the same thoughts and crossed the parking lot to offer her some aid. Then a woman came from another direction seemingly motivated with her second thoughts as well.

Altogether, our pooled sharing was probably enough to feed the refugee family for a day. What was more remarkable to me, however, was how one second thought led to another...and another.

We, in this affluent nation—even in a time of economic downturn—are like the innkeeper who had extra resources to offer. We can be, like the innkeeper, easily overwhelmed with the appeals for help; it may seem like too much with which to cope!

Yet, second, and even third, thoughts can expand our possibility thinking: "Oh yes, there is that space out back." Such thinking can make room for small miracles to be born.

—James Schwarzlose is a United Church of Christ minister in Atlanta, GA. He served three decades as pastor and community advocate and, currently, works as a teacher and mentor to refugees and immigrants.



Glad Tidings

art by Sally Lynn Askins





Glad Tidings

Lessons & Hymns for Christmas Eve

Meditation of Preparation

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. I would be silent now, Lord, and expectant...that I may receive the gift I need, so I may become the gift others need.

—Ted Loder

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 9:2-7

Meditation

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2). The message of the prophet is a message for the people, a message sent into the camps of the exiled, and into the slums of the poor. It is a word against the captains of the arms industry and the fanatics of power. If we really understood what it means, it bursts the bonds of Sunday worship. For if this message really lays hold of us, it leads us to Jesus the liberator, and to the people who live in darkness and who are waiting for him--and for us.

—Jurgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless*

Lighting of the Peace Candle

Hymn

“The People Who in Darkness Walked”

Text: David W. Music, 1998 (Isaiah 9:2, 6-7)

Music: Swedish melody, 17th century; harm. David W. Music, 1998

Tune: BEREDEN VÄG FÖR HERRAN

Celebrating Grace #84

Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 96

Hymn

“Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming”

Text: 15th cent. German;

tr. Theodore Baker

Music: Alte Catholische Geistliche Kirchengesang, 1599;

harm. Michael Praetorius, 1609

Tune: ES IST EIN ROS

Chalice Hymnal #160

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Meditation

Build a ring of quiet around Christmas Eve. Tread softly, give it space. Listen, watch, observe. Christmas is living and many-layered. It is peace; yet it is extreme crisis as reflected in the gospel stories of King Herod's massacre of the children of Bethlehem. Christmas is crisis, but in the darkest hour of the darkest night, the tide begins to turn. Christmas Eve is suspense: “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” A miracle is happening and it includes us. It is just downstairs, by the tree, by the fire, outside your door, in the holy darkness.

—Nikki Simpson, from a Seventh & James meditation booklet

First Gospel Reading

John 1:1-14

Lighting of the Love Candle

Meditation

The Christ Candle is burning;
the hour draws near;
the stillness of the watchful night
comes on us.

Hush! No idle words!

No tinkling sound of temple or bazaar!

Only deep silence!

Only the pregnant plentitude of mystery!

We stand with open mouths.

We cannot fathom how the Word again is
flesh and dwells among us.
—C. W. (Wally) Christian, “Eve of Nativity”

Second Gospel Reading

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Lighting of the Christ Candle

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

Song for Bethlehem

by James Schwarzlose, OEF

Text: Micah 5:2

Bethlehem of Ephrathah!
You lie in peace beneath the stars.
But do you see the light of the Star of Peace
in your midst?

From you shall come forth for God
The Child of that Star—the one
in whom all war shall cease.

Do you see what Micah foresaw?
Or do you, like me, lie in half-belief,
seeing and yet not seeing
What God Almighty is doing
before our eyes?

And what is it that Micah, the shepherds
and the Magi saw
That we do not?

Lord God, open our eyes that we—
every grown, lost, sad child—
May see the miracle gleam in the darkness.

Come O Micah, come again
and shake us loose
From our desire for more—
Though we do not know “more” of what.
Turn our eyes toward wisdom and faith that we,
In this very moment, may see
The holy, sleeping joy that lies in our midst.
Amen.

—James Schwarzlose is a United Church of Christ minister in Atlanta, GA. He has served three decades as pastor and community advocate and, currently, works as a teacher and mentor to refugees and immigrants. He is also a professed member of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans.

art by Jesse Manning

Joseph, the Silent Partner A Christmas Eve Reflection

by Rev. Douglas M. Donley

Here we are, on Christmas Eve. The tree is decorated. The candles are lit. We are inside. We sing our favorite carols. We enjoy being around family and friends. We remember the family and friends who are not here and we are mystically connected to them in Spirit.

Children are in costume. The presents are wrapped. The Swedish meatballs are cooked, the

All of this leads to Mary, who was great with child by extraordinary means, had no lineage that we know of and was ready, willing and able to set in motion the in-breaking of God once again into a sin-sick world.

lefse [Norwegian flatbread] is rolled out, the eggnog is ready, the cookies are baked. Everything seems to be right.

And, just like every year, we see the manger scene. We're transported back to that night when a homeless couple smuggles God into the world. And for a moment we see with new eyes.

And, each year, we remember those who don't always get a lot of attention. Shepherds speak to angels instead of sheep. Farmhands are welcomed to see a royal birth. And, before long, the holy family will need to flee for its very life.

What an odd and unsettling story to inspire so much calm and good feelings.

But there is one character who says nothing throughout the story. Mary gets her Magnificat. The prophets get to prophesy. The Magi get to talk with

Herod and bring gifts. The shepherds get to talk to angels and the angels talk to everyone. Even the animals get to sing a Christmas carol.

But there is a silent partner in all of this. It's Joseph. Christmas carols about Joseph are few and far between. He's the ultimate silent partner, watching from a distance, a part of the story but without much of a say in the matter. What must Joseph have been thinking? He never speaks throughout scripture. In the few times he is mentioned, Mary is the one who speaks, or Jesus or an angel, but never Joseph. He's the silent partner.

Did he simply accept what was going on around him? Is he the strong, silent type? This was supposed to be a story about Joseph, or at least that's what we think of when we read the first 17 verses of Matthew's gospel. The line of generations and "begats" back to Abraham is to be fulfilled in Joseph's son.

Fourteen generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from the first king, David, to the last king, Hezekiah, and the exile in Babylon. And then 14 generations from the exile until the Messiah. It was supposed to be Joseph's son. He was supposed to be the father of the next person in line.

But the pattern is broken. There are only 13 generations—and the child to be born is not Joseph's.

With all of that weighty lineage behind him and all of the pressure of generations upon him, of course he sought to end the marriage and find a new mother for his child. It would be the right thing to do. It would preserve the symmetry of the lineage. It would make Joseph's son a pure-blood.

We know what happened. An angel intervened and told Joseph to break with tradition and support Mary. But was he to break with tradition, or keep it? The genealogy of Joseph includes not only the men, but four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. And each of them point to the fact that

we should not be so concerned about biological purity.

Tamar went to extraordinary means and risked her life in order to have an offspring.

Just like every year, we see the manger scene. We're transported back to that night when a homeless couple smuggles God into the world.

Rahab consorted with the enemy in order to pave the way for a new people in a new land.

Ruth brought her mother-in-law, Naomi, out of her depression by restoring her place amongst the lineage of her people—giving her an adoptive grandson who would be a great king.

Bathsheba advocated for her child who was not the logical choice for the throne, but was the wisest amongst them all.

All of this leads to Mary, who was great with child by extraordinary means, had no lineage that we know of and was ready, willing and able to set in motion the in-breaking of God once again into a sin-sick world. Maybe Joseph was to keep this part of the lineage alive, the part that breaks with tradition, the one that calls into question patriarchy, the one that says that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, the one that he embraces by his silence.

In his silence is his lack of objection, his acceptance, his adoption of Jesus and his embrace of Mary.

At Christmas, we need to focus on the new thing that God consistently does with ordinary people. The best thing that Joseph

does in this case is to remain the silent partner. He does not shun Mary and her son. He adopts both of them as his own and grafts them into that great lineage traced all the way back to Abraham and Sarah.

But silence is not and cannot be the last answer. Joseph refused to rehearse the old tired accusations of his upbringing. I imagine that he and Mary imbued Jesus with a suspicion of oppressive structures and an embrace of outcast people, that they told Jesus that he needed to be God's Word.

So, at the risk of reading way too much into this, I wonder what message Joseph might have given to Jesus. In the twilight of the manger scene, observing a sleeping Mary and Jesus, I imagine him taking out

art by Jesse Manning



a scroll and writing down a few thoughts. Many of us dads do that in the aftermath of labor.

Dear Jesus,
I know it will be a long time before you read this or can even understand it. I know that by the time you read this I may be long gone. So I just want to tell you a few things.

I look at you now, lying in your bed of straw. I'm sorry that we couldn't have given you better, but we were shunned when we got here to Bethlehem. Even my extended family would have nothing to do with us. We were looked upon with suspicion. Rumors flew around about whether you were legitimate or not.

Who's to say a child is legitimate? Every child is legitimate. Every child has worth. Every child deserves protection from God and from good parents. I hope we can give you that. I hope that when you grow up, you'll be able to give that message to people.

You might be called names. Your holiness and your worth may be questioned. This is not a reflection on you. People who do name-calling do so because they are insecure and want to feel better about themselves. Remember that they are people who are hurting. Deal with everyone with compassion, my son. That is the way of God.

I want you to know something about your mom. She is the bravest person I know. No matter how many people talk down to her, no matter how many people shun her, she is focused. She almost glows at the prospect of your life. It's as if she's possessed by light and infused with power from beyond.

She and I have spoken about you and she's the first to see the bigger picture about the direction of your life. She has this magnificent song she sings. It's all about setting things right, filling the empty with good things. Listen to her. She's wise.

You are being born into a fine family. Mary and I love you even before we know you. For we knew you before you were born. We will do everything we can to protect you. In fact, before long, we'll have to flee to another country. King Herod is out to rid the country of all young Hebrew children. We have to protect you, and we will. That's my promise.

But I know, like it is with all parents, I can't protect you from everything. God, how I want to. I want to shelter you from all of the evil in the world. I want you not to be poisoned by defeatism and pain and suffering. At some point, Mary and I will have to let you go.

It will be hard for us. Forgive us when we want to hold you too tight, to keep you from spreading your wings. Gently remind us of our promises to you. We promise to teach you the ways of God. God is the liberating presence of hope in the world. God is the fullness of love. I hope and pray that you can embody this.

Right now, in your manger bed, you remind us that God is here, God-with-us. Thank you for that. I pray that you will be able to spread that message of love as you get older.

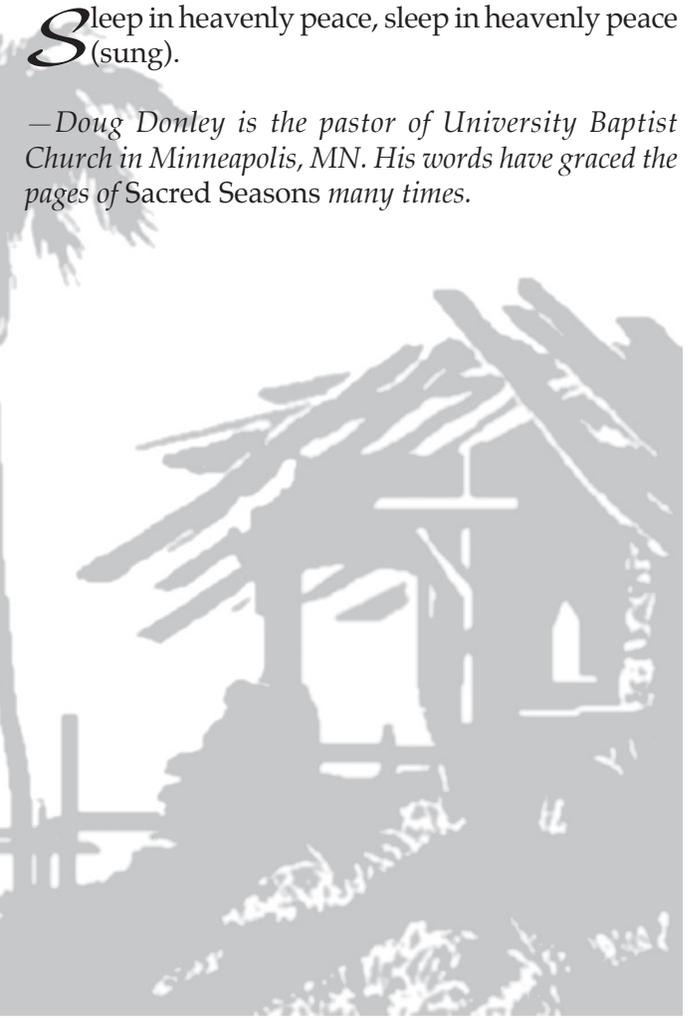
You were made for love. You were made to set the world right. You were made as a gift. I thank God for you and I pray that I may continue to be changed and renewed in spirit for you, for your mom and for the world.

I'm not one prone to long speeches or profound thoughts. But looking at you makes me want to be a better person. Better, more faithful, braver. I hope I can be that for you. For now, sleep, my son.

Love,
Your dad, Joseph.

Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace (sung).

—Doug Donley is the pastor of University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. His words have graced the pages of *Sacred Seasons* many times.



Unto You Is Born This Day

Lessons & Hymns for Christmas Day

Processional Hymn

"Joy to the World"

Text: Isaac Watts, 1719

Music: Attr. George Frederick Handel, 1741;
arr. Lowell Mason, 1848

Tune: ANTIOCH

Chalice Hymnal #143

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 52:7-10

Meditation

To an open house in the evening
home shall [we] come,
to an older place than Eden
and a taller town than Rome.
to the end of the way of the wandering star,
to the things that cannot be and that are,
to the place where God was homeless
and all [people] are at home.

—G. K. Chesterton, *The House of Christmas*

Hymn

"Once in Royal David's City"

Text: Cecil F. Alexander, 1848

Music: Henry J. Gauntlett, 1849

Tune: IRBY

The Worshipping Church #151

Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 98

Meditation

Christmas is about the King of Glory joining
the ranks of the rabble to be our God and to
know us. I am that rabble, and I am grateful.
—Paula Clouse, *Order of Ecumenical Franciscans*

Epistle Reading

Hebrews 1:1-4

Hymn

"Angels We Have Heard on High"

Text: Traditional French carol;

tr. Crown of Jesus, 1862, alt.

Music: French carol melody;

arr. Edward Shippen Barnes, 1937

harm. Austin C. Lovelace, 1964, alt.;

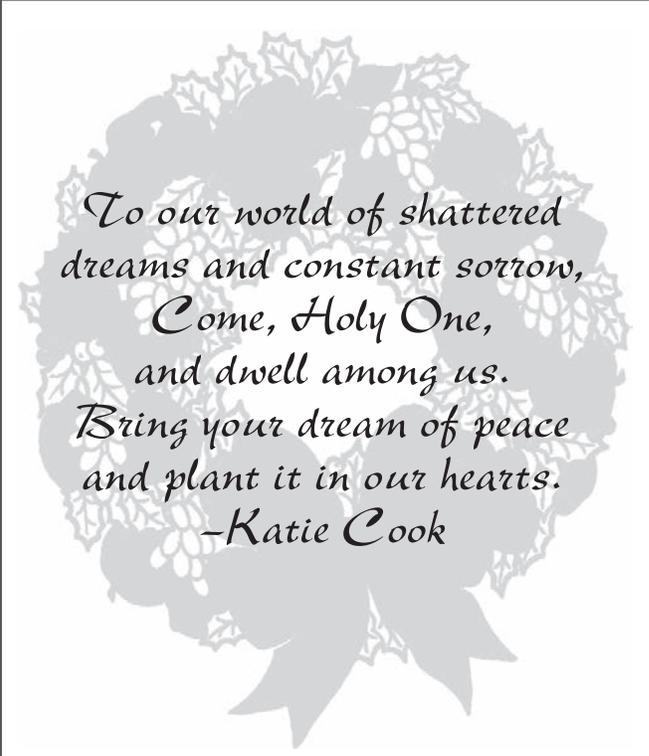
desc. Richard E. Gerig, 1956

Tune: GLORIA

Chalice Hymnal #155

Gospel Reading

John 1:1-14



*To our world of shattered
dreams and constant sorrow,
Come, Holy One,
and dwell among us.
Bring your dream of peace
and plant it in our hearts.
—Katie Cook*

Following the Star

Lessons & Hymns for Epiphany Sunday

Reading from the Prophets
Isaiah 60:1-6

Meditation

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

—Carlo Carretto

Hymn

“Long Ago, Prophets Knew”

Text: Fred Prat Green, 1970

Music: Piae Cantiones, 1582;
arr. Gustav Holst, 1925

Tune: PERSONENT HODIE

The Worshiping Church #142

Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Meditation

Holy One of heaven,
mark these dark nights
with the brilliance of your star to
guide emissaries of exclaiming grace:
of contradiction and scandal
to the insolent innkeepers of this age;
of blessing and bounty to the indigent,
to all who find no lasting home
save in the age to come.

—Ken Sehested from “Advent Longing”

Epistle Reading

Ephesians 3:1-12

Hymn

“Brightest and Best of the Stars”

Text: Reginald Heber, 1811

Music: James P. Hardin, 1892,

adapt. *The Church Hymnal*, 1894

Tune: MORNING STAR

The Worshiping Church #182

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

Benediction

When there is no star to guide you
and you cannot wait for day
and your ancient maps provide you
only hints to find the way,
keep within each other’s calling,
mark each time you make a turn,
shout for help if you are falling,
tell each other all you learn.

—Thomas H. Troeger



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Benediction

*Mighty God born among us,
Holy Child given to us,
Prince of Peace living in us,*

We pause at the dawn of this new year
to give thanks for the precious hope that lies within us.

We have returned again to the manger
to remember who we are and how much we are loved.

We have marveled afresh at the mystery
of your incarnation and the covenant of *shalom*
you extend to all creation.

But for all the promise this new beginning holds,
there are perils your children face;
Many walls divide, and countless needs go unmet;
We pray to be agents of your justice and mercy.

On Earth Peace.

Help us to cry out against hatred and hostility,
greed and indifference,
and to speak kindness to the fear at the heart
of all this world's sorrow.

On Earth Peace.

You have told us we will find trouble
in this world—even persecution,
if we choose to walk in your radical love and truth.
Give us courage to meet the cost of discipleship.

On Earth Peace.

Strengthen us to resist conforming to culture,
to allow your Spirit to transform us and renew our minds,
to mature in discerning your will.

On Earth Peace.

Let us ever be rapt by your advent on that holy night,
to rest in knowing that you have swaddled the world in your love and grace,
to realize that, on earth, peace is only found in you—
who are, yourself, our peace.

Amen.

—Deborah Harris

