

Hidden Treasure



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Worship Resources for the Creative Church Advent 2015

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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Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a

Hidden Treasure

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art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. For 23 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 hunger and 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: seedseditor1@gmail.com. Web

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A Word about This Packet

In this Advent/Christmastide packet, we chose a rather unusual theme, "Hidden Treasure." This was, in part, chosen because of a strong sense of being led in this direction on the part of our "artist in residence," Sally Askins, who teaches design in the Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts, is a member of the Seeds Council of Stewards. (See page 17 for Sally's thoughts, and see pages 8, 11, 15 and 18 for the art she created around these ideas.)

Our brainstorming team, which includes Deborah Harris and Guilherme Almeida, also members of the Council, worked to bring Sally's ideas into an overall theme. Guilherme, a lecturer in musical theatre at Baylor University and a music minister, chose the hymns for the various liturgies.

We have pulled together a wide variety of ancient and contemporary art and writings. The driftwood "wreaths" pictured with the Advent liturgies are by Sharon Rollins. They were inspired by the driftwood that she and Katie Cook, the Seeds editor (and Sharon's housemate) used one year in their home as an Advent wreath. They represent the tangible earthiness of the incarnation and our lives as followers of the incarnate one.

Although the lectionary texts this year do not include the Annunciation passage, we have included two sermons inspired by that passage, because we can think of no other clay vessel that held such a treasure.

One of the sermons is by Erin Conaway, the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, where the Seeds ministry is housed and supported, and one is by Erin Warde, who was, at the time the sermon was written, the associate pastor at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Waco. You will also find a Christmas Eve prayer written by Erin Conaway.

We are delighted to include new art pieces by Jesse Manning, a young man whose art we have included before. Jesse lives in Waco, TX, and comes to the Seeds office every week to draw and discuss new ideas for art pieces.

Many of the litanies and prayers found in the liturgies were written by Stormy Campbell, a professional writer who interned with Seeds in 2012. Stormy's Lutheran background helped to bring a fresh perspective to our brainstorming process.

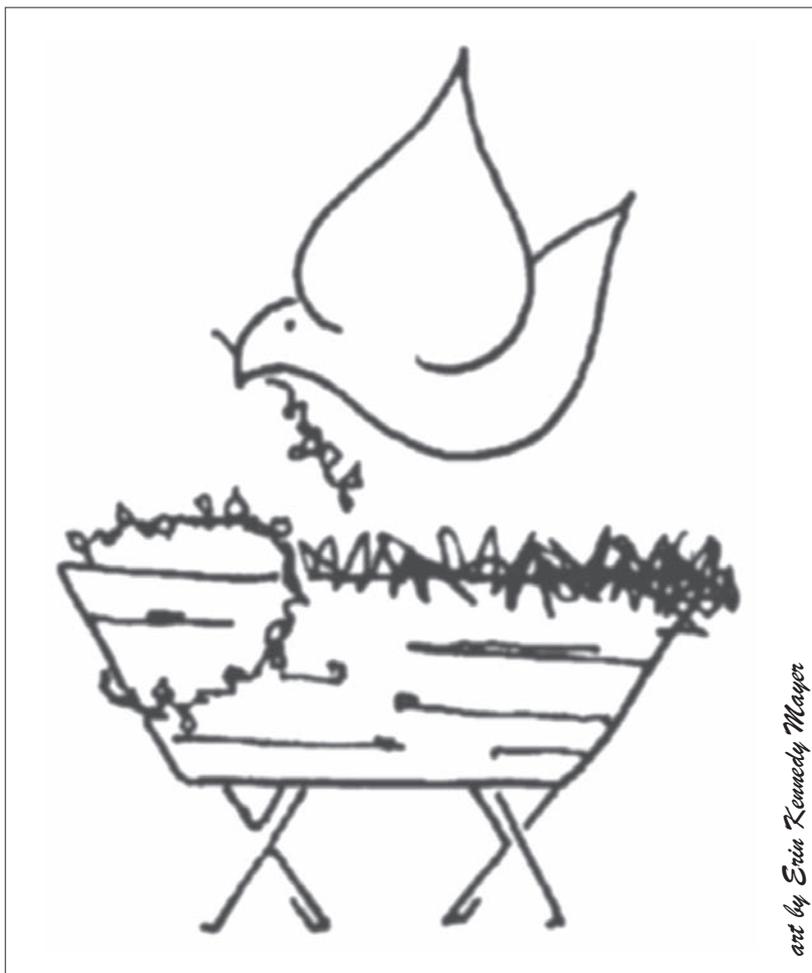
We continue to be profoundly grateful for all of the people who are so generous with their time and creative gifts, and who think of us when they have written worship materials or conceived of innovative ideas for worship themes.

We are also deeply grateful for all of you who subscribe to *Sacred Seasons*, and who make use of these gifts in your worship and work.

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 find your way through a profoundly meaningful Advent and Christmastide.

—Gratefully,
The Seeds Staff and Council of Stewards



art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

Theme Interpretation, Part 1



art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

*The kingdom of heaven is like
treasure hidden in a field,
which someone found and hid;
then in his joy he goes and sells
all that he has and buys that field.
—Matt. 13:44*

Let It Be with Me: An Advent Beginning

A Sermon by Erin Conaway

Luke 1:26-38

Mr. Bradford was my high school political science teacher. Initially, I did not like him. I thought he was arrogant and stubborn; then I realized he was not only teaching us, he loved us with a demanding love that would not settle for the kind of drivel we were used to regurgitating for A's.

He wanted us to think; he required it. He made us read the Federalist Papers. I don't think it was all of them, but it was enough to get me hooked.

I thought the Constitution basically came down from God on a curled up piece of parchment. I mean, I knew they had a convention, but I guess I never imagined the degree of bartering and bantering that went on to create this collaborative and remarkable work.

Now I was reading about these things that made it into the Constitution by the skin of their teeth and other things that were left out that seemed to make a lot of sense. I didn't know what to do—I was worried that this somehow lessened the Constitution.

Of course, I was also a student who assumed that the revision and reworking of papers only happened because one hadn't learned how to write well the first time.

Once you mastered the art of writing you wouldn't need to revise or edit. Your text would just flow out of your mind and onto the page (these two sentences alone were reworked and deleted several times; I'm clearly not there yet).

I had no concept for the art of revision. No one ever told me that the masters painted over entire paintings or changed the notes in their music. Reading the Federalist Papers felt like pulling the curtain back and seeing that the great and powerful Oz was just a silly old man with gadgets.

Even Mr. Bradford's language was mind-boggling. He would say things like, "If you don't read your assignments—really pour over these things and let them into your mind so that you wrestle with the ideas and don't just memorize some of the lines—then, when the test comes you'll end up slightly dead...which right now is better than being slightly pregnant, but only by a little."

I went in to talk to him about how he had ruined the Constitution for me, because now it wasn't the greatest legal document ever written; it was a big compromise with all this back-and-forth mess happening behind the scenes. He smiled a big toothy smile and laughed, saying,

"Now why does the fact that this is the best of a lot of really brilliant people and a few old dunderheads make this less for you?"

"I don't know; I thought it was more like the Bible; that it came out right and eloquent...I mean, our group projects don't produce better work than what we can do by ourselves."

"Well, maybe you're not arguing enough about your group projects. Compromise can produce things that are better than the sum of the parts. I think you'll find a lot of things that you love came together this way. Your Bible might even surprise you."

I laughed that last part off until I got to Baylor and had my mind re-exploded. Twenty-two years later, Mr. Bradford is still teaching me—I can hear his voice in my mind, raising questions about things I thought I knew: greatness happens in first drafts; when you're dead, you're dead and when you're pregnant, you're pregnant. There aren't degrees to these things. Right?

The story of Advent begins with what is often referred to as the Annunciation. That is an Anglicized truncation



of the Latin word from the Vulgate, and it means “to announce.” This is the announcement to Mary of the coming of Jesus into her womb and into her life and into the world.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Gabriel is bringing or announcing the good news to Mary that God has gotten her pregnant before she was

I can't shake loose this zany thought in my mind: What if Mary wasn't the first one? What if the angel Gabriel made a few trips before this one and brought the same call to other women who said, "Oh, no; thank you."

married, which could get her killed, and that this son is going to be named Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

This is all well and good until you consider that the person in whose womb we are talking about placing the Son of God has not yet given her consent. To refer to this as the Annunciation is to negate Mary’s choice in the matter. Perhaps we need a different name.

This exchange between Mary and the angel closely resembles many of the call narratives in the Old Testament.¹ The angel of the Lord or God comes to a person and says, “Boo!” That must be the standard greeting that doesn’t translate well so they leave it out because the next thing they always say is, “Don’t be afraid.”

That gets followed by breathing into a bag for a while, and then comes a divine commission. This is typically followed by an objection from the one who was just scared to death and who has now heard this call of God in their lives. God follows this up with reassurance and then talks of a confirming sign and then we hear from our called ones...and, of course, they always say yes.

But I kept thinking this week—and I have no scholarly input in this, so this is pure, unadulterated speculation on my part, but I can’t shake loose this zany thought in my mind: What if Mary wasn’t the first one? What if the angel Gabriel made a few trips before this one and brought the same call to other women who said, “Oh, no; thank you.”

Like Forrest Gump, when someone asked him about his legs in those horrible braces, “My life is just fine and

dandy, thank you very much.” Now I know that there is a remarkable convergence here with this couple and all of the passages in the Hebrew Bible that point to the line of David and Bethlehem and Nazareth, etc.

I’m not a statistician nor the son of a statistician—or even someone who knows how to spell that word without dictionary.com—but it seems possible that someone else could have fit the bill maybe a generation earlier...or maybe a few generations earlier.

The line of David was all spread out like a dog’s lunch at this point in the population, and it seems within the realm of possibility that someone else, who was a descendent of David, could have been approached by the angel of the Lord to bear this Good News, but they said no. My only reason for thinking this is...well, it’s us.

We hear God’s call in our lives. Some hear a voice; some read books and are arrested by certain passages; some hear it in scripture; some see it in other people and begin to feel it for themselves; some are just nagged by it until they can finally articulate the message; some dream dreams; some just feel it in their hearts.

Some hear it spoken to them by other messengers from God—the less-than-angelic kind—like parents and siblings and teachers and preachers and friends.

We hear God’s call in our lives and, like all of the people in the Bible, it scares us. It is frightening and unnerving to feel as if you are in God’s crosshairs. Right at first, it seems we can’t distinguish between the gaze of God and the eye of Sauron.² It just feels intense—a focus on us that we’d rather avoid if we could.

Gabriel greets Mary, “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you!” Some of us never get past that blessing. Favored one...that’s not us. No, sir or ma’am or angelic messenger thingy, you’ve made a mistake. I’m not a favored one. I can’t be.

Have you looked at my life? Favored ones don’t struggle with the things I’m struggling against. Favored ones don’t think the thoughts I think sometimes. Favored ones don’t do the things I’ve done. Favored ones don’t end up like this. I have an image of what it looks like to be favored by God in my mind, and this isn’t it.

“The Lord is with you.” Really? Then why am I without a job? Why is my life a train wreck that I can’t stop watching? Why do I have cancer? Why can’t I find someone who loves me? Why am I so lost? Why does it hurt this much? I can’t imagine how the Lord could be with me. I can’t imagine any way I could be one of God’s favored ones.

Some of us never make it past the greeting.

Then we hear a word of reassurance. Don’t be afraid. Fear not. Fear not? Are you crazy? Fear is the only thing that keeps me alive. Fear is what keeps me out of trouble. I’m afraid of the water, so I stay away from it and then I don’t drown.

I’m afraid of flying, so I drive and therefore I’ll never be in a plane crash. I’m afraid of having my heart broken again, so I keep to myself and then I’m safe...from that.

Fear is helpful, it's necessary in my life so don't come flying in here with your presence-of-God stuff and favored status and tell me not to be afraid. Fear keeps me hunkered down right here where I have everything I need. Fear cements my routine and my expectations.

Mary had it all going for her. Betrothed to a nice, faithful man who worked hard and had a soft smile. She was living the dream as far as anyone could dream in the little town of Nazareth.

This is what life is supposed to do and who I'm supposed to be, so don't come here and ruin it for me by opening my eyes to farther horizons and new worlds. I'm afraid you want to do something to me—maybe hurt me or worse. Maybe you intend to change my life and, as bad as it may be, it is the one I know.

Sometimes we stop right at the words of reassurance, and we cling white-knuckled to our fear as if our lives depended on it.

Then the call comes. "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." That was Mary's call.

What is yours?

Her call was impossible. It wasn't just far-fetched or quite a stretch, it was ridiculous. It didn't make any sense. Mary wasn't a doctor, but she knew her own body and she knew enough about the "birds and the bees" to know this was not the way of things. This is not how these things happen.

And God isn't asking us to be idiots, so she says to her messenger, "How can this be?" Moses let God know that he couldn't speak well. Jeremiah reminded God that he was just a boy. Isaiah let God know that the lips he was calling into service were not up to the task of uttering the words of the Lord because they were unclean.

Their calls didn't make sense. They were impossible. They were beyond the horizon, past the stars, above the clouds. These plans of God were beyond sight—and not just the destinations. Even the getting there was impossible to imagine. How can this be? Mary was a virgin, Moses had a speech impediment, Jeremiah was too young, Isaiah had too much sin in his life.

How can this be? We know those words. How can this be? I've done things...horrible things that no one should ever do and they are unforgivable and certainly they are disqualifiers for a mission from God. My lips are unclean.

How can this be? I'm too young, I'm too old, I'm the wrong gender, I'm the wrong gender identity, I'm the wrong ethnicity, I'm from the wrong social class, I'm not smart enough, I'm not enough...

How can this be? I can't speak well, I don't walk right, my blood sugar isn't stable, my hands are shaky, I don't have those gifts, I don't have those talents, I'm a slow-learner, I'm too impatient, I'm too selfish, I'm too fat, I'm too ugly, I'm too skinny, I'm too bald, I'm just not the right person for this job.

How can this be? I've never been with a man before. I can't afford graduate school. I don't speak their language. I can't stop drinking. It's not possible. How can this be?

Mary knew her call was beyond her horizon. God was calling her to something she couldn't see, couldn't dream, something she knew was impossible. It was ridiculous, it was outlandish; it couldn't be.

And I keep wondering: Were there other women God called through Gabriel before Mary who couldn't get past some aspect of this calling? Were there others who walked by the burning bush before Moses stopped and turned aside?

Were there others before Samuel who heard God calling them in the night and just kept going back to sleep?

We get the stories of the ones who said yes, so I guess it doesn't matter so much if there were ones who said no for a million different really good and sensible reasons... unless...well, unless that's you. And then it matters more than anything else in the world.

Were there others before Jeremiah who thought God was asking them to speak a prophetic word to their world, but they were too young, so they thought they would get to it when they were older?

Maybe there were people who were slightly pregnant with the call of God in their lives, but they couldn't believe it, they couldn't see it, and they wouldn't take those steps off of a ledge they didn't know...so they stayed slightly dead.

We get the stories of the ones who said yes, so I guess it doesn't matter so much if there were ones who said no for a million different really good and sensible reasons... unless...well, unless that's you. And then it matters more than anything else in the world.

Mary is offered to us in the Gospel of Luke as the model disciple and what she did that matters into eternity is say to God in the face of this impossible call, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

My sisters and brothers we are favored in God's eyes.

The Lord is with us...do not be afraid.

God is calling.

What will we say?

—Erin Conaway is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed.

Endnotes

1. Mark Allan Powell, Commentary on Luke 1:26-38 in WorkingPreacher.org.
2. Sauron is the evil antagonist in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Week 1: The Treasure of Hope



art by Sally Lynn Askins

A Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

Opening Hymn

"Come, O Long-Expected Jesus"

WORDS: Charles Wesley

MUSIC: Rowland H. Prichard;

harm. The English Hymnal

TUNE: HYFRYDOL

Chalice Hymnal No. 125

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Meditation

We can see Spirit made visible when people are kind to one another, especially when it's a really busy person, like you, taking care of a needy, annoying, neurotic person, like you. In fact, that's often when we see Spirit most brightly.

—Anne Lamott,

Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith

Litany of Hope:

The God of Our Salvation

(From Psalm 25)

ONE: O God, in you we place our trust;

MANY: Lead us in your truth.

ONE: Make known to us your ways,

O Lord,

MANY: Teach us your paths.

ONE: All the paths of the Lord are
steadfast love and faithfulness;

MANY: You are the God of our salvation.

Hymn

"The Hands That First Held Mary's Child"

WORDS: Thomas H. Troeger

MUSIC: English folk melody;

harm. Ralph Vaughan Williams

TUNE: KINGSFOLD

Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 115

Epistle Reading

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Meditation

Now, while the night sky is so spectacular, it is a gift of the season to look up and know that we are spirit-free and unlimited. Not even the immense universe and the glittering stars created for us can compare to the stars in our hearts and what has been prepared for us.

—Joyce Sequichie Hifler, *A Cherokee Feast of Days*

Gospel Reading

Luke 21:25-36

Pastoral Prayer

(See "Prayer before the Empty Manger" on page 10.)

Hymn

"There Is a Hope So Sure"

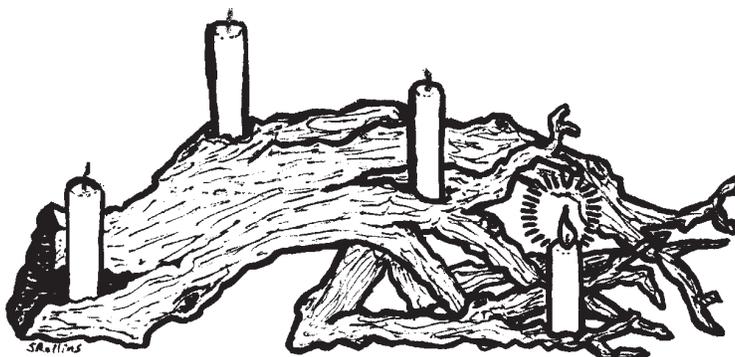
WORDS and MUSIC: Graham Kendrick

CCLI Song No. 3501481

Benediction

May you leave this place filled with the treasure of hope as we begin our waiting for the coming of the Christ Child.

—Stormy Campbell



art by Sharon R. Rollins

The Empty Manger

A Pastoral Prayer

by Chris Caldwell

Author's note: Before offering this prayer, I explained to the congregation that, in Eastern expressions of Christianity, visual images are often used as a way to focus during prayer. I then explained the four images forming the foundation of the prayer I was about to offer.

The first was an empty manger that was placed where normally our pulpit rests. The second was an image of angels at the base of our stained glass window behind the pulpit. The third was the image of Jesus at his baptism in the stained glass. The fourth was the image of a dove descending upon Jesus, also depicted in the stained glass.

Before offering the prayer, I encouraged congregants to pray with their eyes open if they chose, or with their eyes closed. I assured them their prayers would be heard either way.

Let us pray.

How strange it is, O God, to bow before an empty wooden box resting on rickety legs. How daring it is to look for power where there is emptiness.

But this is what we do.

We worship, and we wait.

Waiting as people unaccustomed to mangers, but familiar with emptiness.

We wait as people who know the emptiness of grief, of a place at the table not filled this year.

We wait as people who know the emptiness of illness, of bodies robbed of strength.

We wait as people who know the emptiness that comes from chasing after the thing we think will satisfy, but which does not.

We wait as people who know the emptiness of promises made but not kept.

We come seeking more than emptiness, which is why we find hope in the angels above the manger. Angels come to proclaim the good news of a child who is more than a child, but rather a king, and the good news of a manger that is more than a manger, but rather a throne. Angels come to proclaim Immanuel, God among us.

Send the angels to us, too, Lord. Send them to remind us that *unto us* a child has been born, who is a savior.

Send through them the promise that your Spirit comes first and foremost to the empty places.

But beyond even the angels, help us to see the promise of Christ above them.

Show us the faithful Christ, his arms outstretched. Show us Immanuel, God among us, who journeyed from a wooden manger to the seeming emptiness of a wooden cross.

Show us the living Christ, who humbled himself, so that he might be exalted. Show us the living Christ, who emptied himself so that our spirits might be filled.

Forgive us when we settle for empty things. Fill us with the fullness of Christ's love and grace.

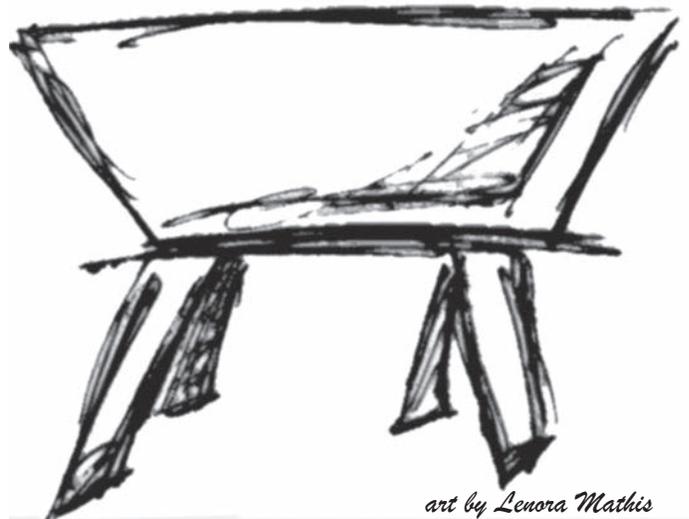
And on this Sunday when we light the candle of Peace, may the peace of your Spirit descend upon us even as it descended upon Christ.

Fill us with your Spirit, Lord.

But forgive us if we settle merely for being receptacles of your Spirit. Help us to be instruments of your peace. Let us not forget the image of the disciples standing behind Christ. Teach us, like them, to follow. And make the circle complete by leading us to empty places and to empty people, so we might do our part to bring there the fullness of your love, and the peace of your Spirit.

Amen.

—Chris Caldwell is the pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, KY.



art by Lenora Mathis

Week 2: The Treasure of Peace



art by Sally Lynn Askins

A Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

Opening Hymn

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

WORDS: Latin hymn (12th Century);

st. 1-2 tr. John Mason Neale;

st. 3-4 tr. Henry Sloane Coffin

MUSIC: French melody (15th Century);

arr. and harm. Thomas Helmore

TUNE: VENI EMMANUEL

Chalice Hymnal No. 119

Lighting of the Hope & Peace Candles

Reading from the Hebrew Scripture

Baruch 5:1-9

Meditation

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 Hays, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*

Litany of Peace

The Song of Zechariah

(based on Luke 1:68-79)

ONE: Blessed be the LORD God of Israel,

MANY: For God has looked favorably on her people and redeemed them.

ONE: God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of her servant David.

MANY: God has spoken through the mouths of the

holy prophets from old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

ONE: Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered the holy covenant, the oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear,

MANY: In holiness and righteousness before the Lord all our days.

ONE: And you, my son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

MANY: By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us

ONE: To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

MANY: To guide our feet into the way of peace.

Meditation

Peace will come when what we want for our neighbors is more than what we demand for ourselves.

—Erin Conaway, from a Sunday morning benediction

Hymn

"Away in a Manger"

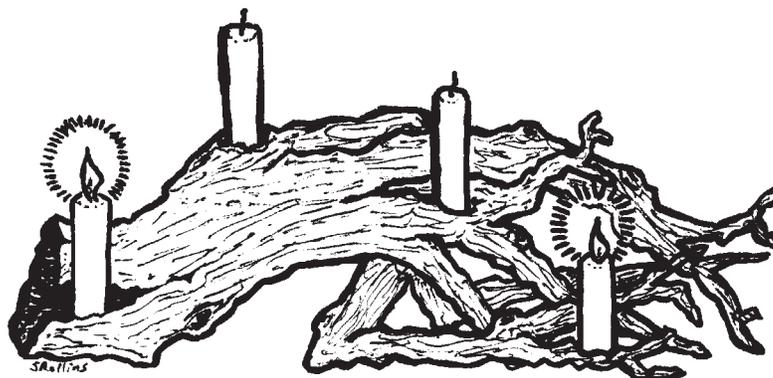
WORDS: Anonymous (19th Century)

MUSIC: Attr. James R. Murray

TUNE: AWAY IN A MANGER

Chalice Hymnal No. 147

continued



art by Sharon R. Rollins

What the Church Could Be

A Meditation on Nativity Scenes

by Katie Cook



Art that depicts the nativity of Christ, for me, is one of the most significant Christmas images. From the most intricate and sublime sculpture out of expensive materials, to the most outrageous children's pageant (especially, I think, the outrageous ones), manger scenes hold an attraction for me that I can't fully comprehend, much less articulate.

I have begun to collect scenes that portray the Holy Family with different ethnic appearances, I think because they convey a sense of the universality of the gift of incarnation, and because they remind me that the commonwealth of God includes a wide diversity of peoples and cultures.

The very first crèche, according to the legends of Christendom, was a live nativity scene put together by St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century.

Francis, stopping over in Greccio during a missionary journey, wanted to re-enact the nativity story during the Christ Mass, so he and his companions selected a cave near the town and suggested that local people play the roles of shepherds and the Holy Family. He gathered animals to share the "stable," and collected candles to burn. The group, we are told, stayed there through the night, singing hymns in the candlelight.

After this, the re-enactment of the "infancy narratives," through Christmas pageants and graven manger scenes, became increasingly popular during the Advent season.

Some of the medieval stories say that the part of the Christ Child in the Greccio tableau was played by a local infant. One legend claims that Francis borrowed a doll to play the part and that, at a crucial point in the Mass, the doll became a living child.

Perhaps there is truth to that thirteenth-century legend; perhaps the Christ Child does take on some kind of mystical life, or speaks to us in some way, to where we are and who we are, in all of these scenes—the

ornate clay Mexican-American Christ Child, cast in traditional Spanish Catholic formality; the unadorned porcelain Christ Child with Asian features; the elongated tribe-like Christ Child, cast in African ebony; the fifteenth-century Portuguese painting of the Holy Family as Native Americans; the kids from government housing in bath robes, holding a black-skinned baby Jesus in the closest thing they can find to "swaddling clothes;" my brother's childhood drawing of the manger scene with an extra character called "Round John Virgin;" even the ones with moppet eyes and excruciatingly Anglo features.

They are all symbols of God made flesh, all a part of Isaiah's peaceable commonwealth, all a symbol of what the church could be if we had the courage.

—Katie Cook is the *Seeds of Hope* editor.

Second Sunday in Advent, *continued*

Epistle Reading
Philippians 1:3-11

Prayer

Gospel Reading
Luke 3:1-6

Hymn
"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing"
WORDS: Charles Wesley
MUSIC: Felix Mendelssohn;
arr. William H. Cummings
TUNE: MENDELSSOHN
Chalice Hymnal No. 150

Benediction
May you go forth from this place with continued hope, and may the light of God's peace illumine your path.
—Stormy Campbell

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

In deep nights I dig for you like treasure.
For all I have seen
that clutters the surface of my world
is a poor and paltry substitute
for the beauty of you
that has not happened yet.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust consume and where thieves break
in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in
heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and
where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your
treasure is, there your heart will be also.
—Matt. 6:19-21

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

Saint Lawrence of Rome, who lived in the third
century CE, was known as a protector of the poor. One
story says that, when the prefect of Rome demanded
for someone to bring the Church's treasures to him,
Saint Lawrence presented to him poor and sick
people, announcing, "This is the Church's treasure!"
—Adapted from the Good News Ministry of Tampa Bay
website

It might be easy to run away to a monastery, away
from the commercialization, the hectic hustle, the
demanding family responsibilities of Christmas-
time. Then we would have a holy Christmas. But
we would forget the lesson of the Incarnation,
of the enfleshing of God—the lesson that we who are
followers of Jesus do not run from the secular; rather
we try to transform it. It is our mission to make holy
the secular aspects of Christmas just as the early
Christians baptized the Christmas tree. And we do
this by being holy people—kind, patient, generous,
loving, laughing people—no matter how maddening
is the Christmas rush...
—Fr. Andrew Greeley

Luke's Gospel account of the Christmas event is full
of activity.... And yet, in the middle of the frenetic
action, here is this woman wrapped in mystical
silence.... She demonstrates the necessity of a quiet
place within ourselves at Christmastime—that place
where we are most ourselves in relation to God. It is

a place of silence, not because it is untouched by all the
activity of our lives, but because it is capable of wonder.
—William Frebuger, "Making Christmas a Saving Event"

If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to
understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God
in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close
as breathing and is crying out to be born both within
ourselves and in the world; we would know that the
Kingdom of God is what we all of us hunger for above all
other things even when we don't now its name or realize
that it's what we're starving to death for. The Kingdom of
God is where our best dreams come from and our truest
prayers. We glimpse it at those moments when we find
ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we
know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis
a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our
own strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong.
It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we
are all of us homesick for it.
—Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*



art by Jesse Manning

Week 3: The Treasure of Joy



art by Sally Lynn Askins

A Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

Opening Hymn

"Of the Father's Love Begotten"

WORDS: Aurelius Clemens Prudentius
(4th Century); st. 1, 3 tr. John Mason Neale
& Henry W. Baker; st. 2 tr. R. F. Davis

MUSIC: Plainsong, Mode V (13th Century);
harm. C. Winfred Douglas

TUNE: DIVINUM MYSTERIUM
Chalice Hymnal No. 104

Lighting of the Hope, Peace & Joy Candles

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Meditation

When we think of that choir of angels, that multitude of heavenly hosts, blazing forth in light and sound, God's: "I bring you good tidings of great joy," it would seem to necessarily entail somewhat more than feeling good and being glad. Especially when we know more of the story, when we know more of the details through which the joy is delivered—through which the joy is made flesh, when we have a little more of the perspective God presumably had when the angels were sent to proclaim the advent of joy, when we have a clear perspective into the details of misunderstanding and rejection, the deep pain of betrayal, physical torture and death. Good tidings of great joy. Alleluia.

So it is thus within the context of our own experience of the shadows of life (our own experience of death and betrayal, rejection and misunderstanding) that with excitement, we begin to suspect that God is redefining again—seeking to provide a consistency for us—a joy not rooted in circumstance, a joy not dependent, a joy beyond our definitions and beyond our understandings.

—John Ballenger

Litany of Joy:

Give Thanks to the Lord

(from Isaiah 12:2-6)

ONE: Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,

MANY: For the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.

ONE: With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

MANY: Give thanks to the LORD, call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations; proclaim that God's name is exalted.

ONE: Sing praises to the LORD, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

MANY: Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Meditation

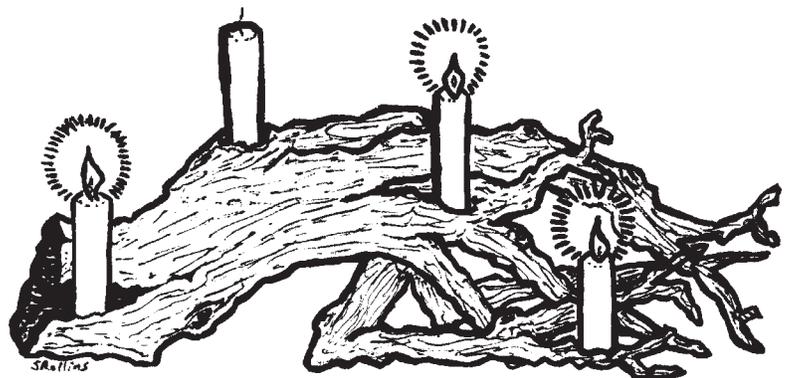
What we have lost...is a full sense of the power of God—to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hopeless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory.

—Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*

Hymn

"The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy"

WORDS and MUSIC: Traditional West Indian
CCLI Song No. 4756091



art by Sharon R. Rollins

Third Sunday in Advent, continued

Epistle Reading

Philippians 4:4-7

Responsive Prayer

ONE: God of timeless grace,
MANY: You fill us with joyful expectation.

ONE: Make us ready for the message that prepares
the way

MANY: That with uprightness of heart and holy
joy we may eagerly await the kingdom of your Son,

Jesus Christ,

ONE: Who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
MANY: now and forever. Amen.

Gospel Reading

Luke 3:7-18

Hymn

"He Is Born"

WORDS and MUSIC: Traditional French Carol
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 106

Benediction

May you go from this place in the light of God's
hope and peace, and may your joy be unbounded.
—Stormy Campbell

Theme Interpretation, Part 2: Images of Sacred Intent

by Sally Lynn Askins

As I sat listening to a friend describe his work and study of an ancient seventh-century Georgian Orthodox church in the village of Seoni, I was affected and moved by the images he had made of the frescos found there. Though often fragmentary, the power and intent of the sacred beings depicted there compelled and arrested me.

My thought was that these images of angels, with wings, halos and garments eroded by time, gained strength through these imperfections. These images of sacred intent continue to bring the treasured messages of hope, peace, joy and love.

As I began to search for other ancient images that were equally compelling, I read the story of the "White Angel." Though painted in the thirteenth century in the Church of the Ascension of Jesus in Mileseva, Serbia, it had been painted over in the sixteenth century. When the church was restored in the twentieth century, this fresco of the Archangel Michael was recognized, not only as a hidden treasure, but it became a symbol of Europe and an enduring symbol of peace.

The Christmas angels that are on pages 8, 11, 15 and 18 in this *Sacred Seasons* Advent offering include renderings of three images from the Georgian Orthodox Church of Ateni, Sioni, as well as the Serbian "White Angel" of peace.

May these ancient messengers, and their images, bring you the same treasures of sacred intent as you make your own journey through this season of advent.
—Sally Askins is a design professor in the Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts, a member of the Seeds of Hope Council of Stewards and our "artist in residence."



art by Sally Lynn Askins

art by Sally Lynn Askins



Week 4: The Treasure of Love

A Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Opening Hymn

"Prepare the Way of the Lord"

WORDS: Isaiah 40:3; 52:10

MUSIC: Jacques Berthier & the Community of Taizé

TUNE: PREPARE THE WAY

Chalice Hymnal No. 121

Lighting of the Hope, Peace, Joy & Love Candles

Reading from the Hebrew Scripture

Micah 5:2-5a

Meditation

The true treasure lies within. It is the underlying theme of the songs we sing, the shows we watch and the books we read. It is woven into the Psalms of the Bible, the ballads of the Beatles and practically every Bollywood film ever made. What is that treasure? Love. Love is the nature of the Divine.

—Radhanath Swami

Hymn

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

WORDS: Liturgy of St. James (5th Century);

tr. Gerard Moultrie

MUSIC: Traditional French Carol;

harm. *The English Hymnal*

TUNE: PICARDY

Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 81

Epistle Reading

Hebrews 10:5-10

Meditation

Only a handful of shepherds, poor boys working a minimum wage job watching someone else's sheep overnight, saw the star and heard the singing of angels. Those who had eyes to see saw. Those who had ears to

hear heard. That is the way it always is when God moves in the human realm.

—Richard Groves

Prayer

Shepherd of Israel, you gently support the one who is with child and call forth the Lamb who dances in the womb. Stir our hearts to recognize Christ's coming, as Elizabeth recognized his presence in Mary's radiant obedience to your desire, and open our souls to receive the One who came to love your flock. Amen.

—Stormy Campbell

Gospel Reading

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Hymn

"In the Bleak Midwinter"

WORDS: Christina Rossetti

MUSIC: Gustav Holst

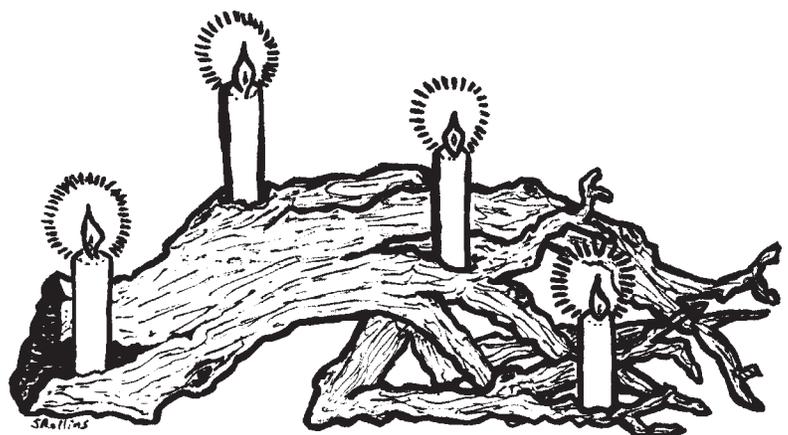
TUNE: CRANHAM

Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 131

Benediction

As you leave this place, may the God of all infuse you with hope and peace, and breathe into your hearts a spirit of joy and love.

—Stormy Campbell



art by Sharon R. Rollins



The house lights go off and the footlights come on.
Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise.
In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised.
The conductor has raised his baton. In the silence of a midwinter dusk,
there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint
that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself.
You hold your breath to listen. You walk up the steps to the front door.
The empty windows at either side of it tell you nothing, or almost nothing.
For a second you catch a whiff of some fragrance that reminds you
of a place you've never been and a time you have no words for.
You are aware of the beating of your heart...
The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only
by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.
Advent is the name of that moment.
— Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

Theme Interpretation, Part 3



*...It is the God who said,
"Let light shine
out of darkness,"
who has shone in our hearts
to give the light
of the knowledge
of the glory of God
in the face of Jesus Christ.
But we have this treasure
in clay jars,
so that it may be
made clear
that this
extraordinary power
belongs to God
and does not come from us.
—2 Cor. 4:6-7*

Lessons & Carols for Christmas Eve

Opening Hymn

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"

WORDS: Latin hymn; attr. to John Francis Wade;
tr. Frederick Oakeley

MUSIC: John Francis Wade

TUNE: ADESTE FIDELES

Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 103

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Reading from the Hebrew

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2-7

First Carol

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"

WORDS: Phillips Brooks

MUSIC: Lewis H. Redner

TUNE: ST. LOUIS

Chalice Hymnal No. 144

Lighting of the Peace Candle

Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 96

Prayer

We bless you, our God,
for you are Mother and Father of us all,
and you have visited your people
in one like us;

in human fragility you have revealed
the face of divinity.

Gather into your arms
all the peoples of the world,
so that, in your embrace,
we may find blessing, peace
and the fullness of our inheritance
as your daughters and sons. Amen.
—Stormy Campbell

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Second Carol

"All Is Well"

WORDS and MUSIC: Michael W. Smith
& Wayne Kirkpatrick

Baptist Hymnal 2008 No. 204

Epistle Reading

Titus 2:11-14

Third Carol

"Welcome to Our World"

WORDS and MUSIC: Chris Rice

CCLI Song No. 2317391

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

WORDS & MUSIC: African-American spiritual

TUNE: GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Chalice Hymnal No. 167

Lighting of the Love Candle

Gospel Reading

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

Fourth Carol

"What Child Is This"

WORDS: William C. Dix

MUSIC: English melody
(16th century)

TUNE: GREENSLEEVES

Chalice Hymnal No. 162

Lighting of the Christ Candle

True miracles are silent;
they never shout,
But come into the world
with downcast eyes
And quietly work their
way among us.
Quietly, so we scarcely
know they're here,
They naturalize themselves
into the world,



art by Rebecca S. Ward

Making themselves incarnate
In rough stables and in mangers and the like.
True miracles are silent as the frost.
—C. W. Christian, “Frost in the Morning”

Benediction

May this Christmas be a time in which we can truly celebrate the Christ who is alive in each of us. And when dawn breaks tomorrow, may we express the vision that is Christmas. May we express Christmas by how we live and walk with God at our side. As the prophet said, it is an audacious time when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the fatling and the calf together, nation shall not raise up sword against nation and neither shall they learn war anymore. The only way for that to happen is if we truly share the Christmas hope with a frozen and bitter world in need of warmth and hope.

—Doug Donley, pastor of University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN

Closing Hymn

“Silent Night, Holy Night”
Words: Joseph Mohr, 1818
Translated by John F. Young, 1863
Music: France Gruber, 1818
Tune: STILLE NACHT
Chalice Hymnal No. 145

During the closing hymn, candles are passed out to each participant. The lights in the worship space should be lowered. The leaders light the first candle at each row, and then participants light each other’s candles. Participants then greet each other by passing the peace of Christ and wishing each other a joyous Christmas.

A Prayer for Christmas Eve

by Erin Conaway

*H*oly God...

In many ways it is finished. The preparations have been made. The waiting is over. The candles are flickering with Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. We’ve been to parties, we’ve wrapped the presents, we’ve sung carols, we’ve heard the story.

In many ways it is finished. We’ve weathered this season of watching and waiting, anticipating your arrival in our world, trying faithfully and in many ways desperately to prepare our hearts for the miracle of your incarnation. Calling down your presence, begging the heavens to be torn apart, looking for the valleys to be lifted and the mountains lowered, praying the winding road will form itself into a straight path.

And here we are, on the eve of your birth with the Christ Candle glowing in our sanctuary. It is finished. And it is just beginning. For you came into the world, not as a grown man with a completed agenda and a written script. You came into the world under the watchful eye of two young parents who themselves couldn’t afford this miraculous event in their lives. So they did what they could do and laid you down in a trough for animals.

You came into this world with the chorus of angels swirling about you and the bleating of sheep and the whinnying sounds of the mules adding their voices. It is just beginning.

You came into this world with gifts for a king and under the threat of death by a king who sat on a lower throne. It is just beginning. An infant—with infinite possibilities for tragedy and triumph, searing pain and transcending hope, understanding and confusion. It is just beginning.

And so it is with us...just beginning, as we gather together in your name to celebrate your incarnation in our lives and in our world. Begin anew your hope that transcends our pain, begin anew your peace that transforms the world, begin anew the unadulterated joy in our hearts, begin anew the love you created us to have for our neighbors, for ourselves, for you.

Begin again, this night, as we feel your birth in our hearts and sing of its wonder with our lives—for we do so, as we pray in the present name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior...Amen.

—Erin Conaway is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed.



A Liturgy for Epiphany

Opening Hymn

"As with Gladness"

WORDS: William C. Dix
MUSIC: Conrad Kocher;
arr. William Henry Monk
TUNE: DIX
Chalice Hymnal No. 173

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 60:1-6

Responsive Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

ONE: Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor.

MANY: May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days, may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

ONE: May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.

Hymn

"We Three Kings"

WORDS and MUSIC: John H. Hopkins Jr.
Chalice Hymnal No. 172

Meditation

The twelve days of Christmas come to an end on January 6, and the season of the Epiphany begins. But Epiphany not only ends Christmas, it also fulfills it by celebrating the



revelation of the Christ to the whole world. The coming of Incarnate God to all people, especially to those of us who are Gentiles, is the bridge from birth into life, the event that makes Easter possible for most of us. The light of the Epiphany illuminates the church's year as it illuminates the human race from whom the kings came.

—Phyllis A. Tickle, "What the Heart Already Knows," *Upper Room*

Reading from the Epistles

Ephesians 3:1-12

Reading from the Gospels

Matthew 2:1-12

Hymn

"One Small Child"

WORDS and MUSIC: David Meece
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 146

Prayer

God of revelation, as we gather in praise for the gracious mystery of your Son, we remember the many needs of your church and your world.

—Stormy Campbell

Prayers of the People

(concluding with the following)

Guide us on the path of salvation, O God, that the radiance and power of your Holy Spirit working in the world will gather together all peoples and nations in one community to offer you worship and proclaim your splendor. Amen

Closing Hymn

"Will You Come and See the Light"

WORDS: Brian Wren
MUSIC: Scottish melody;
arr. John L. Bell
TUNE: KELVINGROVE
CCLI Song No. 879553

Blessing of the Water: A Liturgy for the Baptism of the Lord

Opening Hymn

"When Jesus Came to Jordan"

Words: Fred Patt Green, 1973

Music: William Walker's *Southern Harmony*, 1835

Harmony by Thomas Leary, 2008

Tune: COMPLAINER

Celebrating Grace Hymnal #152

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 43:1-7

Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 29

Reading from the Acts

Acts 8:14-17

Gospel Reading

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Prelude to the Blessing of the Water

FIRST READER: The voice of the Lord upon the waters cries out, saying, "Come, all of you, receive the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of the fear of God, of Christ who has appeared."

SECOND READER: Today the nature of the waters is made holy, and Jordan is parted and holds back the flow of its waters as it sees the Master washing himself.

FIRST READER: As man, Christ King, you came to the river, and in your goodness you hastened to accept the baptism of a servant at the hands of the Forerunner, on account of our sins, O Lover of all people.

SECOND READER: At the voice of the one crying in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord," you came, Lord, having taken the form of a servant, asking for baptism, though you did not know sin.

FIRST READER: The waters saw you and were afraid. The Forerunner trembled and cried out,

saying, "How will the lamp enlighten the Light?"

SECOND READER: The servant placed his hand on the Master and said, "Savior, who takes away the sin of the world, make me and the waters holy."

MANY: Glory to the Creator, and to the Christ, and to the Holy Spirit.

Blessing of the Water

ONE: We give you thanks, almighty God and Creator, for by the gift of water you nourish and sustain all living things.

MANY: Blessed be God forever.

ONE: We give you thanks that through the waters of the Red Sea, you led your people out of slavery to freedom in the promised land.

MANY: Blessed be God forever.



ONE: We give you thanks for sending your Son Jesus. For he was baptized by John in the river Jordan. For us he was anointed as Christ by your Holy Spirit. For us he suffered the baptism of his own death and resurrection, setting us free from the bondage of sin and death, and opening to us the joy and freedom of everlasting life.

MANY: Blessed be God forever.

ONE: We give you thanks for your Holy Spirit who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with his gifts so that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood.

MANY: Blessed be God forever.

The water is blessed, three times, with the sign of the Cross or with a Cross dipped in the water; each time the following is said:

ONE: Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Almighty and Merciful God, in the Baptism of your Son, you have restored Creation and fulfilled it as a means of salvation. Show this water to be the water of redemption and the purification of flesh and spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

MANY: Great are You, O Lord, and marvelous are Your works, and no word will suffice to praise Your wonders.

Postlude to the Blessing of the Water

FIRST READER: Today the grace of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove dwelt upon the waters. Today the Sun that never sets has dawned and the world is made radiant with the light of the Lord.

SECOND READER: Today the Moon with its radiant beams sheds light on the world. Today the stars formed of light make the inhabited world lovely with the brightness of their splendor.

FIRST READER: Today the clouds rain down from heaven the shower of justice for all people. Today the Uncreated by his own will accepts the laying on of hands by his own creature.

SECOND READER: Today the Prophet and Forerunner draws near, but stands by with fear, seeing God's compassion towards us. Today the streams of Jordan are changed into healing by the presence of the Lord.

FIRST READER: Today all creation is watered by mystical streams. Today the failings of humanity are being washed away by the waters of Jordan.

SECOND READER: Today Paradise is opened for mortals and the Sun of justice shines down on us. Today the bitter water as once for Moses' people is changed to sweetness by the presence of the Lord.

FIRST READER: Today we have been delivered from the ancient grief, and saved as the new Israel. Today we have been redeemed from darkness and are filled with radiance by the light of the knowledge of God.

SECOND READER: Today the gloomy fog of the world is cleansed by the manifestation of our God. Today all creation shines with light from on high.

FIRST READER: Today error has been destroyed and the coming of the Master makes for us a way of salvation. Today things on high keep festival with those below, and those below commune with those on high.

SECOND READER: Today the sacred and triumphant festal assembly of the Church exults. Today the Master hastens towards baptism, that he may lead humanity to the heights.

FIRST READER: Today, the One who does not bow, bows down to his own servant, that he may free us from servitude. Today we have purchased the Commonwealth of Heaven, for the Reign of the Lord will have no end.

MANY: Today earth and sea share the joy of the world, and the world has been filled with gladness.

(The blessing above was adapted from the Anglican Church of Canada by Stormy Campbell.)

Closing Hymn

"The One Who Taught Beside the Sea"

Words: John Thornburg, 2003

Music: Wyeth's *Repository of Sacred Music*,
(Part second, 1813)

Harmony by Kathleen Grace, 2008

Tune: GARDEN HYMN

Celebrating Grace Hymnal #153

Benediction

As you leave this place, may you feel God's overwhelming grace, and may it flow like a river within you and outward to those around you.

—Stormy Campbell

Stunning Obedience

A Sermon for Advent and Beyond

by Erin Warde

In the story of Mary, we see the type of questioning, believing and obedience that gives birth to faith in our lives. We, like Mary, cannot be faced with the boldness of the call of the Christian life without being a bit perplexed, and fearful.

However, while we certainly hear that she is afraid, we do not hear that she is a coward. Instead, we can listen to the story of Gabriel announcing the birth of Christ to Mary, and hear in it how she models for Jesus the kind of life he must live, which is anything but a cowardly life.

When Gabriel appears to Mary, the gospel says she was perplexed. She pondered. She was afraid. Her questions of what this could mean for her are like Christ's questions of what it could mean to be the messiah.

Her questions are later heard in the voice of the disciples who wonder, fearful as well, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" Her questions are even questions Jesus will ask of his followers, wondering, "who do you say that I am?"

Gabriel says to Mary, "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Almost as if to say,

Mary, what you give life to, will give us all life. The change you experience now will change everything. And, for all of us, there will be a kingdom with no end. Your womb, your body, your life will literally make room for Christ, and in order for the world to make room for the prince of peace, everything will have to change.

Mary will be the greatest of stewards, in that the very flesh of her body will be stretched, changed, so that God could take on flesh and dwell among us.

Mary wonders, "How can this be? How can it be that, as a virgin, I will have a son?" The disbelief, the wondering—it's almost as if the tone in her voice is the same tone in the voices of the people as they later ask, "How can this be? Isn't this Joseph's son?"

And, in light of the life she will live, and the life she will birth, Mary names herself as a servant. Being given the highest of honors, she lowers herself.

She knows that the Lord will have mercy on those



who fear him, that the proud will be scattered in their conceit, that the mighty will be cast down from their thrones, that the lowly will be lifted up.

She doesn't know, but she believes, that God will come to help his servant, and that the promise God has given to Israel, God will give to her, and that she might be counted as servant and child.

By naming herself servant, she shows Jesus, with her life, how to wash the feet of the disciples. His act of service, his act of love, his act of lowering himself, though he is the messiah, he first sees in the woman who raises him.

We all hear the song of Mary, and we would all profess, I'm sure, to believe that the first will be last, and the last first.

Mary, though—she doesn't just believe it. She lives it. She lives into the truth that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be

exalted. She shows this truth to Jesus through her life.

And even in all the talk of what would happen to her—who her son would be—a note from Gabriel about not just her and her child, but also those around her.

When Gabriel says, "For nothing is impossible with God," he tells Mary what her life will be like, and what life will be like for everyone. It is as if to say,

Mary, it isn't just you who are changed. Everything is changing. Those who are barren will birth children; the impossible is happening, both in Elizabeth, and in you, and later the impossible will be made possible in your son's death that leads to everlasting life.

Mary will live into the truth that nothing is impossible with God. She will lead all of us into this truth through teaching it to Jesus. Jesus will go on to do the impossible with God, and also with us.

The angel says to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

What the angel didn't say, but that we know, is that there will be a shadow of darkness over Jesus, as a curtain is torn in two. And then, like now, like always, the Holy Spirit would be upon not only her but her son as well, with the power of the most high being so strong that death would be turned into life.

art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

Mary models for Jesus that, in order for God to be with us, for us to receive Emmanuel, we make sacrifices. We take risks. We let God take us over so that the kingdom can come. Mary models a level of faithful obedience that teaches Jesus to one day be a savior.

Later in Luke, Jesus will go to the Mount of Olives. He will pray, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." In his anguish, he will pray, and his sweat will become like great

drops of blood falling down on the ground. He will be faced with his own annunciation—the final question, of whether he will love with his being. He will, of course, say yes to God. He will say yes to loving us and giving us abundant life.

Because he learned that response, that willingness, from his mother. Jesus is able to say, "Not my will but yours be done," because Mary first said "Let it be with me according to your word."

This stunning obedience born out of love and faith is learned from the mother who would give life to Jesus so that Jesus could give life to the world.

Mary will later hold a baby in her arms, and sing to him her own song, as if a lullaby. She will be, for him, a teacher. She will tell him the story of what his life might mean, what her life might mean, and how God might be changing everything, through the life that God placed within her, to give to the world.

She has said yes, so that Jesus could say yes, and so that we may say yes to God.

—At this writing, Erin Warde was associate pastor at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Waco, TX.

Mary will live into the truth that nothing is impossible with God. She will lead all of us into this truth through teaching it to Jesus. Jesus will go on to do the impossible with God, and also with us.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

*This is a map that begins
with a star.
This is the chart that starts...
with an ancient light
that has outlasted generations,
empires, cultures and wars.
Step out, and you will know
what the wise who traveled
this path before you knew:
the treasure in this map is buried
not at journey's end, but at its beginning.
—Jan Richardson*

Benediction

by Ann Sims

Prepare in me the way for your coming, Lord.

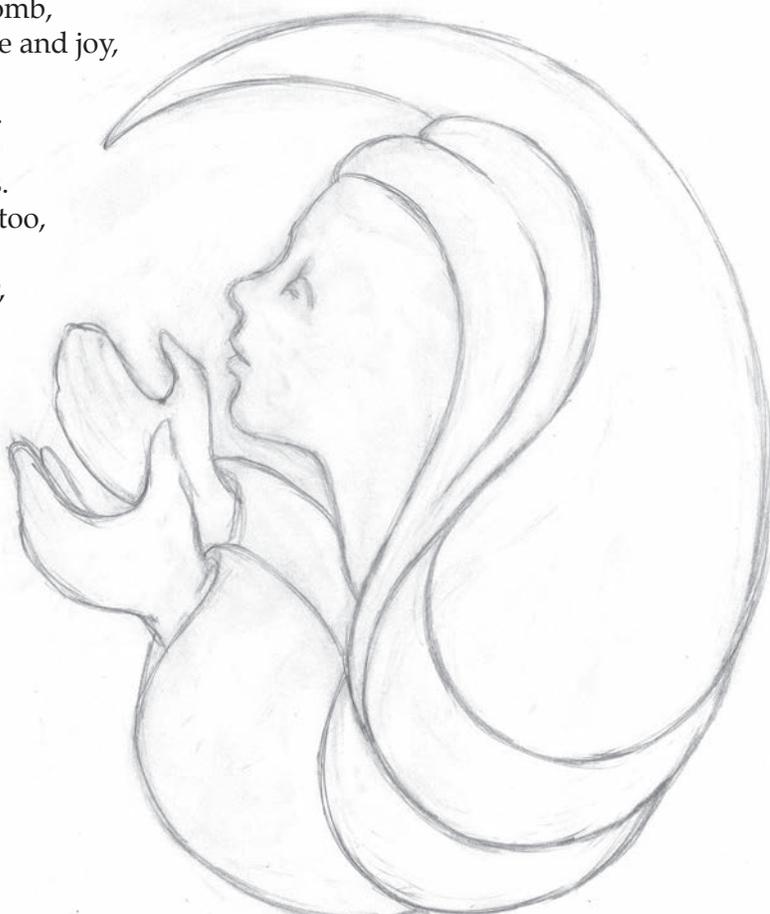
Let the voice of John through my wilderness cry,
Disrupting the dark recesses of doubt,
Straightening the path toward repentance,
Immersing my soul in the salvation of the season.

Forge in me the faith of the fathers and mothers
Who foretold your coming and patiently waited,
Persisting in the possibility of God made man,
Living the proof of God in man,
Believing in the miracles of God through man.

Quicken me with your vibrant, moving spirit.
Like the leaping of the babe in Mary's womb,
Until I, like Mary, overflow with gratitude and joy,
And my soul, too, magnifies you, Lord,
And marvels at the mystery of your plan.

Fill my night with the songs of the angels.
Shine your glory down on this shepherd too,
Resounding me with tidings of great joy,
Redirecting me to the babe in the manger,
A sign unto me, a Savior is born.

Refresh in me the wisdom of the magi
That I too may come from following afar.
Path redirected, faltering faith refueled,
Blazing brilliantly ahead,
 flaming through the night,
Returning me once again
 to the miracle of the season.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

— Ann Sims is a physician who works with victims of abuse, among many other volunteer activities for low-income and at-risk populations. She lives in Waco, TX, and is a member of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds ministry is housed.