

Let There Be Light



art by Sally Lynn Ashkins

Worship Resources for the Creative Church - Advent/Christmastide 2017

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Sacred Seasons



Worship Tools for the Creative Church

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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 to feed the poor were not intended to be

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optional. Since 1991, 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 & 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 address: www.seedspublishers.org. Copyright © 2017.

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a word about this packet

Although the theme of light has been central in a number of *Sacred Seasons* Advent packets (“The People Who Walked in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light,” 1998; “A Light in This Present Darkness,” 2003; “A Light for All Nations,” 2012), the Seeds liturgical team decided that we need light now more than ever.

Guilherme Almeida, a Seeds Council member and our resident liturgist, worked on the liturgies with me. Sally Lynn Askins, another Council member and our resident artist, listened closely to our conversations and created four new Advent angels for this year’s packet. We have gone through some of the old packets and found more of her angels to go with the writings here, along with art by Jesse Manning and Rebecca S. Ward.

Erin Conaway, the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds ministry is housed, is unbelievably gracious when I barge into his office and ask for sermons. You will find two excellent sermons about light that he shared with us.

This packet is dedicated to the memory of our beloved Deborah Harris, whom we lost to mesothelioma, just at the beginning of Advent last year. Deborah was corresponding secretary for the Council, a member of the liturgical team, our copy editor, our resident lyricist and our Slogan Queen.

During her many years with Seeds, she wrote a good many Advent poems, hymns and meditations. You will find in this packet some of those writings, along with some that she wrote for her church, Lake Shore Baptist in Waco.

We are also grateful to Ellen Brown, who graciously stepped into Deborah’s role as chief

copy editor and shows a great deal of patience as we obsess over these resources. We are grateful to Sharon Rollins for occasional writings and art pieces that she produces when I come home grumbling about something we are missing.

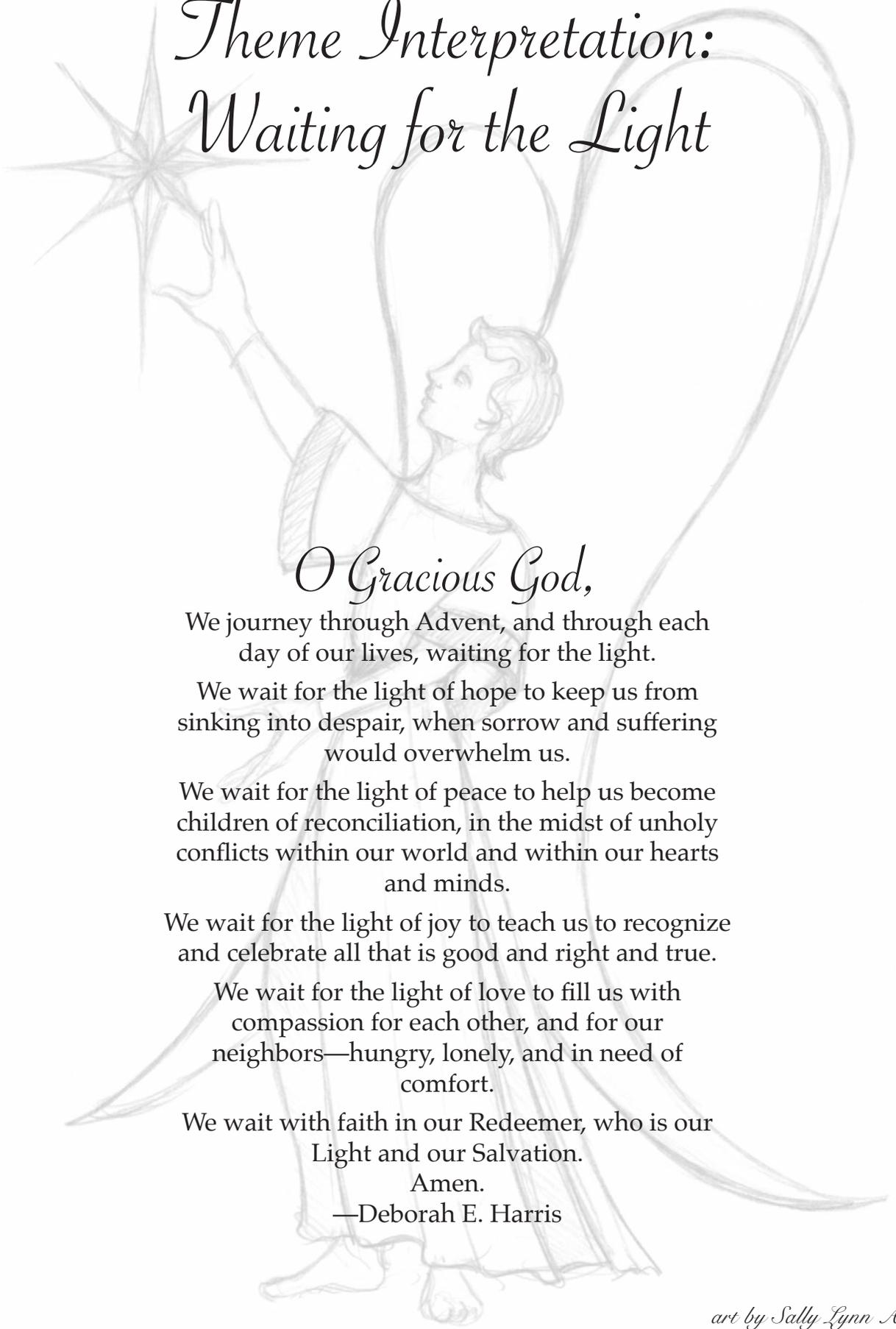
We are grateful to John Ballenger, who was our poetry and drama editor when he lived in Waco, and whose work we continue to appreciate from far-away Baltimore. And that’s just a few of the people who have contributed to this packet and this ministry.

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 resources, and adapt them to your congregation’s needs and resources. The contents of this packet are your congregation’s to use freely and share with others as the need arises. May we find the Light of God during this Advent and Christmastide, and into the next church year.

—Gratefully,
Katie Cook, on behalf of the Seeds staff
and Council of Stewards





*Theme Interpretation:
Waiting for the Light*

O Gracious God,

We journey through Advent, and through each day of our lives, waiting for the light.

We wait for the light of hope to keep us from sinking into despair, when sorrow and suffering would overwhelm us.

We wait for the light of peace to help us become children of reconciliation, in the midst of unholy conflicts within our world and within our hearts and minds.

We wait for the light of joy to teach us to recognize and celebrate all that is good and right and true.

We wait for the light of love to fill us with compassion for each other, and for our neighbors—hungry, lonely, and in need of comfort.

We wait with faith in our Redeemer, who is our Light and our Salvation.

Amen.

—Deborah E. Harris

art by Sally Lynn Askins

A Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

*We wait for the light of hope to keep us from sinking into despair,
when sorrow and suffering would overwhelm us.*

—Deborah E. Harris

Prelude

Processional Hymn

“Arise, Your Light Is Come”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #87)

TUNE: FESTAL SONG

WORDS: Ruth Duck, 1974

MUSIC: William H. Walter, 1872

Call to Worship & Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Note: For each Sunday in Advent, we suggest that you sing a different verse to the hymn below (or add a verse each week) while the appropriate candles are lit. It was selected as a hymn that would be easy for the congregation to sing, but you might also consider having a solo, perhaps a cappella.

“Light the Light, the Fire of Life”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #82)

TUNE: IL EST NÉ

WORDS: David Montoya

MUSIC: French carol, 18th century;

arr. David W. Music

Hymn

“View the Present Through
the Promise”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #99)

TUNE: AR HYD Y NOS, alt.

WORDS: Thomas H. Troeger, 1985

MUSIC: Trad. Welsh melody, alt.;

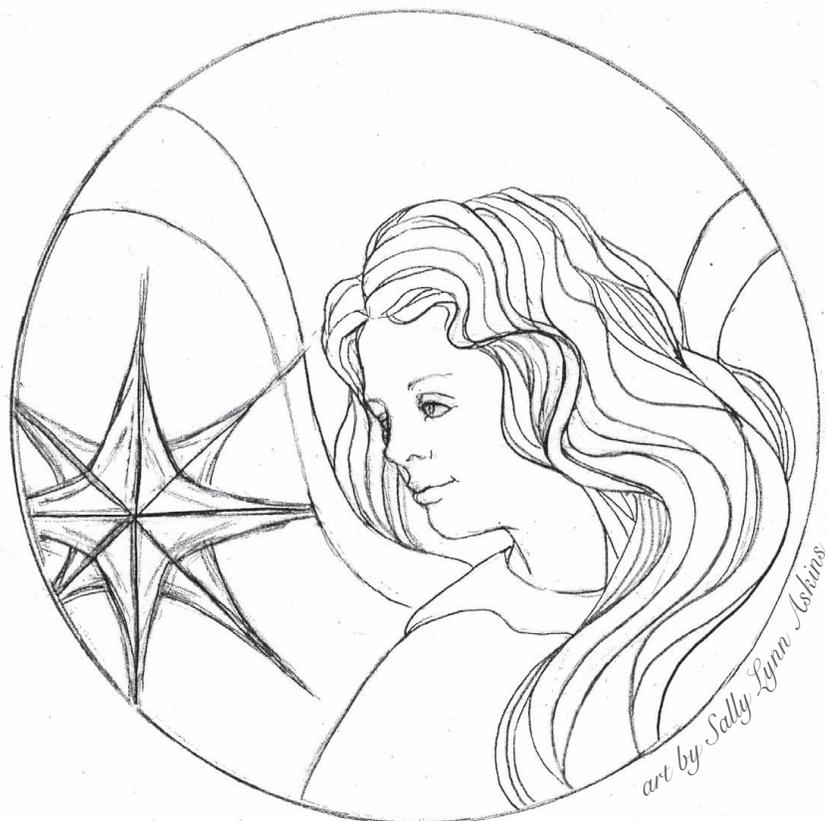
harm. Luther O. Emerson, 1906

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 64:1-9

Meditation of Preparation

“Hustle and bustle” isn’t just a phrase for the holidays anymore. Working, texting and keeping up with demanding schedules often leave us exhausted, with very little room in our hearts and minds for much else. And our fears about money, jobs, wars and more shift our focus from the daily-bread needs of people all



around us. That's why we need to be reminded, again and again, that our hope rests in God, and in the Word that the darkness cannot extinguish. We must make room to be still, to remember whose we are and to be freed to serve in God's name.

—Deborah E. Harris

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Hymn

"Give Glory unto God the Lord"

(Sebhat le egziabher be semaiat)

(Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace hymnal #42)

WORDS and MUSIC: Georgis Dimtsu, Ethiopia, 2010

Reading from the Epistles

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Responsive Call to Hope

ONE: The ones who walk in darkness have seen a great light.

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

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

MANY: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it.

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

MANY: For with God nothing is impossible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gospel Reading

Mark 13:24-37

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Response

Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.

—Anne Lamott, Bird by Bird

Hymn of Response

"I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light"

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #96)

TUNE: HOUSTON

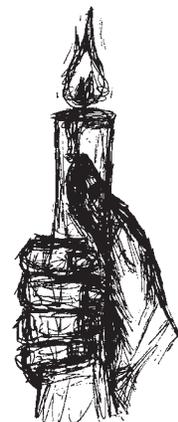
WORDS and MUSIC: Kathleen Thomerson, 1966

Benediction

Postlude

What If?

by Sharon R. Rollins



art by Rebecca S. Ward

What if?

What if there were no light?

What? If there were no light in the world?

What if there were no light in the world;
How could we manage hope?

What if there were no light in the world?
How could we manage?

Hope and light return with Advent.

—Sharon Rollins is a therapist and artist in Waco, Texas. She borrowed the style of "nested meditations" from Kevin Anderson's Divinity in Disguise.

When Days Grow Short

An Advent Hymn

John Ballenger, b.1963

Carol C.M.D.
Richard S. Willis (1819-1900)

The First Sunday of Advent
Year B
Mark 13:24-37; Psalm 80
Isaiah 64:1-9

1. When days grow short and nights are long,
the season's stars shine bright.
Beneath the snow and frozen ground,
lie dreams of warmth and light.
Within the worst of winter's grip,
is joy that hopes bestow.
The advents there of arctic doom—
encased in ice below.
2. The deepest yearnings of our heart,
we seek to meet all ways.
This longing prompting discontent
our desp'rate need conveys.
Within our hunger still we pray
that we might yet be filled,
and looking far beyond ourselves
find hope in us instilled.
3. The seeds of God's redeeming love
are sown in truth and grace.
And in the flower of their bloom,
are contours of God's face.
Remind us, God, in wintry times,
your seeds surround us still.
And in the course of holy time,
will all creation fill.
4. We call upon your name this day,
warm our hearts with your love.
Oh, tear the heavens open now
shine your face from above.
Heaven and earth will pass away,
your Word, our God, draws near.
The presence of your love full-grown
will never disappear.



John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, MD. His poetry, dramas, sermons and meditations have contributed richly to Sacred Seasons since the first Advent packet in 1998. John asks that you let him know if you use the hymn, and, if possible, send a copy of your church bulletin for that service. Send it to the Seeds of Hope office at 602 James, Waco, TX 76706, or email us a scan at seedseditor1@gmail.com and we'll see that he receives it.

Let Your Face Shine!

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

by Erin Conaway

Text: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

He walks into his father's study, and without any sign of emotion, hands him a piece of paper. His father takes the paper and adjusts his glasses, then picks up his red pencil and begins to cross out and circle. Handing the boy back his paper he tells him, "Again...but half as long."

The boy walks away, dejected. He falls into the chair at his desk, takes a deep breath, picks up a new piece of paper and his pencil, and starts again. Later, he returns to his father's desk, his new-and-improved offering in his hand.

When his father looks up, the boy anxiously hands him the paper. Again, the father takes out his red pencil and, like a swordsman in battle, draws blood with his slashes and swipes. He looks over his reading glasses as he hands the paper back to the boy and simply says, "Again...and again half as long."

The boy slumps out of the room and back to his desk. He walks in a third time with his paper in hand. The father doesn't even look up from his work but holds out his hand until the boy places the paper in it. Then he reads his son's work without reaching for the red pencil.

Slowly, agonizingly, he looks through his readers perched on the end of his nose. Then he looks over them to the boy fidgeting in the wooden chair on the other side of the desk, and he says, without smirk or grin, "Good, now throw it away."

In the movie *A River Runs Through It*, the boy seems to be immune to his father's emotionless interaction. He just wants to run off and play, but

most people watching feel the heavy weight of trying to earn their father's blessing and falling just short. Many of us have had that moment on the chair, anxiously waiting for something other than a red pencil slashing through our work. Some of us chase this blessing our entire lives.

This image of the father, behind the big desk, red pencil at the ready, reading glasses like shields

This doesn't seem like the kind of cheery text we expect in this season of expectation. Why start Advent with such a downer? Because it's the truth.

under his eyes—this stern, displeased and unaffected countenance—is how many of us imagine God. We bring our offering to God, lay it on the altar or the desk and nervously wait.

And we imagine God circling and crossing through—revealing how our offering wasn't big enough, our prayers weren't eloquent or spiritual enough, the love we showed our neighbor was selfish and just made us feel better about our own plight. We know we're not good enough for God and we're just waiting for God to tell us, "Again, but half as long."

The Psalmist exclaims on behalf of the entire nation:

How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of



art courtesy of the Franciscanos de la Cruzblanca

tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

Psalm 80 is a national lament. This is not just one pilgrim's cry to God about God's rejection or absence. This is written on behalf of the people. They all want to know how long they must wait until they return to God's favor. "Give ear, O shepherd! Hear our prayer! Listen to us!" They want to get God's attention. They are desperate for God to look their way, to rescue them from this plight—a plight that

The reason we observe this season of waiting is to focus our attention to the fact that we are always waiting, always watching, always crying out to God to break through the darkness and make the presence of the Lord of Hosts known throughout the world and in our hearts.

they, in fact, blame on God. "You made us the scorn of our neighbors; you fed us the bread of tears." How often we blame God for our maladies!

It seems every time a tornado rips through a community and decimates the buildings and the lives they cover, some lunatic is using whatever platform he or she can find to prognosticate about the sin of that particular community—a sin that must have led to God swirling God's finger in disgust and flicking the tornado to that town. Every hurricane that lands on anyone's shores with winds and crashing waves of devastation is followed quickly by someone claiming they know the reason the hurricane spun their way. And it generally has to do with the fact that those communities aren't hating the right people enough, or they are daring to try to enact legislation or fight legislation that violates the self-righteous proclaimer's sense of right.

It seems that no tragedy is too deep, no destruction is too wide to not be fair game these days for people to claim they know why God did this to "those people." And that's just vulgar and dim-witted, but it is easier to do than we think. When bad things happen to the bad people we can all get secretly smug about those things. And we're getting worse and worse about keeping that to ourselves.

We blame God for all of the bad things that happen to the bad people and we think of it as a

cleansing kind of exercise of divine power. But when the bad things happen to the good people, we don't want to blame those things on God. And we resent it when someone else does, because we know those people and they don't deserve that. So around and around we go, passing the blame for this and that on God when it suits us and on something else when it does not.

When the tragedy hits home, do we then also blame God? Sometimes we do. In the same way that we assume God is out to get the bad people in our world with hurricanes and tsunamis and fires, we also assume that God does some of this in our own lives when we deserve it—when we've been the bad people. We know we have not been living the way we should, and so God sent this tragedy or that to get our attention—to straighten us out.

We can even back into this thinking: I'm sick... bad sick. What did I do to make God mad at me? Was it that thing with my sister? She had it coming. It was my car and I was just letting her borrow it, but she wasn't getting a job, so I took it back and sold it. Maybe I should have given her more time. Maybe it was the thing with my spouse...or my business partner. I guess if I think about it long enough, there's a whole list of things that would make God mad enough at me to send this illness. We picture God like a frustrated father behind a desk, slashing our lives with the red pencil of righteousness and disappointment. Do it again...but better this time.

There are also times when we look at the pain in our own lives and we know this isn't something we deserve. We're not perfect, but we're also not bad enough to get *this* or to have *that* happen to us. Why would God treat me this way? Why is God mad at me?

This seems to be where the Psalmist is in this particular psalm. There is no real confession in Psalm 80. You don't get the groveling of recognized sin and uttered transgressions. But there is a very real sense that God is the one who brought these things about—or at least allowed them to happen. And I suspect we can all get there in our thinking: Okay, maybe God didn't give my loved one cancer or depression or alcoholism, but God didn't stop it either.

"How long will you fume against our prayers?" the psalmist asks. The NRSV translates this, "how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" but that leaves out some of the richness of the language used. Anger is generic. It's waiting for something else to be added to it—like a biscuit

waiting to be buttered. But God fuming—that has action to it. There is a visual that goes with that and this is a very visual psalm. “How long will you fume at your people’s prayers?”

It could be that the psalmist is feeling God’s wrath burning hot against the prayers of the people, or it could be that they are up against divine indifference. God’s fuming is more about the thick cloud of smoke than it is the flicker of flames. And this smoke is a barrier between God and the

And so we pray. And we wait. And we watch, because the story we live as we walk this Advent journey together has God showing God’s face in a way we would have never predicted nor imagined.

prayers of God’s people—an impenetrable field of confusion and distance. God’s fuming is another way to describe the perceived absence of God. “How long will you turn a deaf ear to the prayers of your people? How long will you let the cries of our hearts drift into a cloud of nothingness? How long will our desperate prayers wander lost in the smoke of your anger or apathy?”

That hits close to home. We may not know God’s anger, but I suspect most of us can relate to God’s hiddenness, God’s absence. Our prayers do not penetrate the divine smoke.

They can’t find their way through to be heard. It’s as if they are hopelessly roving in a valley of fog—forever nomads in a misty wasteland. At the end of the day, it may not matter much whether we think God caused our pain or simply allowed it; we still need God’s presence.

In our acute pain, in the midst of the turmoil, we often want to know why, but far more than “why” we want to know “where.” Where are you, God, in the midst of this agony? Answers to “why” will wait. Are you close enough to hear my prayers through the cloud of unknowing? Can you feel my pain from where you are? Does it have any affect on you, or are you so far removed that I am inconsequential? Where are you, God, and how long will you hide from the prayers of your people?

This doesn’t seem like the kind of cheery text we expect in this season of expectation. Why start Advent with such a downer? Because it’s the

truth. It’s where we are, and it’s the reason we are so desperately following the star, listening to the angel’s proclamation, wondering and wandering with the shepherds, peering into the cave, peeking over the trough to see if we can see Light in the midst of such inky darkness.

The reason we observe this season of waiting is to focus our attention to the fact that we are always waiting, always watching, always crying out to God to break through the darkness and make the presence of the Lord of Hosts known throughout the world and in our hearts.

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we may be saved.” The psalmist isn’t calling for horses and chariots. He or she isn’t asking for swords and shields or power or wealth. Genuine pain rips the illusion right off of those things and reveals their limits to really matter in our lives. No, the desperate prayer is one of presence: Let your face shine that we may be saved. Shine the light of your face into our shadows. Illumine our world with your radiant love and mercy. Light the path that leads us to you, for we are groping about in the darkness of our pain and suffering—praying for you to be near. We are perishing and the only thing that will save us, the only thing that will really matter in our lives, above all of the other things for which we might wish, is the light of your glory. We need the effervescence of your Grace. We want to be blinded by your Light.

And so we pray. And we wait. And we watch, because the story we live as we walk this Advent journey together has God showing God’s face in a way we would have never predicted nor imagined.

The epic we witness has a remarkable twist that no one saw coming. And if God so surprised us then by shining God’s face and saving us in ways that were new and unpredicted, why wouldn’t God continue to astonish us by shining light in places and in ways we didn’t expect or anticipate?

My sisters and brothers, as we enter this season of radiance, may the prayer on our lips join the prayer of the psalmist and the people of God for thousands of years, “Restore us O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Amen.

— Erin Conaway, a native of Midland, TX, is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. Not only is he generous with his writings in the pages of Sacred Seasons, but he is also supportive in many other ways. As this Advent packet was being produced, he stayed up nearly all night cooking “Holy Smoke” barbeque for a Seeds fundraiser.

A Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

We wait for the light of peace to help us become children of reconciliation, in the midst of unholy conflicts within our world and within our hearts and minds.

—Deborah E. Harris

Prelude

Processional Hymn

“Tell Out, My Soul”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #94)

TUNE: WOODLANDS

WORDS: Timothy Dudley-Smith, 1961

MUSIC: Henry W. Greatorex, 1919, alt.

Call to Worship and Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Note: For each Sunday in Advent, we suggest that

you sing a different verse to the hymn below (or add a verse each week) while the appropriate candles are lit. It was selected as a hymn that would be easy for the congregation to sing, but you might also consider having a solo, perhaps a cappella.

“Light the Light, the Fire of Life”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #82)

TUNE: IL EST NÉ

WORDS: David Montoya

MUSIC: French carol, 18th century;

arr. David W. Music

Hymn

“The Message We Now Are Proclaiming”

(El Mensaje que Hoy Proclamamos)

(Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice
and Peace hymnal #46)

WORDS and MUSIC:

Eleazar Torreglosa,

Colombia, 2007

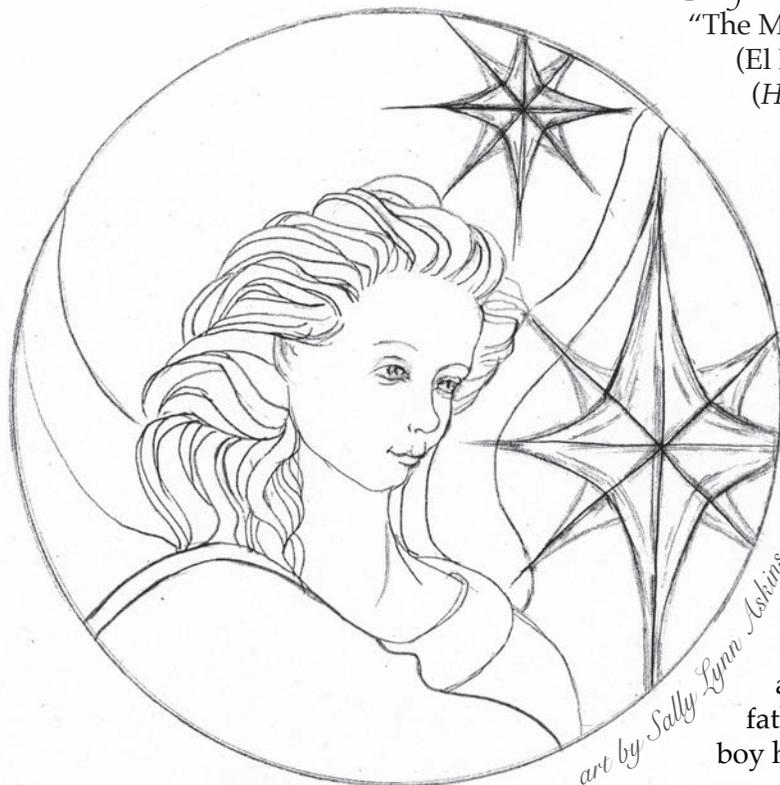
Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 40:1-11

Meditation of Preparation

We cannot make room for Advent
unless we follow the path of peace.

The journey takes us from the shelter
of a mother’s womb to the exposure of
a wayward world. We travel by way of
a shiny-eyed toddler holding fast to his
father’s finger, who grows into a precocious
boy holding his own with the temple elders. We



meet a young man who learns a carpenter's trade, and then becomes a teacher who would trade his life for any one of us, for all of us. Indeed, the way of peace is not without conflict or paradox. It is ultimately a matter of the heart. And where the journey ends it begins again.

—Deborah E. Harris

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Hymn

"Jesus Comes with Clouds
Descending"

(*The Worshipping Church*
hymnal #283)

TUNE: BRYN CALFARIA

WORDS: Charles Wesley, 1758

MUSIC: Martin Madan, 1760

Reading from the Epistles
2 Peter 3:8-15a

Gospel Reading

Mark 1:1-8

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Response

Our happiness is all mixed
up with each other's peace.
Our own happiness, our own
peace, can never be complete
until we find some way of
sharing it with people who the
way things are now have no
happiness and know no peace.
Jesus calls us to show this truth
forth, live this truth forth. Be
the light of the world, he says.
Where there are dark places, be
the light especially there.

—Frederick Buechner, *The
Clown in the Belfry*

Hymn of Response

"Comfort, Comfort Ye My People"
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #89)

TUNE: PSALM 42

WORDS: Johannes Olearius, 1671; tr. Catherine
Winkworth, 1863, alt.

MUSIC: *Geneva Psalter*, 1551

Benediction

Postlude

Litany for the Second Sunday in Advent

ONE: We are in the midst of Advent, yet we are surrounded by
glitz, consumerism, and contrived joy.

MANY: In all of this, how can we find the Holy?

ONE: The season is overloading our senses, crowding our calendars,
and making our minds a blur.

MANY: How can we hear the song of the angels through the noise
of the malls?

ONE: We sing of peace on earth and then we see what a mess we've
made of our world.

MANY: How can we think of the Holy when terror, war, and stock
market reports strike fear into our hearts?

ONE: We sing of joy, while swirling around us are worries about
jobs and bills and illness and loneliness.

MANY: How can we find joy when all we feel is estrangement and
stress?

ONE: And yet...and yet, this time and place can be for us a Holy
time and a Holy place.

MANY: We want to experience the Holy again. We want to feel the
wonder.

ONE: Let us listen to the stories of the Holy One who has come
among us.

MANY: We want to hear the songs of the angels again.

ONE: Let us quiet the noise of the world, and let us quiet our hearts.
MANY: We want to know that sense of peace, that sense of joy, that
the stories tell about. We want to feel the hope, the love.

ONE: Let our souls' whispers become songs of shepherds and babes
and kings from afar.

MANY: Oh little child of Bethlehem, come to
us, we pray.

—Katie Cook



A Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

*We wait for the light of joy to teach us to recognize and celebrate all that is
good and right and true.*

—Deborah E. Harris

Prelude

Processional Hymn

“The Advent of Our God”

(*The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* hymnal #180)

TUNE: ST. THOMAS

WORDS: Charles Coffin; tr. John Chandler

MUSIC: Aaron Williams

Call to Worship and Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Note: For each Sunday in Advent, we suggest that you sing a different verse to the hymn below (or add a verse each week) while the appropriate candles are lit. It was selected as a hymn that would be easy for the congregation to sing, but you might also consider having a solo, perhaps a cappella.

“Light the Light, the Fire of Life”

(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #82)

TUNE: IL EST NÉ

WORDS: David Montoya

MUSIC: French carol, 18th century;

arr. David W. Music

Hymn

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”

(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #81)

TUNE: PICARDY

WORDS: Liturgy of St. James (5th

cent.);

tr. Gerard Moultrie, 1864

MUSIC: Trad. French carol;

harm. *The English Hymnal*, 1906

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

Meditation of Preparation

The angelic tidings of great joy and salvation greet us and give us direction wherever we



find ourselves this Advent. As Eugene Peterson so beautifully interprets Psalm 19:7-8, "The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together. The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road. The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy." In Christ, we come face to face with the Joy of all our longing hearts. We encounter a holy joy not subject to whim and circumstance—a joy that runs deep and true, even in the midst of pain and loss and doubt and tragedy. This unquenchable joy could never be contained in one sacred season of life, but instead journeys with us, no matter which way we are called to go home.

—Deborah E. Harris

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 126

Hymn

"This Land of Beauty Has Been Given"
(*Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace* hymnal #63)

WORDS and MUSIC: Elena G. Maquiso,
Philippines, alt.

Reading from the Epistles

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Gospel Reading

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Response

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*

Hymn of Response

"Christians All, Your Lord Is Coming"

(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #85)

TUNE: PLEADING SAVIOR

WORDS: Jim Miller, 1993

MUSIC: Joshua Leavitt's *The Christian Lyre*, 1830;
harm. Donald Murphy, 2008

Benediction

Postlude

art by Jesse Manning



The Darkness Will Never Conquer It

A Dramatic Reading for Youth and Others

by Katie Cook

Note: This reading would be appropriate for a nighttime service any time during Advent. You will need a number of candles (about fifty small hand-held tapers and nine tall pillars) and something with which to light them. You will need five readers and several people to light candles. Position the pillar candles in a semi-circle around the back of the stage.

The readers should have hand-held candles, which they will keep concealed until near the end. The candle lighters should start at the back of the stage area and move toward the front as the reading progresses.

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

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

After the prelude, Reader One steps out onto the platform or podium. The other readers should be sitting in the darkness on the platform, ready to stand and speak when it is their turn. The candle lighters should be spread out around the stage area. The first lighter should be ready to light the first candle (at the center and back of the stage) while the readers say "Light!"

Then the lighters should move away from the center, alternating from left to right as they light the pillars. As the readers reach the section about the Word, the lighters

will begin moving to the participants in a circle, lighting their candles and indicating for them to pass on the light.

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

READER TWO: And God spoke into the darkness,

READERS THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE: Light!
The first pillar is lit.

READER TWO: And God sang into the darkness,

READERS THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE: Light, light, light!
The next two pillars are lit.

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

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

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

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

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

READER TWO: And they sang,

READERS THREE AND FOUR:



You are my lamp, O God. *Another pillar is lit.*

READER ONE: And again they sang,

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

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

READER TWO: And yet the prophet wrote,

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

READER TWO: And he wrote,

READERS FOUR AND FIVE: "The glorious light of God rises upon you." *Another pillar is lit.*

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

READER TWO: But then something astounding happened! *The last pillar is lit.*

READER THREE: The Word became a human being, and lived among the other humans.

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

READER FIVE: The Word became a creature, and lived among the other creatures. Among US.

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

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

READER THREE: And the darkness could not conquer it.

READER FOUR: The darkness could not overcome it.

READER FIVE: The darkness could not extinguish it.

READER ONE: This man said,

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

READER ONE: And he said,

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

READER THREE: Even now, he calls us out of the darkness into his light. *By this time the readers' candles should be lit.*

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

READER FIVE: Even now, in this present darkness. *Readers indicate, by holding up their candles, that candles should be held high.*

The service could then end with a hymn and the passing of the peace. Appropriate hymns include "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," or "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light." If you don't want the participants to have to worry with hymnals or song sheets, you could opt for "Silent Night," since most of them will be familiar with the words. You could ask a soloist or ensemble to offer the song.

If you prefer a more exuberant ending, you could bring up the house lights a little and ask the congregation to file out of the area singing, "We Are Marching in the Light of God," an African hymn available from the Walton Music Corporation. Then you could ask for the passing of the peace outside, as the participants leave.



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

Happiness & Joy: A Comparison

by Douglas M. Donley

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.

—Doug Donley is the pastor of University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. The passage above is an excerpt from his sermon, "Rivers of Joy."



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us and our own snowbound, snowblind longing for him.

—Frederick Buechner

With you,
let us imagine the world at peace.
With you,
let us imagine our purpose
at one with yours.
Oh, God, let all our imaginings
be not merely dreams
but the beginning of our moving
in the world with you.
Imagine with us, God.
Imagine.
Imagine.

—Sharlande Sledge, *Prayers and Litanies for the Christian Seasons*

Because this is all yet to be—
because God is not finished yet—
because the story is still being
written—
we anticipate.
It is our hope.
It is our prayer.
—John S. Ballenger

May the blessing of light be on you—
light without and light within.
May the blessed sunlight shine
on you like a great peat fire,
So that stranger and friend
may come and warm himself at it.
And may light shine out of
the two eyes of you,
like a candle set in the window
of a house,
bidding the wanderer come
in out of the storm.
—From a Scottish blessing

All Is Calm

by Deborah E. Harris



art by Sally Lynn Askins

O Jesus, Gentle Savior and Mighty God,
forgive our foolish ways and needless fears.

Let the radiant star of Bethlehem
be our steady compass and guide.

Let the sweet innocence of your birth and incarnation
wrap 'round us as a blanket of hope and trust.

And let us know the rest
that your heavenly peace affords
—even when the voyage takes us
through turbulent waters.

Only anchored by your love
can we truly proclaim,
“All is calm.”

—From “Prayer for a New Year’s Voyage,”
in the 2004 Lake Shore Baptist Church Advent worship book,
All Is Calm

A Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

We wait for the light of love to fill us with compassion for each other, and for our neighbors—hungry, lonely, and in need of comfort.

—Deborah E. Harris

Prelude

Processional Hymn

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten”

(Glory to God hymnal #108)

TUNE: DIVINUM MYSTERIUM

WORDS: Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, 5th cent.;

tr. Henry Williams Baker, 1859;

tr. John H. Neale, 1854

MUSIC: Plainsong, Mode V;

harm. C. Winfred Douglas, 1940

Call to Worship and Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Note: For each Sunday in Advent, we suggest that you sing a different verse to the hymn below (or add a verse each week) while the appropriate candles are lit. It was selected as a hymn that would be easy for the congregation to sing, but you might also consider having a solo, perhaps a cappella.

“Light the Light, the Fire of Life”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #82)

TUNE: IL EST NÉ

WORDS: David Montoya

MUSIC: French carol, 18th century;

arr. David W. Music

Hymn

“Blest Be the God of Israel”

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #88)

TUNE: MERLE’S TUNE

WORDS: Michael Perry, 1973

MUSIC: Hal Hopson, 1983

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Meditation of Preparation

As we journey week by week through Advent, we come to the realization that we could never find our way to hope, peace or joy without love. Love opens our minds and hearts to all that is holy and shows us who we are meant to be. In her book *Opening to Miracles*, Betty Clare Moffatt writes, “Practicing the presence of love changes your perceptions. And changing your perceptions creates miracles around you.” Love has never



been more *present* than in the birth of Jesus. Love made flesh, swaddled, and placed in our arms. To this world fractured by fear and hate and greed and despair, the Creator responds, not with punishment or judgment, but with love. Love is born, and when we are graced to love, we are born anew.

—Deborah E. Harris

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Hymn

“Not the Powerful, Not the Privileged”
(Admin. by Wild Goose Publications)

TUNE: PEDIGREE

WORDS and MUSIC: John L. Bell, 1999

Reading from the Epistles

Romans 16:25-27

First Gospel Reading

Luke 1:26-38

Second Gospel Reading

Luke 1:46b-55

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Response

Love can be rather intimidating. When you start talking in terms of the most significant, the deepest, richest, most intimate—you’re getting into some scary dimensions of relating. There’s a vulnerability involved, a trust, an interdependence you choose, a commitment. It’s a risk, a big risk, and what you’re risking is yourself. It’s a gamble, and the stakes don’t get any higher. Is it worth it? Most of us would say yes, but for God’s sake, let’s be careful out there. But it’s not for God’s sake. It’s for our sake that into these responses to love, rises

the Star of Bethlehem. The Advent of Jesus is the astounding claim that love is the only way to relate—to anyone. The Advent of Jesus is God’s emphatic reaffirmation that love is the way God chooses to relate to each of us.

—John S. Ballenger

Hymn of Response

“With My Voice Alone” (Honja Sorironeum)
(*Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace* hymnal #79)

WORDS and MUSIC: Moon Seong Mo, Korea, 2013

Benediction

Postlude

The incarnation is the glory of God that the angels sing.

It is the power of God at work in the miracles.

It is the wisdom of God informing the parables.

It is the truth of God in the sayings of Jesus.

It is the love of God in the relationships Jesus makes.

It is the justice of God in the teaching of Jesus.

It is the transcendence of God even in human form.

Immanuel is “God with us.”

Thanks be to God.

The incarnation is the glory of God wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

It is the power of God made vulnerable.

It is the wisdom of God shared at the dinner table over bread and wine.

It is the truth of God pointed out in flowers and sheep.

It is the love of God in hugs and touch.

It is the justice of God in relationships with the unclean and the despised.

It is the immanence of God even in human form.

Immanuel is “God with us.”

Thanks be to God.

—John S. Ballenger, “Bring Your Hands Together: An Advent Meditation in Lessons and Carols for Nine Voices, Instrumentalists, Soloists and Choir in Three Acts for Christmas Eve”

Lessons, Carols & Candles for Christmas Eve

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

Opening Carol

"Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #122)
TUNE: IN DULCI JUBILO
WORDS: Medieval Latin carol, 14th cent.;
tr. John M. Neale, 1853
MUSIC: Trad. German carol, 14th cent.

First Reading

Isaiah 9:2-7

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Second Carol

"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #132)
TUNE: CAROL
WORDS: Edmund H. Sears, 1849
MUSIC: Richard Storrs Willis, 1850

Second Reading

Isaiah 65:17-25

Lighting of the Peace Candle

Third Carol

"Star-Child"
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #145)
TUNE: STAR-CHILD
WORDS: Shirley Erena Murray, 1994
MUSIC: Carlton Young, 1994

Third Reading

Psalms 96

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Fourth Carol

"Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come"
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #102)
TUNE: ANTIOCH
WORDS: Isaac Watts, 1719
MUSIC: George Frederick Handel; arr. Lowell
Mason, 1836

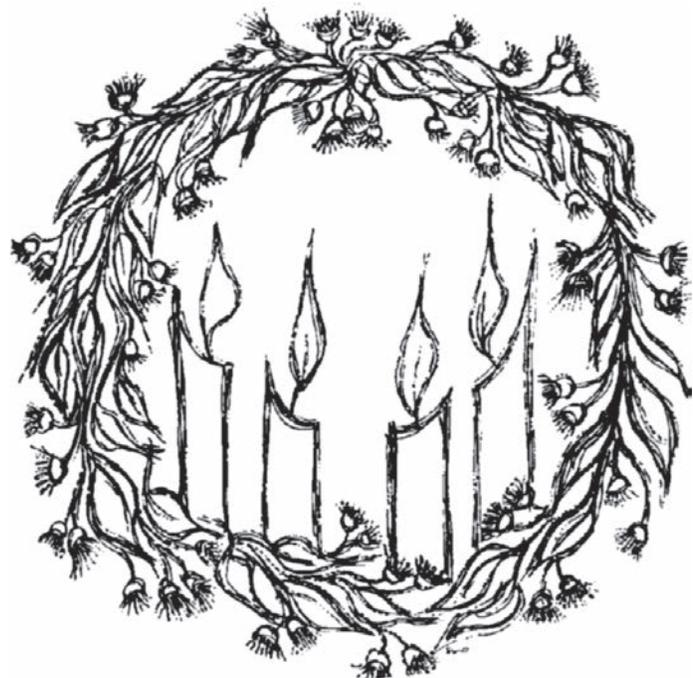
Fourth Reading

John 1:1-14

Lighting of the Love Candle

Fifth Carol

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #107)
TUNE: ST. LOUIS



art by Susan Daily, TBM

WORDS: Phillips Brooks,
1868
MUSIC: Lewis H. Redner,
1868

Fifth Reading
Luke 2:1-20

*Lighting of the Christ
Candle*

Nativity Prayer

Dearest Infant God,
Your presence among us,
yea, right here in our
arms—
has opened our eyes and
hearts to the holy bliss of
your infinite love;
Teach us your kind of
simplicity,
and how to focus on the
weightier matters;
Help us to overcome the
fears that can shut us
down
and hinder our just, loving,
and merciful response
to our brothers and sisters
traveling with us on the
journey each day.
We want more than
anything
for our lives to be simple
gifts
that bless others and honor
you. Amen.
—Deborah E. Harris

Closing Carol

“Silent Night, Holy Night”
(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal
#134)

TUNE: STILLE NACHT
WORDS: Joseph Mohr,
1818; tr. John Freeman
Young (st. 1, 3), 1863; tr.
Anonymous (st. 2, 4)
MUSIC: Franz Grüber,
1818

My Bright Shining Hope Within

by Deborah E. Harris



Sometimes I feel like a child in the dark—
Every unknown brings more fear to my heart;
I reach for comfort, my eyes long to see
Your light of victory;
Still on the journey, yet still far from home,
I start to wonder where all my strength has gone;
Then You remind me my weak knees must bend
to stand in faith again.

You are the Bright Star of Morning,
The light for a heart that's grown dim;
You are the Bright Star of Morning,
Grace to begin life again;
When the night is long, I can hear Your song
Of promise that dawn will come;
Yes, You are the Bright Star of Morning—
My bright shining hope within.

Learning to trust you and knowing You care,
Bringing both praises and pain to You in prayer,
The weight of the world like a morning mist will rise;
Again, I realize...

You are the Bright Star of Morning,
The light for a heart that's grown dim;
You are the Bright Star of Morning,
Grace to begin life again;
When the night is long, I can hear Your song
Of promise that dawn will come;
Yes, You are the Bright Star of Morning—
My bright shining hope within.

—From the 1996 *Lake Shore Baptist Church Advent Worship
Booklet, Flashes of Brightness*

art by Sally Lynn Askins

A Liturgy for Christmas Day

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

Prelude

Processional Hymn

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #103)

TUNE: ADESTE FIDELES

WORDS: Latin hymn; attr. to John Francis Wade, ca. 1743; tr. Frederick Oakeley, 1841, alt.

MUSIC: John Francis Wade, ca. 1743

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

Note: The following carol is sung to the same tune as "Light the Light, the Fire of Life," the hymn that has been used for the four Sundays in Advent. You could have instruments playing or a soloist humming as the candles are lit, and move smoothly into the first carol.

First Carol

"He Is Born"

(Celebrating Grace hymnal #106)

TUNE: IL EST NÉ

WORDS: Trad. French carol

MUSIC: French carol, 18th cent.;
harm. David W. Music, 1999

A Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 52:7-10

Meditation of Preparation

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

A Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 98

Reading from the Epistles

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

Second Carol

"The Hands that First Held Mary's Child"
(Celebrating Grace hymnal #115)

TUNE: KINGSFOLD

WORDS: Thomas H. Troeger, 1985

MUSIC: English folk melody;

harm. Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1906



Gospel Reading
John 1:1-14

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Response

Where, indeed, should your
Light have shown except
upon those who sit in
darkness?

—from an Orthodox chant

Third Carol

“From Heaven Above to
Earth I Come”

(*Celebrating Grace*
hymnal #128)

TUNE: VOM HIMMEL
HOCH

WORDS: Martin Luther,
1535; tr. Catherine
Winkworth, 1855, alt.

MUSIC: Valentin
Schumann’s *Geistliche*
Lieder, 1539

Benediction

O glorious God, every
Advent we come to the
manger, kneel alongside
the shepherds and kings,
and wonder anew at your
Extravagant Gift. You
have given yourself to us,
affirmed our worth to you,
and from your fullness
we have all received grace
upon grace. In the presence
of your unconditional Love
and pure Light, we yearn
to be transformed into
extravagant gifts ourselves.
Please give us the wisdom
and courage to be poured
out as wine upon the

altar for you, to be broken as bread to feed the
hungry for you, to love with humble abandon and
childlike joy.

—Deborah E. Harris

Being the Light:

Some Ideas for Parents and Children’s Leaders

I trapped my church’s associate pastor, Matt Rosencrans, as I was pulling together this packet, and I wouldn’t let him leave the church office until he gave me some ideas for talking to children about the light of Advent. Since he was a youth minister for a number of years, and has been married to a children’s minister for even longer, I thought he might have ideas that we haven’t already printed in the 19 years we’ve been making Advent packets.

Matt said he thought it was important to help children understand that the light of Advent comes slowly. “I don’t think we could handle it if we were exposed to the light of God all at once,” he said. Ruth Ann Foster, Matt’s seminary professor, said long ago that the reason the early Church chose the winter solstice for the celebration of Christ’s birth was not to replace a Roman festival. She said it was chosen because, at the solstice, the days began to get longer.

We discussed various ways of showing this—starting the discussion in a dark space and using a light dimmer to increase the light gradually, using a layer of blindfolds to show degrees of light, explaining how the light gets stronger with each Advent candle being added, or pointing out how the daylight lasts a little bit longer every day as the earth moves closer to the sun. You may have ideas of your own.

We suggest that you then talk to the children about how they can create light in someone’s darkness with very simple acts of kindness. Here are a few examples:

1. Find out about someone in your church who is sick, and make a get-well card for him or her.
2. Make a Christmas stocking for a homebound person in your family or in your church.
3. Encourage a group to go to a nursing home and sing Christmas carols for the residents.
4. Give up one of your gifts for a child whom you know won’t get much for Christmas.
5. Write a letter to someone who is lonely or discouraged.

—Katie Cook



A Liturgy for Epiphany

by Katie Cook & Guilherme Almeida

Prelude

Processional Hymn

"We Are Singing, for the
Lords Is Our Light"

(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal
#155)

TUNE: SIYAHAMBA

WORDS: South African; tr.

Hal Hopson, 1994

MUSIC: Zulu melody; adapt.

Hal Hopson, 1994

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 60:1-6

Meditation of Preparation

"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*

A Reading from the Psalms

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Hymn

"A New Way Has Opened" (Un Camino Se Abre)
(*Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace*
hymnal #18)



WORDS and MUSIC:
Collective Creation,
Matanzas, Cuba

Reading from the Epistles

Ephesians 3:1-12

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Response

Marvel with me that, in
the beginning, even as God
swept over the darkened face
of the formless void of the
earth and its deep waters,
God gave voice to an Idea.
"Let there be light," and there
was light. Then, in the fullness

of time, even as spiritual darkness shrouded a
lonely and hollow world, God chose that light
to lead wise seekers to the One who would give
voice to God's Idea of love and mercy and justice
and redemption. *What has come into being in him
was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

—Deborah E. Harris

Hymn of Response

"Shine, Jesus, Shine"

(*Celebrating Grace* hymnal #156)

TUNE: SHINE

WORDS and MUSIC: Graham Kendrick, 1987;

arr. Tom Fettke, 1989

Benediction

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Dare We Look into the Light?

A Sermon for Epiphany

by Erin Conaway

Text: Isaiah 60: 1-6

He landed on Venus as it was being created. It was also called Perelandra. His name was Ransom. He had been engaged in an epic battle with what he called the Un-man, who seemed to be a fallen angel possessing a man Ransom once knew. They fought hand to hand, fingernail to fingernail, blow for blow. At one point they were in the ocean, riding on sea creatures, when the Un-man grabbed Ransom's arm and pulled him down.

They seemed to be plunging at an impossibly fast rate, as if they were anchored to the ocean floor itself. Ransom struggled until he could not do it anymore. He decided he was drowning, but he could not make his body cooperate with his mind, and just breathe in the water and be done with it.

As his awareness began to fade, he felt a change in direction. They were now going up—and somehow they seemed to explode out of the water, but into a cave of some sort, for there was no light at all, only thick darkness. The fight continued and Ransom was able to gain the upper hand and finally subdue the Un-man. He then thought he would only need to wait for the sun to rise and then he would find his way out of this cave.

He waited for this night to end. He tried to occupy himself by reciting all of the poetry he knew. He set out for himself chess problems and then tried to solve them in his mind. He even tried to work on a chapter of a book

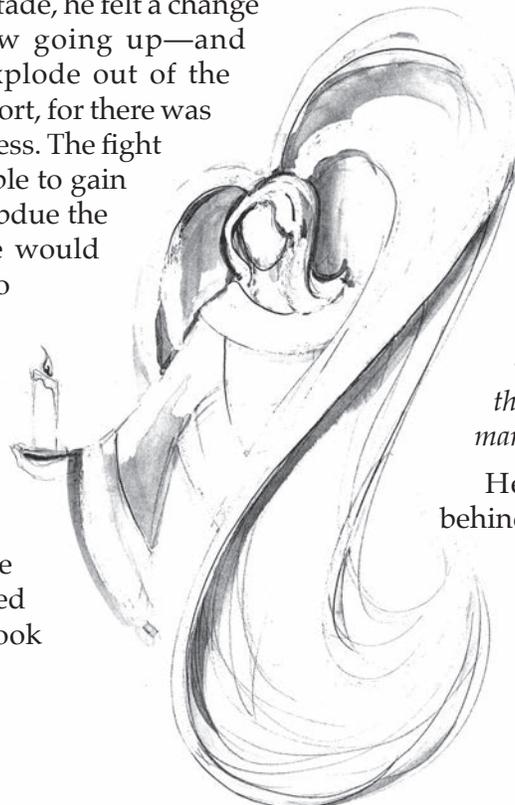
he was writing, but, as he recalled later, "it was all rather a failure. These things went on, alternating with periods of dogged inactivity, until it seemed to him that he could hardly remember a time before that night."¹

Through a series of groping crawls, he determined he was in a cavern under the water. It seemed impossible to reverse the entrance and swim against the current that threw them up onto this inky beach. So he began to crawl and climb, each step tenuous; he didn't know when the smooth stones under his feet would quickly turn to jagged rocks. He would run into a steep rock and had to begin climbing, and then he would reach a landing and crawl forward.

At one point he realized he was able to stand and walk slowly, curling his toes with each step to keep from stubbing them so painfully into the larger stones. He tried yelling to judge the size of the room, but he could only discern that he was in a large cavern.

The starvation for light became very painful. He found himself thinking about light as a hungry man thinks about food.

He started to hear other noises behind him. That quickened his pace. He was also getting hungry for food and he thought he would take a rest,



art by Sally Lynn Askins

but just at that moment he saw the light. His eyes had been mocked before so often that he would not at first believe it. He shut them while he counted to one hundred and looked again. He turned round and sat down for several minutes, praying that it might not be a delusion and looked again

He began to follow it on the water, almost stepping into it until he came to the place where it was directly overhead, coming from an upper cave.

Ransom immediately decided to get into the upper cave, though he was thinking the redness of the light meant it came from a subterranean fire and he could feel the heat radiating down onto his body.

What really moved him, he thinks, was the mere hunger for light. The very first glance at the funnel restored dimensions and perspective to his world, and this in itself was like a delivery from prison. It seemed to tell him far more than it actually did of his surroundings: it gave him back that whole frame of spatial directions without which a man seems hardly able to call his body his own. After this, any return to the horrible black vacancy, the world of soot and grime, the world without size or distance, in which he had been wandering, was out of the question.

C.S. Lewis thus imagines part of this journey for Ransom as he inhabits Perelandra and engages in this battle with evil in a new world. There are wonderful allusions to the Genesis narrative and then great imaginative leaping points in this novel. I love this scene, because it paints such a vivid picture of the complete and total darkness that exists in places in our world, and how the presence of light is so miraculous and piercing into that thick darkness.

Thick darkness, that's the way Isaiah describes the condition of the earth and the people upon it in our Old Testament reading for today: "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." It is a powerful word of hope to a people who knew well what living in thick darkness was like.

This is thought to be in the section of Isaiah that probably came after the exile or at least near the end of the exile. Israel has just been beaten down in so many different ways by so many different oppressors that it's hard to even imagine what the people of Israel are feeling as they take stock of their situation and their place in the world.

They are defeated, scattered and living as if they were already dead. They are paying tributes

to far-away kings and nations, seeing their best and brightest taken away and wondering, if they ever come back, how diluted they will be with the sins of other cultures and other gods.

Thick darkness covers the people, and into that darkness Isaiah brings the word of the Lord saying, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." This light will do what C.S. Lewis so beautifully described above, it will restore your ability to see, and with it you will find new dimensions to life you had forgotten even existed.

You will come again to recognize that there is depth in the world and in your persons. You will see how expansive is the Glory of the Lord as you now look upon the hills covered richly with vines and sheep and cattle. You will once again be able to make out the promise of the Promised Land, because God's Light is now shining over you. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Isaiah goes on to paint a picture that is not only metaphorically brilliant and beautiful, but also practically hopeful and full of promise. Isaiah says to look out in this new light that lets you see and notice the parade of hope coming toward you. Your sons and daughters shall be carried on their

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nurses' arms. Can you imagine what that must be like? Knowing that your children—who were taken from you, ripped untimely from your arms and your care in order to inflict maximum punishment and degradation on you as a people—your children are coming home, back to you and your love and instruction and care.

This is the promise of a glad reunion if ever there was one. It makes me think of the scenes we love to see of soldiers returning from their tours of duty and the family embraces they get as they step off of the plane or the ship. Coming home is such an archetypal event. We can all think of the power of coming home in various ways after being in the far country for too long. And the prophet Isaiah leans

into that familiarity and the righting of this horribly egregious wrong, telling the mothers and fathers that their children will come back.

As the glory of the Lord rises over the Israelites, their sight will be restored and their families will be reunited—and now Isaiah promises that their economy will also be returned:

The abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Finally, the flow of wealth and the movement of the camels bearing treasure will reverse course and begin to flow in instead of out. For as long as they can remember, they have been paying tributes to the kings of Assyria or Babylon or Persia. It is the great inversion of the geopolitics to which Israel has born the brunt for so many years.

They will be coming to us now, and the line of camels carrying gold and frankincense will stretch to the horizon. The reference to camels of Sheba recalls 1 Kings 10, when the Queen of Sheba brought exotic tribute in order to enhance the splendor of Solomon. That scene of opulent abundance flowing into Israel from far-away places is exactly what Isaiah is talking about here. That is the picture he is painting. We read in 1 Kings 10: “Never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon²

This reference would have brought all of this to mind for the hearers of this great promise.

This is good news. In fact, what could be better than the light of God rising over the Israelites, the return of their children, the abundance of the sea and the wealth of the nations all coming into Israel? If nothing could be better, then why did Isaiah need all of these imperatives? Arise, shine, lift up your eyes and look around. How could you possibly miss it?

Being in darkness, in thick darkness, has a way of changing a person and a people. You start to think there was no light before, only a faint dream or a childish wish for light. The darkness begins to sink in, to penetrate the body and the mind and the soul.

You begin to think and believe that this is the way things are—this is how they will always be—dark and destitute, lonely and full of misery. The prophet is trying to snap the Israelites out of their expectation of darkness and return their gaze to the

horizon and to the hills from where their help will come.

But hope is a dangerous thing.

The Israelites may not have wanted to believe that God’s light was about to shine brightly in their world, for several reasons. Maybe they were afraid of what God’s light would reveal. Maybe they had

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been living in darkness and engaging in dark deeds and they didn’t want any light in those shadows.

We know that the prophets were critical of how the Israelites were treating one another, even in the midst of their national struggles. They had started turning on one another and taking advantage of the weak ones and using each other up like commodities to be traded, rather than siblings to be cherished.

Maybe they were afraid the light was a hoax. They had come to know the darkness, learned to grope around and crawl instead of walk and maybe the thought of having to learn to navigate in the light was just too much. They’d rather stay with what they know, dark though it was.

And maybe they didn’t like the way the vision was unfolding. It started off great, with light exploding onto the scene and their kids coming home, and then all of those people who have mistreated them coming back with their treasures on their camels—some of OUR treasure on THEIR camels. And those enemies would finally bow at our feet, or at least that’s what we would like.

But the prophet says those enemies will proclaim the praise of the Lord. If we read on in this chapter, we can certainly find things that represent this attitude of revenge and forced humility upon those who have humiliated Israel and her daughters and sons. But there are also just as many references in Isaiah of God bringing forth justice to the nations (42:1), of God’s salvation extending to the ends of the earth (45:22).³

And the notion from the very beginning of God’s choosing of Israel was that her people were chosen

to be a priesthood to the nations. So it may be that this is not good news to those who would not want to stand side by side with the people from these other nations as they join in the praise of God. Will the people of Israel arise and shine and lift up their eyes and look around? Will they hope?

Will we? The same thick darkness can be found in many of our lives and in some ways in our life together. Some of us are still climbing out of an economic downturn. Natural disasters have come very close to us, wreaking havoc to our attempts at

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order and progress. Many of us have had their lives altered irreparably by the loss of a job, or the loss of a home, or the loss of a loved one.

We, too, have turned on one another and are taking advantage of the weak among us—hoarding resources for ourselves when our neighbors are freezing and hungry, in prison and thirsty, lonely and naked in their despair. Will we choose to stay in this thick darkness because it is the place we know, or will we heed the prophet's call to arise, to shine, to lift our eyes and see the glory of the Lord all around us?

The same temptations would keep us in the shadows. We too know the lure of the safety of misery over the risk of the unknown light. We know how tempting it is to keep lurking about in the darkness, because we know there are parts of all of our lives and parts of our life together that will not look pretty if they're exposed to the light. We have things we just rather keep in the obscurity of despair if it's all the same. And there may be a part of us that resists this sharing of God's grace and God's light and favor with other people.

That's one of the most radical and wonderful parts of this great season of light in our year. We celebrate Christmas and the Incarnation, and Epiphany, when God's miracle of love in the Incarnation was made known to people on the outside of the circle.

Simeon and Anna, who waited through the darkness, clinged to the promise of the light until it became a reality in their lives. The story begins with the insiders, but it doesn't take long before the story, the grace, expands to include the Other. God's Grace is always wider than we can imagine. God's Mercy is always deeper than we think is possible. And God's Light will break through the darkness, even the thick darkness, to bring the dimensions back into your life; to free you from your prison; and to call you farther in.

Friends, Arise. Shine. Lift up your eyes to see the salvation of God, the Light of the World, breaking through the darkness and calling you back to life. Let us walk in it together. Amen.

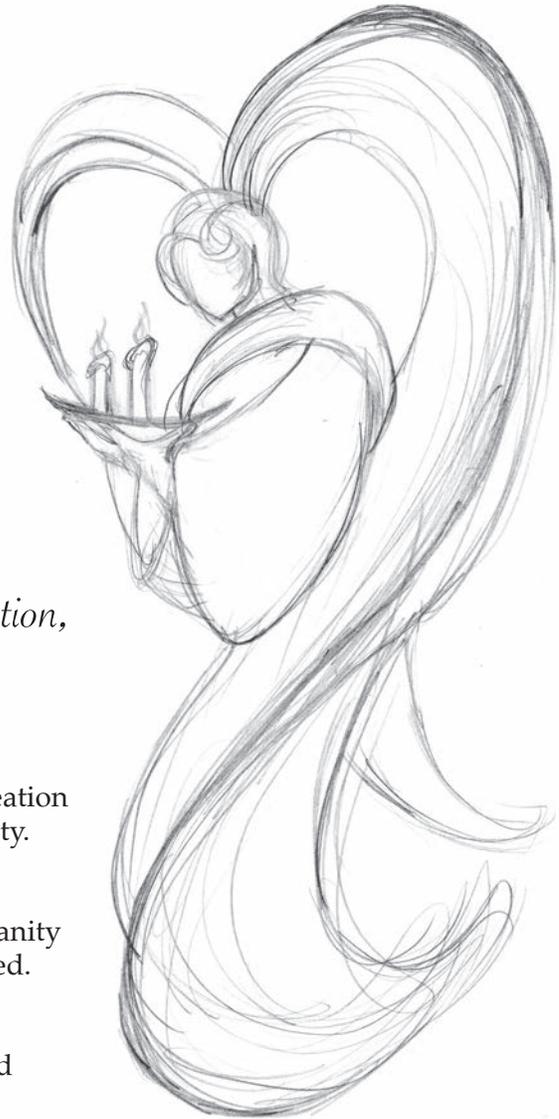
— Erin Conaway, a native of Midland, TX, is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. Not only is he generous with his writings in the pages of Sacred Seasons, but he is also supportive in many other ways. As this Advent packet was being produced, he stayed up nearly all night cooking "Holy Smoke" barbeque for a Seeds fundraiser.

Endnotes

1. All quotes are from C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*.
2. Brueggemann, Walter, *Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 40-66*, p. 205
3. Balentine, Samuel E., *Feasting on the Word, Year C. Vol. 1*. p. 199.



Benediction



art by Sally Lynn Askins

*O Timeless God beyond all finite imagination,
in this moment we stand still and breathless
before your greatness.*

*O Childlike Creator who dreams in color
and designs in delightful detail,
you have imagined a universe whose smallest creation
is big with wonder and limitless with possibility.*

Waken in the awe of Advent.

*Wrap us in the transforming embrace
of the Holy One who has come to redeem a humanity
captive and blind and broken and impoverished.*

*Forgive us when we grow fainthearted
in the midst of global strife
and personal trial, losing our imagination and
finding our spiritual vision blurred by tears.*

Restore to us the joy of our salvation.

*Let us hear afresh and echo abroad
the music of your mercy.*

*Call us unceasingly to join in the dance
of your redemptive love.*

*Through your grace, open our eyes again and again
To the Ever-Present Light
that the darkness cannot extinguish.*

*God with us...imagine!
God within us...imagine!
Alleluia! Yes, alleluia evermore!*

AMEN!

—Deborah E. Harris

This prayer was printed in the 1994 Lake Shore Advent Worship Booklet, God with us...Imagine.