

*Dreaming  
God's  
Dream*



*Creative Resources for Advent & Christmastide*

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

## Creative Worship Tools for Your Church

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### Editorial Address

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## Dreaming God's Dream

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### *a word about this packet*

Part of the cover art for this packet is taken from a 1980s bulletin of Seventh & James Baptist Church. The Sacred Seasons logo is by Sharon Rollins.

The underlying theme is taken from the creative mind of Dawn Ripley, a writer and conservationist who lives in New Albany, Indiana. Dawn suggested that the four weeks of Advent be taken from the Magnificat, and it was during brainstorming with her that the idea of God's dream (referring to the peaceable reign of God) came to the surface. Then Doug Donley's sermon, originally titled "Mary's Voice," provided the four divisions of Mary's song. We have tried to weave the idea of God's dream and Mary's proclamations together.

Only one of the contributors for this packet is new to our readers. Jim Ketcham, who lives in Rochester, contributed our sermon for Epiphany Sunday. He first preached the sermon at Doug Donley's church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Our readers have seen Sharon Rollins's writing and art before; in this issue you will see a new form of meditation she borrowed from the author Kevin Anderson. Deborah Harris has also contributed meditations and hymns, as well as creative consultation. There are one or two new pieces of art from Rebecca Ward, who started with us as a student and is now a nationally acclaimed artist.

The passage from Baruch that starts us off is one of the lectionary readings for the Second Sunday of Advent.

As always, the material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. May it help us to move a little closer to God's Dream.

Gratefully,  
 The Staff and Council of Stewards

*Take off the garment of  
your sorrow*

and affliction, O Jerusalem,  
and put on forever the beauty of  
the glory from God.

Put on the robe of the righteousness  
that comes from God;  
put on your head the diadem  
of the glory of the Everlasting;  
for God will show your splendor  
everywhere under heaven.

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

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;  
look toward the east,  
and see your children gathered  
from west and east  
at the word of the Holy One,  
rejoicing that God has remembered them.

For they went off from you on foot,  
led away by their enemies;  
but God will bring them back to you,  
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.  
For God has ordered that every high  
mountain and the everlasting  
hills be made low  
and the valleys filled up,  
to make level ground  
so that Israel may walk safely  
in the glory of God.

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

For God will lead you with joy,  
in the light of God's glory  
with the mercy and righteousness  
that come from God.

—from *Baruch 5:1-9*

art by Sharon Rollins

# The Song of Mary

## *a preparation for Advent*

by Douglas M. Donley

scripture: Luke 1:46-56

We begin the season of Advent by listening to the voice of our sister Mary. She sang the most important song of all of Christianity. But to whom did she sing it? Did she sing it to Gabriel? Did she sing it to Elizabeth? Did she sing it to Joseph?

I have mentioned before to this congregation that I don't think she sang it while she was pregnant. I think she sang it later, looking back on what her life meant and what Jesus' life meant.

But let's look at it again today. It doesn't talk about Jesus' life at all, at least not specifically. It talks about God. It speaks about how God has considered Mary's estate and has shown that Mary, or someone like Mary, could be a favored one.

I think this song is for us.

Let's look at it today. It has four parts. And it tells us about the God we worship and the God we seek this Christmas.

Mary's song closely resembles the song of Hannah in the Hebrew scriptures, which Hannah sang as she was pregnant with the prophet Samuel. Some scholars say that Elizabeth is the one who actually sang the song. That would seem to fit, since we have a song from Zechariah later in the chapter.

But those questions are not so important for today. For now, let's look at the words the biblical writers or editors put into Mary's mouth. For in those words we can see the priorities of God.

### 1.

Mary started out by saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, who has regarded the low estate of God's handmaiden. For henceforth all generations will call me blessed."

She did not say, "This is the way God told me God is." She did not say, "This is the way that God feels." It was bigger than that. God had become a part of her, a part of her spirit.

She was singing a song of her soul. She was revealing who she was. She recognized that she was in "sync" with

God, and her soul was knit with God's soul. Therefore she sang, "This is what comes from the deepest part of my



*All generations will call her  
blessed because God  
has noticed her  
in her status as an outcast—  
this unwed teenager  
from a hated area.  
This is where God chose to come  
and become incarnate.*

being.” In a moment of self-awareness, she sang, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Mary’s soul was expanded because she was aware of God’s presence within her. She looked at God with a magnifying glass. She saw God for who God was, and at the same time noticed something she never saw before. God had recognized her. All generations would call her blessed, because God noticed her, even in her status as an outcast—this unwed teenager from a hated area. This was where God chose to come and become incarnate.

*Most empires don’t regard those of low estate and call them blessed. These empires will fall because the long arc of history bends toward justice.*

Mary was not transformed so much by her encounter with God. Rather, she was augmented. She was still the person she was, with her own stories, her own journey, her own soul. What happened is that she, for once, became aware of her soul. As Elizabeth taught her to sing, she also taught her how to recognize the efficacy of her soul.

Elizabeth taught Mary how to be present, how to be aware of the miraculous in her, how to recognize her inner power and harness it. Therefore she could sing, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

If you have ever felt that God has no time for you, if you have ever felt that God doesn’t care about you, if you have ever felt ignored by God, then this passage is for you.

God remembered Mary. Even though she was considered lowly, and maybe even considered herself lowly, God chose her. When she looked at God with a magnifying glass, she realized that God always looks out for those the world considers lowly. When Mary saw this, her soul was renewed.

## 2.

Mary then augments that thought with her next phrase:

“For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is God’s name. Mercy is on those who fear God from generation to generation.” Mary realized that this blessedness was not hers alone. God shows mercy to everyone who fears God from generation to generation. This is extremely good news for those of us who feel left out and forgotten.

One of the benefits and liabilities of having young children is that we end up watching Disney movies. I am reminded, as I reflect on this portion of the Magnificat, of the movie *Lilo and Stitch*. Throughout the story, the characters remind us of the Hawaiian word *Ohana*: “*Ohana* means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.” That’s the sentiment of Mary’s declaration about God. God does not leave any of us behind.

This was not a God of vengeance. This was a God of mercy. This was a departure from other depictions of God. This was not the warrior. This was God the merciful. How easy it is for us to forget this about God. So much of popular Christianity shows us a God of vengeance and military might. But that’s not the God of the Magnificat. God is merciful. All that is needed on our part is respect for the power of God.

## 3.

Here comes the powerful statement. This is where Mary uses revolutionary language. This language sounds like John the Baptist—which is why some scholars think Elizabeth was the singer of the song.

This is why people ought to fear God: “God has shown strength and has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones, exalted those of low degree, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

This is very good news to those who are not rich. It’s bad news for the rich. But remember who was singing it. The one singing it was an outcast who would shortly have to take a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem while she’s extremely pregnant, all to satisfy the whims of one of those mighty ones sitting upon a throne.

Mary said that all of this pomp and circumstance and all of this worldly power is an illusion. It’s like you’re living inside the Matrix, in case you’ve seen that movie.

What is real is that God is in charge. God has already sided with the poor and the lowly. In due time, the powers of this world will implode just like every empire in history has. When the smoke clears, we will see that God will endure forever and ever.

How can you tell if your empire is from God? The answer is in how the poor are treated. Most empires don’t regard those of low estate and call them blessed. These empires will fall because the long arc of history bends toward justice.

In that day, the poor will have power, the rich will be sent away empty, the hungry will be fed, maybe even those of us who are blind might one day see the light. Mary had seen the light. She sings to us today so that we’ll see it too.

#### 4.

Finally she said, "God has helped God's servant Israel, remembering the mercy God promised to our ancestors Abraham and Sarah."

This fulfills the covenants God made so long ago and still makes today. That's the hope for the future. That's what we need to remember and focus on this season.

Mary still sings this song so that we will remember who God is and what God does.

Remember the four parts of the song:

1. *God remembers one poor person and exalts her.*
2. *God's mercy is for everyone forever.*
3. *God's plan is that all should be welcome at the table, and no one is to be left out.*
4. *This is who God always was and who God always will be.*

I hope that this Christmas, as you reflect on the gifts you have and the state of our world, you will consider again the implications and power of Mary's voice. She hardly says anything else in scripture. What else is there to say, really?

Why not let our souls magnify God? Why not integrate Mary's voice into our own voices? If we do, we might see the world in a very different way, the way they saw it when God was smuggled into the womb of Mary, an outsider with an insider's perspective.

Let me close with a poetic interpretation of the Magnificat as penned by Seeds of Hope editor and liturgical poet Katie Cook:

### *Magnificat*

*an interpretation of Luke 1:46-55*  
by Katie Cook

My soul overflows with songs  
of the enormity  
and power  
and mystery  
of God;  
My Spirit is full of joy  
Because God will be my redemption;  
God has looked around the world of assorted humans  
and found a poor woman,  
a peasant,  
a serf;  
God has given that woman a noble, majestic quest—  
to participate in the act of creation;  
to bring a new life to humanity;

throughout history people will speak of this quest  
and say,

What joy she must have felt!  
God is holy and filled with power;  
God has done wonderful things just for me;  
I am overflowing with joyful words.  
God does take care of those  
who remember the original instructions;  
God is sometimes overpowering  
to confuse those  
who think power is theirs,  
who think they know what power is,  
who think that people can be ranked according  
to fiscal worth.  
Their own arrogance will cause them  
to be scattered upon the earth.

*If we integrate Mary's voice  
into ours, we might see the world  
in a very different way, the way  
they saw it when God was  
smuggled in to the womb of  
Mary, an outsider with an  
insider's perspective.*

God takes those in positions of earthly power  
and watches them destroy their own structures,  
their thrones,  
and those things that they hoard;  
they will be stripped of this earthly power,  
and their toys of destruction and exclusion  
will be useless.

Those who are now thought  
to be of little worth  
will be in power.  
Thus the hungry will be fed at last,  
and those who had been greedy  
are sent away  
without their material securities.

God never forgot the promises  
made to Abraham and Sarah;  
They have been kept  
and will be forever.

Amen.

—Doug Donley is pastor of the University Baptist Church in  
Minneapolis, Minnesota.

# 1. *God remembers one poor person and exalts her.*

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, who has regarded the low estate of God’s handmaiden. For henceforth all generations will call me blessed.”*

Some dreams float before us like gauzy mists  
or bright balloons.

But then the mist clears  
and the balloon floats away  
or bursts.

Why do we keep dreaming,  
even though the balloons burst  
and the mists burn away?

Perhaps it is because the real Dream,  
the underlying vision,  
goes before us  
day after day  
like a pillar of fire,  
but it is fire in our bones.

And it doesn’t go away.

Perhaps we keep dreaming  
because the Dream itself calls us,  
even in our unreadiness,  
even in our lowliest state.

–Katie Cook

# *The Coming of God*

by Ann Weems

Our God is one who comes to us  
in a burning bush,  
in an angel's song,  
in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found  
locked in the church,  
not even the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be  
with no constraints,  
no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,  
and destruction has no power  
and even death cannot stop  
the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,  
but there is no place to look for the One who comes to  
us.

When God is ready  
God will come,  
even to a godforsaken place  
like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch...

...for you know not when  
God comes.

Watch, that you might be found  
whenever  
wherever  
God comes.



## *Lectionary Readings for Advent,*

### *Year C*

#### **First Sunday of Advent**

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

#### **Second Sunday of Advent**

Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

#### **Third Sunday of Advent**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

#### **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Micah 5:2-5a or Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

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

# *I Will Hope in God*

## *a litany for the first week in Advent*

by Rachel C. Hunter

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in God."  
—Lamentations 1:22-24*

ONE: For the eyes of our children, their energy, laughter, questions, and hugs.

MANY: I will hope in God.

ONE: For the work of peace makers everywhere.

MANY: I will hope in God.

ONE: We have each other.

MANY: I will hope in God.

ONE: For all those who want to share the Earth's resources equitably, for those working for justice, for environmentalists, for artists, for workers, teachers, and ministers;  
For sunsets and frogs and butterflies;  
For great works of literature;  
For the extreme power of changing tides;  
For philosophers, theologians, and socialists;  
For peaceable long-haired anarchist Jesus freaks;

MANY: I will hope in God.

ONE: For hippies, poets, and activists;

For those who shout, those who sing, and those who pray;

For bare feet, for silly moments, for shared moments, for moments of tolerance;

For love; for hugs and handshakes and kisses and backrubs;

For fire and passion; for a student who stands alone protesting against paradigms of patriarchy;

MANY: I will hope in God.

ONE: For a little child fearlessly pointing out the emperor's nudity; For an elder dispatching wisdom of the ages;

For those who bravely work to bring us closer to the realm of God.

ONE: Therefore I will hope in God.

ALL: Amen.

*—Rachel Hunter is a middle-school writing teacher in Richmond, Indiana. The above is taken from a litany called "Weeping and Hoping."*

# Walking on Footprints

by Deborah E. Harris

Last night I pulled my car over to the side of the road in a quiet neighborhood. I felt troubled and frustrated, and decided to stop for a few moments to listen to the holiday music playing on the radio. It ran the gamut from inspirational to silly to sad. I even found myself relating to Elvis and his “Blue Christmas.”

*And then, along the way, I was surprised by a simple, but meaningful, realization. I was walking on and beside and behind innumerable footprints.*

I think that, whatever your faith or spiritual beliefs, the holidays can fall short of all the hype and expectations surrounding them. Sometimes they turn out to be the loneliest times of the year.

I knew I couldn't park there forever; I had to move along. But I didn't have to go home just yet. I could drive over and walk the labyrinth in the lot behind my church.

This kind of labyrinth is a large circle of interconnected pathways which ultimately lead you to the center and then back out again. The design is ancient in origin and is traditionally used as a vehicle for silent meditation and prayer.

I wondered if I could stop all the “noise” in my mind long enough to make this spontaneous excursion on a cold December night worthwhile. The air was crisp, not much wind. The moon was nearly full, unencumbered by clouds and surrounded by stars. I pulled up the collar of my jacket and took my time, walking along the soft dirt and crushed gravel pathways lined with beautiful stones.

But it was, indeed, difficult to concentrate—so many muddled feelings to put aside. I tried to focus on my breathing and the slow “crunch, crunch, crunch” of my feet. And then, along the way, I was surprised by a simple, but meaningful, realization. I was walking on and beside and behind innumerable footprints.

I paused, feeling rather childlike, to fit my foot inside someone else's print. And most importantly, I felt a little less alone.

You see, we are all children of the earth and, some of us would add, children of God. And we all know suffering and loss. True, many suffer in ways that others will not

experience or understand. But we still walk the human path and make the journey with fellow travelers.

Together, we can be surprised by joy. We can cultivate our capacity for hope and forgiveness. We can bring an appreciation for mystery and a sense of gratitude, not only to the experience of the holidays, but also to the dawn of a new year.

Henry David Thoreau offers these profound words of encouragement: “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us even in our soundest sleep....”

—Deborah Harris is a freelance writer and lyricist who lives in Waco, Texas. Because many of the names and titles that you see in *Seeds* publications come from her creative mind, she is affectionately known to the *Seeds* folks as the Slogan Queen. This piece first appeared as an editorial in the Waco Tribune-Herald and is used with permission.

## Waiting a nested meditation

by Sharon Rollins

We wait.

We wait for a stable.

We wait for a stable lifeline.

We wait for a stable lifeline,  
born in a manger, weak and low

We wait for a stable lifeline,  
born in a manger,  
weak and low,  
we bring him gifts.

We wait for a stable lifeline,  
born in a manger,  
weak and low,  
we bring him gifts of our lives.

—Sharon Rollins is a therapist and artist in Waco, Texas. She borrowed the style of “nested meditations” from Kevin Anderson's *Divinity in Disguise*. Art by Rebecca Ward.



# Christmas Treasures

*an activity for children, youth, & others*

My friend Bill Salyers recently reminded me of a wonderful gift idea that could be adapted to use with children. It would also be ideal for young people, as well as adults. Bill's family had succeeded, he wrote, after five years of discussion, in limiting their gifts for each other to stocking stuffers. The expense of getting to each other from across the country, he added, constituted a large part of their gift to each other.

Bill wrote the following about the first Christmas after his family adopted this practice:

*We have a tradition of Christmas morning crepes, creamed chipped beef, and strawberries. Our oldest daughter found some small cheap boxes that look like miniature sea chests. Then at breakfast she gave each of us one of those 29-cent boxes, 1x2x1.5 inches, with a paper folded inside. The paper was personalized with her favorite/strongest/deepest memories of that person. Her husband could not read his aloud for the tears and sobbing. Neither could I. Then she read aloud to all of us a longer paper that recalled her fondest memories of past Christmas experiences. My wife and I were caregivers for my ailing mother, who has since died. It was wonderful to see the joy and pride in her face as our family found ways to share our deepest feelings. It was the kind of family that she had always intended.*

We are always complaining about the commercialism of Christmas, particularly in the US. Many of us have subscribed to "Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?" and have read *Unplug the Christmas Machine*—both wonderful resources from Alternatives for Simple Living. Most of us have heard of this kind of gift-giving before.

My family, which at one time drew names for gift-giving (divided by generation), made a pact one year to give only a handmade gift to the person whose name we drew. It is one of my favorite Christmas memories. We discovered many hidden talents among us, and most of us still appreciate those gifts. I haven't been able to get them to do it again. (They said it caused too much stress!)

I have, however, managed to put together a few "treasure boxes" like Bill described, and the recipients say they were more meaningful than anything else I've ever given them. I scouted out attractive boxes and receptacles



from thrift stores and filled them with notes on small pieces of paper.

Some of the notes recounted my favorite memories of that person, or why I am grateful for that person. Some of them have related encouraging Bible verses or inspiring quotes. Sometimes I color-code them. (For example, the blue ones might be scripture verses, the green ones might be quotes, and the yellow ones might be favorite memories. If I do this, I put in a card with the color code on it.) Once my goddaughter helped me tie about fifty tiny scrolls with ribbon to go into a miniature trunk.

It seems that this would be a good activity for a youth or children's group—or even for a whole congregation. I would imagine that the parents of teenagers would treasure a few notes saying they are appreciated, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Homebound folks from your church, or even folks from the older Sunday school classes, would cherish a gift of this type from the youth or children (with perhaps drawings included.)

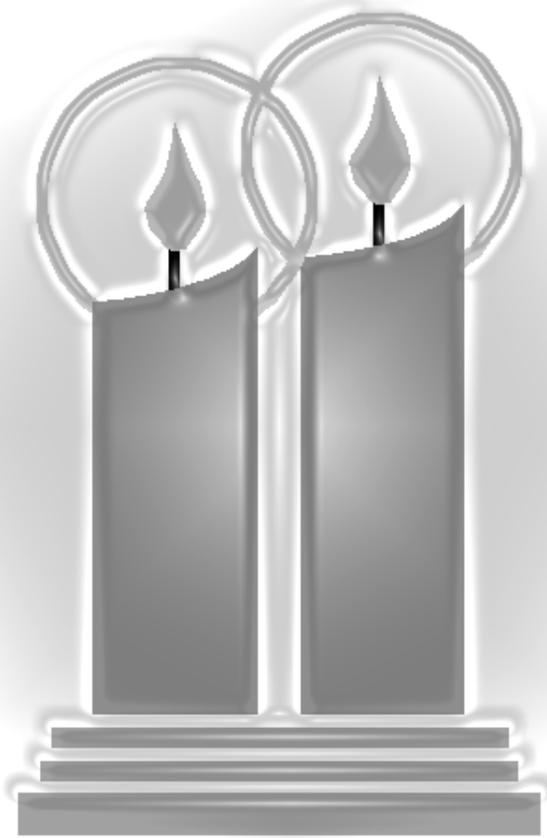
Perhaps each child or young person could write or draw a small note to each person in your chosen group. Then the collections could go into whatever boxes you have chosen (they could even decorate the boxes), and the young people could present them to the recipients one Sunday afternoon, during Sunday school, or during a caroling excursion. Your imagination is the limit.—lkc

## 2. *God's mercy is for everyone forever.*

*"For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is God's name. Mercy is on those who fear God from generation to generation."*



Sometimes we can see and feel the Dream;  
it feels right and good  
and we can see the City of God.  
There is a lurch in our hearts,  
a holy light in our faces.  
But sometimes the feelings are stale  
and our vision is dim.  
Sometimes we act the part  
when we feel dead inside.  
But always the Dream is real.  
Advent is a time when all of us  
try a little harder  
to see the Holy City,  
to catch a glimpse of the Dream.  
—Katie Cook



## Scriptural References to Dreams

- Genesis 20: Abimelech warned not to touch Sarah in dream  
 Genesis 37, 40, 41: Joseph and his dreams, interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams  
 Genesis 28: Jacob's dream of a stairway to heaven  
 Judges 7: Gideon defeats Midianites with the help of a dream  
 1 Kings 3: God tells Solomon in a dream "Ask whatever you want from me"  
 Daniel 2, 4, 5: Nebuchadnezzar's dreams and Daniel's interpretations  
 Ezekiel 37, 40: Visions of dry bones and a man with a measuring line  
 Matthew 2: The Magi warned in a dream not to return to Herod  
 Matthew 2: Joseph warned in a dream to go to Egypt  
 Matthew 27: Pontius Pilate's wife warns him not to hurt Jesus because of her dream  
 Acts 9: Saul's conversion, Ananias told in a vision to go to him  
 Acts 10, 30: Cornelius told in a dream to call upon Peter  
 Acts 10: Peter has a vision of a sheet filled with "unclean" animals lowered from heaven  
 Acts 16: Paul has A vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help  
 Acts 22: Paul told in a vision to leave Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles
- compiled by Jessie Campbell, *Seeds of Hope intern*

### *Candlelight* *a nested meditation*

by Sharon Rollins

A candlelight burns.

A candlelight burns the edges of darkness.

A candlelight burns the edges  
of darkness in my soul.

A candlelight burns the edges of darkness;  
in my soul I long for the birth.

A candlelight burns the edges of darkness,  
in my soul I long for the birth of  
peace, hope, joy, and love.

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

### *dream,*

from Old English (13th cent.) *dreame*, meaning joy

1. *n.*, a sequence of images that appears involuntarily to the mind of a sleeping person
2. *n.*, a series of images, usually pleasant, that passes through the mind of someone who is awake
3. *n.*, something that someone hopes, longs, or is ambitious for, something difficult to attain or far removed from present circumstances
4. *n.*, an idea or hope that is impractical or unlikely
5. *v.*, to experience vivid mental images while sleeping
6. *v.*, to let the mind dwell on pleasant scenes and images while awake,
7. *v.*, to long for something and imagine having or doing it, although it is unlikely
8. *adj.*, perfect and wonderful in every way

# *A Day of Peace*

*a litany for the second week in Advent*

by Katie Cook



FIRST READER: To the God of majesty we pray today;  
SECOND READER: Who made the gardens bloom with colors rich and bright;  
FIRST READER: Who made the seasons in their change;  
SECOND READER: Who crafted the mountains and the seas;  
PEOPLE: Open our eyes to the splendor of our world.

FIRST READER: To the God of hope we pray today;  
SECOND READER: Who created the peoples of the earth;  
FIRST READER: Who invites us to reach out to each other;  
SECOND READER: Who calls on us to care for the helpless;  
PEOPLE: Open our hearts to the pain in our world.

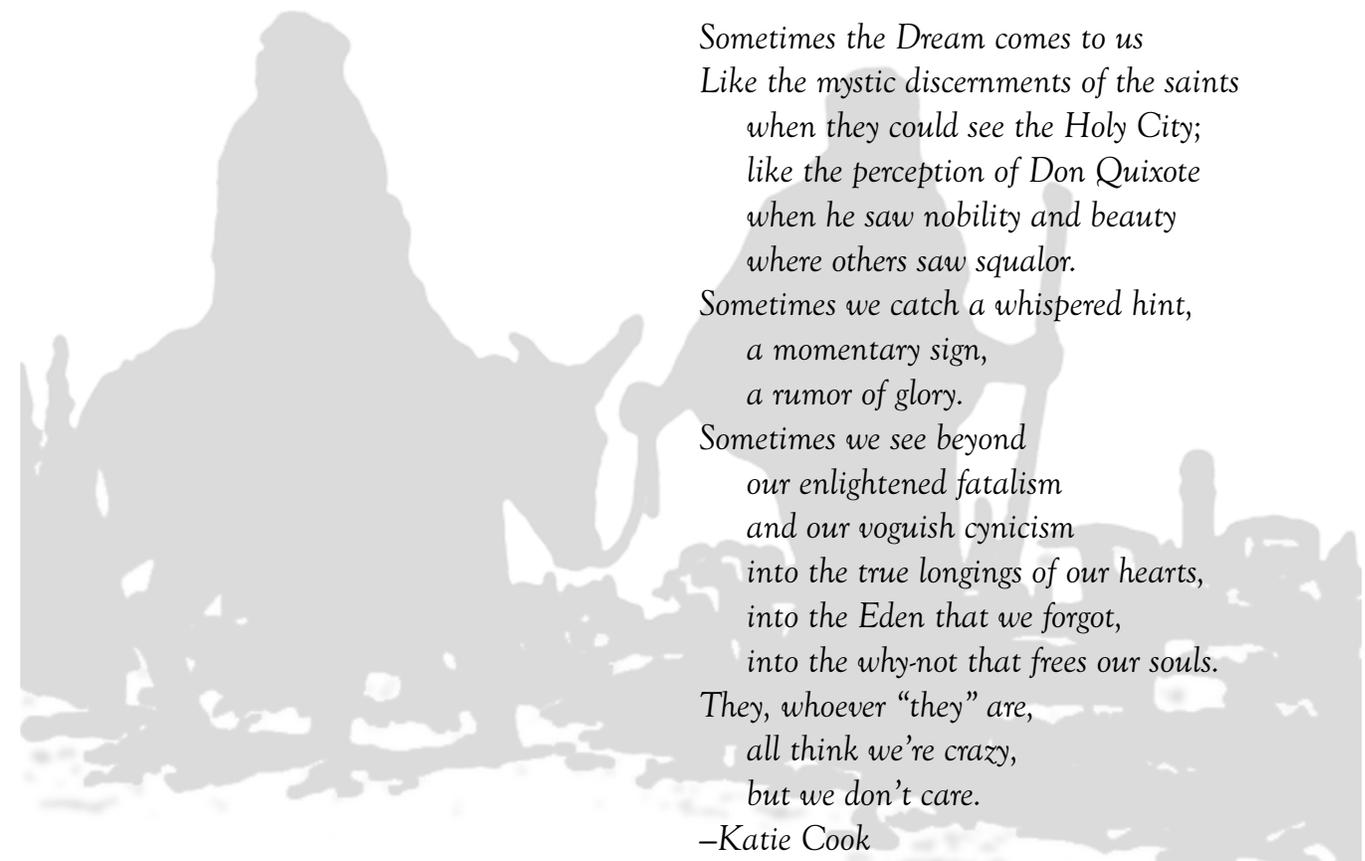
FIRST READER: To the God of grace we pray today;  
SECOND READER: Our petitions for the wounded of our world;  
FIRST READER: Our confessions for neglect and prejudice;  
SECOND READER: Our cries for peace, within and without;  
PEOPLE: Heal us, and heal our world.

FIRST READER: Help us to be true to ourselves, while loving each other,  
SECOND READER: Even when we get on each other's nerves.  
FIRST READER: Help us to care for each other,  
SECOND READER: Those sitting next to us now, and those halfway across the globe;  
PEOPLE: We lift up our gifts to you today, our talents and our visions;  
ALL: We lift up our hopes for a day of peace. Amen.



### *3. God's plan is that all should be welcome at the table.*

*"God has shown strength and has scattered the proud in the  
imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty  
from their thrones, exalted those of low degree, filled the  
hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."*



Sometimes the Dream comes to us  
Like the mystic discernments of the saints  
when they could see the Holy City;  
like the perception of Don Quixote  
when he saw nobility and beauty  
where others saw squalor.

Sometimes we catch a whispered hint,  
a momentary sign,  
a rumor of glory.

Sometimes we see beyond  
our enlightened fatalism  
and our voguish cynicism  
into the true longings of our hearts,  
into the Eden that we forgot,  
into the why-not that frees our souls.

They, whoever "they" are,  
all think we're crazy,  
but we don't care.

—Katie Cook



# *Come, Holy One*

*a litany for the third Sunday in Advent*

by Katie Cook

FIRST READER: Where the valleys are so low and the mountains so high,

SECOND READER: Where oppressor and oppressed writhe in brokenness,

PEOPLE: Come, Prince of Peace, bring healing in your wings.

FIRST READER: Among the destitute, among the privileged, among the old  
and the young,

SECOND READER: Among the male and the female, among people of all nations,

PEOPLE: Come, Everlasting One, and bring us joy.

FIRST READER: Among those who mistrust each other, those who hate  
each other,

SECOND READER: Among those who do not know the way out of the chaos of  
our own making,

PEOPLE: Come, Lord Jesus, and teach us how to love.

FIRST READER: To the deafening and perilous city streets,

SECOND READER: To the scorched and parched fields of famine,

PEOPLE: Come, Emmanuel, and bring us the hope of abundance.

FIRST READER: To our world of shattered dreams and constant sorrow,

SECOND READER: Come, Holy One, and dwell among us.

PEOPLE: Bring your dream of peace and plant it in our hearts.

# Quotes, Poems, & Pithy Sayings

Advent, like its cousin Lent, is a season for prayer and reformation of our hearts. Since it comes at winter time, fire is a fitting sign to help us celebrate Advent....If Christ is to come more fully into our lives this Christmas, if God is to become really incarnate for us, then fire will have to be present in our prayer. Our worship and devotion will have to stoke the kind of fire in our souls that can truly change our hearts. Ours is a great responsibility not to waste this Advent time.

—Edward Hays, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*

The word “advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, which, for the Romans meant the coming of the emperor. It generally refers to the coming of something important or expected. The words roots are *ad*, meaning “to” or “toward,” and *venio*, meaning “to come.” Advent became an official season of the church calendar under Pope Gregory VII, as a spiritual preparation for the Feast of the Nativity. It is interesting to note that the word “adventure” also comes from those roots.

—Katie Cook

It took real courage to be at the manger: Mary’s courage, Joseph’s commitment to Mary, the awestruck obedience of the shepherds, and the politically threatening courage of the Magi to rebuke Herod. The gift of God’s son to a hostile and dangerous world is a story full of risk and adventurous obedience. Lives were radically altered. Don’t be deceived by 21st-century consumerism, “happy holidays” greetings, or the dumbing-down of “Merry Christmas.” Emmanuel—God with us—is a powerful reality.

—Phil Strickland, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas

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.

—Edward Hays, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*

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*

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

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

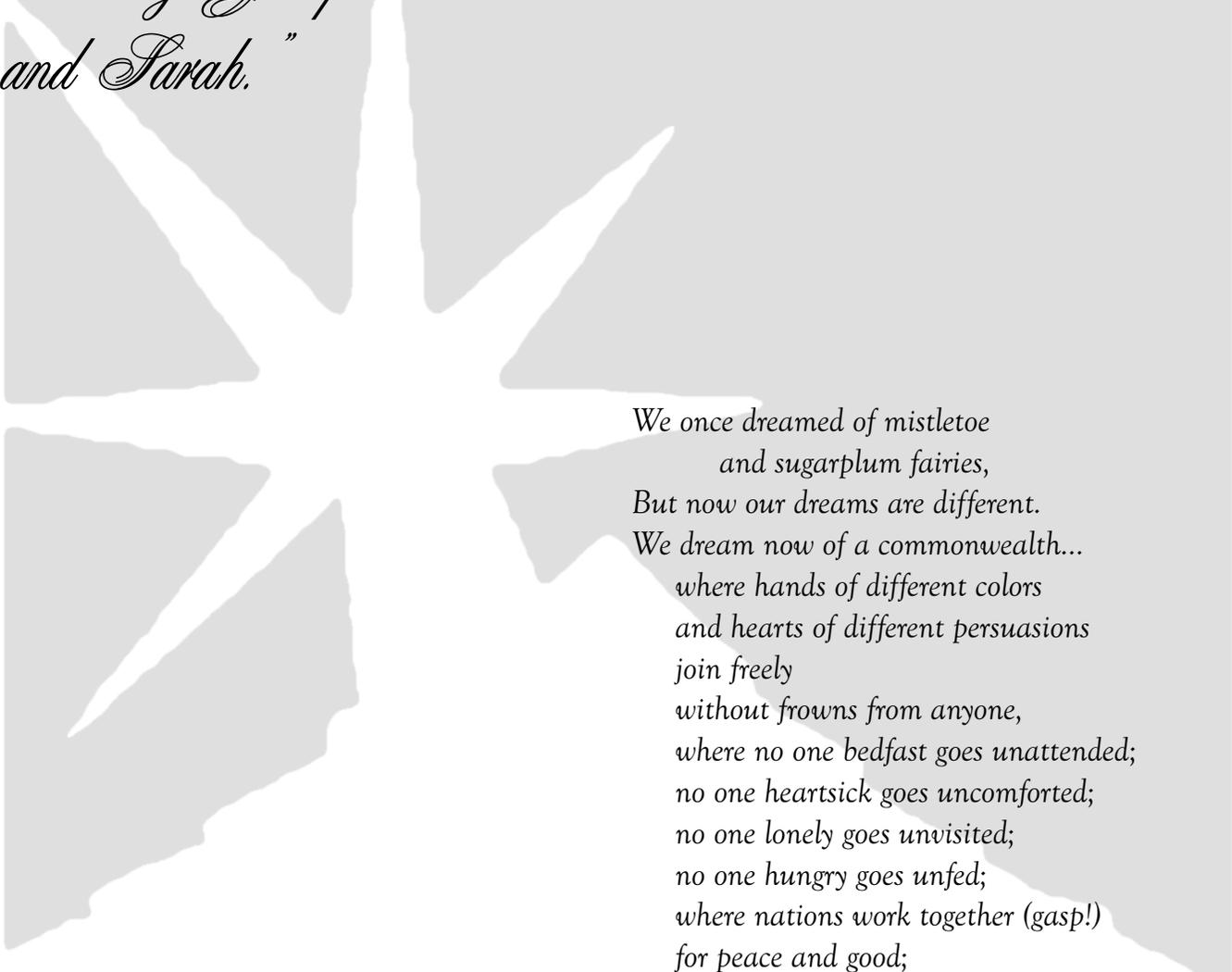
—Fr. Brian Cavanaugh, Third Order Regular

...in Advent, we show up when we are needed, we try to help, we prepare for an end to the despair. And we do this together.

—Anne Lamott

# 4. *God was always merciful and always will be.*

*“God has helped God’s servant Israel, remembering  
the mercy God promised to our ancestors Abraham  
and Sarah.”*



We once dreamed of mistletoe  
and sugarplum fairies,  
But now our dreams are different.  
We dream now of a commonwealth...  
where hands of different colors  
and hearts of different persuasions  
join freely  
without frowns from anyone,  
where no one bedfast goes unattended;  
no one heartsick goes uncomforted;  
no one lonely goes unvisited;  
no one hungry goes unfed;  
where nations work together (gasp!)  
for peace and good;  
where the wealthy share their bounty joyfully;  
Where love really does rule all.  
Listen now for the words of the Dream.  
Listen as though your life depended on it.  
Because it does.  
—Katie Cook



## *Call to Worship for the Fourth Sunday of Advent*

by Sharon Rollins

Creator God  
We come before you this morning in joy.

Creator God  
We come before you this morning,  
enjoying your presence in this place.

Creator God  
We come before you this morning enjoying your presence.  
In this place, we lift our hearts.

Creator God  
We come before you this morning enjoying your presence.  
In this place, we lift our heart's song, rejoicing for the  
coming child.

Creator God  
We come before you this morning enjoying your presence.  
In this place, we lift our heart-song, rejoicing.  
For the coming child will renew our lives, bringing hope,  
love, joy, and peace.

God, fill our hearts with your song and your words as we  
enter into worship together.

–Sharon Rollins is a therapist and artist in Waco, Texas. She  
borrowed the style of “nested meditations” from Kevin Anderson’s  
Divinity in Disguise.

Perhaps this Christmas season you listened to the very old text from Isaiah lyricized by Handel, “To us a child is born.” (Isaiah 9:6) I did. Well, now that all the gifts are open, do pause to consider the miracle of God’s imagination, which sends a savior into the world by way of a homeless family, a truth-teller who shatters the cultural system of lies that enclose people with injustice, a child who grows up to live for others all the way to the cross.

–Harold J. Recinos, Perkins School of Theology (from “What Child is This? And What Does He Ask of Us?” in the Dallas Morning News, December 25, 2005)

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, Minnesota

## *Lectionary Readings for Christmas Day*

### **Christmas Day I**

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

### **Christmas Day II**

Isaiah 62:6-12  
Psalm 97  
Titus 3:4-7  
Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

### **Christmas Day III**

Isaiah 52:7-10  
Psalm 98  
Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)  
John 1:1-14



art by Rebecca Ward



*The Wreath*  
*a nested meditation*

by Sharon Rollins

Oh, wreath!

Oh, wreath! Never-ending ring, which binds my heart together.

Oh, wreath! Never-ending ring, which binds my heart; together, we lock hands.

Oh, wreath! Never-ending ring, which binds my heart together;  
we lock hands in solidarity, waiting.

Oh, wreath! Never-ending ring, which binds my heart; together, we lock hands in solidarity, waiting for the Christ-child.

Oh, wreath! Never-ending ring, which binds my heart; together, we lock hands in solidarity, waiting for the Christ-child who frees us from despair.

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

*Christmas should  
remind us  
of what could be,  
and not what is.*

—Jessica Fletcher,  
*Murder She Wrote*



*Give us, O God,*

the vision which can see  
Your love in the world in spite  
of human failure.

Give us the faith to trust  
Your goodness  
in spite of our ignorance and weakness.

Give us the knowledge  
that we may continue  
to pray with understanding hearts.

And show us what  
each one of us can do  
to set forward the coming  
of the day of universal peace.

—Frank Borman, *Apollo 8 space mission*,  
Christmas Eve 1968

# The Gifts We Bear

## a sermon for Epiphany Sunday

by Jim Ketcham

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Pity the poor Wise Men. Not only did they have to travel abroad during the holidays, they also had to do that most unmanly of tasks: stop and ask for directions! Of course, asking Herod for directions caused more trouble than it was worth.

To top it all off, they had to shop for someone they didn't know. Shopping for a baby is pretty easy since most new parents need about anything, but this baby was royalty and of a different race and religion from the Magi.

So the Magi didn't bother with disposable swaddling clothes printed in the latest cartoon characters and they didn't even think about cuddly blankets with a Star of David pattern.

That one might have been appropriate, actually, since it was a star that brought the Wise Men and they knew the birthday boy was Jewish.

These men chose to focus on the other fact they had: this baby was to be a king. You all know the gifts Matthew says they chose: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold was good; it's what you always gave rulers—whether as a gift from a peer or as taxes from a subject.

Frankincense was appropriate, too. It was very expensive and widely used, at least by rich and important people, in religious rituals of all kinds throughout the Middle East.

Myrrh was also expensive. It was used as an embalming tool and for various medicinal purposes. This gift might seem the strangest of all to give to a baby, but any Christian who knows the end of the story of Jesus knows just how appropriate a symbol it turned out to be.

I imagine that the Magi spent some time considering these gifts, taking into account such factors as the different culture of their destination, and perhaps the relative ease of packing and hauling the gifts themselves.

A few years ago, I had reason to reconsider this story of the first Christmas gifts—up close and personal. That November I was to spend nearly three weeks in Southeast Asia for Church World Service. My wife, Jan, had two goals for me. I was to survive the minefields of Cambodia, and I was to bring home lots of exotic gifts we could give to the many friends and relatives for whom we always struggle to find the right gift.

That year, I had someplace much more interesting to shop than the local mall. But I also had a bigger challenge: anything I brought home had to be lightweight, small, and nearly unbreakable. It had to fit into the two carry-on bags I had, my only luggage. This may not have been as daunting as carrying something across a thousand miles of desert, to give to a baby from a family you didn't know, but it was a challenge.

I bought lots of hand-painted silk, embroidery, and bamboo items. In Bangkok I found a jewelry shop that was affordable and got Jan some gold earrings. My travel partner talked me out of buying incense as well, because I had threatened to announce to Jan on my return that I had brought her “gold, incense, and me” for Christmas.

Even without that last item, I can tell you I haven't had so much fun getting presents since I was a kid and did finger paintings for all my relatives. I think it was because no one else could give them the same items, at least not that year. It was because I had personally selected them and bargained for them. It was because many of them had been bought from small family businesses or workshops for land-mine victims. And it was because I had personally escorted those two bulging bags through six airports and 28 hours of travel to get them home.

I may not have brought gold, frankincense and myrrh, but I think I had some idea of how the Wise Men must



have felt at the end of their journey when they turned home with lighter loads. It's more than just having less stuff to carry around—like solving two problems at once by sending last year's fruitcake from Aunt Helga to Uncle Charlie this year. It's more than just avoiding disastrous choices. A bearer of true gifts walks lighter and feels better for having given.

Those of you in this congregation who helped collect or carry gifts to Nicaragua this past summer, or gathered

*Christians can point to the action of the Wise Men as the root of their Christmas giving, but I learned in my Third-World travels—as many of you have—that whom we give to is at least as important as what we give.*

gifts for a Christmas project or a winter-clothing campaign know what I mean.

I learned a similar lesson from the things I carried over to Southeast Asia, as well. You see, while my family expected me to bring things back, my employer, Church World Service, encouraged me to bring gifts over. Everyone we were to meet would appreciate a token gift, we were told; the village committees, the staff at the schools, the children in the nurseries, the co-op boards—everyone.

Part of this was because we were American and to the rest of the world we seem very, very rich. We have so much stuff in our daily lives that we take for granted things that are too expensive or simply not available in two-thirds of the world. Even pencils and paper can be hard to come by in more remote areas.

I visited a Vietnamese boarding school where sheets of notebook paper were torn off and handed to us for use as napkins at lunch. Those not too stained or crumpled were carefully recycled for penmanship practice—or toilet paper. Is it any wonder I've become a real stickler for reusing paper printed only on one side?

The other factor involved is that, for all the wars and conflicts Southeast Asia has known for the last century, cultures there are based, like the Middle East, on hospitality. Our hosts would be giving us gifts despite their poverty, because that was what a host did.

Gifts are constantly passed between friends, families, business associates, neighbors, teachers and students, bosses, and employees.

No event is too small or trivial to exchange gifts. Much time and energy is spent in selecting the right gift to show respect for the recipient and awareness of any differences in class or status. We would be considered ungrateful if we didn't have something to bring for the people who guided us, and drove us, and generally took time out from their busy schedules to answer our questions and put our needs before their own.

Now it was my turn to come from afar, bearing gifts for people I didn't know. Of course, I had similar guidelines: everything had to fit in my carry-on bags, be lightweight and unbreakable. I tried to choose carefully and wisely, but things didn't turn out quite like I planned.

Someone told me balloons were a big hit when they went overseas, so I packed several hundred CROP WALK balloons. I gave them out to four different groups of ethnic minority school children and waited to see the fun erupt. None of the children had ever seen a balloon before. I showed them how to blow them up and tie them off.

Then they accidentally discovered the neat sound a balloon makes when you let the air out; you know—the one that sounds a lot like a certain bodily function. The rest of these visits were punctuated with more laughter and smiles than I could have anticipated, and probably more than the teachers would have liked!

Jan had provided me with a selection of children's stickers from the company store at 3M that also provoked more laughter than I had anticipated. At one Cambodian school for orphans, I listened as an old Buddhist monk solemnly recited the statistics about the children in his care: their grades, ages, talents, and liabilities.

When my turn to talk came, I presented him with a set of stickers of a rabbit family in their burrow, complete with furniture to rearrange, a table to set, pots and pans for the stove, toys, etc. I was suddenly a little ashamed of the over-consumption of this cute little rabbit family, compared to the orphans who listened quietly from the other side of the room.

When I tried to explain that the stickers could be placed anywhere, the translator got a little flustered. So I showed the monk how they could be repositioned on the sheet they came on, or on a notebook page, as an award for a job well done and then, in a fit of genius (or madness), I placed the sticker on my forehead.

The monk burst out laughing, which made the kids laugh although they couldn't see my forehead. The monk removed another sticker and placed it on his forehead for all to see, and I'm not sure if the little scholars at that tiny school have recovered yet.

That set of stickers cost about a dollar. The laughter we shared was worth all the gold, frankincense, and myrrh I could have carried. I had tried to bring practical gifts.

Imagine my surprise when I opened my bags and found uncontrollable joy.

We like to say that Christmas is about giving. Christians can point to the action of the Wise Men as the root of their Christmas giving, but I learned in my Third-World travels—as many of you have—that whom we give to is at least as important as what we give.

The Wise Men gave to a stranger, a baby whose parents spoke another language, lived far away, and believed in a different religion that was often antagonistic with their own beliefs and practices.

We usually settle for giving to those who look and talk like us, and are related to us by blood or marriage. But Christmas is not just about our immediate families.

The first Christmas card, as we know the concept, was designed in 1843 by the artist J. C. Horsley. It measures about the size of a postcard. In the center is a drawing of a Victorian family celebrating the gentle spirit of the season around a full table. They are making a toast to the health and happiness of their family, friends, and nation.

Flanking this scene of domestic Christmas cheer are two smaller drawings, one showing the family carrying out the biblical concern for clothing the naked, and the other showing them feeding the hungry.

It sounds like the sort of Christmas card someone from this church might send, right? But the first Christmas card did not set well with most church folk. For one thing, the central picture contained too much revelry for mid-19th-century Christians. And the graphic reminders of the real need for benevolence were thought to be equally distasteful. It was, well, excessive.

Who were those dirty, hungry people? Why did they have to spoil the quiet self-satisfaction of a well-fed family gathered in all safe and warm?

I was so glad to see that this year your church's holiday giving included personal hygiene kits for Iraqis, scholarships for kids in Nicaragua, and Provident's health care missions, as well as fundraising for Families Moving Forward.

These are much more in the spirit of the Wise Men than our usual temptations to over-spend and over-consume among our own families.

I'd like to make a modest proposal, an Epiphany resolution, if you like. Next year, let's commit to spending at least 10 percent of our family's Christmas budget to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, like the family on that first postcard.

And let's throw in liberating the oppressed. We could even give gifts in the name of friends or relatives we'd like to honor or memorialize.

To feed the hungry, there's Loaves and Fishes, the Indian Food Shelf, GMCC's Minnesota Foodshare, your

local food shelf, Bread for the World, or Church World Service, to name just a few reputable organizations.

There are not too many naked people running around in Minnesota, so perhaps we could focus on housing the homeless through gifts to Families Moving Forward and Habitat for Humanity, or the Simpson Shelter.

To liberate the oppressed, let's consider gifts to the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, Soulforce, Human Rights Watch, Center for Victims of Torture, and Amnesty International.

Let's expand our focus by giving to strangers, even our own enemies, whoever they turn out to be next year.

*The greatest gifts of all, of course, won't fit into a box or even a camel saddlebag. Those would be the gifts of forgiveness for someone who has wronged us; the gift of our time for someone who is lonely; the gift of inclusion for someone who's been left out.*

Showing hospitality to one's enemies, especially during the holidays, would truly be giving of biblical proportions.

The greatest gifts of all, of course, won't fit into a box or even a camel saddlebag. Those would be the gifts of forgiveness for someone who has wronged us; the gift of our time for someone who is lonely; the gift of inclusion for someone who's been left out.

I'd like to share the story of Larry Trapp, Grand Dragon of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Nebraska. Trapp spent months harassing, intimidating, threatening, and grossing out the new Jewish Cantor, Michael Weissner, and his wife Julie. Rather than just ignore him or run away, Cantor Weissner began to return Trapp's calls, leaving sometimes angry and sometimes conciliatory messages on the answering machine Trapp used for KKK business.

Finally, one night Trapp picked up the phone in the middle of Weissner's message and demanded "What do you want? Are you harassing me? I can have you arrested for that!" Weissner replied "I just wanted to know if I could help you with something. I know you're in a wheelchair because of your diabetes, and I thought maybe I could help you go to the grocery store or something like that." Trapp was stunned. He managed to say "Thanks, but I've got that covered," and he hung up.

In the next few days, though, he cancelled his racist rants on public access television. He later apologized when confronted about another hate-filled diatribe he had delivered before his sentencing in another harassment case. Weissner kept calling and Trapp began answering as soon as he recognized Weissner's voice. Eventually, Trapp told Weissner he wanted to get out of the White Power movement, but he didn't know how.

Weissner not only helped Trapp get out of the movement, he took Trapp into his home to nurse him through his final illness. Trapp converted to Judaism a few weeks before he died. He had been given a gift by a true Wise Man.

Weissner had wanted to fight Trapp. Trapp frightened him and threatened his family. But Weissner guessed correctly that he and Trapp shared very rough childhoods. Weissner knew it was kindness, not anger or fear, that got

him over being abandoned by his parents at an early age. And so he offered kindness when confronted by Trapp's own live voice on the telephone.

That simple but transformative gift is still changing lives, in ever broadening circles, from the entire Weissner family, to their synagogue, to the other minority communities in Nebraska and others all over America who learn of this story as they face hatred in their own communities.

It's a long, long way from Mesopotamia to Bethlehem. We'll need to choose carefully what we are willing to carry such a distance. It's never too late to give the transforming gift of love, of reconciliation, of laughter. May we choose wisely, travel faithfully, and give joyfully. AMEN.

—Jim Ketcham lives in Rochester, New York. This sermon was preached for Epiphany Sunday at the University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



## Starlight



*a nested meditation*

by Sharon Rollins

Starlight glistens.

Starlight glistens in the eyes of a newborn babe.

Starlight glistens in the eyes of a newborn babe, reflections of love.

Starlight glistens in the eyes of a newborn babe, reflections of love and hope for the worlds.

Starlight glistens in the eyes of a newborn babe, reflections of love and hope for the worlds so in need of a peacemaking God.

—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 there is no star*

to guide you  
and you cannot wait for day  
and your ancient maps  
provide you  
only hints to find the way,  
keep within each  
other's calling,  
mark each time you make a turn,  
shout for help  
if you are falling,  
tell each other all you learn.

—Thomas H. Troeger

*Lectionary Readings  
for the Day of Epiphany,*

*Year C*

January 6  
Isaiah 60:1-6  
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12





*... Sing, only, to peace,  
don't whisper just a prayer;  
it's better to sing a song to peace  
with strong, raised voice.  
Let the sun penetrate through the flower.  
Don't look backward.  
Lift your eyes with hope.  
Sing a song for love and not for wars.  
Don't just say the day will come.  
Work to bring that day  
because it is not a dream.  
Within all Jerusalem's squares,  
in all Jerusalem's dwellings,  
let us sing for peace.*

—from Morning Prayers  
at Memphis Theological Seminary,  
Lisa Peterson, liturgist