



*All
Flesh
shall
see
the
salvation
of God*

*Creative Resources for Advent
& Christmastide*

*Worship tools with a peace and justice emphasis from Seeds of Hope Publishers:
602 James; Waco, TX 76706; Phone: 254/755-7745;
Fax: 254/753-1909; E-mail: SeedsHope@aol.com;
Web address: www.seedspublishers.org.*

*Creative
Worship Tools*
from
*Seeds
Publishers*

These unique worship packets are available for the liturgical year, four packets a year for \$120 (\$135 for non-US subscriptions), one packet for \$50 (\$60 outside of the US).

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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 optional. The group intends to seek out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable, and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

Editorial Address

Seeds of Hope is housed by the community of faith at Seventh and James Baptist Church. The mailing address is 602 James; Waco, Texas 76706; Phone: 254/755-7745; Fax: 254/753-1909; E-mail: SeedsHope@aol.com.
Web address: www.seedspublishers.org
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Material in this packet is for the use of the purchasing faith community to enhance worship and increase awareness in economic justice issues. ISSN 0194-4495

Seeds of Hope, Inc., holds the 501C/3 nonprofit tax status. All contributions above the subscription rate are fully tax-deductible.

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the Salvation of God*
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a word about this packet

These materials are offered to you on clean, unattached pages so that you can more easily photocopy anything you wish to duplicate. We are constantly looking for ways to make the pages more attractive and easier for you to photocopy. Feel free to copy any of this, including art, and adapt these tools to your needs.

The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We make a conscious effort to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams.

For sermons and meditations we have gone back to some of our favorite preachers—Brett Younger, Richard Groves, and John Ballenger. The art on the cover, called "Luz," is a gift from the Blanco Cruz Franciscans. Much of the new art was created especially for this packet by Sharon Rollins, a counselor and therapist in Waco, Texas. Rebecca Ward (a University of Texas art student) and Sally Lynn Askins (costume professor at Baylor University) also created pieces for this packet.

A Brainstorming Session from editors and friends

The theme of this worship packet is based on Luke 3:6 as it reads in the NRSV and some of the older biblical translations: “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” It may sound a little archaic, but there’s a reason we chose that translation. (The writer of Luke is quoting Isaiah 40:5, which for some reason is translated differently in most translations: “and all people shall see it together,” the NRSV says. The King James and G. F. Handel say “and all flesh shall see it together.”)

The newer translations somehow didn’t catch the down-to-the-molecule depth that we were reaching for. “All flesh” is all people, but it also includes animals. We stretched it a little further to encompass all of nature. Then we found the verse in Romans 8 which speaks of all creation groaning with labor pains, waiting with us for the salvation of God.

So the hope of Advent includes the hope of the rain forests to continue their lives; the peace of Advent becomes the wolf and the lamb being able to lie down together; the joy of Advent becomes the trees clapping their hands; the love of Advent becomes the rocks crying out Hosannas to the Son of David.

Although we haven’t included any Franciscan quotes or prayers, there is throughout these pages the attitude of St. Francis and St. Clare that all creation praises God—and that maybe it’s not such a crazy thing to preach to birds.

There is also the underlying theme of the Word made flesh—the Creator made creation. You will find that in some of the litanies.

We in the West have made Christmas into a consumer index, and there is material here to respond to that, but there is more. We have also made it “nice.” As John Ballenger says, “Advent should not be *nice*. The early Christians knew that Advent was frightening. The reign of God is not *nice*. It’s glorious and amazing and wonderful, but not *nice*.” So we’ve tried to shake it up and make it a little more, well, real.

Charley Garrison has decided that Advent has become too orderly in his congregation, so he’s changing things around. He’s using the prophecy candle, the angel candle, and so on. But he’s changing the order. He may have some rebellion on his hands, but he’s got the right idea.

For the sensual side of preparations, we have tried to brainstorm some ideas that may not go over well with your congregation’s keepers of the aesthetic. Some people are very fond of the same nativity scene, the same poinsettias and greens, the same tree with Crismons. But we suggest that you bring in tokens of the created world: shells, rocks, leaves, potted plants (John suggests living Christmas trees to be planted later), and other “still life.” You might also bring drawings or photographs of animals and forests (but

not cute ones, John says; pick ones that show the creatures to be intelligent.)

Ask the congregation to bring “nature objects” or photographs that are significant to them. You might even arrange a time for people to share why they brought what they did, and why each object is meaningful.

Try arranging these objects around a nativity scene, or arrange your Advent wreath in the middle of them. This could easily be done using freestanding candles, with the objects arranged around and between them. Or, if you have a tree, hang some of them on the tree. Use more than one altar table, if you need to, or arrange tables in different parts of the worship area or in the foyer. Make banners or placards that say, “All Flesh Shall See the Salvation of God.” Or print cards with the Romans 8 quote (the one from *The Message* is striking).

For music, we suggest that you augment your normal carols with recordings from nature: some of the Solitudes series would be good. Music companies like Windham Hill have produced CDs of whales, dolphins, wolves, and loons. These shouldn’t be hard to obtain. Some of your members probably have a variety. Again, John urges that you go more for the wilder sound—loons and wolves, instead of birds. If you want to stick to traditional Christmas songs, you should be able to find, fairly easily, recordings of these with nature sounds interspersed.

We have prepared litanies for use in lighting the Advent candles. You might want to start out the service in relative darkness, with perhaps a spotlight on some of your creation representations, and have the congregation enter to the sounds of wilderness.

The hope, of course, is that people will begin to understand that we all share our createdness with each other—with all people—and also with the ecosystem. Hopefully this will add something fresh to their experience of Advent. It doesn’t have to be thrown in their faces as a “should” sort of theme. Hopefully, it will come through naturally and in a positive way through these resources.

As always, please adapt these resources to your own needs. We encourage you to be creative in your preparations. Think outside the box. And, as the weeks unfold (in the words of John Ballenger):

may the hope of ancient Israel,
the peace of the angels,
the shepherds and the wise,
may the joy of Mary and Joseph
and the love of God
fill your spirit during advent
that you might fill the coming year
with the spirit of Christmas.—lkc

art by Sharon Rollins

Some Thoughts about Advent

by John S. Ballenger

advent:
add vent

French, *vent*: wind
Greek, *pneuma*: wind, spirit
Hebrew, *ruah*: wind, breath, spirit

advent:
and the spirit of God blows over creation.
darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and God said: "Let there be light!"
and there was light.
advent is creating the hope of light in
darkness.
praise God.

advent:
and the spirit of God breathes life over
creation.
the people walking in darkness
have seen a great light.
on those living in the land
of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.
advent is establishing the peace of
life amidst death.
praise God.

advent:
and the spirit of God breathes life
into creation.
the true light that gives light to
everyone
was coming into the world.
advent is celebrating the joy,
freely given, of God through life.
praise God.

advent:
the light shines in the darkness,
but the darkness has not understood it.

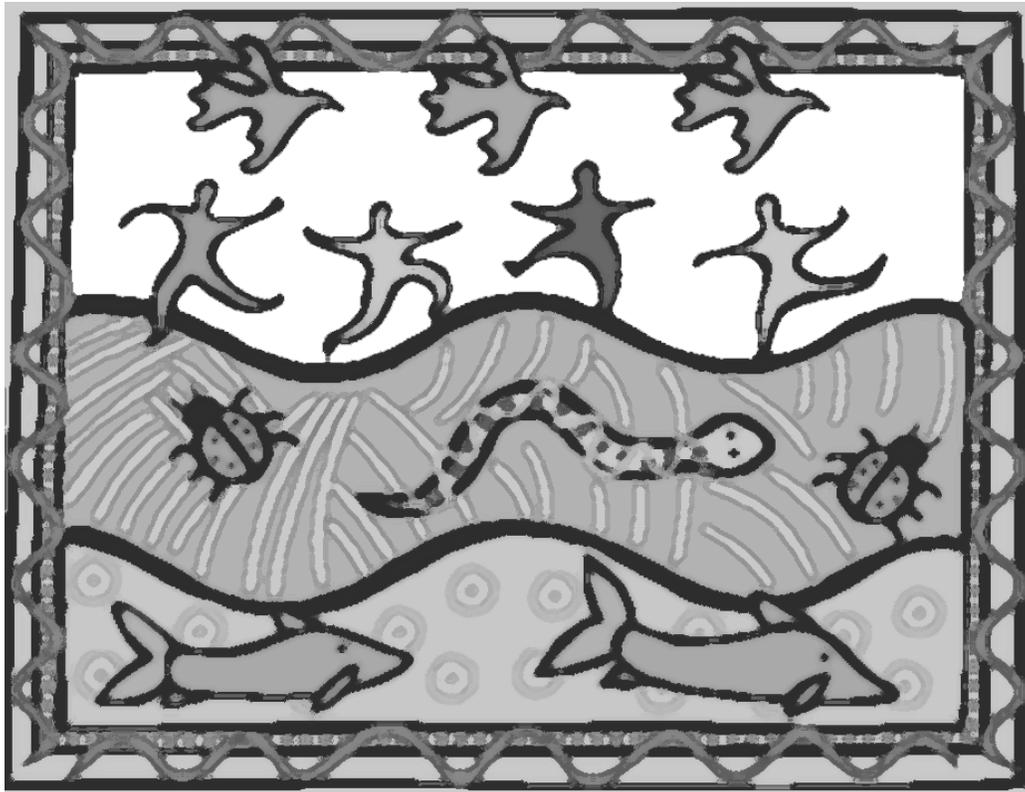
advent is:
validation of the past,
affirmation of the present,
indication of the future;
advent is the consistent, continued
addition of the Godself into the world.
advent is acknowledging the love, freely
chosen, of God through death.
praise God.



—John Ballenger is a pastor and poet who lives in Decatur, Georgia.

bulletin art

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only



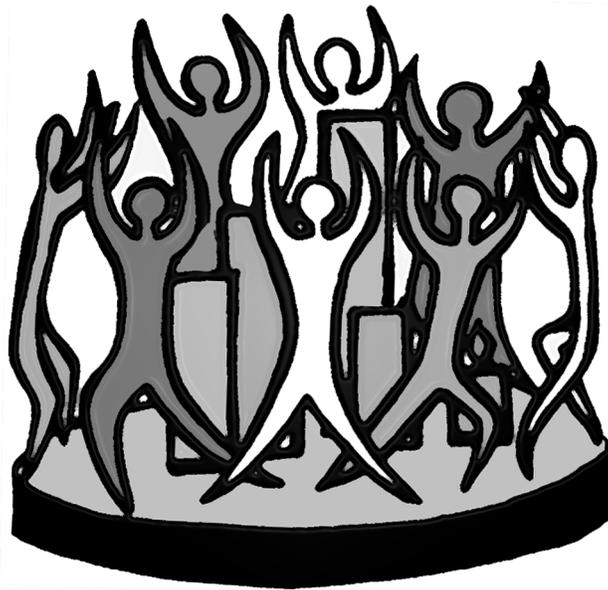
the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait...

(Romans 8:22, NRSV)

bulletin art

First Sunday in Advent

We have a desert to travel,
a star to discover,
a being to bring to life.



—art by Sharon Rollins; text from the
Sisters of St. Joseph of LaGrange

What's Coming Next

a litany for the lighting of the first Advent candle

by Katie Cook

(Altar area is dark. Candles are unlit. Music with nature sounds is playing. Congregants are encouraged to enter in silence.)

FIRST READER: These are dark times, troubled times. It is hard to feel the spirit of Christ's birth. This is just going to be another season of war and hunger and tears. Where is the hope and peace and joy? Where is the love?

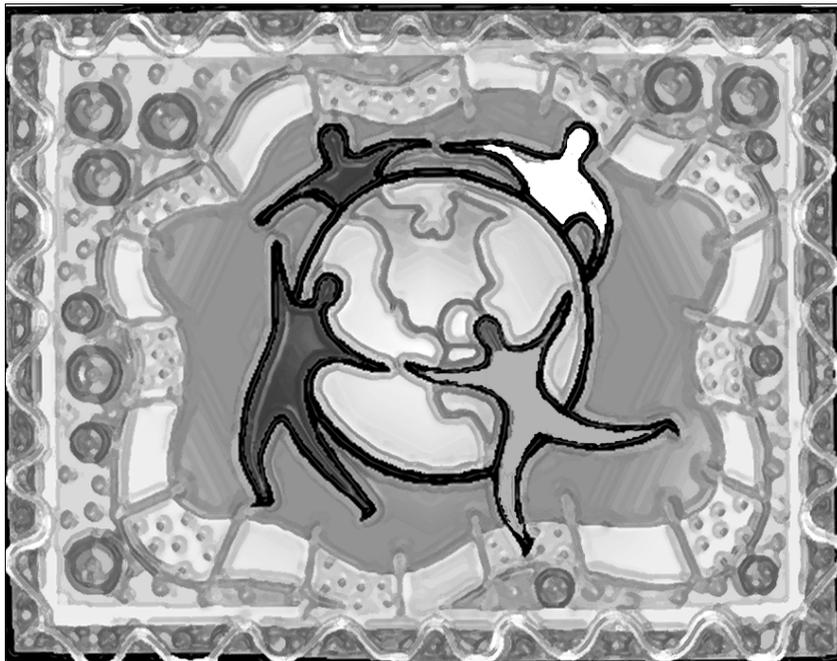
VOICE OF PAUL: The apostle Paul says, "I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next."

VOICE OF ISAIAH: The prophet Isaiah says, Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from God's hand double for all her sins."

VOICE OF PAUL: All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within.

VOICE OF ISAIAH: A voice cries out:
"Prepare in the desert a way for Yahweh,
Make a straight highway for our God
across the wastelands.
Let every valley be filled in,
every mountain and hill be leveled,
every cliff become a plateau, every
escarpment a plain;
then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed
and all humanity will see it together,
for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken."

VOICE OF PAUL: We're also feeling the birth pangs.



These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

VOICE OF ISAIAH: And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

VOICE OF PAUL: All creation is waiting. All of the created world is great with child. This pain we feel is the pangs of birth.

VOICE OF ISAIAH: "Look, I am doing something new," God says. "Now it emerges; can you not see it? Yes, I am making a road in the desert and rivers in wastelands."

FIRST READER: Then let us prepare the way of the Lord.

(FIRST READER lights the first Advent candle. Lights are raised at this point)

Of Nativity Scenes & Courage

by Katie Cook

Art that depicts the nativity of Christ is, for me, the most significant Christmas image. From the most intricate and sublime rare Italian sculpture to the most outrageous children's pageants (maybe especially the outrageous ones), manger scenes hold an attraction for me that I can't fully comprehend, much less articulate.

During Advent in our house there are a number of crèches, most of them gifts, which portray the Holy Family with different ethnic appearances: nativities from Japan, Kenya, Nepal, and Mexico—and two Native American ones. These go up first when we get out the Christmas decorations. And they stay through Epiphany—sometimes all the way to Lent. They are important to me because they convey a sense of the universality of the gift of incarnation, and because they remind me that the Commonwealth of God includes a wide variety of peoples and cultures.

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

stopping over in Greccio during a missionary journey, wanted to re-enact the nativity story during the Christ Mass, so he and his companions selected a cave, or grotto, near the town and suggested that the local people play the roles of



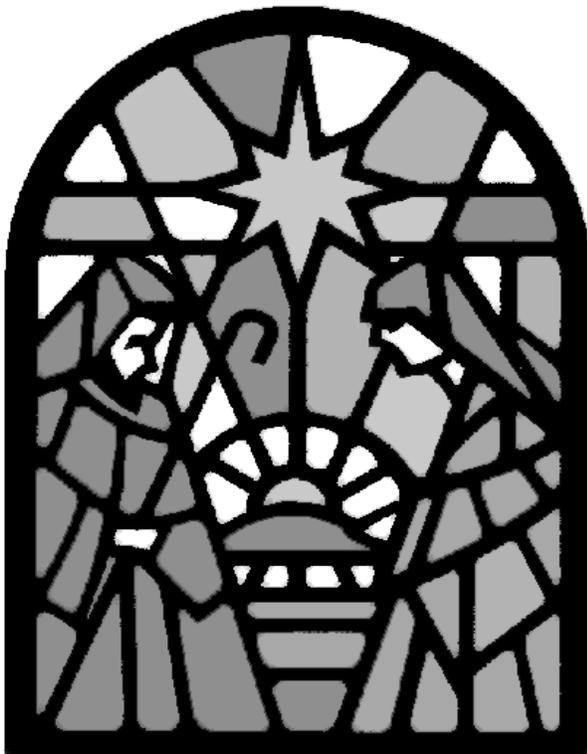
shepherds and the Holy Family. He gathered animals to share the tableau, and collected candles to burn. The group, we are told, stayed there through the night, singing hymns in the candlelight.

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

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

Perhaps there is truth today to that thirteenth-century legend; perhaps the Christ Child does take on some kind of mystical life, or speaks to us in some way, to where we are and who we are, in all of these scenes. No matter what form they take: the ornate clay Mexican Christ Child, carved in traditional Spanish Catholic formality and majesty; the unadorned porcelain Christ Child with Asian features, the elongated ebony Christ Child, guarded by Masai warriors; the fifteenth-century Portuguese painting of the Holy Family as Native Americans; the rowdy kids from the "projects" in bath robes, holding a black-skinned baby Jesus in the closest thing their youth minister can find to "swaddling" clothes, my brother's childhood drawing of the manger scene with an extra character called "Round John Virgin;" even the ones with moppet eyes and excruciatingly Anglo features.

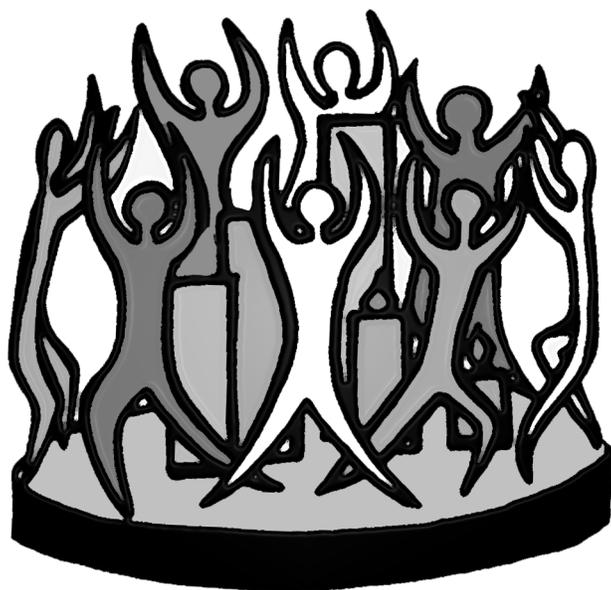
They are all symbols of God made flesh, all a part of Isaiah's Peaceable Reign, all a symbol of what the church could be if we had the courage. ■



bulletin art

Second Sunday in Advent

Christ will come,
expected or unexpected,
when God is ready,
even while we are loudly demanding
signs and proofs
which close our hearts and minds
to the Wildness of Love.



—art by Sharon Rollins;
text by Madeleine L'Engle

In the Midst of the Noise

a litany for the lighting of the second Advent candle

by Katie Cook

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEADER: Let us quiet the noise of the world, and let us quiet our hearts.

PEOPLE: 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.

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

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

LEADER lights the second candle.



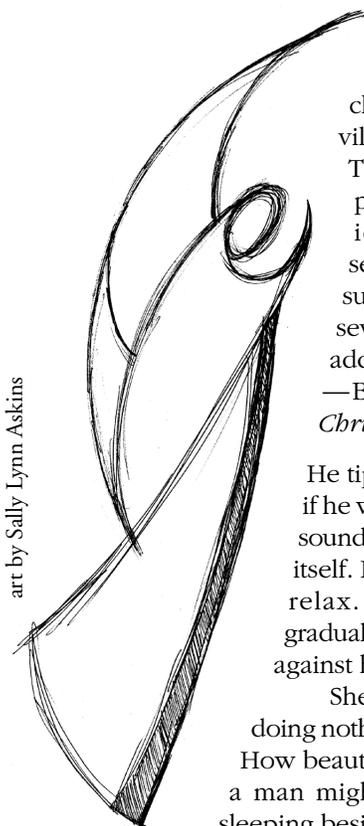
art courtesy of the Blanco Cruz Franciscans

As long as the church continues to confuse the hunger for God, extant in every human heart, with the same yearnings that drive a market culture and a consumerist society, its worship will remain irrelevant at best, and an outright impediment at worst. As long as the church insists on serving up 'Twinkies,' even new and improved ones, many of those once-churched-now-unchurched will continue to seek their bread in the world at large, wherein a still-living, all-loving God continues to reveal self day by day in 10,000 marvelous ways!

—Craig Rice, a letter in Circuit Rider

Quotes, poems, & pithy sayings

art by Sally Lynn Askins



The story began with a girl hardly old enough to have a any child let alone this child. Nazareth was a rundown village in an obscure province of Tome. Mary was a simple peasant girl with no status, no identifiable qualifications, seemingly no preparations for such a role. The angel looked several times to make sure the address was right.

—Brett Younger, *The First Christmas Carol*

He tiptoes into the room almost as if he were an intruder. Then kneels, soundlessly. His white robe arranges itself. His breath slows. His muscles relax. The lily in his hand tilts gradually backward and comes to rest against his right shoulder.

She is sitting near the window, doing nothing, unaware of his presence. How beautiful she is. He gazes at her as a man might gaze at his beloved wife sleeping beside him, with all the concerns of the day gone and her face as pure and luminous as a child's and nothing now binding them together but the sound of her breathing.

Ah, wasn't there something he was supposed to say? He feels the whisper far back in his mind, like a mild breeze. Yes, yes, he will remember the message, in a little while. In a few more minutes. But not just now.

—Stephen Mitchell, *The Annunciation*

This Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night. Our world is sick with war; everywhere we turn we see its ominous possibilities. And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don't have good will toward all people in this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists...but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages...in

the stars but who in one way or another is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God's existence we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence.

—Frederick Buechner

art by Rebecca Ward



All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Romans 8:18-23 (The Message)

The Christmas Gift

a children's sermon

by Mark McClintock

Editor's Note: The following was created as a dialogue between Mark, who is a ventriloquist, and Sydney, one of his dummies. However, it easily translates into a two-part presentation. At two points in the dialogue, Mark brings the children into the discussion, so it would be best to gather the children around the two presenters.

MARK: Merry Christmas, Sidney!

SYDNEY: Merry—Christmas? Is it Christmas already?

MARK: Just about.

SYDNEY: Whoa, I better get busy!

MARK: Do you have a lot to do?

SYDNEY: Yeah, I gotta clean my—

MARK: Oh, good, you're finally going to clean your room.

SYDNEY: Clean my room? Do I look like I'm crazy? I'm going to clean my chimney.

MARK: Clean your chimney?

SYDNEY: Yeah, and grease it down real good.

MARK: Oh, I think I get the picture. Santa Claus, right?

SYDNEY: Well, I don't want the big guy gettin' stuck on the way down, do I?

MARK: There's a lot more to Christmas than Santa Claus, Sidney.

SYDNEY: Oh, I know what you're thinking. There is more to Christmas. There's candy canes, hot chocolate, and presents! But I really like Santa Claus. I know everything there is to know about Santa Claus.

MARK: Oh, you do? All right, where is Santa Claus supposed to come from?

SYDNEY: That's easy. He comes from Taiwan.

MARK: Taiwan??

SYDNEY: That's what it says on all the toys he brings: "Made in Taiwan."

MARK: That's not right. Where is Santa supposed to come from, kids?

SYDNEY: The North Pole?? No way!! Who would want to live up there in all that snow and ice? Brrrrr!

MARK: That's what they say. The North Pole. And do you know what Santa is supposed to bring with him every year?

SYDNEY: Yeah, pneumonia!

MARK: No. He's supposed to bring gifts for all the children in the world.

SYDNEY: Yeah, right, I've heard that one, too.



art by Mike Massengale

MARK: Sounds like you have a little trouble believing it.

SYDNEY: Well, think about it, Mark. How could one guy get toys to all the kids all over the world in one night?

MARK: It does stretch the imagination, doesn't it?

SYDNEY: It's harder to swallow than my grandma's Christmas cookies! Blech!

MARK: If you've really learned about Santa Claus, you know that he started out just giving to a few people.

SYDNEY: He did?

MARK: Yes. Another way of saying his name is St. Nicholas.

SYDNEY: I knew that!

MARK: Nicholas heard about a family with lots of children and very little money. One night, he secretly went to their house and tossed some gold in through the chimney to help them out.

SYDNEY: I wonder why he did that?

MARK: I think he had learned the love and the joy of giving.

SYDNEY: How did he learn something like that?

MARK: Because Nicholas was given the greatest gift of all.

SYDNEY: A *(Sydney names a silly gift)?*

MARK: Nope. Nick's gift came from God. *(to the children)* Anybody know what that gift might be?

SYDNEY: Jesus?

MARK: Exactly. Jesus is God's Christmas present to all of us. Including St. Nick.

SYDNEY: That's right, Christmas is supposed to be Jesus' birthday, isn't it?

MARK: Yes, it is.

SYDNEY: How old is the birthday boy anyway?

MARK: If you counted since he was born, he's about 2,000 years old.

SYDNEY: Two thousand! You'd have to call the fire department in to hose down the candles on the cake!

MARK: I don't think Jesus had a cake on his birthday, Sidney. Don't you know the Christmas story?

SYDNEY: You mean "Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer?"

MARK: No, I mean the story of Jesus' birth.

SYDNEY: Oh, yeah. I was in our church's Christmas play last year.

MARK: What part did you play?

SYDNEY: I was Frank.

MARK: Frank? I don't remember anybody named Frank in the Christmas story.

SYDNEY: Well, that just shows how much you pay attention in church!

MARK: Who in the world is Frank?

SYDNEY: You know, Frank N. Sense. He's one o' those Three Wise Guys.

MARK: Wise Men. I think you need a little help remembering, Sidney. Let me tell you the story.

SYDNEY: Can I go to sleep first?

MARK: No, listen. There was a teenage girl named Mary. God sent an angel to Mary to tell her some good news.

SYDNEY: If I saw an angel, I think I'd hide in the closet!

MARK: Mary must have been scared, too, because the angel said, "Don't be afraid." The angel told her God had chosen her to be the mother of the Savior of the World. She would have a baby who would be God's own son, and she would name him—

SYDNEY: I know! I know! Jesus.

MARK: That's right. The man who was going to be Mary's

husband was named Joseph. At first, he didn't like the idea of Mary having somebody else's baby, but God let him know in a dream that it would be all right.

SYDNEY: And then they had the baby in a barn, right?

MARK: You've skipped a part, Sidney. Do you know who declared that all the world should be taxed?

SYDNEY: Must be the Democrats.

MARK: No, silly, it was the emperor in Rome. So, Joseph took Mary to his hometown, Bethlehem.

SYDNEY: *(Singing)* "Oh, little town of Bethlehem..."

MARK: That's the place. It was so crowded that they couldn't even get a bed in the inn.

SYDNEY: In the what?

MARK: The inn! An inn is like a hotel.

SYDNEY: Then what is an out?

MARK: I don't know.

SYDNEY: It's what you get in baseball.

MARK: Just listen! They must have stayed in a sort of a barn or a stable that night because when the baby was born, they laid him in a manger.

SYDNEY: What's that?

MARK: A feeding trough. Where the donkeys and cows ate their hay.

SYDNEY: Eeww, they laid him in donkey slobber?

MARK: Apparently, they didn't have much choice. Now, let's pretend for a minute, Sidney. Pretend we live a long time ago.

SYDNEY: How long?

MARK: Two thousand years. We're high on a hill with a cool breeze blowing.

SYDNEY: *(Shivers)*

MARK: We're shepherds, camping outside the city of Bethlehem.

SYDNEY: I don't wanna be a shepherd!

MARK: Why not?

SYDNEY: Nobody liked shepherds. They were dirty and sweaty and smelled like soggy underwear.

MARK: You're right; shepherds were outcasts. But stick around; something wonderful is about to happen! We're sitting up on that hill, taking care of our sheep, and suddenly a bright light flashes in the sky.

SYDNEY: An air force jet!

MARK: No.

SYDNEY: It must be Santa Claus.

MARK: No. It's an angel.

SYDNEY: Oh, yeah.

MARK: Do you remember what he says?

SYDNEY: Same thing he said to Mary. "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news!"

MARK: And the good news is that today in the city below the hill a baby has been born.

SYDNEY: Our Savior; Christ the Lord!

art by Sharon Rollins

MARK: Right.

SYDNEY: Let's go see him!

MARK: And leave our sheep? They might run away!

SYDNEY: Well, yeah, but—

MARK: Or the wolves might get them!

SYDNEY: I know but—

MARK: We might lose our jobs and starve!

SYDNEY: But Mark! This is Jesus! Our Savior! Wake up and smell the coffee!

MARK: Why would someone so important as God's son want to have anything to do with us poor, measly little shepherds that nobody cares about?

SYDNEY: Who cares what we are?? Jesus is God's gift for everyone! Kings, millionaires, shepherds, construction workers, liars, and thieves! Lawyers, even!

MARK: You're exactly right, Sidney. The shepherds in the story understood that, and they went to see the baby. And as they went home, they told everybody the good news they had heard. And that's the Christmas story.

SYDNEY: Hold on, you left out the Wise Guys.

MARK: Wise Men. They probably didn't come until a couple years later when Jesus was a toddler.

SYDNEY: Yeah, but the pictures don't look right without Wise Guys there. That way, you've got rich, important folks and poor, ordinary folks worshipping Jesus together.

MARK: You're right, Sidney. I like that picture, too. And that's the story of Jesus' birthday.

SYDNEY: Cool! Next to my own birthday, I like Jesus' birthday best.

MARK: Why?

SYDNEY: 'Cause his is the only other birthday when I get presents!

MARK: I hope you never get for your birthday what most people give Jesus for his birthday.

SYDNEY: Why? What do they give him?

MARK: Nothing.

SYDNEY: Nothing! They go out and get all those things for themselves and don't give Jesus nothing!

MARK: Most people forget about Jesus on his birthday. They're more interested in Santa and presents...

SYDNEY: I know, and candy canes. But Jesus deserves the very best present, and I'm just a little kid without any money. What could a kid give Jesus?

MARK: Just give him YOU.

SYDNEY: Me?

MARK: That's what Jesus wants us to give him. Our lives.

SYDNEY: So we can do what he wants?

MARK: So we can be children of God.

SYDNEY: Great, he'd want me to clean my room all the time and eat spinach!

MARK: Anyway, Jesus never asks us to do anything that he won't give us the strength and the courage to do.

SYDNEY: Wait a minute, who's doing the giving? We give our lives to Jesus or Jesus gives his life for us?

MARK: Both. And when we give to other people in Jesus' name, that's a gift to Jesus, too.

SYDNEY: So Jesus gave his life so we could give our lives to him so we can give love to others so we can give love to Jesus?

MARK: That's it!

SYDNEY: I give up!

MARK: Jesus gives his love to others through us. That way, Jesus' love spreads on and on and on, all around the world.

SYDNEY: Hey, I just thought of something! Do you think Santa Claus works that way?

MARK: What do you mean?

SYDNEY: Just like we help share Jesus' love with others, maybe we help Santa Claus share gifts with kids all over the world.

MARK: Sid, I think you hit the nail right on the head.

SYDNEY: Ow!

MARK: No, not your head, the nail's head.

SYDNEY: I think I've got the idea. Well, see ya later!

MARK: Whoa! Not so fast!

SYDNEY: Oh, okay. See...you...la-ter...

MARK: I mean, don't leave so soon.

SYDNEY: I'm in a hurry!

MARK: Where are you going?

SYDNEY: I'm going to J. C. Penney!

MARK: J. C. Penney?

SYDNEY: Yeah, see ya!

MARK: Wait! Why are you going to J. C. Penny?

SYDNEY: So they can gift-wrap me.

MARK: Gift-wrap you?

SYDNEY: Yeah, so I can give myself to Jesus.

MARK: Sidney, Jesus doesn't want us in gift-wrap. He wants us just the way we are.

SYDNEY: The way we are? Sometimes I'm not so good. He might not like me the way I am.

MARK: Jesus knows we're not perfect, Sidney. But he loves us just the same and wants us to be children of God.

SYDNEY: Really?

MARK: Really.

SYDNEY: (*Looking heavenward*) You are the greatest Christmas present ever! Happy Birthday!

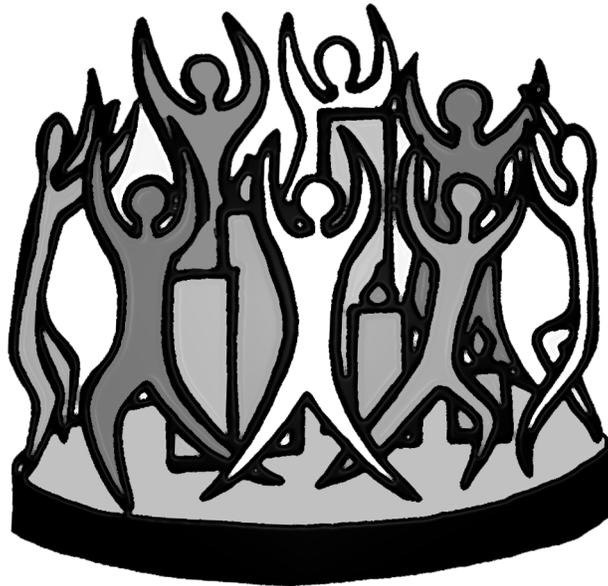
MARK: And a joyful Christmas to you all.

—Mark McClintock is a minister in Waco, Texas and a frequent contributor (especially of children's sermons) to *Seeds of Hope*. He frequently uses Sydney and other puppets to retell old, familiar stories in new, refreshing ways.

bulletin art

Third Sunday in Advent

*Oh, Majestic One,
whose passion spills into flesh and blood,
set our hearts on the edge of our seats,
shivering in hope, longing, longing for the age
when bitter memory dissolves into magnificat.*



—art by Sharon Rollins;
text by Ken Sehested, "Advent Longing"

One-of-a-Kind Glory

a litany for the lighting of the third Advent candle

adapted from a prayer by Caleb Oladipo

FIRST READER: All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

SECOND READER: The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

FIRST READER: And we beheld his glory!

SECOND READER: We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

(SECOND READER lights the third candle)

FIRST READER: O Lord, we have come this morning to meet you.

SECOND READER: For you are the Word who became flesh; you are the Light that can never be put out.

FIRST READER: We are humbled by the fact that we have been instructed to be the mediators of your love in the world.

SECOND READER: O God of mercy and God of all comfort, we thank thee for loving us continuously.

FIRST READER: We confess to you that we are weak in loving, but you are strong and sincere.

SECOND READER: You love each one of us supremely as if he or she is the only one you created.

FIRST READER: Your love is perfect; ours is imperfect. Your love is unconditional, but ours is conditional.

SECOND READER: We have come this morning, O Lord, united to bless your name.

FIRST READER: You have filled the world with beauty, and we give thanks.

SECOND READER: We are grateful that to you there is no East or West, no North or South. We are grateful that you created us all in your image.

FIRST READER: Open our eyes, O Lord, that we may behold thy gracious hand in all thy works.

SECOND READER: Let us rejoice in thy creation.

FIRST READER: May we learn to serve thee with gladness.

SECOND READER: May we learn to serve our fellow humans with joy.

FIRST READER: We give thee thanks for thy mercies and we praise thee for our families, for our friends, for our communities, and for the opportunity to worship thee freely.

SECOND READER: We pray this morning that you give us the grace to show our thanksgiving in a sincere obedience to you.

FIRST READER: Make our hearts full of praise for thee that we may show forth thy praise without ceasing.

SECOND READER: Not only with our lips, O Lord, but also in our lives.

FIRST READER: Be with our leaders as we worship today.

SECOND READER: May thy strength, O God, pilot us.

FIRST READER: May thy power preserve us.

SECOND READER: May thy wisdom instruct us.

FIRST READER: May thy hand protect us.

SECOND READER: May thy way, O God, direct us.

FIRST READER: For the sake of him by whom all things were made, thy son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Caleb Oladipo, a native of Nigeria, is the director of African Studies at Baylor University. Scriptures: Luke 3:6 (NRSV), John 1:14 (The Message)



The mounting rhythmus of time,
the gathering passion of godhead
pervading earth's body
erupt, ecstatic,
unbounded...
no fiery deluge,
no fist-clenching
rapture.

No star-strewn
apocalypse.
Only a woman
laboring.
Only the needy cry
of child in the dark.

Glory is not
what we think.
—Stephen Manning

art by Robert Darden

Joy for Everyone

a sermon by Brett Younger

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
God has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands
grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
God will rejoice over you with gladness,
God will renew you in love;
God will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

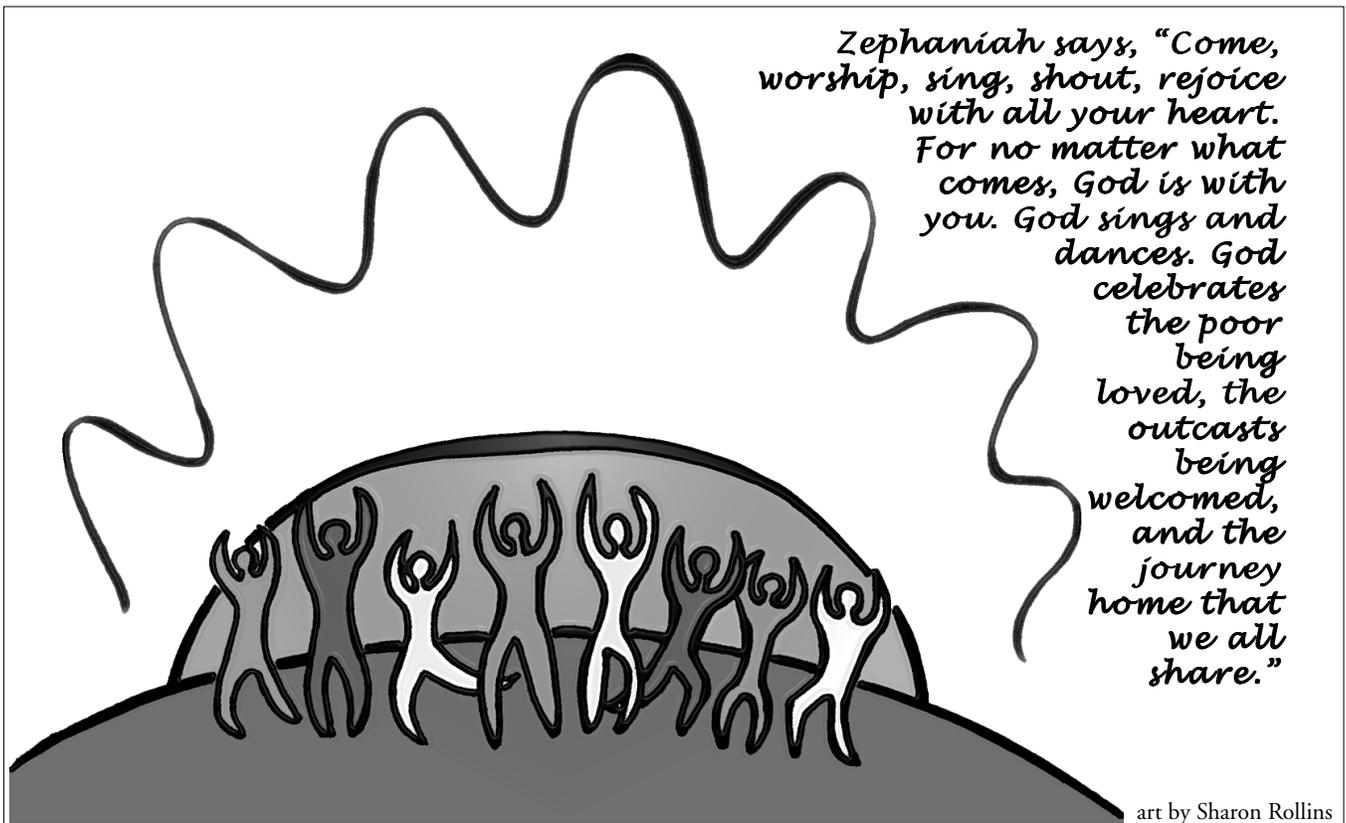
*At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes.*

—Zephaniah 3:14-20

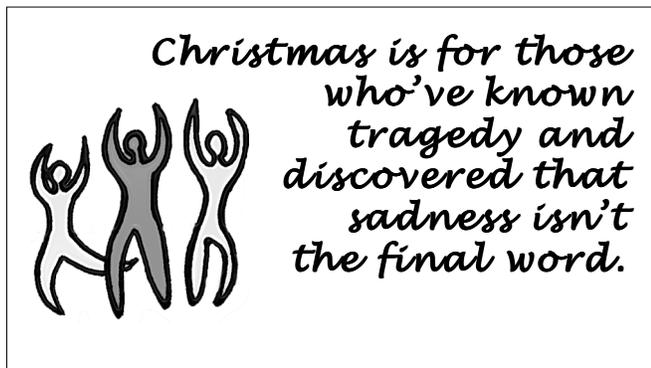
Several middle-aged men sit in a circle in a living room. The caption beneath the cartoon reads, “The Guys Without Gift Ideas support group.” The leader of the group asks, “Leo, how do you feel about Wallace’s not finding anything for his wife except a book of McDonald’s gift certificates?” Leo answers: “It makes me feel better. My oven mitt idea beats that by a mile.”

Sometimes a Christmas support group sounds like a good idea.

When the Puritan Oliver Cromwell ruled England he outlawed Christmas. He wasn’t the last religious person to think this holiday has gotten out of hand. Did you know December 25th wasn’t chosen because it was on Jesus’ birth certificate but because that was the date of the biggest party of the year in Rome and the



Christians wanted a celebration of their own? Some Christians think it's time to give Christmas back to the Romans. Buying gifts, for instance, seems superfluous. Most of us are well fed, clothed and housed. When someone asks, "What do you need?" the answer is "We don't *need* anything." If we really needed something, we would buy it. That's why we exchange presents that no one needs—earrings that light up, underwear in a can, and memberships in the toothbrush-of-the-month club. On Christmas Day, the phrase most used in many



homes is not "Merry Christmas," but "I have the receipt if you want to take that back."

Ebenezer Scrooge grumbled, "If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart." We have moments when Scrooge doesn't seem that hard to understand.

Sometimes our weariness is the result of frustrations that will pass before the tree is taken down, but we also have good reasons to be sad. For someone who's been through a hard year, Christmas can be painful. For those who are facing Christmas for the first time or the tenth time since a loved one has died, almost everything reminds them of the one whose stocking is no longer hanging on the mantle. Our sorrows—the ways in which our lives aren't what we wish, our shortcomings as families, health concerns, aging parents, jobs that feel like dead-ends, dreams that will not come true—are all magnified at Christmas.

It's easy to forget that Christmas is not a party for those who smile the most. This season isn't for people who've never learned that life is hard. Christmas is for those who've known tragedy and discovered that sadness isn't the final word. Wendell Berry writes, "Be joyful, even though you have considered all the facts." The joy of Christmas is a defiant "nonetheless" that doesn't deny sorrow but overcomes it.

The Hebrew prophets invited God's people to celebrate even when things were at their worst. Six hundred years before the first Christmas, Israel was in

terrible shape. Assyria, the latest in a long line of super powers, was threatening. The prophet Zephaniah pointed out how bad things were. He criticized their religious foolishness, hypocritical leaders, and the way they ignored God.

Zephaniah wrote, "The people will soon walk like the blind and their blood will be poured out like the dust." That's not much to sing about, and yet the prophet finds hope. He concludes his book with this glorious song, this call to celebrate God's presence: "Come, worship, sing, shout, rejoice with all your heart. For no matter what comes, God is with you. God sings and dances. God celebrates the poor being loved, the outcasts being welcomed, and the journey home that we all share."

It's often in the hardest times that God's people recognize that God is with us. Think of Mary hurrying to Elizabeth's house. Mary, about whom there are so many misconceptions (pun intended), is a pregnant, unmarried teenager. She's worried about being a mother and worried about what her mother thinks. Imagine Mary and Joseph approaching the hotel clerk who tells them there's no room in the inn. Joseph pleads, "But she's pregnant." The innkeeper says, "That's not my fault." To which Joseph replies, "It's not my fault either."

Mary will soon be a homeless parent. A wicked king will try to murder her child. And yet, Mary sings of joy: "My soul magnifies the Most High, and my spirit rejoices in God. God remembers us with love and mercy." God's people rejoice even where there seems to be little reason. God's presence matters more than our circumstances.

Paul Tillich talks about the "inescapability of God." God is in every nook and cranny of the world. So rejoice no matter what comes, for God's presence is what we celebrate.

In his book *Never Too Late to Be Loved*, Browne Barr tells about the last year of his marriage. As his wife Elizabeth's terminal illness progresses, the Barrs have to deal with their feelings about death and faith and each other. As a result, their time together is gracious and joyful. Very near the end of her life, Elizabeth talks about the prayers that sustain her. With a smile, she tells her husband, a Congregational minister, that "there's too much Baptist left" in her because she's been talking to Jesus a lot lately: "I know that Jesus isn't sitting on the deck beside that pink petunia...But it's easier if I think about him and see him and hear him, when I talk with God...That's lots better than trying to have a conversation with the wind in the trees...Jesus has ears. And you know Jesus speaks English..."

When Browne asks her what she prays about, she replies: "Mostly the children. I know they're all grown up, but there's not a day that I don't worry or wonder about one of them. It's amazing, how in a week or so it

all seems to work out that they all get equal time. Except they get cheated on the days when I'm most worried about you or upset about some stupid thing the State Department is doing...Jesus and I have lots to talk about." When he asks her what she thinks about dying, she doesn't answer at once. "It's sort of strange," she says at last quietly, but her voice isn't somber, it's light and loving: "I really don't. Somehow whenever I think about death...God's just there. I feel God all around me...God's just there. The Everlasting Arms, I guess. So close."

Real joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God's presence, but it takes some of us a while to figure that out.

When I was in the primary department in Sunday school, eight to ten years old, one of my favorite songs was "I've Got the Joy." I'm not sure who wrote the words, but it sounds like it could have been penned by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Down in my heart to stay." The first stanza alone is enough to qualify the song as a classic, but the best part is the last verse: "And if the devil doesn't like it he can sit on a tack. Ouch! Sit on a tack. Ouch! Sit on a tack. Ouch! And if the devil doesn't like it he can sit on a tack. Sit on a tack to stay."

The last stanza was wonderful not only for the lucidity of the poetry and the insightfulness of the theology, but also for its participatory nature. We began the song seated. Then when we shouted "Ouch!" we jumped out of our chairs. When it was over everyone in the primary department rolled on the floor and laughed uproariously at how accurately we had depicted what it would look like if the personification of evil did indeed sit on a tack.

When I was eleven years old, and in the junior department, soon to be an intermediate, the rock band Three Dog Night recorded a song entitled *Joy to the World*. The first line was not, however, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come" but was instead, and those of you who have as little musical taste as I have will remember this: "Jeremiah was a bullfrog, was a good friend of mine. I never understood a single word he said, but I helped him drink his wine." The last line was equally memorable, "Joy to the fishies in the deep blue sea, and joy to you and me."

I bought the 45 rpm record, put the little plastic disk in to make it fit our stereo and, for the first time, invited my mother into my room to listen to a new record. I said, "Look, Mom, I bought *Joy to the World*. That's one of your favorite Christmas carols, isn't it?" My mother expressed amazement and suggested, as I hoped she would, that we listen to it. Mom left during,

"I never understood a single word he said," long before "Joy to the fishies in the deep blue sea." I, of course, rolled on the floor and laughed uproariously.

It's been more than twenty years since I graduated from the intermediate department. Now when I sing of joy it's in a different key. I no longer find much joy in taunting either the devil or my mother, though both of those activities have their place. Joy is now less like uproarious laughter and more like sustaining hope.

Some things aren't as simple as they once were. I realize now that not all of my dreams will come true.

Real joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God's presence, but it takes some of us a while to figure that out.



I've seen some of the people I love hurt terribly. I have a few scars of my own. Some of the people I've loved have died. I've come to believe that when we realize that life is hard and won't be everything we've hoped, our joy either fades away or goes deeper.

Most recent hymnals include *Joy to the World*, the Isaac Watts version, not the Three Dog Night version, but most hymnal omit the third verse: "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found." I'm sure the editors think that most congregations don't enjoy singing: "Far as the curse is found." But it may be that Isaac Watts understood that real joy is found on the other side of the sorrows that grow and the thorns that destroy. Real joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God's presence.

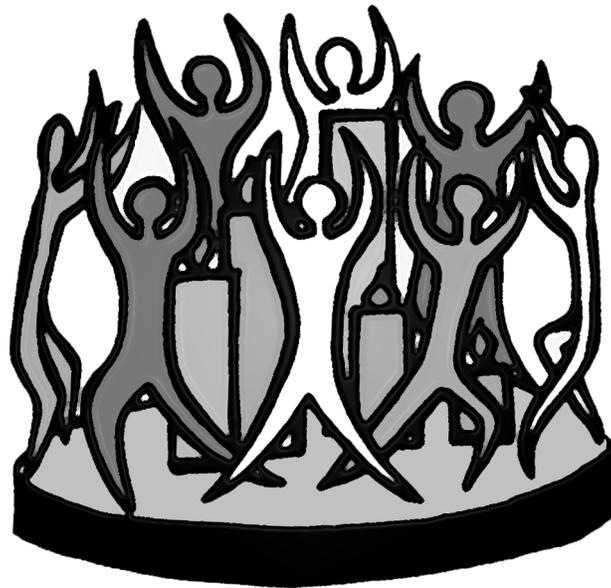
God is the great joy deep inside us—the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts. So wrap the packages—gift certificates and oven mitts. Turn on the Christmas lights. Trim the tree. Enjoy the calories. Laugh out loud. Dance. Rejoice. Celebrate. Be surprised by God's joy. God is with us, so sing joyful and triumphant. And if the devil doesn't like it, he can sit on a tack.

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas, and a frequent *Seeds of Hope* contributor.

bulletin art

Fourth Sunday in Advent

...mind without soul may
blast some universe to might have been
and stop ten thousand stars
but not one heartbeat of this child;
nor shall even prevail
a million questionings against the silence
of his mother's smile—
whose only secret all creation sings



—art by Sharon Rollins; text by e. e. cummings

The Coming of the Lord

a litany for the lighting of the fourth Advent candle

by Katie Cook

art by Michael Long



FIRST READER: The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

SECOND READER: The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

PEOPLE: They shall see the glory of God,
They shall see the majesty of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble knees.

FIRST READER: Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God."

PEOPLE: God will come and save us.

SECOND READER: Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

PEOPLE: Then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy.

FIRST READER: For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert;

SECOND READER: The burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

FIRST READER: A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Sacred Way;
and it shall be for God's people.

PEOPLE: No traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

FIRST READER: No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it;

SECOND READER: No; the redeemed shall walk safely there.

PEOPLE: And the ransomed of our God shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads
they shall obtain joy and gladness
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

FIRST READER: While John was in Herod's prison, he heard about the works that this Jesus was performing, and sent a message by way of his followers to ask Jesus,

SECOND READER: "Are you the one whose coming was foretold?"

PEOPLE: "Or do we look for another?"

FIRST READER: In reply, Jesus said to them,

SECOND READER: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:"

PEOPLE: "Those who are blind recover their sight;
those who cannot walk are able to walk;
those with leprosy are cured;
those who are deaf begin to hear;
the dead are raised to life:
and those who have nothing hear words of hope."

FIRST READER: One of the lawyers of the Temple asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment?"
And Jesus answered him, saying

FIRST READER: "The first one is this: You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind, soul, and strength.
The second one is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

FIRST READER: As we light this candle today, teach us, O God, of kinship and community, of those we call neighbor—in our congregation, in our town, in our world. *FIRST READER lights the fourth candle.*

FIRST READER: And now, there is this word from the apostle James:

SECOND READER: Be patient, my sisters and brothers, until the appearance of Christ. See how the farmer awaits the precious yield of the soil, looking forward to it patiently while the soil receives the winter and spring rains.

PEOPLE: We, too, must be patient.

FIRST READER: Steady your hearts; the coming of the Christ is at hand. Amen.

—from Isaiah 35, Matthew 11:2-5, Matthew 22: 34-40, James 5:7-11, adapted from a liturgy by Buddy Vess

Toilet Paper and the Global Village

some thoughts about community

by Katie Cook

“Who is my neighbor?” the young man asked Jesus.

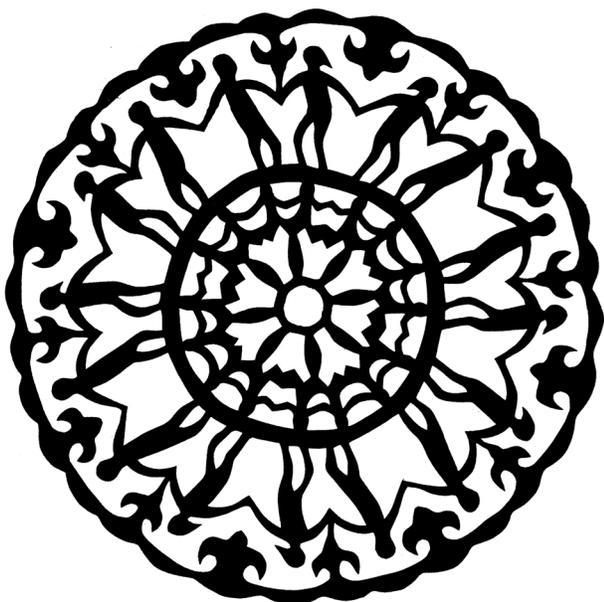
It’s a good question, one that Jesus answered with a story. But it bears looking at again. Who IS my neighbor? What is my community? Is it my city? My region? Is it my brothers and their families? Is it my church? Is it the people I hang out with—with whom I am free to be myself? Is it the people to whom I have given food or a listening ear?

All of those things compose a part of my community. All of those people are my neighbors. But there is more. My community—our community—spans the earth. We are not an island; we are not even a continent. We are a planet, and our lives are inextricably woven together.

When I was in college, my friends decided to celebrate my birthday by “wrapping” my apartment with toilet paper. They got someone to lure me away, and when I returned, the whole apartment was a huge web of toilet paper. I could barely get in the front door. When I freed my coffee pot from the paper in the kitchen, something fell to the floor in the bedroom.

This is a small illustration of the web that connects all of the inhabitants of the world. What you and I consumed for breakfast this morning probably affected wheat farmers in Kansas, banana plantation workers in Guatemala, or coffee farmers in Costa Rica. It may be somehow linked with Colombian drug lords,

So how can we work for peace and economic justice in an esoteric jungle of international politics? Do you and I really have the resources and understanding to sow those things that make for peace in this kind of global village?



or may support cruel regimes in Central Africa. If this sounds complex, that’s because it is—extremely so.

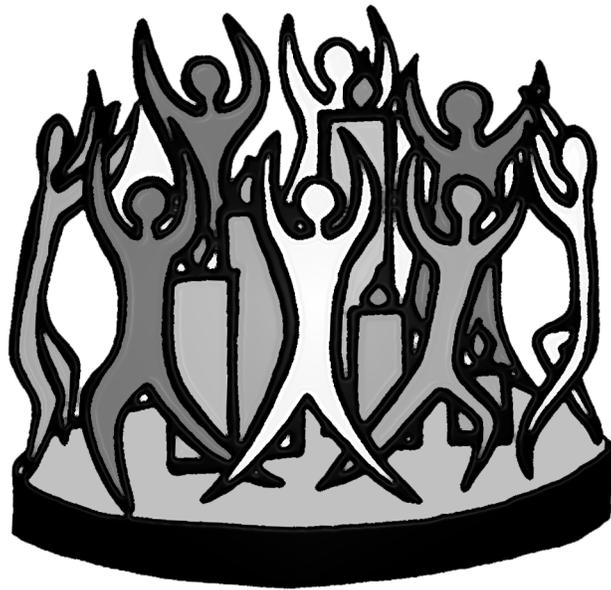
So how can we work for peace and economic justice in an esoteric jungle of international politics? Do you and I really have the resources and understanding to sow love, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy—those things that make for peace—in this kind of global village?

I think we do. A surprising number of our actions, good and bad, touches our neighbors around the world. We may not be able to prevent the atrocities of war or famine. We may not be able to coax tyrants into sharing their resources. But we can still live as if other people matter—through our patterns of consumption, through our lifestyles, in “small” kindnesses. And I believe that the most modest act of mercy can find its way, many times without our knowledge, to the far continents and remote villages of the earth...with healing in its wings. ■

art by He Chi

Christmastide

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

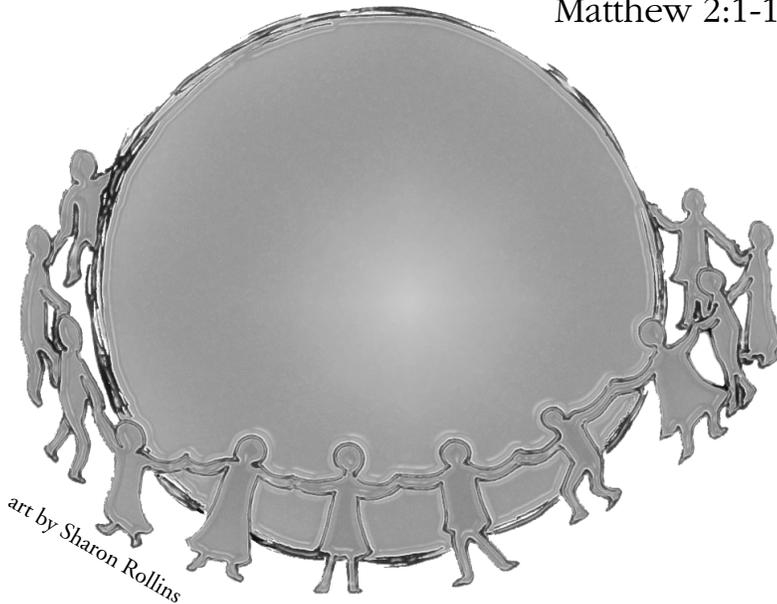


—art by Sharon Rollins;
text from an Orthodox chant

Of Supernovas & Wise Men

a sermon for Christmastide

by Richard Groves
Matthew 2:1-12



One of the gifts I received for Christmas was a book titled *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting on the Spirit of the Universe*. The thoughts are quotations from writers who represent a wide spectrum of the human spiritual and intellectual enterprise, everyone from Dr. Seuss:

*"I say!" murmured Horton. "I've never heard tell
Of a small speck of dust that is able to yell.
So you know what I think?... Why, I think that there
must be someone on top of that small speck of
dust."*

To the biblical book of Ecclesiastes:

*God has made everything beautiful in its time;
also God has put eternity into our minds, yet so
that we cannot find out what God has done from
the beginning to the end.*

To Stephen Hawking:

*Black holes would seem to suggest that God not
only plays dice but also sometimes throws them
where they cannot be seen.*

The images are photographs, breathtaking pictures taken through the Hubble space-based telescope, giving glimpses of the immensity and the beauty of creation. Pleiades, a cluster of stars most of us have known only in those connect-the-dots pictures of the skies, is seen

"surrounded by blue nebulosity illuminated by nearby stars." The Andromeda Galaxy—300 billion stars, 65,000 light-years across, 2.93 million light-years away—a yellow-gold mass encircled by lavender dust swirls against a deep purple backdrop that has been speckled with thousands of tiny white star-dots, like a Jackson Pollock painting.

One cold evening during the holidays I sat in front of the fire and thumbed through the book, reading the thought-provoking quotations and being mesmerized by the photographs. After a while, to be honest, most of the pictures began to blur into one another. Once you've seen one supernova, you've seen them all—if you are an astronomical novice as I am. But one photograph stood out from the

rest. It was a picture of a long column of reddish smoke, like a nuclear fireball, stretching across the page diagonally from the lower left to the upper right. The column, the caption noted, is a trillion miles long. "This is one of the first close-up images," the author said, "of the dynamic process accompanying the final stages of a star's birth."

I was struck. Here we are, I thought, in the Christmas season singing well-loved carols:

*Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

And reading familiar verses of scripture:

*Wise men came from the East to Jerusalem,
saying, 'Where is he that is born King of the
Jews. For we have seen his star in the East, and
have come to worship him.'... Then Herod
summoned the wise men secretly and
ascertained what time the star appeared... And
when they had heard the king they went on their
way; and, lo, the star they had seen in the East
went before them, till it came to rest over the
place where the child was. When they saw the
star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*

The truth, though, is that the birth of a star is a cosmic

event the magnitude and glory of which is beyond our capacity to comprehend. How glibly we speak of a star appearing in the East.

I realize that the brilliantly photographed pictures and provocative comments, and the tale of the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem are two very different ways of telling the story. One is starkly realistic, even though it is presented in breathtaking beauty. The other has the feel of legend about it; it is no less true, but its truth is told in the familiar, comforting form of story. It would not be appropriate, indeed, it would be confusing and misleading to try to mix the two, to intersperse the telling of Matthew's story of the magi with visual images of the spectacular birth of a star.



Of what use is gold when the mother has no bed in which to lay her baby; what good is frankincense when she has no blanket in which to wrap her infant son; of what value is myrrh when the young parents are living in a rented barn?

Yet there is a connection, isn't there? For each, in its own way, taps into the mystery which is just the other side of the boundary that restricts all human knowledge. On one hand, according to Albert Einstein:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead...

Again:

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God. Yet again: I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know God's thoughts; the rest are details.

On the other hand, we have a story, in some ways, but profound, and approaching mystery from a different angle. It would be a great story even if it had no theological or religious significance whatsoever. It has all the ingredients: a poor couple, alone, afraid, intimidated;

a newborn baby, tiny and defenseless; an evil king who kills babies in his diabolical desire to maintain power; three visiting magi, mysterious in their own way, for we know only that they are from the East (the land of mystery), and that one tenet of their astrology-based religion is that a new star appears when a new king is born.

They have seen a new star in the western sky, and they assume that somewhere—they are not sure exactly where—a young prince has been born. They travel westward, bringing with them gifts suitable for a king—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

As fate would have it—as a good storyteller would tell it—the magi stop to ask directions, unknowingly, at the palace of the evil king, who listens intently to the news they bring and pretends to want to pay a visit to the young prince. But when the visiting wise men leave, the king inquires of his own magi if there had ever been a prophecy about a king being born in his territory, and they search the ancient texts and discover that, yes, there was such a prophecy; an infant king would be born in nearby Bethlehem. The evil king begins making his sinister plans.

Meanwhile, the magi find the place where the young couple and their newborn baby are staying. At first, the wise men are confused. Surely, they must have made a mistake. This is no palace. This is no royal couple; this is an ordinary carpenter and his wife. This is no king, not in any ordinary sense. Suddenly, their gifts seem completely out of place. Of what use is gold when the mother has no bed in which to lay her baby; what good is frankincense when she has no blanket in which to wrap her infant son; of what value is myrrh when the young parents are living in a rented barn?

Yet, somehow the magi know. They fall down before the manger and worship this newborn baby. And they offer him their gifts; perhaps they are appropriate in ways the givers do not understand.

But there is great danger lurking in the background. The evil king is plotting to find the infant and kill him. The magi had planned to revisit the palace after they had found the baby; for they did not know of the king's evil plans. But they are warned in a dream not to tell the king where he could find the infant; they are to go home some other way. Then an angel warns the baby's father that his son's life is in grave danger, and that he should get his wife and son out of Bethlehem—take them to Egypt, land of refuge for their ancestors—as soon as possible.

When the young family is safely out of the country, the evil king's soldiers swoop down on the tiny village of Bethlehem and kill all the baby boys.

And above everything hangs a star whose birth had been a beacon to lead the magi from the East to a barn in Bethlehem. The star is the connection with the mystery of which Paul speaks:

To me... this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all people see what is the plan of the

mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things... (Ephesians 3:8-9).

For the God who was incarnate in the baby in the manger was the *God who created all things*. In another place Paul said that *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (in Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)*

Theologians talk about the cosmic Christ, by which they mean that what took place in the incarnation of God in Christ had universe-wide implications. When Christ was born, his birth was not announced in the *Bethlehem Gazette*; it was announced in the galaxy! His coming was accompanied by a star-birth. God was reconciling all things on earth and *in heaven*.

Now, if we are honest I think most of us will admit that we have difficulty understanding language like that. For in our thinking about the divine/human nature of Christ we have come down solidly on the human side. As a needed corrective, no doubt, to the way of thinking of Jesus that rendered him non-human, God walking around in a man suit, like a man walking around in a Santa Claus suit, as one cynic put it. So solidly have we come down on the human side that we have great difficulty understanding what the ancients were talking about when they said, for example, as Paul did, that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (II Corinthians 5:19).*

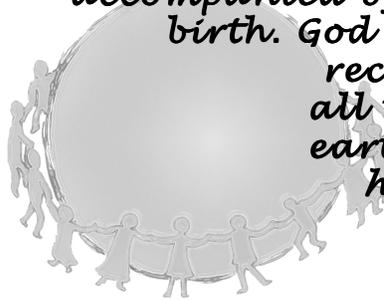
I will tell you what we are like: we are like second-generation immigrants who discover that they no longer know the language of the old country. I saw a similar thing happen when I was an undergraduate. For two hundred years South Louisiana had been isolated from the rest of the country, separated by bayous and swamps and language and custom. Then oil was discovered offshore, and suddenly there was an influx of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who were well-educated, and had fine cars and beautiful homes and lots of money—and they were not Cajun and they did not speak French. The older members of the community resented the intrusion. My wife's grandmother said, disdainfully, "C'est Americains" (He is an American.) Sometimes, "C'est strangers" (He is a stranger.) I was one of the "strangers."

The younger generation, on the other hand, embraced the newcomers. They wanted to be like them. They were embarrassed by their own traditions and customs. They refused to learn to speak French at home. A friend said that her grandmother would point to a chair and say, "La chaise, la chaise," but she would put her fingers in her ears and refuse to hear. By the early 1960s a generation had grown up with little or no connection with its own culture. It has taken a concerted effort on the part of all segments of society to reclaim the heritage that was in danger of being lost. A major part of that reclamation process has been relearning the old language.

That is what we twenty-first century American Christians are like. We no longer speak the language of

our heritage. Ancient concepts, like incarnation and redemption, sound as strange to us as they do to our secular contemporaries. Indeed, we have adopted the language of our secular world—the language of nebulae and supernovas—and its thought-forms. We keep telling our stories—and that is good—but we are no longer sure what they mean. Even the stories are sounding more and more quaint as the years go by.

When Christ was born, his birth was not announced in the Bethlehem Gazette; it was announced in the galaxy! His coming was accompanied by a star-birth. God was reconciling all things on earth and in heaven.



There is an irony, however, one that should give us hope. This is what dawned on me as I was reading *The Hand of God*. Perhaps in a strange and surprising way our adopted language, with its talk about wonder and mystery, can show us the way back to our own proper language and lead us back into the mysteries of our faith. For, make no mistake about it, as one of our local newspaper editors said recently, "exploring outer space and the inner design of matter...are not extracurricular activities..." They are spiritual endeavors, regardless of the language they use. (*Winston-Salem Journal*)

So, let us speak the language of our world. Let us gaze in awe at the wonders of God's creation. And let us tell our stories—about wise men, and evil kings, and dreams and angels, and perhaps, though

*That star which pierced the ancient night
Has faded from above,
Yet through the visionary sight
Of faith and hope and love
We, like the wisemen, still may find
Life's animating goal:
The Christ who prompts the probing mind
And lights the open soul.
(Thomas Troeger)*

May that be God's surprising gift for us as we enter a new age. In Christ's name. Amen.

—Richard Groves is a pastor in Wake Forest, North Carolina and a frequent contributor to *Seeds of Hope* publications.