Breath of God

Worship Resources for the Creative Church – Advent/Christmastide 2020

Sacred Seasons, *a series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis,*
from Seeds of Hope Publishers: 602 James Avenue; Waco, TX 76706 • 254/755-7745
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art by Sally Lynn Askins

Sacred Seasons

Worship Tools for the Creative Church

These unique resource packets are available for the liturgical year, three packets a year for $100 ($125 for non-US subscriptions), one packet for $50 ($65 outside of the US).

Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for poor and hungry people of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. Since 1991, the group has sought out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable and empower a variety of responses to the problems of hunger and poverty.

Breath of God

...in this worship packet:

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Editorial Address

The Seeds of Hope ministry is housed by the community of faith at Seventh & James Baptist Church. The mailing address is: 602 James; Waco, TX 76706; 254/755-7745; seedseditor1@gmail.com; www.seedspublishers.org.

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 501(c)3 nonprofit tax status. All contributions above the subscription rate are fully tax-deductible.

A Word about This Packet

This Advent season, we are indebted to a lot of people for their generous contributions to our worship resource. I am indebted to our liturgical team: Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Scott Turner and Alec Ylitalo, for the direction and theme, and for most of the elements of the liturgies.

You will see in Alec Ylitalo's theme interpretation how we approached the idea of breath and breathing. We came together, extremely aware of our sisters and brothers who have to fight for breath—in every interpretation of that. We wanted this packet to be relevant and helpful in this time of pandemic and chaos in our society.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Sally Lynn Askins, our resident artist, was also thinking about breath and breathing, and about the presence of masks in our world today. We think her stunning creations speak for themselves as they accompany us through the four weeks of Advent. We have also used a number of her Advent angels from years past.

You will also find old and new art by Jesse Manning, Erin Kennedy Mayer, Rebecca Ward, Lenora Mathis and Scott Turner—all of whom will be familiar to most of our subscribers.

Besides the seven liturgies for the Advent/Christmastide season, you will find a sermon by Erin Conaway; a thought for the season from Amy Butler, the interim senior pastor at National City Church in Washington, DC; and a meditation by Grant Dooley, minister to youth, children and families at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, TX.

We also hope you are enriched by the many meditations and prayers from longtime friends like Brett Younger, John Ballenger, Ken Sehested and Bill Cooper that are sprinkled throughout the liturgy pages.

We are deeply grateful for all of you who subscribe to *Sacred Seasons*, and who make use of these gifts in your worship and work. As always, we are counting on you to adapt these contents to your own needs, resources and inclinations. We would love to hear about how you used them.

The contents of this packet are your congregation's to use freely and we want you to share them with others. Our prayer is that they will give us the tools and inspiration we need to enter into a holy and hopeful Advent and Christmastide. May the breath of God blow across your lives and bless them with healing.

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

Breath of Heaven

A Theme Interpretation

by Alec Ylitalo

Breathing is second nature to us. It's one of the most intriguing aspects of the human body because it seems to be both voluntary and involuntary at the same time. You can control your breathing by stopping and starting it, but the moment your body requires a breath, it gasps for one without your own input. In fact, I'd imagine that most people don't even really pay attention to their breathing patterns until that pattern is actually labored or interrupted. Breath is a life-giving and necessary part of being human.

On the other hand, over the past six months, humanity has become rather hyper-focused on breath because of the potential dangers that have come to the forefront in the COVID-19 era. Being (in the current understanding) the primary manner of transmission, breath has almost felt like it's become dangerous and life-threatening at times, while still being a necessity.

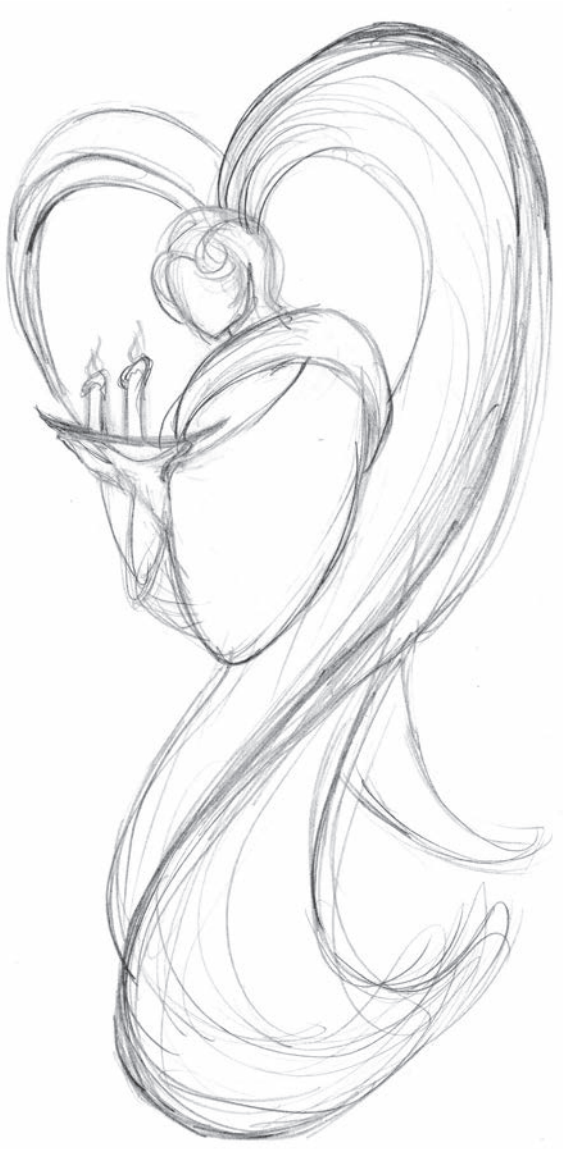
With us all being more aware than usual of how our breath affects, not only our own bodies, but the lives and health of others and the world around us, it seems appropriate to take a deeper look into the effects of God breathing into the world. The breath of Heaven, the breath of God, is a powerful force that is seen moving, creating, speaking and saving all throughout our scriptures, but there is especially an incredible focus on breath during the events that act as the pillars of our faith.

In the beginning, the breath of God forms into words of creation, as from single aspirations, unbounded creativity arises day after day. Everything that we know of, heaven and earth, rock and sea, plant and animal, humanity itself, exists first because God breathed life into this world.

From the start, we see that the breath of Heaven can do magnificent things, but this is only the jumping-off point for us as God breathes the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human. What else can the breath of Heaven become in this new sanctuary?

All of this Divine breathing of new life into existence is incredible, but is only indicative of a far-away God, transcending time and space. What of the immanent aspect of God though? What of the close-to-us God? With the coming of Advent, we witness our faith draw near with the anticipation of the very first breath that will be drawn by the Christ child.

A new sort of creative breath is arriving, a second part to the story of the breath of Heaven. A chapter



art by Sally Lynn Askins

that will be God breathing the same air as we do, joining in the now labored breath of humanity, but also God breathing new life into humanity itself through what will become of that Christ child.

That first wail of Jesus in the manger is the very breath that establishes a life that will breathe hope, peace, joy and love into a struggling world that has fallen far from the flourishing of creation. Cries for justice, caring for the least of these and feeding the hungry form from that very same breath of Jesus, as he seeks to relieve those who are gasping for air while being drowned by the injustices of the world around them.

Breath continues to transform creatively and become action in the world as it now sustains the One who meets the people where they are and lays hands upon those who are in need. Jesus allows the world around him to breathe a little bit easier.

Alas, whereas there is a first breath in a person, there is also a last breath. Not too long after we celebrate with overwhelming joy that first one as Christians, we realize the last gasp of "It is finished" lies in wait. Whereas the breath of creation has abounded so far, we will soon witness the danger and life-taking nature of breath that we've recently become accustomed to, and yet we also will witness that that final gasp is still a creative breath that gives new life in different ways.

We see that the breath of Heaven becomes grace and forgiveness for that fallen world, even as Jesus' final, labored breaths close out the time of Emmanuel, God with us.

From creation to this season of preparing for the first breath of Jesus Christ, on into Lent and the focus on the last breath of Christ, and finally into the Hunger Emphasis season, where it's easy to hear the labored breathing of humanity in the midst of the vast injustices of the world, this year we at Seeds focus on paying attention to the movement, the power, the life-giving nature of the breath of Heaven.

May the Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on you and be felt through all of these seasons in different ways as we realize the involuntary nature of creation's lungs being filled by the Divine, as well as the voluntary actions of us following in the same steps of Christ breathing newness into the world around us. May we take to heart the life-giving and life-taking nature of that breath, and through it all feel the nature of God flowing over the earth.

—Alec Ylitalo, one of the stalwarts of the Sacred Seasons liturgical team, is Senior Minister at Richfield Christian Church in Waco, TX, and is president of the Greater Waco Interfaith Council.

Look and listen for the path in the wilderness. The path is there; God continually creates and recreates it, and continually calls us by name, as the people of God, to walk it.

On the path, the wilderness does not go away. Instead, God brings comfort, peace and absolute creative newness in the midst of wilderness.

You who are alienated, who feel slighted, who have woken up to find yourself disenfranchised, the God of comfort speaks your name. Those of you who just can't seem to catch a break, God has more than a break.

God gives us imagination where we only found despair, a new reality where we only saw an unforgiving grid, peace where we only knew strife. Let us remember in Advent that we are given a new song to sing.

Hear the words of Isaiah, "Here is your God!" and follow it to the singing mother, the baby in the manger, the Kingdom come, God made flesh.

—Marie Curran

art courtesy of the Franciscanos de la Cruzblanca.

Some Thoughts about Advent

by John S. Ballenger

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

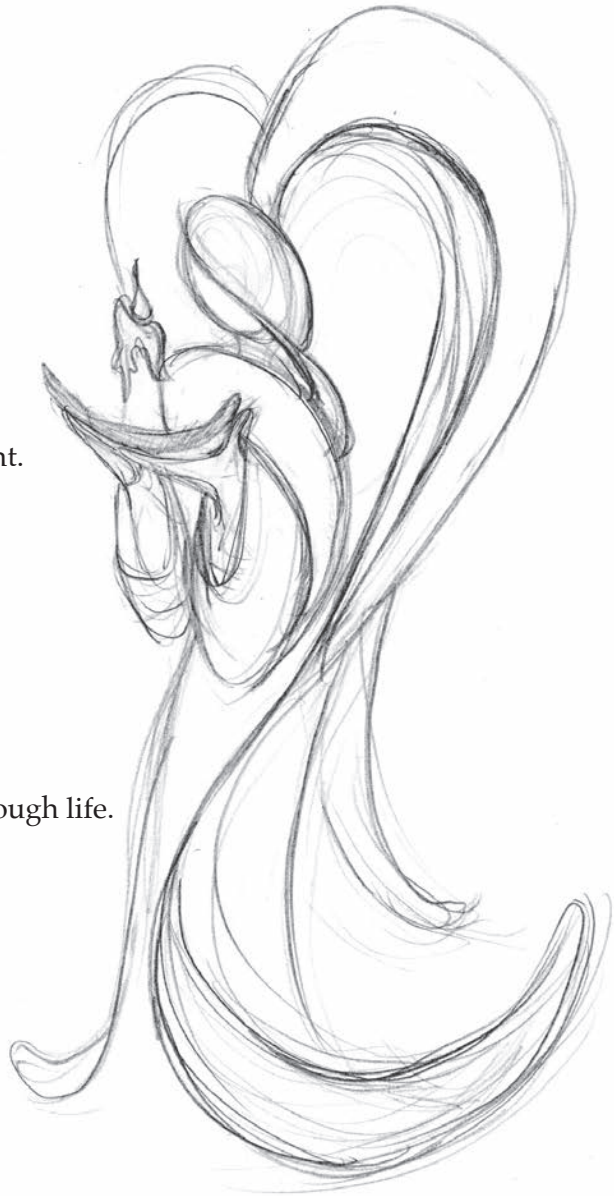
advent:
and the spirit of God blows over creation.
darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and God said: "Let there be light!"
and there was light.
advent is creating the hope of light in darkness.
praise God.

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.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

—John Ballenger is a pastor and poet who lives in Baltimore, MD. His sermons and poetry have graced the pages of Sacred Seasons *for many years.*

A Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Call to Worship

Breathing God, whisper your creating wind gently upon our faces as we begin this season of anticipation. We gather this Sunday in the light of Hope which we find in you. We recall your loving and merciful presence in the past; help us to feel your presence in this moment as we open our hearts and focus our minds to worship you; and we trust you are coming to us from the end of all things, still full of power, mercy, and love.

Lighting of the Hope Candle

From the moment God breathed life into this world, all of creation has been holding its breath. As we light the first candle, we realize that that sigh of relief, that overwhelming release of the struggle is finally near. The solitary flame dances, taunting us almost as we struggle with bated breath and see the other four candles remaining unlit; and yet, in this one flame, somehow hope is kindled for the future, for a time where creation doesn't have to wait, for a time when the world will breathe a little easier as love enters the world.

Hymn

"Make Ready the Way (Come, O Lord)"
TEXT and MUSIC: David Haas
A TIME FOR HOPE - Irregular Meter
Singing Our Faith hymnal No. 102 (GIA)

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 64:1-9

Meditation of Preparation

While you walk along your ways,
Waiting, we bedeck ourselves:
We prepare the house,
We throw open the shutters,
We anticipate your arrival.
You sweep away our weariness,
Making your dwelling in us.
In you, we live again; in you, we are reborn—
In this heedless dawn.
—Jaci Maraschin, translated from the Portuguese by Guilherme Almeida and Anita Scotti

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Hymn
"Hope of the World"
TEXT: Georgia Harkness
MUSIC: Louis Bourgeois
DONNE SECOURS - 11.10.11.10
Glory to God hymnal No. 734

Reading from the Epistles
I Corinthians 1:3-9

Gospel Reading
Mark 13:24-37

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"Hope Shines as the Solitary Star"
TEXT: Catherine Faith MacLean
MUSIC: Janet Bauman Tissandier
HOPE SHINES AS A SOLITARY STAR
- Irregular Meter
More Voices hymnal No. 220
(United Church of Canada)

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
For us, too, the angel comes—tonight, and tomorrow, and the next day. And he says, "You have been chosen to bear this child, this word-become-flesh, this God-with-us. A special task has been appointed to you." And we, each of us, will say, tonight, tomorrow, and the next day, "My soul magnifies the Lord," or we will turn away and leave the Child in the cold.
–Katie Cook, "Advent Promise"

Hymn of Commitment
"Magnificat"
TEXT and MUSIC: Taizé Community
MAGNIFICAT (Berthier) - Irregular Meter
Worship and Rejoice hymnal No. 173

Benediction
Dear siblings, sharing the breath of God with every movement of our lungs and every act of hope, inhabit the world where you are and where you will safely go with the tingling anticipation of Emmanuel, the confident history of Christ in our world, and the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit. May courage, gentleness, and hope be in your heart and on your mind as we walk through this season of wonder.

Litany of Emmanuel

ONE: O come, O come, and be our God-with-us,
O long-sought with-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.

MANY: Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,
Come Root, and Key, and King, and Holy Flame,

ONE: O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,

MANY: Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.

ONE: O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness,

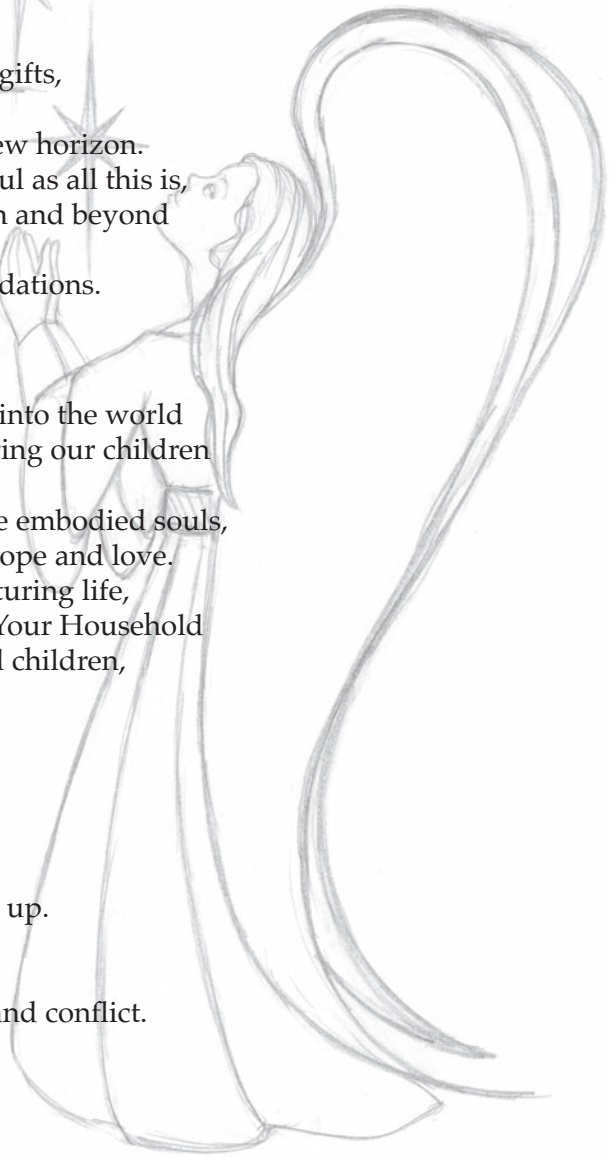
MANY: Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

Adapted from "O Emmanuel" by Malcolm Guite,
Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year

Advent Prayer

by William F. Cooper

art by Sally Lynn Askins



Dear God,
We come this year, as always, moving through the Advent season,
and into your presence in a new way.
Because, dear God, you have already come to strengthen us,
to remake us through the good news that was opened up to us
in the coming of this Son of Man whose birth we celebrate.
And we celebrate this birth
with marvelous decorations,
with trees bearing memories and sheltering gifts,
with songs that join our hearts
and with stories that lead us toward a new horizon.
All the while, as genuine and helpful and hopeful as all this is,
Your coming, His coming, moves us through and beyond
to ways of living that crafted life
in new dimensions and on new foundations.

Dear God,
You would also speak to us through our families,
where we create new homes and bring new life into the world
and gain skills in preparing food and nurturing our children
and each other.
So we learn to celebrate new life and nurture embodied souls,
and craft our lives in the ways of faith, hope and love.
But through this crucially necessary way of nurturing life,
You break in to help us grow as children in Your Household
for you come as Mother and Father to all children,
to all peoples on the earth.
And You even come into our gathering,
our fellowship,
our church,
sometimes like a slowly growing seed,
sometimes grafting on new limbs,
at other times pruning branches that have dried up.
You end up possessing us in changing ways,
so we can live as your family
amidst the continuously encroaching strife and conflict.
We give thanks, Dear God, for your possessing us,
for encouraging and guiding us,
for giving strength when we are feeble.
Teach us to remember anew
what we have been taught and learned
about this One who came to be born in Bethlehem.
Amen.

—Bill Cooper, the son of missionaries in Uruguay, taught philosophy for many years at Baylor University, where he also served for a number of years as Dean of Arts and Sciences. He is a deacon and teacher at Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed.

A Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Call to Worship

Peaceful One, you fill the sails of our ships with your loving breath, gliding us across the seas of our lives. Create a place in our shared, but scattered, lives for us to rest in your peace. Quiet the storms in our minds and the waves of our heart as we open them up to your presence in our worship.

Lighting of the Peace Candle

From the Alpha to the Omega, God's breath remains steady; we witness the rise and fall of the world around us. As we light the second candle, we see that the first flame continues its dance from last week, and are reminded that hope isn't a one-time experience during Advent, it sustains the world through all eternity because we know we can hope in a God who spans all of time. With that reminder, we breathe a sigh of peace, knowing that the breath of Heaven was yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Hymn

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
TEXT: Anonymous, adapt. Thomas Helmore, transl. John Mason Neale and Henry Sloane Coffin
MUSIC: Latin Hymn
VENI EMMANUEL - 8.8.8.8. with Refrain
Celebrating Grace hymnal No. 79

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 40:1-11

Meditation of Preparation

"Peace on earth" in the angelic message does not simply mean peace later—in heaven after this life is over; it does not mean simply peace with God—deep down inside your own individual soul. It means rather Pax Christi, the peace of Christ that begins here and now with the poor who have long since buried their hopes. This different peace is the peace that leads the shepherds from hopelessness and fear into a "great joy which will come to all people."
–Dorothee Söelle

art by Sally Lynn Askins

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

Hymn
"O Day of Peace that Dimly Shines"
TEXT: Carl P. Daw, Jr.
MUSIC: Carlton R. Young
CANDLER - Long Meter Double
Chalice Hymnal No. 711

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

Gospel Reading
Mark 1:1-8

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"Come Now, O Prince of Peace"
TEXT and MUSIC: Geonyong Lee, transl. Marion Pope
O-SO-SO - 6.5.5.6
Glory to God hymnal No. 103

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
When Mary's baby was born it was said that the very heavens sang of peace on an earth that was, at that very moment, seething with a bitterness and an anger that threatened to explode into violence at any moment.
—Richard Groves

Hymn of Commitment
"My Soul in Stillness Waits"
TEXT and MUSIC: Marty Haugen
STILLNESS - Irregular Meter
Lift Up Your Hearts hymnal No. 63

Benediction
Radical Peace to you, my friends. In the midst of a chaotic world swirling with disease, economic injustice, racial and gender inequality, murderous hunger, senseless violence, division and strife, may you know God's Peace far surpassing your own and the world's understanding of it, and may you do the hard work required to share that peace with your neighbor.

art by Jesse Manning

With you,
let us imagine the world at peace.
With you,
let us imagine our purpose
at one with yours.
Oh, God, let all our imaginings
be not merely dreams
but the beginning of our moving
in the world with you.
Imagine with us, God.
Imagine.
Imagine.
—Sharlande Sledge,
Prayers and Litanies for the Christian Seasons

Lighting a Candle

by Grant Dooley

Ever since I was a kid I've been fascinated with flames. My father always got onto me for messing with the logs when we spent weekends at the lake. As you can probably guess, I never stopped pushing the logs around just to see new flames erupt.

Advent is my favorite season of the year because it holds within itself the profound union of doubt and anxiety. The already-not-yet tension is incredible at this time. Advent represents the year's held breath. The year of holding your breath as you pray for the job that keeps your family fed. The year of holding your breath for the grief to finally pass. The year of, "Good Gawd, will this ever end?!?"

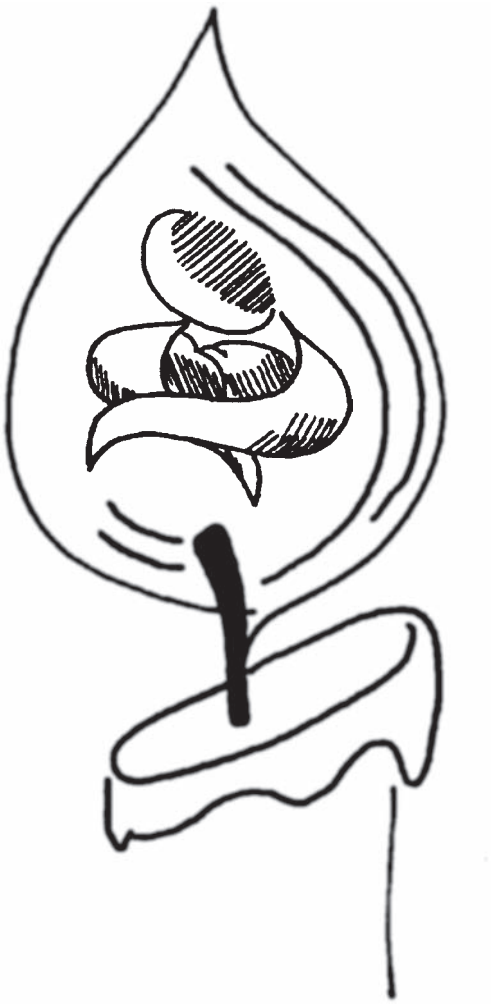
It seems like the everyday anxieties belong in this season.

Advent embraces the fears that our bodies hold onto all year. Advent brings them to the fireside as they share their lists of concerns over a glass of red wine and a plate of buttered bread. Advent, by its holy nature, embraces this tension and whispers, "me, too."

Every time I find myself flailing in life's darkness, I light a candle. Somewhere along my journey of faith, candle lighting became a form of prayer. When tragedy strikes, I light a candle. When a faraway friend needs love, I light a candle. When a dear congregant squeaks out their prayer request, I light a candle.

This practice is not new. It's a practice that Catholics (and others) have used for hundreds of years. For this Baptist, it came to me the summer I travelled to see the Grand Canyon. I found myself at a chapel chiseled into a cliff. Its windows were floor to ceiling, and they were the constant light source for the sanctuary. The thing I remember the most was the front altar. Stairs at the front of the church were filled with candles for people to light as they released their prayers to the heavens. As I stared at the candles, my periphery beheld the splendor of the sunset. I felt like I was in an Anne Lamott book. I knelt at the altar and lit a candle for the coming year. I was about to start seminary and move to Texas. My fears and doubts were palpable.

Nothing magical happened when the match ignited. I didn't all of a sudden feel peace like a river.



art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

But there was comfort in the lit candles of hundreds of pilgrims who had already prayed. The lit candle brought me back to being with my parents around a campfire. As I lit that candle, I was comforted.

After all these years, the light of flames brings me closer to God. While Advent is supposed to be the time to hold one's breath, I exhale the gratitude of being side by side with so many sojourners as the next year approaches. As the candles' flames dance, we know there is hope, and there is light.

—Grant Dooley is the minister to youth, children and families at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, TX. Before coming to Lake Shore, they served at Covenant Baptist Church in San Antonio, TX, where they were ordained, and as youth minister at St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church in Keller, TX.

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

We can see Spirit made visible when people are kind to one another, especially when it's a really busy person, like you, taking care of a needy, annoying, neurotic person, like you. In fact, that's often when we see Spirit most brightly.
–Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

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

You have an unrepeatable purpose as a priest of Christ. It is not to learn someone else's skills, or to project a personality you do not have, or to say words that are not your words, or to do anything at all that is alien to who you are and the gifts that are already in your hands. Be who you are, do what you do, tell what you know: your style, your stuff, your way, your gift…. There is a way of saying the name of Christ that only your life can say.
–Paul Duke

Nowhere does the Bible tell us that
we are called to be nothing.
Rather, we are told that
we are made after the divine image,
that we are heirs of the Kingdom,
children of God,
priests and royalty.
Any supposed humility that denies this
is sinful, for it rejects the divine plan
for creation.
And yet, traditional theology
has often been bent
on promoting the virtue of humility,
particularly since those who are humble
will stay in their place
and refuse to claim their rightful status
in human societies
as children and heirs of God.
–Justo Gonzá°les

art by Rebecca S. Ward

The angel breaks with Heaven's *hail!*
from Joy's horizon on every weary heart,
amid that unruly, precarious land beyond
where cheery sentiment stalls and merry,
bright roads end. Now, in terrain beyond all
mapping, the adventure begins. No warranty
reaches this far. Creature comforts here are
few, risks are high, and danger surrounds.
Here winded Breath calls to bended knee
with promises of ecstasy and manna's
fragile provision. Here water clefts rocks to
slake desperate thirst. Chained, tamed hearts
will never survive, deprived as they are of
Mercy's solvent power to undo generations-old
resentments, driven deep by fear's reflexive
habit into armed entrenchments. The
temptation is strong to abandon earth's rancor
in favor of Heaven's rapture. Yet from Joy's
horizon storms the quelling word: Heaven's
abode is anchored in earth's tribulation.
The proclamation has been rendered;
incarnation, tendered; emancipation,
though delayed, will not finally be hindered.
–Ken Sehested, from "The quelling word:
Emancipation is (still) coming"

How to Celebrate Christmas: Change the World

by Amy Butler

One of the holiest days of the Christian year is right around the corner, and churches all over the world are gearing up for a spectacular celebration of the birth of Jesus. In America, as in many other places where Christmas has been appropriated by secular culture, even people who don't care who Jesus was or what he taught will find themselves darkening the door of a church building this Christmas.

One of my predecessors in the pulpit at The Riverside Church, founding pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick, once exclaimed, "It's a great time to be alive! The world is falling apart!"

They come yearning for all the things that Christmas promises: hope, peace, joy, love, the kind of healing that can come from actually living Jesus' central teaching to love God and to love our neighbors.

And don't we need it? Eleven years until climate change is irreversible. Children in cages. Men who hurt women making laws and holding the highest offices in the land. The five-year-old in your life practicing what she should do when a gunman breaks into her classroom and starts shooting.

One of my predecessors in the pulpit at The Riverside Church, founding pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick, once exclaimed, "It's a great time to be alive! The world is falling apart!" Fosdick truly believed that if enough people were committed to following the teachings of the babe born in a manger, they could have a real, tangible impact in the lives of those he saw every day walking the streets.

And many people of faith are trying. In 2013, the archbishop of the Anglican Church, Justin Welby, launched what became known as the War on Wonga. Wonga, at the time, was one of the largest payday lending companies in Great Britain. Just as in the United States, payday lenders in the UK make money by preying on some of the most vulnerable—individuals who struggle to obtain credit and very often are unable to earn a living wage.

As part of its War on Wonga, the Church of England opened a credit union to provide banking services, including lending, at reasonable rates. The church's efforts were fairly successful, though they didn't eliminate the problem altogether. Then, a few years into the experiment, the House of Parliament finally stepped in, passing legislation to cap the interest rates payday lenders could charge, effectively putting Wonga out of business.

In bankruptcy, Wonga held a loan book of 400 million pounds of unpaid debts that needed to be sold off. The purchaser of the loan book would assume responsibility for the loans Wonga still held.

art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

And right at this moment of victory for the Church of England, an enterprising MP in Parliament penned an open letter proposing that the church, with its £8 billion pound endowment, purchase the £400 million loan book. The church could buy it for a reduced rate. They could reissue the loans at their original amount. Or charge only a small amount of interest if they needed to cover costs. Or, they could forgive the loans outright.

Imagine a single mother working two jobs who finds herself unexpectedly unable to pay both rent

This is the work of the church. And whether people fill the pews or not, it's still the work the church must be doing, because it's the work the baby who was born in a stable came to show us how to do.

and the babysitter one month—maybe her boss cut her hours or she had to take off to take her kid to the doctor. She takes out a loan of a few hundred pounds just to cover this one month. Belts will tighten next month. They have to because the paperwork she signs, complicated and dense by design, means she's now paying an annual interest rate of 5,853 percent.

Before she knows it, within months this mother owes more than £20,000. Until, one night, she comes home late, weary in her soul as well as her bones, to find a letter: "We are followers of Jesus Christ who are trying to take his teachings seriously. In his name, your debts have been forgiven. Merry Christmas!"

Can you imagine?

It is painful how predictable the end of this story is. To be fair to the Church of England, there were many within the hierarchy who wanted to buy Wonga's loan book. But there were legal structures creating red tape, complex bureaucracies to navigate and political will to muster. And the church did not buy the loan book. That single mother did not receive a letter forgiving her debt.

I've been heartened recently by stories of churches actively trying to live out the radical gospel of Jesus in new and impactful expressions. This is good news, truly.

And we need more. We need more churches and we need more Christians to take the teachings of Jesus seriously and risk it all for the sake of healing the world. Pay off debts, partner with social entrepreneurs creating new economies, dismantle and rebuild systems that keep people in poverty, think with creative abandon about how to align what we say we believe with how we live in the world.

This is the work of the church. And whether people fill the pews or not, it's still the work the church must be doing, because it's the work the baby who was born in a stable came to show us how to do. It's radical and filled with hope, a true expression of the meaning of Christmas.

It doesn't take a genius to see that the world is falling apart. What a great time to be alive! Now is the moment to start thinking in a new way, because Jesus did not show up and walk the dusty roads of Galilee so that we could survive and hoard assets, keeping them to perpetuate a narrow understanding of Christian expression. This Christmas is a perfect time to follow the lead of the baby who changed the world.

—Amy Butler is interim senior pastor at National City Church, a historic Disciples of Christ congregation in Washington, DC. She began her career as a missionary for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in New Orleans, LA, in a transitional home for impoverished residents. She then served at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, and as senior pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and Riverside Church in New York City, NY. This sermon was distributed in 2019 by Religion News Service, and is used with permission of the author.

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

–Deborah Harris, 2011

A Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Call to Worship

Dancing Spirit of Joy, fan the flames of your blissful presence into our togetherness. Even as we endure changing times and unkept traditions to stay safe and well, we celebrate not only the anticipation of our unmasked reunions in our sanctuaries, but also the great unmasked gathering you will create when we are all firmly wrapped in your eternal joy. As we gather in your name, overflow our cups with gratitude and the joy of knowing you in this moment of worship.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Lighting of the Joy Candle

From the depth of our souls, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf with sighs too deep for words when we can't catch our breath. As we light the third candle, so too a spark is lit within us as we recognize the Spirit moving us to join the flames that are already dancing together. Expressions of joy replace those deep sighs as we realize that we are guided by the Spirit of the Lord and we should never suffocate the word of God from deep within us.

Hymn

"O Splendor of God's Glory Bright"
TEXT: Ambrose of Milan,
transl. Louis F. Benson
MUSIC: 15th Century Latin Hymn, adapt Michael Praetorius
PUER NOBIS NASCITUR - Long Meter
Glory to God hymnal No. 666

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

Meditation of Preparation

We can see Spirit made visible when people are kind to one another, especially when it's a really busy person, like you, taking care of a needy, annoying, neurotic person, like you. In fact, that's often when we see Spirit most brightly.
—Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 126

Hymn
"Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid"
TEXT: Veni Creator Spiritus, adapt. John Dryden
MUSIC: John B. Dykes
MELITA - 8.8.8.8.8.8.
Lift Up Your Hearts hymnal No. 523

Reading from the Epistles
I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Gospel Reading
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"Joy Has Dawned"
TEXT and MUSIC: Keith Getty, Stuart Townend
JOY HAS DAWNED - 7.6.7.6.D
Baptist Hymnal (2008) No. 186

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
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 [3:14-20] 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."
–Brett Younger, "Joy for Everyone"

Hymn of Commitment
"The Kingdom of God Is Justice and Joy"
TEXT: Bryn A. Rees, transl. Georgina Pando-Connolly
MUSIC: Charles H. H. Parry
LAUDATE DOMINUM - 10.10.11.11.
Oramos Cantando/We Pray in Song hymnal No. 602 (GIA)

Benediction
Enduring saints, may the joy of the season's songs lift your hearts and spirits to radiate from your place of worship out to your neighbors near and far. May the joy of your heart set you apart in this aching world and may God's elation carry you forward until we are cradled forever in God's eternal embrace.

Joy that's Deeper than All Our Troubles

Let me tell you a story. A divorced mother wakes her teenager for school and he immediately starts complaining about everything she tries to do for him. She's worried that he doesn't love her any more. She doesn't know what to do about it.

Her job is terrible. She's working more hours and not getting anything done. She feels older than she wants to feel. She's worried about her mother. Her mom can still care for herself, but in five years they'll have to make some hard decisions.

On the way home from work, the woman flips on the radio. The first station is playing "Winter Wonderland." That's way too cheerful. The second station is playing the dogs barking "Jingle Bells."

She turns off the radio. She used to love December. It was her favorite time of the year. Advent was magical, but this year she just feels tired.

On Sunday, she goes to church though she isn't sure she wants to, but then she begins to sing. The hymns aren't about a holly-jolly Christmas. They're about joy that comes in the midst of sorrows and poor shepherds out on a cold night. The choir sings about a child born into poverty and a glory that's beyond all the grief we'll ever face. This tired and broken woman slowly begins to understand that Christmas isn't about happiness, but about joy that's deeper than all of our troubles.
–Brett Younger

A Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Call to Worship

The light of your love, O God, draws us into this shared moment of worship. We are invited to this sacred space from our places of shadows and sorrows, triumphs and brilliance, ordinariness and mediocrity. Renew our minds, give courage to our hearts, and overwhelm us with the magnitude of your love as we give this moment before us completely to you.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Lighting of the Love Candle

From this moment on, love embodied becomes our new challenge to accept as we are called to breathe the very same breath of love into the world that Jesus is about to bring with him. As we light the fourth candle, the four aren't following the same beat, they all dance and move in different directions. This reminds us that carrying Christ into the world from the manger looks very different from one person to the next, but it always is founded on this new life of love.

Hymn

"Christ Is Coming!"
TEXT: John Ross Macduff
MUSIC: Joachim Neander
UNSER HERRSCHER - 8.7.8.7.8.7.
Glory to God hymnal No. 360

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Meditation of Preparation

Love can be rather intimidating. When you start talking in terms of the most significant, the deepest, richest, most intimate—you're getting into some scary dimensions of relating. There's a vulnerability involved, a trust, an interdependence you choose, a commitment. It's a risk, a big risk, and what you're risking is yourself. It's a gamble, and the stakes don't get any higher. Is it worth it? Most of us would say yes, but for God's sake, let's be careful out there. But it's not for God's sake. It's for our sake that into these responses to love, rises the Star of Bethlehem. The Advent of Jesus is the astounding claim that love is the only way to relate—to anyone. The Advent of Jesus is God's emphatic reaffirmation that love is the way God chooses to relate to each of us.
–John S. Ballenger

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Hymn
"Of the Father's Love Begotten"
TEXT: Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius
MUSIC: 13th Century Plainsong
DIVINUM MYSTERIUM - 8.7.8.7.8.7.7.
Lift Up Your Hearts hymnal No. 78

Reading from the Epistles
Romans 16:25-27

First Gospel Reading
Luke 1:26-38

Second Gospel Reading
Luke 1:46b-55

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"Christians, Awake, Salute the Happy Morn"
TEXT: John Byrom
MUSIC: John Wainwright
YORKSHIRE - 10.10.10.10.10.10
The Hymnal (1982) No. 106

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
May you experience joy, beauty and love
Now, tomorrow and always.
For such is your spiritual birthright.
May you know their Source:
The flowing stream of radiant Light
Which has no beginning and no end,
That lives deep within you and every-One.
—*Skip Londos*

Hymn of Commitment
"How Bright Appears the Morning Star"
TEXT and MUSIC: Philipp Nicolai
WIE SCHÖN LEUCHTET - 8.8.7.8.8.7.4.8.4.8
Lift Up Your Hearts hymnal No. 101

Benediction
Beloved children of God, the day is closer now than it has ever been, when we will celebrate Emmanuel, God with us, not only in the humility of the manger, but also in the glory of the triumphant clouds. With reckless abandon, love God in return. With boundless bravery, love neighbors without exception, and with confident humility, love yourself because you are dearly loved.

art by Jesse Manning

O 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.
As with our ancient sister Mary,
entreat us with the subversive promise
of Only Begotten freedom, begat
in the belly of holy submission.
May our lips echo
the jubilant manifesto
of creation's destiny
with justice and with joy.
–Ken Sehested, from *Advent Longings*

Velveteen Jesus

An Advent Sermon

by Erin Conaway

Text: Luke 1:26-38

There was once a Velveteen Rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bunchy, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming.

> At this point I've got good news and bad news and they are both the same thing. You too are called by God.

There were other things in the stocking: nuts and oranges and a toy engine, and chocolate almonds and a clockwork mouse, but the rabbit was quite the best of all. For at least two hours the Boy loved him, and then aunts and uncles came to dinner, and there was a great rustling of tissue paper and unwrapping of parcels, and in the excitement of looking at all the new presents, the Velveteen Rabbit was forgotten.

The Velveteen Rabbit was put away in the toy cupboard. He was not treated well by all of the other toys. They mocked him for having no springs or levers that would make him move. They said they were all a model of something real and the little Rabbit didn't know there were real rabbits in existence so he stayed very quiet and became a little sad.

Even Timothy, the jointed wooden lion, who was made by the disabled soldiers, and should have had broader views, put on airs and pretended he was connected with government. Between them all the poor little Rabbit was made to feel himself very insignificant and commonplace, and the only person who was kind to him at all was the Skin Horse.

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away. And he knew that they were only toys and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Hopefully you know how the rest of the story goes. The Boy can't find his china dog he is used to sleeping with so the little Rabbit gets substituted and the Boy falls in love. And so does the Rabbit. They have the magical life together that only children and their animals can have. They play together during the day and sleep snuggled close at night.

And one glorious evening, Nana was irritated when the Boy stopped all progress on bedtime until he could find his Rabbit. She said, "All this fuss over a toy." The Boy exclaimed, "Give me my bunny! You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL." And with those words, the Rabbit knew that what the Skin Horse had said was true at last. The nursery magic had happened to him, and he was a toy no longer. He was Real. The Boy himself had said it.

Our Gospel reading this morning is often referred to as the Annunciation. The announcement to Mary: "The Lord is with you! Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And sweet Mary says, "Uhhhh. I think you have the wrong address. This cannot possibly happen to me." The angel assured her that he was right, she was being called by God to bear this glorious burden and that this was a season of miraculous pregnancies, because the angel also told her that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant too, even in her old age. "For nothing will be impossible for God."

And Mary, the model disciple in Luke's Gospel, did not ask for some time to think this over. She didn't ask if she could consult with her friends and family and Joseph and then get back to the angel. She didn't even ask if God would promise to keep her safe if she made this unimaginable journey. She bravely replied, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

> When my greed slams into the reality of my sisters and brothers locked in poverty, I would prefer an ethereal God in those moments. One who stays "up there" and who is sympathetic to me just doing what I can.

At this point I've got good news and bad news and they are both the same thing. You too are called by God. Yes, you. You are called by God to be a disciple of Jesus and to follow wherever the Spirit leads. The good part about that is that you are loved and equipped and trusted by Almighty God to be you in this world and to become what God created you to become. The bad news is: This is real. And the call of God places very real and often painful demands upon your life.

The *Velveteen Rabbit* does a masterful job of asking and answering in a myriad of ways, "What is real?" At the end of the story, just before the little Rabbit is destroyed after being exposed to Scarlet Fever, a fairy comes and turns him into a "real" rabbit with legs that hop and dance and a nose that itches and can be scratched. Does that mean he wasn't real before that moment? I certainly don't think it does. The Rabbit was on a journey and there were different stages along the way. He came to a place where he could no longer be himself only covered in tattered and well-worn cloth. He needed to grow. He needed to take on a different kind of skin.

I think we see something similar by way of illustration, not by way of ontological degree, in the story of Mary and in the broader story of Jesus. Mary's remarkable faith could not and would not be contained to some ethereal propositions or statements of belief. It's all fine and good to say

you are the servant of the Lord, but when you start showing—then it becomes a different kind of belief.

Once you tell someone else that you are carrying the son of the Most High and the Lord God who will inhabit the throne of David and you wait to see if they try to run, or have you institutionalized, or if they smile and change the subject, or if they just stand there, open-mouthed at the wonder of this miracle, then it becomes real in new ways.

Anyone could say yes to a big scary angel just to make him go away. Mary really said yes. She went all in on this promise and this disguised blessing. Her faith might have been real and well worn. The buttons on her faith might have been loved off and its skin appeared shabby, but this is the moment her faith gets legs that move and a nose that itches. This is an Incarnational moment for Mary's faith.

God became one of us and the implications for the way we practice our own faith in an Incarnate God are numerous, and they are painfully practical and personal and deliberate.

Of course, that's what we are celebrating at the culmination of the Advent season. The Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. There are many times when I wish God would have stayed in the clouds of unknowing or stayed on the mountaintops or in the Temple. When my greed slams into the reality of my sisters and brothers locked in poverty, I would prefer an ethereal God in those moments. One who stays "up there" and who is sympathetic to me just doing what I can.

But God didn't stay up there—wherever "there" is. God came down. God took on flesh. God became one of us and the implications for the way we practice our own faith in an Incarnate God are numerous, and they are painfully practical and personal and deliberate. You cannot follow an Incarnate God from a safe distance.

If our god lived on Mount Olympus and never contacted us except through thunder, then we could do our own thing for the most part and worship with a kind of removed and distant praise. But God came down. This is not a faith we can practice in theory or with wispy notions of good will. Practicing faith in the God of the Incarnation has real skin on it.

This kind of faith requires hands that serve and feet that are quick to go but also steady on the journey. Faith in the God of the Incarnation requires eyes that see the plight of the widows and orphans among us and then we actually do something about their wellbeing. Incarnational faith demands that we listen to the voice of God as we spend time in prayer and we cultivate our individual relationship with God as well as time in prayer together as we cultivate our communal relationship with God.

We don't get to keep our faith, our relationship with God, confined to sweet nursery magic, though there is a season for that. We must also move to a place where our faith has skin on it. Skin that touches our neighbor as we feed those who are hungry and bring living water to those who thirst. Our faith must have skin on it that reaches out to those mired in pain and suffering. Worshipping an Incarnational God cannot stop at well wishes and good thoughts. Because God didn't stop there.

God made this personal, and real in ways that change lives, not just minds and hearts. Our minds and hearts are a vital part of our faith, don't get me wrong, but there is a disconnect of cosmic proportions when we keep our faith in the realm of fantasy. We worship God who came to us, became one of us, taught us, touched us, healed us, loved us and forgave us even when we chose violent means to try to preserve our own way.

This Christmas, we worship the Incarnate One—Jesus, the Christ-child, who put on real skin and who took real breaths and who cried real tears and felt real pain and felt real love. We worship Jesus who didn't just holler to people who were sick telling them to get over it; he touched them, with his own hands. He looked at them with his own eyes and he listened to them with his own ears. His heart was moved with compassion for the crowds and he fed them real food.

We worship God, who came to us in the person of Jesus, and who calls us to inhabit our faith in the same way God inhabits our world. With hands and eyes and ears and hearts and wallets and kitchens and laughter and learning and tears and kisses. The cries we hear from the manger remind us that this faith we practice must have real skin on it if we are to be at all true to the Incarnate one and do what he did: be with one another in word and in deed.

"Real faith is how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens in you. When you love a neighbor for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY love a neighbor, then your faith becomes Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When your faith is Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "Your faith becomes. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time your faith is Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once your faith is Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand and who don't yet know."

> We don't get to keep our faith, our relationship with God, confined to sweet nursery magic, though there is a season for that. We must also move to a place where our faith has skin on it.

Merry Christmas and Amen.

—*Erin Conaway, a native of Midland, TX, is a member of* the Sacred Seasons *liturgical team and a frequent contributor to Seeds publications. He is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. The story of the Velveteen Rabbit comes from* The Velveteen Rabbit *(or* How Toys Become Real*) by Marjory Williams, originally published in 1922 by Doubleday & Company.*

Francis [of Assisi] recognized that there are two moments in our life with God. There is the moment when we are passive, when God's grace overwhelms us, when we are forgiven, when we receive our new life in Christ. At this moment God is active; God does for us what we could never do for ourselves. But there is another moment when we become active, whe we respond to God's grace, when we become sources of blessing in the lives of others, when we share the new life we have received, namely, Christ. We are then the Mothers of Christ. We receive Christ as Mary did, by God's grace, but then like Mary we are to bring Christ forth, to present Christ to a world in need. Francis' Maria spirituality was not limited to singing Mary's praises. It moved Francis to action, to share with those in need. Our shrines to Mary ought to be th shelters for the homeless who share her poverty. Our words in praise of Mary ought to be the words and deeds we say and do to bring an end to war and terrorism in the name of the Queen of Peace. Our pilgrimages in her honor might be a walk for the poor. And although Francis' words about Mary are steeped in the sentiment characteristic of the church of his day, his piety went far beyond mere sentiment.

–Roch Niemer, OFM,
In the Footsteps of Francis and Clare

Lessons, Carols & Candles for Christmas Eve

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Opening Carol
"Once in Royal David's City"
TEXT: Cecil Frances Alexander
MUSIC: Henry John Gauntlett
IRBY - 8.7.8.7.7.7
Glory to God hymnal No. 140

First Reading
Isaiah 9:2-7

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Second Carol
"Hark! The Herald Angel Sings"
TEXT: Charles Wesley,
alt. George Whitefield
MUSIC: Felix Mendelssohn
MENDELSSOHN - 7.7.7.7
Chalice Hymnal No. 150

Second Reading
Isaiah 65:17-25

Lighting of the Peace Candle

Third Carol
"O Little Town of Bethlehem"
TEXT: Phillips Brooks
MUSIC: Lewis H. Redner
ST. LOUIS - 7.6.8.6 D
Celebrating Grace hymnal No. 107

Third Reading
Psalm 96

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Fourth Carol
"Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come"
TEXT: Isaac Watts
MUSIC: attr. George F. Handel
ANTIOCH - 8.6.8.6.
Glory to God hymnal No. 134

Fourth Reading
John 1:1-14

Lighting of the Love Candle

art by Caroline Oladipo

Fifth Carol

"Away in a Manger"
TEXT: Anonymous (st. 1, 2); John Thomas McFarland (st. 3)
MUSIC: James R. Murray
MUELLER - Irregular Meter
Celebrating Grace hymnal No. 110

Fifth Reading

Luke 2:1-20

Lighting of the Christ Candle

It's almost here; the expectation and waiting has been overwhelming, but now we join in with all of creation as we hold our breath in anticipation of Emmanuel, God with us. We light the Christ candle and breathe a sigh of relief alongside creation, knowing that with this candle ignited, the creative breath of God enters into the world in a new way that will forever change it. We breathe alongside God, alongside creation, alongside each other, as we witness new life in Christ this day.

Final Carol

Silent Night! Holy Night!
TEXT: Joseph Mohr, transl. John F. Young
MUSIC: Franz Grüber
STILLE NACHT - Irregular Meter
Chalice Hymnal No. 145

Nativity Prayer

(See below.)

Nativity Prayer

by Erin Conaway

Holy, infant God...

We, like your blessed parents, have been on a journey to arrive at this moment. We have been waiting and lighting candles of anticipation in our hearts and in our sanctuary, hoping beyond hope, searching for signs of peace, seeking to find joy in the midst of darkness, and feeling the warm embrace of love wrapped firmly around our insecurities and fears.

Tonight, this holy night, we, like your blessed parents, want to be close to you…we want to stare at your miraculous face as we see it reflected in creation all around us: the crisp breeze in the air, the animals scurrying about making preparations for winter, the silent strength of the stars shining so brilliantly in the clear night sky, the fallen leaves in their motley wonder.

We want to stare at your miraculous face as we see it reflected in the comfort of family found in this place—and in the faces of our neighbors whom we encounter sleeping on the street, serving in restaurants and bars, making the cars we drive and the clothes we wear, working long nights in hospitals and warehouses, teaching and caring for our children and grandchildren, harvesting crops, in the faces of those waiting and hoping for work.

We want to stare at your miraculous face in the silence of the night—the night that occurred so very long ago, and this night that is occurring as we pray. Give us eyes to see your glory, revealed to us in unexpected ways.

Transform us into faithful followers as we take another step in the direction of the star. Hear our praise and accept our meager offerings, and may the playing of our drums echo their melodious song through the gates of heaven.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the humility of your incarnation, for the utter love of your presence among us and for the grace of our salvation. We pray these things in the strength of your name, in the hope of your faith, bathed in deep joy, filled with love and clinging to your peace. Amen.

—Erin Conaway is the pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, where the Seeds ministry is housed.

A Liturgy for Christmas Day

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Call to Worship

Welcome, Jesus, our humble gentle Saviour,
welcome to Bethlehem,
where we have loved and fought
and longed for the peace
the world can never give.
We ask for your peace, your love,
your gentleness,
and the courage to live that way.
—*from* A New Zealand Prayer Book

Lighting of the Advent wreath

A Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 52:7-10

Meditation of Preparation

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But these "births" must not make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact, the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction, a symbol, a cipher. Apart from its historical coordinates, the event loses its meaning. To the eyes of Christians, the incarnation is the irruption of God into human history: an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world; an irruption that smells of the stable.
—Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*

A Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 98

First Carol

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"
TEXT: John Francis Wade,
transl. Frederick Oakeley
MUSIC: Latin Hymn
ADESTE FIDELES - Irregular Meter
Glory to God hymnal No. 133

Reading from the Epistles

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

Second Carol

"Sing We Now of Christmas"
TEXT and MUSIC: 15th Cent. French Carol
NOËL NOUVELET - 6.5.6.5. Refrain
Worship and Rejoice hymnal No. 193

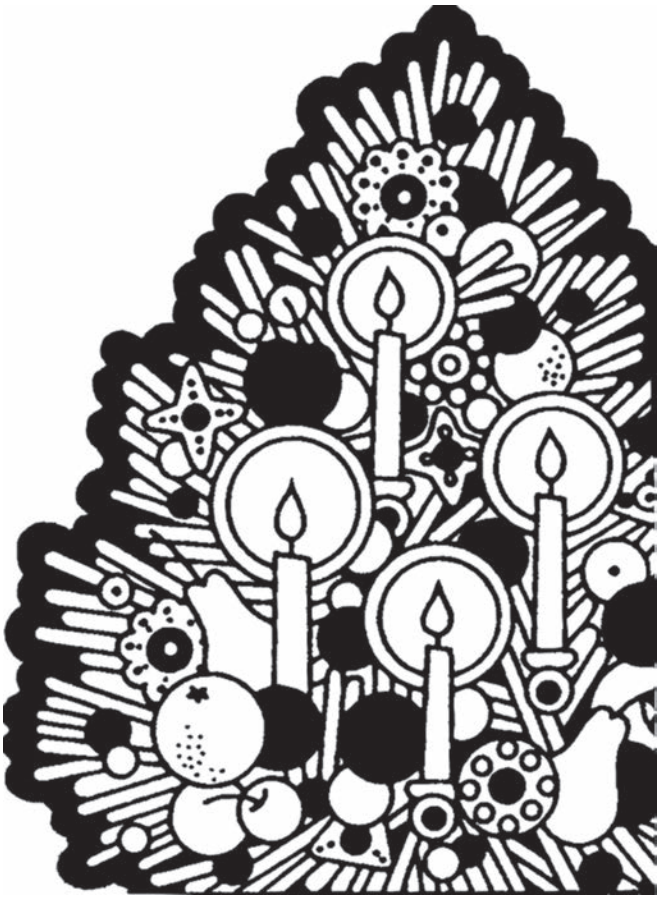
Gospel Reading

John 1:1-14

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

"Love Came Down at Christmas"
TEXT: Christina G. Rossetti



MUSIC: David Evans
GARTAN - Irregular Meter
Baptist Hymnal (1991) No. 109

Sermon

Christmas Meditation

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

Third Carol

"The First Nowell"
TEXT and MUSIC: Traditional English Carol
THE FIRST NOEL - Irregular Meter
Celebrating Grace hymnal No. 124

Christmas Benediction

Let us go in peace now;
For our eyes have seen God's salvation.
We have stood, dumbstruck,
before the manger.
We have exchanged glances with the shepherds
and looked, sheepishly, out of the corners of our eyes
at the wise men.
We have listened, with terror and delight,
to the messengers with their extraterrestrial song.
We, who have walked so often and so long
in terrible darkness,
have been flooded with holy light.

Let us go in peace now;
We have brought our gifts to the manger—
and for some of us it was merely our broken selves—
but now, like the shepherds,
we must go back to our fields;
like the magi,
we must go home another way.

Let us go in peace now;
May this Holy Child guide our steps
into the new year,
And give us the courage
to give birth to God's realm.
–Katie Cook

art by Jesse Manning

What Child is This?

by C. W. Christian

What child is this,
Welcomed by such wondrous auguries,
And yet as full of flesh and blood as we?
Fingers, toes, as any nurseling child,
Eyes to peer and wonder,
Lips hungrily upon young Mary's breast.
What child is this?
Not stifled by omniscience
Or blinded by the glory of the Father,
But senses to feel, to laugh and be surprised,
And, Ah, a heart to love.
Lacking no jot of my humanity,
Blood of my blood,
Flesh of my flesh.
Yet herein is the mystery unfolding,
The sacrament of God incarnate now at last.
Finitum capax infiniti
Rejoice! Rejoice!

– C. W. "Wally" Christian taught theology at Baylor University for many years and was a friend of Seeds for much longer. After his death, the liturgical team organized the 2016 Advent packet, Harbinger of Hope, around his Christmas poetry and in his honor. (For a pdf of that packet, email seedseditor1@gmail.com.)

A Liturgy for Epiphany

by Guilherme Almeida, Erin Conaway, Katie Cook & Alec Ylitalo

Call to Worship

The Child we seek doesn't need our gold.
On love, on love alone he will build his kingdom.
His pierced hand will hold no scepter,
his haloed head will wear no crown;
his might will not be built on your toil.
Swifter than lightening he will soon walk among us.
He will bring us new life and receive our death,
and the keys to his city belong to the poor.
—*Gian Carlo Menotti*

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 60:1-6

Meditation of Preparation

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

Hymn

"Christ Is the World's True Light"
TEXT: George Wallace Briggs
MUSIC: Percy E. B. Coller
ST. JOAN - 6.7.6.7.6.6.6.6.
The Hymnal (1982) No. 542

A Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Reading from the Epistles

Ephesians 3:1-12

Hymn

"Alleluia, Song of Gladness"
TEXT and MUSIC: 13th Century Plainsong, transl. John Mason Neale
URBS BEATA JERUSALEM - 8.7.8.7.8.7.
The Hymnal (1982) No. 122

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

Pastoral Prayer

art by Scott Turner

Offertory
"Draw the Circle Wide"
TEXT and MUSIC: Gordon Light
BROWNING - 8.7.8.5 with Refrain
Common Praise hymnal (1998) No. 418

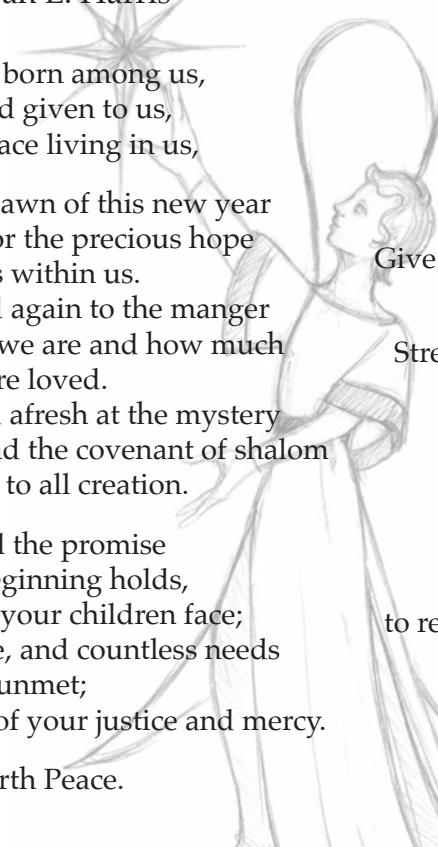
Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
Where, indeed, should your Light have shown
except upon those who sit in darkness?
—from an Orthodox chant

Hymn of Commitment
"The Lord Is My Light"
TEXT: Taizé Community
MUSIC: Jacques Berthier
THE LORD IS MY LIGHT - Irregular Meter
Glory to God hymnal No. 842

Benediction
When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart…
And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say.
Then the work of Christmas begins.
—Howard Thurman

art by Sally Lynn Askins



Epiphany Prayer
by Deborah E. Harris

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

We pause at the dawn of this new year
to give thanks for the precious hope
that lies within us.
We have returned again to the manger
to remember who we are and how much
we are loved.
We have marveled afresh at the mystery
of your incarnation and the covenant of shalom
you extend to all creation.

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

On Earth Peace.

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

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

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

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

—Deborah Harris was a lyricist and freelance writer and a member of the Seeds Council of Stewards. Sacred Seasons was graced by her creative input, careful proofreading and constant encouragement for many years.

Benediction

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

art by Sally Lynn Askins