# Waiting for the Light

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

**Worship Resources for the Creative Church - Advent/Christmastide 2021**

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*
*seedseditor1@gmail.com • www.seedspublishers.org.*

# 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).*



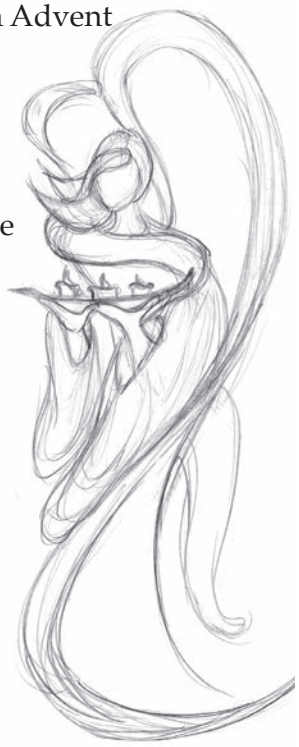
### Statement of Purpose

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.

# Waiting for the Light

*...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.



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

With this worship packet, we begin yet another new liturgical year. Our liturgical team—Guilherme Feitosa de Almeida, Erin Conaway, Scott Turner and Alec Ylitalo (and myself)—has led us toward a sense of active waiting as we prepare once more for the coming of the Christ Child.

As always, we are indebted to a lot of people for their generous contributions to this packet, beginning with the liturgical team. You will find their contributions throughout the packet, although you may not always see their names.

Guilherme, a minister and a native of Brazil, teaches in the Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts. He developed the "Theatre of the Oppressed" workshop that is part of Seeds' "Creating Hope" project. He is responsible for the musical portion of our liturgies.

Erin is pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, where the Seeds offices are housed. Erin wrote the Advent candle meditations. Alec is pastor of Richfield Christian Church in Waco and is very active in hunger-related and interfaith efforts in the community. He wrote the calls to worship and benedictions. Scott is the youth minister at Seventh & James and a divinity student at George W. Truett Theological Seminary. He wrote a children's sermon for us.

You may notice several meditations by John S. Ballenger, many of which are taken from "Bring Your Hands Together," an Advent drama that he wrote for an early *Sacred Seasons* packet. John was the Seeds poetry and drama editor for a number of years.

Sally Lynn Askins is a member of the Seeds Council of Stewards and our resident artist. She has created four new Advent angels, which you will see on the cover and attached to the first four liturgies. You will also see some of the many angels she has drawn for past packets. We also brought back some of our favorite pieces from Jesse Manning, Lenora Mathis, Erin Kennedy Mayer, Sharon Rollins and Rebecca Ward. All of this art was created especially for you.

We are especially pleased to include a liturgy and preparation material for a service to be held around the winter solstice. Sharlande Sledge, associate pastor of Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, has shared a beautiful "Service of Light in the Darkness" that Lake Shore (as the church is locally known) has held for many years. Lake Shore has played a significant role in the life of the Seeds ministry since it moved to Texas. There has been at least one representative from the church on the Council of Stewards for the 30 years we have been here.

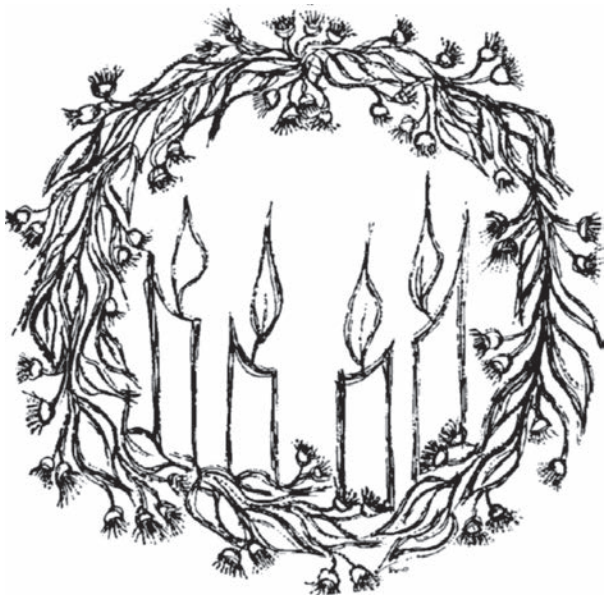
Also, we are grateful that one of our favorite preachers, Brett Younger, has shared an Epiphany sermon with us. Brett is pastor of the historic Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY, and has been generous with many of his sermons over the years.

Our copy editor, Ellen Kuniyuki Brown, is not only good at grammar and checking on the minute details that we writers (and editors) often miss,but she also has a wealth of wisdom that enriches our offerings.

As always, 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.

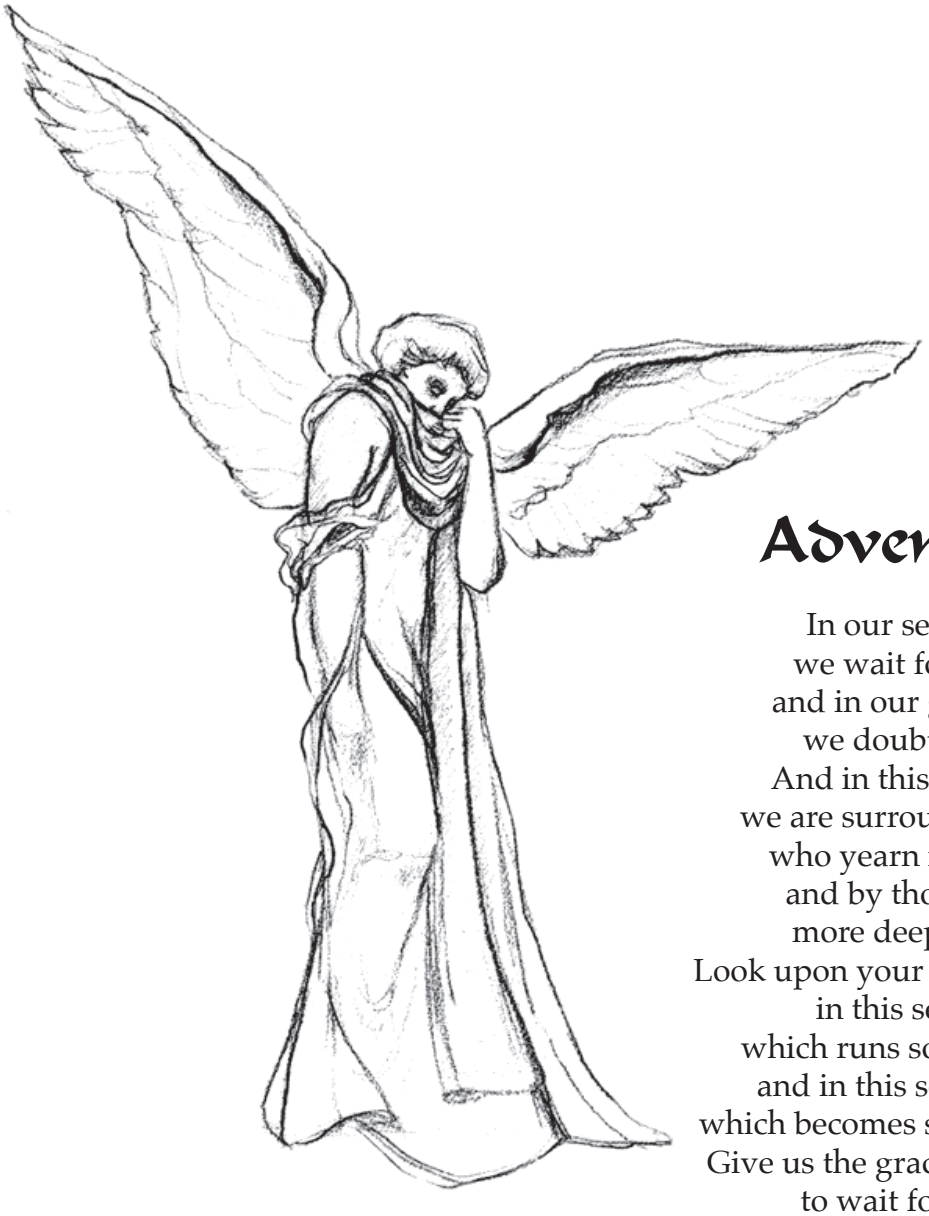
The contents of this packet are your congregation's to use freely and we want you to share them with others. We truly hope that the writings and art will inspire you to enter a holy Advent and a good start to this new liturgical year. May we be inspired to work until all of God's children have abundant food, warmth, shelter and safety.

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



*art by Susan Daily, IBVM*

# Theme Interpretation



## Advent Prayer

In our secret yearnings
we wait for your coming
and in our grinding despair
we doubt that you will.
And in this privileged place
we are surrounded by witnesses
who yearn more than do we
and by those who despair
more deeply than do we.
Look upon your church and its pastors
in this season of hope
which runs so quickly to fatigue
and in this season of yearning
which becomes so easily quarrelsome.
Give us the grace and the impatience
to wait for your coming
to the bottom of our toes
to the edges of our fingertips.
We do not want our several worlds to end.
Come in your power and
Come in your weakness
in any case
and make all things new.
Amen

–Walter Brueggeman

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

# A Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ylitalo*

*On this first Sunday of Advent, we await together the coming of Christ, abounding in love for each other and for all humankind, praying day and night as we wait.*

## Processional Hymn

"Creator of the Stars of Night"
WORDS: Latin 9th Century
MUSIC: Plainsong
TUNE: CONDITOR ALME SIDERUM, *Long Meter*
*The Hymnal 1982* No. 60

## Call to Worship

One: The journey of Advent begins today, but even though it's a long journey, it feels like all we do is wait.

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

*Many: We await the embodiment of love, that we may finally see God face to face.*

One: How can we actively wait instead of just standing back and watching it all unfold?
*Many: Abounding in love for each other and for all lights the first spark of hope for the world, putting action to our role in the season of wonder.*

## Lighting the Candle of Hope

Light is itself a thing of hope: casting out darkness in faith that something worthy of illumination will show up. We light the candle of hope this day as a symbol of our hope in all days: God has filled the world with beauty that reveals the face and heart of the Creator. The artist's spirit laid bare in every stroke. Let the light of our hope awaken us to the splendor all around: in every creeping creature, in each motley sunset, in the lilting of the birds' songs, in the smile and tears of your neighbor. We light this candle and defy the darkness in our world.

## Meditation of Preparation

The celebration of Christmas is not merely a sentimental waiting for a baby to be born. It is much more an asking for history to be born! Creation groans in its birth pains, waiting for our participation with God in its renewal (see Romans 8:20–23). We do the Gospel no favor when we make Jesus, the Eternal Christ, into a perpetual baby, who asks little or no adult response from us. One even wonders what kind of mind would want to keep Jesus a baby. Maybe only one that is content with "baby Christianity."
-Richard Rohr, "Birth is Just the Beginning"

## Hymn of Rejoicing

"Hark! The Glad Sound! The Savior Comes"
WORDS: Philip Doddridge

MUSIC: *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*
TUNE: BRISTOL, CM
*The Hymnal 1982* No. 71

## Reading from the Prophets
Jeremiah 33:14-16

## Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 25:1-10

## Hymn of Proclamation
"Arise, Shine"
WORDS and MUSIC: Steven Urspringer and Jay Robinson
TUNE: ARISE SHINE, *Irregular Meter*
*The Celebration Hymnal* No. 241

## Epistle Reading
I Thessalonians 3:9-13

## Gospel Reading
Luke 21:25-36

## Hymn of Adoration
"I Extol You"
WORDS and MUSIC: Jennifer Randolph
TUNE: I EXTOL YOU, *Irregular Meter*
*The Celebration Hymnal* No. 248

## Sermon

## Meditation of Commitment
In the somewhat frenzied aspects of the season,
and wars and rumours of wars and pestilence
and hope and despair and engaging powers,
I keep a supporting image of God coming to us
as individuals, or stepping into the midst
of conflict, holding out a swaddled infant to us
and saying, "Here, hold this for me, will you?"
–Cam Watts

## Carol of Hope
"Child in the Manger"
WORDS: Mary MacDonald (19th century); tr. Lachlan MacBean, 1888
MUSIC: Traditional Gaelic melody; harm. Mark Edwards, 2007
TUNE: BUNESSAN, 5.5.5.3.D.
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 112

## Benediction
As the first moments of anticipation come to a close, prepare yourself for all that awaits you along the way. Abound in love for those who will walk alongside you on this journey, be inspired by the source of that love overflowing into the world, and let wonder take hold of you as you await the hope of the world. ✶

# What If?

*A Nested Meditation by Sharon R. Rollins*

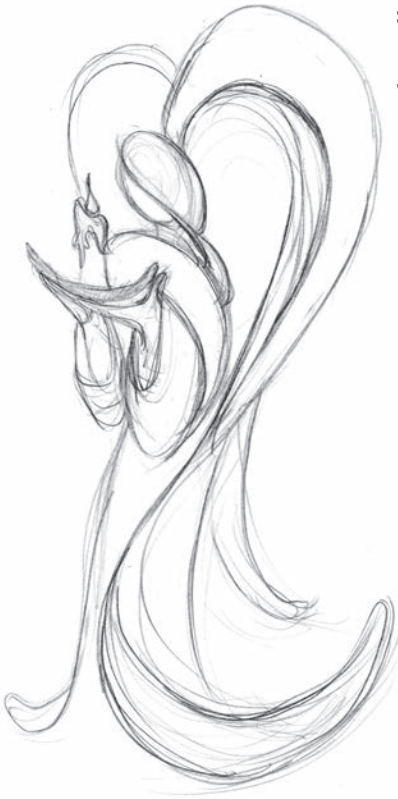
What if?

What if there were no light?

What? If there were no light
in the world?

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

What if there were no light
in the world?
How could we manage?
Hope and light return
with Advent.



*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

*—Sharon Rollins is the director of Waco Family Medicine—Counseling in Waco, TX. Sacred Seasons readers have seen her art in most of the packets produced in the past 20 years (see page 8). She borrowed the style of "nested meditations" from Kevin Anderson's* Divinity in Disguise.

# A Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ytitalo*

*On this second Sunday of Advent, we await the dawn from on high, watching for the light for those who sit in darkness.*

## Processional Carol

"Comfort, Comfort O My People"
WORDS: Johannes Olearius, 1671;
tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1863; alt.
MUSIC: Trente Quatre Pseaumes, *Geneva*, 1551
TUNE: FREU DICH SEHR, 8.7.8.7.7.7.8.8.
*The New Century Hymnal* No. 101

## Call to Worship

One: The light grows stronger today, but all we catch is a glimpse of the dawn from on high as we wait.
*Many: We await the glory of God to shine upon our faces and become the lamp unto our feet, that the way of peace would be illuminated for the world.*

One: How can the light of the world find its way to every corner that is shrouded?
*Many: Reflecting the light of God to one another brightens the path of peace for all of humanity, allowing us all to confidently step forward into the season of wonder.*

## Lighting the Candle of Peace

If we plan them well, mornings can bring a tranquil and soothing start to the day. Lingering over a cup of coffee or tea, listening to the sounds of the neighborhood come to life, and breathing in the cool, morning air. Today, we light the candle of Peace and pray that sense of calm would wash over the entire world. From the child whose stomach aches from hunger to the executive anxious about security, from the manors on hilltops to the refugee tents flapping in the wind, Lord, may your peace visit all of our hearts and worrying minds like the dawn breaking the spell of night.

## Meditation of Preparation

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, from *Prayers and Litanies for the Christian Seasons*

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

## Song of Peace
"Isn't He?"
WORDS and MUSIC: John Wimber
TUNE: WIMBER, *Irregular Meter*
*The Celebration Hymnal* No. 254

## Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures
Baruch 5:1-9 *or* Malachi 3:1-4

## Hymn of Peace
"Now the Heavens Start to Whisper"
WORDS: Mary Louise Bringle, 2005
MUSIC: Alexander Johnson's
*Tennessee Harmony*, 1818;
harm. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 1978
TUNE: JEFFERSON, 8.7.8.7.D
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 86

## Epistle Reading
Philippians 1:3-11

## First Gospel Reading
Luke 1:68-79

## Hymn of Promise
"The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns"
WORDS: Greek Hymn, tr. John Brownlie
MUSIC: William Jones
TUNE: ST STEPHEN, CM
*The Hymnal 1982* No. 73

## Second Gospel Reading
Luke 3:1-6

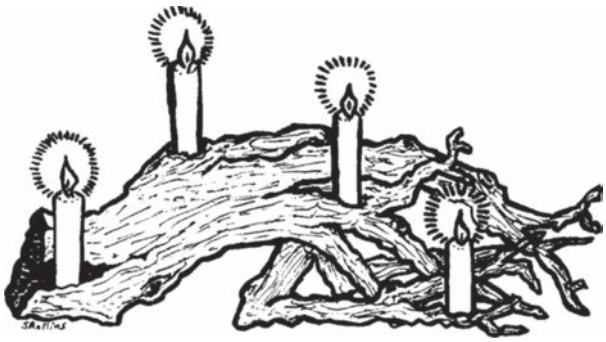
## Sermon

## Meditation of Commitment
I am waiting for a rebirth of wonder,
and I am waiting for the Age of Anxiety
to drop dead….
I am waiting for the Second Coming
and I am waiting for a religious revival
to sweep through the state of Arizona….
I am waiting to get some intimations
of immortality
by recollecting my early childhood
and I am waiting for the green mornings
to come again….
And I am awaiting perpetually and forever
a renaissance of wonder.
—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

## Carol of Promise
"View the Present Through the Promise"
WORDS: Thomas H. Troeger
MUSIC: Roy Hopp
TUNE: FRANKLIN PARK, 8.5.8.5.8.8.8.5.
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 90

## Benediction
As anticipation continues to build from deep within, prepare to walk the path of peace. Reflect the light of God for those that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, be inspired by the source of that light brightening the world, and let wonder take hold of you as you await the light of the world. ✶

*art by Sharon R. Rollins*



*We believe in the season of Advent*
in the times of waiting
in moments of silent contemplation
where all of our wonderings
and our wanderings
can be still and listen.

We believe in the possibility of peace
in the small voice of it
in its beginning as innermost seeds
that need to be nourished
and cultivated
and scattered along the way.

We believe in the hope of a story
in the sharing of it
in the conversation that begins
among all that is holy and human
during the purple interlude
that precedes the dawn.
–Jeremy Rutledge

# The Simple Act of Growing Up

## A Children's Sermon for the Second Week in Advent

*by Scott Turner*

*Text: Luke 1:67-80*

Advent is easily one of my favorite church seasons of the year, but it hasn't always been. Advent can start to feel like a slow countdown to our favorite holiday, a countdown that feels more like sitting in timeout (which I did a lot when I was your age) than joyously approaching Christmas. We so badly want it to be Christmas morning TOMORROW that we think about how fun it will be all year.

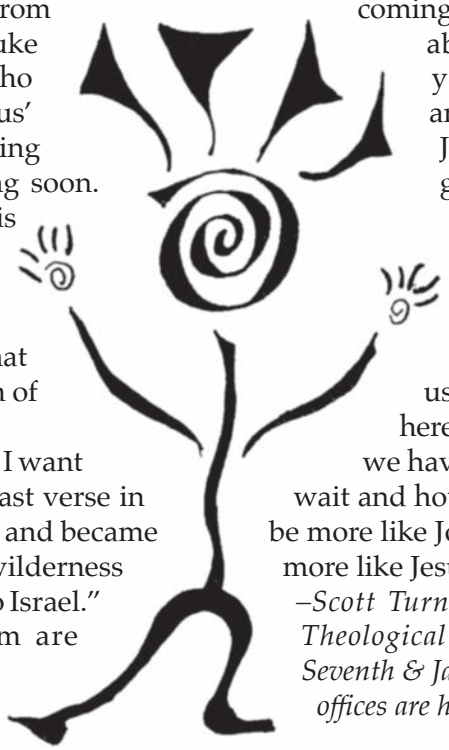
We create Christmas lists in July so we can get a head start on our gift receiving. We even put Christmas decorations up the very first minute after we get up from Thanksgiving dinner. Amidst all this hurry and frantic anticipation, a slow and quiet word flows gently from the church, whispering itself calmly into our bustling lives: the word is *Advent*.

The season of Advent does indeed count us down to the birth of Jesus, but it's here to offer much more to us. Today we read from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke about the prophecy of Zechariah, who was the father of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. It was a prophecy proclaiming the goodness of God that is coming soon. The adults in the room will hear this passage and begin to think of the hope, peace, joy, and love they are supposed to feel this season. They'll begin to think about the waiting that comes with Advent, the anticipation of the great work of God on this earth.

And we should do the same! But I want us to look very closely at the very last verse in this passage today: "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel."

While the adults in the room are thinking about waiting from Zechariah's perspective, we have the unique opportunity to see it from John the Baptist's perspective. John's great act of waiting and anticipation in this world was done in the very simple act of growing up and becoming strong in spirit. That is the same thing we're supposed to be doing everyday! We grow up a little bit everyday and, with every new thing we learn—every new story, every new fact and every new idea that comes to us—we grow a little bit more in our knowledge and understanding.

So this Advent, instead of just counting down the days until Christmas morning, let's wait in the same way that little boy John did: by growing up and getting strong in spirit. And if you ever don't know what to do while you wait, think about John the Baptist. Think about the way that he paved a way for Jesus by telling others that Jesus was coming into this world. And then think about how you can be preparing yourself, your home, your family and your friends for the coming of Jesus. We can do it by hoping in the goodness of God, creating peace wherever we go, being joyful in every part of life and loving everyone around us.



Let's pray together: God, we are thankful that you did not make us wait alone. We have all our friends here with us, we have our families, and we have you. You have shown us how to wait and how to live in this world. Help us to be more like John the Baptist, then help us to be more like Jesus. Amen.

*–Scott Turner is an MDiv student at Truett Theological Seminary and youth minister at Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed.*

# A Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ytitalo*

*During this third week in Advent, we await our homecoming—watching and participating in the gathering of the outcasts into the kingdom of God.*

## Processional Carol

"He Came Down"
WORDS and MUSIC: Cameroon Traditional, trans. and arr. John Bell
TUNE: HE CAME DOWN, *Irregular Meter*
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 92

## Call to Worship

One: As the joy of the morning starts to rise on the horizon, the world gathers in closer in expectation.
*Many: We await the time when God will gather the outcasts back home, that the joy of restoration would overwhelm the fortuneless.*

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

One: How can those who have been scattered and afflicted find their way back?
*Many: Opening our arms to the alien, the rejected, the despised welcomes them to find the joy of belonging once again, building the chorus that waits to sing "Joy to the World."*

## Lighting the Candle of Joy

We have weathered so much separation in these past two years, we know well the unbridled joy of togetherness. Anticipating glad reunions around dining room tables, around living room fireplaces, around rocking chairs and laughing children, our hearts leap with delight and relief. Knowing that you, O God, are drawing us all to The Glad Reunion in your presence makes our hearts skip with glee. We light this candle of joy celebrating the current gladness and in anticipation of bliss we cannot yet fathom, but love to try.

## Meditation of Preparation

When I take a tally of the people who surrounded Jesus in the days leading up to and following his birth, a great many of them seem to fit these descriptions: Mary the humble peasant girl, Joseph the patient carpenter, the coarse shepherds—and those two elderly saints of the Temple community, Anna and Simeon. Because of their faithfulness, we anticipate the coming of true, complete joy and peace—light in the midst of darkness.

We are in the midst of Advent, and it's time for us to take on the roles of these pageant personalities. As people of the light, we have an obligation to shine. As sacred salt, we need to be useful to Christ.
–Mark McClintock, from "Salt, Light & Advent"

## Hymn of Proclamation

"Return, My People"
WORDS: James F. D. Martin

MUSIC: C. Hubert H. Parry
TUNE: REPTON, 8.6.8.8.6.6.
*The New Century Hymnal* No. 114

### First Reading from the Prophets
Zephaniah 3:14-20

### Second Reading from the Prophets
Isaiah 12:2-6

### Hymn for These Days
"With Joy Draw Water"
WORDS: Anne McKinstry
MUSIC: Irish Trad. Melody
TUNE: ST COLUMBIA, 8.6.8.6.
*The New Century Hymnal* No. 109

### Epistle Reading
Philippians 4:4-7

### Gospel Reading
Luke 3:7-18

### Hymn of Celebration
"Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn"
WORDS and MUSIC: Marty Haugen, 1983
TUNE: REJOICE, REJOICE, 9.8.9.8.8.7.8.9.
*The New Century Hymnal* No. 107

### Sermon

### Meditation of Commitment
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, from "Bring Your Hands Together"

### Carol of Joy
"Let Us Even Now Go to Bethlehem / Manglakat na Kita sa Belen"
WORDS: Angel Sotto, Lois Bello
MUSIC: Angel Sotto, arr. Vérne de la Peña
TUNE: MANGLAKAT, 10.10.11.7.7.
*The New Century Hymnal* No. 142

### Benediction
As more and more hearts around you begin to flutter in anticipation, prepare your voice to join the chorus of angels that are gathering in a song of joy. Open your arms wide to the world, just as God does, to welcome all home, be inspired by the source of restoration and redemption, and let wonder take hold of you as you await the joyful chorus. ✶

## It Doesn't Matter

*a Nested Meditation by Sharon R. Rollins*

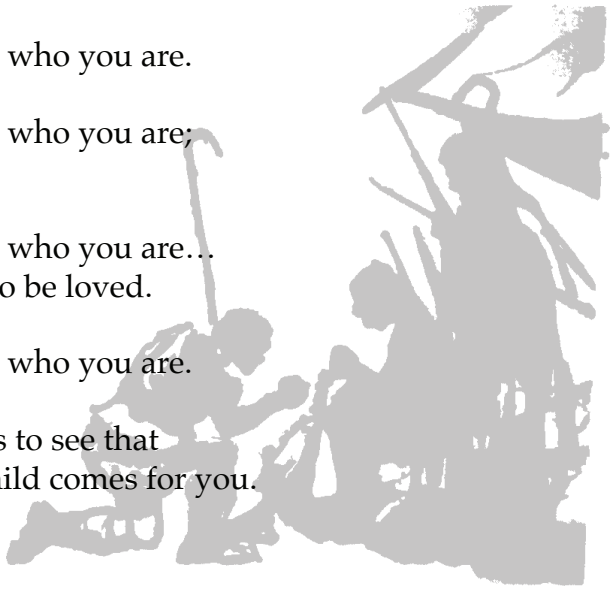
It doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter who you are.

It doesn't matter who you are;
We all want.

It doesn't matter who you are…
We all want to be loved.

It doesn't matter who you are.
We all want.
To be loved is to see that
The Christ child comes for you.



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*Author's note: If you'd like, you can use the above meditation during Christmastide or Epiphany by changing the word "comes," in the last line, to "came."*

# Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

"Hustle and bustle" isn't just a phrase for the holidays anymore. Working, texting and keeping up with demanding schedules often leave us exhausted, with very little room in our hearts and minds for much else. And our fears about money, jobs, wars and more shift our focus from the daily-bread needs of people all around us. That's why we need to be reminded, again and again, that our hope rests in God, and in the Word that the darkness cannot extinguish. We must make room to be still, to remember whose we are and to be freed to serve in God's name.
–Deborah E. Harris

The tamed piety of the conventional church wants an innocent baby who comes gently into our secure lives and keeps everything benign and friendly. It may be conventional and it may be tame, but it is not biblical and it is not Christian. Advent is about both hope and hurt; pain and risk, as well as excitement and joy, are part of the adventure. Christ comes touching those deep places our culture too quickly covers over with glitzy wrapping paper and "Frosty, the Snowman."
–Kyle Childress

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*

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

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

Christmas is no less a cataclysmic event than Easter and resurrection. The world order is altered and will never be the same. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us…full of grace and truth." Christmas is not just for the kids. Here is the essence of Christianity; grace is a person, it is the gift of Godself to us in a person. The truth is greater than that which can be explained. The truth of God must be received by faith.
–Raymond Bailey

*art by Gertrud Nelson*

# A Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ylitalo*

*Like the city of Bethlehem, we await our role in God's dream. Like the child waiting in Elizabeth's womb, we await the day when the lowly will be lifted and the hungry will be filled with good things.*

## Processional Carol

"Come, Lord Jesus"
WORDS and MUSIC: Carey Landry
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 103

## Call to Worship

One: Every part of the world has a role to play as Advent comes to a close, as Bethlehem awakens from its long wait to host the glorious birth.
*Many: We await our role in the birth story too, that we would get to play a part in the divine orchestration of love came down.*

One: How can we find our own place in the beauty that is about to become?
*Many: Participating in the love of God becoming familiar to the world, we witness the embodiment of love and tell the world of Emmanuel, God with us.*

## Lighting the Candle of Love

Love is an often overused word: "I love your dress, I love this cobbler, I love that car." But when we hold an infant in our arms, when we feel a comforting arm around our shoulder, when someone holds us until our tears stop flowing, when we're with a loved one as they draw their last breath, when our heart breaks open in grief, we know love to be a word that conveys the deepest truth. This morning we light the candle of Love to remind our hearts and declare with our actions that we are loved by God…deeply and truly. And we seek to grow in our love for God and for one another. May the light of God's love awaken in us a depth of oneness we've never known before, that we may be one with each other and one with God through the coming Christ-child.

## Hymn of Love

"Meekness and Majesty"
WORDS and MUSIC: Graham Kendrick
TUNE: MEEKNESS AND MAJESTY,
6.6.6.5.6.6.6.5. with Refrain
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 109

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

## Meditation of Preparation

God, enlarge my heart that it may be big enough to receive the greatness of your love. Stretch my heart that it may take into it all those who, with me, around the world, believe in Jesus Christ. Stretch it, that it may take into it all those who do not know him but who are my responsibility because I know him. And stretch it that it may take in all those who are not lovely in my eyes and whose eyes I do not want to touch. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.
–Ghanaian prayer

## Reading from the Prophets

Micah 5:2-5a

## Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 80:1-7

## A Hymn for These Days

"Take Us as We Are, O God"
WORDS: Carl P. Daw, Jr.
MUSIC: Alfred V. Fedak
TUNE: ENDLESS FEAST, 7.6.8.6.8.6.
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 125

## Epistle Reading

Hebrews 10:5-10

## Gospel Reading

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

## Carol of Repentance

"What Is the Crying at Jordan?"
WORDS: Carol Christopher Drake
MUSIC: *Danta De Hymns to God, Ancient and Modern*
TUNE: ST MARK'S BERKELEY, 8.8.8.6.
*The Hymnal 1982* No. 69

## Sermon

## Meditation of Commitment

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, from an early *Sacred Seasons* Advent packet

## Hymn of Proclamation

"Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne"
WORDS: Timothy R. Matthews
MUSIC: Emily E. S. Elliott
TUNE: MARGARET, *Irregular Meter*
*The Faith We Sing* No. 2100

## Benediction

Benediction: As the anticipation of Christ builds to its final moments, prepare your heart to be overwhelmed by the love of God filling the world. Participate in the story of love that came down, be inspired by the source of that love that abides in you and abide in it as well, and let wonder take hold of you as you await the love of God. ✶

*One response was given*
*by the innkeeper*
when Mary and Joseph wanted
to find a room where the Child
could be born.
The innkeeper was not hostile;
he was not opposed to them,
but his inn was crowded;
his hands were full;
his mind was preoccupied.
This is the answer that millions
are giving today.
Like a Bethlehem innkeeper,
they cannot find room for Christ.
All the accommodations in their hearts
are already taken up by other
crowding interests.
Their response is not atheism.
It is not defiance.
It is preoccupation
and the feeling of being able
to get on reasonably well
without Christianity.
–Billy Graham

# How Can She Sing?

*by Chris Brennan Homiak*
*Text Luke 1:39-55*

How can she sing?
the city is threatening to condemn her house,
freshly painted with love
the house she has pieced together from scraps
and lived in for the last ten years.
How can she sing?
they are without papers in a foreign land.
How can she sing?
she cannot afford medicine for her son's epilepsy,
nor technology to help him hear all he cannot see.
How can she sing?
she has no husband nor children who can work.
How can she sing?
last week their telephone service was cut off.
How can she sing?
the immigration judge in Texas is asking
to see the woman who cut the umbilical cord
over twenty years ago
to prove the son was born an American.
How can she sing?
the powerful remain in their thrones,
the rich remain full,
and so often she is sent away empty.
How can she sing?
despairing, she shared:
"Si tengo café, no tengo azucar.
Si tengo azucar, no tengo café!"
How can she sing?
her favorite (and most financially helpful)
social worker is moving away.
How can she sing?
again and again,
she says "esperamos":
we are waiting, we are hoping.
How can she sing?
when I greet her, "Como esta?"
she always replies, "Bien, gracias a Dios!"
How can she sing?
in the middle of a meeting about their future
seemingly barren of hope,
she breaks into song,

*–Chris Homiak, at this writing, was Pastor of Movement Groups and Service Teams at Revolution United Methodist Church in Kansas City, MO. He and his partner Katie lived near Cherith Brook, a new community and house of hospitality. This meditation was first printed in "Waiting in Wonder," the 2009 Sacred Seasons Advent/Christmastide packet.*

# A Service of Light in the Darkness

## Introduction & Instructions

*by Sharlande Sledge*

Early in my ministry at Lake Shore Baptist Church, I began sending out a letter in early December each year as an invitation to our "Service of Light in the Darkness." It spoke to what we all needed that year and what we seem to need more than ever in this time of COVID—a chance to name the losses we have experienced in the last year or two in the company of others who have experienced similar losses. Simply being in each other's presence blesses us. Each year I still use a variation on the same letter *[see page 18]* .

Through the years, as I've planned these services, I've tried to remember these things:

- **Select a name, a date, and a time that are meaningful to the community you serve.** Though other churches in town have a Blue Christmas Service or a Longest Night Service, the name Service of Light in the Darkness gives a sense of hope. We host a mid-afternoon service on the third Sunday of Advent, if possible, so that we may leave the sanctuary in the daylight. (This is somehow comforting to people who are grieving.)
- **Use the following worship elements for the service**

1. *Advent Candles.* The Advent wreath has always been the visual focal point of the service. Depending on which Sunday of Advent we have the Service of Light in the Darkness, we light the same candles that we did on that Sunday morning: usually the candles of Hope, Peace, and Joy.
2. *Remembering by Name.* Each person who walks in the door has a chance to write down the names of those they want to remember. Once the service has started, the person who was watching over the list of names hands the list to the worship leader, who reads each name, pausing before the next, while someone else lights a white votive candle and places it on the communion table.
3. *Communion.* Though our congregation usually walks to the table to receive the bread and the cup, this service is one time when the ministers take the communion elements to the people. Serving the worshipers in their seats is one way the ministers can bless them. The communion service unites the saints above and the saints below.
4. *Music.* "Angels from the Realms of Glory," "The First Noel," "When God Is a Child," and other carols are traditional for this service. "Gesu Bambino," "Bring a Torch, Jeannette Isabella," and "What Child Is This?" are lovely and quiet, like lullabies. For many years someone played a hammered dulcimer for us; during other years, we had a flutist.
5. *Prayers:* Silent, spoken, and sung. *[See the liturgy on page 17.]*

Each year several dozen people who have lost family members or friends during the year, or maybe long ago, come to the service. Some come to be a caring presence for others they know who have suffered a loss. Others come for the quiet, reflective music and prayers. As Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral, wrote, "Advent gives us another chance to allow the crack in the heart to let in the light of new life."

*–Sharlande Sledge has been Associate Pastor at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, TX, for some 30 years. Her careful attention to creativity has enhanced many, many worship opportunities at Lake Shore. Her book,* Prayers & Litanies for the Christian Seasons, *has graced the worship of many other churches across the country.*

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

# A Service of Light in the Darkness

## A Liturgy for the Winter Solstice

*by Sharlande Sledge*

*art by Sally Lynn Askins*

*Advent gives us another chance to allow the crack in the heart to let in the light of new life.* –Alan Jones

### Greeting/Welcome

### Prelude

*We recommend a medley of carols.*

### Lighting of the Advent Candles

### Call to Worship

God of darkness and light, you are the Light and Life of every soul and our source of hope. In this time of remembrance may we experience your present comfort and your everlasting care.

### Hymn for Advent

"Angels, from the Realms of Glory," stanzas 1, 4
WORDS: James Montgomery
MUSIC: Henry T. Smart
TUNE: REGENT SQUARE, 87.87.87
*Chalice Hymnal* No. 149

### Invocation

### Witness of Scripture

Psalm 126
2 Corinthians 1:4
Matthew 1:23

### Prayer for God's Mercy

*This could be written ahead of time by a worship leader, or it could be an invitation to spontaneous prayers from the congregation. After each petition, the leader says, "Lord, in your mercy," and the congregation responds with "Hear our prayer."*

### Hymn of Peace

"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," stanzas 1, 4
WORDS: Edmund H. Sears
MUSIC: Richard S. Willis
TUNE: CAROL, CMD
*Chalice Hymnal* No. 153

### Time of Remembrance

ONE: Remember the messengers of faith you have known, rejoice, and give thanks for their lives and their witness.
*MANY: We, too, will prepare the way of Christ; we will help to make smooth the hills and valleys of life.*

ONE: Hold one another in your hearts this day; pray that love may guide all your relationships.
*MANY: We will weep with those who weep. We will rejoice with those who rejoice.*

ONE: God is with us. This is our assurance and our hope.

### Remembering by Name

*A leader reads the names that have been given to the receptionist, and another leader lights a candle on the altar table at the reading of each name. (Another way to do this would be to ask congregants to come up and speak a name and then light a candle.)*

### Silence

*This should last about two minutes. If your congregation is not accustomed to periods of silence, you might consider introducing it.*

### Meditation for Silence

Our candles are tokens of unimaginable light.
–Frances Copsey

### Prayer for God's Strength

Comforting God, wrap us in your presence. With

these candles, help us find your light, a light that will guide us day by day, step by step, as we try to live life fully and wholly. We cherish the special ways in which we have been touched by our loved ones. We thank you for the gift their lives have been to us. Now comfort us, encourage us. Amen.

## Invitation to Communion

*Print this in your worship guide or speak it: "Please remain seated for communion. As you receive the bread and cup, remember generations of disciples who have received the blessing of Christ at this Table. After we have all received the bread, we will eat together; then we will receive and drink the cup together."*

## Words of Assurance

ONE: What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? What can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

*MANY: No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.*

ONE: For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor things present, nor things to come,

*MANY: nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

–From Romans 8

## Song of Hope

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," stanzas 1, 3
WORDS: Charles Wesley
MUSIC: Felix Mendelssohn,
arr. William H. Cummings,
desc. Paul Liljestrand
TUNE: MENDELSSOHN, 77.77D
w. refrain
*Chalice Hymnal* No. 150

## Benediction

ONE: We take the light of our prayer into the world
*MANY: to pray for those unable to pray.*

ONE: We take the light of compassion into the world
*MANY: to reflect Christ's love to those who are suffering.*

ONE: We take the light of hope into the world
*MANY: to rekindle its flame wherever there is despair.*

ONE: O come, O come, Emmanuel.

*MANY: Illumine our way so that we may see you. Amen.*

## Postlude

*Love is what carries you, for it is always there, even in the dark, or most in the dark, but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery.*
–Wendell Berry

# Sample Invitation to the Service of Light in the Darkness

Dear Friends,

On Sunday, December [ ], at 3:00 p.m., we will gather for our Advent Service of Light in the Darkness.

This season of the year can be a difficult one as we weave the traditions and memories and expectations of the holidays into our everyday lives. As we looked through the newsletters for the past two years, we saw many of your names listed under the words "Remember in prayer." Each was a reminder that for many of you this may be a poignant season because of a personal loss through the death of someone you loved.

Some of your names are written on our hearts because somehow this year life has become very different for you. Especially during this holiday season some of us have a heartful of emotions unlike those we've ever known before.

During the service we will read aloud the names of those we love who have died and gather in communion with each other and in the presence of the great cloud of witnesses. The quiet time of worship will provide an opportunity to bring all that we are feeling and experiencing before God and to look for light and small celebrations as we move toward Christmas and the New Year.

As we gather in our sanctuary, our presence, too, will bring hope—for it is in community that we realize that others understand how life as we knew it can change from one season to the next. Some people come to this service because of its quietness and simplicity during a busy season.

May the promise of the Christ Child's coming into the world be a sign unto you that the Word of God is coming to dwell among us, full of grace and comfort and peace.

With Christ's hope and light,
Sharlande

# Lessons & Carols for Christmas Eve

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ylitalo*

## Processional Carol

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"
WORDS: Latin Hymn; attr. to John Francis Wade, ca. 1743; tr. Frederick Oakeley, 1841, alt.
MUSIC: John Francis Wade, ca. 1743
TUNE: ADESTE FIDELES, *Irregular Meter with Refrain*
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 103

## Call to Worship

As we stand now on the brink of Christmas, let us seek for the stillness of which life the carol sings. It is not the empty stillness and loneliness which life sometimes thrusts upon us. It is the deep mystery of meaning that fills us with awe and presence and reawakens our hearts to love. Let us indeed be joyful, for Christmas is a time of joy! But joy is not always boisterous. Isn't it, at its best and most abiding, a solemn joy that stands with its eyes aglow and its tongue silenced before the mystery of the manger?
–C. W. Christian

## Lighting the Candle of Hope

## Meditation of Hope

Here we are, on Christmas Eve. The tree is decorated. The candles are lit. We are inside. We sing our favorite carols. We enjoy being around family and friends. We remember the family and friends who are not here and we are mystically connected to them in Spirit. Children are in costume. The presents are wrapped. The Swedish meatballs are cooked, the *lefse* [Norwegian flatbread] is rolled out, the eggnog is ready, the cookies are baked. Everything seems to be right. And, just like every year, we see the manger scene. We're transported back to that night when a homeless couple smuggled God into the world. And for a moment we see with new eyes.
–Douglas M. Donley, "Joseph, the Silent Partner"

## A Carol of Hope

"Born in the Night, Mary's Child"
WORDS and MUSIC: Geoffrey Ainger, 1964; harm. Richard D. Wetzel, 1972
TUNE: MARY'S CHILD, 7.6.7.6.
*The New Century Hymnal* No. 152

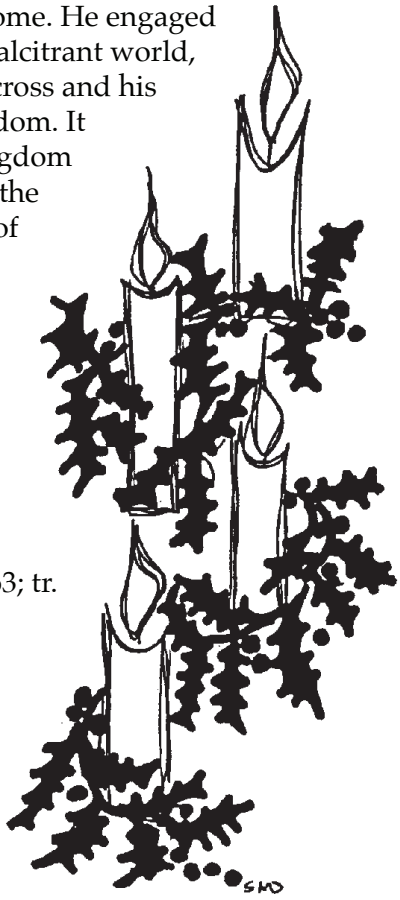
## Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 9:2-7

## Lighting the Candle of Peace

## Meditation of Peace

Bethlehem. The angelic choir's announcement of peace on earth can be trusted because the one born in the stable is anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the slave, sight to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed. The warrior-king has come. He engaged the conflict of a recalcitrant world, his weapon was a cross and his reward was a kingdom. It is and will be a kingdom of peace, forged in the furnace of conflict of suffering.
–James Kennedy



## Carol of Peace

"Silent Night, Holy Night"
WORDS: Joseph Mohr, 1818; tr. John Freeman Young (st. 1, 3), 1863; tr. Anonymous (st. 2, 4)
MUSIC: Franz Grüber, 1818
TUNE: STILLE NACHT, *Irregular Meter*
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 134

## Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 96

## Lighting the Candle of Joy

## Meditation of Joy
Into the darkness of our nights, *God comes*. Into the loneliness and the uncertainty, *God comes*. God touches the darkness of our night with light. *God comes*. That is the wonder and the miracle of the Christmas story; that is the message and the story that we will explore with fresh eyes and hearts this year. This year, particularly, it may feel like *we* are the people walking in the darkness; walking in the loneliness, the worry, the fear, and the uncertainty. Yet, despite it all, the Advent message and the Christmas story remind us that into our lives, *God comes*.
–from the newsletter of the First Baptist Church in Beverly (Beverly, MA)

## Carol of Joy
"Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come"
WORDS: Isaac Watts, 1719
MUSIC: George Frederick Handel;
arr. Lowell Mason, 1836
TUNE: ANTIOCH, *CM with Repeat*
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 102

## Epistle Reading
Titus 2:11-14

## Lighting the Candle of Love

## Meditation of Love
As we journey week by week through Advent, we come to the realization that we could never find our way to hope, peace or joy without love. Love opens our minds and hearts to all that is holy and shows us who we are meant to be. In her book *Opening to Miracles*, Betty Clare Moffatt writes, "Practicing the presence of love changes your perceptions. And changing your perceptions creates miracles around you." Love has never been more *present* than in the birth of Jesus. Love made flesh, swaddled, and placed in our arms. To this world fractured by fear and hate and greed and despair, the Creator responds, not with punishment or judgment, but with love. Love is born, and when we are graced to love, we are born anew.
—Deborah E. Harris

## Carol of Love
"Jesus, Jesus, Oh, What a Wonderful Child"
WORDS: Doc Bagby
MUSIC: Margaret Allison (b. 1920);
harm. Jeffrey Radford (b. 1953)
TUNE: WONDERFUL CHILD, *Irregular Meter*
*Sing! A New Creation* No. 108

## Gospel Reading
Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

## Lighting the Christ Candle
Surprising God, you come to us as the infant son of a poor couple who seem ill prepared to parent the Savior of all. We feel their hesitancy to take on this enormous responsibility as we seek to be your hands and feet in our world today. You became one of us, meek and lowly, innocent and defenseless, in order that you might reveal the full measure of your love and salvation. Open our hearts to the fullness of your affection, open our minds to the mystery of your forgiveness, open our ears to the calling you are singing, and open our hands to receive and to serve in your holy name.

## Benediction
Go from here this night
this night on which Christ was born,
this night we await.
Go from here
to repeat the sounding joy
of truth and grace at work together.
Go from here
to be a part of the thrill of hope—
to work for the rejoicing of our weary world.
Go from here
with angel voices ringing
in your ears
to prepare your heart
to make room.
Christ is born!
And your time on earth
makes room for the divine.
You participate in the making fit
of creation for heaven.
Go from here with the God
with us, Immanuel,
even Jesus Christ,
Amen.
–John Ballenger,
from "Bring Your Hands Together"

*art by Rebecca S. Ward*

# A Liturgy for Christmas Day

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ytitalo*

## Processional Carol

"Gloria/Glory"
WORDS: Luke 2:14
MUSIC: Pablo Sosa, Argentina
TUNE: CUEQUITA
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 116

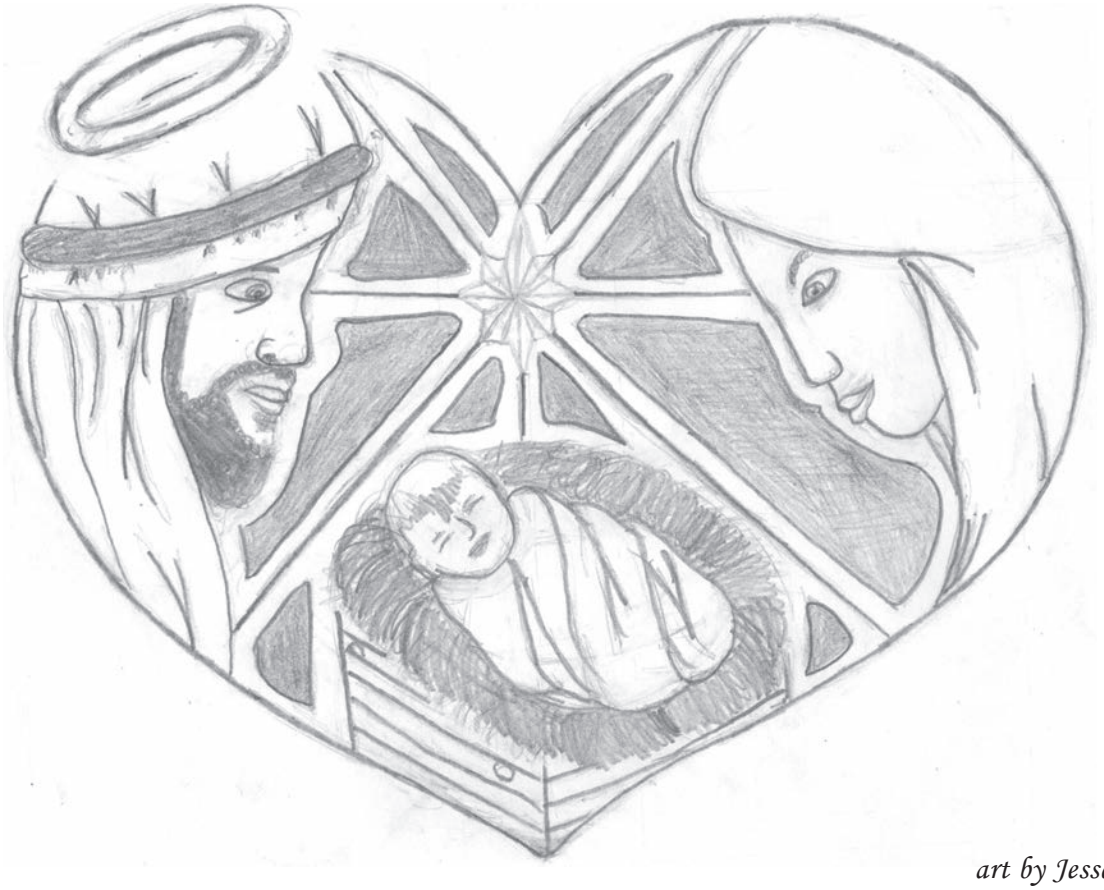
## Call to Worship

One: The Christ Child has finally brought the manifestation of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love into the world, welcome him with praise, with songs, with celebration!
*Many: We've waited and waited, the journey of anticipation is complete, now we rest beside the manger and embrace the beginning of the story of redemption.*
One: How can we hold onto this day, this emotion, this spirit for which we've been longing?
*Many: Resting in the newly realized company of a God, we look forward to the opportunity to glimpse the Divine in human form every day, learning from him, following his ways, and experiencing love manifest in the world.*

## Lighting the Candles of Advent and Christmastide

## Meditation of Preparation

Christmas speaks above all else to the poor and homeless, the hungry, oppressed, and friendless of our world. We must never let ourselves forget that, or



*art by Jesse Manning*

our celebrations will be as false as Santa's whiskers. But it also speaks to those who are burdened in any way, whether with regrets for the past, heartache in the present or foreboding of the future. God says to us this night, "Be strong, fear not, for I am with you. I am for you and I will never let you go. Here is my Son to prove it."
–J. Barrie Shepherd

## Song of Christmastide

"One Holy Night in Bethlehem"
WORDS: Mary Nelson Keithahn
MUSIC: John D. Horman
TUNE: WHISTLER'S TUNE,
*Common Meter with Refrain*
*The Faith We Sing Hymnal* No. 2097

## Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 52:7-10

## Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 98

## Carol of Celebration

"Sing a New Song to the Lord"
WORDS: Psalm 98;
version by Timothy Dudley-Smith
MUSIC: David G. Wilson
TUNE: ONSLOW SQUARE, 7.7.1.1.8.
*Sing! A New Creation Hymnal* No. 112

## Epistle Reading

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

## Gospel Reading

John 1:1-14

## Carol for These Days

"Star-Child"
WORDS: Shirley Erena Murray, 1994
MUSIC: Carlton R. Young, 1994
TUNE: STAR CHILD, 4.5.4.5. with Refrain
*The Faith We Sing* No. 2095

## Sermon

## Meditation of Commitment

God has chosen the weak things to overcome the strong, foolish things to confound the wise, lowly things to humble the haughty. That is God's way, and it ought to be a reminder for us when we wish to know where to look for God or to know what God wants us to do in the world.
–Richard Groves

## Carol of Joy

"The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy"
WORDS & MUSIC: Caribbean Carol, arr. John Barnard
TUNE: THE VIRGIN MARY, 10.10.10.9
*The Faith We Sing* No. 2098

## Benediction

As you continue the celebration of Emmanuel, God with us, welcome the Christ child continually that you may experience the wholeness of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love that he brings into the world forever. Rest in the moment of arrival, be inspired by the fact that God cares enough to walk alongside humanity, and let wonder continue to lead the way this year as you hold onto the birth of Jesus Christ. ✶

*art by Erin Kennedy Mayer*

*For outlandish creatures like us,*
on our way to
a heart, a brain, and courage,
Bethlehem is not the end of our journey
but only the beginning—
not home but the place
through which we must pass
if ever we are to reach home at last.
–Frederick Buechner

# A Liturgy for Epiphany

*by Erin Conaway, Katie Cook, Guilherme Almeida and Alec Ylitalo*

## Processional Carol

"Christ Is the World's Light"
WORDS: Fred Pratt Green
MUSIC: *Paris Antiphoner*, harm. David Evans
TUNE: CHRISTE SANCTORUM, 10.11.11.6
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 154

## Call to Worship

One: We come bearing gifts, but the Christ Child needs nothing of the sorts. Instead of giving, we receive the revelation of God today.
*Many: We open our hearts to the love he will exemplify,*

One: We open our arms to the embrace of justice he will teach,
*Many: We open our minds to the understanding of grace and forgiveness that he will live and die to teach us.*

One: How do we begin a new journey of following the one who reveals God to us?
*Many: Following in his footsteps, listening to his words, let us receive this gift of God.*

## Lighting the Candles of Advent and Christmastide

## Meditation of Preparation

I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam. It is possible, in deep space, to sail on solar wind. Light, be it particle or wave, has force: you rig a giant sail and go. The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.
—Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

## Hymn of Epiphany

"Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning"
WORDS: Reginald Heber
MUSIC: *The Southern Harmony*
TUNE: STAR IN THE EAST, 11.10.11.10
with Refrain
*The Hymnal 1982* No. 118

## Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 60:1-6

## Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

## Hymn of Divine Care

"The Hands that First Held Mary's Child"
WORDS: Thomas H. Troeger
MUSIC: English folk melody, harm. Ralph Vaughan Williams
TUNE: KINGSFOLK, CMD
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 115

## Epistle Reading

Ephesians 3:1-12

## Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

## Hymn of Epiphany Joy

"Alleluia, Song of Gladness"
WORDS: Latin, 11th Century, tr. John Mason Neale
MUSIC: Plainsong, 12th Century
TUNE: TIBI CHRISTE SPLENDOR PATRIS, 8.7.8.7.8.7.
*The Hymnal 1982* No. 123

## Sermon

*art by Helen Siegl*

## Meditation of Commitment

Holy One of heaven,
mark these dark nights
with the brilliance of your star to
guide emissaries of exclaiming grace:
of contradiction and scandal
to the insolent innkeepers of this age;
of blessing and bounty to the indigent,
to all who find no lasting home
save in the age to come.
–Ken Sehested, from "Advent Longing"

## Hymn of Purpose

"We Are Singing, for the Lord Is Our Light"
WORDS: South African; tr. Hal Hopson, 1994
MUSIC: Zulu melody; adapt. Hal Hopson, 1994
TUNE: SIYAHAMBA, *Irregular Meter*
*Celebrating Grace Hymnal* No. 155

## Benediction

As you proceed from the season of wonder into the ordinary, may you continue to witness the extraordinary of this season as it plays out over the coming year in new and different ways. Remember the waiting, remember the pure celebration, remember who it is that you follow from this moment on. May the Prince of Peace lead you, may the God of redemption walk by your side, and may the Spirit of life sustain you on your journey. ✶

# Simplicity, Shopping & the Feast of St. Nicholas

*An Advent Project for Youth*

Here's an idea for a youth Advent project. Introduce the youth to the real St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children (and others), whose feast day is Dec. 6. Encourage your students to plan a "simplicity" project for Advent in his name.

Although little is actually known about the historical Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop of Myra in Lycia, he is remembered for his benevolence.

He is said to have rescued three girls from lives of prostitution by providing dowries for them, and he is remembered for bringing gifts to poor children. Some stories say he put the gifts in the children's shoes.

Edward Hays writes in *A Pilgrim's Almanac* that it is fitting that the feast of St. Nicholas comes at the beginning of Advent, during the Christmas shopping season. According to Hays, Nicholas is also hailed as the patron saint of shoppers and reminds us to keep it simple enough to fit in a shoe.

One gift that could fit in a shoe, or in a Christmas stocking, is a note that speaks of one of our most precious gifts, the gift of time. Such a "St. Nicholas" note might read: "The gift I give to you is half an hour of quality conversation each night right after the dishes are done." The youth could make homemade gifts. They might want to make stockings for older members of your congregation and write encouraging notes to them.

Here's another idea: to go along with the simplicity theme, you could show the movie *What Would Jesus Buy?* by Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. (No; I'm not making that up.) You can order the dvd, borrow it from community library or watch it through a streaming service.

The film, which is funny and poignant, is a "street theatre" project that could help the youth explore the realities of commercialism and how it affects others in the world.

*–by Katie Cook. Historical information is from* The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church *and the* Westminster Dictionary of Church History.

# Rise and Shine

## A Sermon for Epiphany

*by Brett Younger*

*Text: Isaiah 60:1-6*

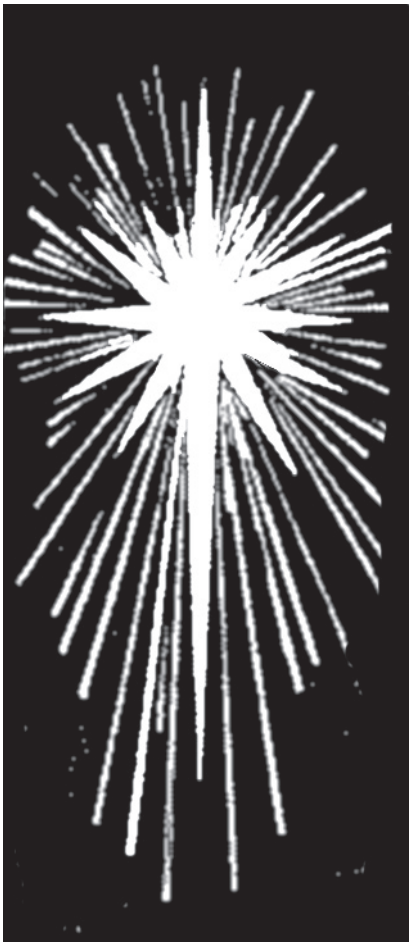
A few years ago, an atheist was really angry with me. I wrote an article in the local paper about the growing number of people with no religious affiliation who consider themselves spiritual. I gently suggested that spirituality without God is empty, that what many people who claim to be spiritual without going to church actually want is to be spiritual without taking responsibility.

I implied that some use their lack of faith in the church as an excuse not to share their money with the poor or work for social justice. I argued that true spirituality leads people to feed the hungry, listen to the lonely and join with others who are doing the same.

What I wrote made perfect sense to me, but a self-described "hard-core atheist" in Colorado sent an e-mail letting me know that I am "painfully ignorant." He pointed out that those who attend church can be just as greedy, cheap and unfeeling as those who don't attend church. (This is not news to a minister.) He wrote that he hoped my next sermon would better reflect the truth as he had explained it to me.

One of the many disadvantages of e-mailing ministers is that it is easier for us to send a sermon than a thoughtful response. So I sent him a sermon on why it makes sense to believe in God—and the debate was on. My atheist friend responded with a lengthy rebuttal he said he would be glad to share with my congregation if I invited him to speak and reimbursed his expenses—an offer that I did not make. He and I traded opinions on heaven, hell, prayer, faith-healing, easy answers, difficult questions, awe, skepticism, curiosity, the Old Testament, the New Testament, black holes, quantum gravity, fifteen billion years of evolution, Carl Sagan, Jerry Falwell and which one of us had the worse church experience.

> *But in the middle of the night, the prophet saw a light. Isaiah shouted, "Rise and shine. Get out of bed. God's here."*



As you would guess, neither one of us changed the other's mind. My atheist pen pal wanted verifiable proof—"no evidence, no belief" is how he put it. Ultimately, I had to admit that what Christians believe is impossible to prove. We believe that once in a while we see a glimmer of light.

We understand that the world is dark. We know all about the darkness. Our country is growing more comfortable with cruelty—separating children from their parents on the border—seeming unconcerned with the deaths of some of those children.

Our country is growing more comfortable with racism, homophobia and sexism.

Our country is growing less comfortable with compassion, kindness and mercy.

The farther away the news, the less we pay attention. The United Nations has called the war in Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis. As many as 12 million people are on the brink of

starvation, killing some 65,000 children. Most of us cannot find Yemen on a map.

Tensions in China, Europe and Syria are rising. The world is dark with ignorance, anger and prejudice. During 2022, children will starve, terrorists will attack and armies will kill innocent people. Hard workers will lose their jobs, sick people will die and drunk drivers will murder children. Preschoolers will be molested, women will be abused and senior citizens will be mistreated.

*The prophet could not prove he had seen a flash of light in the middle of a stormy night, but Isaiah believed that one day the light would overcome the darkness. We understand that the world is dark, but we live in the light.*

Wealthy people will hold tightly to their money. Lonely people will not find the friends they need. Lost people will not find their way home.

Some of the darkness in the world becomes the darkness we feel inside. The days after Christmas can be hard. We have gone from too many parties to an empty calendar, from time with family to recovering from time with family, from eating too much to weighing too much, from taking a break to returning to a stack of work, from time away back to a job that is often depressing, from feeling pressure to act happy to mourning over what we've lost through death, divorce and distance.

We try to avoid the dark places and keep ourselves safe. You know the feeling of visiting a strange house. It is 1:00 a.m. and you want a drink of water, but you do not want to turn on the light. You think you can remember the location of each piece of threatening furniture. You can get to the kitchen without incident. You curl your toes and begin the journey. You think you are going to make it, but then you hit your shin on an end table. You hold in the scream and walk the rest of the way taking baby steps, afraid you will stumble into something else and afraid your next step will be your last.

Even when we know the obstacles, if we are crossing a dark room at night, chances are good we will bump into something. We are trying to walk in the dark. We take baby steps through the darkness of loss, grief, despair and a long list of fears.

If it is not dark this minute, we should be grateful even as we recognize it will be dark again. We are not through stubbing our toe or bumping into things. The day always turns into night.

The dark shadows of the past never go completely away. Not all of our dreams will come true. We will not have a perfect job. Our family will have problems we haven't imagined. Someone will leave too soon and we will pray for a sunny day. We will know all about darkness.

Isaiah lived in dark times. An enemy wiped out Jerusalem, the temple and the economy of once proud Judah. The tiny remnant of Israel—those who were not killed or carried off to Babylon—was being threatened again.

Palestine was constantly being overrun. Wars between countries to the east and countries to the west were fought in Israel. When the battles were over, Hebrew parents watched their children carried away as slaves.

The days were dark and the people were empty. They had given up on things that matter. They did not care for the broken. They did not love the outcast. They did not offer comfort to those who were hurting.

But in the middle of the night, the prophet saw a light. Isaiah shouted, "Rise and shine. Get out of bed. God's here."

Jerusalem was in ashes, ruin and despair, but just when it seemed like the sun would never shine again, dawn was about to break: "Your sons will return from far away. Your daughters will be in their mothers' arms again. The sight of the exiles coming home will make your face break out in a grin, your heart pound and your eyes light up."

The prophet could not prove he had seen a flash of light in the middle of a stormy night, but Isaiah believed that one day the light would overcome the darkness. We understand that the world is dark, but we live in the light. We hold to the belief that, once in a while, we see a glimmer of light. It is not much to go on—and nothing we can prove—but when life is hard, we remember that no matter how dark it gets, there is a flickering light that tickles the retina—enough to give us hope.

A little girl named Madison was afraid of the dark. She would not go to sleep unless the lights in her room were on. She argued that you could never tell who would sneak into her room at night if it were dark. She refused to open her closet door at night because she thought monsters lived there. She liked snow, but she hated winter because it was dark so much of the time. She did not like to go to the country for vacation because there were no

streetlights. She was frightened when she went to the movies because the theaters were too dark.

Her mother said, "Aren't you too old to be afraid of the dark?" but the older she got the more reasons she could think of for being afraid of the dark.

Then, on Christmas Eve, her mother took her to the candlelight service at church. Near the end of the service, the lights were turned down. Madison was afraid. Then the people started passing the light from the Christ candle. Soon the church was filled with light. Madison had never seen anything like it.

*She said, "It's so pretty. The light finally comes, doesn't it? We just have to wait. We just have to see it when it comes."*

She said, "It's so pretty. The light finally comes, doesn't it? We just have to wait. We just have to see it when it comes."

The light comes, but we have to watch for it. Looking for the light is choosing not to accept darkness as the final word. Looking for the light is spending time each day thinking about why we are grateful. Looking for the light is sending thank you notes to people who did not give us a Christmas gift. Looking for the light is praising people who are not used to being praised.

Looking for the light is paying attention to those who are easily ignored. Looking for the light is sitting quietly and thinking, breathing in and out, letting go of stress. Looking for the light is thanking God for the gifts that surround us. The light shines on and through us.

When he was twelve years old, Robert Louis Stevenson was looking from his upstairs window at night watching a city worker light the old gas street lanterns—like Bert in Mary Poppins. Stevenson's nanny came into the room and asked what he was doing. "I'm watching a man punch holes in the darkness," he said. God is punching holes in the darkness for us and with us.

The cemeteries in New England that go back to the 1700s point out the hopefulness of the parents. The headstones of the pilgrims have names like Experience Lothrop. If a woman today had the first name Experience, she might not be grateful to her parents, but, in the 18th century, the name Experience suggested the child would have a daily experience of God and that those who knew her would have the same experience. The pilgrims gave their children names like Love, Prudence and Thankful. Those names were walking commercials for God.

Today, parents give their children names like Grace, Hope, Joy and Justice, and hope their children live up to those names. That is what makes it important that we know the name God has given us. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. Let your light shine before others so that they will see your good works and thank God."

Some of the places we go are shadowy. Some of the people we love have not seen light in a long time. We are the lights in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and church. God's light illumines everything we do—the way we treat our co-workers, talk to our friends, ride the train, spend our money and worship God.

We are candles that keep others from cursing the darkness, flashlights that make emergencies less terrifying, searchlights looking for those who have lost their way, lighthouses leading sinking ships to shore and traffic lights pointing out when to go and when to stop. Shining the light is a doctor giving sight to the blind, a lawyer protecting someone who is innocent, a banker watching out for someone who is about to get hurt, a friend setting aside their to-do list to listen, and a follower of Christ offering light where there was only darkness.

Joy comes in being what we are meant to be, doing what we are meant to do and shining as we are meant to shine. The child of light whose birthday we just celebrated, who Isaiah dreamed was coming, who the shepherds kneeled before, took on the darkness so we could see the light, so we could become the light.

We know what darkness is, but, by the grace of God, we live with the light of God's hope, peace, joy and love. It is hard to explain and we cannot prove it, but if we look carefully, we see a flicker of light. Even in the darkest night.

*–Brett Younger is a generous and frequent contributor to* Sacred Seasons. *He has pastored a number of churches in Indiana and Texas, and now serves as pastor of the historic Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY. Before moving to Brooklyn, he taught homiletics at McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, GA. He has written numerous books and is much sought after for his thoughtful editorial writings.*

# Benediction

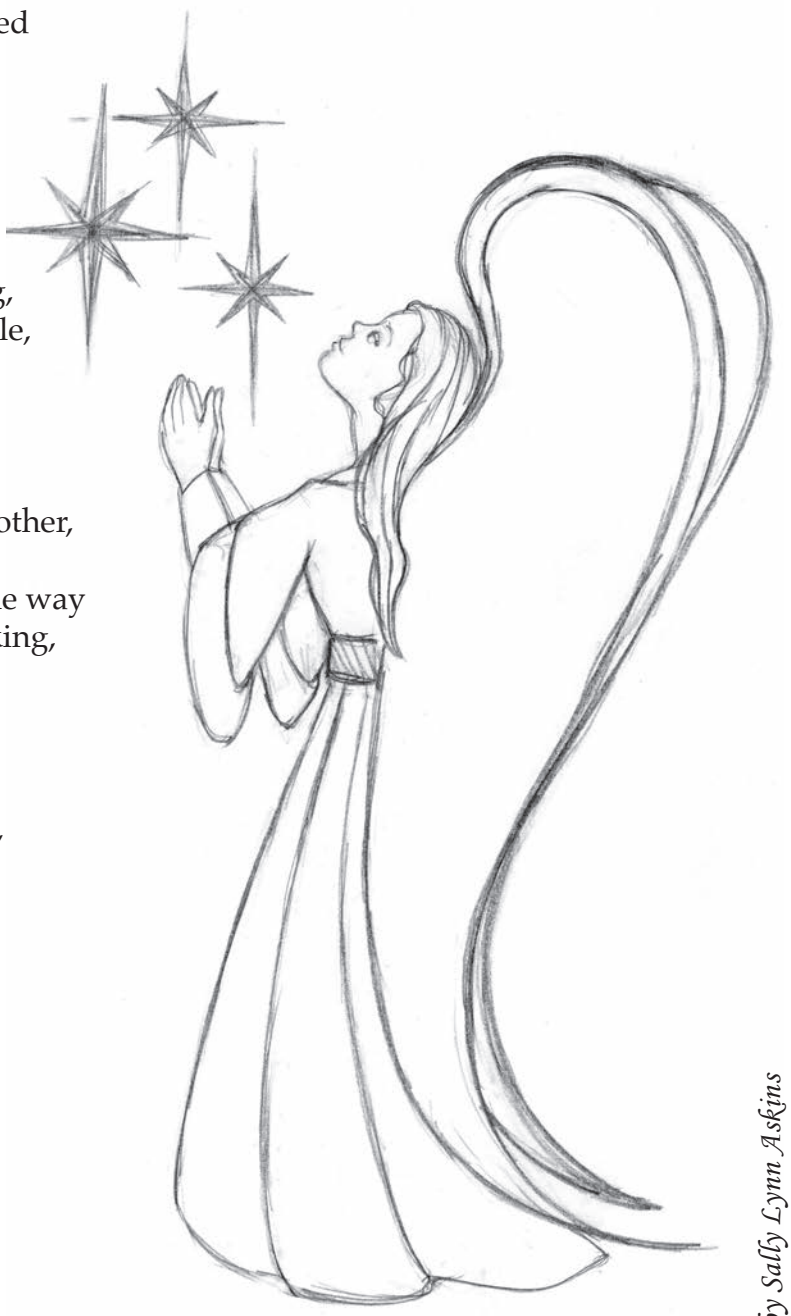
To the deafening and perilous city streets,
To the scorched and parched fields of famine,
Come, Emmanuel,
and bring us the hope of abundance.

Where the valleys are so low
and the mountains so high,
Where oppressor and oppressed
writhe in brokenness,
Come, Prince of Peace,
bring healing in your wings.

Among the destitute,
among the privileged,
among the old and the young,
Among the male and the female,
among people of all nations,
Come, Everlasting One,
and bring us joy.

Among those who mistrust each other,
those who hate each other,
Among those who do not know the way
out of the chaos of our own making,
Come, Lord Jesus,
and teach us how to love.

To our world of shattered
dreams and constant sorrow,
Come, Holy One,
and dwell among us.
Bring your dream of peace
and plant it in our hearts.
–Katie Cook



*art by Sally Lynn Askins*