A Bloom in the Desert

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Worship Resources for the Creative Church - Advent/Christmastide 2022

Sacred Seasons, *a series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis,*
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Sacred Seasons

Worship Tools for the Creative Church

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Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for 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.

A Bloom in the Desert

...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.

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A Word about This Packet

With this Advent/Christmastide worship packet, we begin a new liturgical year. Alec Ylitalo explains the overall theme for the year in the theme interpretation on page 4, so I will just say here that our theme for Advent and Christmastide is about the miracle of blooms in the desert.

You will see this theme borne out in the calls to worship, candle lighting meditations and benedictions written by our liturgical team: Guilherme Feitosa de Almeida, Erin Conaway, Ken Sehested, Scott Turner and Alec Ylitalo.

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 all of the hymn selections.

Erin is pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, where the Seeds offices are housed. You will see his sermon for the fourth Sunday of Advent on page 15 and his Litany of Peace on page 8.

Alec is pastor of Richfield Christian Church in Waco and is very active in hunger-related and interfaith efforts in the community.

Scott is a divinity student at George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco. Scott created a children's sermon (see page 9) and two new pieces of art (see pages 6 and 24).

Ken Sehested, one of the founding Seeds editors, recently joined the liturgical team from Asheville, NC. You will find his meditation on the Feast of the Holy Innocents on page 22.

You will also find a communion meditation for Epiphany by one of our favorite contributors, Brett Younger, pastor of the historic Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY.

Our indispensable fall 2022 professional writing intern, Mitch Martina, has tried his hand at writing a drama involving the astrologers who followed the star to Bethlehem (see page 25). We think you will find it intriguing.

Sally Lynn Askins is a member of the Seeds Council of Stewards and our resident artist. For the four Sundays in Advent, she chose four flowers that grow in Palestine: a Star of Bethlehem bloom, two flowering branches of an almond tree, three crocus blossoms, and four roses. For Christmas Day, she created a drape depicting the flowers of the Jordan River area. We chose this one for the cover. We have also included some of her exquisite angels from Advents past.

Besides these and Scott's art, you will also find some of our most popular pieces created over the years by Sharon Rollins, Robert Darden and Jesse Manning.

We hope you will find these offerings to be challenging and also encouraging. 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 help you to guide your congregation into a blessed and thoughtful Advent and Christmastide, and a joyful new liturgical year.

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

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Superblooms in the Desert: A Theme Interpretation

by Alec Ylitalo

Deserts are among the most unforgiving environments in all of the earth. There's a reason why so many scriptural events and metaphors alike occur in or talk about the desert. It is such a stark contrast to the flourishing majesty of the garden of God, so it makes for a perfect image. When deserts come to mind, most of us think of miles upon miles of sand, unbearable heat during the day and unrelenting cold at night and simply no water to be found.

But what happens when the heavens open up and the cool, quenching rains come for a season? Suddenly, dormant seeds, long-sleeping plants, flowers that have never opened to the sky spring to life all at once as a superbloom[1] transforms the desolate landscape into one of the most beautiful and lush sights anywhere on earth.

When the Seeds liturgical team met to discuss the theme for the coming year, and particularly for this Advent season, we were drawn to what can grow, the fullness of the landscape that can occur, when God provides those showers and streams in the desert. If you have never heard of a superbloom, I encourage you to search for some pictures and read about the phenomenon so you can get an idea of the image we hope this packet will point out, as the season of Advent leads us on paths through what seems like unending desert towards the vast beauty that God will create seemingly overnight.

> But first, we begin in the quiet, in the dark, in the stillness of that desert where it seems as if no life can occur. There is no water, there is no sign of movement, there is no green. The season of Advent starts here.

But first, we begin in the quiet, in the dark, in the stillness of that desert where it seems as if no life can occur. There is no water, there is no sign of movement, there is no green. The season of Advent starts here. As it feels as if all of humanity is waiting for a way to be made out of no way, the impossibility of even just one desert flower.

It's a long wait for the rain to fall in the desert sometimes, and in these four weeks, the gentle rain of hope begins to fall as we hear prophecy, as we hear covenant, as we hear expectation of love embodied. God peacefully showers the earth over these coming weeks, nourishing that hope, stoking that joy and pouring out love into a world in such desperate need in order to transform the landscape.

While it may seem as if nothing is blooming during these coming weeks, the long-dormant seeds of hope that were planted in humanity from the beginning are stirring, slowly awakening, growing from nothing into overwhelming grace in the form of the Christ-child in the most meek and lowly of settings.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." Isaiah's words that we often hear during Advent parallel the coming weeks of course, but they also line up rather well with the idea of the superbloom if you alter them slightly. The people living in the dry desert are suddenly overwhelmed by the beauty of the blossoms that appear seemingly out of nowhere to transform the valley of death into abundant life.

Walk through the desert this Advent season alongside us, know that the seed of hope has been planted, cultivate it and let God rain upon it, and suddenly, on Christmas Day, we will get to witness the greatest superbloom of them all as grace and love blossom and cover the earth—yes even in the middle of the desert of humanity.

–Alec Ylitalo, Senior Minister at Richfield Christian Church in Waco, TX, is a member of the Sacred Seasons *liturgical team. He is active in supporting local social assistance programs and in interfaith efforts.*

Endnote

1. A superbloom is a botanical phenomenon in which wildflower seeds that have lain dormant in desert soil for a long time, suddenly germinate and bloom in large numbers. This has occurred most recently in places like Death Valley, CA, after heavy, prolonged rains—which are rare in that climate.

A Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Processional Hymn

"O Loving Founder of the Stars"
The New Century Hymnal No. 111
Words: Latin Hymn, 9th Century
Music: Ancient Sarum Plainsong, Mode IV
CONDITOR ALME, Long Meter

Call to Worship

ONE: We read these aspirational passages; visions told by prophets of old and we cannot help but wonder… how long?
MANY: Lord, give us hope beyond the present; and urgency for today.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

ONE: It seems the scourge of violence has always been part and parcel of this all too human condition. We curse with Cain and forget we are able to rise above what would divide us and see our common hearts united in God's Grace and love.
MANY: Break open our patterns of thought and blow your Spirit of peace through this gathering of potential peace-makers.

ONE: Make it today…let it begin now, even as it flows to us from ages past and pushes us toward hope for years to come.
MANY: We open our hearts and our hands in anticipation of receiving from you. O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Lighting the Hope Candle:

The seed of hope was planted long ago; it began its journey to flourishing by starting its growth in the darkness. So too, today we begin in that beautiful, creative, nurturing darkness, holding onto that seed of hope that it would begin to grow within us. In this first week of Advent, we light the candle of hope so that it will shine the first glint on the desert that awaits its bloom from that seed. In that first light, we beat our swords into plowshares in order that we may equip ourselves with the tools to cultivate that hope that God sows into the world during this season.

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 2:1-5

Meditation of Preparation

The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before.... What is possible is to not see it, to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you. And you begin to grasp what it was you missed, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, watching God's [back] fade in the distance. So stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait.

Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait. Something is on the horizon.
–Jan L. Richardson

Hymn

"My Lord, What a Morning"
Chalice Hymnal No. 708
Words and Music: African American Spiritual
BURLEIGH, Irregular Meter

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 122

Reading from the Epistles

Romans 13:8-14

Hymn

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
The New Century Hymnal No. 116
Words: Psalteriolum Cantionum Catholicarum, based on ancient antiphons from Advent Vespers
Music: Melody from a 15th Century French Processional
VENI EMMANUEL, Long Meter with Refrain

Gospel Reading

Matthew 24: 36-44

Meditation of Commitment

Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope. The purpose of the Church's year is continually to rehearse her great history of memories, to awaken the heart's memory so that it can discern the star of hope.
–Pope Benedict XVI

Benediction

May you leave this house of meeting with a longing to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks—whether they be forged in metal or in wagging tongue. And may your thirst increase for the day when the fires of war are doused. Go now in the power to live large, laugh often and love well.■

art by Scott Turner

This Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere, paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night. Our world is sick with war; everywhere we turn, we see its ominous possibilities. And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and good will toward all can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don't have good will toward all people in this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power.
–Martin Luther King, Jr.,
in his last Christmas message, December 24, 1967

A Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Processional Hymn

"Prepare the Way of the Lord"
Found in *Enemy of Apathy* (GIA Publications, 1988)
Words and Music: John Bell

Call to Worship

ONE: Parched and cracked land covers over the seeds of beauty in the desert. The rains eventually fall, and life and color burst through in realized hope.
MANY: We join our hearts together in worship like seeds beneath the arid sand waiting for the rain of your Spirit—

ONE: Each of us pregnant with possibility and our togetherness bursting with power to bring about your peace in our world.
MANY: We work while we wait with anticipation for your final act on the stage of earth.

ONE: Transform our hearts to join above whatever would divide us and use our fellowship of diversity to send a message to a world drifting into separation.
MANY: Here we are, realizing and looking forward to the peace of your presence.

Lighting the Peace Candle

We continue to light the way this week with a second candle, the candle of peace. Not much is more peaceful than a desert rain, rejuvenating the dry soil, seeping into the sand to nourish the dormant plants, and preparing the desert to burst forth in blooms seemingly overnight. In this second week of Advent, we light the candle of peace, that God would shower the earth with drops to quench its thirst, and that in that calm the seed of hope that was planted last week would begin to spring up into the growing light.

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 11:1-10

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72 or 72:1-8

Hymn

"Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice"
Glory to God No. 163
Words: Carl P. Daw Jr.
Music: Joseph Parry
ABERYSTWYTH, 7.7.7.7.D

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Meditation of Preparation

We could use a voice crying out in the wilderness, reminding us who we are and from whence we came. We need someone to help us name our fears and terrors, that we might confront them, that we might be assured of God's faithfulness in the face of all that is mighty and unfaithful. We need to know how to be human again.
–Meredith Holladay, "Singing a Song of Salvation"

Reading from the Epistles:

Romans 15:4-13

Hymn

"Hope of the World"
Chalice Hymnal No. 538
Words: Georgia Harkness
Music: V. Earle Copes
VICAR, 11.10.11.10

Reading from the Gospels

Luke 3:1-16

Meditation of Commitment

The promise is peace, and yet…
The promise is peace, and yet…
The promise is peace, and yet…

The promise is peace, and it's here—in this babe who is also God Incarnate; in this war-wrecked world where people give of themselves and their possessions to help those harmed by hate; it's here in this room as we open our hearts and our minds to God's presence and peace all around us; it's here as children share Christmas toys with their siblings, as soup kitchens ladle love into hungry bowls, as we light candles in defiance of the darkness and sing the carols of old that echo into eternity. Peace is here. And it will eventually be complete in God's good timing. Amen.
–Erin Conaway

Benediction

May you depart this house of meeting with Isaiah's vision crystallized in your mind and implanted in your heart: that one day, the meek and the weak will have their fill, that wolf and lamb shall lie together, that a defenseless child shall usher the new age. Such are the signs that earth brims with the knowledge of God. Go now in the power to live large, laugh often and love well. ■

Litany of Peace

by Erin Conaway

One: Peace...the elusive white rabbit we too often chase trying to be more efficient, more determined, more dedicated to our to-do lists, but it only runs faster screaming behind its fluffy tail, "You're late! You're late for a very important date!"

Many: Lord, treat us like the sheep of the Psalmist and make us lie down by the still waters and lead us to the green grass of your Peace.

One: But our frantic chaos is a luxury compared to the madness so many experience in our world. Too many are listening to the cries of their hungry children, too many are sleeping in refugee tents and under bridges, too many are hiding behind couches from abusive partners, too many are looking for safe places to hide in case the shooting starts, too many are afraid to drive at night or walk in their neighborhood because of the hue of their skin, too many are filled with hatred for people they don't know and want to fight for reasons they don't understand.

Many: Prince of Peace, come into our world and put an end to our warring insanity; our selfish hoarding; our fearful wall-building; our violent "solutions;" our still deadly racism; our mindless inheriting of hate.

One: We need peace. We need it in moments that take our breath away as well as a deep foundation for our hearts and minds. We need to breathe deeply the peace of your grace and presence and embrace the work laid out before us as you call us to make peace for all of our neighbors.

Many: Calm our whirring minds and help us to walk deliberately in your Peace.

–For Erin Conaway's bio, see page -21.

Let's Be Kind and Peaceful

A Children's Sermon based on Isaiah 11

by Scott Turner

Note: For this children's sermon, you will need pictures of a cow, a sheep, a baby pig, a lion, a wolf and a snake.

I'm sure we've all played the game "What does the animal say?" It's pretty simple. I will show you a picture of this adorable cow here *(show picture of cow to children)* and you tell me what kind of sound it makes. (*Children in unison say "moo*.") How about if I show you this picture of a sheep? (*Children in unison say "baa*.") What about this picture of a baby pig? (*Children in unison say "oink*.")

See? I knew we could all play that game, but what about the game "What does this animal eat?" Let's look at the cow again. What does the cow eat? (*Children in unison say "grass*.") How about the sheep? (*Children in unison say "grass.")* Here's a new picture. What does the lion eat? How about this wolf? And this snake? What do you think the snake eats?

This is a scary and maybe a little bit of a sad part of God's creation in this world, but sometimes animals need to eat other animals to survive. We don't hold it against these animals, because this is all they know. They are born into the wild, they get hungry, and they must hunt to survive. Grass, like the cows eat, won't fulfill them.

The way God made their bodies and stomachs means that meat is the only thing they can eat to survive. Most people in this world eat animals to survive and that's okay. But we see, in Isaiah chapter 11, that even though God made this world, there is a more peaceful and kind world possible, even for the animals.

We are in the season of Advent, which means that we are awaiting the birth of Christ, coming on Christmas, which is a wonderful and joyous occasion. Don't you love Christmas? In Isaiah, we see that a little twig of a vine will start to grow from the stump of a tree called "Jesse." It's kind of like a beautiful flower growing out of a barren and dry desert. Then, this little twig will grow into a powerful branch that will change the world into a more peaceful and fair place.

We believe that the branch refers to Jesus. And, once Jesus comes into the world, people will stop fighting and being mean to each other. Countries where wars and battles take place will all grow quiet in harmony. People who are forced to live on the streets and survive outside will be invited into homes of their own. The hurting and the sick will be healed. And even the animals will live together in harmony, no longer eating one another.

That's what Advent is all about. We are waiting for Christ to come, so we can see this wonderful world of peace and fairness blossom into a reality. Until then, Jesus wants us to be kind and peaceful to one another. The best way we can prepare for Christmas is by loving one another and living in peace. It's a hard thing to do sometimes when you have brothers and sisters, and when you can't always get what you want, but it's worth it to make it to Christmas and see baby Jesus, knowing that you did everything you could to bring peace on earth.

Let's pray together: Lord, we are thankful that you are coming to bring peace and kindness to this world. Help us to try and do the same. Amen.

–Scott Turner was raised in Georgetown, TX, and graduated with a degree in youth ministry from Howard Payne University. At this writing, he is a student at Truett Theological Seminary and minister to youth at Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. He is also a member of the Seeds Liturgical Team.

art by Sharon R. Rollins

A Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Processional Hymn

"All Earth Is Waiting / Toda la Tierra"
The New Century Hymnal No. 121
Words and Music: Alberto Taulé, tr. Gertrude C. Suppe
TAULE, 11.11.12.12

Call to Worship

ONE: The desert boasts a torrid, barren landscape demanding reverence from all who would cross; and yet, when the spring rains visit and leave their rejuvenating mark, flowers begin to bloom against all odds.
MANY: We gather in the midst of accusations of futility, against the cultural norms, to be united in spirit and in Your Spirit.

ONE: Blooms in the desert stand defiant against the desolation in which they grow. We stand in defiance of the despair that would have us submit to the lesser demons and turn a deaf ear to the greater angels.
MANY: May we hear their song of annunciation and the rose that is to come.

ONE: Every recipient of the angels' glad tidings had to first listen past their fear.
MANY: Open our ears to the whisper of heaven, shouting to us the Good News of God's presence in our midst, and God's grace in our lives.

Lighting the Joy Candle

As a sense of joy begins to build, as the waiting continues into its third week, so too our seed of hope continues to grow as it prepares to blossom and overwhelm the desert of the world. In this third week of Advent, we light the candle of joy, a light that continues the growth of the flame within, but also a light that brings with it the joy of knowing that soon the wilderness and the dry land will be glad and the desert will rejoice in the abundance of grace that awaits us.

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 35:1-10

Meditation of Preparation

If God chooses Mary as his instrument, if God himself wants to come into this world in the manger

art by Sally Lynn Askins

at Bethlehem, that is no idyllic family affair, but the beginning of a complete turnaround, a reordering of everything on Earth. If we wish to take part in this Advent and Christmas event, then we cannot simply be bystanders or onlookers, as if we were at the theater, enjoying all the cheerful images. No, we ourselves are swept up into the action there, into this conversion of all things. We have to play our part too on this stage, for the spectator is already an actor. We cannot withdraw.
–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Mystery of Holy Night*

Hymn

"Awake, Awake, and Greet the New Morn"
The New Century Hymnal No. 107
Words and Music: Marty Haugen
REJOICE, REJOICE 9.8.9.8.8.7.8.9.

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 146 or Luke 1:46b-55

Reading from the Epistles

James 5:7-10

Hymn

"Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation"
Chalice Hymnal No. 275
Words: Latin Hymn, 7th Century
Music: Henry Purcell, arr. Ernest Hawkins
WESMINSTER ABBEY, 8.7.8.7.D

Reading from the Gospels

Matthew 11:2-11

Meditation of Commitment

I don't think we'll understand Advent correctly until we see it as a preparation for a revolution.
–Robert Barron

Benediction

May you go forth from this house of meeting with strengthened hands and sturdy knees. Say to all of fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Sorrow and sighing will be vanquished, displaced by the reign of joy and gladness." Go now in the power to live large, laugh often and love well. ■

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Advent Prayer

by Walter Brueggeman

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.

–From *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*

A Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Processional Hymn

"While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 123
Words: Nahum Tate
Music: George Frederick Handel
CHRISTMAS, Common Meter

Call to Worship

ONE: Into this sanctuary of worship, we come as we are: weary from the race, charged with vibrant hope, and listening for the familiar sounds of the season to soothe our souls.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

MANY: Grace us with your presence, anticipated One.

ONE: Like Joseph, we know just enough to follow your light and walk in faith into this moment of revelation.
MANY: Light your love in our lives as we join them together in your name.

ONE: Burst into the scene of our discontent and fill us with the hope, peace, joy and love that is to come.
MANY: We are ready to join our voices with the songs of angels who herald your presence in this world. Fill us with your melody of Grace.

Lighting the Love Candle

Love ignites the blaze that lights the rest of the way for us this day. That small seed of hope that was planted in the darkness has grown so much over these four weeks that it's about to burst forth in bloom, a bloom that will beautify the earth, a rose that will signify that love will always find its way through the driest of deserts. In this fourth week of Advent, we light the candle of love, now surrounding the Christ candle with light and warmth. Love is about to enter the world and surround us with a flourish as God transforms the desert into a lush garden of plenty.

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 7:10-16

Meditation of Preparation

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

perceptions creates miracles around you." Love has never been more *present* than in the birth of Jesus. Love made flesh, swaddled, and placed in our arms. To this world fractured by fear and hate and greed and despair, the Creator responds, not with punishment or judgment, but with love. Love is born, and when we are graced to love, we are born anew.
–Deborah E. Harris

Hymn
"Savior of the Nations, Come!"
The Hymnal 1982 No. 54
Words: Ambrose of Milan, adapt. Martin Luther
Music: Melchior Vulpius
NUN KOMM DER HEIDEN HEILAND, 7.7.7.7.

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

Reading from the Epistles
Romans 1:1-7

Hymn
"That Beautiful Name"
The Celebration Hymnal No. 266
Words: Jean Perry
Music: Mabel Johnston Camo
BEAUTIFUL NAME, Irregular Meter

Reading from the Gospels
Matthew 1:18-25

Meditation of Commitment
...And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.
–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger*

Benediction
May you exit this house of meeting knowing that you are a great delight to the Beloved. And confident in your fearless testimony, in a world ruled by vengeance, that such delight is contagious; and, in the end, is stronger and sturdier than all enmity. Go now in the power to live large, laugh often and love well. ■

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming,
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flow'ret bright,
Amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.

Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind;
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright,
She bore to men a Savior,
When half spent was the night.

This Flow'r, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us,
And lightens every load.

–Traditional German Carol, 1599; translated by Theodore Baker, 1894; verse 3 by Friedrich Layritz, 1844 (translated by Harriet R. Krauth, 1875)

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

Let us remember that the Christmas heart is a giving heart, a wide-open heart that thinks of others first. The birth of the baby Jesus stands as the most significant event in all history, because it has meant the pouring into a sick world of the healing medicine of love which has transformed all manner of hearts for almost two thousand years. Underneath all the bulging bundles is this beating Christmas heart.
–George Matthew Adams

As Pope John [23rd] told the pilgrimage of women, Mothers for Peace, the seventy-five of us who went over to Rome to thank him for his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, just the month before his death, "The beginnings of peace are in your own hearts, in your own families, schoolrooms, offices, parishes, and neighborhoods." It is working from the ground up, from the poverty of the stable, in work as at Nazareth, and also in going from town to town, as in the public life of Jesus two thousand years ago. And since a thousand years are as one day and Christianity is but two days old, let us take heart and start now.
–Dorothy Day, "A Prayer for Peace," December 1965

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store? What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more?
–Dr. Seuss

My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that?
–Bob Hope

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

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. Christmas 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

I will light Candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.

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 their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

-Howard Thurman

Joseph of Nazareth, Rosa Parks & Civil Disobedience

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by Erin Conaway

Matthew 1:18-25

I've seen men look at her before
And they think I don't see
I'd like to think it makes me proud
But, I'm only fooling me
I know she'll be lookin' back
The minute I'm not there
While she pours herself on some stranger
I pour myself a drink somewhere
She's actin' single
I'm drinkin' double
I hide my pain
I drown my troubles
My heart is breaking
Like the tiny bubbles
She's actin' single
I'm drinkin' doubles

The American country music singer Gary Stewart crooned that one out in 1975. It's a classic in my mind and one which I imagine speaks well to our Gospel lesson this morning. I picture Joseph drinking doubles, because, as far as he knew, Mary had been acting single. Can you imagine finding out your fiancé is pregnant and you know beyond any reasonable doubt that the baby isn't yours? His heart had to be broken when he went to sleep that night.

The Montgomery City Code required that all public transportation be segregated and that bus drivers had the "powers of a police officer of the city while in actual charge of any bus for the purposes of carrying out the provisions" of the code. While operating a bus, drivers were required to provide separate-but-equal accommodations for white and black passengers by assigning seats. This was accomplished with a line roughly in the middle of the bus separating white passengers in the front of the bus and African American passengers in the back.

When African American passengers boarded the bus, they had to get on at the front to pay their fare and then get off and re-board the bus at the back door. When the seats in the front of the bus filled up and more white passengers got on, the bus driver would move back the sign separating black and white passengers and, if necessary, ask black passengers to give up their seats.

On December 1, 1955, after a long day's work at a Montgomery department store where she worked

art by Jesse Manning

as a seamstress, Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus for home. She took a seat in the first of several rows designated for "colored" passengers. As the route progressed, the seats designated for white passengers filled up, and a few were standing in the aisles.

The bus driver stopped the bus and walked back and moved the sign separating the two sections back a row and asked four African American riders to move back to different seats. Three moved, but Rosa Parks remained seated and refused to move.

> But Joseph, following the guidance of God, breaks the law and takes Mary as his wife. Civil disobedience.

The driver became indignant and said, "Why don't you stand up?" Rosa replied, "I don't think I should have to stand up." The driver called the police and, when they arrived, Rosa was arrested and taken to jail.[1]

When asked later by some students why she didn't stand up that day, Rosa replied, "I was tired." She wasn't just physically tired; she was tired of living the lie that she was not equal to people whose skin happened to be a different color. She was tired of the systemic racism that had literally enslaved her grandparents who helped raise her. She was tired of giving in to laws that violated her conscience and broke her heart.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we find Joseph in the middle of a dilemma. He and Mary are betrothed, or engaged, as the New Revised Standard Version translates it. The betrothal period in first century Middle Eastern Jewish culture was the pre-marriage agreement between a father and the man who would take his daughter. You have to try to suspend all of the thinking you currently have about engagements and love and elaborate asking rituals with rings and bended knees and candlelit dinners. This is not a Hallmark movie or a romantic comedy. This was a business transaction that did not require, nor really care about, the consent or even the wishes of the bride to be. In some cases, a woman could find herself betrothed to a man she'd never even talked to before.

We hear this and tend to think of this as a dating time—when the lucky couple could fall madly in love or realize that they weren't compatible and decide to go their separate ways—but that's just not the case. The only way a betrothal could be broken was through a divorce. The assumption was that if a man and a woman spent any time alone together, they were going to engage in marital relations, so they were not allowed to be alone with one another to have those long talks and to gaze lovingly into their betrothed's eyes. This really was a business transaction and there is a great deal of honor at stake in the way this all happens.

For Mary to turn up pregnant brought shame to her and her father's household. Money would have already changed hands between Joseph and Mary's father, and that money would have to be returned. Plus, Mary would now be the responsibility of her father and it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to betroth her away again because of her dishonorable actions.

If her father was able to find someone to take her, she would no longer bring any kind of desirable dowry or bride price because she was no longer a virgin and had already had a baby. This would have been a slap in the face for Joseph as well. He'd acted in good faith with her father and now he's *not* getting what he bargained for, to be totally crass about it. The issues of betrayal of trust and embarrassment and shame are all swirling about in our story this morning.

Joseph had every right to take Mary to court. In fact, he not only had the right to do that; it was the law. These things cannot go unpunished. The order of society and the regulation of trade between people depended on cheaters being punished. Otherwise, anarchy takes over and everyone just does whatever they're big enough to do.

We don't get any information about how Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy or about his reaction. Since they weren't allowed to be alone together in private, I assume this exchange happened on a walk together out of earshot but within eyesight of others. Here's this girl telling her future husband that before they really know one another, and before they've known each other "biblically," she is slightly pregnant.

"But it's not what it looks like.

"See, this angel scared me one night and told me I was going to have a baby and that this baby was going to be the son of the Most High God and the Holy Spirit put this baby in my belly. So I'm still faithfully yours."

Or maybe she didn't tell Joseph about the angel at all and she just assumed that this baby would be hers to raise. She might have just said she was pregnant and so sorry and confused—hoping she would not be stoned, but really not sure how this

plan of God's was going to work out. As far as we know, the angel didn't detail this part of the plan, before or after she said yes.

Isn't that amazing? Mary agreed to follow God down this path that changed everything she knew about life and honor and her future and how things would work out and she said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

She didn't say, "If I don't get morning sickness, then I'll know this is from God and I'll tell Joseph." She said yes, and the only rational outcome was that she would either be stoned to death by her neighbors, or she would bring unspeakable shame on her family and be shunned out of the only town she knew, to raise this baby who is the son of the Most High God all by herself.

We don't know what she said to Joseph. We only know that he found out she was "with child" and he didn't have anything to do with it. We know he was a righteous man. We assume that meant that he followed the laws and lived an obedient life with God and with his neighbor. We find out that he was, not only in the way he lived, but also in his heart and in his soul.

He was a man who searched for what was right in his life and in the lives of those around him. So when he finds out that Mary is pregnant—that his agreement between her father and himself has been violated—he searches for what is right. He remarkably concludes that he will dismiss her quietly—that there's no need to bring this girl before the town and ruin her life, even though she'd violated the law and their agreement.

Matthew says "Just when he had resolved to do this…," indicating that there was deliberation and thought put into this impossibly difficult dilemma and Joseph resolved to respond to a crime perpetrated against him with kindness and compassion. No "eye for an eye," no revenge or vengeance—just gentle and considerate untangling of a gnarled mess that was brought into his life. That is grace. It is recognizing that we are complicated and broken humans and that life and righteousness often require something more complicated than blind obedience to the rules and regulations.

Then in a dream, an angel lets him know that he doesn't have to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Afraid. But he didn't do anything wrong; why would he be afraid? Because this wasn't his child, but who is going to believe that if they get married and she delivers a healthy baby in seven and a half months? No one. And his reputation for being a righteous man would vanish like morning fog and get replaced with an altogether different reputation. And it would be against the law for him to go through with this as if nothing had happened—a baby is happening! But Joseph, following the guidance of God, breaks the law and takes Mary as his wife. Civil disobedience.

There are times in our lives when the Holy Spirit calls us to acts of civil disobedience. Joseph's act of civil disobedience brought Jesus into the world with a family who loved God and loved him and raised him according to God's word. Joseph couldn't see the end from where he stood, but he knew that this girl deserved a husband who would care for her, rather than a scarlet letter. And that was more important to him, and, to him, more obedient to God than it was to follow the law.

Joseph couldn't see the end from where he stood, but he knew that this girl deserved a husband who would care for her, rather than a scarlet letter.

We don't get to hear the rest of Joseph's story—how this act of civil disobedience affected his life and his livelihood. We know that that the Holy family was poor, based on the offering they brought to the Temple, but we don't know if that's because they were just poor, or because there was a stigma attached to Joseph and his relationship with Mary and the baby they named Jesus. We do know that acts of civil disobedience do not come without costs. Obedience to love the way God calls us to love one another is costly and it involves risk with no guarantee that it will work out the way we hope it will in this life.

Rosa Parks was fired from her job at the department store. Her husband was also fired from his job as a result of the publicity surrounding her act of civil disobedience and the bus boycott that followed. They eventually had to leave Alabama and move to Michigan to find work so they could live. She said, "At the time I was arrested, I had no idea it would turn into this. It was just a day like any other day. The only thing that made it significant was that the masses of the people joined in."

Some of our acts of civil disobedience will empower movements that change the world. Some of them will go completely unnoticed by most

Please see "Joseph of Nazareth on page 21

A Liturgy for Christmas Eve

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Meditation of Preparation

Watch your step. You are approaching a dangerous manger. It also serves as a makeshift baby bed. Beware, for the one you seek did not stay a baby. Jesus, nursed and cuddled by Mary, later claimed everyone who does God's will as his mother. Jesus, worshipped by shepherds, later challenged us to seek out not lost sheep, but lost people. Jesus, given gifts by wise ones who had traveled from afar, called us to go out of our way to care for the hungry, the lonely, and the homeless. Watch your step as you take this Bethlehem baby into your arms and whisper to him. You may find him taking you into his arms, whispering new life into you.
–George White

First Lesson

Isaiah 9:2-7
Lighting of the Hope Candle

Carol

"Joy to the World"
Chalice Hymnal No. 143
Words: Isaac Watts
Music: attr. George Frederick Handel
ANTIOCH, Common Meter

Second Lesson

Psalm 96

Third Lesson

Lighting of the Peace Candle

Carol

"What Child Is This"
Glory to God No. 145
Words: William Chatterton Dix
Music: English Ballad, 16th Century
GREENSLEEVES, 8.7.8.7.6.8.6.7.

Fourth Lesson

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)
Lighting of the Joy Candle

Fifth Lesson

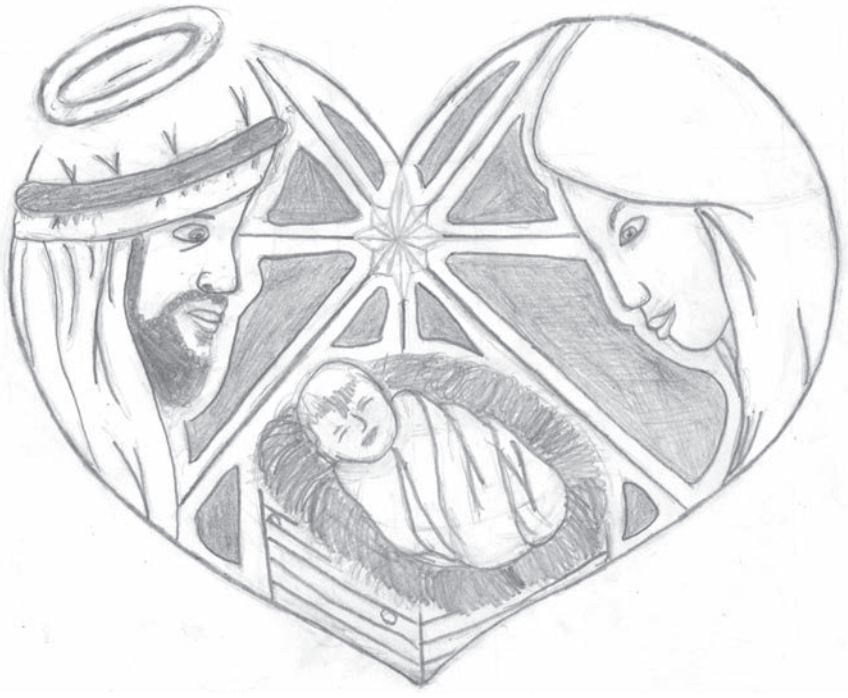
Matthew 1:18-25
Lighting of the Love Candle

Carol

"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"
The New Century Hymnal No. 131
Words: Edmund H. Sears
Music: Richard S. Willis
CAROL, Common Meter Double

Sixth Lesson

John 1:1-14



art by Jesse Manning

Meditation for the Christ Candle

The desert bursts forth in blooms. The crocus paints the landscape around it. The rose opens its petals to take the world in. And we get to witness it all happen suddenly. Today, we light the last candle on our Advent wreath, the Christ candle, as we finally get to see for ourselves what God can grow from that small seed of hope planted in the desert, planted in the darkness, planted deep within. This light illuminates what that seed has become. It shines upon Emmanuel, God with us, as God shows us that, even in the desert, hope can blossom into a covenant of love.

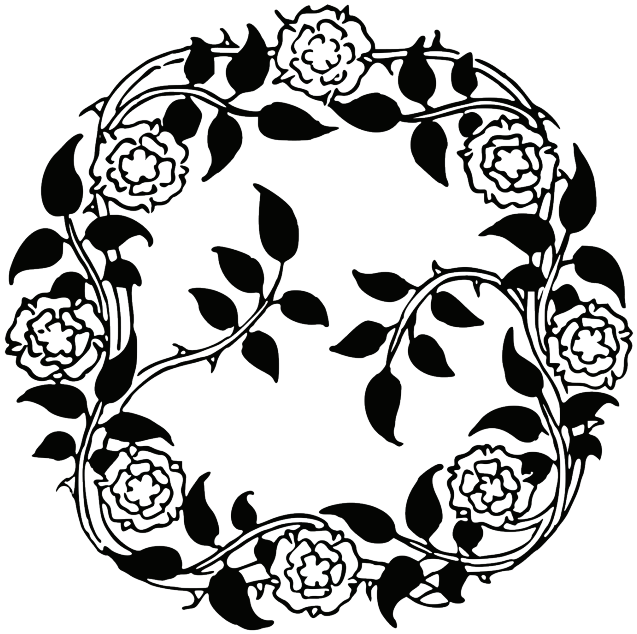
Lighting of the Christ Candle

Carol

"Silent Night, Holy Night"
Chalice Hymnal No. 145
Words: Joseph Mohr, tr. John F. Young
Music: Franz Gruber
STILLE NACHT, Irregular Meter

Benediction

We bless you, our God,
for you are Mother and Father of us all,
and you have visited your people
in one like us;
in human fragility you have revealed
the face of divinity.
Gather into your arms
all the peoples of the world,
so that, in your embrace,
we may find blessing, peace and the fullness of our inheritance
as your daughters and sons.
Amen.
–Stormy Campbell



The incarnation is the glory of God
that the angels sing.
It is the power of God at work in the miracles.
It is the wisdom of God
informing the parables.
It is the truth of God in the sayings of Jesus.
It is the love of God in the relationships
Jesus makes.
It is the justice of God in the teaching of Jesus.
It is the transcendence of God
even in human form.
Immanuel is "God with us."
Thanks be to God.
The incarnation is the glory of God
wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.
It is the power of God made vulnerable.
It is the wisdom of God shared at the dinner table
over bread and wine.
It is the truth of God pointed out in flowers and sheep.
It is the love of God in hugs and touch.
It is the justice of God in relationships with the unclean
and the despised.
It is the immanence of God even in human form.
Immanuel is "God with us."
Thanks be to God.

–John S. Ballenger, from "Bring Your Hands Together: An Advent Meditation in Lessons and Carols for Nine Voices, Instrumentalists, Soloists and Choir in Three Acts for Christmas Eve," published in Sacred Seasons, *Advent 1999, "Preparing the Way."*

A Liturgy for Christmas Day

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Light all of the Advent candles before the service.

Processional Hymn

"Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"
The New Century Hymnal No. 129
Words: Latin Hymn, 14th Century, tr. John Mason Neale
Music: German Hymn, 14th Century
IN DULCI JUBILO, 6.6.7.7.7.8.5.5.

Call to Worship

ONE: Glory to God in the highest! The anticipated one is here! Emmanuel, God with us!

MANY: In carols and wonder we rejoice!

ONE: The unfathomable miracle of your Incarnation is here as each and every one of us creates a cradle within our lives to welcome you to our world.
MANY: Holy child and savior of us all, we open our hearts to receive your wondrous love.

ONE: Just as the angel chorus sang your praise on that glorious morn, we join our voices with theirs to continue the song that will echo into eternity.
MANY: Joyfully we adore you and proudly proclaim your love to all the earth!

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 52:7-10

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

"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"
The New Century Hymnal No. 127
Words: German Hymn, 15th Century, tr. Theodore Baker
Music: Catholische Geistliche Kirchengesäng
ES IST EIN' ROS, 7.6.7.6.6.7.6.

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 98

Reading from the Epistles
Hebrews 1:1-4

Hymn
"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"
Baptist Hymnal 1991 No. 98
Words: Henry W. Longfellow
Music: John Calkin
WALTHAM, Long Meter

Gospel Reading
John 1:1-14

Meditation of Commitment
God, we are your creative works in process. You alone know what we shall become. We do not know what you have in store in the fullness of our time. In the beginning, you created Light. In Mary, you became flesh. What will you become in us? Is there room in us for your seed to take root and grow? You have visited us with grace and favor. Help us now to take your Light to the world.
-Adapted from Thomas Hoffman's *A Child in Winter*

Benediction
Kindred, remember that as the prophet foretold, those residing in every land of darkness have seen a great light. And on the heels of such light comes the startling news: that the boots of trampling warriors and the garments rolled in blood will be as fuel for the fires of God's salvation. Go now in the power to live large, laugh often and love well.

Joseph of Nazareth,
continued from page 17

people. Some will be planned, and some will just happen on a routine day when we're presented with an opportunity to break through for love and do something about the things which make us tired.

> We do know that acts of civil disobedience do not come without costs. Obedience to love the way God calls us to love one another is costly and it involves risk with no guarantee that it will work out the way we hope it will in this life.

We should be tired of seeing Afghani and Ukrainian children covered in blood and ashes. We should be tired of seeing our sisters and brothers starving to death in a world where we have enough food to feed everyone. We should be tired of seeing refugees from the Middle East and from Central America and from Africa living in tent cities or worse because we're afraid to let them in.

We should be tired of the fear of scarcity driving our decisions in the wealthiest country in the world. We should be tired of women continuing to be treated as property and not as children of God. We should be tired of the ways we continue to mistreat people based on the color of their skin or how they worship or who they love.

What is God calling you to do for love? It may be to somehow address these problems that affect us all or it may be something specific to your life and your family, but let us not go through the celebration of the Incarnation this year without considering how and where the Holy Spirit might be leading us to do something bold and risky for love.

It is as much a part of our story as the star and the shepherds—an unflinching act of civil disobedience at the origin of our Holy Family. What is God calling you to do for love? May our answers echo into eternity as we draw closer to the light of the world together.

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.*

Endnote
1. Biography.com, "Rosa Parks."

Angel Wings & Devil Tails

A Meditation for the Feast of the Holy Innocents

by Ken Sehested

The Feast of the Holy Innocents was first established in the fifth century BCE.[1] It references Matthew's account of Judean King Herod's order to kill all the male babies in and around Bethlehem to suppress a potential rival. Some Christian communions in the West mark the day, officially, on December 28. In the East, it is commemorated on December 29.

> When agony is in the air, we must listen both for the sound of angel wings and the flailing of devils' tails. Each provides essential context for interpreting the other.

However, the observance is largely forgotten in most congregations. You can understand why. Who wants to interrupt beautiful carols, the sight of ornamented trees and light-lit homes, or even post-Christmas sales with the story of a massacre of babies?

Needless to say, few—if any—church Christmas pageants, with kids in bathrobes and assorted other makeshift costumes, include all of Matthew 2's story. Christmas Eve candlelight services generally ignore those verses.

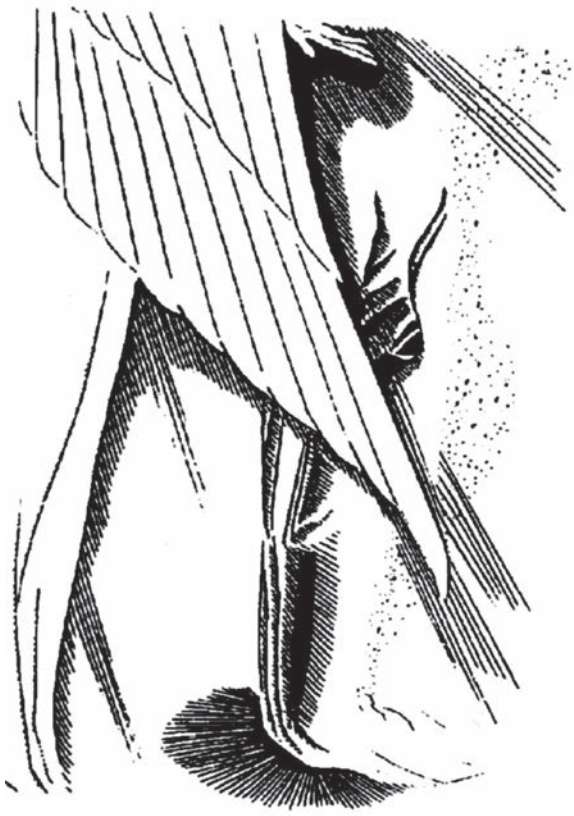
It is certainly not appropriate for young children—as, if you think about it, are many other stories in Scripture. Thankfully, few today remember that, in some European communities prior to the 17th century, the day began with parents spanking their children to remind them of the suffering of those infants, who—gruesome as it sounds—are considered the first martyrs.

But the church ignores this Feast day to our peril and to do so endangers the integrity of our proclamation.

In 2003, I was asked to lead what would be the final group of volunteers joining a delegation of activists present in Iraq. We were attempting to witness and tell a different story about realities in that mangled country, which we felt would only be compounded by a US invasion.

I was in anguish on the long flight to Amman, Jordan, and then for the first two hours—to the Iraqi border—of the 12-hour drive through the desert, though not because of my destination. Two days before leaving, I suddenly remembered that I had an Israeli customs stamp in my passport. You can't enter Iraq if you have such a stamp.

There was no time to get a new passport. Emergency efforts to rinse that stamp from my passport didn't work. So I stapled a photocopy



This piece of art is from a Seventh & James Baptist Church worship guide from the 1970s.

of my birth certificate on that page, hoping this would distract Iraqi customs officials. But I was mentally preparing to hitchhike the two hours back to Amman from the Iraqi border.

Just as I feared, the ruse didn't work. Thankfully, our experienced van driver knew that a bribe approximating US$10 would suffice. It did. I repaid our savvy driver and offered profuse thanks. I returned home less than three weeks before the bombardment and invasion by US troops.

During my three weeks in Iraq, I developed an abiding friendship with my assigned roommate, Ed, from Upstate New York, who for many years has attempted to bring public attention to exponential growth in the US campaign of targeted assassination by drone warfare.

This is the evangelical proclamation of people of faith: The storm still rages, and we are on leaky boats outmatched by menacing wind and surging swells. But a calm is coming.

Ed, along with 15 other members of the joint Voices in the Wilderness and Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation, remained in Baghdad through the bombing and invasion, holed up in a hotel basement.

Ed and I have corresponded off and on since then. I documented one bit of our exchange, during a later season of impending national crisis, this one during Advent, where I ended a note to Ed with "There is agony in the air, and we must listen for the sounds of angel wings."

To which Ed replied, "Nor, alas, dare we ignore the flailing of devils' tails." The intimation of Advent and Christmastide is this: When agony is in the air, we must listen both for the sound of angel wings and the flailing of devils' tails. Each provides essential context for interpreting the other.

We must not forget that Advent's announcement warns of trouble at hand. Most in the believing community prefer Christmastide's songs of peace and hope rather than its contention. Jesus, we are led to believe, doesn't do disturbance. Perhaps this is why we gloss over the fact that the angel's announcement of Heaven's good-news revelation, to many in the Nativity characters, begins with this warning: "Do not be afraid."

There was much to fear. There was King Herod, in particular, who was so threatened by the briefing of the wise men that it prompted him to launch a mission of assassination to Bethlehem.

The chorus of Advent is that every Herod-heart is exposed and flails like devils' tails, enraged by Nativity's insurgent proclamation. Every pharaoh, every caesar is put on notice. But they will not go down without a fight.

This is the evangelical proclamation of people of faith: The storm still rages, and we are on leaky boats outmatched by menacing wind and surging swells. But a calm is coming. The angels still preface their message with "fear not," for faith is risky business, and devils still stalk the land.

Nevertheless. The prophet Isaiah's claim—echoed in Luke's rendering—is that "all flesh shall see the salvation of our God." John the Revelator later asserts a foreshadowed future when "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God." Although much empirical evidence disputes these claims, people of faith insist otherwise, and, in fact, assume the risks of living in accordance with a very different vision, a vision which brings us into conflict with the dominant order.

Angel wings and devil tails often appear simultaneously in history's unfolding. In the end, Christmas cheer is not about sugarplums. It is the confidence that sustains the hearts of all who continue to practice praise in the manner of Mary, with the beatific vision underlying Jesus' sermon on the mount, even in the face of perpetual threat.

Sing, children, whatever the caliber or timbre of your voice, in tune or off. For God is more taken with the agony of the Earth than with the ecstasy of Heaven.

–Ken Sehested was one of the founding editors of the Seeds ministry in Decatur, GA, and is now a member of the Seeds Board of Advisors and the Sacred Seasons liturgical team. He was the founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. This meditation is an excerpt of an entry by the same name in Prayer&Politiks, an online journal for which Ken is the curator.

Endnote

1. The feast day is also known as Childermas or Innocents' Day.

Resources for the Second Sunday after Christmas

Editor's note: Several items in this packet touch on the continuing story of the Holy Family. The latter part of Matthew 2, with its gruesome story, doesn't appear in the lectionary until the first Sunday after Christmas. This year, at least, that Sunday falls after the Feast of the Holy Innocents and before Epiphany. Ken Sehested's meditation on the Feast of the Holy Innocents (see page 22) refers to this passage. Mitch Martina's "The Astrologers & the Star: A Drama in Two Parts" (see page 25) also speaks of the angel's warning in a dream to avoid Herod. In this page, we offer a few resources, including Scott Turner's rendering of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt and some quotes we found to be profound.

Even though it is still officially Christmas, my dreams, like Joseph's, are no longer filled with sugarplums and angelic hosts singing about peace on earth and good news to all. Instead, like Joseph, I'm having nightmares of vengeful politicians in places of power, of innocent children dying on our borders and in our cities, of ecological death and destruction on a scale matched only by Noah's flood.

But the angelic hosts are still singing, however faint their song has become. If I listen closely, I can still hear a silent song of hope when I watch the bony fingers of the trees scratch against the roiling, gray sky. I can just make out the glad tidings in the morning song of the birds outside my window, fluffing up their feathers and sitting close together to keep one another warm. The angels still sing in the warm-hearted laughter of friends and loved ones, sharing a meal or a walk or a hug at the end of a busy day; in the smile of the driver who greets everyone who gets on the bus; and in the countless gestures of kindness and courage that never make the news broadcasts that are filled, instead, with sorrow and suffering. Today's Gospel reminds us that, like Joseph and Mary, we can still take action on the strength of a dream.

–Deborah Sokolove, from *Inward/Outward Together,* Church of the Saviour (Washington, DC)

Even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower,
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse
    across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.
–Malcolm Guite, "Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian year"

The best metaphor for our world of today is astronauts speeding through the cosmos, but with their life-supporting capsule pierced by a meteorite fragment. But the Church resembles Mary and Joseph traveling from Egypt to Nazareth on a donkey, holding in their arms the weakness and poverty of the Child Jesus: God incarnate.
–Carlo Carretto

art by Scott Turner

The Astrologers & the Star:
A Drama in Two Parts

by Mitch Martina

Editor's note: This is a drama in two parts, involving four players: Phraates (king of Persia), Melchior Caspar (astronomers) and Balthazar (a shepherd). It is designed so that it can be performed on two separate occasions or all at once. When Mitch, our fall intern, conceived the idea, we thought that perhaps the first part could be for Christmas Day or after, and the second part could be for Epiphany.

Part One

The first scene takes place in the court of Phraates. The king is holding an audience for Melchior.

PHRAATES: And you said that this star is befitting of a god, Melchior?

MELCHIOR: In truth, King of all Kings—it is an omen the likes of which I have never seen. It seems only worthy of a king or even a god. You know, my Lord, that I would never use such language carelessly in your presence. And, of course, he could not possibly rival Your Preeminence.

Phraates pauses angrily, but then reluctantly accepts this.

PHRAATES: Really, I should have your head, were you not so learned a man—and bold! Very well, Melchior; I will grant your request. But I want you to bring gifts from my own treasury unto this "king," so you might show him that he has a friend in the King of Persia—and one who is no friend of Caesar's. Now be on your way. *Phraates exits.*

MELCHIOR: (to the audience) I am called Melchior, and the story I am about to tell you began when I was given leave by my king to leave Parthia and travel to Judea under the pretense of astronomical studies. *(enter Caspar)* I was to be accompanied by Caspar, a visiting scholar from India, so as not to raise suspicion of our real mission. This mission, prescribed by my king, was to discover whether this star really was an omen of some king or god with whom he could later form an alliance in order to subvert Caesar. So, having been granted permissions, we began on our journey.

CASPAR: In truth, I cared little for Persia's politics. It is no secret that tensions between Parthia and Rome are gradually reaching boiling point, and I question whether an alliance with this mythical king will be as effective as your king imagines. And what, as a scholar of India, do I have to do with Persia? But you and I are astrologers of many years, and I only cared about that heavenly anomaly which had for some time occupied the sky both night and day.

MELCHIOR: I am inclined to agree, Caspar. By night, the "darkness" of the sky could hardly even be called such, for the light of this star was so bright. By day, the star remained fixed and visible—the light of the sun itself seemed as though it were a servant to this greater and more glorious light. And even in all its glory, it humbly fixed itself in the lower

art by Natasha Sinegina

firmaments of the heavens. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

Caspar: Upon reaching the outskirts of Rosh Pina, we happened to cross paths with a shepherd called Balthazar, who inquired as to our destination. *(enter Balthazar)* I explained that it was our business to ascertain the nature and meaning of this star, which had brought a most unusual light to our skies—whereupon the shepherd asked whether he might accompany us. His company seemed pleasing to us, so we happily agreed—though, I must admit, Balthazar, your reasonings seemed strange to us.

BALTHAZAR: And you are truly the most hospitable of men! If I had been approached by a shepherd like myself, with such strange tidings, I should have rejected his company. But heed what I say; I am telling the truth! There I was in my fields one night, watching over my flocks. And, I'm telling you, an angel of the Lord God of Jacob appeared to me all of a sudden, and he said he had good news of great joy that would be for all people. And then he said that a savior had been born in the city of David, and that it was the Messiah. And he said that we would find the baby lying in a trough in a stable. And then I saw the same star you were pointing out—it was right above Bethlehem.

MELCHIOR: How strange that the attention of kings, scholars and shepherds alike should be captured by a star over the skies of Bethlehem—really, *Bethlehem* of all places! And yet I cannot bring myself to doubt your word, good Balthazar. Even as a learned man, I detect that there is real substance in what you say.

CASPAR: Strange indeed, Melchior—for I, too, believe there is merit to this goodly man's word. Who shall he be, I wonder, this supposed "king of glory"? Come now. We draw near to the stable.

They exit.

Part Two

Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar have now visited Christ and offered their respective gifts. Night has passed, the morning has come, and they now prepare to depart from Bethlehem. The three pack up quietly—Melchior in a somber silence, Caspar seeming indifferent, and Balthazar in an irritable frenzy. Balthazar breaks the silence.

BALTHAZAR: Excuse me, gentlemen, but I'm afraid I can stand this no longer. Melchior, you've hardly uttered a word all morning, and what's perhaps even stranger is that *you* [he looks at Caspar] are wholly unaffected by everything that's happened. How can you remain silent after such—such a—oh, you know what I mean!

CASPAR: Balthazar, I don't understand why you are so affected by all this. I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

MELCHIOR: Nothing? Really?

CASPAR: No, I haven't the slightest idea why the child of these Jews has rendered *you* downcast and our friend the shepherd in such a frenzy. This ecstatic fellow, I might understand—you supposed this newborn child to be king of the Jews, and for a moment, I foolishly entertained that notion. But I doubt whether I have ever seen a more ordinary child than this Jesus. Really, a king, in Bethlehem, and sleeping in a trough, helpless, vulnerable, and *ordinary*!

BALTHAZAR: How is it that we, having borne witness to these things, see it so differently? Melchior, what are you thinking?

CASPAR: *(grunts dismissively, then aside to Melchior)* Forget the ramblings of this man, but let's not forget why we're here. Perhaps the star just so happened to settle in the skies above the stable. Anyway, we have no further business with the Jews. Let us finish our studies with haste and assure the Persian king that he has nothing to worry about.

MELCHIOR: I'm not so certain, Caspar, that this man is wrong.

CASPAR: Melchior, don't tell me you—

MELCHIOR: Look—I, too, am eager to fulfill our business. And I, too, thought to dismiss the child. Whoever he is, what have *we* to do with the King of the Jews? But when I laid my offering of gold beside his cradle, a horrible, unspeakable sense took hold of me that neither the gold of my offering nor the shirt on my back were ever mine to begin with. Did you not feel this? That child in all his ordinariness seemed to me, from that moment, the one to whom everything properly belonged—*everything*—the gold, the stars, the kingdoms of the earth. *(to Caspar directly)* I cannot explain it, I can hardly describe it, but would you dare to contend otherwise, my learned friend? You are wise, Caspar. You should know that Balthazar is not wrong. You should know, that this child really has to be something special. I think he really is a savior and a king!

Please see "Astrologers" on page 28

A Liturgy for Epiphany Sunday

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Light all of the Advent candles before the service

Processional Hymn

"From Heaven unto Earth I Come"
The New Century Hymnal No. 130
Words: Martin Luther
Music: Valentin Schumann's Geistliche Lieder
VOM HIMMEL HOCH, Long Meter

Call to Worship

ONE: If the world is reduced to night and day, darkness and light, then we admit this morning to knowing both. We know what it is to stumble in the dark: groping for a guide, an anchor point to help us stand.
MANY: In our seasons of darkness, Lord, hear our prayers for peace and comfort.

ONE: We also know what it is to walk in the Light—to see the beauty of God's Creation and created ones slithering, inching, walking, crawling, leaping, swimming, and flying about with boundless declaration of the glory of God.
MANY: In our seasons of Light, Lord, hear our prayers of thanksgiving and joy.

ONE: And we know the motley hues of dusk, when the light is fading in our lives and we stand on the eve of darkness. Fear and trepidation dart from the growing shadows into our minds and often render us motionless, deaf, and mute.
MANY: By the power of your love, cast out our fear—command us to walk, to hear, to speak.

ONE: For the dawn comes and in truth is always here. It stands sentinel at the end of all things and it breaks through to our today—sometimes in slivers of hope; often in broad strokes of majesty.
MANY: Invite us forward, call us to tomorrow, that we might learn to live well in our today. Illumine the gifts and the blessings in our lives and fill us with the joy and comfort of your Holy Spirit as we open our grateful hearts and lift our hopeful eyes to you.

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 60:1-6

Meditation of Preparation

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

"O Morning Star, How Clear and Bright"
The New Century Hymnal No. 158
Words and Music: Philipp Nicolai, tr. Catherine Winkworth
WIE SCHÖN LEUCHTET, 8.8.7.8.8.7.4.8.4.8.

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Reading from the Epistles

Ephesians 3:1-12

Hymn

"Unsearchable Riches"
The Cyber Hymnal No. 7034
Words: Frances Jane Crosby
Music: John Robson Sweney
UNSEARCHABLE RICHES, Irregular Meter

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

Meditation of Commitment

When there is no star to guide you
and you cannot wait for day
and your ancient maps provide you
only hints to find the way,
keep within each other's calling,
mark each time you make a turn,
shout for help if you are falling,
tell each other all you learn.
–Thomas H. Troeger

Benediction

Kindred, remember that as the prophet foretold, the Blessed One's might is rendered in mercy, signaling the end of all mourning, chasing every shadow by the light of Bethlehem's wondrous, illuminating star. On that day, peace will govern, righteousness will rule, and every vile and violent power be overthrown. Go now in the power to live large, laugh often and love well.

Astrologers,

continued from page 25

CASPAR: (agitated) Of *course* I know he is, you fool! I…I *know* that this child can be no other than a king, unlike any king I have ever known. But think about it; if I let myself believe that, my life as it is would be over. And so would yours! We would be painted as fools before the wise, despised by the kings of the earth and traitors to our nations. What would become of the learning to which I have given my very life, or the wife of my youth? I would have to give him everything. No, Melchior, whoever he may be, I cannot let him be my king—he is to be an ordinary Jew and no more. I cannot afford otherwise.

The trio look at each other in silence.

BALTHAZAR: (slowly breaking the silence) I had a dream last night.

MELCHIOR: Of what sort?

BALTHAZAR: The angel who appeared to me before came to me in a dream, telling me not to go back the way I came, because Herod the present King of the Jews will surely question you as to the whereabouts of the child. And he has no intention of paying him homage. He intends to kill him.

MELCHIOR: If that's true, we'll have to find another way home without going through Jerusalem. *(after a pause)* Balthazar, Caspar—let's be on our way.

BALTHAZAR: Yes, let's go.

The three silently make their way together with Caspar following shortly behind.

–Mitch Martina, a native of Houston, TX, is a senior Professional Writing and Great Texts major at Baylor University. He is serving as a Seeds intern for the fall of 2022.

art by Natasha Sinegina

For the World:
A Communion Meditation for Epiphany

by Brett Younger

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Smart people look for wisdom wherever they can find it. A newspaper asked children and teenagers to send their deepest thoughts. This is a six-year-old's wisdom: "For centuries, people thought the moon was made of green cheese. Then the astronauts found that the moon is really a big hard rock. That's what happens to cheese when you leave it out."

> We do not have to dismiss the truth of what we fail to understand, because the world is filled with wonders.

An eight-year-old writes: "It sure would be nice if we got a day off for the President's birthday, like they do for the Queen. Of course, then we would have a lot of people voting for a candidate born on July 3 or December 26, just for the long weekends."

And this from a fifteen-year-old: "I believe you should live each day as if it is your last, which is why I don't have any clean laundry, because who wants to wash clothes on the last day of their life?"

We should look for wisdom wherever we can find it. We should be open to more than just what we have been told or what we have experienced. Rudyard Kipling said, "What do they know of England, who only England know?"

In the summer of 1985, the Mormon Church announced plans to build a new temple in Stockholm. The opposition began to grow. New religious buildings often cause more anxiety than new religious neighbors do—especially if their buildings are bigger and better than yours. The temple in Stockholm was going to be 16,000 square feet.

The Bishop of Sweden was Krister Stendahl, who had been the dean of Harvard Divinity School. The bishop called a press conference. The media expected him to talk about the deficiencies of the Mormon faith. Instead, Stendahl offered three rules for religious understanding:

1. When trying to understand another religion you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.

2. Do not compare your best to their worst.

3. Leave room for holy envy.[1]

A little holy envy is good for us—a little spiritual covetousness extended to the dedication of Mormonism, the inclusiveness of Hinduism, the nonviolence of Buddhism, the prayer life of Islam, and the sacred debate of Judaism. To be committed to Christ is to be committed to Christ's inclusiveness. St. Augustine argued, "Many belong to the church who don't belong to God, but many belong to God who don't belong to the church."[2]

We should be open to wisdom wherever we find it. Many mistakenly limit their search to what can be seen and measured. Only verifiable facts are worthy of attention. The intellectual is seen in opposition to the spiritual. It is easy to dismiss faith, eternal life and anything that smacks of the sacred. But the

God of our understanding is just that: the God of our understanding. What we need is the God just beyond our understanding.[3]

Atheists argue that science has made religion unnecessary, but their arguments are not convincing. The fact that nature obeys precise mathematical laws, the fact that life and mind have emerged from inanimate matter, and the fact that the universe exists at all are best explained by God beyond what we can see and measure.

> The magi represent the wisdom that recognizes that life is a journey in search of the one who calls us beyond ourselves, one before whom we should kneel and to whom we should offer the best of our gifts.

In his book, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, Anthony Flew writes: "The world picture that has emerged from modern science points to an infinite intelligence that brought the universe into being."

The skeptics sound like they are trying to convince themselves that life can have meaning without God, but without God, life is without Spirit and without hope. To choose disbelief and skepticism is to miss the truths of faith and spirituality. Cynicism leads to a view of life that is dull, routine and ultimately, despairing.

The truly wise leave their minds open to possibilities farther out and deeper within. We should imagine more than we can explain, confess that we need to believe, and admit our sense of the sacred. We should look for the wisdom of the Spirit, the wisdom of Christ.

In most of the Gospel stories, Jesus goes looking for people, intrudes into their lives, and moves into their villages and homes. But in Matthew's story of the magi, they come looking for Jesus. No one travels farther to see him than these non-Jews.

They come looking for wisdom, but we do not know much else about the wise men, so we have gotten good at making stuff up. Matthew calls them "magi," not "wise men" or "kings." The word *magi* is the root from which we get the word *magician*. A magus was a sorcerer and a scientist, an astrologer and astronomer, a physicist and physician, and a metaphysicist. Science and superstition had not yet been separated, and the magi dabbled in all of it.

One early tradition is that there were 12 magi, but that made the crèche crowded, so since there are three gifts—shaky evidence though it is—we went with three. Maybe there were women in the group. They got lost and stopped to ask for directions. With their star charts and whatever passed for telescopes fifteen hundred years before telescopes, the magi come to the peculiar conclusion that a new king has been born in Israel.

One legend is that the journey took 30 days. A trip like that was uncommon—such a long distance, night fires going out, sore-footed camels, unfriendly towns, the danger of bandits, and the uncertainty of what lay behind the next sand dune. An inexplicable longing sends them on this unreasonable trip.

They finally arrive in Jerusalem and start asking around, "Where can we find the newborn King of the Jews? We saw a star that signaled his birth. We've come to worship him."

When word gets to Herod, he gets nervous. Herod is a fake king of the Jews, put in power by the Romans. He is always afraid for his job. He asks the reference librarians for help. Six hundred years earlier, Isaiah described a pilgrimage of rich kings coming to Jerusalem on camels and bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. The Psalmist talked about kings falling down before the Messiah who would deliver the needy and the poor.

But the prophet Micah was the one who gave directions, "It's you, Bethlehem, from you will come the shepherd for God's people." The scribes are smart enough to remember Micah, but not wise enough to look for the child themselves.

Herod becomes very friendly with the wise men and suggests they conduct a thorough search and then check back with him, "When you find him, come back, be my guest, and I'll go worship him also. We kings have to stick together."

The magi set off, the star appears again, and they throw the most famous baby shower ever. They can hardly contain themselves. Mary and Joseph are confused, but the magi celebrate because they have found their way to the long-awaited hope. They open their treasures and worship Jesus.

Matthew does not give details. The magi's visit lasts all of one verse. We are not told if they stayed for dinner, what they thought, what they felt or if Mary traded the myrrh for diapers.

The magi are out of place in this humble village. The visit of the wise men to Bethlehem is "like a

meeting of Iranian ayatollahs in Nebraska."[4] The magi are urban in a rural setting, affluent in the midst of poverty and erudite in an uneducated town, but wisdom led them there.

Matthew tells this story out of frustration that so many of those who heard Jesus dismissed Jesus and persecuted his followers. It was Gentiles who followed the star, but Christ is waiting for anyone looking for wisdom. We do not have to dismiss the truth of what we fail to understand, because the world is filled with wonders. The magi represent the wisdom that recognizes that life is a journey in search of the one who calls us beyond ourselves, one before whom we should kneel and to whom we should offer the best of our gifts. What makes a person wise is seeing the hope revealed in this child.

We do not just believe in Jesus. We follow Jesus. Christ takes us places that we would not have gone without his leading. We have a desert to travel, a star to discover and life to be found, but the journey may be hard.

We have chosen to worship today, at least in part, in response to something we have seen, something we have heard, or something we have felt. Every one of us longs for God. Our spirits hunger for meaning, our souls for hope and our hearts for love.

God calls us to be open to the wisdom that will help us be more than we are. The baby that the magi found was not the end of the journey, but the beginning. We do not just believe in Jesus. We follow Jesus. Christ takes us places that we would not have gone without his leading. We have a desert to travel, a star to discover and life to be found, but the journey may be hard.

Frederick Buechner imagines the wise men's reaction to seeing Jesus: "What we saw on the face of the new-born child was his death. A fool could have seen it as well. It sat on his head like a crown or a hat, this death that he would die. And we saw, as sure as the earth beneath our feet, that to stay with him would be to share that death, and that is why we left—giving only our gifts, withholding the rest. And now, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without him is the real death, that to die with him is the only life?"[5]

Jesus' coming disturbs the status quo for everyone. Everything we own, claim, or dream is threatened if a new king takes over. The baby grows up and changes the rules. Jesus teaches a revolutionary ethic of unconditional love, stubborn forgiveness and radical hospitality to those who are left out. Jesus gets into a lot of trouble for teaching and living out his notion of what God's kingdom looks like.

None of us wants to lose that to which we have grown accustomed. So our trivial desires threaten to obscure our genuine longing. God invites us to waste less time amusing ourselves and give more time to those around us. God calls us to spend less money on ourselves and more on those who need help. God tries to persuade us to turn our attention from the temporary to the permanent—from passing time to investing in eternity.

Are we courageous enough to seek God's wisdom? Are we willing to relinquish our sense of control and go where Christ leads us? Can we rise to a new sense of adventure, forsake our cozy routines, and follow Christ?

The wise men wanted to see Jesus more than they wanted to keep their treasures, more than they wanted things to stay the same, and more than they feared the difficulties of the journey. Wisdom leads us to this supper, to give ourselves to God in the bread and cup. This table is for those who are looking for God's wisdom.

–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.*

Endnotes

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, New York: HarperCollins, 2019, 65.
2. Richard Rohr, *Simplicity*, Crossroad, New York, 1991, 13.
3. Rami Shapiro.
4. Theodore Jennings.
5. Frederick Buechner, "The Birth," from *The Magnificent Defeat.*

Benediction

We are children of the light.
And even in this season of prayer and waiting
We know of your coming, born anew each day into the human heart.
Not in some epoch of the past, although we share a time of violence and oppression,
of confusion and despair with antiquity,
But in the here and now
Even as we call out to you.
In cries and whispers
In song and in tears
We speak your name and you are near
The embodiment of God's love and mercy
Born into the cradle within us.
Growing in us and walking among us, even in the darkest places.
Be born anew today and all days!
–From Catholic Relief Services

art by Robert Darden