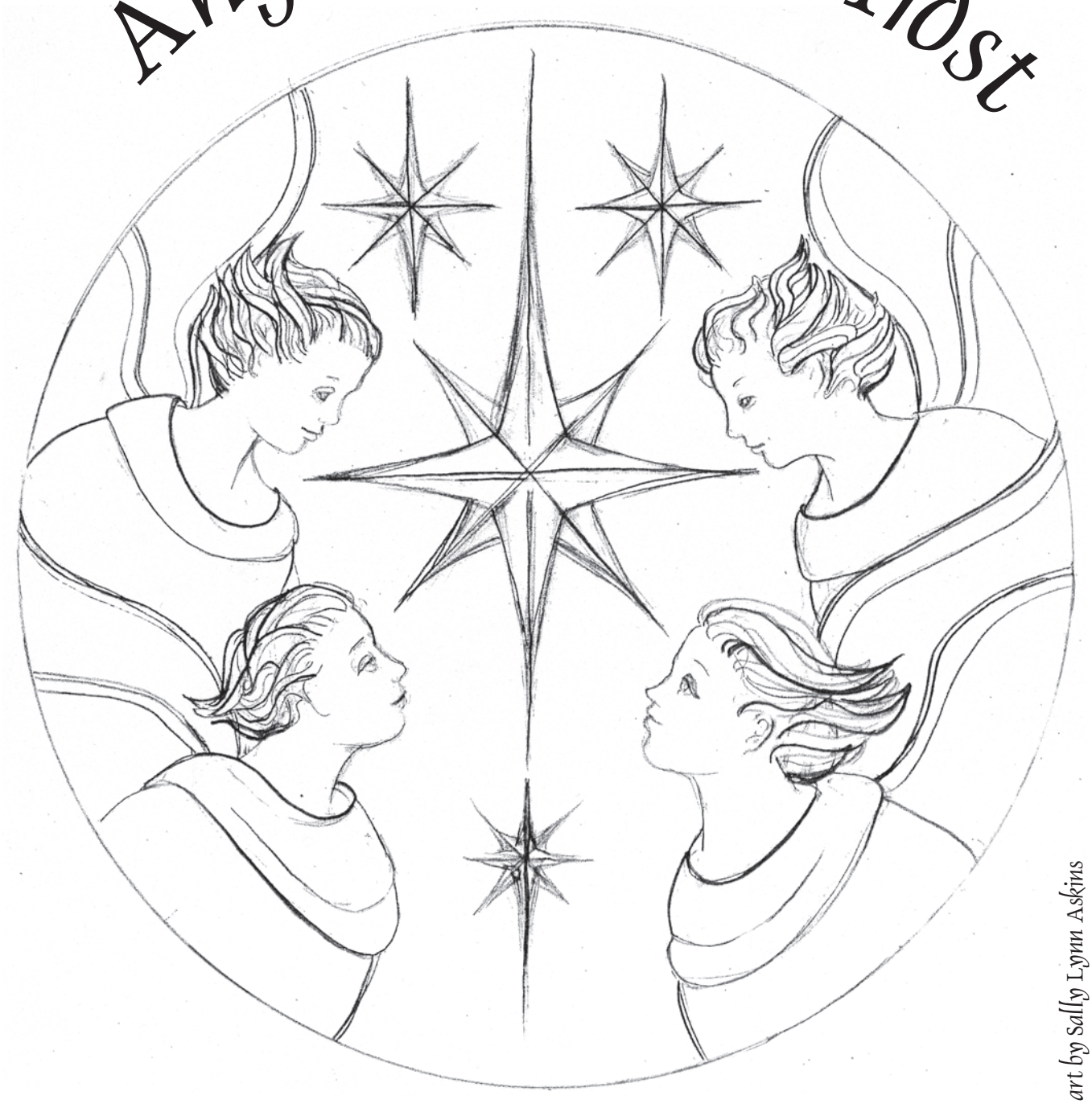
Angels in Our Midst



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Worship Resources for the Creative Church – Advent/Christmastide 2024

Sacred Seasons, *a series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis,*
from Seeds of Hope Publishers: 602 James Avenue; Waco, TX 76706 • 254/498-4997
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.

Angels in Our Midst

...in this worship packet:

art by Rebecca S. Ward

Editorial Address

The Seeds of Hope ministry is housed by the community of faith at Seventh & James Baptist Church. Contact information: 602 James; Waco, TX 76706; 254/498-4997; seedseditor1@gmail.com; www.seedspublishers.org.

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A Word about This Packet

When the *Sacred Seasons* Liturgical Team began to plan this packet, we knew that we wanted to dedicate it to Sally Lynn Askins, who was the Seeds resident artist for many years.

We lost Sally shortly before our Advent packet was sent out last year. She died suddenly and unexpectedly, just after attending a Thanksgiving service at Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. Just weeks before, she had created yet another set of Advent angels for our packet.

Sally created new angels for the four weeks of Advent (and sometimes for Christmas Day and Epiphany Sunday) every year for so many years we've lost count. You will see many of them in these pages. She also created art for a number of *Sacred Seasons* Lent/Eastertide and Hunger Emphasis packets. She always managed to come up with stunning images in spite of our themes that sometimes evoke scratching of heads instead of visual images.

Sally was vice president of the Seeds Council of Stewards. She was an internationally acclaimed costume designer and a beloved design professor in the Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts. And she was a believer in angels. She wrote a piece about a childhood encounter with an angel for our 2012 Advent packet. We're reprinting it on page 8.

art by Robert Darden

You will see many offerings from our liturgical team, which includes Guilherme Feitosa de Almeida from the Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts; Erin Conaway, pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX; Ken Sehested, a founding Seeds editor and writer who lives in Ashville, NC; Sharlande Sledge, retired associate pastor and now resident writer at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco; Scott Turner, youth minister at Seventh & James; and Alec Ylitalo, pastor at Richfield Christian Church in Waco. You will sometimes see their names, but their work is everywhere in this packet.

You will find a piece by Sharlande Sledge about her "collection of angels" on page 12. You will also find a sermon by Erin Conaway for the third Sunday in Advent, a youth activity suggested by Scott Turner, and a number of other meditations and prayers—including a Christmas Eve prayer by Nancy Hastings Sehested and a benediction by Cam Watts.

As usual, Guilherme Almeida carefully chose all of the hymns for the seven liturgies. We hope these musical suggestions, this art and these writings will be inspiring as you create a meaningful Advent and Christmastide season with and for your community. 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. 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. May you find resources that will help guide your congregations into a new year full of hope, peace, joy and love. And may you find angels in your midst.

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

Angels in Our Midst

A Theme Interpretation

by Katie Cook

For this Advent season, the *Sacred Seasons* Liturgical Team chose a theme that can be interpreted in many ways. There are wildly different beliefs (or lack of beliefs) about angels in our world today.

We chose first to look at some of the biblical references to angels. The Greek word transliterated as *angelos* literally means "messenger." In biblical stories, these messengers are sent to people like Abraham, to the rebellious prophet Balaam, to Mary and then Joseph of Nazareth, to Zechariah in the Temple, to a group of shepherds and then to the magi who visited the Christ child. There has to have been something startling about these visitors, because, almost invariably, the first words out of their mouths are "Don't be afraid."

Some people think of angels as our guardians. My own mother told me that she thought I had 13 guardian angels, mostly because I gave them so much work. There are biblical references to these messengers acting as guardians, even in the words of the Satan, who said that angels would catch Jesus if he jumped off a cliff.

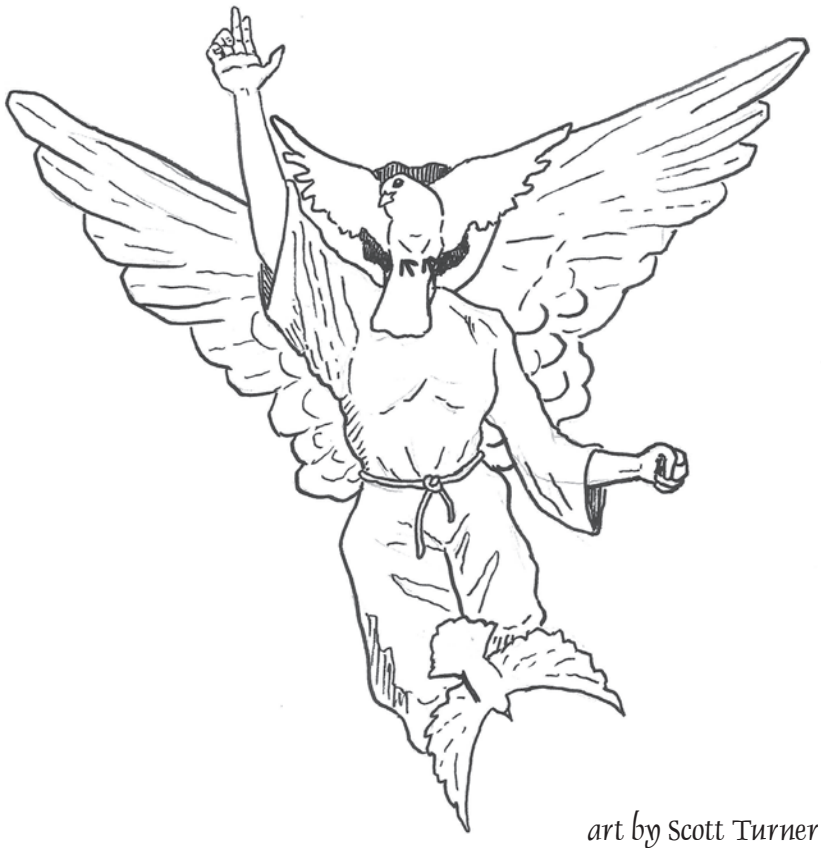
We are more familiar now with depictions of angels from Christmas cards, the sentimental ones that look like beautiful, blue-eyed women with wings. But we need to remember what happened in the biblical stories. If we pay attention to passages like the call of Isaiah in Chapter 6 of that book, we will get an entirely different picture. I saw an Artificial Intelligence attempt at drawing an angel from biblical descriptions. It was a mass of eyes and wings.

I don't suppose we need to dwell on drawings that "creep us out," but we do need to feel what it's like to meet, face-to-face, a being that is totally alien and unexpected. Scott Turner created the piece of art on this page to evoke something of that feeling.

Then we need to get over our fright (or our cynicism) and try to hear what they are trying to tell us.

There were three sub-themes that emerged from the team's brainstorming. One theme was that we need to recognize and value the angels around us. We all (well, most of us) have experienced times when we were in trouble and someone, often a stranger whom we never saw again, came to our rescue. Sharlande Sledge offers a veritable litany of these occurrences in her life on page 12.

Another theme comes from passages like Hebrews 13:2, which reminds us that strangers may be angels in disguise. The writer of Hebrews says that we must practice hospitality, because those



art by Scott Turner

people we are taking in may be angels (or, as Mother Teresa admonished us, Jesus) in disguise. When we pass by those people sleeping on the street, we are ignoring God's messengers. As I learned long ago while working with an emergency assistance program, the people we think we're helping often help us more. And they bring the most amazing messages.

The third theme was that we should become messengers ourselves. Many angelic appearances were to announce good news to marginalized people. We need to announce that same good news to people who are in need of all kinds of help, people who don't have enough to eat, people who don't have shelter, people who cower in fear.

There are angels in our midst. Sometimes they come to our aid, sometimes they need us, and sometimes they need to *be* us.

–Katie Cook is the Seeds of Hope editor.

Do Not Fear Grief

by Ken Sehested

Author's note: Every lit and lively season (Christmas, especially) comes, for some, with heartache, usually over the absence of a beloved whose remembrance still cuts to the quick and pickles the heart. In addition, Nativity's season unfolded with ancient Palestine's writhing under the oppressive heel of Rome's imperial boot. The poem below is set in these parallel moods.

Do not fear grief. She comes, unbidden, with
a word hard but essential. The rocks beneath
your feet are bruising and unrelenting. The
wind, sharp as a razor. The moon casts
threatening shadows,
each a hissing dragon or fearsome
reaper's scythe.

The dark throws its spell and bids you
to bow and shiver.
Neither bow nor quake.
Let every weak knee be steeled; every
back, steadied; every mind, restored;
every tongue, loosed;
every arm declaring its strength.
Say to the rocks: Do your best!
Speak to the dark: Take me, if you dare.
Say to the moon:

Your light is for lovers, not thieves.
To the meadows and
mounts that witness this interrogation, say:
Speak the truth. To the streams and rivers who
run, say: Your wet wonder
precedes all living. To the friends who scatter,
say: Be gone.

To those who linger, say: Give me your blessing.
For under grief's

skirt are angels who say: You are enough.
Who say: You have
what is needed. Who say:
The years lost to the locusts will be
restored. Who say: Weeping endures for the
night, but joy
comes in the morning.
The Promise and Presence of such joy,
sustained by the One who can neither be
named nor tamed,

runs deeper, farther, surer than every sorrow-sullied current
or casting wave. Give yourself
to the bewildering news of Earth's
upside-down, inside-out future and
the begetting power of the
bewilding Spirit, alternately comforting and
afflicting in accordance to the terms of
the reconfiguring covenant uplifting

the lowly and toppling the pretentious.
Stake your life in this
Promise. Abide in this Presence.
Align your attention with this
Purpose. Join the caroling community
whose anthems of praise
—in the face of threat—disclaim
every tear's stain and death's
reign, world without end.
Amen.

art by Rebecca McLean

A Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Call to Worship

Do not bow in the face of fear, O Little Flock of Jesus. Though be vigilant, for there is reason to quake. Before Jesus was so described in the Gospels, it was Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus who was proclaimed as "savior" and "redeemer," who brought "salvation" to the world, and citizens were to have "faith" in their "lord." Scripture's nativity stories have grown sentimental in our telling, but not so for the original accounts. Then and there, a head-to-head conflict was narrated as to whose peace was more reliable, whose promise more trustworthy, whose Word would endure beyond the heavens' rending and the mountains' trembling. Regardless of the stumble, do not slumber. Despite history's grimaces, do not shield your eyes nor stop your ears, lest you miss an angel's announcement of hope's incursion. Stay awake!

–Ken Sehested

Lighting the Candle of Hope

The shadows of the world have collected around us, seemingly drowning out what little light and good shines amongst humanity. We're afraid that we cannot bring enough hope to a world in desperate need, because all we see is despair with no end in sight. In the light of this first Advent candle, though, the words of the angels ring out, "Fear not!" as the light forces those shadows to begin to retreat and we start to find courage to face our broken world with a hope that God is about to calm the chaos and disperse the shadows that abound.

–Alec Ylitalo

Meditation of Preparation

Striving in faith is about the long view. It's about shrinking our fear a little and expanding our lives a lot. Striving is what Paul wrote about in his letter to the Philippians: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." The long view is rooted in that peace. Out of that peace, true freedom is born, the freedom not to be afraid.

–Ted Loder, *The Haunt of Grace*

art by Scott Turner

Hymn
"Come, Lord Jesus"
Sing! A New Creation Hymnal No 103
Words and Music: Carey Landry

Reading from the Prophets
Jeremiah 33:14-16

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 25:1-10

Hymn of Welcome
"My Soul in Stillness Waits"
Sing! A New Creation Hymnal No 95
Words and Music: Marty Haugen

Epistle Reading
I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Gospel Reading
Luke 21:25-36

A Hymn for These Days
"like a child"
Chalice Hymnal No 133
Words and Music: Dan Damon
LIKE A CHILD, 3.3.3.3.3.3.3.D

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. ***Don't be afraid***."
–Frederick Buechner

Carol of Hope
"I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 96
Words and Music: Kathleen Thomerson
HOUSTON, Irregular Meter with refrain

Benediction
Fear not, for there is hope. Hope for you, God's beloved one; hope for them, God's beloved ones; hope for us. Trees will continue to snap and the waters will rise, but neighbors will rally together to search and clear and rebuild. Bombs will continue to fall, but strangers will huddle together and, when the smoke clears, together, they will search and clear and rebuild. The light at the end of things is God's light and nothing can put it out. Fear not, dear friends; there is hope.
–Erin Conaway

Advent Doxology
by Ken Sehested

Oh, Blessed One, choired angels sing/
Of life surrendered, offering
The power to bless as blessed we are/
To welcome strangers near and far.

Oh, Ancient Promise, tune thine ear/
To pain and suff'ring, linger near.
Cast off the rule of wail and woe./
thy tender love on us bestow.

O, Jealous One, of cov'nant vow,/
Recast the sword from threat to plow.
Remold Earth's fury by thy Word./
All flesh observe thy grace conferred.

May all my ways through all my days,/
Befriend thy justice, sing thy praise.
Conformed no more to sin's distress./
Thy sovereign reign uphold and bless.

When Advent's hour erupts o'erhead/
And from below earth's terror spread.
Let Mary's praise guide heart and mind/
To scatter haute; the meek, unbind.

–Sung to the tune "Old Hundredth"

An Angel in Southern Oklahoma

by Sally Lynn Askins

art by Sally Lynn Askins

It is 1957 in Southern Oklahoma. The night sky of my memory is a deep, crisp blackness that recedes into infinity. This sky is filled not only with the ever-present flame that is the burn-off at the oil refinery, but also with magical stars that are prisms reflecting light and mystery. (The stars in the Southern Oklahoma sky are bigger and brighter than any place I know.)

We pull up to the white frame house that my grandfather built some 30 years earlier. I pretend to be asleep because I know, if I do so, that my Daddy will pick me up, and he will carry me in his strong arms into the warm comfort that is Mamaw and Papaw's house on Chestnut Street.

It is Christmas Eve, the house still smells a little of supper's chicken and fried okra. Mamaw is watching "The Lawrence Welk Christmas Show" with my cousins gathered in front of a rabbit-eared television. They wait for the weatherman to break in over the air with the announcement that Santa had been spotted flying over Duncan. Because of Gene Autrey and a claymation-animated special, we know that Santa travels in a sleigh fronted by an awkward, youthful, red-nosed reindeer.

Sure enough, the soap bubbles of the Champagne Music Makers are interrupted by an announcement. Santa has appeared on the Norad radar. Such news triggers action, for Santa will be here soon. I have long since awakened from my pretend sleep, because cousins are around. My big brother and the cousins his age all seem to have a secret, but for this night it doesn't matter. We are going to Bethlehem to see Jesus.

We pile back into the blue and white '56 Buick Special that is my father's pride and joy. We head out for the huge office building that is built on the edge of what was once the Chisholm Trail. My grandfather, one of the original employees of that company, had been given a very special project by the president. He was in charge of orchestrating a life-size nativity that now sat at the edge of a highway where cattle had run not so long ago.

Because of Papaw, we grandchildren have a special privilege. In the dark night, in the shadow of a refinery flame, we get to play in a stable in the Holy Land. In front of a company that specializes in drilling mud, a bible scene runs almost the full length of the corporate building. As we walk toward the nativity, I now know the Sunday-school flannel-graph lessons are not just stories.

There is a baby doll that is Jesus, and costumed figures the size of grownups. We know they might just come to life when we aren't looking, especially since it is Christmas. There are camels and a donkey to ride, and sheep to pet. The sheep follow shepherds with staffs. The kings are glittery and

majestic. Mary and Joseph quietly watch a baby lying in a manger.

And lo, soaring gracefully above all is a beautiful winged being playing a golden horn. She is an angel. She is beautiful. She is a messenger from God's world. She proclaims to one and all the importance of this moment.

And lo, soaring gracefully above all is a beautiful winged being playing a golden horn. She is an angel. She is beautiful. She is a messenger from God's world. She proclaims to one and all the importance of this moment.

I know instantly that she will be a perfect playmate to have as a friend. After all, this angel knows both God and the baby Jesus. In days to come, my mother will have to set an extra plate at the table for the angel. She will have to hold the doors of the Buick open a little longer because it takes extra time to get a set of wings in the back seat.

The angel will become my constant companion, even though there will be those who refer to her as an imaginary playmate. How silly grownups will be to think that she could be pretend. How were they to know that to have an angel as a lifelong companion is to always have with you the gentle memory of a most Sacred Nativity, a nativity that will become the foundation of your entire being?

But that is yet to come. Tonight is Christmas. The grownups think maybe they saw a sleigh overhead. They think that while we were at the nativity Santa might have come. We scramble for the car. I look once more at my angel, and I reach up for my father. I know that, if I do so, my Daddy will pick me up, drive to his Dad's, and he will carry me in his strong arms into the warm comfort that is Mamaw and Papaw's house on Chestnut Street.

—Sally Lynn Askins was Vice President of the Seeds Council of Stewards and the Seeds resident artist. She designed a new set of Advent angels for each Sacred Seasons Advent/Christmastide packet for many years.

Do Not Fear

art by Rebecca S. Ward

The truth is that frightened people will never turn the world, because they use too much energy on protection of self. It is the vocation of the baptized, the known and named and unafraid, to make the world whole:

- The unafraid are open to the neighbor, while the frightened are defending themselves from the neighbor.
- The unafraid are generous in the community, while the frightened, in their anxiety, must keep and store and accumulate, to make themselves safe.
- The unafraid commit acts of compassion and mercy, while the frightened do not notice those in need.
- The unafraid are committed to justice for the weak and the poor, while the frightened see them only as threats.
- The unafraid pray in the morning, care through the day, and rejoice at night in thanks and praise, while the frightened are endlessly restless and dissatisfied.

So dear people, each of you: "Do not fear! I have called you by name; you are mine!"
–Walter Brueggemann

A Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Processional Carol

"Awake! Awake and Greet the New Morn"
Sing! A New Creation Hymnal No 91
Words and Music: Marty Haugen
REJOICE REJOICE, 9.8.9.8.8.7.8.9.

Call to Worship

Be clear about this, O Little Flock of Jesus: Fear is a liar and a cheat. It will bargain its bag of trinkets and baubles and plastic shiny objects for the world-blessing power with which you have been vested. When fear comes knocking, open the door and say, "Come in; stay as long as you like, but you'll get no bed or board here." Do not trouble yourself over fear's sneers. Though tossed on the waves of dread and cast onto the shoals of distress, take heart. Though the wilderness be your portion, remember that the Light of Life has been promised specifically to those who dwell there. Though that great *gettin-up-morning* tarries, the day will come when righteousness and peace will kiss. Fear not, stand still: for such is the war-cry of the nonviolent people of God.
–Ken Sehested

Lighting the Candle of Peace

Turbulent times face us, with unfettered and endless wars dominating coverage. Every day we see the devastation increase exponentially. We're afraid for the plight of humanity, the senseless destruction, and the inevitability that harm hits home soon because it seems that there are no more peacemakers. In the light of this second Advent candle, though, God is illuminating the Way of peace that lies ahead of us, dispelling our fears of a troubled world overwhelmed by war, and meeting us in the midst of it all with the Prince of Peace.
–Alec Ylitalo

Meditation of Preparation

Jesus' peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love.
–Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

Song of Peace

"View the Present Through the Promise"
Sing! A New Creation Hymnal No 90
Words: Thomas H. Troeger
Music: Roy Hopp
FRANKLIN PARK, 8.5.8.5.8.8.8.5.

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

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

art by Sally Lynn Askins

A Hymn of Welcome

"Rejoice! Rejoice, Believers"
The Hymnal 1982 No 68
Words: Laurentius Laurenti
Music: Welsh Hymn
LLANGLOFFAN, 7.6.7.6.D

Epistle Reading

Philippians 1:3-11

First Gospel Reading

Luke 1:68-79

Hymn of Covenant

"Christians All, Your Lord Is Coming"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 85
Words: Jim Miller
Music: The Christian Lyre (1830)
PLEADING SAVIOR, 8.7.8.7.D

Second Gospel Reading

Luke 3:1-6

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment

Kairos is the opportunity to bring Christ—the Prince of Peace—into every situation, every conversation, every decision and choice of our daily lives. It is the way to re-direct the energy of fear into the actions of Micah 6:8. Fear paralyzes. Where there is no movement, there is no hope. Re-directing the energy produced by fear into actions of justice, compassion, and humble service activates hope. Hope swells the light. Light by light, it overcomes all darkness.
–Carol Mason

Carol of Peace

"Let Justice Flow Down"
Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace No 47
Words and Music: Douglas Romanow (Canada)

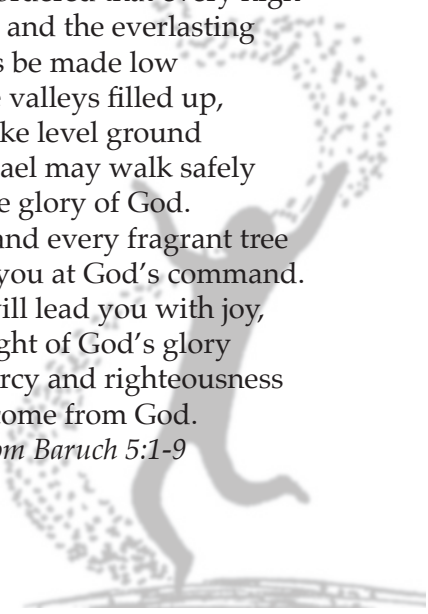
Benediction

Fear not…the light will come and guide our feet into the way of peace. What we thought was closed can be re-opened. What we thought was spent and used up can be renewed. What we thought was dead will come to life. The light of Christ comes into the world with each "yes" we offer to the Spirit's call, and the Prince of Peace will illumine our path. Follow it boldly.
–Erin Conaway

Take off the garment of your sorrow

and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of
the glory from God.
Put on the robe of the righteousness
that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem
of the glory of the Everlasting;
for God will show your splendor
everywhere under heaven.
For God will give you evermore the name,
"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,
and see your children gathered
from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
For they went off from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.
For God has ordered that every high
mountain and the everlasting
hills be made low
and the valleys filled up,
to make level ground
so that Israel may walk safely
in the glory of God.
The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded you at God's command.
For God will lead you with joy,
in the light of God's glory
with the mercy and righteousness
that come from God.
—from Baruch 5:1-9



art by Sharon R. Rollins

A Collection of Angels

by Sharlande Sledge

One afternoon while I was sitting in the living room, talking on the phone, I counted four angels around me from four different cultures. One is a tall tin angel with a wide wingspan, crafted in Haiti. Another is a flat, skinny pure bronze angel with her hands raised high, as much an Easter angel in the posture of praise as an Advent angel, a gift from someone in my church by an artist in Waco.

Yet another angel, a pudgy one, is solidly built of stone-colored clay, a hint of a smile on her face, a tambourine in her left hand, made by someone in North Carolina who had obviously seen an angel or two.

And the fourth angel in the quartet, no taller than my iced-tea glass, an angel that always feels heavier in my hand than I would guess when I see her balancing carefully on the bookshelf, her arms stiffly outstretched to keep her orange wings in place above her pink flowered skirt, her face and hands painted black by her designer in Kenya.

I do not collect angels, but it looks as though a collection from around the globe has found me. Let me say that again: *I do not collect angels, but it looks as though a collection from around the globe has found me.* I never realized before how that sturdy, solid truth is alive in my life.

And it is true in your life, too, for the writer to the Hebrews says to us in chapter 13:

> *Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*

I think of the quiet kinds of gestures some folks have made to me, showing hospitality by no action grander than their calm and quiet behavior. There's my friend Lela, 20 years younger than I am and usually super-extroverted by nature, who took my hand as we were entering the door of a memorial service for a young woman and let me cry my heart out—an extravagant gift.

There's the complete stranger at the Austin airport years ago who said to me, "Looks like you've just put somebody important on that plane. Let me buy you a cup of tea," and so, forgetting all my scheduled events, I let her do just that.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

There's seven-year-old Jill, who broke into the ordination line where I was kneeling and handed me a treasure she'd made in art class—a pink heart etched into a beautifully blue background that has maintained an honored place anywhere I've lived. There's Paul, from the Czech Republic, who met me at the Zurich airport with a sign that said "Rüschlikon" when I arrived to study in Switzerland, and the young woman at the airport in Seoul, Korea, holding a sign with "Sharlande" on it (how could I miss that?), welcoming me to the meeting I would attend in her country.

There are also two couples from Beirut, standing outside our hotel on the last night of our meeting, who invited me to their country, but not for a

tourist visit. "Please come to Lebanon," they urged me, "we need you to help us in our country." I remember the first night of the war in Ukraine; a friend called at midnight to make sure I was listening to a concert by Music Mission Kiev. A soloist gave me a song that has not left me since 2022, "This Little Light of Mine," in her pure, clear voice.

I look back and see these quiet angels I have collected, carrying a message of "Fear not" or "It will be all right" or "Let me help you."

They have found me.

Then I think of angels who had a bit more drama in their appearances. I remember when I had a flat tire on the way home from Fort Worth to Waco, the lights of Hillsboro in my rearview mirror. This was in the days of the first Living-Bible-sized cell phones that found a nesting place by the gear shift in the car. While I was trying to call a friend to come to my rescue, a car pulled up. A man jumped out, risking being late to the Oklahoma-Baylor football game, to fix my tire on the side of the highway.

And there's another flat-tire-on-the-highway experience. This one happened between Dallas and Little Rock, mid-way along our journey. We had to get four cars of mission trippers to a garage that was open on Saturday afternoon. We were eating Saltine crackers while we waited for the repair.

When my name was called, saying that the car was ready, the person at the cash register told me, to my surprise, that there was no charge. She said, "The man before you got wind that your group is on a mission trip. He said he'd just returned from one with his church, and he didn't want your church to be out any money." Who else could that man be but another angel?

Then there was the woman who stopped on the sidewalk in Prague and bent over to ask me what I needed. She could tell that I needed "something" because my face and my clothes were bloody from falling hard on my face on the cobblestones. So, unlike the people who had bent over before she did, tossing tissues my way and talking to me in a half dozen languages I didn't understand, this woman spoke to me one language at a time, first in French, and then in German, and then in English—probably asking the same question in each language: "How can I help you?"

I responded, "I need some water and a telephone." She helped me stand up, led me back into the subway station, which I had exited not long before, and guided me to a water faucet and to a phone to call my friends. Then she walked back to the subway with me, so I could retrace my journey. Then she boarded the train with me. Then she rode all the way to the seminary with me. "Do you live near here?" I asked. "No, I just wanted to make sure you got back okay."

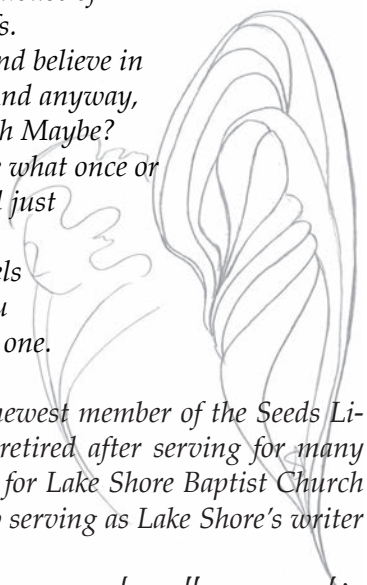
I did not learn her name, but I will never forget the touch of her hand on my elbow, guiding me "home" in a country where I didn't know the map of the city, either above or below ground. I will always call her my angel. She said the things that angels say, "Do not be afraid." "Let me help you." "Here is some news you need to know." And then she left on the next train.

But her spirit has stayed with me, and she is a tender, loving part of my collection of angels with a living, beating heart that keeps saying to me, reminding me, all these years later, "It's not so hard." And it's a holy thing to help, a gift to the one who gives as well as the one who receives, so:

> *Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*

My collection of angels grows year by year. Sometimes I don't immediately realize who has brought the presence of angels close to me. But angels are like that. They show up with messages I'm not expecting, spoken or silent, with a generous portion of God's love. They show me the way. They seem to always carry with them an antidote to fear. Mary Oliver says it this way:

I have refused to live
locked in the orderly house of
reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in
is wider than that. And anyway,
what's wrong with Maybe?
You wouldn't believe what once or
twice I have seen. I'll just
tell you this:
only if there are angels
in your head will you
ever, possibly, see one.



–Sharlande Sledge, the newest member of the Seeds Liturgical Team, recently retired after serving for many years as associate pastor for Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, TX. She is now serving as Lake Shore's writer in residence.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Support for the Angels

A Youth Activity

by Scott Turner

A common motif we see in the Bible is angels hiding among us. Whether it be the three men who visit Abraham and Sarah, the angels at the tomb after the resurrection, or just a word of admonishment from Hebrews about entertaining strangers, the scriptures insist that we must be aware of the spiritual among us. So how can we be prepared to entertain these angels?

Most strangers who walk into our churches are just visitors or maintenance workers. They usually just require a kind welcome and some general information about where to go, but there are also strangers among us who need a lot more.

These strangers need a home, they need food, and they may even need professional services that we are not equipped to provide. Although we can't provide a home or professional services at a moment's notice, we can offer up some basic items that could help a stranger short term and long term.

Your church has probably done something like this before. It's not a new idea; it's more of a classic. We're going to make support bags for impoverished and unhoused people in our community. Grab the supplies yourself or even meet your group at the grocery store. We're going to need water bottles, granola bars, some kind of dried fruit or nutritional fruit snack, crackers and some simple toiletries that would be useful on the streets, like hand sanitizer or sanitizer wipes.

Think about some items that might be helpful in your specific community, like hand warmers, a small disposable poncho or a couple of trash bags. Maybe you could ask your church to make some donations and order some camping blankets that can be packed and carried around easily. Don't forget to get adequate bags to pack all these things in.

Now we want to add something different—some typed-up resources for long term help. If your church has ministries or funds available to help with poverty or bill assistance, add a business card or brochure to help direct people in need to the right place. Include what your church can help with. Then include some resources that are available in your community, like directions and instructions for places like local shelters.

You could add some business card for veterans' services, mental health services or rehabilitation services. We just want to provide some short-term help and information about long-term assistance that could really help the stranger (or angel) among us.

Now distribute these support bags to your youth and their parents, to church members, and to church staff so that they can start giving them to people in need.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

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

A Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Processional Carol

"Come, O Long-expected Jesus"
Chalice Hymnal No 125
Words: Charles Wesley
Music: Rowland H. Prichard
HYFRYDOL, 8.7.8.7.D

Call to Worship

Fear the Lord, O Little Flock of Jesus, for only such holy fear has the power to displace the sway of every mortal life's dread and dismay. Indeed, the fear of God liberates the fretful, whimpering self that demands its privilege and exemption from covenant ties—the very things that ruin life's verdant provision. The One who claims you thereby frees you to be the oil of gladness, an oak of righteousness, repairer of ruined cities. This claim does not maim but authorizes you to declare good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the enslaved and exoneration to the incarcerated. Fear's murmuring shrivels the soul and desiccates the heart. Though weeping overtake, you sow your tears, trusting in the day when shouts of joy shall break out.
–Ken Sehested

Lighting the Candle of Joy

We see pain and hunger on every corner, heads hung low, bodies slouched in exhaustion. How can we find joy when some of God's children are suffering while others have more than enough? A trio of flames now dance in front of us, showing us that God's light does not stop at one or two sparks, but will continue to build and find its way into every corner of our world to dispel sorrow. Do not be afraid to help spread that joy, guided by the light of God, for even a small morsel, a cold cup of water can spread the fire.
–Alec Ylitalo

Meditation of Preparation

"Don't be afraid." That is always the first thing that comes out of an angel's mouth. Don't be afraid. Be ye not afraid. Do not fear. Fear not. However you translate it, angel voices always issue the holy invitation to lean into courage rather than to give into fear.
–Shannon Kerschner

Song of Joy

"Hark! The Glad Sound!"

art by Sally Lynn Askins

The Hymnal 1982 No 72
WORDS: Philip Doddridge

First Reading from the Prophets
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Second Reading from the Prophets
Isaiah 12:2-6

A Hymn for These Days
"Soon and Very Soon"
Sing! A New Creation No 106
Words and Music: Andraé Crouch

Epistle Reading
Philippians 4:4-7

Gospel Reading
Luke 3:7-18

Hymn of Celebration
"Blessed Be the God of Israel"
Chalice Hymnal No 135
Words: Michael Perry
Music: Hal H. Hopson
MERLE'S TUNE, 7.6.7.6.D

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.
–Edmund H. Sears, "It Came upon the Midnight Clear"

Carol of Joy
"My Soul Proclaims with Wonder"
Sing! A New Creation No 102
Words: Carl P. Daw, Jr.
Music: German Hymn
ES FLOG EIN KLEINS
WALDVOGELEIN, 7.6.7.6.D

Benediction
Fear not, for with great joy you will draw water from the well of salvation. The drought will break, and the smell of forgiveness will fill our bodies like rain in the sweltering afternoon. Joy will revive the dry soul when tired bodies are lifted off the ground by a loved one, by a neighbor, by hope, by God. Fear not, dear ones, for with great joy we will all drink from the well of God's salvation.
–Erin Conaway

What Joy Is

If happiness is what we feel when we think we've got what we want, then joy is what we feel when we discover we already have what we most need.

Joy is still present when life is hard. Christ comes for grieving people with broken homes and broken hearts. Christmas is the promise that God loves children who hunger for food, the lonely who hunger for love and all who hunger for peace.

The Word becomes flesh wherever there is sadness, fear or emptiness. God comes to be with us in our dark valleys, to bind our broken hearts, to carry us when we're tired and weary.
–Brett Younger

art by Scott Turner

In Us as It Is in Heaven

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

by Erin Conaway

Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg stunned the world a few years ago when she denounced world leaders for inaction and told them: "Change is coming whether they like it or not. The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago."[1] This plucky teenager addressed the United Nations Climate Summit in 2018 and didn't pull any punches.

She was clear and direct, and she backed up her words with actions. Greta protested outside of the Parliament building in Stockholm every Friday instead of going to school. "I like school, and I like learning," said Greta, who said she planned to end her strike when Sweden starts cutting carbon emissions by 15 percent a year. "But why should we be studying for a future that soon may be no more? This is more important than school, I think."

art by Sally Lynn Askins

She said to the leaders gathered at the conference, "For 25 years, countless numbers of people have stood in front of the United Nations climate conferences asking our nations' leaders to stop the emissions. But clearly this has not worked, since the emissions just continue to rise. So I will not ask them anything. Instead, I will ask the people around the world to realize that our political leaders have failed us, because we are facing an existential threat and there is no time to continue down this road of madness."

I was blown away by her courage and her call for all of us to act to save our planet. The article about her in *Democracy Now* led me to another one that mentioned Henderson Island. Have you heard of this one?

> *Henderson Island, a tiny landmass in the eastern South Pacific, has been found by marine scientists to have the highest density of anthropogenic debris recorded anywhere in the world, with 99.8 percent of the pollution plastic. The nearly 18 tonnes of plastic piling up on an island that is otherwise mostly untouched by humans have been pointed to as evidence of the catastrophic, "grotesque" extent of marine plastic pollution.*[2]

No one lives there…that's all OUR garbage floating to the island and washing up on the shores. The pictures made me sick to my stomach. I keep trying to think about how this must break God's heart to see what we are so callously doing to creation. I tried to imagine God walking through the garden in the cool of the evening and seeing a plastic bottle that the *adam* threw on the ground after he was done drinking it.

I was in Eagle Pass, TX, on a mission trip a couple of years ago, and there was a large plot of land almost completely covered in plastic bags. The wind patterns were such that they blew these discarded plastic grocery bags into this multi-block parcel of land where they stuck to the scrub brush and other weeds. The first day we drove past it someone made a joke saying, "I've never seen a plastic bag farm before, but here's where they must come from."

The next few days it became less funny and more tragic. We asked one of the workers at the community center why no one bothered getting all of those bags off of the land. She said, "It's not our land. No one knows who owns that acreage." I'm not throwing shade at them; we didn't pick up the bags either. We said we were too busy building a house for someone who'd lost theirs in the tornado.

> We light this pink candle as an act of defiance—to cast out the present darkness with the light of tomorrow and the joy it brings us today.

"It's not our ocean…no one really owns it." I guess that's why we don't care enough about what we're doing to our oceans to change much of anything we're doing. But don't we all "own" it? Aren't we all a part of the humanity who depends on the oceans for our lives?

We were sitting around a fire one night talking about the movie "Independence Day," right after it came out in theaters. It's a story that imagines we are under attack by alien forces and all of the nations of the world come together to fight back. One of my friends said he thought it would take an external threat for us to finally join forces and do something together. I hope we can join forces for an internal threat, but it's not looking good so far.

So, what does this have to do with Advent and lighting the candle of joy this morning? It seems an odd way to get into a text about joy—dwelling on the doom and gloom of the world and of creation. The prophet Zephaniah didn't speak this morning's passage of hope and joy into a perfect world where all was merry and bright. He broke into their lives by telling the truth about sin. And it was a dark truth then as it is now.

So why not a candle of agony or repentance? How can we know the truth about ourselves and our people and ever get to joy? Here's how. The same way Paul and the other early Christians sang songs of praise from their prison cells. The same way many martyrs of the faith used their last breath on earth to praise God rather than to cry out in defeat. The same way our enslaved sisters and brothers sang songs of hope in the fields under the lash and in their chains.

Our story doesn't end here. We will not be left in the fields or in the cells or tied to the martyr's post. We know a day is coming when victory, not defeat, will be our firm reality. We light this pink candle as an act of defiance—to cast out the present darkness with the light of tomorrow and the joy it brings us today.

We are told to sing and shout and rejoice and exult with all of our hearts because our Lord and our king is in our midst. Zephaniah declares, "The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more." With disaster engulfing our every waking minute, can you imagine a time where we will fear disaster no more?

We won't look to the horizon for the signs of swirling clouds or swelling seas. We won't make plans and contingencies for fires or floods. We won't find a place in the room or in our house or in our classroom where we could hide from someone who wanted to hurt us. We won't worry about locking doors or setting alarms. We won't be afraid, we won't have to worry, we won't have to watch or wait. A time is coming when our king will be in our midst in ways that will eliminate our fears.

The passage proclaims that our king will rejoice over us and will renew us in God's love. The NIV translates that verse like this: "God will quiet us with God's love." The Tanakh translation says, "God will sooth us with God's love."[3] We will be renewed in God's love; our fears and anxious protests will be quieted with God's love; our pain and agony will be soothed by God's love.

On that day it shall be said to us, "Do not fear." That is a phrase that runs throughout our Advent celebration and time of waiting. We hear the angels say it to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Mary and Joseph, to the shepherds. And we hear the prophets say it to a people in the midst of terrible and debilitating oppression: "Do Not Fear."

We're not there yet, and that's part of the point. We do fear. We are afraid. So why in the world would we light a candle of joy in the midst of all the

destruction and pain we see all around us? Because we trust that a day is coming, the day will come when we won't have to be afraid, we won't need to fear any of it, because God will be in our midst in new ways and will take disaster away from us.

Zephaniah tells us that on that day God will save the lame and gather the outcast. All of us who are lame with grief—who cannot walk the same way we did before because part of us is missing; all of us who are lame with disease, who battle broken bodies; all of us who are lame with mental anguish; whose wounds don't show up on any scans or tests; all of us who are lame with rage and the toll it takes on our hearts and our minds; all of us who are lame with guilt for the things we have done and the good work we have left undone. All of us who are lame.

God will save us and gather the outcasts. Those who never feel like they are part of something outside themselves, those who never feel included or wanted, those who cannot bear the thought of being drawn into the fold for fear the group will then see them for who they are and reject them. The outcasts. Those who seek safety and shelter and opportunity for their children and grandchildren, but who are treated like criminals. They are the outcasts. Those whose rights are threatened because of their gender identity, those who are shoved out of family and fellowship because of who they love. They are the outcasts.

A day is coming when God will gather the outcast. Jesus used the image of a mother hen with wings outstretched—to touch you, to bring you in, to drag you, if necessary, into the safety and the warmth of the flock. God will save the lame and gather the outcast and turn our shame into praise.

Our shame. Those feelings of self-loathing and hatred that we drag around like millstones tied to our necks. Our shame. I heard a story on NPR about the economic crisis in Spain and how so many people over there were losing their homes and apartments because they'd lost their jobs and could no longer afford their rent or mortgage.

Irene Gonzalez, a single mother with three children, was under notice of eviction and was paralyzed with the shame of not being able to provide for her family, and not being able to make her payments. They had a gathering of neighbors who were protesting the foreclosures and Irene decided to stop in and see what the meeting was all about. She told the reporter that coming to a neighborhood association, she discovered a new sense of solidarity and was able to overcome a feeling of shame. But facing the bank was not easy.

She said, "When I found myself going to the bank to beg them to pardon my unpaid mortgage payments, I couldn't afford feeling embarrassed," pausing as her voice cracked. "I cannot feed my children with embarrassment."[4] Our shame—that paralyzing, debilitating, wrenching shame—will be turned to praise. Can you imagine that? We will find, in our weakness, God's great strength.

Through Zephaniah, God says, "At that time, I will bring you home." That's why we can stand in this world so filled with disaster and violence and pain and loss and we can light a candle of joy—not because we necessarily feel it in this moment or even in this season, but we light a candle of joy as an act of faith and declaration—that a day is coming when our king will be in our midst. When the fear of disaster will be removed. When the lame will be healed and the outcast will be gathered and our shame will be turned to praise.

> *On that day it shall be said to us, "Do not fear." That is a phrase that runs throughout our Advent celebration and time of waiting.*

That day is coming when God will bring us home. Bring us home—that place where we are free to be who we were created to be—unafraid, unashamed, fully loved and fully known. God will bring us home. So we light this pink candle of joy and we wait with renewed fervor and we say from the depth of our beings, with our eyes straining toward the horizon and our voice raspy from the cry, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Come, heal our world and bring us peace."

If God is coming and all will be well, then why bother to bring in the outcast, or help the lame to walk? Why bother worrying about climate change and our garbage riddled oceans if God's going to come back and make it all okay? Why not just live it up and throw it out? That would violate our hearts and take us even farther away from the people God created and is calling us to be.

Jesus taught us to pray "On earth as it is in heaven." We often wonder what God's will is; we know part of it from our reading today. All we have to do is look to what God said through the proph-

ets about how things will be to see how we should be working—to make the world like that. When we do the work of gathering the outcast; when we do the work of trying to remove disaster from our world; when we do the work of healing the lame to the best of our ability; when we do the work of living as witnesses to God's presence and love—that puts us right in line with what God is doing in our world and with what we know God will complete when the time comes.

> If God is coming and all will be well, then why bother to bring in the outcast, or help the lame to walk? Why bother worrying about climate change and our garbage riddled oceans if God's going to come back and make it all okay?

We cannot wait idly by when we have this clear vision from the prophet Zephaniah about what our world will look like when our King is fully in our midst—we must continue to try to make it look that way today.

And we do so, facing all of the setbacks and temporary defeats with hope because we know this work is greater than we are. It's God's work. We know the one who started it will be faithful to bring it to completion, but we have this moment today—so let us get to work, and do so with the light of joy radiating from our hands and our hearts. 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.*

Endnotes

1. "Our leaders are behaving like children," *Democracy Now*, Dec. 11, 2018.
2. "38 million pieces of plastic waste found on uninhabited South Pacific Island," *The Guardian,* May 15, 2017.
3. Angela Bauer-Levesque, *Feasting on the Word.*
4. Spain's crisis leads to rise of grass-roots groups," National Public Radio, Dec. 10, 2012.

The Resolve of God's Love

by Ken Sehested

art by Lenora Mathis

The resolve of God's love is not for redemption in the time beyond time, in a place beyond the farthest galaxy, but precisely in and through this time, this space, in and through the tear-stained, blood-smeared, tempestuous and ruffled world.

Incarnation,
our confession's most distinctive claim, is not a tale of
God holding Heaven's nose to lower Jesus into temporal sewage
in order to rescue for eternity a few who've managed
to crawl out of the muck.

No, the Spirit leaps amid sullied streets and seedy alleys, winding her way through derelict neighborhoods, migrant labor camps, toxic factories and defiled fields, attuned to the soil's murmuring sigh and flesh's callused, disposable hands essential to a luxury economy.

Join Her there.

–Ken Sehested was one of the founding editors of the Seeds ministry in Decatur, GA. He 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. He is now the curator for the online journal* Prayer&Politiks.

A Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Processional Carol

"Comfort, Comfort Ye My People"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 89
Words: Johannes Olearius
Music: Geneva Psalter
PSALM 42, 8.7.8.7.7.7.8.8.

Call to Worship

Practice fear displacement, O Little Flock of Jesus. Resist any who proclaim the politics of panic. Live in the blessed assurance that the world—despite much evidence to the contrary—is in God's hands and is promised to the meek who know their true source of security is the One who fashioned the earth in an act of sheer delight. "Fear not!" was the angel's greeting to Mother Mary. And her response to this incredulous announcement? "Let it be. Let it be with me according to your Word." Let it be with thee as well, barren pilgrim, every settler who will not settle for less than the coming new heaven and new earth, every weary traveler who awaits Christ's disclosure in the breaking of bread. Trod on, you traveler to Beulah's fecund fields, to Zion's streams of mercy and vineyards brimmed with gladness, where Love Incarnate soothes every furrowed brow, disentangles every knotted fear, restores the blinded eye and deafened ear, and caters a feast for the ages.
–Ken Sehested

Lighting the Candle of Love

Hate and anger fill the air, conversations just become arguments, and we see division in religion, politics, culture, and just about everything else. Our hearts have been hardened as we scorn our differences instead of celebrating the creativity of our Creator to make each of God's children unique. As the fourth flame on our Advent wreath is lit, God invites us to not be afraid of the Other, but to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is about to enter the world and surround us, a love that can unify if we let it, a love that will be born to show us a new way forward.
–Alec Ylitalo

Hymn of Love

"Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song"
Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace
No 11
Words and Music: Les Petites Soeurs de Jésus and L'Arche Community

Meditation of Preparation

Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes, I will live this life that is being held out to

art by Sally Lynn Askins

me or no, I will not; yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events, or no, I will not.

You can say no to your life, but you can rest assured that no angels will trouble you ever again. But, if you say yes to your life, you can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body."
–paraphrased from "Mothers of God" in *Gospel Medicine*

Reading from the Prophets
Micah 5:2-5a

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 80:1-7

A Hymn for These Days
"A Stable Light Is Lighted"
Chalice Hymnal No 141
Words: Richard Wilbur
Music: David Hurd
ANDUJAR, 7.6.7.6.6.6.7.6.

Epistle Reading
Hebrews 10:5-10

Gospel Reading
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Hymn of Proclamation
"When God Is a Child"
Chalice Hymnal No 132
Words: Brian Wren
Music: Joan Collier Fogg
MOON BEAMS, Irregular Meter with Refrain

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
There is also a legend that Mary was not the first young woman to whom the angel came. But she was the first one to say yes. And how unsurprising it would be for a fourteen-year-old girl to refuse the angel. To be disbelieving. Or to say: "Are you sure you mean-but I'm unworthy—I couldn't anyhow—I'd be afraid. No, no, it's inconceivable, you can't be asking me—I know it's a great honor but wouldn't it upset them all, both our families? They're very proper, you see."
–Madeleine L'Engle, *And It Was Good: Reflections on Beginnings*

Carol of Love
"A New Commandment"
Sing! A New Creation No 134
Words: John 13:34-35
Music: Anonymous

Benediction
Fear not, for love is about to be born. In bombed out churchyards in Gaza when aid workers can begin helping to pick up the pieces, when hungry children in the Mississippi Delta get a backpack filled with food on a Friday, when migrants lay down their bags and breathe free air in their new home, when friends reach out in the hour of desperation, when the labor pains give way to newness, love will make its voice known. Fear not, for love is about to be born.
–Erin Conaway

Go Love

Do not be dismayed
by the brokenness
in the world.
All things break.
And all things
can be mended.
Not with time,
as they say, but
with intention.
So go. Love
intentionally,
extravagantly,
unconditionally.
the broken
world waits
in darkness
for the light
that is you.

–L. R. Knost

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

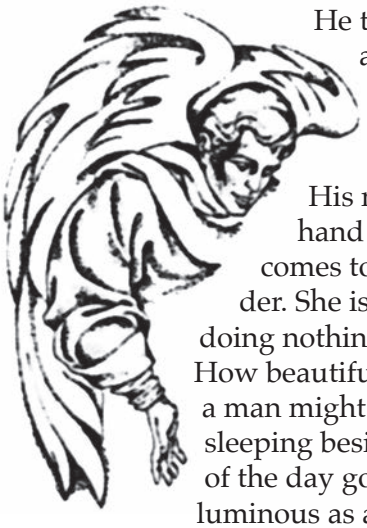
What do your angels look like? Do you recognize them when they show up? When they minister to you, hold you, embrace you, do you hear a new version of God's voice, calling you "beloved?" If yes, then what would it be like to enter into someone else's barren desert right now, and become an angel for their journey?
–Debie Thomas

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

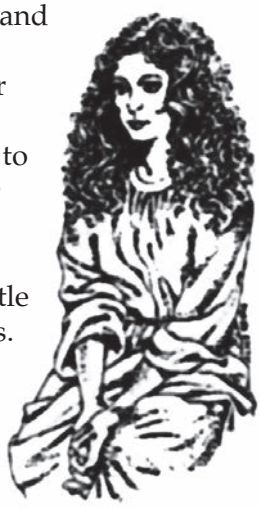
A few years ago, I overheard my retired-preacher father talking with a friend. Dad summed up his Texas ministry by saying, "I spent almost forty years trying to tell people again and again that God is not a creep or a bully." That is my father's very colloquial way of saying he tried his whole ministry to help people fully hear the words of the angels: Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of failing as a disciple. Don't be afraid that God is out to get you. Don't be afraid you are not good enough or that the chaos will win. Don't be afraid that hate and violence are slowly taking over. It might seem like it at times, but they are not, so don't be afraid. Be *not* afraid. Fear not.
–Shannon Kerschner

I'll just leave you with this.
I don't care how many angels can
dance on the head of a pin. It's
enough to know that for some people
they exist, and that they dance.
–Mary Oliver

For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists…but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages…in the stars but who in one way or another is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God's existence we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence.
–Frederick Buechner



He tiptoes into the room almost
as if he were an intruder.
Then kneels, soundlessly.
His white robe arranges
itself. His breath slows.
His muscles relax. The lily in his
hand tilts gradually backward and
comes to rest against his right shoulder. She is sitting near the window,
doing nothing, unaware of his presence.
How beautiful she is. He gazes at her as
a man might gaze at his beloved wife
sleeping beside him, with all the concerns
of the day gone and her face as pure and
luminous as a child's and
nothing now binding them
together but the sound of her
breathing. Ah, wasn't there
something he was supposed to
say? He feels the whisper far
back in his mind, like a mild
breeze. Yes, yes, he will remember the message, in a little
while. In a few more minutes.
But not just now.
–Stephen Mitchell,
The Annunciation



A Liturgy for Christmas Eve

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Processional Carol

"On Christmas Night All Christians Sing"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 133
Words and Music: English Carol
SUSSEX CAROL, 8.8.8.8.8.8.

Call to Worship

Lighting the Candle of Hope

Meditation of Hope

Don't be afraid. Be *not* afraid. Fear not. These are Christmas words for sure, but they are also some of the most powerful words in all of scripture for every day of our lives, not just for Christmas Eve, for this holy call to have courage, to *not* be afraid, speaks in direct opposition to the growing environment of fear that permeates so much of our lives these weary days.
–Shannon Kerschner

A Carol of Hope

"Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"
Chalice Hymnal No 163
Words and Music: Polish Carol
W ZLOBIE LEZY, 8.7.8.7.8.8.7.7.

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 9:2-7

Lighting the Candle of Peace

Meditation of Peace

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

Carol of Peace

"Her Baby, Newly Breathing"
Chalice Hymnal No 158
Words: Brian Wren
Music: Hal H. Hopson
MERLE'S TUNE, 7.6.7.6.D

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 96

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Meditation of Joy

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Sometimes there are no trumpets, but only
a slight shift in the light, the angle
of vision, the syntax. Revelation
can hover like a hummingbird, dart
in and out of sight, leave only
a shock of color and the amazement
all that energy awakens.
–Marilyn McEntyre

Carol of Joy

"Angels We Have Heard on High"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 125
Words and Music: French Carol
GLORIA, 7.7.7.7. with Refrain

Epistle Reading

Titus 2:11-14

Lighting of the Love Candle

Meditation of Love

Only a handful of shepherds, poor boys working a minimum wage job watching someone else's sheep overnight, saw the star and heard the singing of angels. Those who had eyes to see saw. Those who had ears to hear heard. That is the way it always is when God moves in the human realm.
–Richard Groves

Carol of Love

"A Child Is Born in Bethlehem"
The Hymnal 1982 No 103
Words: Latin Hymn
Music: Benedictine Processional, 14th Century
PUER NATUS IN BETHLEHEM, 8.8. with Alleluias and Refrain

Gospel Reading

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Lighting the Christ Candle

Today, we light the final candle on our Advent wreath, the Christ candle, which shines the brightest of all. Its light disperses the shadows of fear and doubt with hope beyond measure, illuminates the path of peace in a troubled world, ignites overwhelming joy that we may dance at the well of salvation, and emits a warmth of love that can heal the heart of humanity. As it shines forth as Emmanuel, fear not, for God is with us to show us the Way.
–Alec Ylitalo

Choral Benediction

"Silent Night, Holy Night"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 134
Words: Joseph Mohr
Music: Franz Grüber
STILLE NACHT, Irregular Meter

Sing Bright Seraphs

by C. W. Christian

The night is dark and cold
On these bare, stony hills.
Nothing to shield me
from the wind.
It gusts and ruffles my campfire
And scatters the paltry flame
Before my feet can feel its heat.
A curse on my profession!
Profession? Ha!
It should be women's work.
Something is troubling the sheep.
I see their dark shapes moving
Against the faint glow of the town.
I believe I'll move up-wind.
You'd suppose in all these years
I'd be accustomed to their smell.
I doze a bit,
But what they pay me for is watching.
Why? Nothing ever happens
In this god-forsaken place.

–Wally Christian was a theology professor at Baylor University who also wrote poetry, especially about Christmas themes. He was always generous in allowing Seeds to publish his writings. Our 2016 Advent/Christmastide packet was dedicated to him.

God of the Night Watch:

A Christmas Eve prayer

by Nancy Hastings Sehested

art by Sally Lynn Askins

We have stepped into this night desperate for you, longing for your love to show up. Send us one of your interrupting messengers to call out our name as chosen.

Startle us out of the predictable. May you find us as willing as Mary to say yes to your impossible choice of us to birth hope in the relentless terrors of these long nights.

We rejoice in you, for you have looked with tenderness upon our vulnerability and emptiness and still call us blessed.

Give us the courage of Mary to embrace the darkness, to live in the darkness, to trust the darkness, holding our own bodies, as well as the body of this church…the body of your love…with the stirrings of your new life in us, through us.

Quicken in us the stirrings of your womb creating. May we repeat the name again with assurance…Emmanuel…you, the divine in us, with us, and within your Earth-womb of creation.

Make holy these days, giving us courage to sing that ancient chorus that you have shown strength with your arm of compassion…and you will again.

You have brought down the mighty, terrorizing dictators from their thrones…and you will again. You have filled the hungry ones with good things and sent the rich ones away empty-handed…collapsing the damnable abuse of power…and standing us all on the same level ground of justice…and you will again.

Give us your night vision to see each other as your creation, made in your image, no less. Comfort all who weep this night.

Don't give up on us. Keep choosing us to body forth your mercy handed to us from our ancestors, flowing through us from generation to generation.

May we feel joy and peace that can't be explained or snatched away in the night. With heart and soul, with all that is within us, we pray and hope in you. Amen.

–Nancy Hastings Sehested is a minister living in Asheville, NC. She was one of the first female senior pastors among Baptists in the US South.

A Liturgy for Christmas Day

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Christmas Day

Using texts from Nativity of the Lord, Proper III

Processional Carol

"Break Forth, O Beauteous Light"
The Hymnal 1982 No 91
Words: Johann Rist
Music: Johann Schop
ERMUNTRE DICH, 8.7.8.7.8.8.7.7.

Call to Worship

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 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

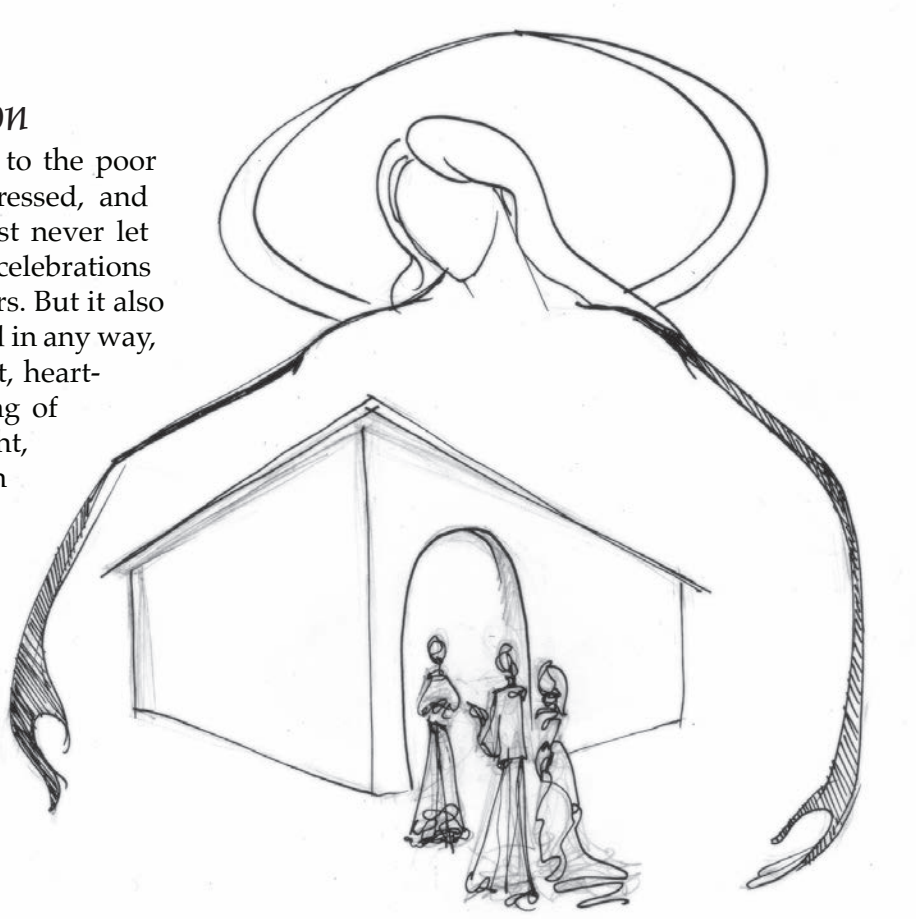
"'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime"
The Hymnal 1982 No 114
Words: Jesse Edgar Middleton
Music: French Folk Melody
UNE JEUNE PUCELLE, 8.6.8.6.8.8. with Refrain

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 52:7-10

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 98



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Carol of Celebration

"Jesus, Jesus, Oh, What a Wonderful Child"
Sing! A New Creation No 108
Words: Doc Bagby
Music: Margaret Allison

Epistle Reading

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

Gospel Reading

John 1:1-14

A Carol for These Days

"Go, Tell It on the Mountain"
The Hymnal 1982 No 99
Words and Music: Afro-American Spiritual
GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN, 7.6.7.6. with Refrain

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment

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

Carol of Joy

"Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No 102
Words: Isaac Watts
Music: George Frederick Handel
ANTIOCH, Common Meter with Repeat

Benediction

O glorious God, every Christmas we come to the manger, kneel alongside the shepherds and kings, and wonder anew at your Extravagant Gift. You have given yourself to us, affirmed our worth to you, and from your fullness we have all received grace upon grace. In the presence of your unconditional Love and pure Light, we yearn to be transformed into extravagant gifts ourselves. Please give us the wisdom and courage to be poured out as wine upon the altar for you, to be broken as bread to feed the hungry for you, to love with humble abandon and childlike joy.
–Deborah E. Harris

In the somewhat frenzied aspects of the season,
and wars and rumours of wars
and pestilence and hope and despair
and engaging the 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

A Liturgy for Epiphany

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Processional Carol

"As with Gladness Men of Old"
The Hymnal 1982 No 119
Words: William Chatterton Dix
Music: Conrad Kocher
DIX, 7.7.7.7.7.7.

Call to Worship

Lighting the Candles of Advent and Christmastide

Meditation of Preparation

Conversion doesn't always require
a fall from a horse or three days
of blindness. Sometimes we see
the light at the edge of the field
when the gaze is fixed on the teacup
or we are chewing our pencils,
Looking for a word.
–Marilyn McEntyre

Song of Epiphany

"We Three Kings"
The Hymnal 1982 No 128
Words and Music: John Henry Hopkins, Jr.
THREE KINGS OF ORIENT, 8.8.4.4.6. with Refrain

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 60:1-6

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Hymn of Light

"Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning"
The Hymnal 1982 No 118
Words: Reginal Heber
Music: The Southern Harmony, 1835
STAR IN THE EAST, 11.10.11.10 with Refrain

Epistle Reading

Ephesians 3:1-12

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

A Hymn for These Days

"Sing of God Made Manifest"
Chalice Hymnal No 176
Words: Carl P. Daw, Jr.
Music: Jacob Hintze
SALZBURG, 7.7.7.7.D

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment

Much of our public life is dominated by fear. So how do we know we don't need to give into that fear? Our Christian faith's response to that question is the whole reason we are here today. We don't need to be afraid—either afraid of our world or of God—because we have seen God's face. Yet not only have we seen God's face, we have seen it in a totally unanticipated way.
–Shannon Kerschner

Hymn of Purpose

"What Was Your Vow and Vision"

Chalice Hymnal 1982 No 177
Words: Brian Wren
Music: Southern Harmony, 1835
COMPLAINER, 7.6.7.6.D

Benediction

Fear not, the light in your midst will guide you to salvation and the darkness cannot overcome it. Carry the light into the world. When it feels dim in your hands, huddle close to those whose light is bright. When it is glowing and radiant, hold it up as high as your arms will reach and let the shadows retreat. Fear not; the light in your midst will guide you to salvation, and the darkness cannot overcome it.
–Erin Conaway

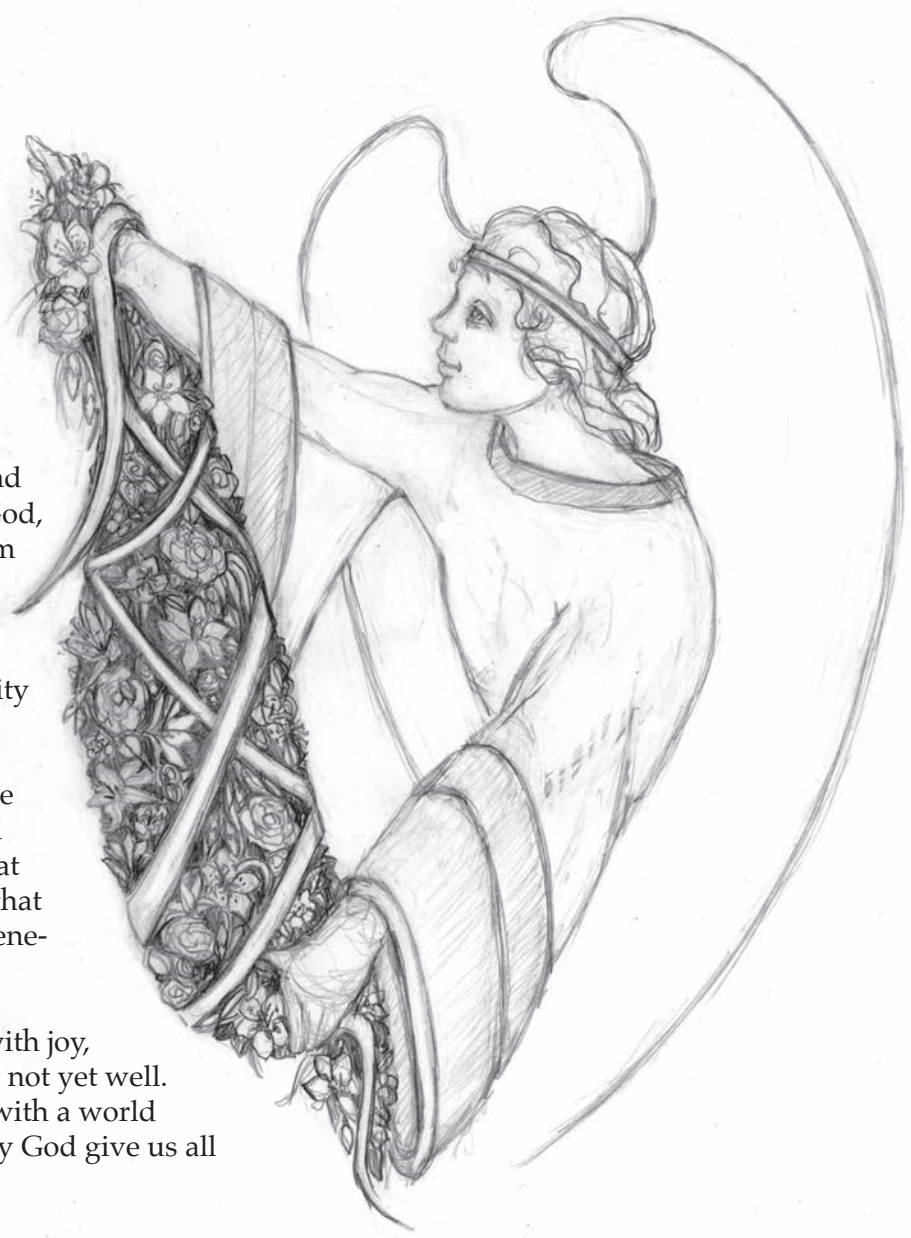
Epiphany Prayer

by Katie Cook

Well, Lord, here we are,
standing before you
On the last Sunday of Christmastide,
with one last chance to enjoy
the beauty of the sanctuary at Christmas,
the lights of the Chrismon tree,
the colors and sounds of this season
at this church.
In the next few days,
we will dismantle the tree, take down the lights,
and carefully put them away
until next November.
In spite of all we try to teach ourselves
About not getting scheduled into oblivion,
most of us lurched into Christmas
with our hair on fire,
hoping against all odds that
we would get everything done,
trying our best to appreciate
the moments of beauty
in the midst of the chaos.
Now, we're thinking, we're worried,
that the sparkle is about to be gone.
There are bills to be paid, a house to clean,
a job to finish.
We're wondering, is this
what you want us to do?
For just a moment, we looked again
into the Stable and saw the Child.
For just that moment, we saw a glimpse,
a brief vision of love and joy and peace.
We don't want to put that away
with the ornaments and
the cards we got in the mail.
We need your help to hold on to
the real work of Christmas.
You have given us a new year,
a new page on which to write,
a new vision, a new task.
We have a new chance to watch for your light
and listen for your word of guidance.
Open our eyes and ears, so that we don't miss them.
So much can be done this year, with your help.
We ask today that you make yourself known in our midst,
and for the days to come,
that you continue
to walk with us.
Help us to see
this new day
and this new year
as the gifts
that they are.
In Jesus' name,
Amen.

art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

Benediction



Let us go from this place filled with the hope and wonder of this season, with our heads and hearts filled with the dream of God, a dream that is born of hope from deep within. Let us go, holding the dream in our hearts and minds, with the promise to work tirelessly to bring that reality into our world.

Let us go from this place with the peace of Christ in our hearts and minds. Let us go into a world that is warring with itself and bring that peace to our neighbors and our enemies.

Let us go from this place filled with joy, even in the knowledge that all is not yet well. Let us go out and share our joy with a world that is bathed in sorrow, and may God give us all strength and grace as we go.

Let us go from this place with our fears quenched by the love of God. Let us go, clothed in the love that only God can give, loving our neighbors without exception and daring even to love our enemies.

Let us go now from this place and, as Mary did, ponder all the things that we have heard and seen, keeping our eyes open for the strangers that may be angels, and for the angels who may be there to help us; keeping our ears open for their messages.

–Katie Cook

art by Sally Lynn Askins