On Earth PEACE



Worship Resources for the Creative Church - Advent/Christmastide 2025

Sacred Seasons, *a series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis,*
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art by Pam Allen

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).

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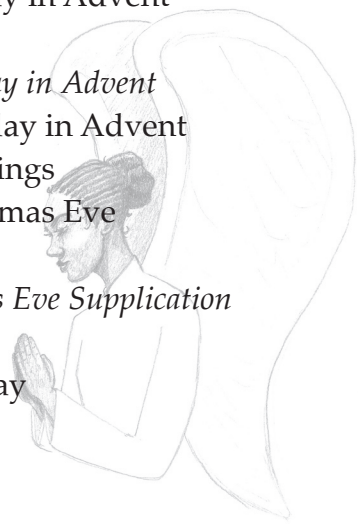
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On Earth, Peace

art by Scott Turner

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A Word about This Packet



The theme of this Advent/Christmastide packet is "On Earth, Peace." When the Seeds Liturgical Team first looked at the lectionary passages for Year A, the notion of peace seemed to stand out in all of our discussions. We thought the readings for the four Sundays of Advent fell into four manifestations of peace: Peace among all people, peace with creation, peace within ourselves and peace with God.

We tried to follow these themes with the four Advent liturgies. For Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Epiphany, we tried to emphasize the peace themes that are already present in the readings.

As we wrote our various pieces, one verse stayed in our minds: Ephesians 2:14, which says "For Christ himself is our peace." We are only too aware of the polarization of our society. Part of that passage says that Jesus has broken down the walls we have built between us. You may not see those exact words, but we hope that truth will come through all of our writings.

You will see many offerings from our 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. This year we are delighted to introduce the newest member of the team, Ruba Byrd. She is pastor of a Friends congregation in Oregon. Many of our readers have seen her writings under the name Jan Richardson.

As always, you will sometimes see the names of our team members, but their work is everywhere in this packet. Ruba wrote the theme interpretation and a meditation piece based on Edward Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom* art. Guilherme chose the hymns for all 10 liturgies. Sharlande wrote the litanies for the four Sundays in Advent. Erin wrote the candle meditations and the sermon. Alec wrote the meditations of preparation. Scott wrote an Epiphany prayer and created the art on pages 21 and 25. Ken wrote pieces that you will see all through the packet.

As we talked more about peace, some of the Waco people remembered the wonderful logo that Pam Allen created for Lake Shore Baptist Church the year the church chose "On Earth, Peace" as the Advent theme. The logo, a congregational (and local) favorite, was on a banner, a t-shirt and a meditation booklet. Pam generously allowed us to use it for the cover of this packet. We also have a wonderful new piece, created by Rachel Farris specifically to go with Ruba's "Peaceable Kingdom" meditation. Other art in these pages you may have seen before. It might be fun for you to know that the Rwandan Madonna on page 17 was created by Ruba's brother, John Richardson.

It was Sharlande's idea to use a choral benediction for all of the liturgies. We are recommending "Go Ye Now in Peace" by Joyce Eilers. Some of the team suggested a new(ish) arrangement by Lloyd Larson that is available from JWPepper.com.

All of this is painstakingly proofread by Ellen Kuniyuki Brown, who tries to make sure that we make sense. We hope this packet will be inspiring as you guide your congregation through a meaningful Advent and Christmastide. 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. This year, may we contribute profoundly to the hope for peace on earth.

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

On Earth, Peace

A Theme Interpretation

by Ruba Byrd

Editor's note: Our theme interpretation for this packet comes from the newest member of the liturgical team.

Peace is a theme we touch on every Advent season, most of us. We hear the litany from Isaiah 9:6 about the child given to us who is called "Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." We light the candle of peace. And perhaps this year, against the backdrop of national and world events, the words of the angelic host from Luke 2:14 feel especially poignant: "Glory to God in the highest, *and on earth, peace*."

"On earth, peace" is our theme for this packet. As we thought about the ways that we long for peace on earth—peace among all people, peace with creation, peace within ourselves, and peace with God—we considered these words from Ephesians 2:4: "For Christ himself is our peace, who has made both groups one and has broken down the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."

Everywhere we look, we see walls that divide us. Far from being dismantled, these walls are proliferating at an alarming rate, fortified by the worst kind of vitriol aimed at people we don't even know. Our world seems caught up in a frenzy of wall-building. It's far too easy to slot others into polarizing categories and assume we have far less in common than we almost certainly have.

Our worst assumptions can become entrenched beliefs that give us excuses to separate ourselves from anyone who doesn't look like us, vote like us, worship like us, or live in families just like ours. As we build the walls of separation thicker and higher, it becomes more and more difficult to see the faces or hear the voices of those we have relegated to the other side of the wall.

Yet, in the stillness of the Judean night, Emmanuel is born—God with us, God with *all* of us! And he comes to live a life among us devoted to persistently, insistently breaking down the walls that separate us from one another. He comes to bring *shalom*, that biblical vision of God's intention for all of creation.



art by Pam Allen

Randy S. Woodley, a biblical scholar who is also a Cherokee descendent recognized by the Keetoowah Band, says this in his book, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision.*

Shalom *is a Hebrew word, often used in the Scriptures to mean "peace," right? That's correct only if you consider it correct to call the Grand Canyon "a large crack in the ground" or the Pacific Ocean "a large pool of water."… Not only does* shalom *express much more than 'peace,' but the kind of peace* shalom *represents is active and engaged, going far beyond the mere absence of conflict.…* Shalom *is communal, holistic, and tangible. There is no private or partial* shalom. *The whole community must have* shalom, *or no one has* shalom. *As long as there are hungry people in a community*

Please see "Theme Interpretation" on page 7.

Lamentation to Adulation: Every Psalmist's Perilous Journey

A Prayer for the Brink of Advent

by Ken Sehested

"Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; behold, and see our disgrace." –Lamentations 5:1

Blessed One, whose name we dare not speak, but of whose Presence we dare not remain silent, we stand before you with hearts in shreds and hands frozen.

We know that we creatures were made for praise and thanksgiving. We recognize that gratitude is our natural home.

But these are unnatural days. Instead of Heaven's jubilation at Creation's unfolding, most of what we hear are the arias of agony and the cornet's sounding of retreat.

Sighs hover; cries haunt. And still your Face eludes.

Such is our distress: Our minds have forgotten the lyrics of assurance; our hearts, the melody of steadfast ardor. From all that we can see, joy has crashed against the shoals of sorrow.

In our wavering confidence—just short of throwing in the towel, to be rid of all aspiration for your Beloved Community—all we know to do is to prostrate ourselves, to petition your long-suffering Gaze, for renewed vigor and purpose and courage.

Remind us again, O Holy Spirit, of that design by whose pattern we were made. Call back to memory, Sweet Jesus, at whose table we eat and drink, of whose feet we are to wash. Call us back to our right mind, for clarity over the source and aim of our commission.

From the captivity of silence, give us speech; from our waywardness, guide us back onto the Way. Grant the needed armor to withstand the Deceiver's assault. Restore sight to fading eyes; strength to feeble knees. Lift our bodies from the slough of failed dreams, broken vows, and sullied virtue.

Let the morning sun again rejoice even when shrouded in cloud. Let every evening's dark descent be occasion for rest rather than fright.

Adorn us again with the expectation of hope; of might's manifestation in mercy; of the crowning of peace by the coronation of justice. Open again Heaven's portal of adoration echoed in Earth's just flourishing.

Gracious One, grant us the wherewithal to journey from Mary's annunciation, to Epiphany's acclamation, through Lent's interrogation, all the way to Easter's exultation.

And may our Ordinary Days be marked by both sweat and praise, and find us faithful in the ordinary work of clearing, plowing, planting, that we might winnow the grains of justice and reap the harvest of peace.

Now. Forever. World without end. Amen.

–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 the curator for the online journal* Prayer&Politiks.

art by Sharon R. Rollins

Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

–Peace among All People–

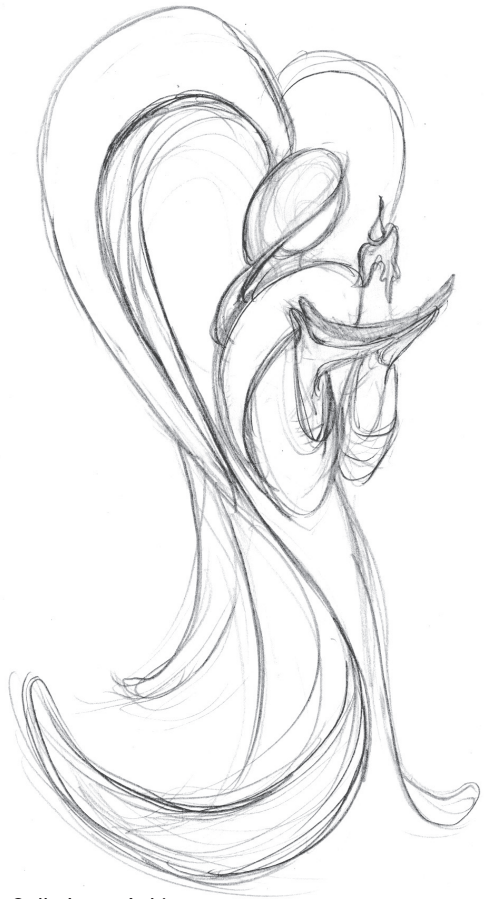
Processional Hymn

"View the Present Through the Promise"
Sing! A New Creation No. 90
WORDS: Thomas H. Troeger (b. 1945)
MUSIC: Roy Hopp (b. 1951)
FRANKLIN PARK - 8.5.8.5.8.8.8.5.

Call to Worship

ONE: We gather this morning in the name of the God of Hope.

MANY: The God of Hope makes the crocus bloom in the desert and transforms rough journeys into smooth places on which we can walk with ease. We look again this year for God's light in the darkness; we are always surprised by its glory.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

ONE: For so many on our earth, even a glimmer of light is scarce; some people may lament they feel beyond hoping for what they need. God is calling you to plant yourself in the midst of the dwelling place of hope. Wait there. Linger a while. Restore your soul. Tend those you love. Behold your God.

MANY: We will walk together, always looking toward the horizon for the coming of Christ,
who calms our trembling, who holds us steady, who carries the sure and certain Light for us.

ONE: Worshipers of many needs, what need do you bring to the Lord this Advent on behalf of the world?

MANY: Our world needs hope. "On earth, hope." That is our prayer.

ALL: O come, O come, Emmanuel. And when you come, bring hope.
–Sharlande Sledge

Lighting the Hope Candle

We don't often imagine something as simple as lighting a candle can be rebellious and subversive, but this is the candle of hope. Hope that we hold even as the seas rise, the storms rage, the ice caps weep and the droughts choke the earth. Hope that we hold as crops wither, garbage grows and the earth groans under the weight of our greed. Hope we hold with each simple act of care: the recycled bottle, the shared ride, the planted tree and the lit candle flickering its guiding light into the world of shadows.
–Erin Conaway

Meditation of Preparation

We begin Advent with shadows over our eyes and over our lands, blanketing the world in the all-too-familiar chaos that we have created. Over time we've beaten our swords not into plowshares but more and greater instruments of violence. Person against person, group against group, nation against nation, the walls define us and confine us. God of reconciliation, may we find your light of hope peering through the shadows, calming the unending ferocity and tearing down the walls between us all.
–Alec Ylitalo

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 2:1-5

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 122

Hymn

"Blest Be the God of Israel"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 88
WORDS: Michael Perry (written in 1973)
MUSIC: Hal Hopson (written in 1983)
MERLE'S TUNE - 7.6.7.6.D

Reading from the Epistles

Romans 13:8-14

Gospel Reading

Matthew 24: 36-44

Sermon

Hymn of Commitment

"Arise, Your Light Is Come"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 87
WORDS: Ruth Duck (written in 1974)
MUSIC: William H. Walter (written in 1872)
FESTAL SONG - Short Meter SM (6.6.8.6.)

Meditation of Commitment

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

Benediction

"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular



Theme Interpretation,

continued from page 4

that is well fed, there can be no shalom…. Shalom *is not for the many, while a few suffer; nor is it for the few while many suffer. It must be available for everyone.*

Friends, this path of *shalom* that we walk as followers of Jesus takes effort. The walls that divide us can't be blasted down. Working side by side, we have to dismantle them brick by brick. We have to face our barely recognized fears of who and what we might find on the other side of the wall. We have to understand on a deeply personal level that this is not work we can do on our own. We have to keep turning away from our comfortable assumptions and toward the face of Jesus—who never excluded anyone from God's love and mercy and transformation. *Anyone*.

We hope the resources offered here for this season of Advent strengthen and nourish you and your communities of faith as you take on the dusty, messy, sweaty, grimy—and deeply joyful—work of God's shalom, through the grace and presence of Jesus, who is himself our peace.
—Ruba Byrd is pastor of Eugene Friends Church in Oregon, her first pastorate. She is a lontime friend of Seeds. Our readers will remember her writings under the name Jan Richardson.

Ideas for Children & Youth Activities

compiled by the Seeds staff

Below are some ideas for Advent stories and activities for children and youth from brainstorming sessions spanning across the US and Canada and back as much as 20 years.

Mary Meadows, a pastor and former children's ministry specialist, suggests using the theme of lights, using things like candles and Christmas tree lights. She suggested asking them if they ever wake up at night in the dark, and how that feels—or even turning the lights off in the sanctuary for a moment and discussing the difference between light and darkness, and why we think of waiting in the darkness for Jesus to come.

Mary also suggests including the historical story of St. Nicholas. She has employed this story in her church in Raleigh, NC, where the children wanted to know how Jesus related to Santa Claus. "Why doesn't Santa come to poor children?" some of them wanted to know. It would be good to remind them that perhaps Santa does not, but Jesus does.

LeAnna Bryant, an educator who lives in Atlanta, Georgia, suggests using a "trick" candle in a children's sermon. When it is blown out, the light comes back. LeAnna suggests using this to illustrate how the darkness of the world can't ever blow out the light that we have in God and Jesus Christ.

Leslie Rosencrans, associate pastor and minister to children at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, gives each of the children an Advent wreath every year on the first Sunday of Advent. She describes it and explains the weekly themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. She gives them a booklet of prayers to go with each candle and encourages them to light the candles with their families.

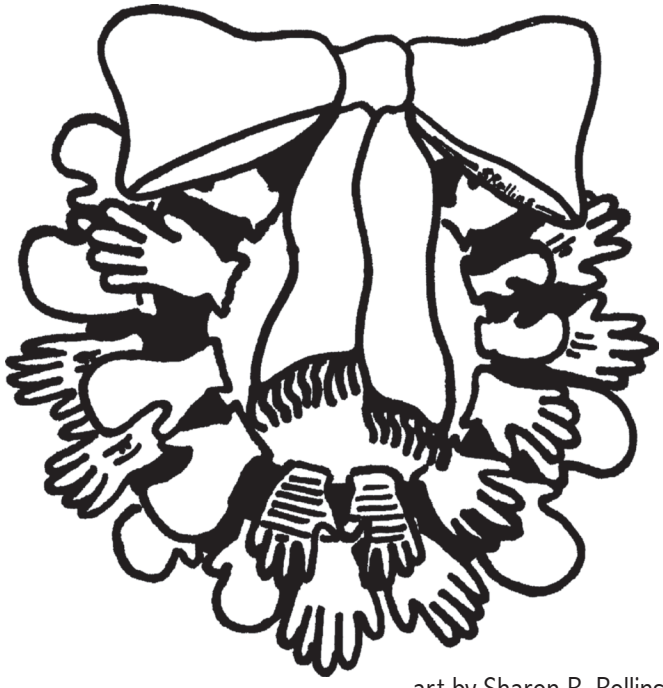
Mark McClintock, a former organizer of children's camps in Birmingham, AL, and now a pastor in Indianapolis, shared ideas for Advent activities with a justice theme. One of these is a "recycled" nativity crèche, made by the children completely out of disposable household items. An emphasis on the environment, with reference to John 1:3, "all things came into being through him," could accompany this activity.

Another of Mark's ideas is to give the children a chance to make creative Christmas cards, also out of household items (the point would be not to buy any materials to make the cards) and take them to a nursing or retirement home. The children could sing Christmas carols for the residents when they deliver the cards.

A similar idea would be for the children or youth to make cards and send them to the church's homebound members.

During one Advent at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, the youth and the Sunday school class with the oldest members met together during the Sunday school time. The youth had prepared Christmas stockings for the older members. They sat together at tables and answered questions (such as "What is your favorite Christmas memory?") that the youth minister had prepared. The session ended with a Christmas carol.

An idea which we printed before, but which is worthy of repetition, also comes from Mark McClintock. Ask the children to bring new or gently used gloves and mittens to your group's activity. Make a Christmas wreath out of them, using a styrofoam form (make sure it's the kind made without CFCs that are harmful to the environment.) When Christmas is close, take the wreath to a homeless shelter or emergency assistance center.



art by Sharon R. Rollins

Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

—Peace with Creation—

Processional Hymn

"God of Justice Ever Flowing"
Sing! A New Creation No. 101
WORDS: Kathleen R. Moore (20th Century)
MUSIC: Columbian Harmony (1825)
HOLY MANNA - 8.7.8.7.D

Call to Worship

ONE: We gather this morning in the name of the God of Peace.

MANY: God of Peace, you are the one who is able to help us unravel the tangled threads of the labyrinth we each seem to be able to make with the strands of our own life. Out of confusion, misunderstanding, and sometimes a sense of overwhelm, you call us to practice clarity and discernment and purpose. Each day of this year– and each day after for as long as we can imagine, you name us "peacemakers," children of God, for you believe that we will carry on the mission of Emmanuel God among us. May we never forget who we are; may we never forget whose *we are.*

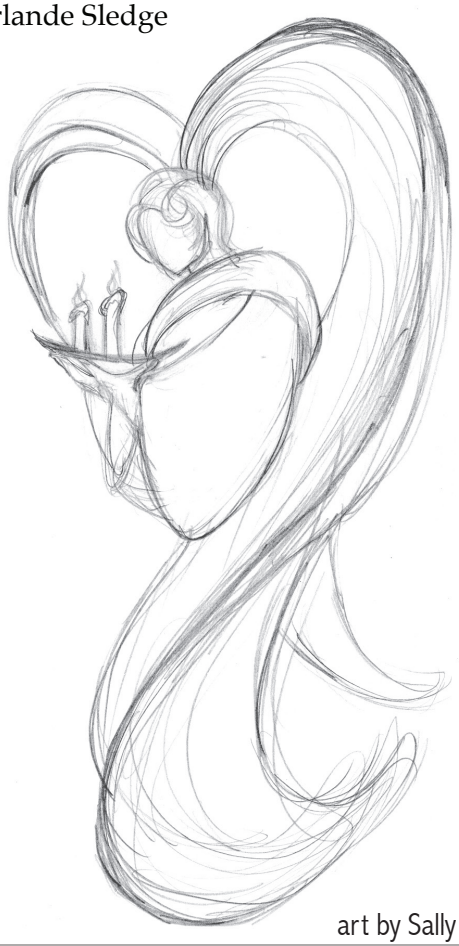
ONE: When Pope Leo XIV was named to the papacy, his first words were "Peace be with you." With those four syllables he offered all of us both a blessing and a call to service. These words are found within his simple words: *"In your grief or your sorrow. In your desire to help. In your ache for a more just world. In your faith and in your doubt. In your leadership. In your fatigue….* Peace be with you."

MANY: We pray for peace within ourselves, so we may approach our differences with others carefully and thoughtfully. We pray for our nation, toward the purpose of different cultural, economic, and political groups living peacefully toward making a home together. And we pray for the nations of the world, that we may respect the songs and the sorrows of those who may not inhabit the same patch of land yet share visions, purpose, and wisdom about how to tend this earth and its creatures. We are one humanity in your name, O God.

ONE: Worshipers of many needs, what need do you bring to the Lord on behalf of the world this morning?

MANY: Our world needs peace. "On earth, peace." That is our prayer.

ALL: O come, O come, Emmanuel. And when you come, bring peace.
–Sharlande Sledge



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Lighting the Peace Candle

Robert Frost writes, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall; that wants it torn down." That something is the call of God to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We think Peace is the absence of conflict, shoving into the shadows all who challenge our views and test our ordered life. Holy Child, you came to bring peace, deep peace we must make with our whole self and with one another. We light this candle as a guiding light to make peace together.
–Erin Conaway

Meditation of Preparation

We feel around in the dark for a path of peace to follow, but in the process we trample upon creation in so many different ways. Instead of learning from the peaceable kingdom that surrounds us, we endanger its very livelihood in the name of progress and expansion. God of harmony, may we find your way of peace exemplified in creation, following the lead of the wolf lying with the lamb, led by the childlike footsteps of the Christ-child, and building towards a kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven.
–Alec Ylitalo

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 11:1-10

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7 or 72:1-8

Hymn

"My Soul in Stillness Waits"
Sing! A New Creation No. 95
WORDS and MUSIC: Marty Haugen (b. 1950)
[No Meter Info]

Reading from the Epistles

Romans 15:4-13

Gospel Reading

Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment

We cannot make room for Advent unless we follow the path of peace. The journey takes us from the shelter of a mother's womb to the exposure of a wayward world. We travel by way of a shiny-eyed toddler holding fast to his father's finger, who grows into a precocious boy holding his own with the temple elders. We meet a young man who learns a carpenter's trade, and then becomes a teacher who would trade his life for any one of us, for all of us. Indeed, the way of peace is not without conflict or paradox. It is ultimately a matter of the heart. And where the journey ends it begins again.
–Deborah E. Harris

Hymn of Commitment

"Savior of the Nations, Come"
The Worship Church Hymnal No. 138
WORDS: Attributed to Ambrose of Milan (4th Century);
German version, Martin Luther (1523);
tr. Calvin Seerveld, 1984
MUSIC: Enchiridia, Erfurt, 1524;
harm. Seth Calvisius, 1594
NUN KOMM, DER HEIDEN HEILAND - 7.7.7.7.

Benediction

"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular



art by Erin Kennedy Meyer

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

The Peaceable Kingdom:
Embodied Shalom

by Ruba Byrd

In all of scripture, there is perhaps no more beautiful description of Christ's reign of peace than this passage from Isaiah 11:6-9 (NIV):

> *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

Here we see a wonderfully diverse group of creatures who would never naturally coexist. The predators and their prey are transformed into family—living together, even playing together, with a complete absence of enmity or fear—led by a little child who embodies humility, the opposite of the usual power dynamics inherent in human hierarchies.

Although there are many works of art depicting this vision from Isaiah, from third-century CE catacomb frescoes through today (including this beautiful interpretation on this page by our artist, Rachel Farris), the most well-known paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom are by Edward Hicks, (1780–1849), a Quaker minister born in Bucks County, PA. He traveled widely among Friends Meetings to preach, yet also made a living as a sign painter. Throughout his life, he remained uneasy about his vocation as an artist, as many Quakers of his day viewed artistic expression as worldly distraction from simplicity and "true" spirituality, which was focused on inward communion with God.

Yet Hicks was compelled to paint and, though self-taught, he is considered a major figure of American folk art. From roughly 1816 to his death in 1849, Hicks painted at least 62 versions of Isaiah's vision. In each painting, he places Isaiah's menagerie in the foreground with a child, often adding a background scene of William Penn signing a 1683 treaty with the Lenape Indians, linking Isaiah's promise with Quaker pacifist ideals.

In 1827–28, the Society of Friends in the eastern US underwent a schism known as the Hicksite-Orthodox separation, which centered on the relative authority of the Inward Light versus Scripture. Followers of Elias Hicks, Edward's cousin, emphasized direct divine guidance within each person, while the Orthodox Friends stressed biblical authority and the saving work of Christ's atonement.

Hicks aligned with the Hicksites, and subtle shifts in tone in his Peaceable Kingdom paint-

Please see "Peaceable Kingdom" on page 13.



art by Rachel Farris

Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

–Peace within Ourselves–

Processional Hymn

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 83
WORDS: Charles Wesley, 1744
MUSIC: Rowland H. Prichard, 1830
HYFRYDOL - 8.7.8.7.D.

Call to Worship

ONE: We worship this morning in the name of the God of Joy.

MANY: God, we believe that is your name, so in your mercy, could you give a little joy to our world? Surely you know that it is difficult beyond words for us to schedule joy in between all the other pieces of our lives, and we so wish we could put it at the top of the list. We admit that we bring you our prayer lists of those dear to us who are ill, or could use some soup and rides to their doctors; we could use some help with our finances and the rough shape our cars are in; and we're exhausted from the extra hours at work and the continuous reel of bad news about our nation and our world…. Surely life has never been this devoid of joy.

ONE: Children of God, be of good cheer! Paul knew his friends in Rome had seasons of life where joy waned, and faith felt stale, so he wrote them: "Be gifted in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer," encouraging them to experience joy amidst all their trials. This Advent, ponder how you will bring joy with you into the hard spaces, into the expectant waiting, into the afflictions and into your faith. Imagine Jesus with you, sharing in the bubbling up of joy and laughter as you celebrate his birth. Give way to laughter that you cannot contain! Relax when a word that settles in your heart like a quiet joy that only you understand. Imagine seeing the new baby in Bethlehem or feeling calmer once you received Paul's words in Rome. Be part of creating joy for others.

MANY: Lord, in your mercy, let it be so for us. May the joy of the Lord hold our broken pieces together as we expectantly await the joyful restoration of our lives.

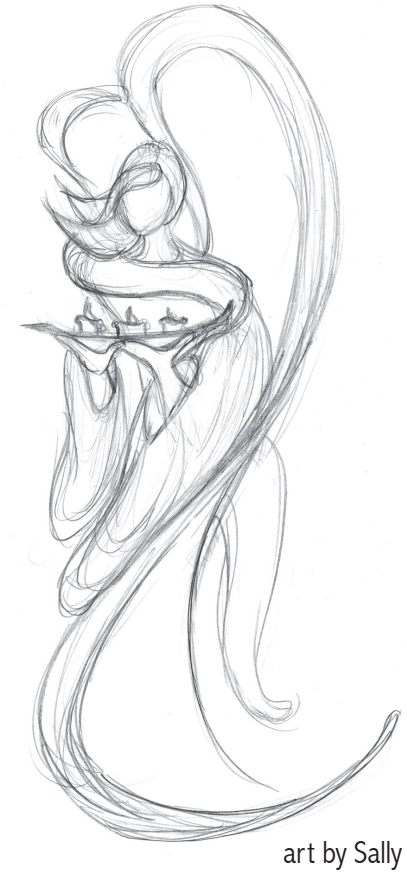
ONE: Worshipers with sorrowful and with swiftly moving lives, what is your prayer this morning?

MANY: Our world needs joy. "On earth, joy." That is our prayer.

ALL: O come, O come, Emmanuel. And when you come, bring joy.
–Sharlande Sledge

Lighting the Candle of Joy

In Death Valley, even brief rain showers can spark



art by Sally Lynn Askins

an explosion of color as flowers jump to life in the barren wasteland. Tiny sea turtles, as their first act of life, make the journey across treacherous beach sand to the sea. Oppressed people sing praises even in the midst of their misery. Joy breaks through. It surprises us with its resilience and endurance. We light the candle of joy as a witness to its presence in our lives, even in the most unlikely places.
–Erin Conaway

Meditation of Preparation

We dive down within ourselves to try to soften our hardened hearts, attempt to mend brokenness and despair and fight through a weakness deep in our souls. A lifetime of difficult choices, faltering footsteps, and painful mistakes threatens the most tenuous relationship of all, the one with our own self. God of wholeness, may we find your beautiful image in the mirror as we critique ourselves, being stilled by your gentle words of affirmation, and finding joy in being knit together even when we think we're shattered into too many pieces.
–Alec Ylitalo

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 35:1-10

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 146 or Luke 1:46b-55

Hymn

"Awake! Awake and Greet the New Morn"
Sing! A New Creation No. 91
WORDS and MUSIC: Marty Haugen (b. 1950)
REJOICE REJOICE - 9.8.9.8.8.7.8.9.

Reading from the Epistles

James 5:7-10

Reading from the Gospels

Matthew 11:2-11

Sermon

Hymn of Commitment

"Sing a New Song to the Lord"
Sing! A New Creation No. 112
WORDS: Psalm 98; vers. Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)
MUSIC: David G. Wilson (b. 1940)
ONSLOW SQUARE - 7.7.11.8.

Meditation of Commitment

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, bind our broken hearts and carry us when we're tired and weary.
–Brett Younger

Benediction

"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular

Peaceable Kingdom

continued from page 11

ings after that time reflected his grief that those who preached peace could not live in peace with one another. Before 1827, the colors he uses are brighter, and the animals are placed in a balanced symmetry, a visual sermon on the possibility of peace among all creatures. After the schism, the colors in the paintings become gradually more earthy and subdued. The animals begin to turn away from one another, sometimes overshadowing the child.

Yet until the end of his life, Edward Hicks persisted in immersing himself in that shining vision of God's shalom, of complete reconciliation between sworn enemies. The luminous expressions of his devotion have endured far longer than the sermons he preached as a minister. His commitment to both his artistic gift and his deep longing for a world restored to wholeness sound a prophetic call to us, as we ourselves are guided by the Christ Child into the way of shalom, the path of peace.
–Ruba Byrd is the newest member of the Seeds Liturgical Team. She is pastor of Eugene Friends Church in Oregon, her first pastorate. She is a longtime friend of Seeds. Our readers will remember her writings under the name Jan Richardson.

Who Is He? Who Am I?

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

by Erin Conaway

Text: Matthew 11:2-11

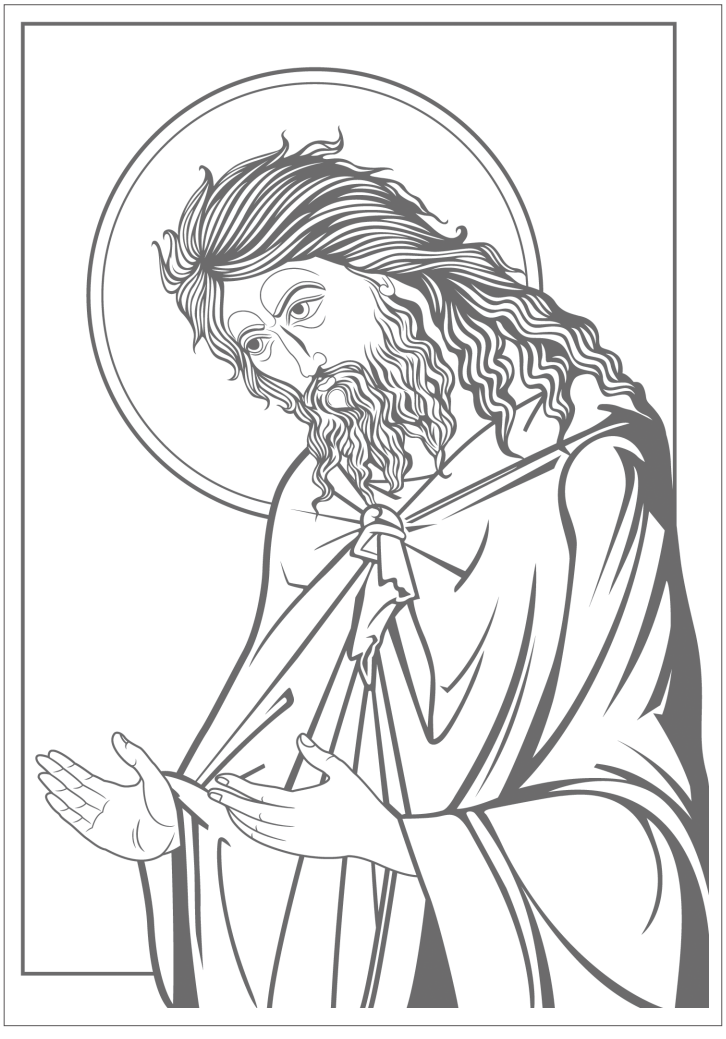
Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany. His father was a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Berlin and one of the most outspoken critics of the euthanasia program started by Hitler in 1939. Dietrich was steeped in faith in action from his earliest days.

> *From the first days of the Nazi accession to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer was involved in protests against the regime, especially its anti-Semitism, and despite another 18-month absence, during which he served as pastor of two small German congregations in London (1933–35), Bonhoeffer became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, the center of German Protestant resistance to the Nazi regime.*[1]

Bonhoeffer's own involvement became increasingly political after 1938, when his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnányi introduced him to the group seeking Hitler's overthrow. In 1939, Bonhoeffer considered taking refuge in the United States but returned after only two weeks in New York City, writing to his sponsor, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, that "I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." The next year Bonhoeffer charged that

> *the Church was silent when it should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ.*[2]

Bonhoeffer and von Dohnányi responded personally by helping some Jews move to neutral Switzerland. Bonhoeffer was eventually arrested on April 5, 1943, and was imprisoned in Berlin. While in prison, he wrote theological essays and corresponded with many. Here is a model Christian. Putting his own life on the line to stand up for the lives of others. He was a published Christian thinker and theologian. He was a pastor and life-long Christian, and yet, he too struggled with questions about his own identity and how bifurcated his true self was from his faithful appearance. He wrote a poem a month before he was hanged by the Nazis titled, "Who Am I?" He wrote:



Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.
Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands
were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers,
for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotism
and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends
at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking,
at making, faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone
weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions
of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

That's hard to hear and at the same unspeakably comforting. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wondered about his own sense of self as a person of faith, and he was on death row for living his faith out loud. Not only that, by all accounts he was a model Christian prisoner in the line of the Apostles Paul and Peter and many others throughout the years who counted it a blessing to suffer for the gospel of Christ. And yet, this stalwart man of faith lived with the same doubt, the same questions, the same fears you and I also share.

The selection of today's passage from Matthew's gospel is one of the most brilliant moves by the Revised Common Lectionary Committee. In year A, the first of the three-year cycle, on the third week of Advent, in our Gospel reading, we don't get shepherds, we don't get angels, we don't even get Mary and Joseph or Elizabeth and Zechariah—we get John the Baptist, imprisoned and in painful doubt and wondering.

That doesn't sound like the reason we all come to church in December. This is supposed to be the warm, cozy, cinnamon-and-chocolate, marshmallow-and-spices time of year when all is merry and bright. It's the highlight of the Christian calendar—the tree is up, the candles are almost all lit, the songs are melodic and familiar. Why bring us down with a doubting John text?

In year A, the first of the three-year cycle, on the third week of Advent, in our Gospel reading, we don't get shepherds, we don't get angels, we don't even get Mary and Joseph or Elizabeth and Zechariah—we get John the Baptist….

Because this is the Christian life—without pretense or poinsettia, stripped down of all the garland and ribbons. This is the Christian life of faith. Sometimes we act better than we feel inside or we live as if something is true even when we may be actively wondering our doubting if it really is.

John the Baptizer sends his buddies to go ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" John is asking this. John who was born to parents who were much too old to have him.

His origin story begins with a miraculous conception and a father who cannot speak until he names his boy what the angel told him to. His entire life was dedicated to following God. He lived an ascetic life—he didn't drink wine, he wore the scratchy clothes of a prophet, and he ate locusts and honey. I imagine you need a lot of honey to choke down a crunchy locust.

He lived the life of faith his entire life. He was so committed to his faith and the word of God, he preached against many of his family friends, who were Pharisees and Sadducees working in and around the Temple like his father did. You know

Thanksgiving was awkward with all of the uncles, after John called them a brood of vipers. But he did it anyway because he felt God calling him to do that and to say those things that would eventually get him thrown in prison.

Before that, he even baptized Jesus! And he knew exactly who Jesus was. He said I can't even carry your Converses, much less put you under the water. But he did. And he was standing next to Jesus when the dove descended and God spoke from heaven, identifying Jesus as the one—and not only that, but the one in whom God was well pleased.

Even during this season of light casting out the darkness, of watching and waiting, of joy and peace and hope and love, even now it's okay to ask the questions even while we're going through the motions of faith.

And yet, he had to ask—are you really the one?

Friends, if John the Baptist gets to wonder and doubt and be unsure, we absolutely have permission—and perhaps are required to do the same. Are you the one? Or should we keep waiting? The implication might be that he had been waiting for Jesus to start doing the Messiah stuff he was expecting him to do. Matthew says that after John heard what the Messiah was doing, he sent word with his question. Does that mean he didn't think what Jesus was doing was what the Messiah should be doing? Maybe. Or maybe he thought the revolution should have already started. I don't know what John's doubts were about, but they absolutely free me and you up to have them ourselves.

It's hard when Jesus doesn't do what we think he's supposed to do. And it's at least as hard when Jesus' timing doesn't line up with our expectations. Why is this person still alive when this angel died when she was just 15? Why do people suffer for doing the right thing? Why do people seem to be rewarded for doing the wrong thing? Are you really the one? Or should I keep looking for a savior?

Even John wasn't always sure—and he touched Jesus, he held him in his very own arms. He saw the dove, heard the voice and yet…. Even determined, bold, prophetic, locust-eating, camel-dress-wearing John wasn't sure. It's okay to feel out of synch with the songs of the season. So much of what we do ritually is to help us act ourselves through those seasons when our hearts can't believe. We do right and pray for our hearts to come along with our actions. And that doesn't mean at all there is something wrong with or less about our faith.

This is part of the journey of following an infinite God who cannot be completely known by our finite minds and hearts. We worship a mystery. If there were never moments of doubt or unsureness in our lives, are we really worshiping all of God or just the part we think we know and feel comfortable wielding in the world? That's idolatry—just as much as carving a little block of wood and bowing down to it.

Real faith lived out in the lives of real believers will have seasons of honest doubt. Take heart my friends; you are not alone. The greatest among humans, after seeing what Jesus was doing, said, "Are you the one, or is there someone else?"

Jesus told his friend and cousin and baptizer to look again at what he was doing. See, John, the prophecies are being fulfilled, just maybe not the ones you thought would come first. John thought Jesus would baptize with fire and the spirit, and we don't know what he meant by that, but it sure sounds like power and judgement and conquering the world's lesser powers.

John heard about Jesus forgiving the sins of a paralyzed man, and then telling him to pick up his mat and walk. You can't win a war with someone who's been lying on his back for years and years. He heard about Jesus healing an unclean woman who'd been bleeding for years—and then two blind men who cried out for mercy. You can't oust the occupying power with an army filled with women and girls and people who just started seeing things last week. He heard about Jesus releasing the tongue of a man who couldn't speak.

And then there was this love, this good news for the poor, not the powerful, this attention to the broken, the sinners, even a tax collector like Matthew. And John wondered. "You're not the Messiah for whom I thought we were making the paths straight. You're not doing the things I thought you would do to usher in the kingdom of God. Are you sure you're the Messiah? Did I get it wrong?"

He wasn't wrong at the Jordan or in his prison cell of doubt—this is part of what it means to be a believer. Even during this season of light casting out the darkness, of watching and waiting, of joy

and peace and hope and love, even now it's okay to ask the questions even while we're going through the motions of faith.

Was it a slam on the kingdom of God for Bonhoeffer to be kind to his jailers and tormentors even when that wasn't what was in his heart? Or is that what it means to be a person of faith? We act as if something is true in our hearts and in our world. When Jesus was answering the question, he didn't offer apologetics or some long treatise about his lineage and God's work in the world. He didn't point to his own miraculous birth story or the angels heralding his arrival. Jesus told them to report back to John what they saw and heard.

When you doubt—and you will—look for the ones who are healing the hurts, who are caring for the poor in ways that cost them, look for the ones who are finding new life even in the midst of death, and there you will find the work of Christ in the world.

Our actions matter. Even when our heart isn't in it—and perhaps especially then. For maybe those are the moments when our faith is strong—when we can behave ourselves back into believing. When you doubt—and you will—look for the ones who are healing the hurts, who are caring for the poor in ways that cost them, look for the ones who are finding new life even in the midst of death, and there you will find the work of Christ in the world.

In those places where kindness overcomes evil, where enemies are loved, where faith is put on like a garment—there will you find the warmth of the light of the world. There will you find the one on whom we wait: the Messiah. Emmanuel. God with us always. 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. *Encyclopedia Britannica.*
2. Ibid.

Into this world, this demented inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all,
Christ has come uninvited.
But because He cannot be at home in it,
because He is out of place in it,
and yet He must be in it, His place is with
those others for whom there is no room.
His place is with those who do not belong,
who are rejected by power because
they are regarded as weak,
those who are discredited,
who are denied the status of persons,
tortured, exterminated.
With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in this world.
—Thomas Merton,
Raids on the Unspeakable



art by John Richardson

Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

—Peace with God—

Processional Hymn

"The King of Glory Comes"
The Worshipping Church Hymnal No. 134
WORDS: Willard F. Jabusch, 1966
MUSIC: Traditional Israeli Melody;
arr. John Ferguson, 1973
PROMISED ONE - 12.12.Refrain

Call to Worship

ONE: We worship this morning in the name of the God of Love.

MANY: During Advent we are still quietly worshiping with a waiting spirit that knows our world needs repair. We set these days aside for God to nurture us and for us to tune ourselves to the new ways God wants to be with us in our world. "Come, Lord Jesus," we plead. "Come to bring us God's hope. Come to bring us God's peace. Come to bring us God's joy. Come to bring us God's Love." God's love holds all the others as Mary held her call from God – as preciously as the prophets held the promise of a messiah, as tenderly as Mary's own mother had held her daughter to her breast.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

ONE: In ways as numerous as there are lovers of the story of Emmanuel God coming to Earth, people have told and retold the story of the annunciation and birth of Mary's child in ways that spoke to the generation of people with whom they made their home. Sixty years ago – and during all the Advent seasons since – Charlie Brown, disillusioned by the chaos of the season, asks us, "Isn't there anyone who remembers what Christmas is all about?" Linus Van Pelt always responds with the story of God's love coming to the world in the form of a child. On *A Charlie Brown Christmas Special*, after reciting the gospel story from Luke 2, Linus quietly and clearly speaks truth into the confusion as he tells the story of the strong, pure reality of God's love for us. "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

MANY: That's what Christmas is all about. God's love that entered the ordinary world and made it holy. God's love that came to us in the form of a baby—the baby that Mary loved, the baby who showed us how we are created to love God, the baby who showed us how to love each other.

ONE: Worshipers who know the depth of God's love, what is your prayer this morning?

MANY: Our world desperately needs God's love. "On earth, love." That is our prayer.
May we share God's love in ways that are uniquely ours to share.

ALL: O come, O come, Emmanuel. And when you come, bring love.
–Sharlande Sledge

Lighting the Candle of Love

For God so loved the world…. This season of watching and waiting culminates in the arrival of love—love in a form we could see, touch, hear and understand. Christina Rossetti wrote, "Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine." We light the candle of love to welcome, to celebrate, to let the light and the warmth of love's flame into our hearts that it might also flow out of our lives.
–Erin Conaway

Meditation of Preparation

We cry out, God, over the separation we have created between us and you, growing the chasm as we continue to run from your calls for justice, fail to uphold your laws of love and sin our way to what feels like a complete cutoff from your presence. God of never-ending grace, may we find that your forgiveness draws us nearer to your heart, reassuring us that while we do falter in our responsibilities, you still believe in us to embody overwhelming love with one another, the creation that surrounds us, and even ourselves.
–Alec Ylitalo

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 7:10-16

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Hymn

"For Ages Women Hoped and Prayed"
The Worshipping Church Hymnal No. 143
WORDS: Jane Parker Huber, 1986
MUSIC: John B. Dykes, 1868
VOX DILECTI - C.M.D.

Reading from the Epistles:

Romans 1:1-7

Reading from the Gospels:

Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon

Hymn of Commitment

"Of the Parent's Heart Begotten"
The New Century Hymnal No. 118
WORDS: Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-413 AD);
tr. *The New Century Hymnal*, 1993
MUSIC: Medieval Plainsong
from Petri's *Piae Cantiones*, 1582;
harm. C. Winfred Douglas, 1940
DIVINUM MYSTERIUM - 8.7.8.7.8.7.7.

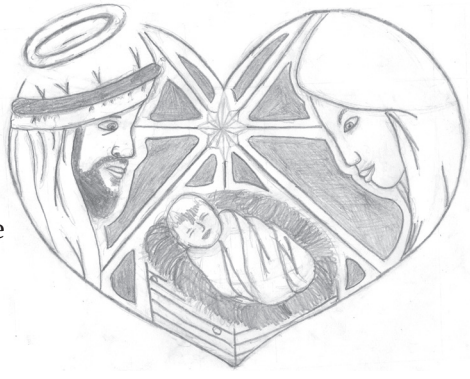
Meditation of Commitment

The supreme rule in the Church is love. No one is called to dominate; all are called to serve. No one should impose his or her own ideas; we must all listen to one another. No one is excluded; we are all called to participate. No one possesses the whole truth; we must all humbly seek it together.
–Pope Leo XIV

Benediction

"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular

Somewhere in the darkness
of our wisdom,
love labored once again
to show its cause:
how to communicate to distant people
something of their value
to the Maker of them all;
searching for a gesture
that might say it all,
love reached deep inside
itself—
and shaped a fragile
child,
took it gently
to a quiet corner of
the word,
and trusted it to people
too young and poor to
be spoiled....
–Daniel G. Bagby



art by Jesse Manning

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

In the silence of a midwinter dusk, there is a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. You are aware of the beating of your heart. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.
–Frederick Buechner

Politicians compete for the highest offices. Business tycoons scramble for a bigger and bigger piece of the pie. Armies march and scientists study and philosophers philosophise and preachers preach and labourers sweat. But in that silent baby, lying in that humble manger, there pulses more potential power and wisdom and grace and aliveness than all the rest of us can imagine.
–Brian D. McLaren

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

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

Miss Velma Westbury used to say, "If you just love the folks that's easy to love, that really ain't no love at all." She said, "If you love one, you have to love 'em all." That is the radical message of Easter. That is the glad tidings of Christmas…. Of course, some folks said Miss Velma was crazy.
–Will Campbell

Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.
–Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

"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



Lessons & Carols 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

We peer into the manger in expectation as we await the babbling infant who will grace our presence in the morning. The Prince of Peace, born to tear down the walls between us, inspire our care for the beauty of the earth, heal the scars on our heart and, most of all, reconcile our relationship with you. God with us, may we find our way to sit at the feet of the Christ child, and then, following his steps from there, learn to greet the world with his peaceful presence upon our paths, within our words and through our actions, so that Emmanuel would illuminate a way forward in a world that so desperately needs direction.
–Alec Ylitalo

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*



art by Scott Turner

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

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

Benediction

"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular



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

Way Will Open

A Christmas Eve Supplication

by Ken Sehested

This moment—from recent past
through foreseeable future
Is everything but merry and bright.
It's more like dispirited
and shadowy and downright mean.
One cannot dispel gloom
by tossing chipper cliches against the wall,
hoping one will stick.

Pretense is not just dishonest;
it also forecloses on the possibility
of Hope finding its way through the murk
and lather to align our
feet and reorient our hearts
to a precipitous future, a glorious
and unwarranted disclosure,
that might arise in spite of all

available evidence.
"How then shall we live?" is the proper
question—though it be more like
an unwelcomed mandate,
a task beyond our imaginable fortitude,
an unsought and



art by René Boldt

preposterous verdict, a too-demanding
and impervious yoke,

a consignment for which we are to surely fail,
spectacularly so.
Can't we sit this one out? "No, child,"
comes the response, in a faint
but assured tone, a voice like a slice of grace
and sliver of poise.
"A way will be made," comes the descant,
a calm word of aplomb,

a response not of callous demand
or inscrutable imposition.
Instead, a word of coaxing and invitation.
Way will open. *But*
what way?! I plead. Where? When?
How the hell will I know…?
as my trembling voice trails off,
as I search for a seat among

those who, too, sit beneath dark overpasses,
whose sitting
is not resignation but resilience
however improbable and
beyond all available warrant—
and share meager provisions,
tell our implausible stories,
refusing to suppress our lament

but at the same time sensing the approach
of a comforting
word, an invigorating and animating word,
a gestating word,
a word attesting its own surety.
Noli temere. Don't be afraid.
Noli timidus. Don't be timid.

–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 and is now the curator for the online journal* Prayer&Politiks.

Liturgy for Christmas Day

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Processional Hymn

"Angels We Have Heard on High"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 125
WORDS: Trad. French Carol;
tr. *Crown of Jesus*, 1862
MUSIC: French Carol Melody,
arr. Edward Shippen Barnes, 1937;
harm. Austin Lovelace, 1964, alt.
GLORIA - 7.7.7.7. with Refrain

Call to Worship

ONE: We welcome Christ into a world full of empty stomachs, a world of "us" versus "them," of borders and walls, and a world where hunger rumbles in our very souls.

MANY: We welcome the Bread of Life into that world: One who will multiply our loaves and fishes so all may eat, One who will break bread with the stranger and the outsider, One who will nourish the souls of all who hear.



art by Caroline Oladipo

ONE: We welcome Christ into a world we don't recognize anymore, lost and lonely, a world that harms and destroys, a world where rains of injustice batter us daily.

MANY: We welcome the Shepherd into that world: One who will gather in the scattered, One who will shoulder the wounded and sick, One who will guide all towards shelter and comfort.

ONE: We welcome Christ into a world that ignores the least of these, a world where the status quo is seemingly set in stone, a world that is fallen and hurting.

MANY: We welcome Justice into that world: One who will take up the cause of the poor, the marginalized, the lost, One who will turn over the tables of those who take advantage, One who will break the chains on all of us, on the world, on the law of sin and death.

Meditation of Preparation

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

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 52:7-10

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 98

Hymn
"Let Your Gladness Banish Sadness"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 121
WORDS: Slovak version of 14th Century Latin text;
tr. Jaroslav J. Vadja, 1960
MUSIC: Michael Burkhardt, 1998, alt.
HEAVEN'S GIFT - 14.14.6.6.14.

Reading from the Epistles
Hebrews 1:1-4

Gospel Reading
John 1:1-14

Sermon

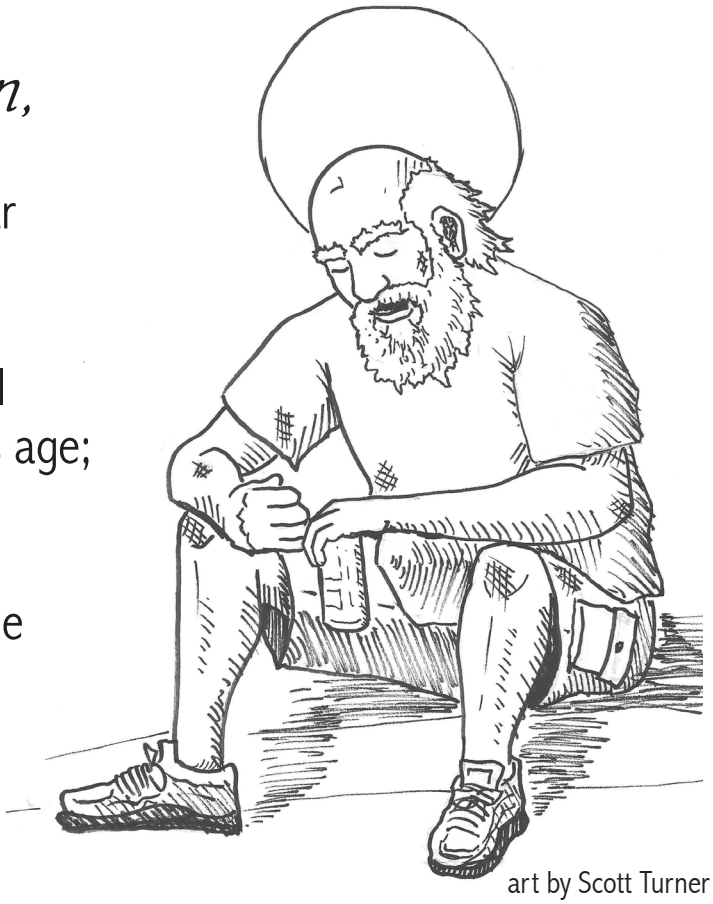
Hymn of Commitment
"Jesus, Jesus, Oh, What a Wonderful Child"
Sing! A New Creation No. 108
WORDS: Doc Bagby
MUSIC: Margaret Allison (b. 1920);
harm. Jeffrey Radford (b. 1953)
WONDERFUL CHILD, Irregular Meter

Meditation of Commitment
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 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

Benediction
"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular

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.

—from "Advent Longing"
by Ken Sehested



art by Scott Turner

Liturgy for Epiphany Sunday

by the Sacred Seasons Liturgical Team

Candles are lit before the service.

Processional Hymn

"O Morning Star, How Clear and Bright"
The New Century Hymnal No. 158
WORDS: Philipp Nicolai, 1598;
tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1863; alt.
MUSIC: Philipp Nicolai, 1598;
harm. J. S. Bach, c. 1731
WIE SCHÖN LEUCHTET - 8.8.7.8.8.7.4.8.4.8.

Call to Worship

ONE: Light of the World, Emmanuel, Justice.

MANY: No matter the name we call out, we welcome God incarnate into the world.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

ONE: We bring gifts that mean the world to us and lay them at the feet of the manger,

MANY: But it is the gifts that Christ brings to the world that will forever change it.

ONE: The brightness of dawn this day will only be eclipsed by the light piercing the empty tomb.

MANY: As we follow from infant lowly to resurrected one, may we learn the ways of humility, righteousness, and justice along the Way.

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

Reading from the Prophets

Isaiah 60:1-6

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Hymn

"Los Magos que Llegaron a Belén / The Magi Went to Bethl'hem Long Ago"
Sing! A New Creation No. 118
WORDS and MUSIC: Trad. Puerto Rican Carol;
tr. George K. Evans (b. 1917)
ISLA DEL ENCANTO - 12.12. with Refrain

Reading from the Epistles
Ephesians 3:1-12

Gospel Reading
Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon

Hymn of Commitment
"O Sing a Song of Bethlehem"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 164
WORDS: Louis F. Benson, 1889
MUSIC: Trad. English Melody; arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1906

Meditation of Commitment
We bring with us gifts of all kinds, not yet knowing what we should do now or how we continue to celebrate this miracle of the Divine in our physical presence. God of guidance, may we find the words of comfort that Christ brings to be soothing, the miracles of healing and feeding to be inspiring, and the journey from here to the Cross to be empowering. As we embark upon our discipleship, following the path of Christ from here, may the gifts of peace that you have bestowed on us this Advent season instill in us a strong foundation for our next steps along the Way.
–Alec Ylitalo

Benediction
"Go Ye Now in Peace/Go, My Friends, in Peace"
Voices Together No. 839
WORDS and MUSIC: Joyce Elaine Eilers
METER: Irregular

Epiphany Prayer
by Scott Turner

King, Born in a Manger,
We come to you today
with full hearts and great expectations.
We have welcomed your birth with songs of praise, moments of silence, and we celebrated blissfully with our loved ones and friends.

While we have celebrated and worshipped you, we know that our journey is not over. For there are powers in this world that see your reign as a hurdle to climb or as a leash to grab control of and manipulate.

Help us Lord, to be like the Magi. Devoted enough to journey and trek from afar to see your majesty, but shrewd enough to navigate the pitfalls of the power hungry and greedy.

Help us to bring our very best gifts, day in and day out, fully devoted to serving you and sharing with our neighbors.

Lead us daily, like a star in the night, for we have nowhere else to go, Our King, Born in a manger.
Amen.

–Scott Turner, an MDiv student at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, is minister to youth at Seventh & James Baptist Church and a member of the Seeds Liturgical Team.



art by René Boldt

Benediction



art by Jesse Manning

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?"

–Cameron Watts

At this writing, Cam Watts was pastor at Aylmer Baptist Church in Southern Ontario. Our readers will probably recognize his name from poetry that has been printed in Sacred Seasons *over the years.*