The Long Way Home



art by Rachel Farris

Worship Resources for the Creative Church - Advent/Christmastide 2026

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



Worship Tools for the Creative Church

Sacred Seasons is a series of creative worship tools to help raise awareness of hunger and justice issues. Once subscription-based, these unique packets are now sponsored and available to whoever needs them for no charge. To order, call 254/498-4997 or e-mail seedseditor1@gmail.com. For back issues or to donate, go to www.seedspublishers.org.

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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.

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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The Long Way Home

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art by Rebecca S. Ward

A Word about This Packet

The theme for the 2026 Advent packet is "The Long Way Home." We hope Trent Clifford's Theme Interpretation on page 4 will help you understand how we arrived at this theme. We discovered along the way that there are many ways to live out the journey home, as you will see in our writings, as well as the quotes and poems that we chose to include.

First, we hope Rachel Farris' cover art has already helped you begin the journey. Rachel has created most of our cover art for the past several years. A graphic artist and illustrator, she attends Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, where the Seeds ministry is housed, and where her husband, Daniel, serves as minister of music.

You will see many offerings from our Liturgical Team, which includes Guilherme Feitosa de Almeida from the Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts; Ruba Byrd, pastor of a Friends congregation in Eugene, OR; Trent Clifford, a writer and former minister in Waco, TX, one of whose specialties is now in theatre; 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 at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco; Scott Turner, youth minister at Seventh & James; and Alec Ylitalo, pastor at Richfield Christian Church in Waco.

As always, you will sometimes see the names of our team members, but their work is everywhere in this packet. You will also find a sermon by Brett Younger, pastor of the historic Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY, and one of our favorite sermon writers. There is also a sermon for Epiphany by Brian Ammons, pastor of First Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland—a Presbyterian church. Brian is a native of North Carolina.

You may notice several short pieces by Claire McKeever-Burgett sprinkled through these pages. We didn't have room to add her biographical information, but we want you to know who she is. A former Seeds intern, she is a writer and spiritual leader who specializes in books celebrating women in scripture and theology, using women's stories to help people to heal from religious and theological trauma.

Most of the art in this packet has been carefully chosen from 28 years' worth of Advent packets. Some of what you will see is work done lovingly for us by artists who have gone on before us, leaving us with a legacy of wonderful images.

We are grateful to Linda McManness for proofreading all of this material.

We are also deeply grateful for those of you who sponsor *Sacred Seasons*. If you enjoy and are able to use the resources, we invite you to donate what you can afford to help us continue this work and to make it available to as many congregations as possible.

Our prayer is that this packet will be inspiring as you guide your congregation through a joyous Advent and Christmastide. We are counting on you

Please see "A Word about" on page 5.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

The Long Way Home

A Theme Interpretation

by Trent Clifford

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. —1 Cor. 1:3

Advent, as we know, is a season of waiting. We anticipate the coming of the Messiah, which we often view as a destination toward which we are journeying. We turn the pages of our daily Advent devotionals, and we light the weekly candles on our Advent wreaths, marking down the days when we will arrive at our long-anticipated holy day.

While I love the glitz and the glamor and the shopping and the pageantry, there's always some small part of me that looks forward to the inevitable return to normal. Then, another part of me feels guilty for that, because aren't I supposed to be ENJOYING all of this?

Waiting, when viewed only as a means to an end, however, loses some of its power. Every year, I know I'm guilty of letting the weeks of Advent pass me by in a blur, and part of me is grateful—the holiday season sometimes feels like "too much." While I love the glitz and the glamour and the shopping and the pageantry, there's always some small part of me that looks forward to the inevitable return to normal. Then, another part of me feels guilty for that, because aren't I supposed to be *enjoying* all of this?

I think this year's theme, "The Long Journey Home," beautifully encapsulates this tension.

This year, we are inviting our readers and writers to consider the journey of Advent as a *return*. Perhaps that small part of each of us that yearns for a return to normalcy isn't something we ought to feel guilt for, but rather something we should listen to. Perhaps if we recognize this season as a journey toward a more regular rhythm, or a journey toward *home*, we might enjoy this altered Advent rhythm for the weeks that it comprises.

After all, if we believe that our home is in Christ and that our identities are bound up in the incredibly fragile newborn Messiah-King that this season celebrates, then we must recognize that we are not traveling new ground. No, we are returning to something sacred. That place which roots us in our shared identity as image bearers of the Christ-child. *(We are the clay, and you are our Potter. – Is. 64:8)* Advent, then, is an annual return to home, after spending a year traveling in ever-widening circles from this ever-important center.

Now, this journey home may look startlingly like a journey deeper inward. As Christ-followers



art by Rachel Farris

who house the divine spirit within us, a pilgrimage home in many ways is a slow and careful soul-searching. *(The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." –Luke 1:35)*

But whether we relate to the wise men who followed a star to travel across the ancient world or the innkeeper who followed an inner knowing to traverse the distance between a declined offer and accepted hospitality, the journey is not a short one. There is a reason we are calling it the *long* way home.

In a culture that prioritizes efficiency and praises expediency, this is no mistake. There is no shortcut back to center.

But whether we relate to the wise men who followed a star to travel across the ancient world or the innkeeper who followed an inner knowing to traverse the distance between a declined offer and accepted hospitality, the journey is not a short one. There is a reason we are calling it the LONG way home.

As I picture this journey, I am reminded of a prayer labyrinth. If any of you have ever walked one, then you know that there is only one path to follow, and it is winding. It takes you close to where you think you're going, only to take you back out to the periphery again before at long last bringing you to that sacred center, which in this particular metaphor, represents our home in Christ on Christmas Day. *(He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" –John 1:23)*

And yet, this meandering is purposeful. We are called to *savor* the slowness. In a world that prefers to barrel ahead, we are asked to wander deliberately. The *long* journey home is an invitation to be still and a recognition that we will get there in due time.

But the journey doesn't simply end on Christmas Day. The Wise Ones, whose arrival is marked by Epiphany, are a reminder that every end of a journey is but the start of another. The Wise Ones returned from whence they came after honoring the Messiah. And are we not reminded in this way that we are dual citizens, wading through this world that we presently call home while knowing that our true home is with Christ?

Advent may be a returning, but Epiphany could well be a sending—one which sets us on the inevitable journey home again, for in Christ there is no leaving, only a slow and steady returning.

Thanks be to God. *(Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. –Ps 126:2)*

–Trent Clifford, the newest member of the Seeds Liturgical Team, is the author of Reclaiming Faith *(2024),* By a Firefly's Glow *(2025) and* Reimagining Scripture *(2026). He is a writer, speaker, theatre maker, and spiritual director based in Waco, TX. A seminary graduate, he served on a number of church staffs before turning to the arts for his career.*

A Word about

continued from page 3

to adapt the 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 as many others as you can think of. May we all receive the challenge and inspiration that we need, this Advent, and may we all find a fitting way to welcome the Christ Child into a world that desperately needs him—and us.

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



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Glad Tidings

by Ken Sehested



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Sisters and Brothers,
bend an ear
to the singing of angels.

Not that of seasonal
carolers who pause
at lace-curtained window;
offering familiar and favorite
tunes in delicious harmony
and frosted breath;
providing splendid distraction
from the agonized arias of the innocent.

But of angels, who,
in the midst of
Caesar's endless census,
erupt from darkest eclipse
with unnerving news—
startling—
interrupting
private patterns and sanctioned order
with the disruptive announcement
of a New Order: COMING SOON
TO A NEIGHBORHOOD
NEAR YOU!—
unsettling keepers of every flock
with the overture
of swaddling-wrapped revolt:
Behold the light
for those who dwell
in the shadow of death!

Those for whom
this "world" is "home"
will take offense
at the herald announcing
this manger marquee.
As with the shepherds,
they will "wonder" at your tale.

But fear not, for
these are glad tidings.
Blend your voices
with the heavenly chorus,
singing glory, and peace,
to God, and for the earth.

Sisters and Brothers,
Rejoice! For
unto us a child . . . .

–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.*

Liturgy for the First Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Choral Call to Worship

"O Word of God, Creative One"
Hymn Tune: PUER NOBIS NASCITUR
Note: Sing the first verse of the hymn each Sunday, and add a verse each week.

O Word of God, Creative One,
whose language shaped the seas and sun.
O Holy Child, grant us your birth.
Come dwell in us; come live on earth.

O Word of Hope, how long, how far?
Give us your guidance through a star.
Shine on our road, though long the way.
Our holy journey starts today,

Lighting of Candle of Hope

Hope is not only the thing wished for in the future, it is the tomorrow in which we trust that makes today bearable. We light this candle of hope in defiance of despair. We light this candle because we believe in a future with God which shapes how we live and survive today. It is the future which connects us to the past; like Odysseus yearning for Ithaca, we look forward to returning fully to home, to Eden, to God. We live to be born again as we wait on the delivery of the Christ child.
–Erin Conaway

Hymn of Adoration

"Jesus Came, Adored by Angels"
The Hymnal 1982 No. 454
Text: Godfrey Thring
Music: Gerald Near
LOWRY, 8.7.8.7.8.7.

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 64:1-9

Meditation of Preparation

With trembling hands and shaking knees and hearts so out of rhythm that we are sure they are not in sync with where they ought to be and scarcely able to move us forward a half-step, we journey together down the long road toward the birthplace of your incarnation. And we wonder: Is there a word more powerful than our fears? Are we already more disheartened than we have ever been? Is *desperation* the word we see when we look at the faces of so many of our neighbors? Is *lament* the word we need to use for our gathered spiritual distress?

Some of us will tell stories, not only about how we traveled the long road to Bethlehem, but also the different way we left that village. Even the magi confounded Herod by going home "by another way." If we were to meet them in the city of David, some of us might tell about wandering



art by Sally Lynn Askins

without an end in sight as we looked for God.

Many times we urge on our God, who seems so slow. Others of us, trying to find our center, may have traveled routes as circuitous as a labyrinth. Or we may have heard from others that their travels involved risk, imagination, or change in direction. Others may have experienced hopeful stopping points along the way that may have made the way even longer. Who knows? What we do know is that we feel depleted. We need a new word that will carry us to the source of the incarnation.

Despite all the words we feel in our world, the word we need for our long Advent journey is "hope." We take a tentative first step on that journey with hope as our traveling companion and as the name of the destination we're trying to reach During Advent we may just hear it again.
–Sharlande Sledge

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

Hymn of Hope
"I Bind unto Myself Today"
Glory to God No. 06
Text: Attributed to St. Patrick (5th Century)
Music: Charles Villiers Stanford
ST PATRICK, Long Meter Double

Reading from the Epistles
I Corinthians 1:3-9

Gospel Reading
Mark 13:24-37

Pastoral Prayer

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment
We can turn on the TV, open the newspaper, listen to the radio every morning of our lives to hear big news, important news. But somewhere on the margins, every morning of our lives, there is something taking place that is far more important—somewhere someone is singing a subversive song, someone is demanding justice, someone is speaking truth, someone is waging peace, someone is beginning to love him or herself, someone is laying down arms, someone is coming out of the closet, someone is putting down his bottle forever, someone is giving her heart to Jesus, someone is standing up for someone else, someone is organizing others, someone is joining a community, someone is listening for God's voice, someone is pulling down the walls, someone is preparing the way for the Lord.

Maybe it's me. Maybe it's you.
–Cindy Weber

Hymn of Commitment
"Who Is He in Yonder Stall?"
The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration No. 168
Text and Music: Benjamin R. Hanby
LOWLINESS, 7.7.7.7. with Refrain

Benediction
It feels like the first step is the biggest, and now that we have made it, our hope starts to be rekindled as we see the signs that tell us He is near. May the long journey we embark upon today be one filled with wonder and awe as we intentionally take our time in finding our way back to where it all begins, step by step, with hopeful anticipation.
-Alec Ylitalo

What is hope
if not the very sight
of children gathering to learn;
adults preparing the way;
stars shining in the sky;
hungry bellies that are full;
broken hearts that mend;
tired bodies that rest;
trees decorated;
dances danced;
songs sung.

What is hope
if not the very prayers
we pray this day
for peace in Gaza,
for love everywhere,
for joy deep in our hearts,
our bodies,
our souls.

–Claire McKeever-Burgett,
from "A Prayer for Hope"

Liturgy for the Second Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Choral Call to Worship

"O Word of God, Creative One"
Hymn Tune: PUER NOBIS NASCITUR
Note: Sing the first verse of the hymn each Sunday, and add a verse each week.

O Word of God, Creative One,
whose language shaped the seas and sun.
O Holy Child, grant us your birth.
Come dwell in us; come live on earth.

O Word of Hope, how long, how far?
Give us your guidance through a star.
Shine on our road, though long the way.
Our holy journey starts today,

O Word of Peace, come with us live.
Teach us the language to forgive.
Reign in our world, make this your home,
a place of peace, *salaam, shalom.*



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Lighting the Candle of Peace

In a season of war and rumors of war, lighting the candle of peace can seem a fool's errand. Like standing on the beach in a hurricane with a match and good intentions. But, as Nelson Mandela said, "Peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is the creation of an environment where all can flourish." We create and keep that environment in our hearts, in our homes, in our churches, and in our world. Peace, like the Advent journey, is returning to our birth and our true home in God's love and presence.
–Erin Conaway

Hymn of Assurance

"The Lord Will Come and Not Be Slow"
The Hymnal 1982 No. 462
Text and Music: John Milton
YORK, Common Meter

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 40:1-11

Meditation of Preparation

The writer Arthur Gordon said, "There is not enough darkness in all the world to put out the light of one small candle." And now we have two candles. And we seem to have more darkness on this Sunday. How can two small candles carry us through the darkness?

We are not so different from the prophets of old, nor from Jesus or Paul and all the others who have prayed before us. We, too, address the silent heavens and call on the distant Lord we cannot see. We continue to urge on the God who seems so slow. Faithfully, like those before us, we enter again into the drama of yearning to set our feet on the road of peace and to direct our hearts to follow the long road to the incarnation.
Light seems to speak of peace, not darkness. Light is the essence of a hope urged on by the calmness of the peace God's Word brings to the world. May

we bring our prayers for the world to God, not only for hope but also for peace.
–Sharlande Sledge

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

Hymn of Justice
"Comfort, Comfort You My People"
Chalice Hymnal No. 122
Text: Johannes G. Olearius,
tr. Catherine Winkworth
Music: Louis Bourgeois, Claude Goudimel
GENEVAN 42, 8.7.8.7.7.7.8.8.

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

Gospel Reading
Mark 1:1-8

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"The Great Love of God"
Together in Song No. 164
Text: Daniel Thambyrajah Niles
Music: Elisha Albright Hoffman, Charoen Vijaya
THAILAND, 5.6.5.6. anapestic

Sermon

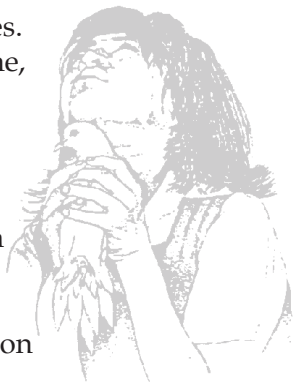
Meditation of Commitment
"Peace on earth" in the angelic message does not simply mean peace later—in heaven after this life is over; it does not mean simply peace with God—deep down inside your own individual soul. It means rather Pax Christi, the peace of Christ that begins here and now with the poor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

Hymn of Commitment
"There's a Voice in the Wilderness Crying"
The Hymnal 1982 No. 75
Text: James Lewis Milligan
Music: Henry Hugh Bancroft
ASCENSION, Irregular Meter

Benediction
As we continue our journey on the winding road back home, may we not be anxious about the next step, next day, next week, but find a sense of peace in the wandering. While it may still seem far off in the distance, may we find calm in the moments of beauty that too often we rush past on our way to greet the Savior.
–Alec Ylitalo

Holy God of earth and sky,
of light and dark,
of this time and last time,

We still pray for peace because
we still believe in miracles.
Miracles of body and bone,
marrow and music
bread and blood
hands and feet
breath and amen.
Miracles of childlike faith
and adult wonder
of light and love
of dancing and communion
of daring and diversity.
Miracles that light the night sky
even on the darkest of nights.
Miracles that stop a warrior's hand
even in the most brutal of circumstances.
Miracles that continue to lift the voices
of the weak, the meek, the mild, the least,
the last, the lonely, the lost.



Holy God of earth and sky
of light and dark
of this time and last time,

We still pray for peace because
we still believe in miracles.
Miracles like the one that brought you to us.
Miracles like the one that heard angels sing,
"Peace on earth and goodwill to all…"
Miracles like Mary giving birth
to the Holy Child,
Jesus.

Yes, we still pray for peace because
we still believe in miracles.
Alleluia and Amen.

–Claire McKeever-Burgett

Advent Prayer

by Jung-Hyun Min

Dear God,

Indeed, here we are… "realizing and looking forward to the peace of your presence like seeds beneath the arid sand waiting for the rain of your Spirit."

Just like you gave the seeds the ability to deal with day-to-day toils while waiting, you have also engraved in us the strength to live through each day's challenge and hardship and have us come together today.

Thank you for this amazing blessing of another today to be alive in your presence together. We know that it is not to be taken for granted, for we do not know how to number our days.

Though we tend to forget to count our blessings, and we often get caught up in fear and unhelpful habits, the Advent season allows us to remember the beginning of your deliverance for us, as Christians, and renew our resolution to continue the way of Jesus. And we are thankful.

Today, we are also grateful for the opportunity to worship you in music.

Thank you for the gift of music, this mysterious medium that is present in one moment but gone the next while harboring eternity in between. Through music, we boldly tell our stories and confess our faith together in ways that words alone cannot do. Through music, your Holy Spirit directly touches us, and we see your glory.

Help us to accept this gift and this worship experience not as a temporary fix before returning to the frantic cycles of our lives but as a new phase for your work in us—that which we call salvation—that will ring beyond this hour and this room. Help us to fully soak in your presence like the seeds soak up the rain.

May our thoughts and love for you expressed today, whether they be audible through our ears or through our hearts, be pleasing to you.

In the glory of your name, we pray.

Amen.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

–JH Min is a nationally recognized professor of chemistry and biochemistry at Baylor University in Waco, TX. She is a deacon and choir member at Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds offices are housed. This prayer was offered on a Sunday when the service was entirely made up of Advent music.

Liturgy for the Third Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Choral Call to Worship

"O Word of God, Creative One"
Hymn Tune: PUER NOBIS NASCITUR
Note: Sing the first verse of the hymn each Sunday, and add a verse each week.

O Word of God, Creative One,
whose language shaped the seas and sun.
O Holy Child, grant us your birth.
Come dwell in us; come live on earth.

O Word of Hope, how long, how far?
Give us your guidance through a star.
Shine on our road, though long the way.
Our holy journey starts today,

O Word of Peace, come with us live.
Teach us the language to forgive.
Reign in our world, make this your home,
a place of peace, *salaam, shalom.*

O Word of Joy, our heart's delight
that whispers even in the night.
and rises with the glad refrain
that cheers, inspires, uplifts, sustains.

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Hopefully, we've all had that euphoric experience of coming home. Whether it's a return to a childhood house or the feeling of being in embraced by someone who knows you deeply and loves you fully, coming home can give us unmeasured joy. We light the candle of joy this morning as a marker, casting light into a bright tomorrow and back on the progress we've made. May it guide us in elation at the coming of God's Incarnation.
–Erin Conaway

Hymn of Glory

"Lift Up Your Hearts"
Arise, Your Light Is Come No. 102
Text: Ruth Duck
Music: William H. Walter
FESTAL SONG, 6.6.8.6.

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

Meditation of Preparation

The angelic tidings of great joy greet us and give us direction wherever we find ourselves this Advent. As Eugene Peterson so beautifully interprets Psalm 19:7-6, "The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together. The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road. The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy." In Christ, we come face to face with the Joy of all our longing hearts. We encounter a holy joy not subject to whim and circumstance but rather a joy that runs deep and true, even in the midst of pain and loss and tragedy—even when we find ourselves on a long and winding road. This unquenchable joy could never be contained in one sacred season of



art by Sally Lynn Askins

life. We rarely know exactly which way we will be called to travel home.

Sometimes we have whittled "joy" down to the categories of pleasure, happiness or laughter. But the joy God gives us sustains us; it helps us breathe more easily and pause with contentment. A joyful experience has the power to last in our memory and cast God's presence over our lives decades later when it prompts us to email a friend we've not seen in years, delight in our dog's joy as we walk by moonlight or make brownies just the way we made them every Saturday afternoon when we were children—from a box.

When a new child in church comes and passes the peace of Christ, that's joy! When a bird flies into the sanctuary on Saturday and decides to stay for worship the next morning, that's joy! When you think of the pre-filled communion cups we used during the pandemic and realize we moved out of that season of so many fears, that's joy! When you sing the rousing "Joy to the World," that's joy, again this year. When someone lights the pink candle on the Advent wreath, that's joy!
–Sharlande Sledge

Reading from the Psalms
Psalm 126

Hymn of Joy
"What Child Is This, Who, Laid to Rest"
Glory to God No. 145
Text: William Chatterton Dix
Music: English Ballad (16th Century)
GREENSLEEVES, 8.7.8.7.6.8.6.7.

Reading from the Epistles
I Thessalonians 5:16-24

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

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 105
Text: German Carol (15th Century)
Music: Michael Praetorius
ES IST EIN ROS, 7.6.7.6.6.7.6.

Sermon

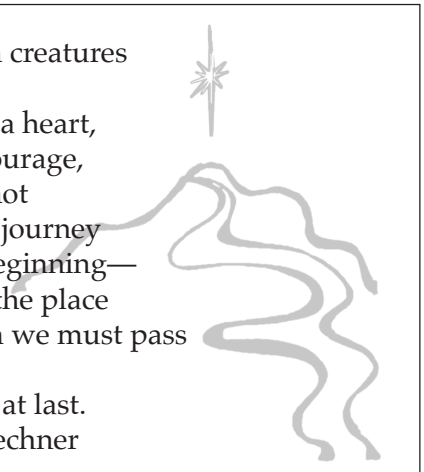
Meditation of Commitment
The Hebrew prophets invited God's people to celebrate even when things were at their worst. Six hundred years before the first Christmas, Israel was in terrible shape. Assyria, the latest in a long line of super powers, was threatening. The prophet Zephaniah [3:14-20] pointed out how bad things were. He criticized their religious foolishness, hypocritical leaders, and the way they ignored God.

Zephaniah wrote, "The people will soon walk like the blind and their blood will be poured out like the dust." That's not much to sing about, and yet the prophet finds hope. He concludes his book with this glorious song, this call to celebrate God's presence: "Come, worship, sing, shout, rejoice with all your heart. For no matter what comes, God is with you. God sings and dances. God celebrates the poor being loved, the outcasts being welcomed, and the journey home that we all share."
–Brett Younger, "Joy for Everyone"

Hymn of Commitment
"My Soul Cries Out with a Grateful Shout"
Lift Up Your Hearts No. 69
Text: Rory Cooney
Music: Irish Traditional Song
STAR OF COUNTY DOWN, 8.6.8.6.D.

Benediction
While it seems like we should be home already, there's a sense of joy in the realization of how far we have come and also how close we are to what awaits us. May that joy sustain our steps and renew our enthusiasm for the days to come as we wander with purpose towards Bethlehem and the good news of great joy!
–Alec Ylitalo

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



Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close as breathing and is crying out to be born both within ourselves and in the world; we would know that the Kingdom of God is what we all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don't now its name or realize that it's what we're starving to death for. The Kingdom of God is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse it at those moments when we find ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our own strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it.
–Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*

To an open house in the evening
home shall [we] come,
to an older place than Eden
and a taller town than Rome.
to the end of the way of the wandering star,
to the things that cannot be and that are,
to the place where God was homeless
and all [people] are at home.
—G. K. Chesterton, The House of Christmas

Lord of the excluded,
open my ears to those I would
prefer not to hear,
open my life to those I would
prefer not to know,
open my heart to those I would
prefer not to love,
and so open my eyes to see
where I exclude you.
–the Iona Community

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

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



The angelic tidings of great joy and salvation greet us and give us direction wherever we find ourselves this Advent. As Eugene Peterson so beautifully interprets Psalm 19:7-8, "The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together. The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road. The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy." In Christ, we come face to face with the Joy of all our longing hearts. We encounter a holy joy not subject to whim and circumstance—a joy that runs deep and true, even in the midst of pain and loss and doubt and tragedy. This unquenchable joy could never be contained in one sacred season of life, but instead journeys with us, no matter which way we are called to go home.
–Deborah E. Harris

The Way of Peace

An Advent Sermon

by Brett Younger

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Does the world seem scarier than ten years ago? More frightening? More stressful? Ten years ago in Bethlehem, tourists crowded the shops, restaurants, and churches, but this is a painful time to sing, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie."

Christmas in Bethlehem is one of the fatalities of the war in Gaza. Christians and Muslims have fled the city. There are no plans to put up the traditional Christmas Tree. In one church, there is a nativity scene that includes the baby Jesus lying in a pile of rubble.

> Nazareth is a rundown village in the corner of an obscure province. A teenage girl in Nazareth does not have a lot of opportunities. If Mary is like 99 percent of the girls around her, she is illiterate and poor. She has little experience with men, angels or the world.

We have multiple military conflicts fueled by racial, ethnic and religious animosity. The news is painful every day. What's happening to our world?

What's happening to our country? We have given in to way too much xenophobia, misogyny and greed. We take pride in racism, praise dictators and sell off the environment to oil and gas executives. We have not come to grips with our country's catastrophic addictions, alcoholism or suicide.

Every two and a half weeks we lose more Americans from drugs, alcohol and suicide than we lost in 20 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. If you do not win the lottery when you are born, in terms of the family you are born into, then you are going to have to struggle. If you are in foster care, you have a 2 percent chance of graduating from college.[1]

The turmoil outside seeps inside. We find it hard to cope. We have cycles of numbness, sadness and self-loathing. And we get angry.

The theologian Emilie Townes said, "Despair kills, demeans and leaves you mean as a snake."

Sometimes the stress shows up in our muscles. According to one expect, certain emotions land in particular parts. Shoulder tension is from responsibilities. Carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders is a real thing. Neck tension is fear. Upper back trouble is sadness, lower back issues rejection. Pain in your rear comes from anger.

Anne Lamott posted this:

For the last three weeks, my mind has perched on top of my head like a spider monkey on acid, and thought of more things that could go wrong, and whose fault those things would be. My mind is my main problem almost all the time. I wish I could leave my mind in the fridge when I go out, but it likes to come with me. I've tried to



get it to take up a nice hobby, like macramé, but my mind prefers just to think about stuff, and jot down the things that annoy it.

We know what it is like to have a spider monkey perched on our heads. We worry about all kinds of things. We try to sleep, but our brain will not stop talking to itself. We do not have peace of mind, because we are busy with our responsibilities managing the universe. We could make a long list of reasons conflict is winning the day.

The story of Gabriel's message to Mary is about conflict that's winning the day, worries that keep us up at night, and stress we feel in our back. Luke's Christmas story begins with an evil king. The Roman emperor acts with total power, while God is at work with people who do not get to vote. Nazareth is a rundown village in the corner of an obscure province. A teenage girl in Nazareth does not have a lot of opportunities. If Mary is like 99 percent of the girls around her, she is illiterate and poor. She has little experience with men, angels or the world.

Gabriel flies through the night so silently that nobody notices. The angel goes to a tiny house, to a woman who is sleeping, dreaming of the man to whom she is engaged. She is not old enough to be expecting a child, but she is old enough to be dreaming about her wedding. She did not need a big wedding, but even small weddings in Nazareth were big events. The whole town shuts down for a couple days of eating too much, dancing too late and singing too loud.

Gabriel tiptoes into the room as if he is an intruder. He straightens his robe, and takes a deep breath. The angel stands there without a sound looking at this young, innocent girl. Is this the right place?

When Gabriel first speaks, it is so quiet that Mary does not hear. Mary thinks she might have heard something—maybe the wind. She rolls over and pulls the blanket over her head.

God whispers to Gabriel, "What are you waiting for? Talk to her."

The angel sounds apologetic, "Wake up, favored one. God is with you."

Mary is afraid.

God whispers, "Gabriel, tell her not to be afraid."

Gabriel's voice is like the sound of snow falling, "Don't be afraid."

Mary will hang on to those words, "Don't be afraid."

How many times after stomach pains, or a fall, or not feeling the baby move for a while must the distressed thought "something isn't right" take over her mind like a spider monkey?

Mary is shaking, but the angel says, even more gently, "I know how this sounds, but you're going to have a baby. You'll name him Jesus."

> We practice peace, but we recognize that ultimately peace does not depend on the meager peace we can and should share, but on God coming with peace that will last forever. We live as if the world is better than it is.

Mary is sure she heard wrong—a baby?—"What's going on?"

God says, "Gabriel, tell her what's going on."

The angel almost sings the next part, "Mary, your child will be great, the son of the Highest, the long-awaited one, a reign that goes on forever, a kingdom that has no boundaries."

Gabriel makes it sound wonderful, but Mary knows a baby will make her life harder. Then Mary thinks she has come up with a loophole. She knows that a baby does not fit the facts of her relationship to Joseph. She starts to explain to Gabriel—who is an angel after all—the process by which human babies are conceived.

The angel says, "It's going to be God's child. Elizabeth is having a baby, too. You know how old she is. No one would've thought that was possible either."

The future of creation hangs on the response of a ninth grader. Mary wishes that she was older or somehow more prepared—though it is hard to imagine how anyone could prepare for such a thing. None of her dreams included walking down the aisle in a wedding dress that has been altered because she is pregnant. The neighbors are not going to do any overeating, two-stepping or serenading for an expectant mother.

Mary has to decide whether to take hold of the unknown life the angel has not described with much detail. It is not completely clear if Mary has a choice. Could she say no? Could she close her eyes and refuse to open them until the angel leaves? Could she go back to sleep and pretend nothing happened?

Mary's response is amazing: "I am God's servant, body, and soul. Let it happen just like you said."

God smiles and Mary's life gets much harder.

Pope Benedict XVI said, "Mary's yes to God was not just an act of submission, but an act of profound trust and love. She knew that God's plan for her was greater than anything she could have imagined for herself."

God invites us like God invites Mary, to not know exactly what we are expecting and say "yes" anyway. We do not have to change the world, but we do have to make a difference.

Sometimes the difference between stress and tranquility is who we think is in charge. The difference between a tense day and a hopeful day is perspective. The difference between feeling conflicted and feeling peace is recognizing God with us.

The Christmas story is for frightened, stressed-out people. Christmas starts with the belief that God will set things right in a way that we will never accomplish on our own. We practice peace, but we recognize that ultimately peace does not depend on the meager peace we can and should share, but on God coming with peace that will last forever. We live as if the world is better than it is. We live rehearsing in the hope of peace. We understand the worst of humanity, as well as the best. We are in awe of courage, as well as evil.

Nicholas Krystof tells the terrible, amazing story of Mukhtar Mai.

She lives in Mirwallah, a tiny village in Pakistan. Mukhtar was sentenced by her village council to be raped because of something that her younger brother supposedly had done, and, in fact, probably had not done. But the village council carried out the order. They gang raped Mukhtar. Their expectation was that she would then kill herself out of shame.

Instead, Mukhtar prosecuted her attackers. She sent them to prison. She used the compensation money for this horrible crime to start the first school in her village, because she believed that education was the best way to fight the misogyny and cruelty that led to her being victimized. Then she enrolled the children of her attackers in her school. That village is a testament to the evil that people are capable of, and to one woman's incredible courage and goodness.

God invites us like God invites Mary, to not know exactly what we are expecting and say "yes" anyway. We do not have to change the world, but we do have to make a difference. When our church helps migrants, we do not solve the migrant crisis, but we make a difference, one person at a time. Each one of us has the capacity to make a difference.

We pray for peace in the world and with our neighbor. We volunteer with our churches' ministries to the most vulnerable. We put more than spare change into the offering plate. We give to the toy drive. We think more about what others have done for us than about what we have done for them. We move past what the world owes us to what we owe the world. We love children who are challenging. We care for parents who do not want to be parented.

We choose not to offer thinly veiled criticism. We open our eyes and see God's goodness.

In the post that begins with spider monkeys, Anne Lamott closes with:

> *Moses led his people in circles for 40 years so they could get ready for the Promised Land, because they had too many ideas and preconceptions about what a nice Promised Land should look like. In these cold, dark days, we have to sit in our own anxiety and funkiness long enough to know what a Promised Land would be like. The Promised Land would definitely be outside my comfort zone, larger than us and our anxieties and ferocious need to control.*
>
> *The Promised Land would be good old love, caring, generosity, a heart for each other's suffering, regardless of party affiliation, the responsibility we take for others, the kindness, marbled into our shared histories like a flavor streaked through the batter of our prejudices, catastrophic thinking, character defects, hidden and on the surface. Things get badly broken—they always do—and children always yap and stamp and cry and glower, and demand all your attention.*
>
> *The brokenness and mess are called real life, and it's cracked and fragile, but the glue for me is the beating of my heart, and love. So now is the perfect time to look away from the hatred and madness, to give as we are able, to plant bulbs and scatter seeds, in the hope that some of*

Please see "Advent Sermon" on page 19.

Liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Choral Call to Worship

"O Word of God, Creative One"
Hymn Tune: PUER NOBIS NASCITUR
Note: Sing the first verse of the hymn each Sunday, and add a verse each week.

O Word of God, Creative One,
whose language shaped the seas and sun.
O Holy Child, grant us your birth.
Come dwell in us; come live on earth.

O Word of Hope, how long, how far?
Give us your guidance through a star.
Shine on our road, though long the way.
Our holy journey starts today,

O Word of Peace, come with us live.
Teach us the language to forgive.
Reign in our world, make this your home,
a place of peace, *salaam, shalom.*



art by Sally Lynn Askins

O Word of Joy, our heart's delight
that whispers even in the night.
and rises with the glad refrain
that cheers, inspires, uplifts, sustains.

O Word of Love, always the same.
You've written on our lives your name.
You came, a little child on earth.
You risked your love for our new birth.

Lighting the Candle of Love

Home is nothing without love. Coming home is wispy nostalgia if it doesn't evoke memories of real love. Our journey is back to Eden, back to the original blessing when God said we were good, back to Mount Sinai when the people worshipped, back to this moment in time when the baby's first cry pierced the darkness and the angels sang his wondrous arrival.
–Erin Conaway

Hymn of Expectation

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"
Lift Up Your Hearts No. 56
Text: Charles Wesley
Music: Christian F. Witt's "Psalmodia Sacra" (1715)
STUTTGART, 8.7.8.7.

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Meditation of Preparation

We have journeyed week by week through Advent. Today is the Sunday closest to the sacred event of the Incarnation. As Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me. It is further from being explainable than the farthest star in the farthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love, enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus the Christ, fully human and fully divine. Wherever the Child is born in a heart,

wherever Jesus begins his earthly life anew—that is where the life of God's love and of God's peace dawn's again."
–Sharlande Sledge

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

Hymn of Gratitude
"My Soul Gives Glory to My God"
Chalice Hymnal No. 130
Text: Miriam Therese Winter
Music: Charles H. Webb
MORNING SONG, Common Meter

Reading from the Epistles
Romans 16:25-27

First Gospel Reading
Luke 1:26-38

Second Gospel Reading
Luke 1:46b-55

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory
"Mary, Woman of the Promise"
The New Century Hymnal No. 123
Text: Mary Frances Fleischaker
Music: Ralph Vaughan Williams
QUEM PASTORES, 8.7.8.7.

Sermon

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

Hymn of Commitment
"My Song Forever Shall Record"
Glory to God No. 67
Text: The New Metrical Version of the Psalms (1909)
Music: Michael Praetorius, George Ratcliffe Woodward
PUER NOBIS NASCITUR, Long Meter

Benediction
Can you sense the love that is rising over the next hill where the dawn will break the silent night? We are almost home at the foot of the manger where life and light will all begin again. May we be guided on this final leg of the journey by the heart of the season, the heart of our faith, the heart of the Divine which is about to overflow into this world.
–Alec Ylitalo



Advent Sermon,
continued from page 17

them will grow. We'll rise up when we're stronger and less crazed. For now, we show up when we're needed, with grit and kindness. We try to help. We prepare for an end to the despair. And we do this together.

You and I need God's peace. We need to give our fear and frustration to God. We are never going to get all the pieces of the puzzle together, but we recognize that there is a bigger, better picture to see, the peace that will last forever.
–Brett Younger, a generous and frequent contributor to Sacred Seasons, has pastored a number of churches in Indiana and Texas, and now serves as pastor of the historic Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY. Before moving to Brooklyn, he taught homiletics at McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, GA. He has written numerous books and is much sought after for his thoughtful editorial writings.

Endnote
1. Nicholas Krystof on Kate Bowler's podcast, *Everything Happens*.

Las Posadas

Activities for Children & Youth

by Ruba Byrd

This year, we suggest involving children and youth in the 2026 theme, "The Long Way Home," through the traditional Mexican and US Southwest celebration of *Las Posadas*. Las Posadas means, literally, "the inns." Begun in Franciscan missions in Mexico some 500 years ago, these celebrations take place on the nine days before Christmas Eve (*Noche Buena*, or "Holy Night"). Each Posada is a dramatic re-enactment of Joseph and Mary—*Los Peregrinos* (the pilgrims) *San José y la Virgen María*—looking for lodging in Bethlehem.

Each night, a procession makes its way from a church through the town led by a child dressed as an angel, with other children dressed in robes and carrying lit candles or lanterns and images of Mary and Joseph riding a donkey. Adults, including musicians, follow the children as they stop at different homes asking for lodging for Mary and Joseph. They are turned away until they arrive at the last house. There the pilgrims are welcomed in and given refreshments. They might sing and pray around a nativity scene, and the party might end when the children break open piñatas crafted in the form of a seven-sided Star of Bethlehem filled with candy and toys.

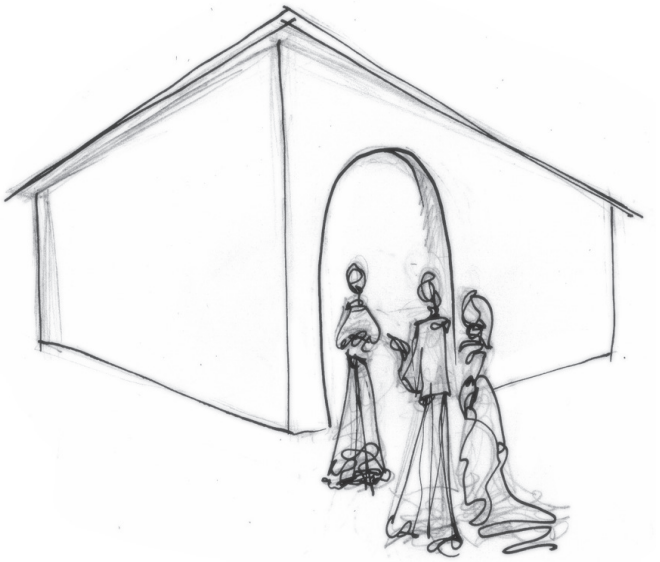
The ancient Posadas were observed to remind the faithful that the parents of the Baby Jesus were homeless, and that the family also became refugees to Egypt after Jesus' birth. There are a number of ways that children and youth can experience this celebration and share it with your congregation to raise awareness of those in your community who might be refugees or struggling to find adequate shelter.

The ancient Posadas were observed to remind the faithful that the parents of the Baby Jesus were homeless, and that the family also became refugees to Egypt after Jesus' birth. There are a number of ways that children and youth can experience this celebration and share it with your congregation to raise awareness of those in your community who might be refugees or struggling to find adequate shelter.

Use the following suggestions to create either a simple or a more elaborate celebration of Las Posadas that fits your children and youth. The description of how to offer a children's sermon in morning worship can work just as well acted out during children's church or a lesson time. If your kids put on a nativity play for the congregation each year, as many churches do, you can use the Las Posadas processional at the beginning, as a way to get Mary and Joseph to the stable.

Preparation

Determine who will be Mary and who will be Joseph, then designate the other children (and/or willing youth and adults) to be innkeepers who are scattered throughout the congregation. You can have as few as three or four "inns" where the procession stops or as many as you want, given the time allotted and the number of available players. If you have only a few kids involved, invite youth and adults to be innkeepers. For a large group of



art by Sally Lynn Askins

kids, put two or more innkeepers at each stop, or add pilgrims to the processional.

Costumes are optional, but even simple biblical head coverings—at least for Mary and Joseph—can help create a festive atmosphere. Any of the nativity characters (angels, shepherds, magi) are appropriate. If your kids enjoy dressing up and you have the resources to put everyone in a costume, go for it! If the kids made luminarias (lanterns) beforehand (see the craft activity on this page), they can carry them in the procession or you can line the front platform with the lit lanterns.

An optional activity is to make signs for each of the inns that the innkeepers will hold up when the procession reaches them. Older children might enjoy making up fun names for the inns in Bethlehem based on popular motel chains, then decorating signs made out of card stock or poster board. If you have too few children or they are too young to create the signs, leaders can make them ahead of time. Another optional activity is for the kids to make (or you can purchase) a Star of Bethlehem piñata filled with treats to break open on the day of the Las Posadas processional.

The Processional

In this children's sermon/activity, kids act out the journey in which Mary and Joseph go from inn to inn looking for lodging in Bethlehem, only to be turned away from all but the last one, where they are offered room in the stable. Before worship starts, position the various innkeepers at different places throughout the worship space (near the aisles) and plan how the processional will proceed to each "inn" in turn. (Make sure Mary and Joseph know the path, or send an adult with them as a guide.)

Please see "Las Posadas" on page 23.

A Las Posadas Craft Activity for Kids: Glass Jar Luminarias

by Ruba Byrd

In the traditional Las Posadas processional, the pilgrims carry lighted lanterns, or *luminarias*, from house to house. This is a fun craft for all ages, and you can adapt it to fit your resources and the size of your group. (If you need a quicker and simpler Las Posadas craft, you can find instructions online for making luminarias from paper bags with cut-out designs.)

Materials:

- Clean glass jars—Either mason jars (from hardware or thrift stores) or clean peanut butter or jam jars with a ridge around the neck to hold the handle
- Glue—Such as Mod Podge® decoupage glue or a 1:1 mix of white school glue and water
- Foam brushes or sponges to apply the glue
- Colored tissue paper or Sharpie markers to decorate the jars
- Scissors
- Craft wire (18-20 gauge) or sturdy cord or twine for handles. Cut two 15" lengths of wire or two 30" lengths of cord per lantern to make the collar and handle.
- Battery-operated LED tea lights (inexpensive at dollar stores)
- Mounting putty to secure the tea light to the bottom of the jar

Instructions

There are various ways to decorate the outside of the luminaria. To create a stained glass effect, glue torn or cut pieces of colored tissue paper all over the outside of the jar and let them dry. Even very young kids can do this with some help. Older kids and youth might want to cut designs in tissue paper (with the fold-and-cut technique used to make snowflakes) and glue the cutouts to the jars so that the light shines out through the openings. Other decorating options are to use glass paints or markers, or even regular Sharpie markers. (Cleaning the jars with rubbing alcohol will help the Sharpie colors adhere better.)

For the handles, use wire or cord/twine: Wrap the craft wire tightly around the neck, beneath the rim. Twist it securely, then attach a separate arched wire handle to opposite sides of the collar. Adults should manage cutting and tucking in the sharp ends. You could also double-wrap sturdy cotton or jute cord around the neck beneath the rim, tie it securely, and attach a separate cord handle on opposite sides with firm knots. Test each handle to make sure it bears the jar's full weight.

A Las Posadas Activity for Youth

by Ruba Byrd

Las Posadas isn't complete without sweet and savory dishes for the pilgrims to enjoy after their processional ends each night. A way to involve youth in Las Posadas is for them to either prepare or purchase these traditional foods and sell them to congregants as a fundraiser for organizations or ministries that help address housing insecurity or provide support to immigrant families in your community.

If you can, use a youth group session for preparing the food (and invite adults to join in as needed). Cooking is itself a traditional activity during Las Posadas that brings family and friends together. There are many recipes for the following traditional dishes online, so find the ones that fit your budget and the size and interests of your youth group. But if preparing food from scratch isn't practical, take the youth on an outing to a local market or restaurant that offers authentic Mexican dishes you can purchase and then resell to raise funds. After worship on the day of the Las Posadas children's sermon might be a good time for this fundraiser, or before or after the Christmas Eve service, or as part of an all-church potluck or weeknight meal during Advent.

Perhaps a local shelter ministry would appreciate a donation of food for their residents. The goal is to offer youth an experience of the Las Posadas traditions and use them to address the needs of folks in your community. As part of this activity, ask the youth to talk about what it would have been like for Mary and Joseph to be strangers in Bethlehem, unable to find shelter, and just about to have a baby! Mary was likely a teenager, after all. What might it be like for people their age right now who are immigrants far from home or are living on the streets? If they were in those situations, how would they want others to respond?

Traditional Dishes for Las Posadas

- Tamales: Corn masa filled with meats, cheese, or chilies wrapped in corn husks.
- Pozole: A hearty, savory hominy and pork or chicken soup seasoned with red or green chiles.
- Pambazos: White bread dipped in a warm guajillo pepper sauce and stuffed with *papas con chorizo* (potatoes and Mexican sausage).
- Buñuelos: Crispy, thin fried dough pastries coated in cinnamon sugar or drizzled with piloncillo syrup.
- Churros: Sweet, deep-fried dough tubes dusted in cinnamon and sugar, often enjoyed after breaking the piñata.
- Empanadas Dulces: Baked or fried pastries filled with fruit jams or sweet cream and rolled in cinnamon sugar
- Arroz con Leche: A Mexican cold dish made from rice mixed with milk and other ingredients such as cinnamon and vanilla.
- Ponche Navideño: A hot, sweet, fruit-filled punch simmered with water, piloncillo (raw cane sugar), and cinnamon sticks
- Champurrado: A type of masa-based Mexican hot chocolate

Traditional Las Posadas Chant

VILLANCICOS PARA PEDIR POSADAS

LOS PEREGRINOS: En el nombre del cielo, yo os pido posada, pues no puede andar, mi esposa amada.

LOS HOSTELEROS: Aquí no es mesón, sigan adelante, no les puedo abrir, no vaya a ser un tunante.

SE REPITEN LAS MISMAS ESTROFAS EN DOS CASAS MAS Y EN LA TERCERA LES DAN POSADA.

LOS PEREGRINOS: Posada le pido amado casero, pues madre va a ser, la reina del cielo.

LOS HOSTELEROS: Pues si es una reina, quien lo solicita, como es que de noche, anda tan solita.

LOS PEREGRINOS: Mi nombre es José, Mi esposa es María, y madre va ser, Divino Verbo.

LOS HOSTELEROS: Posada os brindo, Santos Peregrinos, y disculpa os pido, no os reconocía.

TODOS: Entren Santos Peregrinos, Peregrinos...Reciban este rincón, que aunque es pobre la morada, la morada...os la doy de corazón.

–Courtesy of Justo Gonzales

Las Posadas,

continued from page 21

As the procession approaches each innkeeper, that person will stand when their "door" is knocked on. (The "knock" can be mimed, or Mary or Joseph can say something like, "Hello! Is anybody there?") Either Mary or Joseph then asks if there is room for them to stay for the night. Each time, the innkeeper turns them away. Some of the responses can be regretful, and other others can be more brusque—encourage the innkeepers to be dramatic! (If you want to use versions of the traditional chants exchanged between the holy couple and the innkeepers, see the chant on page 22.)

Then the minister or teacher might want to say a few words about how Las Posadas is a reminder to us that just as Mary and Joseph were strangers in Bethlehem and couldn't find shelter, there are people in our own communities who are experiencing the same thing. When we remember the Christmas story, we remember those who need our help to find safe, warm places to stay.

At the last inn, the one closest to the front of the worship space (or room), the innkeeper tells them that there are no rooms available, but there is a stable out back where they can spend the night. If this is the introduction to a full nativity play, Mary and Joseph can then go to the stable to continue the story. If it's a stand-alone children's sermon or lesson, you can choose to have a manger set up for Mary and Joseph to go to, or you can end the procession and have the children sit down at the front.

Then the minister or teacher might want to say a few words about how Las Posadas is a reminder to us that just as Mary and Joseph were strangers in Bethlehem and couldn't find shelter, there are people in our own communities who are experiencing the same thing. When we remember the Christmas story, we remember those who need our help to find safe, warm places to stay.

If your congregation supports ministries or organizations that address those problems, you can mention those. Perhaps your youth are raising money for such groups by providing traditional Las Posadas foods (see the youth activity on page 22). Draw connections for the kids and your congregation in whatever ways are appropriate. One final thought: if you use this as a children's sermon in a worship service, either include a brief description of Las Posadas in the bulletin, or have one of the children or a minister/teacher say a few words of introduction about the meaning of Las Posadas before the procession starts.

–Ruba Byrd is a member of the Seeds Liturgical Team. She is pastor of Eugene Friends Church in Oregon, her first pastorate. She is involved locally with interfaith ministries and offers spiritual companionship through the expressive arts. Our readers may have seen her earlier writings under the name Jan Richardson.



Advent is the perfect time

to clear and prepare the Way. Advent is a winter training camp for those who desire peace. By reflection and prayer, by reading and meditation, we can make our hearts a place where a blessing of peace would desire to abide and where the birth of the Prince of Peace might take place.

Daily we can make an Advent examination. Are there any feelings of discrimination toward race, sex, or religion? Is there a lingering resentment, an unforgiven injury living in our hearts? Do we look down upon others of lesser social standing or educational achievement? Are we generous with the gifts that have been given to us, seeing ourselves as their stewards and not their owners? Are we reverent of others, their ideas and needs, and of creation? These and other questions become Advent lights by which we may search the deep, dark corners of our hearts.

–Edward Hays, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*

Lessons & Carols for Christmas Eve

by the Seeds Liturgical Team



Meditation of Preparation

As we stand now on the brink of Christmas, let us seek for the stillness of which the carol sings. It is not the empty stillness and loneliness which life sometimes thrusts upon us. It is the deep mystery of meaning that fills us with awe and presence and reawakens our hearts to love.

Let us indeed be joyful, for Christmas is a time of joy! But joy is not always boisterous. Isn't it, at its best and most abiding, a solemn joy that stands with its eyes aglow and its tongue silenced before the mystery of the manger?
—C. W. (Wally) Christian

Opening Carol

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

First Reading

Isaiah 9:2-7

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Second Carol

"Once in Royal David's City"
Chalice Hymnal No. 165



Text: Cecil F. Alexander
Music: Henry John Gautlett
IRBY, 8.7.8.7.7.7.

Second Reading

Isaiah 65:17-25

Lighting of the Peace Candle

Third Carol

"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 132
Text: Edmund H. Sears
Music: Richard Storrs Willis
CAROL, Common Meter Double

Third Reading

Psalm 96

Lighting of the Joy Candle

Fourth Carol

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"
Glory to God No. 121
Text: Philips Brooks
Music: Lewis Henry Redner
ST. LOUIS, 8.6.8.6.7.6.8.6.

Fourth Reading

John 1:1-14

Lighting of the Love Candle

Fifth Carol

"Away in a Manger"
Celebrating Grace Hymnal No. 110
Text: Anonymous
Music: James R. Murray
MUELLER, Irregular Meter

Fifth Reading
Luke 2:1-20

Lighting of the Christ Candle
It's almost here; the expectation and waiting has been overwhelming, but now we join in with all of creation as we hold our breath in anticipation of Emmanuel, God with us. We light the Christ candle and breathe a sigh of relief alongside creation, knowing that with this candle ignited, the creative breath of God enters into the world in a new way that will forever change it. With a breath of new hope, a new sense of peace in our hearts, a new understanding of joy, and a commitment to love, we set out to go home the long way.
–Erin Conaway

Benediction
With weary legs we make the last couple of steps to greet Emmanuel. While it's been a long journey to get here, looking back we can see where God has sustained us with hope for this moment, calmed our anxieties with overwhelming peace, ignited the flames of joy that continue to dance in front of us, and let us follow as love led the way. Go on this night with expectation and excitement, for the breaking of day tomorrow brings this journey to a close where God will dwell in our midst.
–Alec Ylitalo

God with Us
A Christmas Litany
by Brett Younger

ONE: God is present when we put more than spare change into the offering plate; when we pray for joy in our hearts and in our neighbor's as well.

MANY: God is present even in the midst of horrific tragedies, in the lives of Syrian refugees, when we care for broken people, when we long for a world where children are safe.

ONE: God is present when we think more about what others have done for us than about what we've done for them; when we move past what the world owes us to what we owe the world;

MANY: when we see that other people are just as real as we are, and look beyond their faces to their hearts.

ONE: God is present when we love children who are challenging; when we care for parents who don't want to be parented;

MANY: when we do something kind for the ex-husband without getting credit.

ONE: God is present when we can't think of any reason why anyone would want to be our friend, but find our friends are there anyway.

MANY: God is present when we choose not to speak a word in anger or offer thinly veiled criticism.

ONE: God is present when we laugh, especially when we were wondering if we'd ever laugh again.

MANY: God is present when we open our hearts and feel God's joy.

ONE: Most of the time we don't notice that God is here.

MANY: We're so used to hearing what we expect and remaining deaf to what we most need that it's hard to break the habit,

ONE: but if we listen with patience and hope,

MANY: if we keep our ears and minds open,

ALL: then we may hear God speaking.

–For Brett Younger's bio, see page 19.



art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

Liturgy for Christmas Day

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Call to Worship

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

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

A Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 52:7-10

Meditation of Preparation

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

A Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 98

First Carol

"Joy to the World"
Glory to God No. 134
Text: Isaac Watts
Music: Lowell Mason
ANTIOCH, Common Meter with Repeat

Reading from the Epistles

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

Second Carol

"Sing We Now of Christmas"
Worship and Rejoice No. 193
Text and Music: French Carol (15th Century)
NOËL NOUVELET, 6.5.6.5. with Refrain

Gospel Reading

John 1:1-14

Pastoral Prayer

See "A Christmas Prayer" on page 25.

Offertory

"Go, Tell It on the Mountain"
African American Heritage Hymnal No. 202
Text and Music: Spiritual



art by Gertrude Nelson

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN, 7.6.7.6. with Refrain

Sermon

Christmas Meditation

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

Third Carol

"O Word of God Incarnate"
Chalice Hymnal No. 322
Text: William W. How
Music: Meiningen Gesangbuch
MUNICH, 7.6.7.6.D.

Christmas Benediction

As we proceed from the manger where we were called back in to start everything anew, may a new journey appear on the horizon for us all, one that goes to share the good news of great joy, one that follows the Christ child's footsteps wherever they may lead, one that doesn't necessarily lead us away from home, but on a new adventure in our faith as we go to tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!
–Alec Ylitalo

A Christmas Prayer

by Erin Conaway

Holy God…
In many ways it is finished. The preparations have been made. The waiting is over. The candles are flickering with Hope, Peace, Joy, Love and the light of the Christ Child. We've been to parties, we've wrapped the presents, we've sung carols, we've heard the story.

In many ways it is finished. We've weathered this season of watching and waiting, anticipating your arrival in our world, trying faithfully—and, in many ways, desperately—to prepare our hearts for the miracle of your incarnation. Calling down your presence, begging the heavens to be torn apart, looking for the valleys to be lifted and the mountains lowered, praying the winding road home will form itself into a straight path.

And here we are, on the day of your birth, with all the candles glowing in our sanctuary. It is finished. And it is just beginning. For you came into the world, not as a grown man with a completed agenda and a written script. You came into the world under the watchful eye of two young parents who themselves couldn't afford this miraculous event in their lives. So they did what they could do and laid you down in a trough for animals.

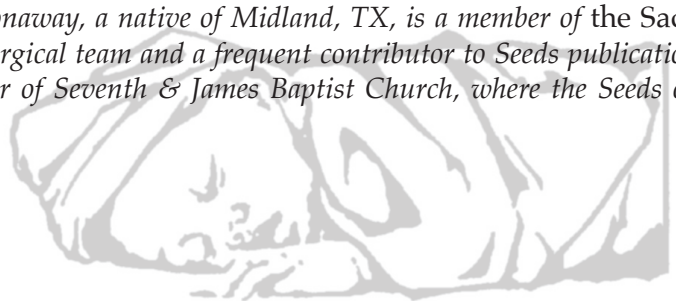
You came into this world with the chorus of angels swirling about you and the bleating of sheep and the whinnying sounds of the mules adding their voices.

It is just beginning. You came into this world with gifts for a king and under the threat of death by a king who sat on a lower throne. It is just beginning. An infant—with infinite possibilities for tragedy and triumph, searing pain and transcending hope, understanding and confusion.

It is just beginning.

And so it is with us…just beginning, as we gather together in your name to celebrate your incarnation in our lives and in our world. Begin anew your hope that transcends our pain, begin anew your peace that transforms the world, begin anew the unadulterated joy in our hearts, begin anew the love you created us to have for our neighbors, for ourselves, for you.

Begin again, this day, as we feel your birth in our hearts and sing of its wonder with our lives—for we do so, as we pray in the present name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior…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.*



Liturgy for Epiphany

by the Seeds Liturgical Team

Call to Worship

ONE: Blest be the King whose coming
is in the name of God!
MANY: For Him let doors be opened,
no hearts against Him barred!
ONE: Not robed in royal splendor,
in power and pomp, comes He;
MANY: But clad as are the poorest, such His humility!
–Frederico José Pagura

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures

Isaiah 60:1-6

Meditation of Preparation

The twelve days of Christmas come to an end on January 6, and the season of the Epiphany begins. But Epiphany not only ends Christmas, it also fulfills it by celebrating the revelation of the Christ to the whole world. The coming of Incarnate God to all people, especially to those of us who are Gentiles, is the bridge from birth into life, the event that makes Easter possible for most of us. The light of the Epiphany illuminates the church's year as it illuminates the human race from whom the kings came.
–Phyllis A. Tickle, "What the Heart Already Knows," *Upper Room*

Hymn of Promise

"In the Heavens Shone a Star"
Glory to God No. 131
Text: Jonathan Malicsi, Ellsworth Chandlee
Music: Joel Navarro
KALINGA, 7.7.7.7. with Refrain

A Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Reading from the Epistles

Ephesians 3:1-12

Hymn of Splendor

"Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies"
Lift Up Your Hearts No. 667
Text: Charles Wesley
Music: Charles F. Gounod
LUX PRIMA, 7.7.7.7.7.7.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

Pastoral Prayer

Offertory

Sermon

Meditation of Commitment

"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



art by Sally Lynn Askins

poor. It is a word against the captains of the arms industry and the fanatics of power. If we really understood what it means, it bursts the bonds of Sunday worship. For if this message really lays hold of us, it leads us to Jesus the liberator, and to the people who live in darkness and who are waiting for him—and for us.
—*Jurgen Moltmann,* The Power of the Powerless

Hymn of Commitment

"'Twas the Moon of Wintertime"
Glory to God No. 142
Text: Jean de Brébeuf
Music: H. Barrie Cabena
UNE JEUNE PUCELLE, 8.6.8.6.8.8. with Refrain

Benediction

May the blessing of light be on you—
light without and light within.
May the blessed sunlight shine on you
like a great peat fire,
so that stranger and friend may come
and warm himself at it.
And may light shine
out of the two eyes of you,
like a candle set
in the window of a house,
bidding the wanderer
come in out of the storm.
And may the blessing
of the rain be on you,
may it beat upon your Spirit
and wash it fair and clean,
and leave there a shining pool
where the blue of Heaven shines,
and sometimes a star.
And may the blessing
of the earth be on you,
soft under your feet
as you pass along the roads,
soft under you as you lie out on it,
tired at the end of day;
and may it rest easy over you
when, at last, you lie out under it.
May it rest so lightly over you
that your soul may be
out from under it quickly;
up and off and on its way to God.
And now may the Lord bless you,
and bless you kindly. Amen.
–Brother Brendan Shaffer, OEF

Song for Bethlehem

by James Schwarzlose, OEF
Text: Micah 5:2

Bethlehem of Ephrathah!
You lie in peace beneath the stars.
But do you see the light of the
Star of Peace
in your midst?
From you shall come forth for God
The Child of that Star—the one
in whom all war shall cease.

Do you see what Micah foresaw?
Or do you, like me, lie in half-belief,
seeing and yet not seeing
What God Almighty is doing
before our eyes?
And what is it that Micah, the shepherds
and the Magi saw
That we do not?

Lord God, open our eyes that we—
every grown, lost, sad child—
May see the miracle gleam in the darkness.

Come O Micah, come again
and shake us loose
From our desire for more—
Though we do not know "more" of what.
Turn our eyes toward wisdom and faith
that we,
In this very moment, may see
The holy, sleeping joy that lies in our
midst.
Amen.



—James Schwarzlose is a retired United Church of Christ minister in Atlanta, GA. He has served as a pastor, a community advocate, and a teacher and mentor to refugees and immigrants. He is also a professed member of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans.

Sometimes Faithful is All We've Got

An Epiphany Sermon

by Brian Ammons

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Y'all ever come back to a story you've known for years and realize it isn't quite the story you thought it was?

I don't know what the Epiphany story has been like for you, but for a long time mine lived in a kind of Hallmark frame: three wise men—always three, though the text never says that, and always men, though it never actually specifies that either—following a star, bringing gifts, affirming how important this baby is. That version isn't wrong. It's just incomplete.

Because the author we call Matthew does not tell this story gently.

He places it right at the beginning of the Gospel because it introduces the world Jesus is born into—and because it shows us how that world reacts when real change appears. The story opens with outsiders arriving in Jerusalem with a question. Not certainty. Not proclamation. A question.

Matthew calls them Magi—astrologers—people trained in attention rather than control. They work with fragments, with signs, with partial information. They are comfortable not knowing everything, trusting what they've noticed enough to follow it. They walk through the world attuned to mystery.

They know very little by Jerusalem's standards. They don't know the scriptures. They don't know the politics of the court. They don't yet understand how dangerous that culture's power becomes when it feels threatened. And that becomes frightfully clear when they meet Herod.

Because, unlike the Magi, Herod knows the story. He knows the scriptures. He knows the prophecies. When the Magi ask their question, he consults the religious authorities and receives a precise answer: Bethlehem.

Matthew is intentional here. Herod's problem is not ignorance. It's clarity—certainty. He understands exactly what a Messiah would mean, and exactly what it would cost him. And so he is afraid.

> The Magi leaving by another road is not the last word. It's just the last moment before the story turns darker, before fear hardens into violence, before the machinery grinds forward with devastating force.

The contrast is sharp but simple. The Magi know little and remain open. Herod knows a great deal and closes ranks. One way of knowing leaves room for surprise. The other gathers information to secure what already exists.

So, Herod sends the Magi on their way. "Go to Bethlehem. Search carefully. Come back and tell me what you find." Matthew gives us no hint that the Magi suspect danger. They have no reason to distrust him. They are still operating with openness. They assume good faith.

So they go. They follow the star. They find the child. They offer their gifts.

Epiphany.

And then the dream comes—a second, smaller, darker epiphany. "Do not return to Herod." The dream doesn't explain itself. It doesn't offer a strat-



egy or a guarantee. It simply names danger. And suddenly the Magi understand the world they have wandered into. They see how their curiosity has been co-opted by power, how their question has become useful to a system intent on protecting itself. They realize that what they now know makes the child vulnerable—and that it makes them vulnerable, too.

Because once you understand how power works, neutrality disappears. Once you see how information can be used, innocence is gone. Knowing changes you.

The Magi do the right thing—and the world still breaks. That's not an accident of the text. That's the theology we're handed.

The Magi don't gain authority. They don't gain leverage. They don't gain the ability to stop what's coming. What they get is a choice. They can decide whether they will participate. And so they refuse.

They don't return to the palace. They don't hand over what they've learned. They don't allow their attention to be turned into a tool of harm. They go home by another road. When power reaches for them, it does not find consent.

And if the story ended here, we'd have a tidy little lesson. We could rest easily into that ending. We could feel justified—maybe even comforted. We could tell ourselves that discernment has happened, faithfulness has been named, the right choice has been made.

Matthew does not let the story end here. The lectionary does—mercifully, perhaps. But the Gospel does not. I wish it did, because it would be a lot more fun to just preach that message.

The Magi leaving by another road is not the last word. It's just the last moment before the story turns darker, before fear hardens into violence, before the machinery grinds forward with devastating force.

Matthew's Gospel is not so tidy. Epiphany is not a pause between sweetness and safety. It is a threshold—a moment after which the coast is not clear, but the cost is. The Magi's refusal does not stop what comes next. It does not intercept Herod's rage. It does not protect the children of Bethlehem. The very next movement of the story is grief—loud, unspeakable grief—and Matthew doesn't look away from it. Which means we don't get the satisfaction of treating refusal as resolution.

If we stopped here, we could tell ourselves a comforting story: that clarity leads to safety, that right action produces protection, that faithfulness shields us from consequence. But Matthew dismantles that illusion almost immediately. The Magi do the right thing—and the world still breaks. That's not an accident of the text. That's the theology we're handed.

Matthew refuses to preach a gospel that pretends if we get faith right, the world will behave better. Instead, he tells a hard truth: God enters a world where violence still happens, and in that world faithfulness may not look like success, but rather the refusal to participate in harm.

This is where the story presses on us, because we are not the Magi. We don't arrive on the scene with the gift of innocent naïveté. We recognize the patterns. We know how this works. Yet, we are certainly not Herod, either. We don't sit at the center. We don't issue declarations that sweep through the land and have the power to disrupt lives. We don't decide outcomes.

What we *are* is closer to the community Matthew was writing for—people who know enough to be unsettled. A religious community trying to make sense of what's going around them, mining their tradition for glimpses of wisdom. People who hold both mystery and knowledge in tension. People who cannot unknow what has been revealed, and yet cannot fully control what follows. And that leaves us with a harder question: What does faithfulness look like from here, from where we stand?

It's the recognition that faithfulness is not the same thing as effectiveness, that discernment does not guarantee success, that sometimes the most truthful thing we can do is refuse to participate in harm, even when we know it won't be enough to stop it.

Matthew's answer is restrained. All we get is that sometimes faithfulness looks like refusal. Not triumph. Not rescue. Just refusal.

And for people who care deeply about justice, that can be hard to hear. Because refusal does not always feel like enough. It feels small. It feels unsatisfying. It doesn't stop the machinery. It doesn't undo the harm. It doesn't give us the relief we want—especially as people who organize,

who show up, who try to bend the world toward something more just. Sometimes refusal can feel like failure, and Matthew does not step in to soften that feeling. The hard truth in this story is that the Magi's refusal does not prevent violence. It doesn't save the city. The story doesn't comfort us with the idea that right action automatically produces right outcomes.

That dissatisfaction—that ache—is not a lack of faith. It's a dose of humility. It's the recognition that faithfulness is not the same thing as effectiveness, that discernment does not guarantee success, that sometimes the most truthful thing we can do is refuse to participate in harm, even when we know it won't be enough to stop it. Sometimes all that is given to us is the fuzzy clarity of a dream. Sometimes all that is entrusted to us is the choice not to return the same way.

Epiphany, in Matthew's telling, is not a resolution. It's an interruption. It is the moment after which we cannot unknow what we've seen. But know this, too—that incomplete, unspectacular, sometimes-unsatisfying faithfulness is not the end of the story. It's just the beginning.

The Magi don't go home triumphant. They go home changed, carrying knowledge they didn't have before, living differently because they can no longer pretend they don't know how power works. They leave by another road. The road is not safe. The world is not healed. They are simply no longer willing to cooperate.

And here is the truth I want to invite us to sit with: refusal may not save the world, but it can keep our souls aligned with the love that still insists on entering it. That alignment *matters*. Not because it guarantees results, but because it shapes who we become—because it guards us against becoming efficient at things that hollow us out, because it keeps us from confusing urgency with righteousness, or effectiveness with faithfulness.

Epiphany, in Matthew's telling, is not a resolution. It's an interruption. It is the moment after which we cannot unknow what we've seen. But know this, too—that incomplete, unspectacular, sometimes-unsatisfying faithfulness is not the end of the story. It's just the beginning.

Because the child is still here. The powers are still quaking. The roads still diverge. And we are still being asked, again and again, not whether we can fix the world, but if we will lend our hands, our voices, our attention to what harms it, or if we will choose another way—not because it's enough or because it guarantees the outcomes we hope for, but because it's faithful.

And y'all, sometimes… faithful is all we've got.

If you think I'm saying we should give up, that we should do anything less than bring all we have to living into the kindom we are still called to midwife, I'm not. What I am saying is that if we align ourselves only with effectiveness and outcomes—well, for starters, we'll burn out. But, more importantly, we'll have missed the point. Those things matter, and matter dearly, but aligning ourselves with love is not a victory march.

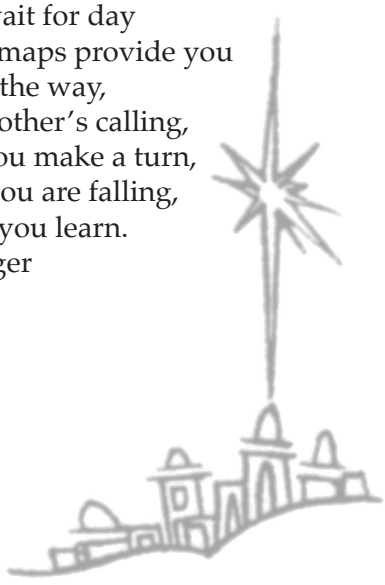
So if, like me, these are days that the headlines leave you particularly tired and angry and tempted to despair, remember this: the world may not be saved by our faithfulness, but by our faithfulness we can still choose how we move through it.

We still get to take the long way home.

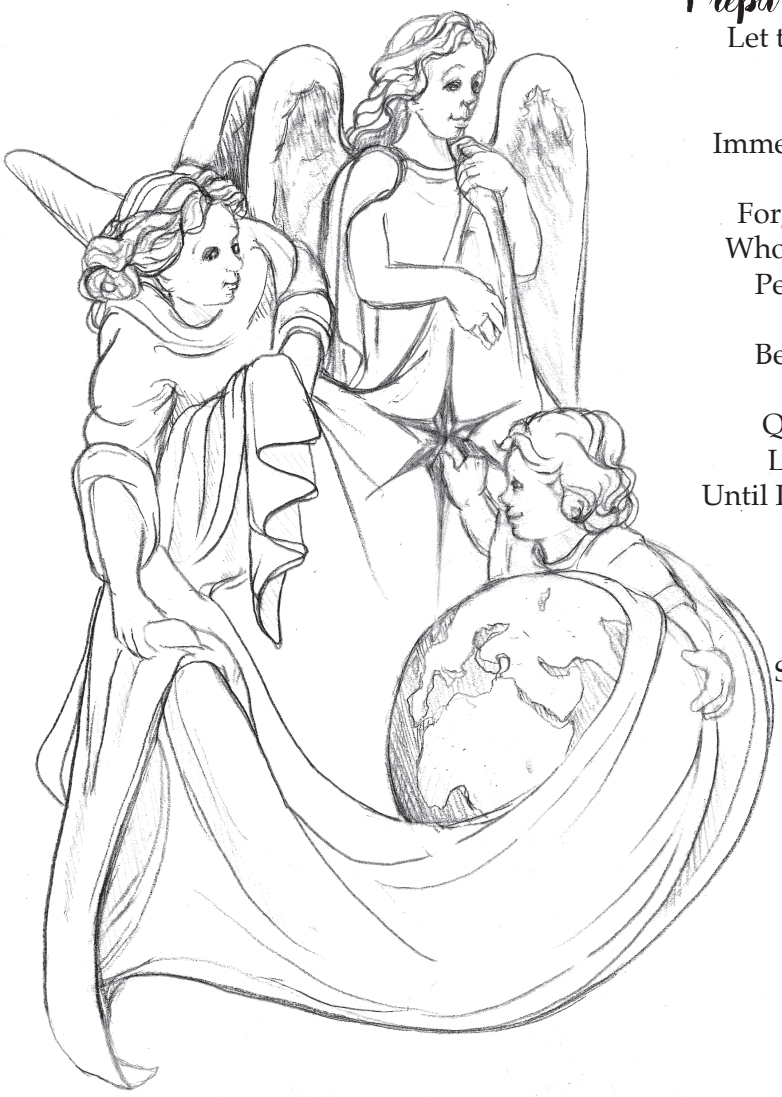
–A native North Carolinian, Brian Ammons is pastor of First (Presbyterian) Church, the oldest surviving church in Belfast, Northern Ireland. This sermon, shared with us by Ken Sehested, was delivered at the Circle of Mercy Congregation in Asheville, North Carolina. At the end of the sermon, Brian left the pulpit softly singing "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

When there is no star to guide you

and you cannot wait for day
and your ancient maps provide you
only hints to find the way,
keep within each other's calling,
mark each time you make a turn,
shout for help if you are falling,
tell each other all you learn.
–Thomas H. Troeger



Christmas Benediction



Prepare in me the way for your coming, Lord.
Let the voice of John through my wilderness cry,
Disrupting the dark recesses of doubt,
Straightening the path toward repentance,
Immersing my soul in the salvation of the season.

Forge in me the faith of the fathers and mothers
Who foretold your coming and patiently waited,
Persisting in the possibility of God made man,
Living the proof of God in man,
Believing in the miracles of God through man.

Quicken me with your vibrant, moving spirit.
Like the leaping of the babe in Mary's womb,
Until I, like Mary, overflow with gratitude and joy,
And my soul, too, magnifies you, Lord,
And marvels at the mystery of your plan.

Fill my night with the songs of the angels.
Shine your glory down on this shepherd too,
Resounding me with tidings of great joy,
Redirecting me to the babe in the manger,
A sign unto me, a Savior is born.

Refresh in me the wisdom of the magi
That I too may come from following afar.
Path redirected, faltering faith refueled,
Blazing brilliantly ahead,
flaming through the night,
Returning me once again
to the miracle of the season
–Ann Sims

—Ann Sims is a retired physician who has worked with victims of abuse, among many other volunteer activities for low-income and at-risk populations. She lives in Waco, TX, and is a deacon at Seventh & James Baptist Church, where the Seeds ministry is housed. She is also a member of the Seeds Council of Stewards.

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