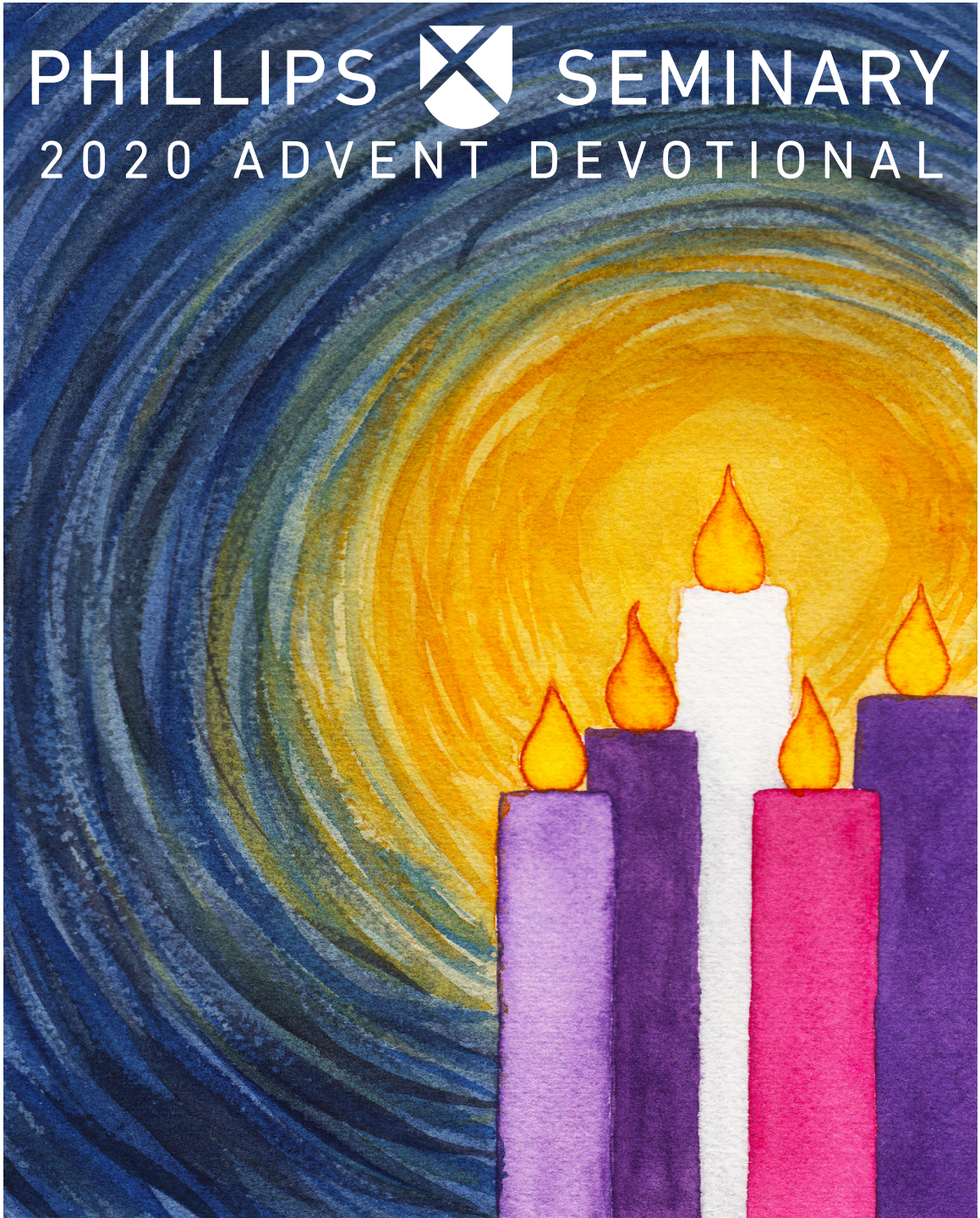


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2020 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



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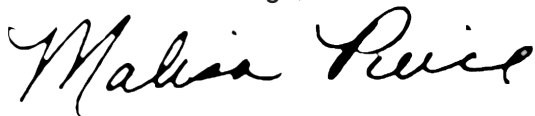
Phillips Theological Seminary is once again providing you, our gracious donors and supporters, with an Advent Devotional. Phillips is grateful that we can offer you this resource.

This year has been difficult and strange in so many ways. But we have the hope, peace, joy and love that Advent brings. I personally hope and pray that each devotion in this booklet speaks to your life and is a balm in this weary time.

The devotional is an important part of our goal to support and educate the whole church. We value your contribution to the seminary and consider you a part of our community.

We have hope in the unchanging, sacrificial love of God, love of each other, our congregations and the love that brings equality and justice into the world through the life of Jesus. We hope that as you read this booklet you are inspired to deepen your faith and renew your hope.

Peace and Blessings,



Malisa Pierce

Senior Director of Stewardship and Alumnae/i Relations

P.S. Remember, you can access daily Advent devotions on the Phillips Seminary website (ptstulsa.edu/devotionals). We will also provide each devotion as a daily podcast that you may access through your preferred podcast provider.

 *where faith leads*

ADVENT WEEK ONE

November 29, 2020

A Bounty

Mark 13:24-37

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert and pray." Mark 13:32-33b

bounty—"goodness, generosity, a favor bestowed freely, a gift"

Jesus has begun to share his parting instructions and wishes with his students and friends. To get their attention, he spreads before them an extravagant spectacle of prophecy and celestial wonder announcing the complete transformation and reconciliation to come. More importantly, Jesus indicates this is the season of preparation and watchful activity.

Over and over, Jesus instructs them to "be awake!" He urges them to receive this command as a gift, one left to trusted and mindful friends. The gift of this awakening is not expressed as a sleepy gaze upon a distant horizon but the intentional practice of the Master's work.

"Be Awake!" "Be Alert!" "Be about my work!"

There is bounty throughout my life.

With my head tucked down, seeing only the cracks and grime beneath my feet, I overlook, forget or maybe misplace the favors of this life and world: a butterfly comes to rest upon my knee as I sit out and we watch each other, the strong confidence and friendship of those with whom I work, the words and care of those whom I hold dearest, even the heartbreak of holding the hands of one losing ground, becoming a living invitation to those left residing on the margins, laughter given and shared, the peace of a sunset held alone.

Beyond my living it will be the richness and wonder of this bounty that will remain, not what has caused pain, or loss, or separation. Those will pass.

The gift is to come, the bounty to be received.
Hope is revealed when the bounty is expressed.

Dr. Terry Ewing

Vice President of Advancement

ADVENT WEEK ONE

November 30, 2020

Hope in Joy and Peace

Micah 4:1-5

... but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. Micah 4:4

The portion of today's scripture that gives me the most hope is the result of the peace that verse four describes. All will have their place of shade and safety (vines) and food (fig tree). It doesn't say that people won't have fear—but won't be made to fear by others.

In early August, I had a day when everything weighed heavy on me. My ability to keep moving forward and deal with life ceased to exist... my coping capabilities took a vacation.

I was worried about: people with the virus, people treating the virus, black people, trans people, people unable to pay their rent, people losing jobs, people being hungry, compassionless people, family safety, and a family mental health crisis. Concern, too much information that breeds fear... and then... the postal service? I think the effort to destroy the postal service may have been the straw that broke the camel's back for me. It was too much.

I hit my limit of overwhelming concern for others and had to off-load. I sat with a friend and melted into a puddle of tears. I felt better, however I realized I needed to disconnect and take care of myself. So, I went camping which gives me strength and restoration. I restricted my social media and tried to be in the moment. To just be. I needed hope that the world would make it through this difficult period and that I could make it through with care and compassion... without breaking. I sat under the vine and ate the figs and let go of the fear.

Hope seems impossible these days, and not everyone is allowed time to take off work, go camping, or take a mental break, but I must believe there is hope for peace and joy for all.

May we rest under the vine and have plenty of figs to eat and not made to be afraid.

Malisa Pierce

Senior Director of Advancement and Alumnae/i Relations

ADVENT WEEK ONE

December 1, 2020

Now to Then

Micah 4:6-13

In that day, says the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. Micah 4:6

There is no new normal. There is now and there is then. Now is really hard, especially for people in our world who already had it hard. And while we distress over the challenges of our now, this is not new.

Today's scripture is about one of those times. The prophet speaks hope to the ancient peoples whose lives were turned upside down because the part of the world where they lived was undergoing radical change and their political leaders were making things worse. This is not new.

The actions of the political leaders made it especially hard for those who were barely getting by before the heaping on of the additional troubles. The prophet's words were meant to help those just hanging on to have hope, even while they suffer. This is not new.

Moving from the now of suffering to the then of hope isn't new either. It's a frequently repeated story in our faith's scriptures. The prophet's words do not take away, deny, or otherwise disparage suffering but rather point to the promise of God's liberation for those most in need. These words of hope are meaningful because the speaker acknowledges the pain happening now, especially for the lame, driven away, and dispossessed.

May we embrace the pain and suffering in our world this Advent as we prepare for the arrival of the one who comes to liberate all.

Kurt Gwartney

Senior Director of Communications

ADVENT WEEK ONE

December 2, 2020

Be Present

Luke 21:34-38

"Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." Luke 21:36

As I write this devotion in mid-August, pandemic alcohol consumption and pot sales are way up. So is violence in cities, with Chicago and Portland often in the news. Racist and bigoted behaviors in public seem to be everywhere, as do protests against racism, bigotry, and state-sponsored violence. Mental health professionals warn of the mental health crisis that is sliding toward us like a broken ice sheet heading for the sea. Economists ring the alarms about jobs.

Then there is the small matter of the presidential election and its possibly unprecedented aftermath.

I'm feeling anxious. Really anxious. And, like everyone else, I'm trying to chill.

But our call is to *be present*. According to Luke's version of Jesus's last week, he was in the temple, teaching every morning. At night, he retreated to the Mount of Olives—praying, we imagine (hold on to that image of him praying at night to fuel his day). Among Jesus's final words, Luke claims he said: "Take care your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don't let that day (the coming of the day of the Lord) fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap."

Jesus's counsel (v. 36) in a time when it feels like the world is coming apart, because it may really be coming apart: Stay alert. Pay attention. Be present. Pray.

I confess—these words feel inadequate, weak, untimely. I want everything resolved in favor of personal and social shalom NOW. But hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is rooted in trusting in God. Trust may best grow by paying attention, just as Jesus practiced and counseled.

Dr. Gary Peluso-Verdend

President Emeritus and

Executive Director of the Center for Religion in Public Life

ADVENT WEEK ONE

December 3, 2020

Restoring Right Relations with All My Relatives

Psalm 85: 1-2; 8-13

The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Psalm 85:12

The ancient faith community hearing the words from this psalm still remembered that the land was not only a gift from God, but in a very real way, still belonged to God. It is a word of hope that God's actions to bring the community into right relationship would bring a restoration of peace amid turbulent times.

This theology also reflects a Native American worldview, often reflected in the ceremonial realm in which interpersonal, intercollective, and interspecies relations are emphasized, established, renewed, and mended. Among the Sioux people, the ritual phrase *mitákuye oyás'in*, often translated as "all my relatives or all are related" exemplifies this principle of relatedness between human and non-human creation. Together we are all responsible for our conduct and the maintenance of the earth.

In *Spirit and Reason*, Lakota scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr. wrote, "The idea of covenant... is an early and important concept for tribal peoples. ... A covenant places responsibilities on both parties and provides a means of healing any breach in the relationship." A covenant involves not only mutual respect and responsibility but also the acknowledgement of our common kinship: that we are all related. Covenants also have an inherent mechanism for healing or mending temporary ruptures in times of stress, crisis, and trauma.

In this seasonal time of waiting, we need to be reminded of our covenant with God and all of God's creation and return to our roots as stewards rather than "owners" of this world. Salvific healing and peace come when we can recognize that within creation, God is present and incarnate for us when we strive to live in covenantal relationship with all our relatives.

Dr. Lisa D. Barnett

Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity

ADVENT WEEK ONE

December 4, 2020

Hope is Doing

Jeremiah 1:4-10

See, today, I appoint you this day over the nations and kingdoms, to pluck and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. Jeremiah 1:10

Too often, I find myself cheapening the annual advent journey with messages and anecdotes of silent, passive reflection. Pensively yearning for what *should be* amid the frustration for what *is*, hope can be distant and nebulous. To be sure, reflection and introspection are vital. But Advent, a season of preparation for Christian communities, requires more. Advent beckons and requires Christians to a hope that does more than wait.

What might an active hope look like in an era characterized by racial, political, and ideological division? How do we foster hope in the devastating wake of COVID-19?

The Mystery meets the self-doubting, hopeless Jeremiah with a “how-to” guide, detailing the process of hope. The Holy uses six verbs back-to-back in this litany of instruction, teaching us that hope is not something a person has, but rather something a person does. To do hope is to *root out* injustice. To *pull down* oppressive systems, *destroy* that which creates inequity, and *throw down* the idols that blind us to the suffering of creation. Hope is *building* up the dominion of God even when it is not politically advantageous to take a risk or get involved. Hope is *planting* the seeds of justice with determination and reckless abandon.

Hope is doing. It is doom and renewal. It is destruction and rebirth.

Advent, a season of hope, is far more than a time for reflection. It is pregnant with the impetus to act. May we choose to live into this season with faithfulness, advocating for the abandoned, the disinherited, and the rejected.

May we do hope.

Kyle Miller-Shawnee

Admissions Officer, Student Senate Member and Master of Divinity Student

ADVENT WEEK ONE

December 5, 2020

More Questions Than Answers

Mark 11:27-33

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things." Mark 11:27-29

If you've ever spent much time with a 4-year-old child, you know they have a lot of questions. The simplest, "But, why?" holds a yearning to understand how their wants, needs, and desires fit within the world around them. As weary as we may grow of answering these questions, they are an integral part of shaping their young, impressionable minds.

Questioning the world around us is normal. It's healthy, and it helps us shape our opinions, our attitudes, and our actions. Asking questions can bring healthy dialogue, encouraging us and others to think outside of the box. Questioning people, systems of power, and the universe itself can aid in our desire to act on issues that conflict us at the deepest levels.

It's surprising to note that Jesus asks more than 300 questions in the Gospels, but answers very few. What does that say about Jesus, and what can we learn from this example? Jesus asked questions with a goal of engaging others and bringing about transformation. What are our motives in questioning people, society, and the world around us? Jesus's questions confront us with our own thoughts, beliefs, and biases. Are we open to change, growth and action as we seek answers to difficult questions?

Holy One, may you bless both our questions and our answers. May our questions bring about healthy dialogue and guide us into actions that bring love, compassion, and justice to a world with far more questions than answers.

Sharon Russ

Executive Assistant to Advancement and
Donor Relations Specialist

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 6, 2020

Embrace the Wilderness

Mark 1:1-8

... the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," Mark 1:3

What a year. The verse above speaks to me right now, even more than in times past, because I have found myself crying out a lot lately. We are surrounded by racial brutality, a world health crisis, political divisiveness, economic injustice, and social isolation. This year has certainly felt like a wilderness to me.

The author of Mark's gospel opens by echoing Isaiah 40:3 and tapping an experience residing deep in the psyche of the hearers—the wilderness. Mark's proclamation would have instantly called to memory the narrative when the Israelites were led out of slavery in Egypt, by way of the wilderness, toward a promised land. As well, there was Moses who headed to the wilderness to run away from his past: there was also Hagar who negotiated with God in the wilderness to ensure the survival of her son.

So how does the wilderness experience seem to operate within most of these biblical tales? The wilderness elicits soul-searching. The wilderness requires acute focus. The wilderness clarifies mission and identity. As well, in each instance, the wilderness operates as a space of transition when a people or a character transform from an "old" self into a "new" self.

Rather than cursing this wilderness we all find ourselves in, what if we embrace it as an opportunity to engage in deep and comprehensive soul-searching and become clearer and more intentional about our focus, mission, and sense of identity? I am certain such a discipline can help us draw to the surface destructive beliefs and self-defeating behaviors that hinder our transformation. Let us embrace this time in the wilderness and do the internal work to *prepare the way of the Lord*.

In the words of Rumi, *"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."*

MaryAnn Morris

Dean of Students

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 7, 2020

Seek Peace

Psalm 27

You face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Psalm 27:8b-9

In whose face or faces do you see God?

Seeking God's face is a plea for God's favor which leads to shalom, a sense of peace, security, and wholeness. And *shalom* is not an individual experience; it's a state of being for all God's creation.

Nevertheless, individual peace and security that is not an end unto itself can be the beginning or the sustaining middle of a larger effort toward *shalom*-bringing. And when the soul grows weary under torment and constant struggle, it's easy to join the psalmist's loud cry, "Be gracious to me and answer me! ... Your face, LORD, do I seek."

What we seek is not the kind of shallow peace that suggests everything is OK when it is definitely not OK,

But the kind of deep peace that provides sustaining energy to stay engaged in the work of justice.

What we seek is not the kind of resigning peace that encourages the acceptance of suffering because that's just the way it is,

But the kind of visionary peace that allows the imagining of a vibrant life free from torment and turmoil.

What we seek is not the kind of powerless peace that gives permission for cozying up and hiding permanently in the corner while ignoring the struggles of people all around,

But the kind of powerful peace that motivates and compels attentiveness to the world around and unrelenting action as a *shalom*-maker.

As the psalmist declares, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!"

Amen.

Rev. Susanna Weslie Southard

Interim Director of Supervised Year in Ministry Program, Chaplain,
and Instructor in Ministry Studies

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 8, 2020

Wait to Wait

Psalm 27

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall. ... I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Psalm 27:2, 13-14

I remember how the chapel smelled: of must and fabric softener, typical of a basement in an old house, but also the sweet beeswax smell of a lit votive candle. It sat burning next to the small box (called a tabernacle in Roman Catholic parlance) to indicate that some consecrated wafers were contained therein. The body of Christ. This was the small subterranean chapel of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker house in Washington, D.C., where I once lived. We would gather there for morning prayer, and longtime community member Art Laffin *loved* to lead us in a sung call-and-response version of this Psalm.

And then we would go on about our business of distributing food and clothing to low-income neighbors and medium-term shelter to families... and protesting the violence inflicted on God's image-bearers for the sake of the military might and prosperity of the United States.

I could have, and did, pray that Psalm through while believing every word of it. I was also young, privileged, and idealistic, with plenty of resources to fall back on if and when my experiment with radical Christian living didn't pan out. Sometimes we got shouted at during our protests, which was terribly exciting. Sometimes friends got arrested on purpose. But today, 20 years later, the category of "adversaries and foes" seems at once broader and more concrete. The arrests are not protest theatre; our adversaries do much more than just shout at us. Begging the Psalmist's pardon, I don't see them doing a lot of stumbling and falling. Frankly, I'm not sure that I do believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait? Be strong? Seriously?

God who loves the bold and the discouraged, when we find we cannot even wait for you, help us to wait for a time when we can wait for you. Make good on your promises. Show us your goodness. Amen.

Dr. Sarah Morice-Brubaker

Associate Professor of Theology

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 9, 2020

Surprise!

Luke 1: 5-17

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, ..." Luke 1:13

Zechariah had been chosen to preside over the altar that day. He paused before entering the sanctuary. He had waited his whole life for this moment, and he wanted to remember it. Taking a deep breath, he stepped inside at last, leaving behind the crowds of people and the sounds of their murmured prayers.

He bowed his head for a moment, eyes closed as the incense slowly drifted upward. It was when he opened them that he saw an angel of the LORD standing before him. Almost falling on the floor, he was so scared, he heard the angel call his name: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah ..."

What he heard the angel announce next seemed unbelievable: his dear wife Elizabeth would bear him a son! This child would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he took his first breath! He would prepare the people's hearts for God! Usher in the Way—a forerunner of the Chosen One!

I imagine Zechariah came to regret the words that came blubbing out of his mouth later in response: What? My wife? At her age? Her body isn't as nimble as it once was! Her hands and face are as wrinkled as mine! And now you tell me she's going to have a baby?!

Maybe it was the shock of the whole experience. Maybe he was just too overwhelmed with joy. After all, he was only human. The news would leave him speechless.

God of surprises, hold me up by your grace when I become overwhelmed by the unexpected.

Rev. Gina Woods

Alumni Board Member (2014) and

Associate of Pastoral Care, Fellowship Congregational Church, Tulsa, Okla.

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 10, 2020

I am Not Standing Still, I am Lying Wait*

Habakkuk 2:1-5

For there is still a vision for the appointed time; ... If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Habakkuk 2:3

In the first chapter of Habakkuk, the prophet laments and asks the question many of us have been asking this year, “How long, O LORD?” We ask, we lament, and we wait for things to get better. And the waiting gets to be too much. So, we make a move, but we move too fast and we reap the repercussions of moving too soon. I understand, however, the motivation to act. One does not want to feel like one is just standing still doing nothing as the world goes on around them.

Yet, in chapter 2 of Habakkuk, the prophet used another tactic. After lamenting, the prophet waits and expects God to reply. “I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.” Both the watch post and the rampart are defenses used in battle. The waiting this prophet is doing is not about sitting around, it is about being ready.

God answers and tells the prophet that there is still a vision for the appointed time. God has not forgotten us. God hears us. God is still at work and we should be too. So, we stand at the watch posts God has given us whether it is a classroom, pulpit, youth center, or the streets. And we gird ourselves so that we are ready for the changes that God will empower us to make.

Dr. Annie Lockhart-Gilroy

Assistant Professor of Christian Education and Practical Theology

**Title taken from Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Cast Recording)*

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 11, 2020

Thanksgiving in a Time of Chaos

Psalm 126

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Psalm 126:5

This communal “Song of Thanksgiving” celebrates the saving works of God both in the lives of those who have gathered for worship and in the lives of their ancestors in the faith. This particular type of psalm is often thought to have been spoken on the other side of a lament, when the community has made it safely through a time of suffering or trial.

The words of Psalm 126 seem to echo the prophetic promise delivered by Isaiah (see 43:16-21) to the Babylonian exiles. The “new thing” the exilic prophet had spoken about has been realized in the restored “fortunes of Zion.” When the people returned to Jerusalem, they found the city needed a great deal of restoration. Plowing their fields, once again, brought tears and laughter, as they remembered both the pain of exile and the joy of homecoming.

Could this psalm have been spoken by those who returned to Jerusalem after Cyrus issued the edict allowing those placed in exile by the Babylonians to go home? Perhaps, but they could also be the words of a community that has felt God’s presence in a multitude of other ways.

This is the beauty and enduring value of the Psalter. These prayers (even though grounded in a particular context) can become the words of the faithful in very different contexts. While we have voiced many laments in 2020, can we also be thankful for the Holy’s faithfulness in a time of chaos? In this season of advent, Psalm 126 can provide us with an opportunity to reflect on how the Divine presence has been known to us, even in a time of the COVID-19.

Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible

ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 12, 2020

Peace, be Still

Matthew 21:28-32

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him. Matthew 21:31b - 32

We are living in unusual times due to COVID-19. Churches are finding different ways to connect through online media outlets. The normal aspect of life is no more, and our peace is being disturbed. The death of George Floyd by the deadly force of a white police officer going viral through national and social media platforms is the catalyst to a stronger commitment to the movement of Black Lives Matter. This explosion of support and commitment is forcing all Americans to pay attention to the unjust policing of black and brown humans. A combination of events created a national platform for voices to speak directly to people who need to get in the game and off the sidelines of silence and disconnect.

Peace, be still! A new democracy for America must trend away from glorifying violence, brutality, and destruction. The new democracy is a true foundation of peace, freedom, and protection for all. The current American democracy stands as the second son in the scripture. America said it would be a place of freedom and liberty for all, but in all honesty, America is still not a land for all to receive equity. The taste and smell of being built on a foundation of capitalism, systemic racism, privilege, discrimination, and slavery is still prevalent. A 21st century makeover must push for a new democracy of love, peace, and justice.

During this advent season, please remember the importance of living with peace. Knowing that God is the sustainer of the earth who operates in love, care, joy, and peace provides hope for overcoming obstacles. This advent season is your season of peace. Blessings to all!

Peace, be still!

Rev. Ulysses Allen

Recruiter

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 13, 2020

Joy to the COVID World

Isaiah 6:1-4, 8-11

"Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." Isaiah 6:9b

Joy tends to be defined with deep spiritual meaning, and happiness tends to be defined with the temporal and fleeting. I wonder: is this distinction between joy and happiness splitting strands of hair, or is it the split ends of a single strand of hair? I think Isaiah experienced joy and happiness as a single, illusive strand that he desperately longed to know as a unity in the presence of God. As Isaiah considered the social and political realities of his day, he faced a dream deferred by the death of King Uzziah.

To be in the presence of the Lord fills many believers with thoughts of joy. Who among the faithful would not be filled with joy by seeing and hearing the Holy One? Unfortunately, the words spoken to Isaiah were not words that inspired joy or happiness within Isaiah. And the words God instructed Isaiah to speak also did not inspire joy among the people. *"Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand."* For Isaiah, God appeared in the time of trouble, but God's joy is declared after the struggle.

This has been a year of profound trouble and struggle as millions have been victimized and more than one million have died worldwide from Coronavirus. As we seek God's face this Advent, our hearts long for the experience of joy in the COVID world. Yet God's word to Isaiah instructs us to not overlook the desolation wrought by coronavirus. Despite the devastation and death, we are in the presence of our Holy God; and it is only by turning from conventional wisdom that we will be restored to life.

Dr. Lee H. Butler, Jr.

Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Academic Dean

William Tabbernee Professor of the History of Religions and Africana Pastoral Theology

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 14, 2020

Joy in Trust and Security

Psalm 125

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. Psalm 125:1

Can you imagine a place so secure you have no fear or anxiety? A place that would keep you from harm both physical and mental? I imagine this place would look much like an impenetrable fortress and you wouldn't have anything for which to worry. You would only have those there you trust and love. Access would be denied, or any breaches foiled by those who wish you harm or evil. With all the uncertainty we face in this world, wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a place where you feel so secure?

In reality, I know of no place on this earth that can make this promise. As we read this psalm, and you should read and re-read it when you feel anxious, the intention is to show us that while there may not be a place to provide security and stability, there is a who, God. All that is required is to "trust in the LORD" as the psalm begins. It is through this trust that provides that protection from wicked and grants peace shared in the rest of the song.

The psalm sets the image by using the city of Jerusalem and the protection provided by mountains. Mountains are secure and, in many ways, Jerusalem is more secure because of the protection provided. The song goes on to say that just like Jerusalem, the LORD surrounds his people with this same immovable protection. It finally shares, the righteous and those who trust will also see the end to the evildoers.

What immense joy we should have because we really do have that impenetrable fortress in God. Through the implicit trust and conviction, we find the safety, security and refuge we desire and need in this uncertain world.

Leslie LeSieur

Director of the Center for Ministry and Lay Training

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 15, 2020

One Big Family Tree

Acts 3:17-4:4

These prophets, along with the covenant God made with your ancestors, are your family tree. Acts 3:25a (The Message)

Decades ago, we enrolled our daughter Joy in our public school's "magnet" multicultural Kindergarten program. This meant she would have to ride a bus to school each day.

On the first day of school we all waited for the bus: Nancy and I, our daughter, and her great-aunt. We waited and waited. But because of new semester confusion, no bus ever showed up.

That waiting seemed like an eternity. When we ask our now-adult daughter about this, she doesn't remember the waiting or even missing school that day. She only remembers that what we had promised her came true: she experienced an amazing year of new adventures, friends, and teachers.

Advent is about joy waiting for something wonderful to happen, at just the right time. About reminding us that our timetables are not often the same as God's. This week is all about waiting for that perfect moment when an angel suddenly appears, saying, "The waiting's over! It's begun! Now sing your songs of joy with me!"

Peter proclaims this in today's passage: there is a time coming when through Jesus all things will become fresh again, will be renewed again—and just at the right moment. Moses told us this. So did Samuel. All the prophets made such promises, says Peter, and these are for all of us: for every kind of family, for everyone on earth. Says Peter: we're all part of one big family tree.

This, then, is how we joyfully wait for God's timing: we do it together. Kindergartners, moms, dads, great aunts, you, me—whoever! No exceptions. We're all part of the family of God. We're all in this together.

Dr. Thomas Hoffmann

Adjunct Faculty

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 16, 2020

Accessibility of Joy

Mark 9:9-13

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Mark 9:9

If there were ever a moment to invoke joy from the Gospel, it would be during Advent. It is not that we as persons of faith are not to pursue joy at every turn. But, rather, it does not take much meandering into the gospels to glean the prospects of discipleship that Jesus promises his followers: contempt, persecution, and a material fate similar to his own.

Jesus is so attuned to this difficult future for his followers that, in today's passage from Mark 9, he swears them to what is known as the Messianic Secret: don't let anyone know who I truly am quite yet, or you'll get us all killed before my mission is complete.

Perhaps the reason why joy feels more accessible during Advent is because we have not yet arrived at the horizon of Jesus's birth and potential. It can be easy to lose sight of why it is that Jesus must swear his followers to secrecy: he has brought a form of justice so radical that its shockwaves are too much for many of us to bear.

The difficult joy of Advent thus is understanding that while Jesus's life brings profound conflict, this is only because it brings profound healing first. The invitation is to create space for ourselves to dwell on the euphoria of Jesus's care for others, even while knowing the eventual costs of discipleship.

Dr. Peter Capretto

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care in Religion and Culture

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 17, 2020

Faithful to all Generations

Psalm 89:1-4

I will sing of your steadfast love, LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. Psalm 89:1

Few things have stretched my understanding of God's faithfulness to all generations than the past year. A wonderful Advent celebration followed by a Lenten season that found us wondering if the world would ever be the same again. Our solemn gatherings grew silent as we gathered online and, for the first time in my life, Easter was celebrated without every seat in the sanctuary filled and "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today" being sung as loud as my small congregation could manage. We had entered a new day.

We find ourselves in the middle of Advent again and a new normal has taken hold. We have had to adapt to a new way of living together and protecting one another, a new awareness of how to share our love, and in the midst of this beginning to the Christian year we are once again reminded that God's faithfulness is to all generations.

Even in the darkest hours light shines through and God is faithful to us as we gather and as we worship and we hope and find Joy in new beginnings, in the God made flesh, in the Christ Child. As our time of Advent begins to draw to an end and Christmas is upon us, as the miracle of birth brings Joy and wonder to us all, let us remember that even the darkness of the past year will not overcome the light that has been brought into the world and that we can proclaim God's faithfulness to all generations.

Rev. Jeremy Skaggs

Alumni Board Member (2002) and

Senior Minister, The Welcome Table Christian Church, Arlington, Texas

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 18, 2020

Dance with Joy

2 Samuel 6:12-19

David, dressed in a linen priestly vest, danced with all his strength before the LORD. This is how David and the entire house of Israel brought up the LORD's chest with shouts and trumpet blasts. 2 Samuel 6:14-15 (Common English Bible)

On a brisk, sunny morning last January, our assembly of jet-lagged seminary students passed underneath the Dung Gate of Jerusalem, emerging in awestruck joy within the walls of Old Jerusalem. The sacred geography pressed me with its weight of time and managed to give me a strange kiss of responsibility and challenge whispering: What will you do with this place?

Thousands of years before our moment of awe, David, fresh from victory against the Jebusites, makes his ingenious political move to denominate 'Ir David, Jerusalem, as a neutral seat of his government.

Unlike our entrance, his entrance is made with tremendous fanfare, dancing, music, and holy sacrifices. David is dressed in priestly garb, representing his role as king-priest, leading the seat of Yahweh, the mobile God, into this place selected for what will be its unifying role for the people of God. Yahweh seems to have had to consider being ready for domestication, having killed an attendant in a twitchy moment a few months beforehand. But the partnership now becomes settled, and the people are celebrating this new relationship's beginning as expressively as possible. God is here among the people, kindling joy within them and their new experiment in kingship.

Jerusalem is still resplendent with sacred celebration. Christian bells, Muslim calls to prayer, and Jewish chants intermingle in constant calls for respite and unity with God. Dance and be joyful as the holy story continues.

Sandy Shapoval

Dean of the Library and Research Services

ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 19, 2020

Unbridled Joy

Judges 13:2-24

Then the Manoah entreated the Lord, and said, "O LORD, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born." God listened to Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "The man who came to me the other day has appeared to me." Judges 13:8-10

As the third week of Advent ends with its theme of Joy, I reflect on the joy in Judges 13:2-24. The joy of the woman was unrestrained as she "ran quickly" to tell her husband that the prayer for the guidance of the child they were expecting was here.

It is not that there was a time limit, and that is why she needed to run. She was running for excitement to share in the answered prayer with her husband. Unbridled joy is that feeling of so much joy a person cannot help but react. Smiling, laughing, as a physical reaction to release the amount of joy as you feel you might burst.

Although it can be difficult to pinpoint moments of joy in the day-to-day, like: 1:02 p.m. August 9, 2020, joyous moment for 108 seconds, my cat purred in my lap, reassuring me of its love. It is much easier to recall unbridled joyful moments as this is the "best day ever" feeling. Frequently, these are in walking across graduation stages, the words "I do," a baby's first cry, and other major life moments.

It might be challenging for a person to attempt to capture an unbridled joyous moment they had just this past week. However, I am sure it is possible. It might be something seemingly insignificant, like the joy in seeing someone who makes you happy when it has been a rough week. It could also just be the joy of knowing that you are a beloved child of God. Any moment of joy is one for celebration, no matter how bridled.

Lukus Ebert

Student Senate Member and Master of Divinity Student

ADVENT WEEK FOUR

December 20, 2020

God of Love

Luke 1:26-38

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Luke 1:38

"Gods don't love humans." If there was one common understanding among most of the peoples of the ancient Hellenistic world, it is this. To love was to be attached to someone beyond oneself, to be vulnerable to pain or rejection inflicted by that someone, to be open to change brought by that someone. Such qualities implied weakness and would inevitably lead to dishonor and shame. And since the gods were not weak and would not tolerate dishonor, they did not love humans. The most humans could do to get them to act on their petitions was to appeal to their vanity, their honor, or their power.

But the Jewish people of the first century had a different claim about their God. Their God loved them. Loved them corporately and loved them individually. In fact, many were coming to believe, not only did God love them, God loved everyone. Which left God open to pain, to change and to caring about what happens to people. Which left God weak.

Almost as weak as a young woman with little status and no power. Yet, in contrast to similar stories of gods impregnating young women, Luke's telling of Mary's encounter with Gabriel gives space for her to say no. But she said yes. Just like that. And though the word "love" appears nowhere in this passage, it permeates it. The love between God and a young woman. The love between the young woman and her people as she joined with her body their hopes for a more loving future. The love among God, a woman, a people and a world.

Dr. Nancy Claire Pittman

President and

Stephen J. England Associate Professor of the Practice of Ministry

ADVENT WEEK FOUR

December 21, 2020

Pour Out Your Heart

1 Samuel 1:1-19

"Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." 1 Samuel 1:16

The season of Advent lifts up this story of answered prayer from the beginning of First Samuel, because the birth of Samuel is seen in Christian tradition as a precursor to the birth of Jesus. And the text from I Samuel is read not only as a precursor in the historical sense of coming before, but also in the Christian allegorical sense of speaking about a longing that would be fulfilled only with the birth of Jesus.

Instead of focusing on this traditionalist, and supercessionist logic of precursor/ fulfillment, I would like us to stay close to the story's depiction of Hannah's tears. She has been tormented for years by Peninah for being barren, and she pleads with God to lift the stigma of barrenness from her. Eli takes her to be drunk as she moves her lips while "pouring out her soul before the LORD," "speaking out of great anxiety and vexation."

There is desperation in Hannah's anxiety, just as there is in so many of our prayers in these days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prayers and tears over loss of jobs, eviction from homes; tears of profound grief across the world for those who have already been ill and died. And in Hannah's vexation we can hear as well the outrage of a nation and world over the injustice of George Floyd's death—a death representing so many countless others—voicing a prophetic call for the courage to turn our hearts around and stand for justice with those who are suffering.

With Hannah, let us pour out our hearts this Advent, longing for newness of life and for the mystery of God to draw near to us.

Dr. Joe Bessler

Robert Travis Peake Professor of Theology

ADVENT WEEK FOUR

December 22, 2020

America's Wanting Love: Mercy as Covenant

Luke 1:46b – 55

What we need today in the onward march of humanity is a public sentiment in favor of common justice and simple mercy ... [T]wo things are wanting in American civilization—a keener and deeper, broader and tenderer sense of justice [and] a sense of humanity... — Frances E. W. Harper, 1875

Today's devotional text presents Mary as theologian and lyricist. Drawing from Jewish scripture she asserts that, "G*d's mercy (exists) in generation after generation on behalf of those who respectfully revere him." The divine mercy depicted in Mary's song, however, reverses neither her moral nor religious state but alienation caused by societal strictures that denied her full humanity: poverty, Jewishness, femaleness, premarital pregnancy.

Mercy, traditionally, offers lenient judgment to admittedly guilty and blameworthy petitioners. Such mercy judges Mary's class, ethnicity/race, religion, gender, and circumstance as undesirable, of her own making, and requiring transcendence. Judicial mercy demands full submission to institutions in hopes that those controlling said institutions use their privilege to protect petitioners from the very same systems. This toxic mercy buttresses unjust systems and beats the downtrodden into a posture where relief requires submission and pardons become propaganda.

Mary's song, with its psalter allusions, invokes an alternative covenant-oriented mercy as love or *hesed* (steadfast love, loyalty). Here, mercy symbolizes that unbreakable, steadfast love and loyalty that is the essence of G*d's covenantal devotion toward humanity. Despite society's judgment, Mary's soul rejoices because G*d's *hesed* recognizes her value and worth.

Some 145 years ago, Frances Harper poignantly described America at social, moral, and religious crossroads. Her calls for common justice and simple mercy tragically fell before a hard-hearted nation. In this 2020, marred by COVID-19 and routine evidence of police brutality against unarmed Black folk, Mary's song and Harper's call exhort Christian America to commemorate and model Christ's advent as more than judicial relief but as covenantal love and simple mercy.

Dr. Arthur F. Carter, Jr.

Assistant Professor of New Testament

ADVENT WEEK FOUR

December 23, 2020

A Triumphant Love

Mark 11:1-11

Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Mark 11:9

Love is a word that is used in our homes, workplace, and with our friends. And yet love is the one thing that we long to have in our lives. Most of the time it is utilized to identify with someone how we feel concerning them. However, love should be used by showing action of how one feels and not merely the talk of it. God exhibits this type of love toward us all. You do not have to be in a certain social or economic class for God to love you. God gives an Agape love to everyone. It is unconditional no matter your thoughts, deeds, or actions. God sent Jesus in this world because God loves us and to redeem our souls.

Jesus made a triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. Jesus was not a part of the elite or wealthy but was walking and talking as if he had authority. The actions of Jesus caused the leaders at that time to make plans to punish him. One example of this is when Jesus sent his disciples out to retrieve the donkey. Not just any donkey but a specific one and to tell anyone who asked that the Lord needed it. It was God's infinite love for people that Jesus was granted such power and authority to give hope. As Jesus entered Jerusalem the people were crying out to God to be saved through praises.

It was God's victorious demonstration of love that gave Jesus the mandate to be a sacrifice for you and me. As we continue during this Advent, let us remember God is love and gives love to all. Let us continue to live obediently and know that it will lead us to victory every time.

Claudette President

Student Senate Member and Master of Divinity Student

ADVENT WEEK FOUR

December 24, 2020

Peace: A Way of Life

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Luke 2:14

Peace is such a Christmas theme, isn't it?

I've heard sermons on how you can have peace in your heart

- when you're doing Christmas shopping,
- when you're cooking Christmas dinner,
- when you have a houseful of relatives you don't like.

Peace in your heart—no doubt there are apps and breathing exercises for that.

But it's not what the angels proclaim in this first Christmas cantata.

"Peace on earth." (Luke 2:14)

They're not talking about cardiac peace but peace on earth.

First Isaiah proclaims a child who is to be Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6). The Christian tradition has often read this passage in relation to Jesus (reinforced by Handel's *Messiah*). But Isaiah was not talking about Jesus—perhaps King Hezekiah (ruled 715-687 BCE).

Judea was threatened by Assyrian imperial oppression. The prophet anticipates a time when that menace would end. "The rod of the oppressor" will be broken; there will be "endless peace" (Isa 9:4, 7). The vision is not just of the end of military threat. It's a vision of "justice and righteousness" (Isa 9:7).

Peace in the biblical tradition is not the absence of stress, anxiety, war. It's not based on domination, military conquest, quests for greatness.

Biblical peace concerns a society marked by just interaction among all people. It embraces the dignity of all people made in the image of God regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, social status. It works for equal access for all people to the resources and opportunities necessary for good and satisfying life.

Peace is a fine Christmas, angelic vision but biblical—Christmas—peace requires a year-long way of life.

Dr. Warren Carter PhD

LaDonna Kramer Meinders Professor of New Testament



PHILLIPS SEMINARY

> *where faith leads*

The 2020 Advent devotional cover was created by Elizabeth K Gwartney. Elizabeth is a junior honors student at Oklahoma City University studying biomedical science, pre-occupational therapy, and child advocacy. Besides watercolor, her hobbies include cooking, crocheting, and playing with her beloved fluffy feline, Pumpkin.

"This year's cover was inspired by my favorite symbol of the Advent season: the Advent Wreath. Growing up, we always had one on our dining table during Advent, and we lit it before dinner. Often it would be the only seasonal decoration on display, because Advent was a very busy time of year in our home. While the season may feel very different this year, I can count on the Advent Wreath to mark the passage of time and anticipation of the celebration of the Holy Child."

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