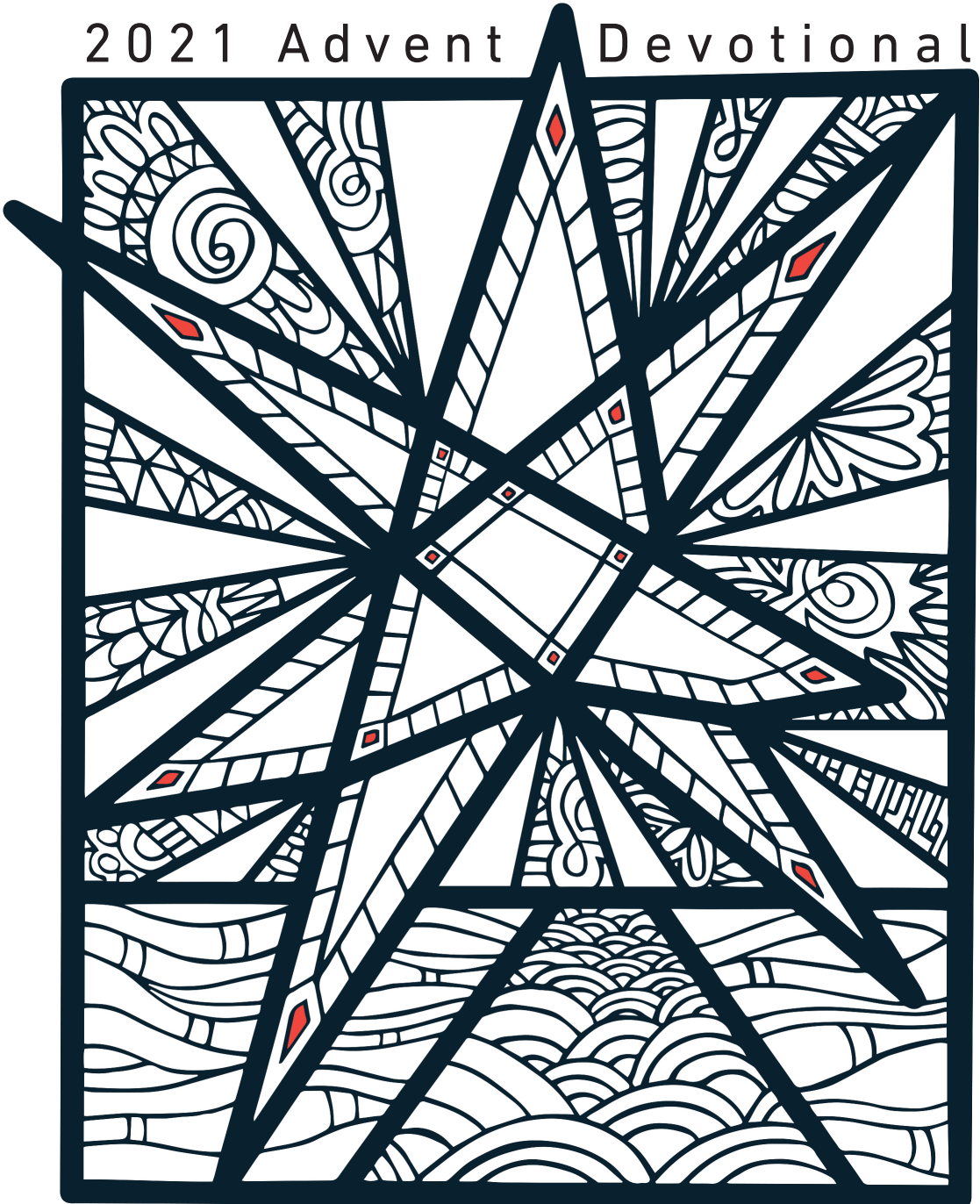


# PHILLIPS SEMINARY

2021 Advent Devotional





# PHILLIPS SEMINARY

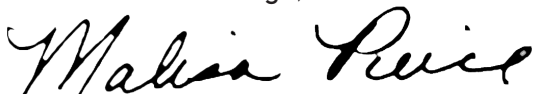
Once again, Phillips Theological Seminary presents to you the Advent Devotional. The devotional is an important part of our mission to support and educate the whole church. We value your contribution to the seminary and consider you a part of our community.

In the last several years, adult coloring books have become very popular. In such trying and stressful times, it can be a good and helpful thing to play—do something childlike.

This year, the illustration for the devotional cover is a geometric line drawing with a few spots of color. We hope you will use it in conjunction with the devotion and color a portion each day as a meditation. Or use it as a reflection time after reading the devotion. Maybe let your child or grandchild color and use it as an opportunity to discuss the importance of the star and Advent. You could end Advent by coloring the path in the middle and reflect on where your faith has led you this season.

We hope that as you read this booklet you are inspired to deepen your faith, your hope is renewed and you reflect on where your faith is leading you.

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](http://ptstulsa.edu/devotionals)). We will also provide each devotion as a podcast that you may access through your preferred podcast provider.

## Week One

November 28, 2021

### Hope

*Luke 21:25-36*

*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Luke 21:28*

I am, down to the very bottom of my soul, an optimist. I am the person who, when pushed off the roof of a 20-story building, shouts to the person standing at the 10th-story window, "So far, everything is going great!"

Except this year. This year our communities continue to deal with COVID-19 and the information and misinformation that divide us. This year the women of Afghanistan, not to mention the men and children, are under siege again by a body-destroying, soul-sapping form of sexism. This year rallies in support of white supremacy attract more devotees while chronic frustration ignites arguments and fistfights in airports. This year my friends in New Orleans and California deal with the social and economic turmoil of climate change. This year my beloved partner of almost 35 years passed away.

This year I read the warnings of the Lukan apocalypse without optimism. I fill each word of disaster with the scenes of the year almost gone—bombs exploding at airport gates, wreckage floating, houses burning, hospitals filled with people literally coughing their lungs up. And my optimism turns into a net with a large hole at the bottom of my fall from the 20-story building.

Which means that now I can truly hope. My heart is no longer weighed down by a false optimism that keeps me from feeling the pain of the world or from sensing my own deep wounds. I can look out for signs of the presence of the Messiah among us, both transcendent and immanent, both beyond time and in time. And I can pray with you for the strength and the courage to hope in the face of all that has gone awry.

**Dr. Nancy Claire Pittman**

President and

Stephen J. England Associate Professor of the Practice of Ministry

## Week One

November 29, 2021

### **A Patient God**

*2 Peter 3*

*But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3: 8-9 (NIV)*

This has been a whirlwind of a year. If I were to write this devotion in the beginning of the summer, like I had planned, when COVID seemed to be under control, I would have written about hope in the movement of the Holy. People were getting vaccinated, ICUs stopped being overrun. It would have seemed like a great analogy as the coming of the Lord mostly represents hope to me. I think about being a child sick in school and having the nurse tell me that my mother was coming to get me. I knew that when she came, she would make things better.

But now, it is the end of the summer. Delta variant is more easily spread affecting many who chose not to get vaccinated to protect themselves and the more vulnerable around them that could not get vaccinated and in my county, the hospitals are more overrun than they have ever been. I am tired of humanity.

Now I feel like the little sister that has been mistreated and threaten my assailant by saying, "My big brother is coming for you! I knew that he would make things better and get 'em!"

Thankfully, we are not under my control. Peter tells us that we are under the control of a more patient God. 2 Peter tells us that God is not slow, but patient and giving humanity time to get it right. That means that we have the ability to change course and do what is right. Maybe God believes we can get it right and I should too.

**Dr. Annie Lockhart Gilroy**

Assistant Professor of Christian Education and Practical Theology

## Week One

November 30, 2021

### **Our Responsibility**

*2 Samuel 7:18-29*

*...for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever. 2 Samuel 7:29b*

In our reading from 2 Samuel, David is sitting before the Lord, confidently spinning out a theology of conquest, celebrating the way God has chosen Israel, and seen fit to use Israel's military success to establish his, God's (or might David mean his own) reputation. David's humility is eloquent, deferring to God's power and righteousness, but celebrating too—and just a few chapters away from his own fall in the seizing of Bathsheba—how God will establish the house of Israel “forever.”

It is a very human longing—the promise, the guarantee, of forever, of eternal rewards—a longing for divine power, for love that doesn't end, for certainty, for abundant fullness—that is the longing for a protective God—for a transcendence untouched by pain that protects us and rewards us for our obedience. The problem, perhaps, is not simply with David's pride going before a fall, but with this vision of God itself—a God whose power protects us in exchange for our right belief, our worship and faithful obedience.

This advent, I wonder afresh at the vulnerability of the child born to Mary and Joseph, the painful ambiguity of her pregnancy, the courage of her yes to the angel, and the courage of Joseph's yes as well, and I grieve for all the “innocents” slaughtered by Herod, without angels to protect them. What if this Advent we take seriously the presence of immigrant children, separated from families, lost in bureaucracies, pawns of ideological struggles, as figures of Jesus in need of a place of rest, and needing the courage of our response? What if, in seeing all of nature itself in climate travail, we trust not in God's power to heal the world, but the call to our own responsibility to love and care for the world?

**Dr. Joe Bessler**

Robert Travis Peake Professor of Theology

## Week One

December 1, 2021

### **This Too Shall Pass?**

*Psalm 90*

*For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. Psalm 90:4*

Psalm 90 points out that time is experienced differently for God than it is for us. What we experience is just a blip in time, “a thousand years...are like yesterday.” We run the risk of allowing this time-perception difference to minimize what is happening right now in our lives.

In the middle of a pandemic (third wave, fourth wave, who knows anymore), fires destroying land and forests, and weather destroying cities and people destroying each other—this time seems like an eternity, a never-ending horror movie. We can’t run fast enough. We just seem to keep falling down and making things worse. Will we ever be able to leave this phase of peril and destruction? This isn’t just a blink of the eye to us; it is our all-consuming existence.

Enter Jesus. The celebration of the birth of Jesus offers us moments of peace, hope, joy and love in the middle of what feels like death, chaos and destruction. A friend recently gave birth. I sat and held the sleeping newborn. The only reminder of the world circumstances I had was the mask on my face.

Nothing else mattered in that moment. Time slowed down. The contentment and peace the baby had as she slept transferred to me. This magical transference is mystical, divine, the peace and love and joy and hope that we all need.

All the chaos around them had to completely disappear when Mary and Joseph held Jesus. That is what Jesus brings us now. The hope and joy and peace and love that we all need. During this Advent season may we steal those moments in the midst of the current chaos.

**Malisa Pierce**

Senior Director of Stewardship and Alumnae/i Relations

## Week One

December 2, 2021

### **Light is Coming**

*Luke 1:68-79*

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 1:78-79*

To be at all cognizant of one's location in history is to know the moments when blessings have flowed. Or, rather, faithful existence requires that we practice some degree of even-keeled honesty over trying seasons before us, when grief takes the form of future stories lost.

What perhaps makes this honesty most challenging is that it demands as much sobriety in the face of God's gifts as it does for times when God feels absent. For faith practitioners of a progressive persuasion, the problem often is not our ability to sustain faith during seasons of drought; it is instead the audacity to consider that God actually remembered us. Self-worth is a theological issue prone to overcorrection.

In the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel, we witness Elizabeth and Zechariah navigate this tension over God's providence in a disarming fashion. Their hope for a child had long vanished by the time the angel of the Lord visits Zechariah, revealing that Elizabeth would soon give birth to a son named John. To the delight of those of us who resent perfect believers, Zechariah is not without his doubts. Before praising the Lord God of Israel in verse 68, he interrogates the angel of the Lord in verse 18, inquiring into how it is possible for God to remember him in the eleventh hour.

For those of us prone to despair in the darker and colder months of Advent, the closing words of Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1 pose a possibility that may take time to accept: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

**Dr. Peter Capretto**

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care in Religion and Culture



## Week One

December 3, 2021

### Meeting People Where We/They Are

*Philippians 1:18b-26*

*Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. Philippians 18b-21*

Sometimes circumstances can leave us feeling stuck. These days we don't have to look far to experience fear, dismay, anger, sorrow. In our communities, across the nation, on the far side of the globe, and perhaps in our own homes, opportunities for distress abound. Our present realities press in on us, and we can be left feeling numb, and without focus.

Under house arrest and chained to a guard for the better part of two years, the Apostle Paul faced trying circumstances. Circumstances that most of us, fortunately, will never experience. I can hardly imagine a less inspiring environment from which to proclaim the message of Christ. It would have been easy for Paul to give up and accept his confinement as the end of his ministry. After all, he didn't even know if he would live or die.

Instead, Paul was consumed by passion and a determination to continue to boldly proclaim the gospel no matter his personal outcome. You've heard of meeting people where they are? Paul took the phrase to the extreme and continued to build up and to reassure and rejoice with the believers in Philippi from his place of incarceration. He went as far as to say that whether he lived or died, he couldn't lose. Wow.

Holy One, help us to meet people where they are no matter where we happen to be. Remind us that in times of virtual distancing and limited face-to-face interaction, your desires for our lives remain steady. Give us the courage to face all circumstances, even those that produce suffering, as opportunities to make a difference in the world each day.

### Sharon Russ

Executive Assistant to Advancement and Donor Relations Specialist

## Week One

December 4, 2021

### **Too Big To Fail, Too Small To Matter?**

*Malachi 4:1-6*

*See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. Malachi 4:1-2*

“Too big to fail.” The phrase littered public discourse during the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. The theory, though, had been postulated decades earlier: that certain corporations are so complex, massive, and interconnected that their failure would bring ruin to the entire worldwide economic system. As a result, they simply cannot be allowed to fail, even if failure is the natural result of their incompetence and corruption.

It doesn't take a genius to see how this leads to abuse and injustice. If an organization or individual is seen as so essential to a system's survival that they cannot be allowed to fail, then that organization or individual may commit any abuse they like in service of their success. Those with less power may suffer, but what other options have they got? The disempowered depend upon the system's survival for their own survival, but the system only depends on the one deemed too big to fail.

Which is why the “sun of righteousness” image in this passage from Malachi is so audacious. Every living creature is at the mercy of the sun for its survival. What sort of sunshine is simultaneously hot enough to burn evildoers to stubble, yet gentle enough to coax tender grass out of the ground so that young cows may be set to graze on it? When have the cosmos ever shown themselves to be partial to righteousness? Can God, the maker of the cosmos, intervene on behalf of the dispossessed? Has it ever been so? Will it ever be so?

**Dr. Sarah Morice Brubaker**

Associate Professor of Christian Systematic Theology

## Week Two

December 5, 2021

### Work in Progress

*Philippians 1:3-11*

*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6*

My mother is an artist. All my life I have been in an artistic environment, within a family of artists. I spent most of those early years around my mother's art and watching her paint.

Artists see differently. Where I might see a tree or a person, my mother sees a leaf or a pair of hands. Upon a blank canvas she would begin using broad and sweeping strokes as she sketched the shapes. Then, these vague sketches would begin to take form, becoming clear and distinct.

As she prepared her palette with different colors of paint, I would imagine how those colors might be applied. I would be baffled as she began to apply the paint: mixing, combining, creating texture and leading the colors to follow her vision.

Soon, I was able to see these forms as a landscape, portrait or still life. Gradually, the painting would be revealed. I could see it. Then, my eyes saw what she had seen all along.

In this season of preparation, waiting and arrival we gather around the Artist once more. We have lived within a sketch of the world, jumbled and indistinct, plain and without color, empty of the form we long to see, to now stand in awe before the promised masterpiece of forgiveness and compassion, spoken of across our generations. Our eyes have been sharpened and grown accustomed, by faith, as we peer over the Artist's shoulder, once more.

May this season of Advent become the living gallery in which our wandering sight opens wide and we fall upon our knees before a work of sprawling majesty, in which, we too are portrayed.

**Dr. Terry Ewing**

Vice President of Advancement

## Week Two

December 6, 2021

### **A Word of Comfort**

*Isaiah 40:1-11*

*The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah 40:8*

I used to work at a summer camp. During training, we would rehearse a list of values and principles that would guide our work together. Most of them have faded from my memory but one embedded itself in my life: When confronted with changes big and small, the twinge (or wave) of anxiety I feel is met with the phrase, “I am flexible and adapt to change.”

It helps us all to be flexible and adapt to change because change is inevitable. Viruses mutate. People get sick. People die. People grow. People move. New jobs start. Families grow. Families divide. Seasons pass. Grass withers. Flowers fall. Grass grows. Flowers bloom. The list could go on and on and on.

But, as Bon Jovi sings, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” It often seems like a lot of the troubles in our world endure as steadfastly as God’s love. Global warming continues to progress at a terrifying pace. Police brutality and the killing of oppressed peoples persists. The pandemic rages on. Again, the list could go on and on and on.

Hear a word of comfort and call this advent season: in the midst of it all, God is steadfast and sure. We are flexible and adapt to change! We work with God, responding to the needs of the world, ushering in change that brings relief to the suffering and liberates the oppressed.

**Dr. Allie Utley**

Assistant Professor Liturgy and Practical Theology

## Week Two

December 7, 2021

### **Someday At Christmas**

*Isaiah 19:18-25*

*In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together... The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel, my inheritance." Isaiah 19:23, 25 (NIV)*

Someday at Christmas, men won't be boys,  
Playing with bombs like kids play with toys.  
One warm December, our hearts will see  
A world where men are free.  
—Stevie Wonder, "Someday at Christmas" (1967)

When I was a child, we put up decorations while listening to this holiday classic every Christmas. As a child, the music moved me. But now, as an adult, I value the lyrics equally. The song's message is just as important now as it was in 1967. In my view, it is such a fitting song for Advent.

I often wonder if Stevie knows how his song dovetails nicely with the prophetic and eschatological themes of Advent. Like the prophet Isaiah, he penned a vision of the future where joy, peace, hope, and love will be the order of the day. However, what's important to note is that no one will be left out of this vision. In the oracles from Isaiah, we read that although God will hold Egypt and Assyria accountable for their oppression of God's people, yet still God includes them in this reconciling work.

This Advent, may we consider how anticipating Christ's coming into the world involves drawing the circle of grace wider. We embrace those already in the fold, those pushed to the margins, and yes, even our enemies. In Advent, we anticipate restorative justice not through building walls but through paving highways that all may enter the ever-inclusive Kin-dom of God. The fruit of our faithful labor may not be immediately apparent. But as Stevie would put it, the fulfilment will come "maybe not in time for you and me, but someday at Christmastime."

### **Keith Anthony Bethell**

Student Senate Member and Master of Theological Studies Student

## Week Two

December 8, 2021

### **A Hope Filled Longing for Joy**

*Isaiah 35: 3-7*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. Isaiah 35:5-7*

Alienation is one of the conditions of living in exile. In Isaiah's writings, we encounter people living under chaotic, disorienting experiences of oppression where there is a scarcity of hope.

For many living in the middle of an ongoing pandemic and the heightened racial and political tensions of the last five years, there is a profound sense of estrangement. One consequence of isolation and ongoing tensions is the struggle to maintain a sense of hope. The reminder that joy is more than a possibility it is a promise of abundant justice and healing.

In the wilderness of separation parched by feelings of loneliness and uncertainty about the future, the memory of connection and wholeness lingers in the distance like a mirage. The longing for refreshing springs of renewed health and relief from the suffering of Creation and her Peoples.

Isaiah reminds us there is still hope and the potential for joy as we remind one another and bear each other up while navigating the desert. God's promise bubbles forth and the thirst abates and gives way to song. Even in precarious surroundings, we are not alone in our sojourn. Together, we can participate in compassion in such a way that a place of communion is created.

**Dr. Lisa A. Dellinger**

Visiting Assistant Professor of Constructive Theologies

## Week Two

December 9, 2021

### Faith Leads Us to Peace

*Isaiah 12:2-6*

*Yes, indeed— God is my salvation. I trust, I won't be afraid. God- yes God!— is my strength and song, best of all, my salvation! Isaiah 12:2 (The Message)*

At first glance, you feel the peace presented in this joyful song, but the prophet Isaiah shared these words in a world full of doom and gloom. The people of Judah had struggles, fears, divisiveness, and uncertainty. This passage is a much-needed bright spot sharing of the future day when we draw together to give thanks and praise.

Today's struggles, fears, inequalities, and other crises echo Isaiah's time. We also experience personal strife, worry, illness, accidents, and loss. We feel frail and very human. It seems too much to join in or repeat this beautiful song; to trust, and not be afraid.

When we are fearful though, it helps us to understand that God is always faithful. The Spirit reaches to us from the pages and across the centuries to let us know that God is with us, is our strength, stands beside us, and even carries us through painful moments or worrying times. Grace and love are gifts bestowed upon us; compassion and comfort are blessings that sustain us, enabling us to withstand what overwhelms us. This verse is a promise that can help us get through troubles and personal challenges.

During this season of Advent, as nights seem so dark and the relentlessness of this world keeps us worried, we wait, just like the people of Isaiah's time, for "the future day" when God's salvation will come to us in all its fullness, we won't be afraid. We are drawn toward that, ready to "sing praise-songs to God. Let the whole earth know what's been done!" (Isaiah 12:6). We celebrate with the whole people of God. Can we get any more peace than that?

**Leslie LeSieur**

Senior Director of the Center for Ministry and Lay Training

## Week Two

December 10, 2021

### **Cheerful Giving and Receiving**

*Amos 8:4-12 and 2 Corinthians 9:1-15*

*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! 2 Corinthians 9:15*

Has shopping for Christmas presents ever felt more like a grudging obligation than a joy? I have to confess that most years at least some of my gift-giving feels compulsory rather than cheerful.

I admire my few, brave, counter-cultural friends who refuse to participate in gift exchanges at Christmas. I wish I would follow their example of rejecting the idolatry of consumerism and commercialism that conscripts so many of us into buying and material junk as a token of love. Yet, I can hardly imagine opting out of the custom.

This lesson from Amos reminds me that greed is a human tendency with serious consequences. Ideally, the practice of gift giving could be a rehearsal for generous sharing — the opposite of greed. In the 2 Corinthians passage we read about one community's outpouring of love to support another community. When love flows between those who can give to those who are in need, the Commonwealth of God is manifest in visible, tangible ways.

I am intrigued by the line in verse 15 about God's gift that is indescribable, inexpressible, unspeakable. Can we say anything at all about that gift? Perhaps we come closest to experiencing that gift through the wonder and hope that stems from the miraculous power that can free us from greed. The insatiable, acquisitive drive in me is a cruel master. It is a miracle when I am freed from grasping in order to appreciate and share with others instead of wanting more for myself.

May your giving and receiving be filled with potent cheerfulness this Christmas.

**Dr. Kathleen D. McCallie**

Associate Professor of Ministerial Leadership and Ethics  
and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program



## Week Two

December 11, 2021

### **Second Kind of Faith**

*Luke 1:57-66*

*But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." Luke 1:60*

Faith is tricky. For some, faith comes easily, a childlike trust that God is always there, a belief that God hears every prayer, a certainty that God has a plan about everything. For others, faith is more difficult, like trying to grasp a handful of fog or see the wind. It's there, but not easily describable or concrete.

Looking into the future is an act of the second kind of faith. We can't know what's there with certainty; we can only peer into it with near-sighted vision. Yet our faith can give us an underlying hope in the future, as in the passage from Isaiah.

For a people in exile, dreaming of a return home, it would have been easy to succumb to hopelessness. But with their faith, the words of Isaiah about the future, about repairing, restoration, and rebuilding were like trying to grasp that fog. It was there and not there at the same time.

Like the amazement surrounding the naming of John the Baptist, there is wonder about both the present and the future. As John's name was clearly decided, people still wondered about his future—and their own—as they wondered what he would become. His future was not yet written but had promise and potential.

And so it is with us. As we wait through Advent and through life, may we embrace the fog and the wind, and the steadfast God there through it all.

**Kelly Youngblood**

Student Senate Member and Master of Divinity Student

## Week Three

December 12, 2021

### **Extended Warranty**

*Philippians 4:4-7*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philippians 4:4*

If you are a mainline, Protestant person of a certain age, you likely have a tune going through your head about now. “Rejoice... rejoice... and again I say, rejoice.” You may also be hearing that music as a round that will take a while to exit your brain. You may also be thinking of the lack of things to rejoice about over the past year.

The “rejoicing” expressed in this text is not a happy kind of feeling. Instead, it’s a call to a sense of total well-being in the promises of a Divine One whose desire is for our protection and peace. This is a total protection plan, the most extended warranty of warranties, far beyond anything a telemarketer could offer, regardless of how many times they call.

Folks in Philippi get a reminder in this letter that while they may not live in the most welcoming neighborhood in the Roman empire, they are to trust their faith to lead them to a life of shalom, a peace that “exceeds human imagination” (Charles B. Cousar). They are reminded that their hearts and minds are also guarded by the Divine One, even as they navigate persecution from without and disagreements within their community.

The folks of Philippi know that as faithful followers of Jesus, the one we await this season, they are expected to also share this encompassing love, this peace that “exceeds human imagination” outside of their community, even to those who persecute them, rejoicing in the Lord always and in all ways.

### **Kurt Gwartney**

Senior Director of Communications

Instructor, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

## Week Three

December 13, 2021

### **Korah's Rebellion**

*Numbers 16:1-19*

*And the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation. Numbers 16:19b*

Whichever word you use for it — incarnation, real presence, embodiment — a central theme for Advent and Christmas is how the human Jesus reflects the work of God in a flesh-and-blood world. The next question, then, is how and where this holy work manifests in a real way today.

Though the biblical story of Korah's rebellion requires more exegetical unpacking than we can do here, it does offer an interesting perspective on how a fiery God shows up in the midst of challenge to reveal what is holy. "And the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation" (Num 16:19b).

In Korah's case, the result was to reinforce the status quo, Moses and Aaron as God's chosen leaders. Ponder with me the possibility of a different result.

What if we ignite a fire within by challenging our existing assumptions about our own holy work? What if we begin seriously to question the traditions and structures in which we and those around us operate? What if we interrogate ourselves, our own motives, our own conscious or unconscious participation in systems we thought were neutral when it comes to justice and liberation?

Imagine this Advent as a season of rebellion against complacency, a time of self-examination and proactive exploration in which we pay attention to how a fiery God shows up in the challenge and reveals to us anew both the internal and external holy work to which we are called. This, too, is incarnation.

**Rev. Susanna Weslie Southard**

Dean of the Chapel and Affiliate Instructor for Ministry Studies

## Week Three

December 14, 2021

### Where Faith Leads

*Numbers 16:20-35*

*...when the ground under them burst asunder, the earth opened its mouth, and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people, and all their possessions. They all went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them... Numbers 16:32-33 (Jewish Study Bible)*

What a satisfying ending to anyone's enemies, no? So ends the tale of Korah, great challenger to Moses's leadership. The interesting bit about the tale is that at first blush it looks like Korah's beef with Moses is really about democracy versus divine appointment.

Korah presents Moses with a pretty good complaint, stating that all of the Israelites are holy. He demands, "Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" Think of Pete's confrontation with Everett in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*: "Who elected you leader of this outfit?" Unlike Everett, Moses doesn't have a snappy comeback. Instead, Moses prostrates himself and begins to consult with G-d.

He perhaps senses a demagogue in Korah. Korah is a Levite and already has special privileges, so why is he looking to end Moses' leadership? As a prophetic figure Moses knows there is more to leading G-d's people to G-d, that land of milk and honey, than simply declaring everyone finished in achieving holiness.

Martin Buber suggests that Moses knows, through G-d, that the road to learning how to become a holy people is a long one and must be hewn across generations of choices "between the way of G-d and the wrong paths of their own hearts." Where does faith lead you this season?

**Sandy Shapoval**

Dean of the Library and Research Services

## Week Three

December 15, 2021

### **Sacred Autonomy**

*Micah 4:8-13*

*But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan... Micah 4:12a*

A common trope in novels, television, and movies is the damsel in distress. A woman, usually young and beautiful, is captured by an evil villain who threatens her life and virtue, thus enticing the hero, usually a young and equally beautiful man, into the villain's lair to rescue the fair lady at risk. A great fight ensues, the leading man carries away the leading lady, who, of course, falls hopelessly in love with her rescuer, and they ride happily off into the sunset.

In this text, the city of Jerusalem is depicted as a damsel in distress being held captive in Babylon, waiting to be rescued, not by a human hero, but by the LORD. Her captors are drooling over her, thinking that she is there for the taking.

But Lady Jerusalem does not sit around waiting to be rescued. In fact, rescue is not even in the LORD's plan for her. Instead, God's plan is for her to take matters into her own hands and provide her own rescue herself.

She has a "king" and a "counselor" within her (v. 9)—her own strong spirit, breathed into her by the God who created her. God's plan for her, and for all people of all genders, is that we all have sovereignty over our own selves, a king and a counselor within each of us.

We all were created and called very good by a loving God whose desire for all of us is to flourish in lives of sacred autonomy, living out every dream that the Divine has for us and that we have for ourselves.

### **Rev. Renee Goodwin**

Theological Reflection Group Facilitator and  
Pastor of First Christian Church of Girard, KS

## Week Three

December 16, 2021

### Embodying the Covenant

*Jeremiah 31:31-34*

*"I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Jeremiah 31:33b*

The text contains some of the most familiar words of this prophetic book. Jeremiah is speaking to the exiles in Babylon and envisioning the future that God intends for them. Through the prophet, God promises them a future, when God will "build and plant" the people in Judah and establish a "new" covenant.

It is this last promise that needs some closer consideration. What about the covenant will be "new?" God does not say that there will be new commandments or teachings; the content will not change. Rather, it is how people will know the covenant that will be new. Whereas in their past, the Israelites had a tradition of a "written," or text-based, covenant with God (though that was probably a later development), now God says that the covenant will be "written" on their hearts. There will be no need for monuments containing the commandments or for teaching others about God's desires. All will know the covenant intuitively.

How could this be possible? Certainly, children and new community members will need instruction in what the covenant requires, wouldn't they? There is no reason to take this text literally, implying that no one will ever need a reminder about how God wants us to live.

If a community structures its life together with a clear sense of accountability and acts in ways that consider the current need and possible future results, it will embody the covenant requirements. They will love God with all their being and love their neighbors as themselves; their living will "teach" the next generation. Their faith will lead them into a new future.

### Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible and  
Director of Formation for DOC Students

## Week Three

December 17, 2021

### Remembering and Persevering!

*Hebrews 10:32-39*

*So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. Hebrews 10:35 (NIV)*

We have heard of stories of people who have waited for loved ones to return from a journey or an assignment and what a joy it is when they finally receive them back. We have also heard of some people who have unfortunately given up “a few minutes” before realizing their dreams.

I once heard a story about a miner who gave up and sold off what he considered a useless mine but unknown to him, he was just a few meters away from the gold that he had been looking for most of his life.

In Hebrews 10:32-39, the author talks about remembering our love or commitment to faith in Jesus. “So do not throw away your confidence, it will be richly rewarded,” (v. 35). “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what God has promised” (v. 37).

As we await the coming of the Lord, we are being called upon:

1. To Wait patiently on God’s promise
2. To Remember our love and commitment to the message of Jesus.
3. To Persevere in order to receive what the Lord has promised.

Do you know what the Lord has promised you? Knowing what the Lord has promised us is one of the things that will help us to persevere and not give up, especially when the journey gets hard. As we wait on the Lord’s coming, let us do so joyfully and with perseverance, knowing that the Lord is coming soon and will not delay! Are you expectant?

**Judith Nakibuuka**

Financial Accountant

## Week Three

December 18, 2021

### A Roller-Coaster Season

*Isaiah 66:7-11; Luke 13:31-35*

*The sound of an uproar from the city!...The sound of the Lord repaying his enemies what they have earned. Isaiah 66:6 (Common English Bible)*

The Advent season is not for persons who want only “ups” in life. Take Lucy Van Pelt of Peanuts fame. She complained to Charlie Brown, “Why can’t my life be all ‘ups?’ If I want all ‘ups,’ why can’t I have them?...I don’t want any ‘downs!’ I just want ‘ups’ and ‘ups’ and ‘ups!’”

In contrast to Lucy, we have Isaiah and Luke, two masters of sending our imaginations on fabulous ups and terrible downs. They juxtapose images worthy of a Salvador Dali painting.

Isaiah’s author tells of Jerusalem’s post-exilic rebirth being like a woman delivering before labor begins. The returnees are newborns drinking from Jerusalem’s milk-swollen breasts. But before and after those joyous and tender images are condemnations of God’s enemies. “The sound of an uproar from the city!...The sound of the LORD repaying his enemies what they have earned.” Downs with the ups.

In Luke, friendly sometimes-sparring partners warn Jesus that Herod wants him dead. Rather than saying, “Thank you,” and taking cover, Jesus tells them he is headed for Jerusalem, the place of danger for those who speak truth laced with justice and compassion. Jerusalem here is not the loving new mother but prophet-slayer. This time, it is Jesus who would play the loving mother. He longs to gather the city’s people as a hen gathers her chicks, but no one comes.

Advent is not a time of pure joy or terror. It is a mixture of warning (the downs), the demand for change (always a gut-jerking ride), and wild promises of a more joyous future (ups!). I would sure prefer Lucy’s world, but that is not where we live, especially during Advent.

### Dr. Gary Peluso-Verdend

President Emeritus and

Executive Director of the Center for Religion in Public Life



## Week Four

December 19, 2021

### **A Song of Love and Justice**

*Luke 1:46-55*

*"My Soul Magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor upon his servant.... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." Luke 1:46-48, 52-53.*

The Magnificat has become one of the most potent pieces of justice literature in the entirety of scripture for me. Growing up half-Roman Catholic and half-Pentecostal in rural Oklahoma, I remember hearing about Mary in very different tones depending on which side of the family we enjoyed after-church meals with.

Today, I honor and revere her.

Not just because of the clear connection she has to the expectation we all experience in Advent. Not as a woman created in the image of a rather absurd, westernized "meek and mild" archetype. Not even as the Theotokos, or, the Mother of God. But as an exemplar of the Holy's commitment to love and justice.

Mary exclaims with Divine conviction that God's eternal promise to lift the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, fulfill promises, and love with abiding presence will never falter. But it doesn't stop there, for this only represents half of Mary's exclamation. The powerful, the rich, the proud, and the greedy find justice in a different way within her prayer. "Meek and mild?" I think not.

The Magnificat shakes me from my privileged torpor to remind me that I am not always to whom the prayer is meant to comfort. Mary's song is one of both comfort and retribution. Love and justice. Renewal and doom. As I greet the Living God in Christ this Christmas, will I find comfort in Mary's song? Will you?

May we all be shocked by Mary's Song. May the Magnificat help us realize justice, and indeed love, this Advent.

**Kyle Miller-Shawnee**

Interim Director of Admissions and Student Services

## Week Four

December 20, 2021

### **Praise the LORD**

#### *Psalm 113*

*Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD. Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised. The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD! Psalm 113:1-9*

As I reflect on 2021, I can only pull together thoughts of hope and promise. Hope stands as the foundational breath we need as humans to push from day to day. Promise is the key to a home that reminds all of us of the bountiful blessings bestowed by God to God's people. It's the promise that evokes a movement capable of illuminating the power and might to change lives, heal the sick, and save souls. Many lives have seen and felt much pain over the past years.

Psalm 113 is an example of the hope and promise we receive through the public and private practice of praise and worship. This is a psalm for the community to unite and build a strong tower of support. As I envision the imagery of Psalm 113, I can envision people of all races, religions, and walks of life coming together to offer affirmation of praise and gratefulness. Psalm 113 provides us with a picture of a LORD who wants to love and protect us. The LORD is in the blessing business of elevating the poor and needy to a place of importance, royalty!

During this Advent season, please remember the importance of praising the LORD! Praise the LORD who provides for you and your family. The LORD who takes away your troubled pain and gives you the power to strive to greater accomplishments. Praise the LORD who never loses a battle or faces defeat. Please remember to share with your community, family, and friends the sincere benevolence of love, peace, and joy. Praise the name of the LORD! This advent season is your season of glorified praise. Praise the LORD!

**Rev. Ulysses D. Allen**

Interim Director of Recruitment and Retention

## Week Four

December 21, 2021

### **Life in the Darkness**

*Romans 8:18-30*

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? Romans 8:24*

Today is the Winter Solstice. In the northern hemisphere it's the darkest day of the year. Sometimes I think darkness gets a bad rap. The fact that the church picked this time of the year as Jesus' birth is not a coincidence. Christianity baptized many traditions and claimed them as ours. My favorite carol is "In the Bleak Midwinter"—which fills my soul. Today I want to celebrate darkness.

In 1986 I moved to the San Luis Valley in Colorado. My 11 years in that mystical place gave me many gifts. Our home was on an acreage away from the town. Sometimes I would go outside at night just to breathe the alpine air. The stars always put on a show. I had been doing this for a while when I realized that what I thought was a collection of clouds, was actually the Milky Way galaxy.

One summer we hosted an international exchange student from Japan. I will never forget walking outside with him on one of his first nights with us. He stopped and pointed to the sky, "Beautiful," was his only word. He explained that in Tokyo you can never see the stars because "we have too much light" (light pollution).

The eighth chapter of Romans ranks up there with my favorite Christmas carol. It reminds me that at the core of our faith is the truth of hope. That hope is grounded in the reality that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness" (vs 26). In the supposed darkness of these times, whether in our communities or our beings, the forces of light and hope are present.

### **Rev. Dr. Mark W. Pumphrey**

President of the Phillips Alumni Association

Senior Pastor at First Christian Church in Greeley, Colorado

## Week Four

December 22, 2021

### **An Inclusive Faith**

*Ephesians 2:11-22*

*He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household. Ephesians 2:17, 19*

As we near the culmination of the celebration of Advent, the juxtaposition of today's Hebrew and Christian lectionary texts provide an interesting meditation on the journey and transformation this Advent makes possible. Indeed, the incarnation demonstrates for us what Willie James Jennings in *The Christian Imagination* calls an "intimate joining" we are called to manifest in our own lives.

As those who have been grafted into another's story, made fellow citizens and also members of God's household, one would think by now that Christians would be better witnesses to learning from others' varied experiences, reconciling and loving across differences. Instead, we too often use religion—whether Christianity broadly or denominations more specifically—to exclude.

By contrast, today's Hebrew text from Micah reflects a monotheism, to be sure, but not a closed monotheism. Even in "the last days," it allows that "all the nations may walk in the name of their gods." Likewise, Revelation 21 surprises us with the mention of "nations" and "kings of the earth" in the New Jerusalem. Both Micah (4:2) and Revelation (21:24) speak to the nations seeking God's wisdom and coming to walk in God's paths.

May this Advent season's example of humility and emptying inspire us anew to empty ourselves and open our hearts, eschewing our own "wisdom" that we may seek God's alone and walk in the ways set before us.

**Kaaryn McCall**

Alumna (2020)

## Week Four

December 23, 2021

### Mary's Song in Troubled Times

*Luke 1:46b–55*

*[G\*d] has come to the aid of Israel, his child, a reminder of mercy. Luke 1:54 (Common English Bible)*

Life can bring about uncertain times when it is difficult to recognize G\*d's love. The pressures of life can bombard our senses as we anticipate end-moments, those times when pain ends, and dominance is achieved. Interpretations of Mary's song often assume this posture: eyes forward we see pre-emptive praise for Christ-mediated end-moments of salvation and victory.

I pose an alternate posture. Mary, a betrothed yet unmarried Galilean woman, was an expectant mother. Imagine her not as mother of G\*d but as a young woman in a hostile, patriarchal world holding on to a promise. Imagine this vulnerable woman aware of her condition while not yet showing. Imagine Mary, living daily in ever-present awareness of being discovered and castigated. Have you ever felt vulnerable? To society? To the economy? To a virus? Amidst her danger, Mary held Gabriel's promise that the Holy Spirit would move on her behalf, and it did. Despite cultural norms and stereotypes Mary found safety with Elizabeth. It was in Mary's service (to Elizabeth) that she was extolled. Elizabeth's words fell upon Mary's ears creating a profound moment of love and affirmation, a moment prompted by the spirit. Might Mary's song be euphoric praise for the steadfast love of G\*d, articulated in the unexpected outpouring and transformational relationship fostered by Elizabeth?

Covid-19 has wreaked havoc on the world. So many of us grapple with how to live safely and authentically in times of vulnerability. I do not know what Sars-CoV2 will be like by Christmas. I'm uncertain if the delta, lambda, or nu variants will shutter church doors, national boundaries, or claim millions more lives. Yet, advent calls us to be reminded of G\*d's love, a promise embodied in Christ's birth. May we, in our most vulnerable moments, be reminded that G\*d's love is with us, now and tomorrow.

**Dr. Arthur F. Carter, Jr.**

Assistant Professor of New Testament

## Week Four

December 24, 2021

### Good News for the Working Class

*Luke 2:1-20*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." Luke 2:15*

Sheep are very dependent animals and require all of their daily needs to be provided. Since they don't have a strong survival mechanism, they are easy prey for predators. When sheep are in an open, hostile environment, they require a protector, a shepherd who guards and guides the sheep. Without a shepherd, death of the sheep is certain.

Although being a shepherd was a common profession, it was not a very well respected profession. The shepherd was not seen as noble. Instead, the shepherd was regarded as dirty, low class, and unprincipled. The shepherd, who worked outdoors all the time, had to combat the weather as well as combat carnivorous animals like wolves, bears, and lions. On occasion, a shepherd also battled thieves who sought to steal the sheep. Without a shepherd, the sheep might wander away and perish. The shepherd was required to be alert, watchful, fearless, and attentive.

On that holy night, the skies became the backdrop of a magnificent drama that invited the ordinary to participate in an extraordinary event. The night became as day as the good news was proclaimed to the socially impoverished. God calls everyone to experience saving grace. The shepherds did not question, "What is this?" or "What does this mean?" Rather, being inspired by their fidelity, they chose to collectively travel to witness what had been declared to them. Their faith made them a part of the sacred scene that we cherish during this season. Once they arrived at the manger, they kept watch over the Lamb of God who also became the Good Shepherd!

### **Dr. Lee H. Butler, Jr.**

Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Academic Dean and  
William Tabbernee Professor of the History of Religions and Africana Pastoral  
Theology

## Week Four

December 25, 2021

### **Christmas Day: Life**

*John 1:1-14*

*What has come into being through him was life... the light for all people. John 1:4*

John's Gospel opens its presentation of Jesus with a communication metaphor, the Word. And it employs the Hebrew Bible paradigm of Wisdom the communicator.

The Hebrew Bible, notably Proverbs chapter 8, presents Wisdom as a female figure who exists "in the beginning" with God. She comes from God to communicate divine presence and purposes among humans. She seeks to draw people into relationship with God as God's friends. Among people she experiences acceptance and rejection.

John's Gospel borrows this paradigm. It presents Jesus as the definitive word who reveals or communicates divine presence and purposes among people.

What does Jesus communicate? "What has come into being through him was life... the light for all people" (John 1:4). Jesus manifests the life-giving, liberating, and loving purposes of God. The word becomes flesh and lives among us (John 1:14). Jesus lives in solidarity with victims of dominating and life-depleting power. He opposes the damage caused by indiscriminate and self-serving power. He pursues justice that honors the dignity of all people and their access to just societal structures and requisite resources for good life.

Communication, though, can be ambiguous. A long tradition has preferred to spiritualize and individualize this "life." Some interpretations emphasize life that "saves souls" but ignores bodies, that focuses on the future but not the present, that concerns individuals but not societal structures and practices. Such claims ignore that the Word becomes flesh, lives among us, and offers life to all.

### **Dr. Warren Carter**

LaDonna Kramer Meinders Professor of New Testament



# PHILLIPS SEMINARY

> *where faith leads*

The 2021 Advent Devotional cover is “Star” inspired by Matthew 2:1-12.  
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