



# Phillips

Theological Seminary  
2022 Advent Devotional







**The Advent season is upon us.** At Phillips Theological Seminary, we are honored to go on this anticipatory and preparatory journey with you. We are grateful that you are part of the Phillips community and choose to join us in reflection and thoughtfulness by reading the devotionals we have provided this year. Please use and share this as a resource in your home with your family, in your church with your congregation, or in your own quiet spiritual time.

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 coming of the Christ. We hope that as you read this booklet you are inspired to deepen your faith as your hope is renewed.

May you experience peace that passes all understanding this season.

In Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Malisa Pierce'. The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of 'Malisa' and 'Pierce' being capitalized and prominent.

**Malisa Pierce**

**Assistant Vice President of Advancement**

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. Ebook versions are also available.

Week One  
November 27, 2022

## **A Familiar Place**

*Psalm 122*

*I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Psalm 122:1*

Familiar, from the Latin, "belonging to a family, of a household, intimate. Also, famulus, family; familia, household servant.

I like to attend worship. It is familiar and it always feels like home.

During seminary I served as the associate minister at First Christian Church of Stroud, Oklahoma. I worked with the youth groups and participated in Sunday worship. The kind and generous members of First Christian Church were tolerant of my youthful efforts and treated me as one of their ministers. However, I never understood myself to be a minister, not really.

I was ordained during Sunday morning worship at First Christian Church. Following worship, not one but several members said to me, "Congratulations, Reverend Ewing." It was then, I knew I was a minister. I was home.

During Advent, we arrive at another familiar place. It is a place of arrival and coming. We recognize all those here, as we have been recognized. We are members of a common household, a gathering, in this place marked as a household of service and edged by the Lord's Peace. In this familiar place, this Coming Place, I recognize home. I am recognized as being at home. It is a home welcoming each one, in this or any time, it is:

- the Great Family of Belonging,
- defined by acts of Service and Justice,
- and becomes the House of Hope.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

**Dr. Terry Ewing**

Vice President of Advancement

Week One  
November 28, 2022

## **Restoration**

*Genesis 8:1-19*

*God did not forget Noah and all the animals in the ark, and sent a mighty wind over the earth so that the waters began to subside. The springs of the Deep and the windows in the heavens were closed up. The rain from the heavens stopped. The water covering the earth gradually dropped, until at the end of 150 days it was gone. Genesis 8:1-3*

The crisis is over. God has not forgotten us. In this third Advent season beyond the squealing of the brakes in March 2020, we can begin to imagine what is next. It is obscured, for sure. The flood waters still hide what will be discovered later — but at least the rain has stopped.

I am fascinated by this story in Genesis, the story of Noah and the flood. It follows the tragedy in the garden, then the tragedy of Cain and Abel. In fact, as the story opens, we read, “YHWH was sorry that humankind had been created on the earth; it pained God’s heart.” When God created humans, the Holy One crowned them with the pronouncement, “...and it was very good.” What happened?

This passage in Genesis reaches back for the beautiful Hebrew word present in the first chapter, “ruah.” It can be translated: breath, wind, or spirit. It is the source of creation, what God breathed into the first human to bring life. Right here, after the world has been destroyed, God once again breathes upon the earth and the direction shifts from devastation toward restoration.

That’s what hope looks like to me. Appearing as a tiny shift, perhaps unnoticed by most, but appearing even so. Hope is like the wind when it shifts direction bringing a change in the weather. Hope is like holy breath. Hope is water receding. Hope is the life that survived against all the odds, waiting to be discovered.

We are in the first week of Advent. The darkness of the womb strongly embraces us. We are too early to catch the first light of the birth canal. Still, hope comes to the fore. May God bring hope like a fresh wind in this season.

**Rev. Charla Gwartney**

Adjunct Faculty, Century for Ministry and Lay Training



Week One

November 29, 2022

## **The Hope of Repeated Promises**

*Genesis 9:1-17*

*"...When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the Earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth." Genesis 9:16-17*

Earlier chapters of Genesis share destruction, flooding, death, and traumatic events, and I can imagine fear taking hold within those present wondering, "What's next?" Instead, in Genesis 9 there is a new hope given. It shares God's blessings of prospering and re-filling the Earth, followed by instructions for taking care of creation, and finally a promise by God to never again destroy the Earth by flood. It's that promise God shares first in verses 8 through 11, repeats in verse 12, and again repeats in verses 16 and 17, that delivers the calming effect.

When we want to make a point to a student, church member, or others, we repeat that concept or phrase; repetition matters. This covenant was so important to God that it is repeated to Noah and his family over and over. Not only that, a part of the promise includes a symbol of a "bow" set up in the clouds so that even when it rains, every living thing doesn't need to fear but can trust in God's repeated promise for Earth. Each time a rainbow is set in the cloud it's a proof of a repeated promise.

Verse 16 establishes the covenant not just between God and Noah for that time but as an eternal covenant. We, the future generation of everything living, benefit without having to have done a single thing. This everlasting promise adds another layer of hope. God is asking nothing from Noah or us in return for this promise, we are just to receive it.

God established this covenant. God has kept and will keep the agreement, and each time we see this sign we take hope in all God's promises.

**Leslie LeSieur**

Senior Director of the Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week One  
November 30, 2022

## **Love Wins**

*Isaiah 54:1–10*

*For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10*

In this scripture, the Holy's love becomes steadfast, overcoming the stories of "divine wrath" that make up parts of the Hebrew bible and Hollywood movies with an ancient biblical focus.

This shift promises that prior shame, disgrace, and geopolitical disaster aren't the final word. It is noteworthy that this part of Isaiah also has the Holy taking responsibility for abandoning the people, contributing to their deep loss. "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer" (v. 8).

For many who follow the way of Jesus, the hope of our Advent season is to prepare our welcome for the most compassionate one who comes to free and welcome all into the promise of steadfast love. Meditating on the words from Isaiah, I find myself drawn into a discipline of compassion this season, but compassion is hard.

Compassion requires an openness to the feelings of others and where they are. It requires an acknowledgment of my own actions and lifestyle that may contribute to suffering, fear, and anger in the world. Turning away is the easy thing to do. Turning toward and offering hope-building, steadfast-loving compassion is hard.

But with the assurance of the Holy's steadfast love and covenant of peace, and the promised coming of the Holy into the world, true compassion is possible.

## **Kurt Gwartney**

Senior Director of Communications and  
Adjunct Faculty, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week One  
December 1, 2022

## **Hope**

*Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19*

*May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon throughout all generations.*

*Psalms 72:5*

What if we had a powerful leader who established justice, prosperity, and conditions for righteousness to flourish for all generations? The psalmist imagines an advocate who endures as long as the sun, as long as the moon. I share the profound longing for someone who would defend the afflicted and save the children of the needy. But I cannot muster much real hope for those possibilities. What does hope mean after we realize that the sun and the moon will endure beyond all human dreams?

The James Webb telescope is gifting our world with images that unite us in wonder beyond national borders. Photographs from the telescope include galaxies whose light took billions of years to reach us. Scientists say we are looking back in time as we see these images. My mind staggers as I try to comprehend the implications. If images travel through time, or our gaze defies time this way, how could our concept of hope change?

In an expanding, everchanging pluriverse, I find assurance that the love, compassion, and justice of the Holy endures beyond space and time. I can understand people who want a powerful figure to deliver us all from tribulations. My hope in this season of Advent and this season of human history is that we follow the stars to allow ourselves to be led by beauty and wonder. Blinded by the light of day in so many ways, we are often oblivious to infinite possibility surrounding us all. Continuing to search motivated by our longing is an act that manifests hope.

**Dr. Kathy McCallie**

Associate Professor of Ministerial Leadership and Ethics



Week One  
December 2, 2022

## **Legacy of Love**

*Acts 13:16–25*

*...God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised... Acts 13:23*

In Antioch of Pisidia, Paul (Saul's newly-mentioned Gentile moniker) and Barnabas sit down in the synagogue on the sabbath day. After the Torah and the Prophets are read, Paul is asked to share a word of exhortation. He outlines the history of God's covenantal actions: from the exodus to the wilderness to the Promise Land to the judges and the prophets to the kings. Paul recounts how God has provided for God's people up to and including John and Jesus.

This is not supersessionism, but it foreshadows his image as a leader in the Gentile integration movement. Paul extends the faith tradition in light of "The Way" which John proclaimed through baptisms and Jesus modeled through his life and death. God extends continuity of care from Israel to Jesus through the Pauline church and eventually to the ends of the earth. Even to us on this day and in this place.

By remembering our history as God's people, we recognize God's investment in us and acknowledge those who remain enslaved and displaced. The traditions of Torah and Gospel draw our attention to God's ever-expanding love for humankind and our responsibility to help bring about the good that God intends.

We are, after all, part of the same covenantal system in which God proclaimed "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3). During the Advent season of watching and waiting, let us not only have hope that this legacy will carry us forward, let us act in ways that make it so.

**Traci Gardner**

Student Senate Member, MA(SJ) Student

Week One  
December 3, 2022

## **Hope**

*Isaiah 40:1-11*

*“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” Isaiah 40:1-2 (NRSVUE)*

When it comes to Isaiah's chapter 40, there's a tendency to jump into the drama of preparing a way in the wilderness, straightening out twisting highways, leveling mountains, lifting the tilted slabs of the desert. Big drama. God stuff, on a cosmic or at least geological scale.

Which means we rush past the quiet introduction, as we so often can end up doing. Hear it almost whispered, not in the trumpet refrain announcing the usual Way of the Lord:

“Comfort... oh, comfort...”

Can you hear it? Can you hear God calming and reassuring us, the people of God?

In fact, the prophet, who has already had red hot coals pushed toward his face and seen the dust of earthquakes in the Temple chambers, is told very specifically: speak tenderly.

**Rev. Jeff Gill**

Adjunct Faculty, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week Two

December 4, 2022

## **Envision the Impossible**

*Isaiah 11:1-10*

*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11:9*

In Isaiah 11:1-10, we find words attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, the 8th century BCE prophet, directed at the nation of Judah. In 722/21 BCE, the Assyrian empire had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and forced Judah to pay tribute. This new financial strain was not born by the wealthy of Judah; it was passed along to those who had little to spare.

The prophetic vision, found in Isaiah 11:1-10, seems to echo the dreams of a people who were desperate for a better life. Since the fate of the nation of Judah was controlled by their human ruler and their relationship with the Holy, the best hope that Isaiah could offer was the promise of a future when a just and righteous ruler would end all the suffering of the poor and punish their oppressors. This new ruler would usher in a time of unprecedented peace, reflected both in nature and in the political realm.

While Isaiah envisioned a future king for Judah, the vision expanded to the possibility of any leader (or community) who would help to create a world in which natural enemies work in mutuality for the common good and everyone knows a life of wholeness (shalom) that only comes from the Divine.

To our 21st century minds, such a vision seems unimaginable. Perhaps Advent is a time to envision the impossible and then work to make it a reality.

### **Dr. Lisa Davison**

Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible and  
Disciples Director of Denominational Formation

Week Two  
December 5, 2022

## **Steadfast Love**

### *Psalm 21*

*In your strength the king rejoices, O Lord, and in your help how greatly he exults! [...]*

*His glory is great through your help; splendor and majesty you bestow on him.*

*"You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence.*

*For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved."* Psalm 21:1, 5-7

Psalm 21 constitutes an expression of gratitude for victory, likely used in liturgy for the coronations of kings. The psalm acknowledges that royal success has come through the goodness of God, whose steadfast love has prompted the king to trust in God and receive God's strength. Some of us might see how such a festive psalm could feel natural in times of great accomplishment or unexpected flourishing, but how might these words be relevant in times of failure, discouragement, or disempowerment?

Many of us have felt called to walk with those who are in pain, and to bring about positive change for all whom the powerful have sought to marginalize. When finding ourselves up against centuries-old systems of oppression and violence, however, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, helpless, and even hopeless.

What can I do that will truly make a difference in the face of so much evil? we may ask ourselves. How can I possibly make the world a better place when so much in my own life is falling apart?

Thankfully, we are not in this alone. God sees us, remembers us, and has not abandoned us. In a few weeks, at Christmas, we will celebrate the arrival—in person—of the steadfast love of the Most High. Even as we name our grief and sit with our disappointment, both individual and collective, may we find comfort and empowerment in the presence of the One who is with us, strengthening us, and partnering with us to establish peace and justice in this world.

### **Dr. Briana Wong**

Assistant Professor of the History of World Christianities

Week Two

December 6, 2022

## **Peace and Power = Bold Peace!**

*Romans 15:14-21*

*Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:15-16 (NRSVUE)*

As we come to the close of 2022, I embrace the thought of desiring and praying for peace. With life's experiences, I need the peace that surpasses all understanding daily. Many things in life I struggle with the motives, meanings, and purposes. I want to see the love and peace of God in humanity; however, it is hard many times.

My walk in life needs peace to influence people who are hurting and suffering from the trials of life. One can only imagine the pain of losing loved ones and possessions in war. Why? Why did we witness the neighboring country of Russia attack Ukraine on February 24, 2022? Why did peace not prevail over the actions of Russia towards Ukraine? I will continue to pray for peace.

Paul, in Romans 15:14-21 writes a letter to the Gentiles in Rome concerning a divine assignment to proclaim the word of God. Paul is seeking to bring unity to the Roman churches. I consider Romans to be a book with bold peace. Romans 15:14-21 is a declaration of Paul's idea of using peace and power in the churches in Rome. I believe Paul understands the struggle of not being present; however, Paul knows the church must choose peace and power, not just power. Bold Peace!

Well, 2022 is coming to a close. I believe God is calling God's people to spread bold peace over our positions. Bold peace is the act of combining peace and power. Many times, those in power impose their will over others through the lens of power only.

Bold peace is the act of using peace and power to operate within a structure that's productive for all. Bold peace is needed today. Bold peace will remove senseless wars. Bold peace will remove racism, bigotry, abuse, and hatred. We should want each other to freely operate with peace and power.

**BOLD PEACE! Peace and Power = Bold Peace!**

**Rev. Ulysses D. Allen**

Director of Recruitment and Retention

Week Two  
December 7, 2022

## **Spirit into Action**

*Matthew 12:33-37*

*Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. Matthew 12:33-35*

Most if not all of us have had the experience of expecting good fruit to emerge from bad trees. We grow frustrated with ourselves when sermons don't write themselves after we've neglected our personal studies. We're discouraged when our compassion isn't as sharp as we'd like following a season of disconnection from our communities. We become disappointed with others when we've failed to mentor them as they deserve.

Institutions are partly to blame for this recurrent experience. Many of us are expected to be machines who generate fruit at rates that exceed photosynthesis, yet others are surprised when we arrive at a critical moment without sustenance for those around us. It seems none of us can keep up with the demands of the fruit market.

Yet, Jesus's admonition to his "brood of vipers" is not a mere matter of victim blaming. This is no pep talk on the merits of self-care for maintaining corporate productivity growth. He is speaking to the cultivation of our moral and theological imagination. Our words are shaped by our spiritual formation, which means they are the fruits we bear to those around us—and which organize our spirit into action.

The challenge of a pericope like Matthew 12:33–37 is that it speaks to the spiritual capacities that unlock our understanding of it. A diet of spoiled pears will leave us fixated on the wrong fruits. We encounter a hermeneutic circle that demands of us spiritual practices and fortitude to navigate without spiraling.

**Dr. Peter Capretto**

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care in Religion and Culture



Week Two  
December 8, 2022

## **Peace**

*Psalm 146:5-10*

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God...*

*Psalm 146:5*

Peace has of recent become more of a wish than a reality! Something so elusive, almost unattainable. When was the last time we thought we could be in a state of “completeness, wholeness, or safety?” We talk about the realities of our times: covid (and its strains), monkey pox, inflation, Russia and Ukraine. It almost feels like the world is accepting and learning to live with the way things are rather than hoping for the unattainable.

I recently read an article about seven habits that slowly take away one's peace. These included things like checking social media first thing in the morning, having ears plugged with earphones all the time, taking pictures of everything, leaving messes uncleaned, overworking or obsessive thinking, and being pessimistic. These seven things were PEACE STEALERS!

This got me thinking about what my own list of things that steal my peace would look like. What does peace mean to me, as an individual, in my life, in my career, in my plans? How does God's definition for peace differ from mine? There is no peace for the wicked, is one scripture that came to mind (Isa.48:22). Can I have peace without God being the source of my peace?

In Psalm 146:5-10, we are called upon to put our trust in God. Our hope (or our Peace) is to be found only in God. Isaiah in chapter 9:6 calls Jesus the Prince of Peace, and as we go through this Advent season, let us seek Jesus as the source of true peace that we can depend on!

**Judith R. Nakibuuka**  
Financial Accountant

Week Two

December 9, 2022

## **A Second Coming**

*2 Peter 3:11-18*

*Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. 2 Peter 3:14*

At a committee meeting in the 4th century, a date was set for Easter; an annual celebration of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus would occur on the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the spring equinox. A date for Christmas came next and then the development of pre and post seasons. Easter came first. Everything else, we celebrate in relationship to Easter.

Because we most easily connect Advent to Christmas, we spend the season in anticipation of the birth of a child. But the theology of advent is inseparable from the theology of Christmas which is inseparable from the theology of Easter. This child we await will be crucified, die, and rise again.

Our passage from 2 Peter reminds us that the story is not over, Christ will come again—this time, like a thief in the night (2 Peter, vs. 10). The thought of Jesus coming to us in the form of a baby engenders feelings of peace more readily than the thought of the heavens disappearing and the earth laid bare!

A faithful celebration of the season of Advent requires us to think apocalyptically. This world of ours has seen salvation AND is in desperate need of a savior. Where do we see glimpses of salvation, here and now? What needs to be destroyed in the heat of God's fire? What does it look like to prepare for the end? What does it look like to be at peace as we wait for a new heaven and new earth?

**Dr. Allie Utley**

Assistant Professor of Liturgy and Practical Theology

Week Two

December 10, 2022

## **A New Kind of Music**

*1 Samuel 2:1-8*

*He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. 1 Samuel 2:8a*

Faithful Hannah sings thanksgiving and praise. With God's help, she who was thought barren, has brought new life to the world! Her nation is in crisis. Her son, Samuel, will be Israel's dynamic prophet-leader. Kings Saul and then David whom he anoints, will lead the Israelites to defeat the Philistine invaders. The nation will know peace.

But first, a grave internal threat must be resolved—the moral crisis of corrupt religious leaders. Hannah's firstborn son will succeed them as Israel's faithful religious leader.

In a time of crisis, God's freely loving power to transform despair into hope can begin that holy work as quietly as the song of a new mother. As Hannah's ode to joy continues, it overflows with hope that the gracious God will strengthen the feeble, fatten the hungry, raise up the poor, and lift up the needy.

Christians await Emmanuel while so many of our neighbors await the blessings of the transformations Hannah sings—God's gracious reversals—want, poverty, hunger, and weakness swept away!

JRR Tolkien wrote that all creation was sung into existence. Iluvatar, the uncreated creator, introduced a melody and the angelic Ainur harmonized.

In a very real way, Christ's followers harmonize with the Gospel's melody. Realities of poverty—social, political, and spiritual—challenge believers to “sing” a new world into existence. Together we are called to weave our prayerful actions into The Melody to help create a new and liberated world blessed by the peace of God's passionate possibilities for all trapped in a barren wilderness of want. Will we sing along with Hannah?

**Rev. Charles Ragland**

Alumni Board Member and Secretary (1982)

Week Three  
December 11, 2022

## **Joy and Grief**

*Matthew 11:2-11*

*When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Matthew 11:2-3*

Imagine John in prison defeated, frustrated, angry, grief stricken. Then he hears rumors of a man—the man he baptized—teaching and healing. Then John receives confirmation that Jesus is the one that he was proclaiming.

The scripture does not mention how John reacted when the messengers came back to him verifying the rumors. We can only speculate how John felt. Joy. Gratitude. Elation. How would you feel seeing your life's work affirmed and fulfilled? Then add to that knowing the purpose of this man, the Messiah. Joy in overabundance coming forth in the knowledge of what the future holds.

My father died just a few months ago. I still feel as if I am in a bit of a prison of grief. So, this year during Advent, I may not experience joy in overabundance, and John may not have either, but I am determined to find joy and experience it in even the smallest, fleeting ways. Memories of my dad reading the Christmas story. The joy of watching my niblings' excitement while they open presents. The joy of lazy winter holiday naps—which my dad loved. Joy and grief can coexist.

Throughout the rest of the Advent season, as we wait, let's make a point to stop what we are doing, focus on our breath for 20 seconds and then focus on our surroundings. What joy can you find in the moment?

**Malisa Pierce**

Assistant Vice President of Advancement

Week Three

December 12, 2022

## **Seeking What is Holy**

*Psalm 42*

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. Psalm 42:1*

A popular Psalm and possibly even a more popular song derived from the Psalm invoking images of a deer thirsting for water symbolizing the author's thirst for the divine. In a world where having clean water and even having access to water is a growing threat to the wellness of creation, we are reminded of the simple need to live in balance and harmony recognizing the divine or holy in all of creation.

Many of us in the United States have even distanced ourselves from the natural desire to drink straight from natural water sources, but yet we still thirst for what gives us life. Sometimes, without even knowing, we possess this thirst and even a hunger to be in fellowship with what is holy.

During this moment in the church calendar, those who have found a home in the Christian movement are asked to remind themselves of the coming light and of the coming goodness we celebrate during this season.

In the same manner as our Psalmist, let us not forget the intimacy that we desire with our Creator and all of creation as we seek to live a life of abundance. And as our meditations and actions move us closer to the divine, may our prayers and thoughts center around our entire global community as we navigate a world that often disappoints.

May our lives point to the same presence that gives us life and may we also be reminded that this presence is found in all the world around us. May the joy we seek be a joy that is experienced by all.

**Rev. Chebon Kernell**

Executive Director, Native American Comprehensive Plan and  
Phillips Seminary Board of Trustee Member

Week Three  
December 13, 2022

## **Time for Wavering**

*Jude 1:17-25*

*And have mercy on some who are wavering. Jude 1:22*

I'll be honest: being assigned this passage felt a bit like sitting next to someone on an airplane who, after a few minutes of pleasant chitchat, mentions sotto voce that we are clearly living in the end-times. "Oh no," one thinks. "This is going to be a long flight."

At only 24 verses, the book of Jude at least spares us a lengthy voyage; it's more of a puddle-jump. Nevertheless, the author is eager to let the reader know that the end is nigh. Having just quoted the apocalyptic text of I Enoch (v. 14-15), the author drives the point home: "In the last times there will be scoffers who follow their own desires."

Yes, well, I suspect he's right. I imagine, too, that in the last days there will be people who misplace important items and are cranky when they don't get enough sleep. While these might not be our favorite behaviors, they are reliably human ones.

But as this short flight begins its initial descent, there is a moment of gentleness from our apocalyptic seatmate: "have mercy on those who are wavering," he says. It's that verse which sticks with me as I gather my metaphorical luggage from the metaphorical overhead bin. For the apocalypse didn't, as it turns out, show up shortly after the author of Jude wrote this letter.

The congregation which so worried him because of its inclusion of interlopers, transgressors, selfish people, grumblers, and the like: they ended up having a while to work things out. So that mercy he called for was, in retrospect, a decent investment. Perhaps we would do well to remember that in our own moments of apocalyptic moral urgency.

**Dr. Sarah Morice Brubaker**

Associate Professor of Christian Systematic Theology



Week Three  
December 14, 2022

## **Joyful Action**

*Zechariah 8: 1–17*

*These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord. Zechariah 8: 16–17*

In this section of Zechariah, the prophet speaks of a God who makes a lot of promises. God promises to restore Jerusalem in many ways. God promises long lives and joyful children as part of an overall rebuilding on Jerusalem. God promises a world that is not restored to its former glory, but made even better, stronger, and more righteous. This is all a part of God's overall promise to dwell among them and be their God. The prophet presents this not as God doing these acts begrudgingly, but as God taking delight in God's people.

And what does God ask in return? For our own joyful action. For this joyful society to exist, the people need to speak truth and show love and peace through their actions. This should not be done begrudgingly or unwillingly, but as acts of joy.

While it may be hard to believe, we in modern day times, also get to create a society that is joyous, peaceful, and loving by consistently doing the same acts of truth, love, and peace. May we truly believe in this possibility, act accordingly, and move forward with joy.

## **Dr. Annie Lockhart-Gilroy**

Associate Professor of Christian Education and Practical Theology and  
Interim Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program

Week Three

December 15, 2022

## **No Bartering Required**

*Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19*

*May You honor the people at Your right hand. May You honor the nation You have raised up for Yourself. Then we won't turn away from You. Give us new life [and we] will worship You.*

*Psalm 80:17-18 (NIRV)*

Like many of us, I have favorite Psalms, but the ones I like least are what I call Psalms of Barter. They acknowledge God's greatness, ensure God understands how desperate and dire things are, and then make conditional promises: "We'll do this for You, if You'll do this for us." Psalm 80 is one of them: "God, You're all-powerful. You can save us if You will—and why wouldn't You? And if You'll save us, we'll worship You forever."

I dislike Bartering Psalms because they're empty offers to do what God's people should have already been doing. We'll stop straying and start worshipping You if You'll.... Maybe I dislike them, though, because they confront me.

We barter picking up a Bible, praying every day, attending worship every week, inviting someone to church if God will.... There's something altruistic about bartering for peace to reign or pandemics to end. Then there's the peace at this year's Christmas gathering or enough money to purchase just-the-right presents. Peace and harmony. More than enough. All the makings of joy.

I was told of an aged woman who, like most in her tiny Italian village, hobbled down a steep hill every day to the village square. The villagers didn't have much and lived lives most of us reading this would consider desperate and dire; yet they had no dearth of joy. When asked what could possibly bring them such joy, the woman responded, "You find joy when you get what you want; we let joy find us."

No bartering required. One of Christmas' secrets had found the villagers: there's only one Giver of Joy, who can't be bought or bribed.

**Dr. Kris Tenny-Brittian**

Adjunct Faculty, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week Three  
December 16, 2022

## **What is My House?**

*2 Samuel 7:18-22*

*Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" 2 Samuel 7:18*

The ark of the covenant carried God's presence. Up to this point, the ark was being carried around in a mobile tent, with no permanent home. After David is anointed as king, he defeats the Philistines and after defeating them, David is tasked with building a house for God's presence to dwell in. David sees this as an honor.

In David's response to God's instructions, David first shows his humility. He says, "who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house that you have brought me thus far?" David is not from royal blood. His origin is one of lowliness and struggle. However, God takes a shepherd and makes him a king.

Just like David, many people today do not come from royal blood. Our origin tells the story of who we are and where we have come from. Although there are times when we may see ourselves as unworthy to fulfill the tasks and assignments that God has called us to, God is faithful to love us well, to reveal God's grace to us, and to bless us.

Not only does David show humility, but David also shows gratitude. David recognized that what God had instructed him to do was a small thing in comparison to the promise that would come. May David's response to God be a reminder to us all during this Advent season that no matter what the origin of our lives may be and no matter how small the instructions may seem, God has great destiny and promise for you and your house.

**Jas Geiger**

Student Senate Member, MDiv Student

Week Three  
December 17, 2022

## **Embracing the Both/And**

*John 3:31-33*

*The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. John 3:31-33*

“In a world that tries to push us to either/or, the true gift we give ourselves is embracing the both/and.” These words from my late mentor, Gail O’Day, deeply resonate with me as I think about the invitations of the fourth canonical gospel. A quick read of this text may have us thinking that Jesus’ heavenly origin was more important than his earthly experience. But I believe the real wisdom is in the both/and.

John 3:33 says, “Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true.”

What is the testimony that certifies God is true? It was certainly that Jesus came of divine origin. It was also his practices on earth of attending to those harmed, engaging with those not popular, decentering normativity through his parables, and believing that a more just world was possible through our practices. These things and so much more were Jesus’ testimony. They are the signs and markers of a God that is true.

In the midst of this Advent season, as we find ourselves waiting and wondering while still working and trying to navigate the chaos of this world around us, perhaps we might find comfort, hope, and possibility in considering the both/and. Yes, Jesus is divine and also, Jesus’ witness to God’s nature is also shown through his life here on earth.

Yes, the world is full of grief and yes, we can feel gratitude for the things around us that spark peace and enliven joy. Yes, we may have some real questions for God about all that’s going on in this world and also yes, we can still believe God is love and is still calling us to be that love on this earth.

May we find an invitation this season in the beloved opening of the both/and and the testimony of Jesus that reminds us of who God is.

**Dr. Chelsea Brooke Yarborough**

Assistant Professor of African American Preaching, Sacred Rhetoric,  
and Black Practical Theology

Week Four

December 18, 2022

## **Dreaming During Advent**

*Matthew 1:18-25*

*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...*

*Matthew 1:24a*

Deeply embedded within African American culture, dreaming is a resource for surviving the everyday traumas of being Black in America. In the days of my youth, dreams were understood to be messages from God as guidance for daily living. Everyone, whether within the church community or the extra-church community, understood the messages from dreams to promote individual and communal well-being. Dreaming, like praying, kept African Americans close to and in constant conversation with God.

Because dreaming was such a normal part of life in my childhood, the sharing of dreams represented a spiritual discipline. As powerful as the experience of dreaming is, dreaming is nothing without dream interpretation. Within African American dream interpretation, dreams are less about symbolic representations but are understood to be direct and literal communications. Dreams are intended to keep the dreamer from harm by revealing what was previously hidden or by revealing the person's responsibility or irresponsibility.

Joseph's dream, using an African American cultural interpretation, is seen as a visitation and direct communication from "an angel of the Lord." "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." Joseph did not reflect on the symbols of the dream; nor did he hesitate and explore multiple ways to interpret the angel of his dream. Once he awoke, he accepted the message as direct from the Lord and did as he was instructed. By Joseph following his dreams, he became an active agent within God's plan for redeeming creation. May we all, like Joseph, follow our dreams as divine messages from God!

**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

Week Four

December 19, 2022

## **Staying Open to Closed Doors**

*Genesis 17:15-22*

*God said to Abraham, “As for Sarah your wife... I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her.” Genesis 17:15-16*

Imagine (or recall) a whole life of your partner leaving the toilet seat up even if you (or child) continuously falls in, or a whole life of having a roommate that won't stop leaving the kitchen cabinet doors open after literally thousands of pleas to STOP THE MADNESS AND CLOSE THE CABINET DOORS, THE CAT IS GETTING THE DISHES HAIRY. At some point you will likely run out of hope that things can change. You may even begin to question if the “offending party” even loves you—if they did, wouldn't they care about your comfort?

Now imagine one day the cabinet doors are miraculously closed, or the toilet seat is down... and it never happens again. Would you feel seen? Loved? In the case of Abraham and Sarah, The Holy One sees their advanced age and blesses them with a geriatric pregnancy (which sounds harsh but is also the contemporary medical terminology for pregnancy after 35 years old. I'm only a messenger!), making good on promises for progeny that would rule nations.

Advent is a season of waiting, anticipation, and expectation. By this time in the scripture Abraham and Sarah have lived and waited through many seasons together—long enough to know the unglamorous ebbs and flows of spending a whole life with someone. It's easy to become dismissive of hope for things to change after living a lifetime with them the way they are. They must have given up some hope in their heart for a child—yet by grace Sarah becomes a mother. A closed door opens.

In this season of hope and anticipation, what does it mean for us to anticipate (or expect) God's love? Maybe it means responding to seemingly closed doors (or open cabinet doors) in faith, trusting the reality of love we can't see rightly when we aren't looking. We receive God's love with every breath, every heartbeat, every bout of inspiration, in every act of kindness, compassion, or mercy, in simple expressions of love, peace, creativity, bravery, sacrifice, or beauty.

Perhaps to expect God's Love in the world is to live with openness and readiness to receive love in unexpected ways, at unexpected times, and in humbling abundance.

**Cortney Lemke**

Director of Admissions



Week Four

December 20, 2022

## **The World Upside Down**

*1 Samuel 2:1-10*

*Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in my victory... the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. 1 Samuel 2:1, 4:4-5*

Hannah has just left her long-desired infant son with the priest at the temple in Shiloh. She has fulfilled her vow to God: If she were given a son, she would give him to the temple to become a nazirite, a servant of God, for his lifetime. She had been barren, enduring both the clumsy sympathy of her husband and the jeers from his fertile, second wife.

Now she breaks out in a prayer of praise to God. But this is not the expected joyful thanksgiving for a son. It is a song praising God's power to create reversals: rich to poor, low to exalted places, bringing to Sheol and raising up.

Scholars believe this is an ancient Hebrew hymn, placed in Hannah's mouth since her story emphasizes a particular example of Yhwh's theology of reversal. These great reversals can also be seen in Mary's prayer of praise in Luke, and even in Jesus' Jewish theology in his Sermon on the Mount. This upside-down world of our Judeo-Christian tradition is truly a call for joy in this Advent season, our "hope for years to come."

**Sandy Shapoval**

Dean of the Library

Week Four

December 21, 2022

## **Grandparent Stories**

*Matthew 1:1-17*

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David the son of Abraham.*

*Matthew 1:1*

The late New Testament scholar Doug Adams contrasted parent stories to grandparent stories. Parent stories tend to clean up and prettify their own youthful years in order to claim the moral high ground. “When I was a child, I never talked to my parents that way.”

The grandparent version of the same story might be: “No, you did not talk back to me but instead gave me a grin that dripped with sarcasm and disrespect.”

The Bible, said Adams, is full of grandparent stories. Matthew's Ancestry.com construction of Jesus' sometimes-shady relations provides examples.

- Judah's sons by Tamar. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law, who after her husband's death seduced her father-in-law posing as a woman-for-hire on the side of the road, and Judah hired her.
- Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab. Did Matthew mean for his readers to recall the only Rahab in the Bible who was the sex worker who hid the spies prior to the destruction of Jericho?
- Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth. Ruth a Moabite woman. A foreigner in Israel, from whom both David the great king and shameful actor and Jesus were descended.

And those examples are merely from the first third of the genealogy. Included in the rest of the list are persons of low moral stature and unwise decision. And, of course, at the end of the list Matthew names Joseph, who Matthew is about to tell us is not Jesus' biological father.

To paraphrase Adams: biblical grandparent stories are told with love rather than to establish moral superiority. Why? Because we need love in order to embrace, yet not to be determined by, our own stories.

## **Dr. Gary Peluso-Verdend**

President Emeritus and Executive Director of the Center for Religion in Public Life

Week Four  
December 22, 2022

## **Facing the Vortex**

*Isaiah 33:17-22*

*But there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass. Isaiah 33:21*

The late Civil Rights champion, James Baldwin once asserted that not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. During Advent, we must face the fact that we are living during perilous times.

Our era has been accented by the enactment of blatant anti-democracy policies and punctuated by the theologically bankrupt system of white christian nationalism. Many thought our nation was rid of such scandalous schemes, yet like a vicious monster in a low-budget horror movie, they keep reemerging and seemingly will not die.

Daily installments of these absurdities are forming a swirling vortex of misery that can seemingly sweep away any hope we have for a more just future.

However, we who are motivated by love to seek justice are not hopeless. We await the coming king, one whose beauty and majesty will cause us to focus not on insolent people, but the promise of an immovable sanctuary city, Jerusalem, not in the heavenly realm but in the world we know.

People will experience him as a place of broad, nurturing waterways where no offending force can prevail. Through him, people will flourish and be saved.

We know this king to be Jesus. Through his love, we are able to withstand the vortex of fear and hate.

The love of Jesus confers onto us the boldness necessary to forge equitable relationships with people in underserved ZIP codes, and the courage required to have hard conversations on ways we can leverage our privilege in the name of justice. Through the love of Jesus, we are given the honor of living as agents of hope.

O, come, O come, Immanuel. Amen

**Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr.**

Adjunct Faculty, The Center for Ministry and Lay Training and  
Executive Director, The Ohio Council of Churches

Week Four  
December 23, 2022

## **God is at Work**

*Luke 2:1-14*

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Luke 2:1*

Shootings. Extremes of wealth and poverty. Food insecurity. Racial-ethnic tensions. Corporate greed. Military invasions. Divisive leadership. Limited access to healthcare. Cultural and political divisions. Societal intolerance and violence. And so forth.

One might wonder, where is God in the midst of our broken world? What is God doing? If anything?

The first-century world had its own issues and damage. It was very broken.

Verse 1 names the source of the brokenness.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. (Luke 2:1)

In this act of decreeing a registration or census, the Emperor Augustus asserts his absolute power over some 65 million or so people. It is an act of domination, of economic exploitation through taxation, of territorial control, enforceable by military might if disobeyed. And Jupiter's decree sanctions this world order.

It doesn't matter that there is no historical evidence for Augustus' decree. Its role in the Gospel narrative is to set the scene for Jesus' birth and for the Gospel's incredible proclamation.

In the midst of Augustus' imperial world, in the midst of his overwhelming power that stretches even to this minor province of Judea, the Gospel promises, explains, and declares: God is at work.

And divine work does not sanction Augustus' empire. It takes a different route for a different purpose: a baby (very powerful as every parent knows), anointed to save the present world from a system of domination, exploitation, elite privilege, and injustice. Yet ironically, he anticipates a future world marked by the full establishment of God's empire that dominates all.

**Dr. Warren Carter**

LaDonna Kramer Meinders Professor of New Testament

Week Four  
December 24, 2022

## **Love**

*John 1:1-14*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*John 1:1*

"In the beginning was the Conversation and the Conversation was with God."

When the Gospel of John was translated into Latin from its original Greek, translators of the first few centuries used the Latin word *sermo* for the Greek word *logos* in this passage.

There's a perfectly good Latin word that denotes a single linguistic utterance—it is *verbum*, word in English.

*Sermo*, according to Victoria Loorz in her book *Church of the Wild*, "means not 'word' but 'conversation.' *Sermo* indicates not a one-way sermon but a lively discourse, a dialogue, a manner of speaking back and forth: a conversation" (p. 109). *Sermo*, more than *verbum*, connotes the riches of meaning in the word *logos*. For this is a relational word full of all the words of the divine life-force that holds all of life together.

"In the beginning was the Conversation and the Conversation was with God."

I imagine Mary having a conversation with the infant in her womb much as I did when I was pregnant. "Shush now and let me sleep," I murmured, and the baby kicked back: "I will not be ignored." Conversation. The baby's father leaned toward my full belly, "Daddy to baby, daddy to baby," he chanted; and the baby squirmed, in delight I imagine. Conversation. The baby emerges from Mary's body into the dimness of a manger and cries. Mary hugs him close and soothes him, "It's alright, you're alright." Conversation.

Christmas Eve is a night of remembering holy conversations, the speaking of holy words from one to another, between infant and parent, between God and humanity, between and among one another. This eternal, life-giving, embodied and re-embodied, conversation was in the beginning. It is now. And it will be our end.

**Dr. Nancy Claire Pittman**

President and

Stephen J. England Associate Professor of the Practice of Ministry

Week Four  
December 25, 2022

## **Tis the Season to...**

*Titus 3:4-7*

*When kindness and benevolence appeared through G\*d, our savior, appeared, it was not a result of those deeds.... Titus 3:4-6 (A. Carter Paraphrase)*

It's commonplace to describe our society as results driven. Metrics, measurables, and product, with good reason, have become outcome-oriented benchmarks that establish and legitimate organizational value, worthiness, and rationale. Such perspectives are important correctives that challenge rigid power structures and inequities. Carrying associations with positive outcomes, metrics often function as indicators and, thus, metaphors for success.

We can, however, become over invested in mutated forms of these metric metaphors. With Christmas at times seeming the busiest time of the year, we are occasionally lured into metric-based approaches to Christmas: our love measured in gifts, travel, and tree height; our faith by the relaxation, consumption, service attendance, or donations.

This Christmas is an opportunity to remind ourselves anew of the essence of G\*d's love. In today's passage, many translations render the Greek terms *chrystotes* (kindness/good) and *philanthropia* (philanthropy, love for humanity) as good and kindness. Such renderings, while accurate, obscure the author's nuance. For the author of Titus, kindness and benevolence are transformative, they characterize G\*d's orientation to and love for humanity. Neither society's metrics nor the Church's measurements can warrant G\*d's liberating love, not even our pursuits for justice. If salvation was metric-based could today's church in any way justify such sacrifice given by Christ?

Titus thematically centers on divine grace and its impact on human social-being. Recognition of such grace inspires us to reflect Christ's love. The author of Titus measured such love partially by the absence of social discord. Unfortunately, interpreters often seek in Titus, not an articulation of divine grace and love, but decontextualized metrics for faith by legislating of power in church and society through mutated metaphors.

This Christmas, might we humbly hear this letter's testimony on love: a reminder that the source of human salvation has but one immeasurable source, the awe-inspiring kindness and benevolence of G\*d.

**Arthur F. Carter, Jr. PhD**

Assistant Professor of New Testament and  
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online at **[ptstulsa.edu/devotionals](https://ptstulsa.edu/devotionals)**

The cover art is an original work of Sally Wheeler, wife of the Rev. John Wheeler, 2017 Phillips graduate. The mixed media piece, *The Light*, was specifically created for the Phillips Theological Seminary 2022 Advent Devotional. In this time of darkness, a light can always be found in the coming of the Christ child.

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