





Phillips Theological Seminary is once again providing this Advent Devotional for you. We continue to be blessed by the response to the booklet and the way that it is used. Many have shared that you use the devotional to assist with sermon preparation, in church small groups and Sunday school classes, as a daily congregation wide devotion, and for personal and family devotion time.

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

At Phillips Seminary, we are so honored to go on this anticipatory and preparatory journey with you during Advent. We are grateful that you choose to join us in reflection and thoughtfulness in this season.

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 birth of Jesus. We hope that as you read this devotion you are inspired to deepen your faith and find your hope renewed.

In Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malisa Pierce". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Malisa Pierce
Assistance Vice President of Advancement

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

Week One: HOPE
December 3, 2023

Embrace and Extent

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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

In the letter to the Corinthians, like in other letters, Paul begins with thankfulness and encouragement for the community, reminding them of the Grace and Peace they have in Jesus.

As we begin the Advent Season, we begin with hope. Hope is a forward concept — looking to the future with encouragement for the future and sustaining us in the present.

Let us remember what we have been given and what Advent points to — the reminder of the birth of Jesus and a renewed grace and hope that was born with Him. Our grace is our Hope. Grace for today and every day after — grace that brings Hope of the love that changes lives through Jesus Christ.

“Grace and Peace to you” and during this time of Advent, I would add joy, hope, and love.

Grace and Peace and Joy and Hope and Love to you (and me).

Grace isn't “celebrated” during Advent, but Grace is there underpinning the peace, joy, hope, and love we celebrate. These are the actions that are the focus of Advent while we wait for the birth of Jesus. Grace is the foundation. Grace that points us to Christ and spurs our need for peace and love — joy and hope.

I don't know about you, but I need more of all of these in my life during Advent and every day of my life.

Every day I need more grace, peace, joy, hope, and love.

This Advent, may we embrace for ourselves and extend to others the grace, hope, love, joy, and peace that God has intended for us.

Malisa Pierce

Assistant Vice President of Advancement

Week One: HOPE
December 4, 2023

A World of Divine Imagining

Isaiah 2:1-5

...they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4b

Isaiah 2:1-5 comes at the beginning of Isaiah and dates to the 8th Century BCE, attributed to a prophet called to speak to the people in Jerusalem. During the early part of this century, the city enjoyed a time of economic prosperity, but the riches were not shared with everyone. This intense stratification between the “haves” and the “have nots” was a breach of the covenant they had made with God. They had forgotten the repeated Divine commandment to take care of the most vulnerable among them. The future looked bleak for those without authority.

Into this scene of injustice and despair, Isaiah dared to speak a word of hope and encouragement. There would come a day when “the mountain of the LORD” would once again be a beacon of justice and peace. Instead of oppressive decrees coming from Jerusalem, God’s commandments would be proclaimed. The city would be an example of the Holy’s vision for all of creation: shalom (wholeness). So amazing was this prophetic vision that Isaiah’s words suggested the impossible; God would do something that was beyond human imagination. Justice would reign for all people. Weapons of destruction would be converted into tools of production. Peace would settle over the nations, and all would live in harmony.

These prophetic words provided a glimpse of a possible future for the people of Isaiah’s time. For every generation of believers since, this prophetic vision has encouraged those who felt hopeless. In the 21st Century, these words offer us hope as well. In our current context, seemingly the opposite of the Divine’s desires for shalom, can we imagine a future that is different from what we know now? What can we do to help further God’s desires for the world to become a place filled with justice, peace, and wholeness?

Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean
Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible

Week One: HOPE
December 5, 2023

Imaginations of Others

Revelation 18:1-10

“Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgement has come.” Revelation 18:10b

The critical theorist Mark Fisher famously remarks that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Capitalist Realism, p. 1). For those of us aspiring to be generous in thought and spirit, this very idea may provoke immense discomfort. A primary task of theological liberation is to resist the inertia of Stockholm syndrome, where the risk of rebellion is thwarted by the safety of developing affection and allegiance to oppressors.

Why is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism? Because such imagination necessarily involves a revolution in spirit, where we become responsible for deploying freedom as a vehicle for freeing others.

The radicality of Revelation’s prophecy of the fall of Babylon lies precisely in its willingness to invite others into such a possibility. For most 1st century followers of Jesus, Babylon—which symbolizes 1st century Roman rule—has been all that has been known. What has been becomes inevitable and shapes consciousness to down to the most fundamental level. Gravity. Capitalism. Oxygen. Occupation. Imagining otherwise is not merely naïve, some might contend, but also delusional. “You criticize society, and yet you participate in one,” the sardonic meme goes.

Imagination is not speculation, fantasy, or escape. It is the declaration that one’s spirit has not been foreclosed by the forces that thrive on submission and silence. Sometimes this means imagining a better world ourselves, but often it means developing the space in ourselves to receive the imaginations of others as the acts of freedom they truly are.

Dr. Peter Capretto
Assistant Professor of Psychology, Culture and Religion

Week One: HOPE
December 6, 2023

One of the Little Clans

Micah 5:1-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days ... and he shall be the one of peace. Micah 5:2, 5a

The book of Micah is attributed to a prophet decrying the injustice of the rulers in Judah and Israel during the 8th century BCE. Micah can be seen in these verses as declaring the need to start afresh, with new leadership arising out of Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah” (v. 2). In this case, the term “little” refers to perceived importance rather than size. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament are replete with instances of God honoring and partnering with those who are considered to be of little consequence. During Advent, many Christians remember Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem as a prime example.

In a Thai refugee camp in the 1970s, a group of Cambodian refugees performed a Christmas pageant for their fellow displaced neighbors. Rather than raising the curtain with the tranquil nativity scene we see memorialized in living rooms and front yards every year, this particular Christmas play showed the beleaguered holy family settling down in an Egyptian refugee camp. Many in the audience found themselves drawn to the idea of a God who willingly entered into the little places, into the experience of forced migration—with all its concomitant precarity and loss—and who identified with all those disregarded and considered disposable.

If you want to see God at work, I encourage you to open yourself to the voices emerging out of the “little” places—those all too often overlooked or dismissed as insignificant—and prepare to encounter the presence of “the one of peace” (v. 5a). If you, yourself, are calling out from a “little” place, know that God sees you, identifies with you, and is moving in your midst.

Dr. Briana Wong
Assistant Professor of the History of World Christianities

Week One: HOPE
December 7, 2023

Hope from Dawn and Rain

Hosea 6:1-6

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth. Hosea 6:3

I can be a pretty negative person sometimes — well maybe not so negative as morose. I see the negative events happening in the world and unpleasant incidents happening in my own life and it overwhelms me. The overflow of emotion shuts me down to any feelings because the worry, sadness, and anger for injustice is too much. What can override this overwhelming negativity and dread?

In the passage today, Hosea's words, as a prophet, are calling Israel to repentance. However, the words of the prophet provide me with hope in God's steadfast love and forgiveness. God is always there to put us back together and revive us (v. 12). And God's appearance to us is as sure as the dawn and the rain (v. 3). Or perhaps God's appearance to us IS the dawn and the rain. Either way, Hosea presents hope in the form of restoration and God's presence in our lives.

There is hope that justice will right itself, that the negative will turn positive, or at least we can experience the positive in spite of the negative. Hope at the very least (or most) affirms that the Divine is present during dark and overwhelming days. Hope that we are not alone. Hope that the dawn will come, and the dawn of day will be a new beginning and the light will shine in the darkness.

Hope that a refreshing rain will come and bring coolness to the blistering and overwhelming feelings of despair. Hope that the rain will be a soothing balm and give temporary relief — long enough to see clearly and begin anew.

Hope that the steadfast God is ever present to provide relief, a new understanding, and strength to make it through the day or take the next step to wholeness.

Infuse hope into your darkness with the presence of God among us.

Malisa Pierce
Assistant Vice President of Advancement

Week One: HOPE
December 8, 2023

Beacons of Light

Acts 11:19-26

Now those ...traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, and they spoke the word...

Acts 11:19

Iona is a small island, only three miles long and less than two miles wide, in the north of Scotland. A community there embodying Celtic theology and practice gathers for worship every morning at 9 a.m. and every evening at 9 p.m. in an abbey of ancient stones.

The scattered islands in that area are called the Hebrides, named in connection with the tradition of a goddess Brigid that persists in the tales of Saint Brigid, a potent figure in early Christianity of the region. The Book of Kells in Ireland was begun at the abbey on Iona. Art and stories of the faith are filled with the motif of journeys crossing the sea between islands.

As good people with steadfast purpose travel and share their lives, the Spirit of Christ spread to new communities in expanding regions. Like those who traveled from Cyprus, Cyrene, and Jerusalem, others whose names have been forgotten shared a winsome Spirit of Christ that brought faith and hope. We know that in some instances the church spread through empire and conquest, and unsavory consequences continue legacies of injustice and harm.

However, the encouraging, cheerful gentleness of nameless good people ignited curiosity and wonder that persisted. What are these ways of Jesus? What is this Holy Spirit? How can the Divine be incarnate in flesh and blood that interacts with solid ground, shifting seas, and stones standing for centuries? Today I remember Iona and other beacons of light in our weary world. Ponder of our connections with seekers of justice and transformation who meet every week to sing, study, pray, and act for new creation.

Dr. Kathy McCallie
Associate Professor of Ministerial Leadership and Ethics

Week One: HOPE
December 9, 2023

A Word of Hope

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. Ezekiel 36:28

This passage from Ezekiel speaks a word of hope to the people of Israel. It describes a move and a shift; God will gather the exiled communities and give them new life. God promises to bring people home. God promises to enliven their hearts and spirits. God promises to be with them, as kin, forever.

As I read this hopeful message, I began to think about times in my life that I have felt such a move and a shift. I am reminded of how I felt when my first niece was born. At the time, more days than not, I felt despair and hopelessness about the state of the world, particularly as it related to the climate crises. But when I held this baby for the first time, this little one who shared my DNA, something happened in my heart and spirit.

All of a sudden, I felt hopeful. I had to be hopeful for the world in which she would grow up. The hope moved me to action because I also felt responsible for creating and shaping and saving the world in which she would live.

Advent is a season of hope. We hope that God will once again come to us, gather us in, enliven our hearts and spirits, and love us well. We know that God will and still we pray, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We need some movement. We need a shift. Deliver us, O God, we pray.

Dr. Allie Utley
Assistant Professor of Liturgy and Practical Theology

Week Two: PEACE
December 10, 2023

A Bridge of Restoration

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Psalm 85:10

Once, there were two peoples of two lands. People as diverse as stars in the night sky. Yet, they had become brittle and unyielding, filled with judgment, unable to accept anyone who seemed different. They were divided by a great river, the source of all life. At one time, a bridge had bound these lands together. Now, the bridge was a crumbling and dangerous reminder of their separation. Two great columns towered at each end of the bridge. They stood, as teetering and moss-covered examples of what had been lost. Upon each of the columns was an inscription, remaining unread under the grime.

It happened, a messenger came, sharing words of God's abiding care. And all the people heard the message of restoring a right-ness among the people and the acceptance of God's own mercy in their lives.

A change occurred. It became a new time. The earth was in bloom and the river flowed without end. The people began to bloom as well. Embracing the wonder and beauty of each one. It was new, sweet, and glorious.

The bridge between them was repaired and made new during these wondrous days. When it was complete there was a great rumbling, the bridge shook and the waters jumped and quivered. With slow and deliberate movement, the great columns leaned into and upon one another, creating an arch at each end of the bridge. The grime and dirt fell from the four old inscriptions. Now, the words could be read: On one end of the bridge, "Steadfast Love" and "Faithfulness."

At the other end of the bridge, "Righteousness" and "Peace."

"Restore us again, O God of our salvation."

Dr. Terry Ewing
Vice President of Advancement

Week Two: PEACE

December 11, 2023

Radical Peace

Isaiah 26:7-15

O Lord, may you ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us. Isaiah 26:12

Peace is defined as, “a state of tranquility or quiet. A state of security or order within a community provided for by law or custom.” In this fast paced and social media driven age, I intentionally look for people and places where there is a sense of peaceful belonging. It is not hard to encounter friends or strangers who want to find belonging through radical peace. I believe radical peace is the ability to encounter people and experience places through a lens of hope, joy, forgiveness, and compassion. Radical peace is an opportunity to find belonging. Now is the time to infuse the spirit of radical peace in our workplaces, schools, homes, churches, and communities.

Think about it. When and where do people go to find a place of belonging? How do we create radical peace in order for people to find belonging? Does social media bring people radical peace?

I do know that the use of social media will merge your life with others. For example, a vacation or outing to the store, mall, or favorite restaurant can turn into a trending topic for the world to view. One would hope this trending story would display you in a positive light; however, many times the trending stories are those of shame, hurt, embarrassment, and defeat. Therefore, it is important to seek radical peace through positive encounters with friends and strangers. I firmly stand on the notion, Radical Peace!

Radical Peace! During this advent season, please remember the importance of living with radical peace. When the trials of this world are laying heavy on your life, seek God's peace. Seek God's peace when your family is sick and hurting. Seek God's peace when the world needs more of you, but you're tired and weary. Isaiah 26:12 says, “O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, all that we have done, you have done for us.” God will ordain your peace.

Radical Peace!

Ulysses D. Allen

Director of Recruitment and Retention

Week One: PEACE
December 12, 2023

Faith, Not Fear

Psalm 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1

Fear is a powerful motivator and method of control for humans. When we fear, we lose faith. The psalmist declares that in the bleakest of circumstances, when life itself is on the line, they will choose confidence over fear. Fear is the anti-faith, the denier of hope.

We might say that while we are stressed and distressed, the psalmist would encourage us to remain confident, to believe in our deepest being that the Divine is the source of our lives. The hope of Advent lies in the welcoming of the God with us who will demonstrate faithfulness in the face of life-ending fear.

I've seen that fear in the faces of emergency room patients while working as an EMT. The look of anguish, eyes scanning the room for something to hold on to, seeking hope in a situation where it wasn't to be found because death was happening.

I've seen confidence in the eyes of other patients who understood death was happening. Their eyes were focused, calm, surreally relaxed. They had a hope beyond that veil of thinness, where this life meets the next. In death, they did not fear.

"The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear?" Even for those looking for hope and failing to find it, that hope is always there because it comes from the source of all love and life itself, the ground of our being we sense closer than ever in this Advent season.

Kurt Gwartney
Senior Director of Communications

Week Two: PEACE
December 13, 2023

Do Not Be Afraid

Luke 1:5-17

Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. Luke 1:11-13

Fear arises when we face the unknown or are confronted with challenges. So many people live in fear. Understandably so, there are many fear-mongering voices in the media, marketplace, and more whose dire warnings add to general anxiety. When we're fearful we grasp, hoard, and hold on for dear life. In Luke 1:5-17, we find a story that should help us overcome our fears, but simply through the phrase "Do not be afraid."

Zechariah and Elizabeth are an elderly couple who longed for a child but were unable to conceive. Bring on the anxiety and the fear. Were they thinking "we aren't good enough?" "Is there something wrong with us?" "What can we do?"

We know that Zechariah was a priest and both he and Elizabeth were faithful. While serving in the inner sanctuary, an angel appeared to Zechariah. At first, he is filled with fear and disbelief, scripture says he was terrified, when the angel tells him, "Do not be afraid," and that his prayers have been heard. He and Elizabeth will have a son named John.

Fear, in this text, represents the doubt and uncertainty that can hold us back when we face unexpected or miraculous opportunities. Zechariah's initial reaction is a reminder that fear can blind us to the possibilities that lie before us, causing us to question the divine and doubt our own abilities.

While fear is a natural part of life, it should not paralyze us. Instead, we should confront fears with faith, and be open to the blessings that can arise. Just as faithful Zechariah's and Elizabeth's fears gave way to the fulfillment of their desire for a child, our own fears can lead to growth, transformation, and the realization of our highest potential when we approach them with trust and faith.

Leslie LeSieur
Senior Director, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week Two: PEACE
December 14, 2023

On Being Human

Psalm 126

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy carrying their sheaves. Psalm 126:5-6

I have always loved the Psalms. As a child I wanted to read them more than any of the texts laid before me. I loved the poetic nuance and the way they sounded, and as I have grown older, I also love the ways that these sacred truths offer a glimpse into the wide range of human emotion. There are psalms of outcry and psalms of comfort. There are psalms of rage, possibility, grief and rejoice. In the midst of these tensions, there is truth. The truth that all of this is a part of being human, while trying to understand a massive God.

In this particular psalm, the writer is remembering a time of restoration and hoping toward another. The writer believes that weeping will have an end for those who have endured far too many nights of tear-stained cheeks. They believe that those hearts that have been burdened with sorrow will be relieved with songs of joy. The writer believes this because stories have passed down of times where God has moved alongside the work of the people towards new visions of peace.

In this season of our world where marginalization and supremacy are the norm, I don't experience peace as the absence of tension. The peace that passes understanding is the courage to believe in the possibility of hope, restoration, and joy amidst it all. In this season of Advent, may we find the strength and the audacity to believe in the possibilities of beloved community that looks like working toward justice alongside a God who is moving with us. Perhaps it is there where peace can find life once again amidst this current season of being human.

Dr. Chelsea Brooke Yarborough
Assistant Professor of African American Preaching, Sacred Rhetoric, and Black Practical Theology

Week Two: PEACE

December 15, 2023

Peace

Habakkuk 3:2-6

O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. Habakkuk 3:2

Song: "It is Well with My Soul" (hymnist Horatio Spafford and composed by Philip Bliss.)

My little brother was born with a hole in his heart—a hole the size of a dime. I can't imagine the anxiousness and fear of my parents. While no heart surgery is easy, time and technological advancement have made the procedures more routine today. However, in the 1980s, heart surgery on infants wasn't a standard surgical procedure. Even with the procedure's ambiguity, my parents decided for my little brother to undergo open heart surgery at just six months old.

One picture in our family photo album captures this medical journey. And it wasn't until recently, when my now middle-aged brother and I were perusing the family photos, that we noticed something in the image we had constantly overlooked. My little brother was lying post-operation with tubes and wires coming from everywhere, and in the corner of the photo, you see my mother smiling as she sat next to the bed. We asked her about the picture, and she told us many church members had just come and prayed for my little brother. And she let us know that amid the prayer, she had a peace that overcame her soul. When we inquired about the peace, she said the prayer was a reminder of what God had done in the past, how God had kept me, her firstborn son, when I was diagnosed with spinal meningitis two years prior.

In this passage of Habakkuk, we see the same thing: a prayer of recollection. During Habakkuk's trials and tribulations, the prayer in Habakkuk 3: 2-6 is to recall everything God has done in the past. This process of remembering served as the reassuring peace Habakkuk and his listeners needed as they endured their storms.

Can you take a moment to recall things God has done in the past? Can you use those memories as a reassuring peace today?

My prayer: May you peacefully navigate the day with this reassurance, "If God did it before, God will do it again."

Dr. Eric Gill

Director of Theological Field Education and Interim Dean of Chapel

Week Two: PEACE
December 16, 2023

New Expectations

Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. Matthew 21:31c-32

At a recent gathering, half of the expected people didn't show up. The people said they were coming but didn't make it. This usually is not a big deal, except that the gathering was catered. Several already packaged hearty meals were leftover and the question became what to do with them.

I loaded the meals back into the box and took them to a coffee shop, one with a community fridge. While I was concerned with a fridge to make sure they didn't spoil, two people with their entire belongings on their backs came in to see what was coming to the fridge. Before I could unload the meals, these folks smiled, talked about what their friends would like, and started taking the meals out to others on the street. And suddenly, there were just as many people enjoying this hearty meal at the outdoor benches as were in the church fellowship hall.

We hope and wait for the expected to come, but how often do we see the things we expect let us down? What if we loosened our expectations to allow for something new to surprise us? The streets turn into spaces of welcome, those ignored become the guests we were preparing for. When we see the grace of Christ show up, will we recognize it? Or can we let the expectations of what once was, what we wish it was, shield our experiences?

May we encounter a Peace this Advent in an ability to let go of expectations. May we welcome and celebrate the surprising ways Christ appears before us, God's grace with us.

Rev. Travis Smith McKee

Alumni Board Member (2013)

Associate Regional Minister of Congregational Transformation Christian Church in Kansas

Week Three: JOY
December 17, 2023

Joy

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Sometimes I think I wouldn't recognize Isaiah's kind of joy even if it planted itself right in my office and grew branches through the ceiling. As I come in of a morning, I would simply stumble absent-mindedly over its roots, put my bags down, and turn on my computer. Its leaves would drop gently around me as I respond to emails and tackle the long to-do list, now made even longer by the Christmas shopping and preparations. It would drop fruit in my lap, and I would brush it away as a silly distraction from more important tasks.

The spirit of the Lord God may well be upon us. The Lord God may well have anointed us to proclaim the year of God's favor and to give the oil of gladness instead of mourning to captives, prisoners, and the oppressed. We may indeed be blessed as God causes righteousness and justice to spring up around us like wild pecan seedlings, but who has time to attend to any of that? I'm just trying to get to Christmas.

And Paul has the nerve to say from prison, "Rejoice always!" Not because we live stress-free peaceful lives but in spite of them. Not because we don't see injustice and indifference, even in December, but because we are proactively celebrating their end by laughing joyously in their faces.

Maybe today, if only for a few minutes, I will sit down under the tree of joy and sample its delights.

Dr. Nancy Claire Pittman

President and Stephen J. England Associate Professor of the Practice of Ministry

Week Three: JOY
December 18, 2023

Peace and Troublemaking

1 Kings 18:1-18

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" He answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals." 1 Kings 18:17-18

*"Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."
John Lewis.*

Have you ever gotten in good trouble? I bet a number of us have. You, dear reader, might not have been arrested, but my guess is that you may have risked something important to clear space for another step on a path toward peace — not an easy peace that comes from being quiet and letting chips fall, but the kind of peace that includes God's justice.

Elijah was a troublemaker of the first order. I'm not entirely sure I would have liked him; he was rigid and uncompromising. King Ahab, on the other hand, was not. Acting with diplomatic and economic compromises in mind he married into Baal-worshipping Phoenician royalty. This politically expedient marriage results in God's commandments being broken, particularly that first, pesky commandment about not having "other gods before me."

By the time Elijah pops onto the scene to confront King Ahab, the religious situation in Israel has devolved into Yahweh-worshipping priests having been murdered by the king's wife's functionaries. Elijah appears to the king and announces a drought which threatens Israel's horse-and-mule-based society and, no doubt, military capabilities. So, when Elijah reappears to Ahab after three years of drought, it is at great personal risk.

What are we willing to risk for real peace?

Sandy Shapoval
Dean of the Library and Research Services

Week Three: JOY
December 19, 2023

Finding Joy in Divine Presence

Psalm 125

The people who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion: never shaken, lasting forever. Mountains surround Jerusalem. That's how the Lord surrounds his people from now until forever from now! Psalm 125:1-2 (CEB)

Psalm 125 is a message of enduring hope and unshakable joy. As we continue our journey through this Advent season, take some time to reflect on the profound sense of joy that comes from placing our trust in the Divine Presence.

The psalm begins with these words: “The people who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion: never shaken, lasting forever.” Mount Zion is a symbol of strength and stability that reminds us our joy is grounded in the unchanging character of our God. In a world filled with chaos and uncertainties, our trust in the Divine Presence brings steadfast joy.

The Advent season can be chaotic and distracting, but Psalm 125 challenges us to fix our gaze on the Lord, just as Mount Zion stands firm. When we keep our hearts and minds centered on God, we experience a deep and abiding joy that transcends circumstances.

Verse 2 says, “Mountains surround Jerusalem. That’s how the Lord surrounds his people from now until forever from now.” This image of protection and divine presence should fill our hearts with joy. The Spirit encircles us with perfect love, providing refuge and peace in every season of life.

In the final verse, we read, “But as for those people who turn to their own twisted ways—may the Lord march them off with other evildoers! Peace be on Israel!” These words remind us of the importance of turning away from sin and toward God. The result is not disapproval but peace. True joy is found in walking in the path of righteousness, hand-in-hand with the Divine.

This Advent season, let us find joy in the unchanging character of our God, the unwavering presence of the Spirit, and the peace that comes from walking in faith. As we trust in the Lord, may our hearts be filled with the joy that overflows, blessing our lives and those around us. In this season of waiting, may our joy be a witness to the world of the hope we have in Christ.

Linda Tucker
Alumni Board Member (2019)

Week Three: JOY
December 20, 2023

A Book of Remembrance

Malachi 3:16-4:6

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. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts. Malachi 4:2-3

Where I live, there's a brand-new airport. It's everything a modern traveler should expect: big, open halls, high ceilings, excellent directional signage. It's very simple to navigate! We waited for years for its completion. When it opened, the city held a major unveiling. The preparations leading up to the grand opening were well publicized and therefore eagerly anticipated.

Advent includes the call to preparation and anticipation. Malachi plays out a trial-like conversation between the Lord and the people (v. 3:5), calling the assembly to task and speaking of refining them in a purifying fire (v. 2-3). The "trial" in the early verses of chapter 3 sets the stage for celebrating the remnant of the people that remain, those who have endured the waiting and the purification. They have been remembered as a "treasured possession" and have written the scroll of remembrance.

Do you wonder how today's faithful communities continue to endure waiting and purification? Do you borrow the faith of this remnant during Advent to once more welcome a presence of the Holy around you? Because Malachi offers a caution to those who have already been remembered and have already been considered faithful: revere the name of the Lord, remember the laws and decrees, and turn your heart in kindness to one another.

Perhaps these final days of Advent aren't only about waiting. If that's all it is, how boring! I wonder if Advent must also be centered in the communal worship, acts of kindness, and shared rituals we keep. Are these the ways we write our own books of remembrance? How must this then prepare us for the joyful arrival of Immanuel?

Rev. Andy Beck
Alumni Board Member (2013)
Pastor, Hillcrest Christian Church, Kansas City, MO

Week Three: JOY
December 21, 2023

Reflecting Jesus

Hebrews 1:1-4

(Jesus) is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being. Hebrews 1:3

It is wonderful to know the Jesus I follow is the reflection and imprint of the Divine. This should bring so much joy that I can barely stand it. But while I read this, I also know that when people encounter me, they should see this Jesus reflected in our meeting. Maybe, sometimes, once-in-a-while that might happen-ish.

My experience of someone experiencing a reflection of Jesus from me often comes from the other person being practiced in seeing qualities of the Divine in others. There are reflections of the Holy in each of us, but our senses are sometimes dulled by the things that separate us from God and one another.

Jesus provides the example of leading followers to clear the fog to find a more inclusive understanding of the Divine reflection. Starting our encounters by seeking the Holy reflection in others increases joy and brings a more loving perspective.

There is a bit more attention paid to looking for “the reflection of God’s glory” in others during the Advent season. Experiencing the Divine in others isn’t easy and takes practice. Following the way of Jesus and living more faithfully, lovingly, patiently, and hopefully, will bring more joy into our lives and those we meet each day during Advent and beyond.

Maybe rewriting the words to “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus” helps in this pursuit.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

Seek Christ in each other’s face.

And the things you feel

Will be kinder still

In the light of each other’s grace.

Kurt Gwartney
Instructor, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week Three: JOY
December 22, 2023

Golden Repair

Hebrews 1:5-14

"You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." Hebrews 1:9

Imagine encountering new information that threatens to break your faith and wrestling with how to put the pieces back together. Jesus' prophetic voice and radical practices challenged orthodoxy so significantly that the author of Hebrews is practically adding a disclaimer to this scripture, as if to say, "This sounds impossible, but it is true." The author helps to establish Jesus' credibility by comparing him to the angels that bear important news from God. In this pericope, the author assures us that Jesus' Word is superior to angels, alluding to the angel that delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses.

Examining the scripture through the lens of the Advent season, what might the author of Hebrews want us to consider about the reign of Jesus? Consider the myriad differences between Moses' Ten Commandments and Jesus' Beatitudes. If Moses emphasizes faithfulness through adherence to law, Jesus upends law itself by subverting our expectations of what righteousness, faithfulness, and salvation look like.

The Japanese art of Kintsugi or "golden repair" is the practice of repairing broken pottery with real gold. Philosophically, it is believed the pieces are made more beautiful by repair than by perfection. Jesus' Beatitudes shows us that when we reach to God for 'golden repair' in our low moments, in our persecution, in our grief, we are blessed by becoming better disciples and are transformed into a more beautiful creation.

This Advent season I invite you to meditate on the "golden repair" offered by Christ. What did "golden repair" mean for Mary as she sought shelter for her broken, laboring body? What did "golden repair" mean for the ancient world that God broke into through Jesus? What does "golden repair" mean for the world that God breaks into through you today?

Cortney Lemke
Director of Admissions

Week Three: JOY
December 23, 2023

The Details of Right and Rites

Judges 13:2-24

Then Manoah entreated the Lord and said, "O my Lord, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born." Judges 13:8

To be honest, I'd forgotten the details of the visits to the not-yet-Mom of Samson. Like other birth announcements in the Bible, the unnamed wife of Manoah can't have children when a "Man of the LORD" (i.e., an angel) visits with the good news she's going to birth a son who'll be a Nazarite, one who's life intricately entwines with God's.

Not-Yet-Mom runs home to share every little detail with her husband, whose questions elicit a confession from not-yet-Mom: the only other detail she remembers is that The Man's "appearance was so amazing it filled me with great wonder" (verse 6, as translated in the NIRV).

Manoah wants to make sure he's got the details right, so he begs God to send The Man back. I can see not-yet-Mom's excitement when He returns and she rushes Him home so Manoah can meet him in person (in angel?). The angel answers all Manoah's questions for raising Samson right; but Manoah's questions about the angel are answered with the details of a sacrificial rite.

While Manoah and not-yet-Mom watch the burning altar, they see the angel—whom they now realize is THE LORD—ascend in a flame. They fall to their knees, Manoah fearing for his life because he's just seen THE LORD and not-yet-Mom because she's gotten to see Him again.

Getting the details of Advent rites right often gets in the way of recognizing THE LORD when He visits: hearing Him through the Good News Words intricately entwining our lives with His, seeing Him in the flames of our Advent wreaths. May you see Him in amazing and wondrous ways this year.

Rev. Dr. Kris Tenny-Brittian
Adjunct Professor, Center for Ministry and Lay Training

Week Four: LOVE
December 24, 2023

Past, Present, Future

Luke 1:26-38

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. Luke 1:32

It's nearly here! All that planning for meals, gifts, travel. All the build up to Jesus' birth.

It's easy to think that Christmas Day is the goal, the culmination.

Today's Gospel passage, however, challenges and counters that thinking.

The angel Gabriel announces to Mary her pregnancy (1:30-31). But then he informs her of the life-work of the yet-unborn Jesus:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33 NRSV).

First, the angel declares Jesus' greatness. Second, he identifies Jesus as the Son or agent of God's will. Third, he evokes King David's reign.

David was not a saint. Yet God entrusted David (and other kings) with the key task of enacting God's purposes. Royal Psalms like Psalm 72 spell out David's job description.

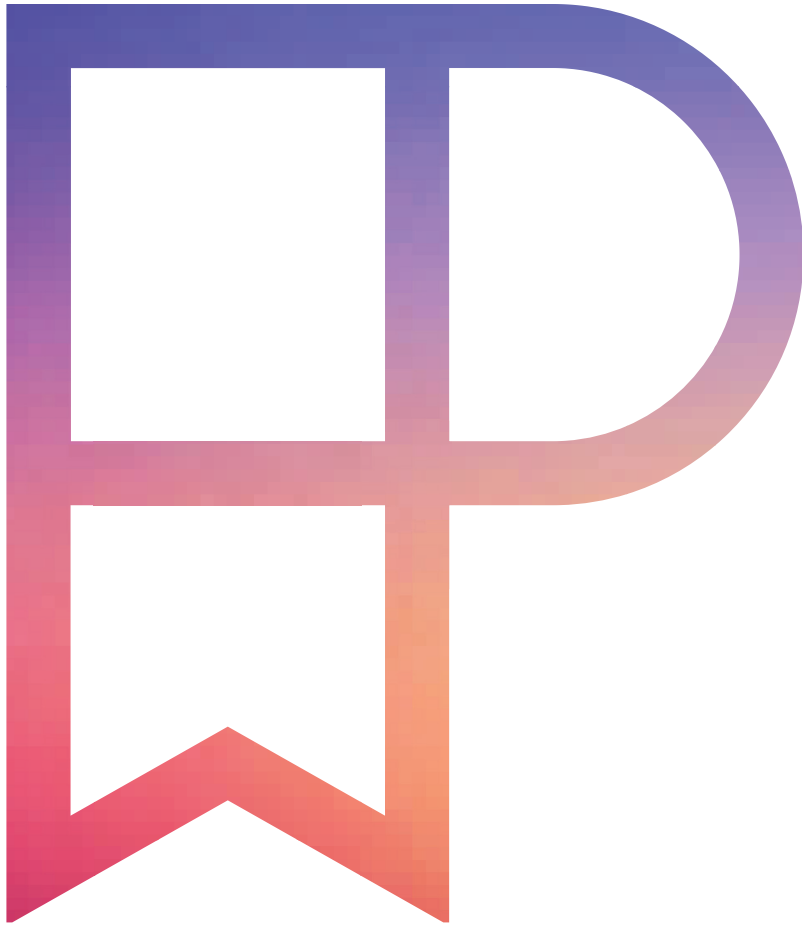
Give the king your justice, O God... May he judge/rule your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor..., give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. (Psalm 72:1-4)

The Psalm envisions a world marked by justice; care for the poor, weak and needy; abundant food for all: the end of oppression.

This is Jesus' lifework. And this Christmas Day reminds us it is not finished. It is the continuous task of God's people, past, present and future.

Dr. Warren Carter

LaDonna Kramer Meinders Professor of New Testament



The 2023 Advent Devotional cover was created by Torii Ransome Freeman.

Torii Ransome Freeman, JD, is a licensed attorney who has spent more than 25 years in human resources and employee relations and is the Senior Director of Human Resources and Title IX Compliance Officer for Phillips Theological Seminary.

She considers herself a hobby artist and has used a digital medium to design the cover of the 2023 Advent devotional. The cover design highlights the change in marketing imagery of the Phillips logo, emphasizing the purple and utilizing the multiple colors that transform the versions of our new image.

Through the multitude of colors the design has various triangular shapes that represent stained glass, often found in places of worship, while using warm tones to signify the warmth of the season of gathering and honoring. In addition, the more modern creation with the symbolic candles is a designation to the diversity amongst us.