



COVENANT

AN ADVENT COMPANION

Bearing the Wait

THE COVENANT
COMPANION

ADVENT 2018

ADVENT *devotional*

In “Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy),” a song he wrote for his young son, the late John Lennon put his own spin on an old aphorism. He sang, “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

I caught that song on an oldies station recently and was struck by that lyric in a way that hadn’t occurred to me when I first heard it years earlier. Preparing for the future is wise, but it’s also true that we’re sometimes so preoccupied with plotting our next move that we neglect

to pay attention to what’s happening now.

Advent is the season of the year that gives us the opportunity to practice the delicate balance between preparing and waiting.

The Bible speaks of preparation as a mark of wisdom. “Learn from the ant,” the proverb says. “It prepares provisions in the summer to have enough food for the winter” (Proverbs 6:6-8). There’s no shame in planning ahead to be ready for uncertain times.

But waiting is important too. More than just an exercise in passivity, waiting can also be an active time to ponder, reflect, and rejoice.

Advent invites us to anticipate the miraculous event of Jesus’s arrival on earth as “the Word made flesh,” while living fully in the present as people called to give glory to God and extend peace and goodwill to our neighbor. We look forward to the miracle of Christmas, yet we acknowledge the wonder and value of each moment leading up to that special day.

This Advent devotional was compiled from numerous and diverse voices who have shared their reflections in the *Covenant Companion* over the years. It is a resource designed to help you enter into a spirit of “active waiting.” Our prayer is that this collection of stories and meditations will inspire you to reflect on the goodness of a God who provided us with a Savior who taught us how to live, died for our sins, and then rose again that we might experience a new birth.

May you use this Advent season as a time to perfect the art of preparing and waiting.

EDWARD GILBREATH
EDITOR OF *THE COVENANT COMPANION*

- DAY 1 — Bearing the Wait
JOSH DANIELSON
- DAY 2 — Anticipating the Unexpected
(like Random Socks)
JELANI GREENIDGE
- DAY 3 — 'Tis the Season—Almost
JANE SWANSON-NYSTROM
- DAY 4 — Fleeing to Bethlehem
HELEN LEE
- DAY 5 — The Handmaiden’s Lowly Estate
JENNY RAE ARMSTRONG
- DAY 6 — Accepting the Christmas Burden
GLEN V. WIBERG
- DAY 7 — Accidental Pilgrim
CATHY NORMAN PETERSON
- DAY 8 — Living with the Incarnation
DAVID BECK
- DAY 9 — Entering Advent with the
Witnesses of the Faith
ELLEN M. KOGSTAD
- DAY 10 — Confessions of a Not
So Cheerful Giver
DANA BOWMAN
- DAY 11 — Reclaiming Lament
SOONG-CHAN RAH
- DAY 12 — An Advent Prayer for
Those Who Wonder
DIANA TRAUTWEIN
- DAY 13 — The Dark Night
CHRIS HAYDON
- DAY 14 — In the Fullness of Time
GARY WALTER
- DAY 15 — Oh, Small Child
KRISTA BRUMBERG STEVENS
- DAY 16 — Flipping the Script
This Christmas
JOSÉ HUMPHREYS
- DAY 17 — A Net for Catching Days
HEATHER MONKMEYER
- DAY 18 — The Unexpected Nativity
JIM BLACK
- DAY 19 — The Fragility of the Bluebell
JOHN E. PHELAN JR.
- DAY 20 — The Defense of Christmas
DONALD C. FRISK
- DAY 21 — Winter Solstice and the
Promised Light
RICK MYLANDER
- DAY 22 — Frozen Ground
KATHY KHANG
- DAY 23 — Facing the Christmas Confusion
BOB ANDERSON
- DAY 24 — Heaven’s Noble Refugee
C. JOHN WEBORG
- DAY 25 — Our Day of Joy Is Here Again
A.L. SKOOG

Bearing the Wait

I've recently gained firsthand experience with waiting. Undecided about next steps, and unclear as to my options, I felt like I was living the photographic negative of ministry. I found myself in a darkroom, hoping that processes were happening that would develop me.

Sometimes it just felt like sitting in the dark. Days passed with no discernable progress toward answers or understanding. I have friends who have been waiting far longer for answers or respite from matters much weightier than temporary unemployment. The particulars are different, but we share the common burden of feeling frozen.

But maybe waiting is more than an experience to be endured. Maybe it teaches us something we can only learn in the interlude. Maybe waiting itself has meaning.

In his book *Out of Solitude*, Henri Nouwen reminds us that "our worth is not the same as our usefulness." How easy it is to equate the two, especially when we struggle with feeling useless. If Nouwen is right, then my worth is based in something other than my employment status. Milton, the seventeenth-century English writer, composed "On His Blindness" in the midst of going completely blind.

His last line hits me right between the eyes: "They also serve who only stand and

wait." Amidst Milton's own anxieties about feeling useless, he is reminded that human productivity is not the standard by which God measures our service to him.

This idea permeates the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. The Gospels begin at a point when the Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah for hundreds of years. Hopeful expectance was their way of life. And then God makes known to certain people that the time is almost at hand.

The Hebrew people were waiting. They taught their children and prepared their lives and houses, and got ready for when the Messiah would show up. It made them live differently.

Every year we spend four weeks remembering the expectant hope that preceded the birth of Jesus Christ. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been waiting. Joseph waited. Mary waited. Simeon had been waiting his whole life. When we are waiting, we live differently.

Jesus is always coming—in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. Maybe the trick is realizing that waiting for Jesus—living in active expectation—is actually the very service that God asks of us.

I wait for the
LORD, my soul
waits, and in
his word I hope.

PSALM 130:5

Anticipating the Unexpected (like Random Socks)

When [Zechariah] did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

LUKE 1:22-25

To me, the season of Advent is about anticipating unexpected blessings.

God's provision can be hard to recognize as a blessing when it comes. It's sort of like when you were a kid and you had that one thing that you really hoped you were getting for Christmas, and whatever you did get was filtered through that expectation. Gloves? Socks? Fleece pants? Wonderful—three pairs of not what I wanted.

Right now, I'm on the precipice of some exciting things for my life and ministry, but it's hard not to be preoccupied with my precarious financial situation. Every day feels like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, hoping it'll be a step in the right direction instead of a kick in the groin.

So these days when I read the beginning of Luke's Gospel, there are new portions that really leap off the page for me. See, normally I tend to read Luke 1 as Jesus's superhero origin story, but lately I'm more focused on the subjects of the text—Mary and Elizabeth.

Both of them received tremendous blessings, but their encounters with those blessings were probably full of doubt and fear. Consider Elizabeth—it was her husband Zechariah who'd received the good news from the angel but was unable to speak of it.

How crazy confusing was their first interaction after he came back? Did she even know sign language?

And then there's Mary. Despite a lack of biographical details, I have a feeling that Mary's life, to quote Langston Hughes, wasn't "no crystal stair." When the angel first makes contact, we see her immediate response in verse 29: "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." When the shoe finally dropped, she did receive a blessing—but not what she expected.

The irony is delicious. Elizabeth wanted a son, but when she got one, it was years—no, decades—later. But Mary was given a son before she was even married.

I don't know the secret to anticipating the unexpected, but if, like Mary and Elizabeth, we all chose not to spiral into jealous competition but instead to love and support each other, trusting God along the way, that would make for a great holiday, random socks or not.

'Tis the Season— Almost

Make ye straight what long was crooked; make the rougher places plain, let your hearts be true and humble, as befits his holy reign. For the glory of the Lord now o'er earth is shed abroad; and all flesh shall see the token that his Word is never broken.

JOHN OREARIUS,
TR. CATHERINE
WINKWORTH,
THE COVENANT
HYMNAL, #131

For the past two months, there have been signs of Christmas in stores, in advertising promos, and on our increasingly overscheduled calendars. And once again we are confronted with how best to prepare. We may vow to start earlier, or simplify, or take time for reflection. Or, my personal favorite, attempt to be more organized and focused. I keep thinking that if I make reasonable lists, and stick to the tasks, there will be time to “appropriately” observe both Advent and Christmas. Don’t get me wrong. I love this time of year. I thrive (most of the time) amidst the chaos that I bring upon myself in trying to decorate, shop, plan, and participate my way through the season. Of course, not everything works out as hoped. But with a little more resolve and focus, I will send out Christmas cards—next year. I will be prepared.

“Prepare the way of the Lord.” It is Isaiah’s call. It is expressed in the first aria of Handel’s *Messiah*. It is sung in Advent hymns. But the words don’t sit alone. The entire verse reads: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (40:3).

There is no end to deserts and places of wilderness in our world. A family loses a

baby midterm. A boy who sees few options in his life joins a gang. A student drops out of school feeling increasingly depressed and doesn’t know where to turn. A friend loses her job after years of faithful service. A family member receives a life-threatening diagnosis. A community is decimated by wind, flood, and fire. A nation is torn apart by civil war.

These are inhospitable regions—dry and barren places of disappointment and despair, of confusion and conflict. Places beyond the reach of tastefully draped garland and carefully baked cookies. And yet we hear the prophet’s call to prepare the way of the Lord. How is that done? By making straight in the desert a highway. Again, how is that done?

No simple answers here, but perhaps the first step is to look up from the to-do list and find the deserts and areas of wilderness; to locate those who are stranded within them and identify with them. And perhaps in so doing, we can help make a rough place plain, level the unlevel ground, and point a direction to someone who might not otherwise see the promise ahead.

4

Fleeing to Bethlehem

I enjoy the Advent season and strive to create a sense of joyful expectation in my family as we draw nearer to Christmas. But at the same time, I can never forget that the beginning of Advent coincides with one of the most sobering days in my family history.

On December 4, 1950, my then thirteen-year-old father departed Pyongyang, North Korea, with his brother and my grandfather to escape conscription in the North Korean army. He said goodbye to his mother, who stayed behind to wait for her brother, believing that they would be separated for a week or two at most. But her opportunity to leave never came as the war raged on and eventually took the form of the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas.

Advent for me is a remembrance of both my dad's harrowing departure from North Korea as well as his struggle as a foreigner in the unfamiliar lands of South Korea and the United States, where he settled permanently.

Why do we so often excise struggle and suffering from our retelling of the Christmas story? We gloss over the difficult reality of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus's own dangerous, middle-of-the-night flight from Bethlehem to Egypt, likely hundreds of miles long in which they were themselves foreigners in a foreign land. Have we so idealized and sanitized the

Christmas story that we cannot embrace that suffering was very likely a mainstay of Jesus and his earthly parents in their earliest years as a family? We also skim past Luke 2:35—a sword will pierce Mary's soul. I think of the grandmother I never met. How soul-piercing it must have been for her not to know what had become of her husband and her sons after their separation.

How did Mary weather the knowledge that suffering was inevitable and at her doorstep, and that it would likely involve her son's pain and torment? These kinds of thoughts are almost too much to bear when I consider them. And yet consider them we must, because we know from Scripture that the road of suffering leads to perseverance, character, and ultimately hope.

There is a joy that comes from internalizing the story of Christ's birth in a way that is rooted in an understanding of what it means to be marginalized, traumatized, and foreigners in a land that will never truly be your own. No matter our personal discomfort, may we be united as one in the ultimate witness to a world that so desperately needs to see hope and wholeness, by God's grace, in the midst of suffering and brokenness.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

LUKE 2:34-35

The Handmaiden's Lowly Estate

She's just an ordinary girl. Her days are spent in hard labor. Her hands are chapped from grinding grain, her neck sore from balancing the water jug on top of her head, and her two gowns are faded and stained from sweat and dust. Her life is no different from the lives of the other village girls.

She loves her family and would do anything to make their lives better—well, almost anything. She catches sight of the man her father has promised her to in marriage working outside his carpentry shop. For a moment she admires the care he takes over the wood, but then she remembers: as far as their families are concerned, she is no more valuable than the livestock.

She grabs the water jug and begins the two-mile trek to the well. She is only fourteen. The livestock her father will receive in exchange for her will feed her family. Maybe her brothers will get an education. Everyone says what a good man her fiancé is. She should be grateful.

Still. She has been traded. By the time she reaches the well, she is dripping with a salty mixture of sweat and tears. She has seen bruises on the other girls in the village after they married. Others have died trying to birth babies their young bodies couldn't accommodate. Is this really all there is to life—unceasing work, hunger, and despair?

This girl wasn't born two thousand years ago. She was born fourteen years ago. Unlike Mary, her name has never been written down anywhere. And there is a good chance she will die without ever hearing the name of Jesus. She may never hear that his mother was a girl just like her or that he came to save the world, to bring hope, to offer a new life to people like her.

She is a member of one of the most vulnerable and most overlooked groups in the world—adolescent girls living in poverty. More than 600 million adolescent girls are growing up in developing nations today. Twenty-five percent of them receive no education. One in seven will be married by the time they are fifteen. At least 14 million teenage girls give birth in developing nations each year, and complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for adolescent girls worldwide, surpassing violence, malnutrition, and disease.

God consistently aligns himself with the vulnerable and the oppressed. Perhaps there is no better example of this than the miracle that occurred at Nazareth—the Holy Spirit coming upon an adolescent girl from an oppressed people group, God himself coming to dwell in her and with her, in an incredible demonstration of what was to come for all who put their faith in Christ.

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies
the Lord, and my
spirit rejoices in
God my Savior, for
he has looked with
favor on the lowliness
of his servant.
Surely, from now
on all generations
will call me
blessed; for the
Mighty One has
done great things
for me, and holy
is his name.

LUKE 1:46-49

6

Accepting the Christmas Burden

The engagement of Mary to Joseph is followed by the discovery of her pregnancy and the offense and embarrassment to Joseph, who is described as a man who always did what was right, which means he went by the Book. And because of it, he tries to figure out how to do the right thing in breaking the engagement with the least amount of hurt and public disgrace to Mary.

Through an angel in a dream, God gives Joseph the greatest Christmas gift imaginable, a special kind of spectacles by which he can now read the Book through the lens of grace and love of God.

A few Advents ago in a church on the shores of Lake Siljan in Dalarna, Sweden, I witnessed a Swedish father sitting on the sidelines of the annual Christmas pageant. At first I wondered why he was there. He seemed so out of place among the little silver-winged angels and shepherds with gray woolen sheep. But then in the midst of children singing we heard a baby's cry from the manger. There was no Jesus doll in the crib but a real, live baby.

Mary, a child herself, tried comforting the baby by pushing a pacifier in his mouth while Joseph in his bathrobe stood by helplessly. Here was the father of the child, his sweaty face showing anxiety and pain, with his arms

reaching out to his child for fear the frightened Mary who picked up the crying infant might drop him.

If today you feel you are being handed something you haven't bargained for, I proclaim to you the angel's word to Joseph: do not be afraid. The Child who was born in Bethlehem may be born again even in us today. For the Child evokes the best in you, and by grace cancels out the worst.

When Joseph woke from sleep he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do. This man who always did what was right becomes responsible—but in a new way, beyond what the law says. Now he reads the Book through the lens of grace, the kindness and love of God.

The good news is that Christmas will last as long as God can find in every community one person who says as Joseph said, "I will do what is the right thing to do," which is to read the Good Book and to see the human condition through the spectacles of the love and grace and kindness of God, then to pursue justice for the weak and oppressed. As long as there is one in every community, it will always be Christmas. The question is, of course, whether or not you will be that person.

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

MATTHEW 1:24-25

Accidental Pilgrim

When my kids were young, I worked hard to create a meaningful Advent. I bought ornate calendars. We added straw to a wooden manger every time someone showed kindness in the house. I laid out Christmas books. We tried to create a peaceful, reflective house in the midst of a hectic season.

But it was impossible to sustain. We'd forget to open the Advent calendar windows. Christmas would be around the corner, yet the manger remained disconcertingly empty of kindness straw. And every time I suggested reading our lovely picture books, the boys responded, "Nah. Let's read Percy Jackson."

Those practices were important, even when we were inconsistent. But the best moments usually ended up being unscripted—singing silly Christmas songs in the car, or debating which balsam fir was perfect for our house. In other words, moments of consolation, as St. Ignatius called them, usually happened by accident.

It's a lesson I have to keep learning. I'm prone to lists and schedules, and I tend to approach my life with God the same way. When I was younger I followed Bible reading plans and prayed through names attached to D-rings. Now I seek out liturgy and pray through the Book of Common Prayer. So it was a bit out of character to find myself on an unplanned pilgrimage this past year.

An invitation to travel to Jordan with religious journalists seemed a great opportunity to learn about a part of the world I knew little of. It wasn't a full-blown Holy Land trip, but perhaps this would be less daunting.

Yet as our departure neared, I grew anxious. Unrest was flaring up in the region, so I wondered about safety. I didn't know one other person on the trip. What if I got sick? I tried to prepare, but overwhelmed, I gave up.

It turned out, I became an accidental pilgrim. I had no visions, no holy epiphanies. But I saw God in ways I never anticipated. I embraced my fears and did something new. Instead of being lonely, I developed unexpected friendships. I saw the face of God reflected in my fellow travelers—each smart, funny, cranky, impatient, beautiful one. I met God in Jordanian priests who passionately and urgently cared for their people. I saw Jesus in our long-suffering tour guide and in homeless Iraqi Christians forced to start over in a completely foreign place, while at the same time expressing their steadfast faith in God and compassion for one another.

I thought I would find God in places, but I found God in people. In typical divine fashion, God's blessing was a surprise, breaking into my well-charted course and upending my plans. And Jesus Christ, the gift of Christmas, comes to us the same way—God's gift of love to us. Love divine, loves excelling, indeed.

Love divine, all
loves excelling,
joy of heav'n to
earth come down,
Fix in us thy
humble dwelling,
all thy faithful
mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art
all compassion,
pure, unbounded
love thou art;
Visit us with thy
salvation, enter
ev'ry trembling
heart.

CHARLES WESLEY,
THE COVENANT
HYMNAL, #439

Living with the Incarnation

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

¹ JOHN 4:9-11

One of the standard Christmas images is a stable scene, with Mary and Joseph looking affectionately upon baby Jesus. Overhead is a nighttime canopy of stars with one extraordinarily bright star shining a beam of light down on the family. This is a quaint picture—until we stop to think about the astonishing reality it conveys. In *The Jesus I Never Knew* Philip Yancey writes, "The God who roared, who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard, this God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food or control his bladder, who depended on a teenager for shelter, food, and love."

Though the metaphysics of God becoming human boggle our best thinkers, more astonishing still is the love God expressed. God created all things and crowned creation by fashioning human beings after his own image, only to have us rebel against him. He invited us to love him, but he received rejection instead. Even then God did not back off. Quite the opposite. He responded to our

rejection by pursuing us all the more. The almighty God entered into the human fray by becoming one of us.

As Paul explains in Philippians 2:6-8, this meant God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, both emptied himself of his divine rights and privileges, and humbled himself to submit first to the grime and struggle of human life and ultimately to the pain and gore of human death by crucifixion. There is no greater story of transcendent love than the incarnation.

The word advent means "coming." The season of Advent becomes a celebration and imitation of the coming of God to dwell among us (John 1:14). Turning around our experience of Christmas means absorbing the story of the incarnation. We let it soak into our bones by reading it, thinking about it, praying over it, and living out what we learn.

Entering Advent with the Witnesses of the Faith

During the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, communication between heaven and earth seemed broken. Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and some random shepherds all were visited by angels bringing messages from God—finally. Rather than ignore the intruders, they listened and allowed their lives to be interrupted. God was reconnecting in a way that no human could ever have dreamed possible. The liturgical season of Advent prepares the church for a most miraculous God-experience.

At that point God's people must have wondered if God would ever show up again. Four centuries is a long time to doubt, to keep traditions going by sheer habit and weak hope. Yet, enough faith remained in the community for a few to still recognize the voice of God. Mary started the movement by responding, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Mary was welcoming God back into the human drama. But this time God entered the world by starting at the beginning—the Son of God was implanted in his mother's womb. Jesus who birthed the world would now be birthed himself. God with us—indeed, God as one of us.

Advent begins in the dark. The days are short, the nights are long. The four weeks before Christmas help us prepare not only our holiday baking, decorating, and shopping but also our inner selves. The Savior is coming. Each Sunday one more candle is lit in the Advent wreath reminding us that it won't be dark forever. Into the murkiness of the human condition came a Light. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). Advent recalls the first coming of Jesus. God's people had waited four hundred years in silence for Messiah; God's people wait again. Jesus will return; that is our Advent hope today.

Some church seasons are so familiar that it is easy to slip comfortably into our routines. After two millennia of tradition, the seasons of Advent and Christmas have become so engrained in our culture that it can become difficult to remember that Advent invites us to expectantly wait for God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

JOHN 1:3-5

10 Confessions of a Not So Cheerful Giver

In early December my boys and I take our yearly shopping trip to fill shoeboxes for those who have little or no presents under little or no Christmas trees. It is our great “charity shopping spree,” and it will be fun and educational! I will post about it later on Facebook!

Our shoebox children take on an almost mythical quality for the boys. I am reminded of Christmas Eve when they set out milk and cookies for Santa, and even a carrot for Rudolph. Now at Walmart they throw coloring books and socks into a cart for the equally illusive shoebox children. They hand over their dollars with benevolent resignation when it’s time for the items to be rung up.

The shoebox has taken on mythical proportions for me as well. It contains such small gifts but is so heavily weighted with meaning: it appeases my guilt. By sending out that box I have done my part. I have saved Christmas for a child. I have taught my own children about giving. It is, I reason, enough.

But it isn’t. As we head back to the car, we walk past the Dreaded Bell Ringer of Guilt.

The boys want to drop some money into the red bucket. All I really want to do is make the incessant clanging stop, so I dig in my purse for some quarters. Before I find the change, Charlie spots a five-dollar bill in my bag. And it is there in the gathering darkness that I get in touch, big time, with my inner Scrooge. I go through all five stages of grief, right there in the parking lot, for my beloved five-dollar bill.

I don’t want to share. There, I said it. Charity means letting go of what I treasure most: my time, and yes, my money. The money is the hardest, truly, because I feel each dollar keeps me safe. I am terrified of the discomfort of want. How hard it is to hand that over.

And that, I know, is precisely the point. It is only the hungry who are ready to be filled, after all.

I start to realize that handing over something precious might actually mean a freedom—and a filling up. As is so often the case, the generosity lesson for my children actually ends up being my own to learn.

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:7-8

Reclaiming Lament

One of the most important things that happens in the first part of Lamentations is the telling of a story of the suffering in Israel. Many say that the unnamed narrator is probably Jeremiah, who was the one and only not-guilty party in all of Israel. He was the one calling for repentance and saying, “Give in to the righteous judgment of God.” So he was the one that is without sin in that context.

Yet there he is, crying out to God in confession and prayer. So Jeremiah develops a solidarity with those who are suffering and he’s able to hear their cries and repeat them back to the people. It’s a powerful moment.

Lamentations is one of the most feminine books in the Bible. You see the personification of Jerusalem as a woman. You hear the voices of the women who have been left behind because the able-bodied men and leaders have been sent away into exile—the widows, the orphans, the elderly, the most broken and marginalized of society.

So he’s telling somebody else’s story, but then he puts himself into that story. He’s not saying, “I know better how to fix these people,” but, “I want to be in the midst of the broken and the suffering to be able to reflect their voices.”

Then in Lamentations 5 the people begin to pray for themselves. It’s an amazing moment because all throughout, Jeremiah has kind of been speaking for the people and crying out on their behalf. But chapter 5 is pivotal. Jeremiah moves toward that moment when his voice disappears and the people cry out for themselves. To me that’s justice.

That’s the challenge for us in the West. Who are the marginalized voices that we have left on the wayside? The voices of the ethnic minorities, the voices of the immigrant, the voices of the refugee, the voices of the women—these are the voices that we have neglected.

O come,
O come,
Emmanuel,
and ransom
captive Israel,
that mourns
in lonely exile
here, until
the Son of
God appear.
Rejoice!
Rejoice!
Emmanuel
shall come to
thee, O Israel!

LATIN,
NINTH CENTURY,
TR. JOHN M. NEALE,
THE COVENANT
HYMNAL, #120

12 An Advent Prayer for Those Who Wonder

If we're really honest, Lord God, we don't completely "get" what you've done for us in the coming of Jesus.

We get pieces of the puzzle, and we celebrate joyously what our limited imaginations can grasp. But we too easily join the chorus of, "Why him?" "Why here?" "Why her?"

I for one am often prone to second-guess what angels have to say. I try, and fail, to wrap my mind around the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of salvation, the mystery of faith itself. I second-guess everything—a lot. Then I know it's time to slow down, breathe in and out, and be still.

Still enough to hear your voice of love through all the garbage in my head. Still enough to allow your Holy Spirit to re-capture my imagination.

And still enough to remember: that you always do things in unexpected ways, that you choose to make yourself visible in the weak, the lost, the little, the least, that you are not in the business of taking over the world by force, but you are in the business of wooing your people in ways that are subtle, strange, and surprising. For that, we say, "Thank you." For that, we humbly ask, "Woo us, O Lord."

In this time of Advent, God, we need a Savior, a healer, a companion on the way.

Many of us dread these days of celebration ahead—we're missing people who are absent from our family circle, through death or divorce; we're struggling with illness and pain; we're tired of the overhype and the overkill; we're broke and we're frightened about the future; we're facing exams and deadlines and not enough time or energy to do any of it; we're facing the harsh reality of aging, and we yearn for heaven.

We're a mixed-up, crazy bunch here, Lord. And we truly don't get it a lot of the time.

But we deeply desire to get you. Through all the questions and all the wrestling, and all the sighing and all the wondering—we want you.

We want you to be—in us and through us—the God who surprises people with grace, the God who welcomes the stranger with words of hope and peace.

We want you to be the God who comes to us as one of us, tiny and squalling, poor and needy. The one who cries tears of compassion over our lostness. The one who lives a fully human life and dies a fully human death, who is resurrected by the power of Divine Spirit, and who will come again to bring justice and mercy where justice and mercy are due.

Come, Lord Jesus!

"Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

PSALM 46:10-11

The Dark Night

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy or all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

LUKE 2:9-12

When I was a little boy I was afraid of the dark. We had a scary basement with only a single light bulb hanging over the washer and dryer, leaving everything else in shadows. Since it was my job to do the laundry, I had to force myself to go down there.

Over the years I grew out of that fear—until I found myself working the midnight shift as a campus police officer in college. The places I patrolled were often dark, far from campus, and secluded from other people. So I decided to conquer my fear. Each night as I approached the scariest places I would leave my flashlight in the cruiser and make my patrol in the darkness. I would stop to let my eyes adjust, letting myself become accustomed to the dark.

It worked. I never had that fear of the dark again. It became a companion, a shroud around me as I walked.

We all grow accustomed to the dark—not around us but within us. We carry fears and guilt, shadows that keep our sins secret, fear that we won't be loved or accepted. We hide it all away. In the dark are the hurts and wounds, the losses and loneliness and grief. In the dark lurk remorse and regret and a dozen other demons, real and imagined. In the light we seek God; in the dark we hope to hide our ungodliness from him.

On that first Christmas night the shepherds came out of the darkness trembling with fear and excitement—and at the same time shining the light they had received from angels: "Good news, great joy, God with us!" They dropped to their knees at the sight of holiness. Mary and Joseph saw that light and their fears and darkness disappeared. The light of the world shone out of a dark barn and the world was forever changed.

Why did Jesus come at night? Perhaps because the darkness is where we most need to be found. The Light of the world enters our darkest places.

Into the dark night of our own souls, God comes. Jesus is born. As shepherds trembled to look into the manger, do we dare to look into the depths of our own heart to see Christ being born there? Are we tired enough of hiding from ourselves, sick enough of the facades that protect us, desperate enough to let holiness reach in and touch us?

His coming invites us to come out of hiding, to let go of our fears and embrace his love. Like the shepherds, we are called to simply share the light and joy with those who are dying for new life and longing for that kind of love.

In the Fullness of Time

Every model of car I have ever owned is no longer being manufactured, including the seven-year-old vehicle I currently drive. Indeed, I got a good deal on it precisely because the automaker had already announced that model would no longer be produced.

Auto factories are called assembly plants, not manufacturing plants. Very few parts, if any, are actually made on-site. Instead, parts are manufactured in multiple other locations, shipped to the plant, and then assembled to produce a complete vehicle, new car smell and all.

I am reminded of the clear coming together of factors surrounding the birth of Christ. In Galatians 4:4 Paul writes, “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son.” In other words, the timing of the birth of Jesus was not random, but prepared. The appointed debut of the Messiah arrived right on schedule, in a context readied for the spread of the good news in ways the world had never known before. What does it mean for us as we slow down and reflect this Advent?

First, God is not absent in the silence. There are 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the events of the birth of the Messiah. In the midst of it, no doubt

it could have been perceived as deafening silence from heaven. Through it all, however, circumstances were being actively orchestrated for the timely coming of Immanuel, God with us. Silence does not mean abandonment. God remains at work in ways we cannot perceive that lead to God’s even more manifest presence among us.

Second, perspective on the pieces is found in light of a larger purpose. Life is not merely the accumulation of isolated experiences. Our faith tells us that God weaves things together into larger meaning. He knows the plans he has for us, according to Jeremiah. All things work together for good, according to Paul. No incident of life is all of life. When we allow God to weave them together, we see displayed the gracious and purposeful hand of God. Take heart. There is meaning yet to unfold even in your bewildering circumstances.

Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.” This Christmas season, may we slow down enough to see the miracle of the birth of our Savior, and in so doing, be encouraged by the miraculous hand of God at work in each of our own lives.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

GALATIANS 4:4-5

Oh, Small Child

Oh, small child, nestled in such a place
warm and hay bright in the light of beasts' eyes
bewildered shepherds their staffs streaming
remnants of starlight, sheep watching and
forgetting for sheep have short memories.
In the manger corners and the stable
shadows watch. You bring us great light and hope
in this darkness of our winter, our lives, our times.
But our attention is shorter than a falling star;
we forget the wood that cradles you now
will also bear you for our thoughtlessness
just a turn around the corner of the year.
Silence the angels heralding: pause the Wise Men:
calm King Herod: dim the stars: slow the world:
hold off the inevitable fate your mother fears:
to this one moment and listen to soft breaths
blowing out through noses and the small rustle
of an infant who will, if we allow it, change everything.

I think your mother knew this. Somehow.
The trouble with loving someone with every
beat of your heart and fiber of your body is that
you are ultimately powerless to stop death.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

LUKE 2:6-7

16 Flipping the Script This Christmas

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

LUKE 1:52-55

During Advent, a Christmas wreath and other trimmings usually grace our doorframe. But the other side of the door tells a different story. Each day my son Javier adds one piece of a kit containing cutouts of a manger set. In our tech-driven society it's a primitive gesture, but it's a tradition we've held since he was two. Each cutout contains a Bible verse, and each day we add a piece until a fully constructed manger scene is formed at the end of Advent. We find this daily checkpoint sets our minds on the real Christmas story; each verse becomes a visual, time-released reminder—an act of resistance against alternative stories of hyper-consumerism that flood us whenever we exit our apartment.

On Day 16 we put up the Mary figure. Taped to her back is an excerpt from the Magnificat found in Luke 1, her song inspired not by a mighty archangel, but by another peasant woman named Elizabeth. “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (vv. 52-53).

Mary's song was a subversive retelling of Israel's story within the context of the Roman occupation. Her song re-appropriates Rome's

affluence in light of the Messiah's true provision for the poor. And a poor peasant teenager from an obscure village would flip the script through Holy Spirit inspiration.

We the church as a storied people can reframe Christmas reality. Advent can reorient our attention from consumption craze back toward the Christ of the manger, who preached detachment from worldly possessions. It is the art and practice of retelling the Christmas story—a remix and contrast between a commoditized holiday and a Christ who devalues its currency.

In our latest family “flip” we are exploring the historical Santa. My wife has been teaching Javier about Nikolaos the Wonderworker, also known as St. Nicholas. Born in Turkey in the fourth century and historically known as a patron saint, he was known to place coins in the shoes of the poor. Nikolaos's generosity has got us considering stocking stuffers in a different light—perhaps in service to Christ and the poor.

As we live into the Christmas season, we join the chorus of storytellers and singers pointing us back to a gloriously ordinary scene of a manger in Bethlehem. We join the great chorus of voices who would flip the Christmas script.

A Net for Catching Days

One of my favorite places in the world is in the Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts, home of twenty-seven murals painted by Diego Rivera depicting Detroit Industry. The paintings are vibrant and monumental, and whenever I stand in that gallery, my neck craned to take it all in, I am amazed that a human could possibly create such beauty with paint and a tin can full of brushes.

A large, movable scaffolding was erected to allow Rivera to reach spaces that would otherwise be precarious. Photos show the artist painting perilously high above the marble floor. Imagine if Rivera had to improvise by standing on tiptoe or with makeshift ladders, balancing himself, his palette, and brushes to bring his murals to life. Instead, the simple structure of a scaffold allowed him to work without the distraction of figuring out how to do it each day.

A rule of life works something like that. Structure is created with patterns of spiritual practices that allow us to be in communion with God. Having structure makes it easier to open ourselves to God's grace and

presence. It allows us to focus on the beauty we are called to bring to the world. It catches our days.

My structure includes praying daily, exercise, journaling, and reading Scripture. I have built this structure over the years and I can rely on it. It is what I do most days.

There are other practices that I integrate on a weekly, monthly, seasonal, or annual basis. Things like partnering with people with diverse backgrounds to work for justice, adding a new prayer practice during the seasons of Advent and Lent, seeing a spiritual director, and finding extended times of silence are also part of the structure.

I try to keep a playful spirit in this essential piece of my life. I want my rule of life to be something I long to do, so I add new practices from time to time to keep things fresh and surprising. I hope a rule of life will help you too answer this question of poet Mary Oliver, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

LUKE 2:19

The Unexpected Nativity

As I was delivering a basket of food and toys to a family that our church was sponsoring, I drove by a nativity scene. There was Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and right in the middle, the baby Jesus, all sitting serenely—on the roof of the strip club.

I had seen this particular nativity scene two years earlier, and had laughed at the sight—it just didn't seem to fit. The next year I wondered what the owners of the club were thinking. And on this Christmas Eve I just had to find out.

It was around three in the afternoon. I parked my car and walked to the door, glancing nervously over my shoulder. What if someone saw me, a pastor, walking in? Would anyone understand? Would my career be over?

To my relief, the club was not open and there was a Christmas party being held for the staff—with everyone fully clothed! I asked for the owner, and a woman around sixty years old approached me. I introduced myself, and I said how much I admired the nativity scene on her roof. She began to tell me about her belief in God, and how much she needed the Lord's help in her life. I hadn't planned what I was going to say, and I didn't feel the Lord prompting me to preach to her about the obvious incongruity of the scene.

I told her I was a pastor and encouraged

her to keep on talking with and listening to Jesus. She had tried to go to church before, but she just didn't feel like she belonged there—she knew what they would think of her if they ever found out what she did for a living. After wishing each other a Merry Christmas, she thanked me for stopping in, and told me that she had never really talked with a pastor before.

As I drove away, the strip club nativity scene in my rearview mirror, I realized just how much it fit. Jesus didn't come to the world to stay away from sinners (myself included). He was born right in the middle of the pain and longing of humanity. He loved sinners, they loved him. He lived with them, touched them—they were the reason he came. It was in the religious world that he didn't fit.

I wish I could say that the owner of the club came to church and was transformed that Christmas, but I never saw her again, and the club was soon closed. As I prayed for her that day I realized that our meeting was for my benefit.

If Jesus came today, where would he be found? In a beautiful church? Or in a place as scandalous and confusing as the roof of a local strip club? In my mind I heard him saying to me, "I really do love the world. Go and do likewise."

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

JOHN 3:16-17

The Fragility of the Bluebell

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

LUKE 2:13-16

In December of 1914 in the freezing, bloody trenches of the First World War, German and British troops began an impromptu carol singing. Thus began the famous Christmas truce in which soldiers from both armies left their trenches to exchange greetings and small gifts. According to some accounts they even played a soccer game. Soon enough they were back in the trenches trying to kill each other.

Following Jesus has not prevented Christians from killing each other. Christian soldiers have faced each other in some of the world's bloodiest wars. In spite of the efforts of popes and other religious leaders, the bloodshed has continued unabated. But this actual bloodletting reflected the theological bloodletting that has afflicted the Christian faith.

Biblical affirmations of unity and love have not prevented us from dividing into some 40,000 Protestant denominations, many claiming to be the "pure" church. In fact, we seem to have an endless capacity to be ugly to each other. When it comes to manifesting the love and hope in Jesus, we are our own worst enemies.

In the mid-1970s I discovered the Evangelical Covenant Church. I was told that if I loved Jesus that was enough. I could read and interpret the Scriptures with sisters and

brothers who would accept me, even if they thought I was wrong. The Bible was their key authority and guide. We could disagree, but if we loved Jesus, we could stay together.

When I told others about this church, I was told it was ultimately unsustainable. But we didn't claim to be the pure church. We claimed to be a small group of Jesus followers struggling to worship, serve, and proclaim the good news. True, we are a fragile thing—like a bluebell growing in a wagon track, as former North Park Seminary dean Eric Hawkinson put it. We could be crushed and destroyed by the wheels of outrage and division.

While we have had our battles, for the better part of our existence we have incorporated refugees battered by other theological backgrounds. We have welcomed them as we have welcomed all who love Jesus. But this is still a grand experiment. We are still that "fragile bluebell in the wagon rut."

So I have a modest proposal for the Christian church, the Covenant Church included: Let Christians resolve not to destroy each other and to live with humility and modesty. If you love Jesus, you are my brother, my sister, wherever you stand on the theological spectrum. And I call a truce—and not just for a few hours.

The Defense of Christmas

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

MATTHEW 2:16-18

Christmas is under attack! But, then, that is nothing new. From the day Herod tried to trick the wise men into revealing the place of the Christ child's birth there has been an undying enmity between the world and Christmas. True, for a few days each year the world so far forgets itself as to imagine there is no conflict. When carols ring upon the air and candles glow in cheery windows, when the eyes of laughing children reflect the lights of the decorated tree and all mankind breathes the atmosphere of good will, there is a surrender to the spirit of Christmas. But be not deceived; it is but for the moment.

Today Herod is replaced by Hitler, the mercenary armies of long ago are superseded by tanks and guns, and still the words are true, "In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be consoled."

Bullying dictators strut upon the earth, evil reigns in high places, the worldly wise "see the price of everything and the value of nothing," but still there are some who have seen a star and have believed in a Babe whose "name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." And so the battle goes on between the spirit of the world and the spirit

of Christmas. I, for one, have no anxiety as to the outcome. The Herod of the mansion and the Child of the manger have been in conflict before, and always the Child has won.

More critical is the attack upon Christmas by its friends. Here is no pitched battle with clearly drawn lines, but rather a subtle disloyalty to the spirit of Christmas itself.

Can it ever be appropriate to observe the season in such a way that the salesgirl, the postman, and the delivery boy dread its coming? If the shoving and pushing of our shopping expeditions lead us to sigh, "I'll be glad when Christmas is over," we may be sure we haven't caught its spirit.

All too passively we have permitted a noisy, hurrying commercialism to invade the sanctity of Christmas, and now we have a battle on our hands to keep the holy season as it should be kept. But a spiritual Christmas is worth fighting for, because it alone leaves the soul aware of the glory of the Lord which shone round about the shepherds on that first night of good tidings.

No one really keeps Christmas until he kneels in awe before the manger-cradled Babe. Nor can Christmas be kept one day only, for if we have seen him—really seen him—all life is different.

Winter Solstice and the Promised Light

Our winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere occurs December 21. Starting this very day, daylight begins to lengthen. This will continue for six months until the summer solstice in June heralds our long plod toward winter.

It is curious to me that the first day of winter is also the first day of winter's demise. One might think winter's opening day would portend more of the same—nothing but cold, dark barrenness. We don't call it the "dead of winter" for nothing.

But there it is, the illuminating contradiction: just as we brace for winter's chill, we start receiving more light. Lengthening sunshine mocks winter, scoffs at the cold, derides the bleakness, and each day thereafter, the sun rises just a little earlier and sets just a little later. Winter anticipates spring, death foresees life, dark predestines light, cold envisages warmth: these are the paradoxes of the seasonal change we call the winter solstice.

So it's no coincidence that the early church chose to recognize the solstice as the most appropriate time to celebrate the birth of Christ. In actual fact, Jesus's birth likely took place sometime in October.

But no. Beautiful as autumn can be, it just won't do. To celebrate something as signifi-

cant as the incarnation, a time is needed that belies its context, that refutes the cold right in the midst of its bleak midwinter and long underwear. Solstice. Now *that's* an appropriate time to celebrate the Light of the world.

And so we do. We know there is no life without light. Light begets being.

The same is true in the spirit world. John put it this way: "In him was life, and that life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5).

Light dispels darkness, not the other way around. Open a door into a dark closet and what happens? Does the darkness come creeping into the room in which you stand? No, the opposite holds, and always will. Light supersedes darkness.

Solstice is here, so let us celebrate the Light. Let's proclaim Charles Wesley's Christmas truth: "Light and life to all he brings, ris'n with healing in his wings!" Or, as Bing Crosby sang, "The Child, the Child, sleeping in the night: He will bring us goodness and light."

Either way, let there be light!

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

ISAIAH 9:2

Frozen Ground

Lo, how a Rose
e'er blooming from
tender stem hath
sprung, Of Jesse's
lineage coming as
saints of old have
sung. It came, a
flow'ret bright,
amid the cold
of winter, when
half-spent was
the night.

GERMAN,
SIXTEENTH CENTURY,
TR. THEODORE BAKER,
THE COVENANT
HYMNAL, #148

I am a fair-weather gardener. I spend many winter days looking out my kitchen windows at our vegetable garden. I get excited in the spring when the ground begins to thaw and show promise of warmer days. Bumper crops of zucchini happen annually to many gardeners, but that only happened to me once. That year I was the zucchini chocolate-chip muffin lady. Most years, after the initial excitement, the hard work of gardening wears thin. Weeding. Watering. Weeding. Oh, why bother?

During the past two years I have also become a fair-weather church attender. I grew up going to church every Sunday. My parents tell me that our first Sunday in America included a visit to a Korean immigrant church. I went to Awana and “American” church with my friend Tammy. In college I joined a Christian fellowship. Those were the zucchini chocolate-chip muffin years of my faith—incredible, unexpected growth.

It was easy to be an every-Sunday attender when I was the zucchini muffin lady. When you bring something everyone wants, it's great. But lately I have become someone I never thought I would be—the doubter.

Racial tensions have caused me to doubt how peace is with me and also with you. What does peace in a broken world look like?

Although my primary identity is in Christ, I live in my body—which is that of a Korean American woman. Because of my physical characteristics I am regularly asked if I speak English, told that my English is almost flawless, and asked where I am “really” from. And that's in Christian settings! I have been mistaken as the nail technician at my favorite nail salon, even when I am sitting in the chair waiting to get my nails done. I have had cars slow down to pass me as their occupants scream words at me that I will not repeat.

I am a Christian and in my gender, racial, and ethnic identity I am an image bearer of God. God created a colorful, vibrant, diverse world of image bearers who display God's wholeness in a way one person, one race, one ethnicity, one gender cannot do.

It's winter here in the Midwest. The ground is frozen and can't yet bear fruit, but the fair-weather gardener and church attender in me always finds hope that in the spring thaw God will bring forth a new chance to flourish.

23 Facing the Christmas Confusion

Each year I carry an image, a perfect picture actually, of what Christmas should look and feel like—unhindered, uncluttered, unconfused. I want time away from festivities and shopping and even formal worship to just be in touch with the miracle—to find the space where I can apprehend that Jesus truly is born in me today. Though I strive for such an experience, it never happens the way I plan—the way any of us plan.

Years ago I led monthly worship services at two different nursing homes. One had a nice room, a pianist, and an attentive group of people. The other was quite the opposite. Yet one Christmas, that's where I found myself, in more ways than one.

Less than a week before Christmas, I was way too busy to be there. We met in what can best be described as a bulge in a hallway. To help set the mood, someone had placed a crooked artificial Christmas tree with cast-off ornaments and a dusty garland of popcorn in the corner. The woman who often shouted during my talks was there. So was the man who sometimes slipped out of his wheelchair. There was also a painter working only a few feet away from us, and down the hall a radio blared.

Our singing was off-key but heartfelt, and I began to think we would make it through bet-

ter than expected. But as I shared the wonder and joy of the Christmas story, a family on a tour of the facility walked right through the middle of our gathering, a nurse dispensed medication to several worshipers, and before long the shouter began to shout and the slider began to slide.

By then, I was way past not wanting to be there. I looked over the gathering and wondered whether it all made any difference. There wasn't much peace there—it was all chaos and confusion.

After grabbing my coat and my Bible, I turned around to see the painter standing in front of me. He said, "It's been a very long time since I've actually listened to that story. Even though I know it's true and I was raised in the church, I've left it all behind for too long. It's time to get back. Thanks for reminding me of that today—when I was least expecting it."

I'd forgotten that Christmas never was about the cessation of confusion or inconvenience. After years of trying to get it right, I realized that perhaps the most meaningful experience of Christmas happens right in the midst of confusion to help us refocus our perfect images into something more fitting than we had ever planned.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

ISAIAH 11:6

4 Heaven's Noble Refugee

We are protected against the “refugee Jesus” by conventional Christmas portrayals of the manger with shepherds and Magi at worship. Even the stable looks sterile compared with the barn and cows I grew up with, milked, fed, and cleaned up after on a Nebraska farm.

It is the aftermath of Bethlehem that sent Herod on his rampage to seek out and kill his supposed rival king. So Matthew’s Christmas account continues with the story of the slaughter of the children, and Mary, Joseph, and Jesus seeking safety in Egypt. And, thus, the Holy Family is a refugee family, and the one we call Lord and Savior is a refugee.

Irony of ironies: the nation that once had enslaved their ancestors is now their redeemer. The mystery of God’s saving ways!

Anyone listening or reading the news knows about the refugee crisis in our world today. It occurs in areas of military action, where life is disrupted and people are dislocated, wounded, killed—words run out. The crisis occurs in nations attempting to host refugee families. And then other nations debate whether they should participate in

the hosting and hospitality enterprise or not.

Does it matter that Jesus was a refugee? That he began his life that way? Jesus’s first act of ministry was not to speak, except to cry as infants do. It was not to perform any deed with his hands as adults would. His first act was to receive care, to bless the Egyptian host family who gave him and his parents food, water, shelter, and maybe more permanent housing.

Jesus blessed them by receiving, and that’s all. Presence is the incarnation’s basic instrument for guest and host.

The refugee issue concerns not only what people who have earthly goods and spiritual gifts can do, but also what a well-provisioned nation can do. The other side is: what gift does a refugee bring? The refugee brings the manifestation of the image and likeness of God, since each human, according to Scripture, is created in the divine image. By their presence they bless us and invite us to do the will of God. And so our service, by welcoming the refugee, is to the Creator in the created.

For Mary, Joseph, 'twas the place to sit and sup at tables' grace. A longing sojourn bade them rest. No inn, but stable called them guest. 'Tis heaven's holy refugee who for us all died on a tree, and by his death gave us a place to sit and sup at tables' grace.

DENNIS MOON,
THE COVENANT
HYMNAL, #168

25

Our Day of Joy Is Here Again

Our day of joy is here again with love and peace and song;
Come let us join th'angelic strain with voices clear and strong.

When darkness lay upon this earth, a glorious light did shine:
God sent a gift of priceless worth and showed his love divine.

Now to the manger let us go to worship and adore
The tender babe upon the straw, our Savior evermore.

How wonderful that God's own Son should so himself abase!
He thrust the mighty from their throne and gave the lowly grace.

REFRAIN

Glory to our God, we sing, glory to our Lord and King;
Peace, good will with all abide this holy Christmastide.

A.L. Skoog—*The Covenant Hymnal*, #187