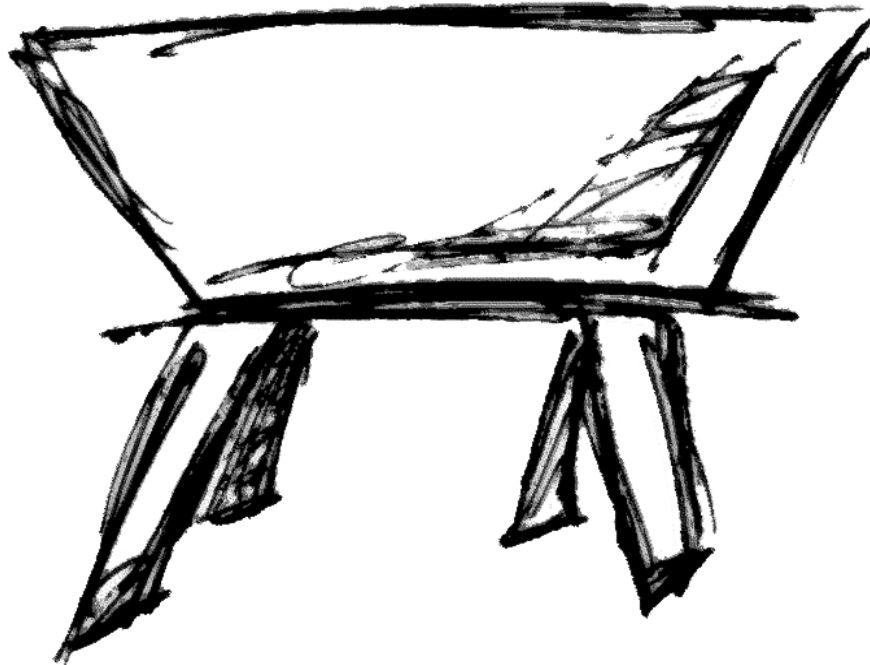


What Will I Bring to the Manger?



*Creative Resources for Advent,
Christmastide, and Epiphany*

*Sacred Seasons, a quarterly series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis, from Seeds of Hope Publishers:
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Sacred Seasons:

Creative Worship Tools for Your Church

These unique worship resource packets are available for the liturgical year, four packets a year for \$120 (\$135 for non-US subscriptions), one packet for \$50 (\$60 outside of the US).

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Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group intends to seek out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable, and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

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a word about this packet

As always, the material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We were inspired to use the theme "What Will I Bring to the Manger?" by the copastors of Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. A "birthing" theme seems to have emerged on its own volition, most evident in the two sermons, one by Stephanie Wyatt, now of Fort Worth, Texas, and Cindy Weber of Louisville, Kentucky. The art comes from many of our old friends. The cover art is by Lenora Mathis, now in Denton, Texas. The Hanging of the Greens service and the Los Posadas ideas were suggested by Janna Williams, a minister in Huntsville, Alabama.

Also as always, we try to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams. Blessings on your new church year. —lkc

Bulletin Art

O God, some of us have a gift

*to share with the Christ child,
but we are afraid that it is not enough,
that it is not good
or beautiful.*

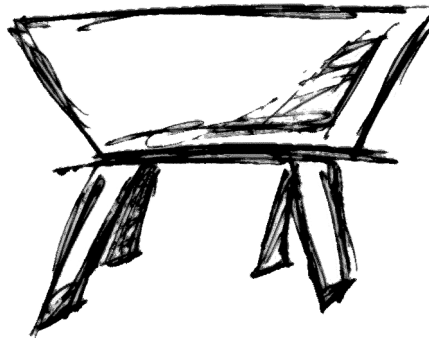
*Silence those inner voices
that give us fear.*

*Some of us have a gift to share,
but we want to keep it for ourselves.*

*Open our eyes and our hearts
to the wonders of giving.*

*Some of us do not know
what to bring to the manger.*

*Help us to begin the journey in faith,
and perhaps we will find our gift
for the Child
along the way.*



words by Katie Cook
art by Lenora Mathis

Dear Mr. Advent

by Brett Younger



Author's Note: As the pastor of a prominent, big-time church with liturgical worship you might guess that I get questions from young ministers concerning the Christian year—particularly Advent. Here is what might be [note from the editor: place an emphasis on “might be”] some recent e-mail correspondence.

To the Pastor
Big-Time Liturgical Church:
What's the deal with Advent?
A Young Minister

Young Minister,
The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *advenire* which means “coming.” The Advent season (which includes the four Sundays prior to Christmas) focuses on the coming of God in the past (in the revelation of Jesus), present (as the Spirit with us), and future (as the Hope beyond time). Many churches find Advent traditions meaningful.

Brett Younger, Pastor

Rev. High Church,
We now have an Advent wreath on the Lord's Supper table. The deacons got into an argument over which candle to light on the Third Sunday of Advent. We have three yellows and a green left.

Rev. Low Church

Rev. LC,

Light whatever works for you, but a traditional approach is to use three purple candles and one pink one (a candle for each Sunday in Advent). Purple symbolizes penitence and pink represents joy. A fifth candle, a white one in the center, is the Christ candle that's lit on Christmas Eve.

Keeping the Candles Burning

Dr. Advent,
Has any child ever set the Advent wreath on fire?
Liturgically Challenged

LC,

Ask Graham Younger or anyone in church with him on Christmas Eve, 1995.

A Proud Father

Mr. Liturgy,
Advent is going great. Almost everyone loves it. In fact, we have a sign out in front of the church that says “14 Shopping Days Left in Advent.”

Counting Days

Shopping Liturgist,

I'm delighted that Advent is going so well. You might want to talk about the differences between the commercial aspects of Christmas - shopping, decorating, baking and socializing - and Advent - which is meant to move our attention toward God's presence.

Also Shopping

Adventurer,
Who started Advent? I've got a ten spot riding on the 7th Day Adventists.

Needing Money for Gifts

Gambler,

The celebration has its historical roots in the Catholic Church. Pope Gregory I (590-604) instituted the four-week Advent celebration. Don't make any more wagers. Advent shouldn't be about losing money.

Grateful to Gregory

Father Christmas,
I have been following the scriptures for Advent and am disappointed. The texts deal with judgment and repentance. Why is Advent such a downer? Why can't we read about Christmas?

Wondering

Wanderer,

I'm not sure "downer" is fair, but you have a point. It's Pope Sylvester II's fault. Before his reign (999-1003), Advent was schizophrenic. In France and Germany, Advent was spent fasting and confessing in preparation for the Last Judgment (especially as they neared the year 1000).

Meanwhile, the church in Italy celebrated Advent as four weeks of parties leading up to the Feast of the Nativity. Because the French and Germans had more influence than the Italians, Sylvester went with their less joyful Advent. Through the years the penitential approach became the focus of the entire church. I'm with you. There's a lot to be said for the old Roman Advent and having fun.

Wishing You a Roman Holiday

Italian-at-heart friend,

We got into another argument at the last deacons' meeting. We know that the Advent themes include hope, peace and love, but is the fourth theme forbearance, self-control, or self-esteem?

Guessing It's Forbearing

Forbearing One,

You're talking about a recent innovation. It's hope, peace, joy and love—in that order.

Joyfully

Self-appointed expert,

Everyone but Mrs. Wendleken is on board with Advent. Her husband says that during the lighting of the candles she mutters under her breath, "Advent Shmadvent."

What to do?

Advent Friend,

You could say, "Mrs. Wendleken, people who are not as spiritual as you need to be reminded of the presence of God" or you could leave a lump of coal in her Advent stocking. You do have Advent stockings, don't you?

Merry Advent,

Brett

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas. A version of the above was printed in Baptists Today and also in Younger's book, Who Moved My Pulpit? A Brief, Amusing Guide to Almost Everything Ministerial, published in 2004 by Smyth and Helwys (www.helwys.com).

We Bring to the Manger... Our Longing for Joy

by Bill and Thelma Cooper

When life is desperate, hope waxes and wanes in unsettling ways. That is why we long for a peaceful, restful time to remember the good of the past so we can anticipate that this same good will come again.

At restful times, we think we gain a better vision and new strength for our hope. But when the pace of life leaves little inclination to create restful places and when fear and fragmentation and chaos loom up on our horizon, to hope for difference, to hope for good, to hope for life redeemed can almost become an unwarranted escape.

Yet, our calling and experience is for good, for life redeemed. Such deep desire finds expression in the Psalms. "O Lord, my God, I cried to you and you healed me. O Lord, you brought me up from Sheol and saved my life as I was sinking into the abyss... You have turned my laments into dancing; you have stripped off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy" (Psalm 30:3-4, 11, author's paraphrase).

Then again, in the letter to the people at Colossae: "He rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us away into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom our release is secured and our sins forgiven" (Colossians 1:13-14, NASB).

This is our calling. It is in this calling that we seek refuge while the struggle to claim the release is carried out in our daily pilgrimage. We need to be assured and reminded that this daily struggle is the work of God. So to keep the memory vivid and the courage strong, we turn each year to the beginning of the story through which our life redeemed is portrayed.

That story, too, had a fragile beginning, shrouded in tragedy and difficult decisions and yet, like a root out of dry ground, the promise in that beginning became real, took on the same flesh in which we live and demonstrated in ways we still taste and feel that our sackcloth is being stripped off. Our release is secured and we are being clothed with joy.

—Bill and Thelma Cooper are, respectively, a retired Arts and Sciences dean and retired piano professor in Waco, Texas.



art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

the woman having surgery the week after Christmas
the man putting together a bicycle for a child
at the housing development

The Joy of Advent to...

the woman singing "Silent Night" along with Barbra Streisand
the daughter with closed eyes in the family Christmas picture
the man whose car broke down trying to get home
the pregnant teenager who wants diapers for her baby
the woman in Ghana cooking yams with onions
the man buying peppermint mocha at Starbucks every morning
the mother preparing a vegetarian dinner for her children
the soldier who wishes December 25 will come and go quickly
the black king in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*
the woman signing her Christmas cards with a shaky hand
the woman who's watched *Christmas at Baylor* five times
the man who sends all his holiday greeting by e-mail
the man as silent as Zechariah
the young couple in their new home
the woman who eats babka straight from the bag
the Texas rancher shepherding a flock of sheep
the woman who awakens to see the sun rise every morning
the woman who tries to buy love with expensive gifts
the man who strings lights on his neighbor's roof
the family whose house burned last December

The Love of Advent to...

the woman who wears a different Christmas sweater every day
the woman who can't see the words in the hymnal for the tears
the toddlers who pull ornaments off the tree
the boy baptized on the fourth Sunday of Advent
the homeless woman taking refuge in the church basement
the Palestinian Christian who cannot celebrate in Bethlehem

the woman who meditates on the words of Mary's magnificat
the little girl in a green velvet dress and patent leather shoes
the boy who eats all the red Hershey kisses
the toddler at the party who threw her arms around Santa
the woman who needs someone to read Christmas cards to her

the father calling the church for jeans for his girls
the person who craves a quiet night at home
the officemate who plays *The Messiah* at full volume
the man who wants a visit to a spa for his wife with cancer
the photographer, silent, before a shining Japanese maple
the ninety-year-old wearing his "Jingle Bell" tie

—Sharlande Sledge is a minister in Waco, Texas.

Lectionary Readings for the Sundays in Advent

Year B

First Sunday:

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Second Sunday:

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Third Sunday:

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126 or Luke 1:47-55
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Fourth Sunday:

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38



The Hanging of the Green

a service by Katie Cook

Author's Note: This service is for the beginning of Advent. Many churches observe this tradition on the first Sunday of Advent—some in the morning, and some in the evening. You will need a number of people to process, carrying wreaths, garlands, altar cloth, Advent wreath, candles, crèche, figures for the crèche, etc. If you have a Chrismon tree, have several people ready to bring a sample of the Chrismons to hang on the tree while the reader describes them. (You may not include all of the decorations we describe. The service is written so that these parts can be cut without affecting the remainder of the service.)

For the procession, we call for the use of a song that features the words "Prepare the Way." There are a number of hymns and anthems with that title, in all kinds of music genres. One suggestion would be the first song/processional from the musical Celebrate Life! by Buryl Red and Ragan Courtney. The sheet music and recordings are available from LifeWay Christian Resources (formerly Broadman Publishing Company) at www.LifeWay.com. An ensemble or choir could present it. Another possibility would be "Prepare Ye (the Way of the Lord)" from Godspell (recording from Arista Records, sheet music available from www.sheetmusicplus.com.)

Most of the descriptions of the symbols are read by two readers. You could have the same two readers during the whole service, or you could ask two people to read from each group presenting a particular decoration. (For instance, the people who hang the wreaths could be the readers for that description.) You might ask different families or groups to bring each kind of decoration, or you might ask different age groups from the church to bring each one. It is important to involve all ages of congregants, and it is important to include people who are not part of traditional family groups within the church.

Prelude

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Words: Liturgy of St. James, adapt. Gerard Moultrie

Music: Traditional French melody (PICARDY)

Note: An a cappella solo would be nice here.



Call to Worship

ONE: Today we come together to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ.

MANY: Today we make ready our welcome for the babe born in Bethlehem.

ONE: Let us clear our minds and open our hearts to the coming of the Lord.

MANY: We honor this birth by adorning our sanctuary with the symbols of Advent.

Litany of Confession

ONE: Almighty God, we come again to you with confessions. We've blown it again and again. We can't seem to stay on track.

MANY: We have such high hopes for each Christmas—for each year—and we always blow it. Forgive us for our myopia and our short attention spans.

ONE: Our hearts are cold with disappointment and disbelief.

MANY: Warm us with your presence.

ONE: We face the darkness around us with fear.

MANY: Comfort us with your hope.

ONE: Our lives are full of activities, but our hearts are empty.

MANY: Fill us with your love.

ONE: Help us to make a new beginning, here, today.

MANY: Help us to make a new beginning.

Hymn

"Comfort, Comfort, Now My People"

Words: Johannes G. Olearius, tr. Catherine Winkworth

Music: Louis Bourgeois (GENEVAN 42)

Lesson from the Prophet

Isaiah 40:1-5

Procession

Procession with wreaths, garlands, altar cloth, Advent wreath, candles, crèche, figures for the crèche, Crismons, etc. Participants

stand across the front of the sanctuary. They could return to their seats after their portion.

Hanging of the Green

Evergreen garlands and wreaths are hung.

READER ONE: The beginning of Advent is a time for the hanging of the greens, decoration of the church with evergreen wreaths, boughs, or trees that help to symbolize the new life that Christ brought into the world. We hang these evergreens in our sanctuary because, throughout the centuries in the Church, they have represented everlasting life.

READER TWO: In addition to this, the entire story of Christ is told through the evergreens. Cedar represents royalty, pine and fir represent everlasting life, holly represents the passion and death of Christ, and ivy represents resurrection.

READER ONE: The circle of the wreaths reminds us of the cycle of life, the repetition of the seasons. The story of Christ knows no end as it inspires and challenges us again and again.

READER TWO: Perhaps God caused the cedar and pine to live on in winter, to show those of us who live in the cold that, in the bleakest and bitterest time, there is green—there is life. As we decorate our homes and places of worship with evergreens during this season, let us thank God for that life that cannot be killed by frost.

Poinsettia

Poinsettias are placed around the dias or altar area. (Note: some churches ask individuals to purchase potted poinsettias for use in the sanctuary, and they are taken on Christmas to the homes of homebound members.)

READER ONE: Many churches bring poinsettias into the sanctuary as an Advent symbol. The leaf of the flower is shaped like a star, and reminds us of that greatest of stars. The bright red of the flower is a sobering reminder that this Child would give his life out of love for others.

Lesson from the Prophet

Isaiah 9:2-7

The Chrismon Tree

If you have a Chrismon tree, this would be the time for those processing with Chrismons to come forward. The lights on the tree, traditionally white, could be turned on at this time.

READER ONE: Our tree is decorated with various Chrismons—symbols for Christ. Chrismons are

traditionally white and gold, so that they contrast to the green of the tree.

READER TWO: The Greek letters Chi Rho are the monogram for Jesus Christ. The Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and remind us that Christ is the beginning and the end. The Star represents the star of Bethlehem.

READER ONE: The Circle reminds us of the neverending love of God. The Triangle symbolizes the Trinity. The Dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit.

READER TWO: The Greek word for Fish, Ichthus, is an acrostic for the Greek words for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. It was one of the signs used by the Christians of the early church.

READER ONE: The Cross reminds us of the suffering and death of Christ, for we are reminded of those things even now.

READER TWO: The Crown symbolizes Christ as King. The white lights represent Christ as the light of the world.

Hymn

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

Words: Latin hymn, tr. John M. Neale

Music: Thomas Helmore, based on plainsong phrases (VENI EMMANUEL)

Lesson from the Prophet

Isaiah 60:1-3

The Advent Wreath

Cloth is placed on the altar table, wreath and candles are arranged.

READER ONE: It is a season of hope, a season of expectation, a season of suspense.

READER TWO: The Advent wreath symbolizes this in our churches and homes. This wreath is circular, to represent the Church year, and to remind us that God’s mercy has no beginning or end. The candles represent the light that Christ brought into the dark world.

READER ONE: The four outer candles represent the period of waiting during the Sundays of Advent. The three purple candles remind us that we must prepare our hearts for the coming of the Messiah. They also represent royalty.

READER TWO: The pink candle represents joy, and is lit on the third Sunday.

READER ONE: The Christ candle in the center is lit on Christmas Eve. It is white, to remind us of the

purity of Christ.

READER TWO: As one of the candles is lighted each week, our anticipation grows and the light grows brighter against the darkness.

Lesson from the Prophet

Isaiah 40:1-9

The Crèche

Crèche and figures are placed on the altar.

Note: There is some controversy as to whether the Baby Jesus should be included in the crèche before Christmas Eve. Your congregation will have to decide that for yourselves. There is also controversy as to whether the Magi should be included before Epiphany. The ministers at one church in Greensboro, North Carolina came to a compromise by placing their figures somewhere else in the sanctuary, to signify that they were on their way.

READER ONE: On our altar is a crèche to remind us of the humble birthplace of our Savior. The first crèche was a live tableau organized by St. Francis of Assisi, more than 800 years ago, to reenact the birth of Christ. In that story, there was a real baby.

READER TWO: Sometimes our nativity scenes today are gilded or sculpted into beautiful works of art. Let us not forget that this was a barn, with the dirt and smells and sounds of a barn.

READER ONE: This reminds us that God came to be with us as one of us. The Son of God was homeless.

Note: If you are participating in the "Crowd at the Crèche" activity, invite the congregation to come forward with their figures. (See Crowd at the Crèche, on this page.)

Hymn

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

Words: Charles Wesley

Music: Rowland H. Pritchard
(HYFERDOL)

Meditation

Some of us have a gift to share with the Christ child, but we are afraid that it is not enough, that it is not good or beautiful.

God, silence those inner voices that give us fear.

Some of us have a gift to share, but we want to keep it for ourselves.

Open our eyes and our hearts to the wonders of giving.

Some of us do not know what to bring to the manger.

God, help us to begin the journey in faith, and perhaps we will find our gift for the Child along the way.

Benediction

ONE: Let us pledge to spend these weeks re-membering, searching our hearts, and renewing our love for this unlikely deliverer and his unlikely reign.

MANY: Let him be born again in our hearts.

ONE: Let us prepare to bring our gifts to the manger.

MANY: At the end of these weeks, may we, like the shepherds, return home from the manger, rejoicing and exulting in the wonders that we have seen.
Amen.

—Katie Cook is the editor for the *Seeds of Hope Publications Sacred Seasons and Hunger News & Hope*.



Crowd at the Crèche

The leaders at College Park Baptist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina have a tradition called "Crowd at the Crèche" in which they ask each congregant to bring a small figure or representation of himself or herself to place by their nativity scene. (Their crèche is at the back of the sanctuary, rather than on the altar table, which may be something they have decided from experience with this tradition.)

The notice in their newsletter reads, "The figure may be of any sort: plastic animal, cartoon character, fast-food toy, Star Wars character, dinosaur, Christmas ornament, or Lego figure. The possibilities are endless. This is just a light-hearted activity to involve children, youth, and adults in Advent worship and to symbolize that each of us will be watching and waiting for Christ to come. Bring your figure any Wednesday night for Sunday morning. Make sure your name is on the figure if you want it back."

They give the members a deadline for picking up their figures, and after that they are considered a donation to the church. (You could include a missions component by donating the figures to a shelter.)

Quotes. Poems, & Pithy Sayings



Advent is the waiting season,
hoping to be rediscovered.
She is seasoned waiting,
wishing wisdom
and pregnant with promised life.
She is a season conceived each day.
—Joseph J. Juknialis

In deep nights I dig for you like treasure.
For all I have seen
that clutters the surface of my world
is poor and paltry substitute
for the beauty of you
that has not happened yet.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

And when we give one another
our Christmas presents in His
name, let us remember
that He has given us
the sun and the moon and the stars,
and oceans and all that lives
and moves upon them.
He has given us all green things
and everything that blossoms
and bears fruit—and all that we
quarrel about and
all that we have misused.
And to save us from our own
foolishness and from all our sins
He came down to Earth
and gave Himself.
—Sigrid Undset

All the broken hearts
shall rejoice;
all those who are heavy laden,
whose eyes are tired
and do not see,
shall be lifted up
to meet with
the motherly healer.
The battered souls and bodies
shall be healed;
the hungry
shall be fed;
the imprisoned
shall be free;
all her earthly children
shall regain joy
in the reign
of the just and loving one
coming for you
coming for me
in this time
in this world.
—Sun Ai Park, Korea

*What do I want for Christmas?
I want to kneel in Bethlehem,
The air thick with alleluias,
The angels singing
That God is born among us.
In the light of the Star,
I want to see them come,
The wise ones and the humble.
I want to see them come
Bearing whatever they treasure
To lay at the feet
Of him who gives his life.
—Ann Weems*

Bulletin Art



We believe in the season of Advent

*in the times of waiting
in moments of silent contemplation
where all of our wonderings
and our wanderings
can be still and listen.*

*We believe in the possibility of peace
in the small voice of it
in its beginning as innermost seeds
that need to be nourished
and cultivated
and scattered along the way.*

*We believe in the hope of a story
in the sharing of it
in the conversation that begins
among all that is holy and human
during the purple interlude
that precedes the dawn.*

*words by Jeremy Rutledge
art by Lenora Mathis*

The Blessing of the Womb

a sermon for early Advent

by Stephanie Wyatt

Texts:

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Luke 1:26-56

Philippians 1:1-11

While the Bible may seem to be old news,—perhaps the oldest of news to some people—it has an amazing capacity to be reborn with each new age, bolstering new movement and even revolutionary activity.

Today's text from Luke, telling the story of the Annunciation, is one most of us have heard over and over again. After all, even those who haven't grown up in church have at least picked up the basics from their favorite Soap Opera or the Charlie Brown Christmas special.

Still, Mary's story has the potential to rouse fading passions and mobilize the masses. In the 1980s the Guatemalan government banned Mary's song, the Magnificat, from being read in public because of its subversive overtones. During the same period across the globe, Polish resistors fought their way through the iron curtain looking to Mary's image in the face of the Black Madonna to strengthen them for the struggle.

This appeal of Mary in revolutionary times isn't new. Going back a couple of centuries, provincial French women found her to be a powerful ally during the suppression of religious activity that came as a by-product of the French Revolution. These women formed barricades and hurled rocks at those who would infringe upon their right to worship. They did so at the risk of their lives, and they did so in the name of Mary.

But this is Mary's more modern history. To understand the lineage of her words that have become words for the generations—a kind of revolutionary manifesto—it is necessary to hearken back to the First Testament to tell the story of the "Mothers of Israel."

Mary's Greek name is rooted in the Hebrew *Miriam*, which means "rebellion." Such a connection brings us to the seminal event of the Hebrew scripture, the Exodus, which would not have been possible without the saving grace of several women: Moses' mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter.

Later on in Israel's history, we find a woman on her knees in the temple praying to her God, with a stubborn

spirit, to relieve her barrenness. Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah, and though Elkanah loved her deeply, his love did not fulfill her desire for children. She could not bear children as could Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah. Peninnah gloated before Hannah because, in the language of the story, "the Lord had closed her womb."



*God brings blessing and a divine
spark into the world in the body
of a wrinkly little baby born in
the stink of a stable to a young
Jewish peasant.*

The Hebrew scripture plays over and over again with this theme: the loved, favored heroine of a particular story is distraught because she is unable to have children. Barrenness was the ultimate double whammy in the social world of the Biblical narrative. A man's ability to produce children assured his social and economic status in that culture. A fertile woman was necessary to climb this social ladder—even if such a need was not immediate (after all, most men had multiple wives.)

God was seen as the guardian of the womb. Thus, barrenness signaled punishment for sins known or unknown. Barrenness was a powerful stigma; it ostracized a woman in terms of her relationship with other people and with her God.

Theologically speaking, a woman's womb was closed to emphasize divine providence. Though a child may have been promised long before (as in the case of the Hebrew matriarch, Sarah), the heroine must learn to wait on God's timing for the granting of a child.

She may have the love of her husband, but she is asked to wait on the fulfillment of children. In the divine time, the womb is opened and the blessing of a child who will lead the next generation is fully revealed.

Because of Hannah's persistent petition, she is granted many children, the first of which will serve as a prophet/priest of Israel.

She and other Biblical women are raised up as Mothers of Israel, women whose faith and patience shaped a nation.

Israel had a history of impatience. They were impatient for the promised land, impatient to have a king like their neighbors, impatient to return from exile, impatient for their deliverer.

Elizabeth and Mary come to us with this heritage. They, too, will shape the destiny of a people.

Elizabeth, like Hannah, was barren. Upon learning of the child that was to be hers, Elizabeth's words echo the woman who went before her, "This is what the Lord has done for me when God looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." Elizabeth knew the sting of barrenness.

Elizabeth and Mary are connected through their wombs. When Mary comes to visit Elizabeth, their language is consumed by this image. The wombs communicate to each other as the unborn child within Elizabeth jumps at the recognition of the divine within Mary.

Ironically, here stand two women, one who has been written off by her culture because she cannot bear children and another who could potentially be killed in accordance with religious law because she is with child prior to marriage.

As the two women celebrate what is to come, Mary voices a song, the Magnificat, which brings Hannah's voice across the ages into a new context. The language of the

song speaks to their situation—for, you see, it is in the most unexpected places and people that God chooses to manifest the divine self. God acts in a way that overturns social expectations in a radical way.

Thus, Mary sings that, through the divine blessing, the powerful are brought down and the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things and the rich go away empty. Mary interprets God's mercy to the children of Israel

*We can all be a part of manifesting
the divine presence. We too can wage
peace. . . . We can all contribute to
bringing about the Kingdom on earth
as it is in heaven.*

who have lived lives, like most us, fraught with impatience.

God brings blessing and a divine spark into the world in the body of a wrinkly little baby born in the stink of a stable to a young Jewish peasant. And we are reminded that, as Hannah puts it, the poor are the pillars that hold up God's world.

Fear and expectation surround the psyche of new mothers—particularly these Biblical mothers, who lived with anticipation of the days to come. Their children were to be put into danger as they called people to a renewed faith in God. John the Baptist and Jesus were peacemakers, though often the journey towards their calling was not always so peaceful. As his father prophesied, John "guided their feet in the way of peace" as far as he could. He was beheaded for his message. Likewise, Jesus called individuals to shalom—the wholeness, fullness, and completeness that comes from relationship with God. He, too, faced misunderstanding, ridicule, abandonment, and death.

A friend of mine once instructed me, "Stephanie, there are two kinds of suffering. There is the suffering endured by the one on the cross and there is the suffering of the mother-figure standing at the foot of it. Both are valid. Both are necessary."

Social commentator Joyce Hollyday, tells the story of South African Steven Biko, a prominent anti-apartheid activist who was tortured and killed in 1977 because of his "black consciousness" activities. Alice, his mother, went through many devastating days waiting to see if he had made it out alive from his most recent scrap.

During one discussion he tried to strengthen her by comparing what they were going through to the relationship experiences of Jesus and Mary.

"Are you Jesus?" she asked him.

*We, like the Biblical mothers,
are going through a time of
expectation and anxiety. But we
don't have to be afraid, because
the blessing is both the journey
and the goal. Others have gone
before us and others will join us.*

"No, I'm not. But I have the same job to do."

At a later time he told her, "I am not your son only; I have many mothers. And you have many children."

He was reminding her of her role as a Mother of Israel. She was not only his mother, but the mother of all who are engrossed in the struggle for peace and justice.

Elizabeth and Mary were co-creators with God. Their participation was a necessary part of the work their sons were to do. They said "yes," though they knew that peace, like war, is waged and that often prisoners are not taken.

Mary's song reminds us of an ongoing process that God continually ordains. God also calls us to co-creation and blessing. In their songs, Hannah and Mary gave voice to new community and new power arrangements like others before them who had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

They call us to share in grace—a place where none lords over another, where we all participate equally in God's healing power. The Biblical message summons us to care for each other and to speak against those forces that nurture fragmentation.

We can all be a part of manifesting the divine presence. We, too, can wage peace, whether that comes in the form of working with children, fighting for an

endangered environmental treasure, or seeking a moratorium on the state death penalty. We can all contribute to bringing about the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We, like the Biblical mothers, are going through a time of expectation and anxiety. But we don't have to be afraid, because the blessing is both the journey and the goal. Others have gone before us and others will join us. In the interim period we have to be reminded to be patient for the divine timing and to be faithful to our calling. We must show up, we must listen, and it's okay if we, like Sarah, occasionally laugh at the odd ways blessing comes to us.

—Stephanie Wyatt is a minister in Fort Worth, Texas. She first preached this sermon at Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Mary, fear not.

but, Lord, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.

ah, Mary, don't be afraid.

as much reason as you have to be afraid,

as good as it is that you know enough to be afraid—

I want you to birth God into the world!

as much valid cause as there is for you to be terrified,
fear not.

for you have found favor in my sight.

I will make all my goodness pass before you—

the power of the Most High will overshadow you,

you will be baptized by light—by the lightnings of angels
but fear not.

though you cannot see my face
(for no one shall see me and live)

yet shall you see my image—

my word made flesh,
full of grace and truth.

who is my mother?

no one will claim a relationship with me
that is not an option for anyone to have.

woman, here is your son; I love you.

grace and truth.

fear not, Mary—

fear not.

my soul magnifies the Lord!

*surely from now on all generations will call me blessed
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name.*

God's mercy is for those who fear the Lord!

— excerpt from a service called "Angelsong"

by John S. Ballenger, a pastor in Baltimore



Los Posadas: a Mexican tradition

adapted by Katie Cook

Introduction

Los Posadas make up a traditional Mexican and US Southwest tradition in celebration of the Nativity of Christ. *Los Posadas* means, literally, “the inns.” Begun in Franciscan missions in Mexico some 500 years ago, these celebrations take place on the nine days before Christmas Eve, which is known in these areas as Noche Buena or “Holy Night.”

Each Posada is a dramatic re-enactment of Joseph and Mary—*Los Peregrinos* (the pilgrims) *San José y la Virgen María*—looking for lodging in Bethlehem. Starting on December 16, nine families will agree to host one evening’s Posada, finishing on Noche Buena. A number of families must also agree to turn the pilgrims away each evening—usually two homes for each evening.

Each home has a Nativity scene, with the Bambino not placed yet. The hosts for the evening are the innkeepers, and the guests accompany Los Peregrinos, who walk from house to house and request lodging.

The guests often carry lighted candles, or paper lanterns, as they walk. Sometimes teenagers are chosen to carry small figurines of Joseph and Mary (on a donkey), and sometimes children dress up as the Holy Parents. Usually a chant is used between the innkeepers and the guests, and the guests are turned away from two homes before they get to the host home.

The Chants

JOSEPH AND MARY:

In the name of God we beg; will you let us enter? We are tired and we are cold. May we please have shelter?

THE INNKEEPERS:

You look dirty and you smell. Will you please keep moving? For your kind there is no place, for our inn is decent.

JOSEPH AND MARY:

It is not by our own choice that today we travel. But the Emperor has said that we all must be counted.

THE INNKEEPERS:

For your reasons, we care not. Every room is taken. Can’t you see the place is full? You are bad for business.

JOSEPH AND MARY:

Will the child be born tonight out on a street corner? Can’t you find a place for him? Do you have no pity?

THE INNKEEPERS:

Oh, my goodness, do come in. You can use the manger. For the rooms that we do have are for a rich traveler.

(translated from traditional chants by Justo Gonzales. for a Spanish version, see the sidebar on this page.)

ALL:

Holy Jesus, you are still with the poor and homeless;
If we wish to do your will, we will bid them welcome.
Holy Jesus, do forgive, in this Christmas season,
That the way in which we live so beclouds our vision.
(Last verse written by Justo Gonzales)

Inside the “Inn”

Once the guests are inside, they sometimes gather around a Nativity scene to pray and/or sing Christmas songs. After this the guests enjoy refreshments: perhaps a simple supper of traditional Mexican food, or perhaps a dessert with hot cider or punch. The children often celebrate with a piñata. (Modern piñatas are made from *papier mache* in different shapes, decorated with crepe paper and filled with sweets. The children are blindfolded and given sticks to beat the piñata until the contents spill out.)

VILLANCICOS PARA PEDIR
POSADAS

LOS PEREGRINOS:

En el nombre del cielo,
yo os pido posada,
pues no puede andar,
mi esposa amada.

LOS HOSTELEROS:

Aquí no es mesón,
sigan adelante,
no les puedo abrir,
no vaya a ser un tunante.

SE REPITEN LAS MISMAS
ESTROFAS EN DOS CASAS
MAS Y EN LA TERCERA LES
DAN POSADA.

LOS PEREGRINOS:

Posada le pido
amado casero,
pues madre va a ser,
la reina del cielo

LOS HOSTELEROS:

Pues si es una reina,
quien lo solicita,
como es que de noche,
anda tan solita.

LOS PEREGRINOS:

Mi nombre es José,
Mi esposa es María.
y madre va ser,
Divino Verbo.

LOS HOSTELEROS:

Posada os brindo,
Santos Peregrinos,
y disculpa os pido,
no os reconocía.

TODOS:

Entren Santos Peregrinos,
Peregrinos...
Reciban este rincón,
que aunque es pobre la morada,
la morada...
os las doy de corazón.

In the predominantly Catholic homes in these areas, the families will attend midnight Mass, *Misa de Noche Buena*, on December 24 after the *Posada*. Some wait until after the Mass to have a special dinner with family and friends. Sometimes a friend who is without family will be invited to join a family, and that guest will place the figure for the Baby Jesus in the manger of the Nativity scene. People exchange gifts, or give gifts to the children, on January 6, *el día de Reyes*, “the day of the Kings.”

A Focus on Displaced Persons

The ancient *Posadas* were observed to remind the faithful that the parents of the Baby Jesus were homeless, and that the family also became refugees from Herod the Great’s slaughter of the infants in Judea. One way to carry on the spirit of the ancient *Posadas* would be to choose nine groups of displaced or homeless people to remember on each evening, and use the worship time to share information about them. You can be as elaborate as you would like with this. The homes could be decorated with objects from the country or area of origin for each group. The food could also be organized around these themes. Joseph and Mary could be dressed as each group might dress. Or you could simply share the information, or distribute copies of the information below.

These are descriptions of nine groups of refugees, displaced persons, and other homeless people. The term “refugee” is used to describe people who have fled from their country. “Internally Displaced Persons” are people who have been forced from their homes, but who stay within their country’s borders.

1. Colombians

Refugee organizations estimate that between one-and-a-half million and three-and-a-half million people were internally displaced in Colombia as of March 2005, mostly because of a longtime civil war in the area. Poor people are caught between the government troops and rebel forces. Coffee farmers are often exploited by global coffee companies, causing a large number to live in poverty. Also, a US military practice of spraying pesticides on Colombian land to try to kill coca crops (the plant that yields cocaine) has proven to kill almost everything but the coca—and to cause widespread sickness among the people. There are 44,847,000 people in Colombia. The official language is Spanish, although many indigenous groups speak their own dialects.

2. Ivorians

Some 500,000 people were reported as displaced in Cote d’Ivoire last year. Cote d’Ivoire lies along the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa. There are four large cultural groups, which are made up of over 60 smaller groups. About 40 percent are Muslims, about 27 percent are Christians, and the remainder practice traditional African religions. Although French is the official language, the *Jula* (Dyula) language, which is used in trade, is the most widely spoken language.

The majority of Ivorians live in small villages consisting of several family compounds containing mud houses. Most people are farmers. Cote d’Ivoire is the world’s leading exporter of cacao beans, which are used to make chocolate. Many large chocolate companies (mostly US-based) have been using child labor and slave labor to harvest the cocoa. Recently, however, several of the companies (including Hershey’s and M&M/Mars) pledged to stop this practice.

3. Indians

At least 600,000 people were displaced in India as of May 2005. With more than a billion people, India is one of the most densely populated countries in the world and one of the largest. The people belong to a variety of ethnic groups and speak hundreds of dialects and languages. Hindi is the national language.

The people practice a number of religions. Most are Hindus, but many are Muslim. India has a growing number of scientists and engineers, but a large part of the population cannot read and write. India is one of the world’s major manufacturing countries, but many of its people live in extreme poverty.

Food production in India increased enormously in the late 1900s, but a third of the population is malnourished. Many women have trouble getting adequate nourishment. In traditional homes, men and children are served by the women and older girls, who eat what is left at the end of the meal.

4. Iraqis

Iraq is an Arab country at the head of the Persian Gulf in southwestern Asia. The country is bordered by Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. Baghdad is Iraq’s capital and largest city. Arabic is the official language, but Kurdish is official in Kurdish areas. The population is more than 25 million. A year ago, a United Nations team reported over a million Iraqis were internally displaced.

Most of the people live in cities. Many people have moved to the cities since the 1940s in search of work. Others fled rural villages and southern Iraqi cities that were damaged in the 1980s during the war with Iran. Overflowing urban populations have resulted in severe unemployment and housing shortages in some cities. The US-led war in Iraq has caused much upheaval among the poor population, including civilian deaths counted between 26,000 and 30,000.

5. Sri Lankans

Sri Lanka is an island country in the Indian Ocean, about 20 miles off the southeast coast of India. Its estimated almost 20 million people belong to several ethnic groups. The Sinhalese, descended from northern Indians, are the largest at 74 percent. Their language is called Sinhala, and most of them are Buddhists. Tamils, descendants of southern Indians, are next at 18 percent. They speak Tamil, and most of them are Hindus. Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages. A caste system is strong among Sinhalese and Tamils.

Moors, descendants of Arabs, make up about seven percent. Most Moors speak Tamil and are Muslims. Smaller ethnic groups include Burghers, Malays, and Veddahs. The Burghers are descendants of European settlers who intermarried with Sri Lankans. The Malays are descended from people from what is now Malaysia. The Veddahs are descendants of Sri Lanka's first known residents.

About 69 percent of the people are Buddhists and about 15 percent are Hindus. Christians and Muslims each account for about 8 percent of the population. The countryside is dotted with Buddhist and Hindu temples and shrines, Islamic mosques, and Christian churches. Most of the people farm the land and follow the traditions of their ancestors.

Even though it was hundreds of miles away from the epicenter of the December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, Sri Lanka was one of the countries hit by the Tsunami triggered by the quake. Refugees International reported early this year that the Tsunami displaced around 500,000 people there. These were added to the 390,000 people already displaced by civil war.

6. *Sudanese*

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, lies in the northeastern part of the continent. It sprawls across vast deserts in the north, grassy plains in its central region, and steamy jungles and swamps in the south. Most of Sudan's people live near the Nile or one of its branches. People have lived in what is now Sudan for thousands of years. Ancient kingdoms flourished in parts of Sudan, and Egypt controlled the country at various times. Sudan became independent in 1956.

Most northern Sudanese consider themselves Arabs and are Muslims. Arabic is the nation's official language. In the southern third of Sudan, the people belong to several different black African ethnic groups. They speak a number of different languages, and most follow traditional African religions or are Christians. Most Sudanese work as farmers. A small percentage are nomads, who move in search of water and grazing land for their herds.

Since 1983, rebels in the non-Muslim south have been fighting against the country's Muslim government. This conflict has killed about two million people and displaced four million. It has also interfered with the production and distribution of food and caused widespread hunger. Many civilians in the south have fled to the north or to neighboring countries. Drought conditions have contributed to the spread of hunger and disease. In July 2002, the government and the rebels reached an agreement in which the government pledged not to apply Islamic law in southern Sudan. Fighting has continued, however, in spite of the agreements.

UNICEF reports that more than a million people are still displaced by ethnic and political conflict in the Darfur region to the south. In addition to this, many of the dwellers in refugee camps have witnessed much violence in what US President Bush and others have termed genocide. Many say

the government-backed *Janjaweed* militias have killed more people than the December 2004 Tsunami.

7. *People of New Orleans*

Louisiana, a southern state of the United States, lies where the Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico, making the state one of the country's busiest commercial areas. The 2000 US census reported that Louisiana had 4,468,976 people, ranking 22nd in population among the 50 states.

Most of the people of Louisiana live in metropolitan areas, including Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Houma, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Monroe, New Orleans, and Shreveport-Bossier City. Many of these cities, particularly New Orleans, hold a rich cultural history.

Since colonial times, people have built walls along Louisiana's rivers to help control the floodwaters. These levees stretch along 1,650 miles. In late August, Hurricane Katrina brought water that broke through, in several places, the levees that had been protecting New Orleans.

Official figures claim 1,302 fatalities from the hurricane and subsequent flooding, and potentially more. More than a million people were displaced. The hardest hit were the poorest people, living in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. Some are calling this the greatest humanitarian crisis in the US since the Great Depression.

8. *US Street People*

Not all homeless people are displaced by war or natural disasters. Many live on the streets because of personal crises. Some are mentally ill. Some are there because of substance abuse. Some are there because they have "chosen not to live by society's rules." Some are there because they lost their job or got sick and they were among the rapidly growing group of working poor in the US. These people are one paycheck or family emergency away from the street.

Although homeless people are notoriously difficult to count, the most reliable way of gauging the numbers is to check with shelters in each city. The Coalition for the Homeless in New York City reports 38,000 homeless people residing in various shelters in the city. The report said that 44 percent of these are children.

The US Department of Health and Human Services reports that 600,000 people go homeless each night in the US. Thirty-six percent of these people are in families. The average age of a homeless person in the US is seven years.

9. *Your Community*

For the ninth group, find out if there are homeless people in your community, or select a poverty population near you to highlight.

Sources not mentioned in the text: Worldbook, Wikipedia, the Global IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) Project, Baptist Peacemaker, Hunger News & Hope, Alternatives. The translations and writings of Justo Gonzales are from the Alternatives publication To Celebrate, 1987.

A Word from the Census Manager

A More-True-Than-Funny Monologue

by Cam Watts

Tell the shepherds to take turns coming in to see me. Most of them are already in town? Good, makes it easier for them, doesn't it? Angels? Cute. What gender are they? Okay, then. Please form a line in front of the desk, and, please remember, the most important thing that's happening here is keeping Rome happy.

*(From the author:
Blessings as you focus on
families and friends and manglers this Advent season.)*

—Cam Watts is a pastor in Aylemer, Ontario.

Okay, if I could have some quiet in here please—I am Papyrus Crispus, regional census manager for Caesar Augustus, long may he reign. I have a few instructions for you that should make things go quickly so that I won't be inconvenienced. The fees for being counted are as follows: One day's pay for all general workers. A half a day's pay for all male children. One and one-tenth day's pay for all religious workers. If you are a professional the rate is negotiable. You will be able to claim these fees on your tax returns next year.

I only—repeat, only—need to count the males, so please do not crowd into the room with your families. Although I am a civil servant, I do not serve you; I serve the civil authority, which is Caesar, so if you have any problems with me, go to Rome and take it up with him. I will not be grateful for any foolish delays which will keep me from getting home for the holidays.

I do not want to hear your stories about how hard it was to get here. I do not want to hear your family history. I do not want to barter with you for the census fee. I do not want to listen to you complaining about having to be here. You get Roman Peace and prosperity, you get taxed for it; and, since Roman Peace and prosperity come with a price, you will be counted so that we can tax you.

I do not want to hear about your religious convictions nor living arrangements, they are of no interest to me. I want to know how many males of any age reside under your roof and I want to know the total household income of all those males. If you need to give me a lower estimate of that income there will be an additional cash fee.

Any questions? No? Good, let's get started, so you and I can go home. I'm sorry? Yes, we count newborns. What? I don't care what is going on, make sure your second cousin gets himself out of that stable and gets over here to fill out his paperwork. Yes, you? Of course, field workers have to be counted.

Lectionary Readings

Nativity

Year B

Proper I

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Proper II

Isaiah 62:6-12

Psalm 97

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

Proper III

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

John 1:1-14

Epiphany

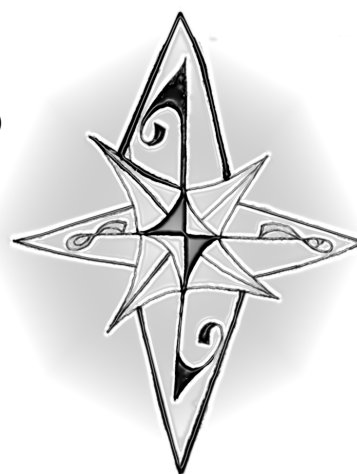
Year B

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12



art by Lenora Mathis

Birthing God's Realm

a sermon for Christmastide

by Cindy Weber

*Powers chatter in high places.
—Bruce Cockburn*



In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituracaa and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Powers chatter in high places, but the Word of the Lord comes to one living along the margins of power, to one dwelling in the wilderness, to John the son of Zechariah.

Powers chatter in high places...

In those days a decree when out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This is was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria...And all went to be enrolled, all to their own city...And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Powers chatter in high places, but the revolution is birthed among the lowly—quietly, patiently, painfully, slowly, unseen altogether but for angels and shepherds—but birthed, nevertheless, gloriously and forever birthed.

Powers chatter in high places, stake their claims, stage their wars, count their spoils, but somewhere along the

margins, somewhere along the edges, two women sit and knit and rub each other's feet and pregnant stomachs, and hope and dream and sing subversive songs:

*God has shown strength with God's arm,
the mighty are put down from their thrones,
the hungry are filled with good things,
the rich are sent empty away...*

Powers chatter in high places, stake their claims, stage their wars, count their spoils, but somewhere along the margins, a little girl, on the way home from school, in the back seat of my car, sings a song she heard in church:

*Don't you know, we're talkin' about a revolution,
it sounds like a whisper.*

*Don't you know, we're talkin' about a revolution,
it sounds like a whisper.*

*While they're standin' in the welfare lines,
cryin' at the doorsteps of those armies of salvation,
wastin' time in the unemployment lines,
sittin' around, waitin' for a promotion.*

*Don't you know, we're talkin' about a revolution,
it sounds like a whisper.*

*Cause finally the tables are starting to turn,
talkin' bout a revolution... (Tracy Chapman)*

I hear her sing this, and join in. I know that she doesn't know what it means. But I also know that one day she will.

Powers chatter in high places—greedy, gluttonous voices determine the value of human life in measures of oil. Powers chatter in high places—busy, bossy voices urge us to measure the value of our lives by what we own, by what we drive, by how we look. Powers chatter in high places—pious, proud voices...

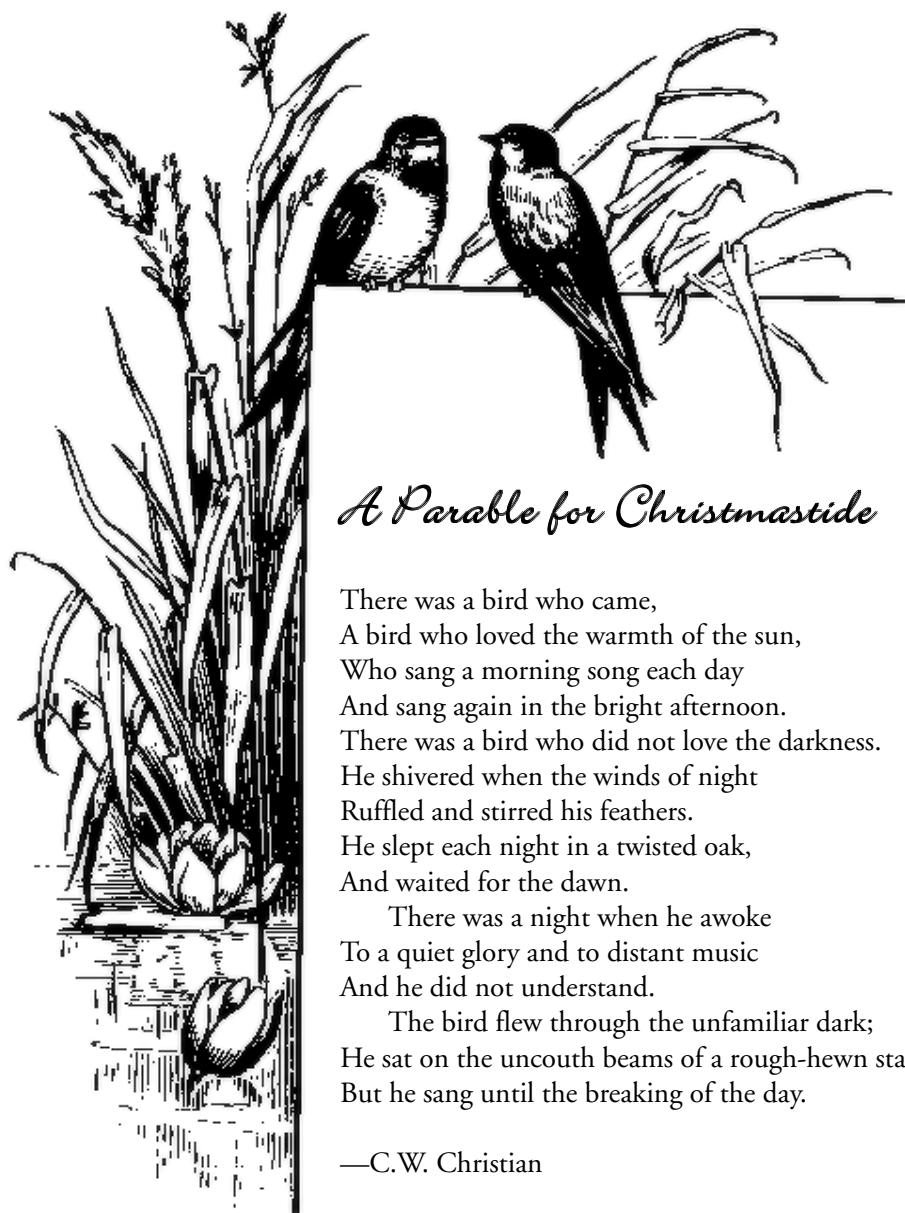
Powers chatter in high places, but it's there, on the margins, in the homes and hearts of the humble, that the revolution is being birthed. It's there, on the edges, that God's radical realm is taking hold. It there, in the wildernesses, in those places of struggle-to-make-do, in those places of not-enough, in those places of I-can't-handle-this-alone, in those places of help-me-Jesus-help-me-Jesus, that God is able to move and breathe most freely.

We can turn on the TV, open the newspaper, listen to the radio every morning of our lives to hear big news, important news. But somewhere on the margins, every morning of our lives, there is something taking place that is far more important—somewhere someone is singing a subversive song, someone is demanding justice, someone is speaking truth, someone is waging peace, someone is beginning to love him or herself, someone is laying down arms, someone is coming out of the closet, someone is putting down his bottle forever, someone is giving her heart to Jesus, someone is standing up for someone else, someone is organizing others, someone is joining a community, someone is listening for God's voice, someone is

Powers chatter in high places, but it's there, on the margins, in the homes and hearts of the humble, that the revolution is being birthed. It's there, on the edges, that God's radical realm is taking hold.

pulling down the walls, someone is preparing the way for the Lord. Maybe it's me. Maybe it's you.

—Cindy Weber is a pastor in Louisville, Kentucky.



A Parable for Christmastide

There was a bird who came,
A bird who loved the warmth of the sun,
Who sang a morning song each day
And sang again in the bright afternoon.
There was a bird who did not love the darkness.
He shivered when the winds of night
Ruffled and stirred his feathers.
He slept each night in a twisted oak,
And waited for the dawn.

There was a night when he awoke
To a quiet glory and to distant music
And he did not understand.

The bird flew through the unfamiliar dark;
He sat on the uncouth beams of a rough-hewn stable.
But he sang until the breaking of the day.

—C.W. Christian

Thoughts at the Approach of Epiphany

by Ken Sehested



LAST YEAR, ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, members of our congregation, the Circle of Mercy, gathered in our Ashville, North Carolina home for a "Watch Night" service. It was a novel event for some, not having grown up with this religious tradition (which was probably initiated by converted 18th century British miners who, eager to stay sober, spent the night in prayer and praise).

We were reminded, however, that the tradition has a unique significance in the African-American tradition. When slavery was legal in the US, January 1 was often the moment when plantation owners made decisions about the sale of slaves. Thus, in the slave quarters, New Year's Eve was the occasion for special terror, wondering which families would be split in obedience to the logic of free-market

the church's observance of Epiphany.

There are three versions of what Epiphany ("manifestation") is meant to commemorate in the church's calendar. One of those traditions is to celebrate Jesus' baptism on January 6. Another tradition links Epiphany Sunday with the birth of Jesus. Yet another tradition celebrates Epiphany as marking the arrival of the magi of "We Three Kings" fame—the figures played in Christmas plays everywhere by children dressed in bathrobes.

Yet the common element in each of these versions is the inauguration of a confrontation between God's Only Begotten and those in seats of power.

AS A BAPTISMAL OCCASION, this Manifestation inspired Jesus' first sermon in the temple at Nazareth. The gathered crowd was so perturbed at his message of deliverance that the text says they "were filled with wrath" and attempted to launch him headlong over a cliff.

AS A BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT, this Manifestation so infuriated the reigning regime that the "rules of military engagement" were expanded to include the execution of all male infants in the region. And the First Family was forced to flee as refugees into Egypt, seeking political asylum from Herod's rage.

AS AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORT, this Manifestation threatened to implicate even visiting foreign dignitaries in the web of political intrigue, and they were smuggled out of town, on back roads, "by

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capitalism.

But after US President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (a war strategy, by the way, not a human rights initiative; it applied only to those states who were part of the Confederacy), made effective 1 January 1863, the New Year's Eve Watch Night service became a freedom vigil.

This historical reference, I think, illumines the mixture of terror and hope which flavored the original context of the Nativity narrative.

Now, midway through Christmastide, we move toward



another way.”

In each reading of the narrative, the message is clear: The Manifestation of God’s Intent will disrupt the world as we know it. Those for whom this “world” is “home,” who profit from current arrangements, from orthodoxys of every sort, will take offense at this swaddling-wrapped revolt.

The bias of heaven is clear: The goodness of this news is evident only to “children,” to the defenseless ones, to the ones facing life on the road without provision, to the excluded and those judged unclean and unworthy.

Biblically speaking, when you talk about heaven you’re liable to raise hell. Such is the speech of evangelical announcement. Everything else is mostly sentimental drivel, designed to calm the powerful and control the weak.

But blessed are you poor, you mournful, you meek and merciful, you restorers of right-relatedness; blessed are you who are persecuted and accused in the cause of peace; for yours is the future, the riches of redemption, the solace of salvation, the bounty of the earth in all its goodness.

God will arise, says the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 33), at the sound of suffering, of weeping from the envoys of peace, of mourning from the land itself. And so shall we.

But the announcement of God’s Emancipation Proclamation does not diminish the struggle yet to come. For 19th century black slaves in the US, freedom’s announcement would face the test of Jim Crow laws, the epidemic of lynchings, the bombing of Sunday school children by terrorists marching under the banner of a Christian cross—not to mention outright assassinations. And this particular struggle, now less obvious, is far from

over.

Which is to say, things will probably get worse before they get better. I m sure Jesus figured as much as he rose from his own baptismal waters, signifying his coming disruptive career.

It is a sobering thought for us who have submitted to

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similar baptismal waters.

Before you go there, though, remember that, for Jesus, the disruption was endured “for the sake of the joy set before him” (Hebrews 12:2). Accordingly, our discipline is stay connected with such joy.

This is the horizon to which our eyes must remain trained as our exile deepens. We are drawn, not shoved, toward this promise—a promise powerful enough to sustain perseverance in the face of overwhelming and contradictory evidence.

As Wendell Berry is wont to say, “Be joyful, though you have considered the facts.”

Sisters and brothers, this is no time for modesty. All hope to be had must endure the flagrant frost of our bleak midwinter, must be cradled with sometimes-numb fingers.

May you live large, laugh often, and love well.

—Ken Sehested is co-pastor of Circle of Mercy Congregation and a stonemason in Asheville, North Carolina.

EPIPHANY (from the Greek verb *epiphainein*, “to manifest,” through Late Latin, Middle French, and Middle English): A Christian festival celebrating the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, or in Eastern churches as a commemoration of Jesus’ baptism; an appearance or manifestation, especially of a divine being; a usually sudden manifestation or illuminating discovery of the essential nature or meaning of reality [adapted by Peter Yuichi Clark from Merriam-Webster’s 10th Collegiate Dictionary]



A Return to Our First Love

some thoughts for January

by Daniel Pryfogle

Backward. That's an odd way to walk into a new year, especially when goals, resolutions and prognostications are the order of the day. But January's namesake, the Roman god Janus, encourages this direction. He has two faces. One looks to the future, the other the past. Janus embodies an ancient wisdom: If the future is the realm of growth, we get there by an orientation to the past—backward. Which is to say by remembering.

Remembering sounds easy enough. The difficulty is we are overwhelmed by a culture that would have us chase the future without regard for the past.

I am going backward this month, rereading a little book by Parker Palmer titled *Let Your Life Speak*. Clues to vocation are found in the past, Palmer says. To gain clarity about our callings, where God would lead us, we must remember how God has made us. "Vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to become something I am not," Palmer writes. "It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be."

Rereading our lives, individually and institutionally, reconnects us to our identity. Remembering—going back over particular images of ourselves, ruminating on formative experiences, recalling moments of passion—reminds us of vocation, what the writer of Revelation calls our "first love." Remembering reminds us that vocation is a gift, as Palmer says, "the original selfhood given me at birth by God."

Remembering sounds easy enough. The difficulty is we are overwhelmed by a culture that would have us chase the future without regard for the past. It is a system that feeds on our fixation and anxiety about what's next—the next model, the next big thing, the next prescription for our happiness and success. The system collects that worry, literally banks it, so that we rush into the future in debt and deeply discouraged yet still chasing the next solution.

Our culture sells, and we buy, the notion that the answer is out there, just beyond us. That we are impoverished by such so-called vision is plain to see, as Wendell Berry observes. "And so we have before us," he writes, "the spectacle of unprecedented 'prosperity' and 'economic growth' in a land of degraded farms, forests, ecosystems, and watersheds, polluted air, failing families, and perishing communities."

"Return!" says the Lord in the voice of the prophets. Vocation is not about spiritual acquisition. The Big Project is not a linear quest, not a journey of consuming one experience after another until we find our reason for being. Vocation is backward. "Return!" says the Lord. Purpose, wholeness and renewal are found in remembrance.

This month we celebrate that January child whose vision was truly progressive, truly visionary because it was rooted in memory. Martin Luther King's vocation was to call us to a "new thing" by telling "the old, old story": by reminding us of a Creator who said all creation is good; by reminding us of a Parent who promised provision for all people; by reminding us of a Liberator who comes to set us free. King called us forward, as prophets have always done, by inviting us to remember.

This year may we commit ourselves to a similar practice. Let us be renewed and rekindled by reconnecting to the gifts God has given us. Let us remember.

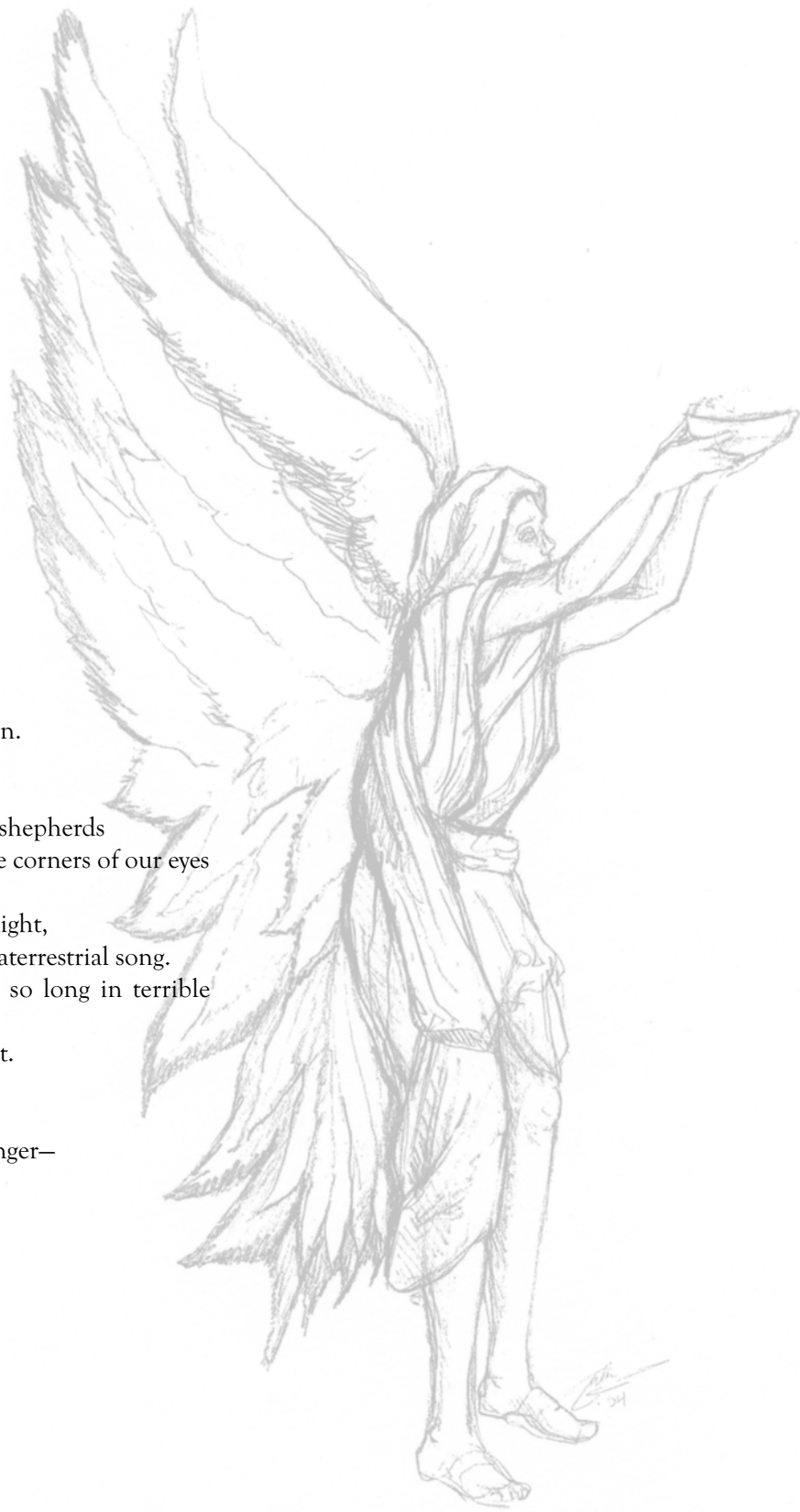
—Daniel Pryfogle, a minister who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, works as a consultant and specializes in Affirmative Inquiry.



Let us go in peace now;
For our eyes have seen God's salvation.
We have stood, dumbstruck,
before the manger.
We have exchanged glances with the shepherds
and looked, sheepishly, out of the corners of our eyes
at the wise men.
We have listened, with terror and delight,
to the messengers with their extraterrestrial song.
We, who have walked so often and so long in terrible
darkness,
have been flooded with holy light.

Let us go in peace now;
We have brought our gifts to the manger—
and for some of us
it was merely our broken selves—
but now, like the shepherds,
we must go back to our fields;
like the magi,
we must go home another way.

Let us go in peace now;
May this Holy Child guide our steps
into the new year
And give us the courage
to give birth to God's realm.
—Katie Cook



art by Sally Lynn Askins