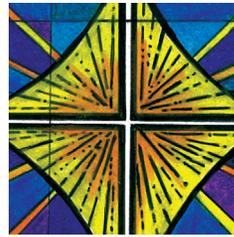


AS WE WAIT

DEVOTIONS FOR ADVENT AT MOUNTAIN BROOK BAPTIST CHURCH



WAITING

We're all waiting for something, aren't we? Maybe you're waiting for healing or for a spouse. Maybe you're waiting for a child or for reconciliation with someone you love. Perhaps you're waiting for a job or for God's provision in another area of your life. We don't like waiting. In fact, we're a society that has tried to rid our lives of unnecessary waiting! You can now order your fast food on apps so restaurants can have your order ready the minute you drive into the parking lot. Waiting of any kind is hard for us.

Waiting was hard for the Israelites, too; they spent a lot of time waiting for the hope of the coming Messiah. Sometimes, our tendency is to rush through the Christmas season and find ourselves at the manger, where "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." But that's not the way life works. The story of the Old Testament is a story of longing and waiting—sometimes for many years—for God's provision and redemption. As children of the new covenant, we also enter into this waiting as we long for the return of our Savior, when He will make all things right.

Our prayer this season is that you would slow down and enter into the waiting as you walk through each week's reading. Each week will look at a different aspect of waiting as we walk through the story of the Bible, realizing that each of these stories of waiting point us to the hope we have in Jesus. We pray that you would be encouraged in your walk with Christ as you wait for Him.





WAITING *for the* PROMISED LAND

Our story begins with God and creation. He makes the world and declares it all to be good. He also creates man and woman—the crown jewels of His creation. Yet they disobey and choose to trust the scheming words of the Deceiver rather than the truthful voice of their Father. For this, they are thrown out of the Garden of Eden and exiled from their home. But God doesn't give up on His people. He raises up servants for Himself through Abraham's lineage, promising that He will give them a place to call home.



NOW THE LORD SAID TO ABRAM,
“GO FROM YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR KINDRED AND YOUR
FATHER’S HOUSE TO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.
AND I WILL MAKE OF YOU A GREAT NATION,
AND I WILL BLESS YOU AND MAKE YOUR NAME GREAT,
SO THAT YOU WILL BE A BLESSING.”

GENESIS 12:1-2



TO YOUR OFFSPRING I WILL GIVE THIS LAND

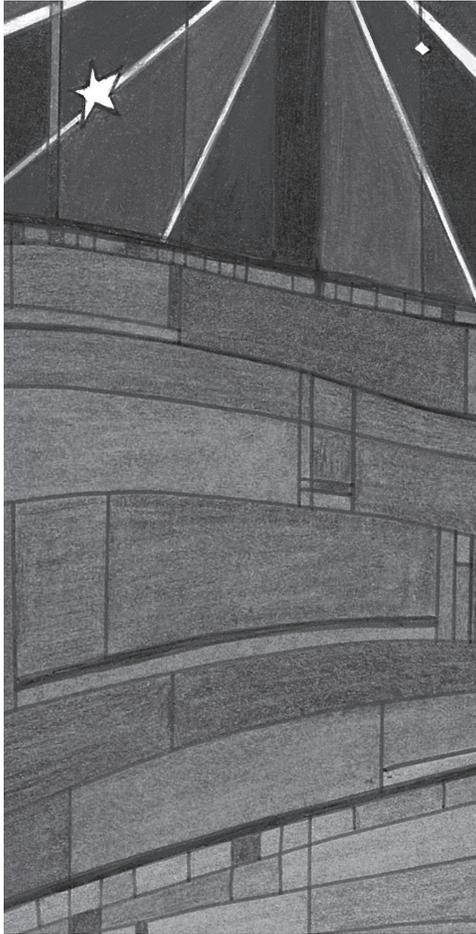
Monday, November 28 | Genesis 12:1–9 | Doug Dortch

Abraham is the quintessential figure of faith because of how he left a familiar place for the strange and unfamiliar, simply because God called him to do so. Simply put, Abraham forfeited the familiar for the promise of something better, a land large enough to sustain the generations that would follow him and would build upon the blessings God would bestow upon him.

Each of us has his or her “comfort zones”—places where we can operate almost on auto-pilot because of how we have become locked into patterns of believing and behaving that require little thought and even less sacrifice. But the problem with those familiar places is that their customary character causes us to think we can manage things on our

own, a major misunderstanding that deprives us of knowing the fullness of God’s favor.

As you read this text, think about the abandonment to God’s future it required of Abraham. Think as well about how Abraham’s choice affected more than just his extended family, but also generations that would come after him—even to this day! Then, think about your own faith journey and how God is guiding you along a path that will ultimately lead you to a “land that is brighter than day.” Staying true to God’s promise will require you to go through occasional seasons of discomfort, but it will also secure for you the confidence that your steady endurance will be more than worth the wait and the faith.



THEN THE LORD SAID,
“I HAVE SURELY SEEN THE AFFLICTION OF
MY PEOPLE WHO ARE IN EGYPT AND HAVE
HEARD THEIR CRY BECAUSE OF THEIR
TASKMASTERS. I KNOW THEIR SUFFERINGS,
AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO DELIVER THEM
OUT OF THE HAND OF THE EGYPTIANS AND
TO BRING THEM UP OUT OF THAT LAND
TO A GOOD AND BROAD LAND, A LAND
FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY.”

EXODUS 3:7-8

HELP IS ON THE WAY

Tuesday, November 29 | Exodus 2:23–3:12 | Doug Dortch

Americans have a hard time wrapping our heads around what it's like not to be free to do what we want, go where we want, buy what we want, or say what we want. That's why we struggle hearing the message of Exodus, where the children of Israel moaned and groaned for too many years over the burdensome nature of their bondage in Egypt. But we can think of times when life began to close in around us, and we suddenly found ourselves unable to enjoy our days as we once could. How did we make it through those times? As people of faith, we took our burdens and anxieties to the Lord, and in His time, He answered them.

The hardest part of waiting on God's answer is understanding that God is at work even when it seems like nothing is going on.

Look carefully at this text. Notice that at the same time the people are taking their case to God, God is in the process of preparing His servant, Moses, to be able to

muster the courage and conviction to approach the new Pharaoh, demanding that he let God's people go. The children of Israel had no clue that a deliverer was on the way. Yet all that time, God was preparing His mediator, the shepherd Moses.

Christmas, of course, celebrates the birth of Christ, the one Mediator between God and humankind (1 Timothy 2:5). In the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), God sent forth His Son to redeem us and make us His sons and daughters. Advent prepares us for such a celebration by inviting us to anticipate Jesus' second coming and to use this time to prepare our hearts for our ultimate liberation in glory. Both are based on our hope that God will at some point intervene and make our lives much better than they presently are.

So, if things seem a bit unsettled for now, keep praying and keep preparing. God is at work, and help is on the way. God is at work, and hope is on the way.

THEN ALL THE CONGREGATION RAISED A LOUD CRY, AND THE PEOPLE WEPT THAT NIGHT. AND ALL THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL GRUMBLED AGAINST MOSES AND AARON. THE WHOLE CONGREGATION SAID TO THEM, WOULD THAT WE HAD DIED IN THE LAND OF EGYPT! OR WOULD THAT WE HAD DIED IN THIS WILDERNESS! WHY IS THE LORD BRINGING US INTO THIS LAND, TO FALL BY THE SWORD? OUR WIVES AND OUR LITTLE ONES WILL BECOME A PREY. WOULD IT NOT BE BETTER FOR US TO GO BACK TO EGYPT?

NUMBERS 14:1-3



THE DAYS THAT NEVER WERE

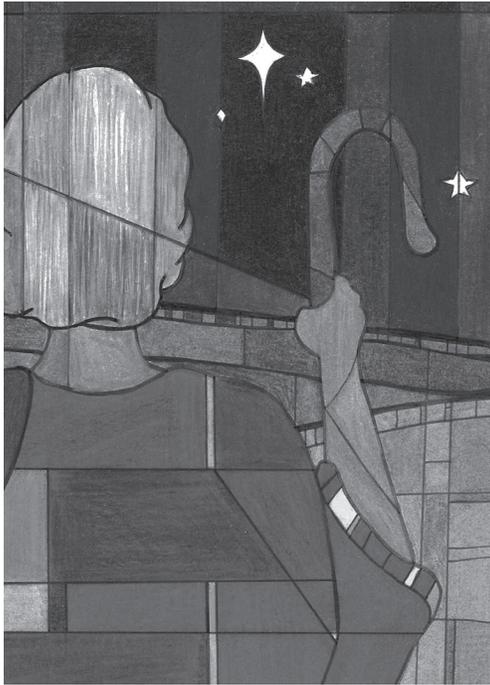
Wednesday, November 30 | Numbers 14:1–45 | Doug Dortch

The book of Numbers is not about arithmetic. If anything, it's about murmuring—specifically, the murmuring of the children of Israel as they find themselves in the middle of nowhere with the Promised Land nowhere in sight. So, you know how the people respond. They respond by pining for “the good old days,” when they had plenty to eat and plenty to drink and not a care in the world.

Of course, such a time never actually existed. The only “golden days” were ones where the hot Egyptian sun beat down upon them as they made their bricks to build Pharaoh's palaces. How quickly they forget their pain and suffering in their impatience over God's promise not arriving as quickly or as easily

as they had thought. So great was their sin that God decreed that none of that generation would enter the Promised Land, save the clans of Caleb and Joshua, who had spied out the land and had chosen to believe in God's ability to secure it for them.

You've heard the saying, “Hindsight is 20/20.” It is also falsely alluring. Things in the rearview mirror always look better than they were. Only those who have seen the future can muster the fortitude to keep pressing on, believing in God's ability to bring blessings to pass when blessings seem to be a thousand miles away. Anything less is outright rebellion against God, rebellion with which He will never find favor.



KNOW, THEREFORE, THAT THE LORD
YOUR GOD IS NOT GIVING YOU THIS
GOOD LAND TO POSSESS BECAUSE OF YOUR
RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR YOU ARE A STUBBORN
PEOPLE. REMEMBER AND DO NOT FORGET
HOW YOU PROVOKED THE LORD YOUR GOD
TO WRATH IN THE WILDERNESS. FROM THE
DAY YOU CAME OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT
UNTIL YOU CAME TO THIS PLACE, YOU HAVE
BEEN REBELLIOUS AGAINST THE LORD.

DEUTERONOMY 9:6-7

COUNT YOUR MANY TRANSGRESSIONS

Thursday, December 1 | Deuteronomy 9:1-29 | Doug Dortch

The book of Deuteronomy reflects on God preparing His people to secure what He has promised them—a land flowing with milk and honey, where they will live in peace and prosperity. Because God knows that faith can be fleeting, He inspires Moses to recount for the children of Israel a long and, no doubt, painful tale of their ancestors' refusal to do what God had commanded them to do. This retelling sets the stage for what will become a new way of understanding God's purposes: Do what God says and be blessed, or reject God's ways and be cursed. The choice is yours.

That same choice exists today. God honors faithfulness and does not look kindly on disobedience. The problem is that we forget this truth when it seems

like the “bad guys” aren't being held accountable for their misdeeds, while blessings seem to miss those who show righteousness. But what we fail to understand is that God's timetable for rewarding obedience and punishing faithlessness is one we can never know. We must be content with living moment by moment, pursuing God's ways, and waiting for His favor to come to us at the right moment.

Perhaps looking back at how your sins eventually caught up with you will be all the motivation you need to press on with the devotion that God desires and deserves. Only then will you know the blessing you really do not deserve and the favor that comes to those who make the choice each day to wait and to walk in faith.



FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD IS GOD OF GODS AND LORD OF LORDS, THE GREAT, THE MIGHTY, AND THE AWESOME GOD, WHO IS NOT PARTIAL AND TAKES NO BRIBE. HE EXECUTES JUSTICE FOR THE FATHERLESS AND THE WIDOW, AND LOVES THE SOJOURNER, GIVING HIM FOOD AND CLOTHING. LOVE THE SOJOURNER, THEREFORE, FOR YOU WERE SOJOURNERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT. YOU SHALL FEAR THE LORD YOUR GOD. YOU SHALL SERVE HIM AND HOLD FAST TO HIM, AND BY HIS NAME YOU SHALL SWEAR. HE IS YOUR PRAISE. HE IS YOUR GOD, WHO HAS DONE FOR YOU THESE GREAT AND TERRIFYING THINGS THAT YOUR EYES HAVE SEEN. YOUR FATHERS WENT DOWN TO EGYPT SEVENTY PERSONS, AND NOW THE LORD YOUR GOD HAS MADE YOU AS NUMEROUS AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN.

DEUTERONOMY 10:17-22

FEAR IS NOT A FOUR-LETTER WORD

Friday, December 2 | Deuteronomy 10:1–22 | Doug Dortch

The tenth chapter of Deuteronomy continues the litany of acknowledging past sins, which Moses began in the previous chapter. But it doesn't last forever; ultimately, confession must lead to commitment—one that is based on a healthy fear of God's power to bless and curse, depending on how His people respond.

Fear is a word we don't find very encouraging. That's because we associate it with a source of threat that only robs us of the good for which we so yearn. But in the Bible, the word fear, when used about our attitudes toward God, is more about reverence and respect. It's more about how we align our lives around God's expectations, because we know in our heart of hearts that only by

following God's ways will we secure God's blessings.

You only fear what you understand to be greater than you. Unfortunately, we've spent so much time and energy trying to fashion God in our own image that we have ended up with a god who is nothing like the Bible describes.

That's why this season of the year is so critical to our faith. Understanding how the fullness of our Creator could have come down to be with us as a tiny baby is more than enough to evoke wonder and awe, which is precisely the spirit that is necessary to lead us to order our lives around His glory and link them upon His unconditional love. As the children of Israel were to discover, these sorts of faithful actions are always for our own good.



WAITING *for a* RIGHTEOUS RULER

Israel's first and foremost leader was the Lord, but the Israelites wanted more. They wanted to be like all of the other lands around them, with a physical ruler and king. The Lord grants their wish, but we see that, sometimes, when we get exactly what we ask for, it's not all we hoped and dreamed! Samuel warned the people that having a king might not be a good thing, and we see this unfold in the historical books of the Old Testament. Some kings are good and lead righteous lives, pointing to the Lord as their example. But some kings aren't as faithful; they make alliances with foreign nations and practice syncretism—the mixing of worship of false gods with the worship of Yahweh, the one true God. We read these stories and we long for a ruler who is completely righteous and blameless before the Lord, who leads with competence and confidence in God's calling on his life, and who has the best interests of his people at heart.



AND THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL DID WHAT WAS EVIL IN THE
SIGHT OF THE LORD AND SERVED THE BAALS. AND THEY
ABANDONED THE LORD, THE GOD OF THEIR FATHERS, WHO
HAD BROUGHT THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT. THEY
WENT AFTER OTHER GODS, FROM AMONG THE GODS OF THE
PEOPLES WHO WERE AROUND THEM, AND BOWED DOWN TO
THEM. AND THEY PROVOKED THE LORD TO ANGER.

JUDGES 2:11-12



A GOD OF COMPASSION

Monday, December 5 | Judges 2:1–23 | Wayne Splawn

In many respects, Judges is a sad book. All throughout the book, we read of the many ways God's people continually rebel against the Lord, choosing to worship the false gods of the people around them rather than offering their worship to God alone. The people eventually endure God's righteous judgment because of their repeated disobedience. However, judgment isn't God's only response to their sin. Instead, in Judges 2:18, we read that the Lord is moved with pity for His people and raises up judges to deliver them from the hand of their oppressors. The cycle of sin, punishment, deliverance, and relapse into sin repeats throughout the book of Judges. The judges lead the people to a place of greater faithfulness for a time, but the people eventually return to their sinful ways.

During the season of Advent, we are reminded of the way in which the Lord showed pity

and compassion to us by sending Jesus Christ, our righteous ruler, to deliver us from the punishment we deserve for our sins. Just as the Lord was moved to pity during the times of the judges and sent leaders to deliver His people, so the Lord was moved to pity by our rebellion and sin and sent His Son to deliver us.

Unfortunately, we often follow the pattern of the people we find in the book of Judges. Rather than faithfully following Christ, we often choose to go our own way. During the season of Advent, spend some time in reflection and repentance. Examine your heart and ask God to reveal to you ways that you have failed to listen to and obediently follow Jesus Christ. Praise God that He has seen our sad condition and shown us compassion by sending Christ to deliver us from our oppression to sin so that we might walk in the freedom that comes from giving ourselves fully to His plan and purposes in our lives.



BUT THE PEOPLE REFUSED TO OBEY
THE VOICE OF SAMUEL. AND THEY SAID,
“NO! BUT THERE SHALL BE A KING OVER
US, THAT WE ALSO MAY BE LIKE ALL THE
NATIONS, AND THAT OUR KING MAY JUDGE
US AND GO OUT BEFORE US AND FIGHT OUR
BATTLES.”

1 SAMUEL 8:19-20

A PEOPLE HOLY AND SET APART

Tuesday, December 6 | 1 Samuel 8:1–22 | Wayne Splawn

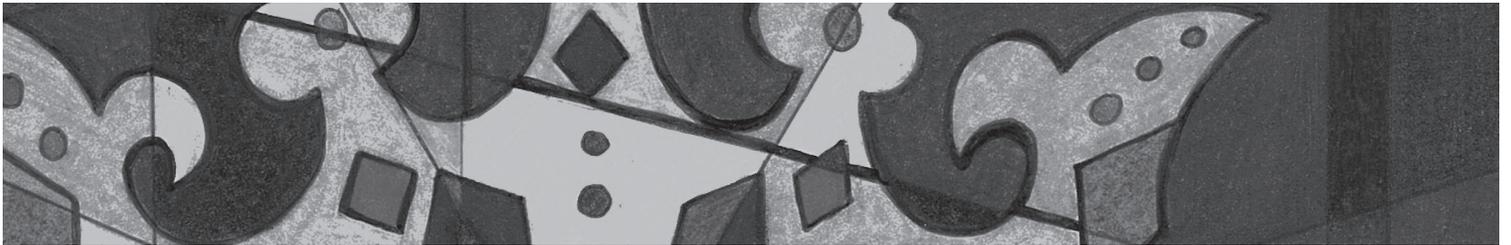
One theme we find recurring throughout the Old Testament is the Israelites' tendency to be like the peoples around them rather than fulfilling their calling to be a people who are holy and set apart for the Lord. In 1 Samuel 8, the Israelites' desire to be like the nations around them manifests itself in their desire to have a king. The Lord tells Samuel that the people's desire for a king is ultimately a rejection of His lordship in their lives.

Samuel warns the people that the king they are requesting will not bring the freedom and security they desire. Instead, the king will require them to serve in his army and give a tenth of all they own in order to support the establishment of the kingdom. However, the people are not dissuaded by Samuel's warning. They persist in their demand for a king, and the Lord grants their request.

Like the Israelites, we are often tempted to conform our lives to the cultural norms of others around us. We may not state it explicitly, but there is sometimes a desire in our hearts to be like others who are not followers of Christ. But, God has called us to be different. One of the ways we fulfill our calling to be God's holy people is by reflecting on the character of King Jesus. Rather than ruling over us with an iron fist, Jesus humbled Himself by taking on flesh and being obedient to God the Father's plans and purposes, even to the point of willingly laying down His life on the cross for our salvation (Philippians 2:4–11). During this season of Advent, take the time to reflect on the character of Jesus, our servant King. Ask God to give you a growing love for Christ and to empower you by His Holy Spirit to conform your life to the norms of the kingdom of God rather than the norms of our culture.

WHEN YOUR DAYS ARE FULFILLED AND YOU LIE DOWN WITH YOUR FATHERS,
I WILL RAISE UP YOUR OFFSPRING AFTER YOU, WHO SHALL COME FROM YOUR
BODY, AND I WILL ESTABLISH HIS KINGDOM. HE SHALL BUILD A HOUSE FOR
MY NAME, AND I WILL ESTABLISH THE THRONE OF HIS KINGDOM FOREVER.

2 SAMUEL 7:12-13



A GIFT WE COULD NEVER REPAY

Wednesday, December 7 | 2 Samuel 7:1–17 | Wayne Splawn

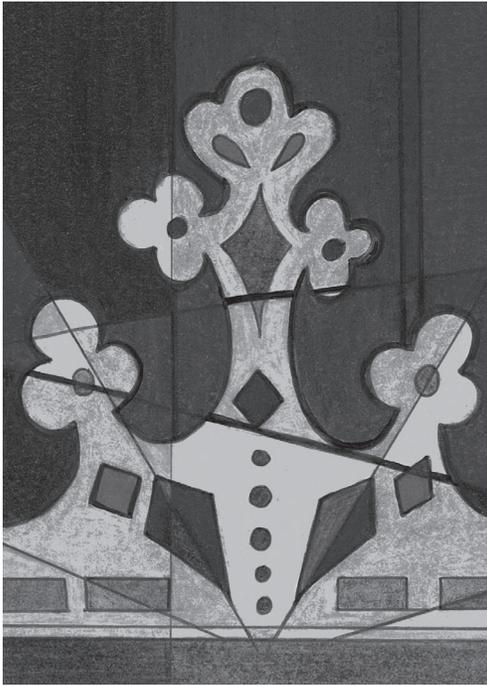
Gift-giving is one of the signature characteristics of most of our Christmas celebrations. In fact, I would venture to guess that you will spend much of the season of Advent making your list and checking it twice in order to ensure you get just the right gifts for your family and friends.

In 2 Samuel 7:1–17, we read of a time in the life of King David in which David decided that he needed to give a gift to the Lord. David dwelled in a nice house while the ark of God dwelled in a tent. David thought it only right to build an impressive structure to house the ark of God.

However, David soon discovered the Lord did not share David's sentiment. Yes, a Temple would one day be built for the Lord, but not by David. As Dale Ralph Davis notes in his commentary on 2 Samuel, the Lord is the one who will be recognized as the gracious gift giver in this passage of Scripture (Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel*). God establishes an

eternal covenant with David that will result in one of David's descendants ruling over God's people forever. The eternal covenant God makes with David in this passage of Scripture is an act of God's grace that is so extravagant that David could never repay the Lord. We have the luxury of knowing that this Davidic covenant was finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the righteous ruler whose kingdom will know no end.

Many of us are tempted to follow David's example and offer a gift to the Lord that adequately expresses our gratitude for all we have received in Jesus. In many respects, this is surely a godly desire, and we would do well to offer ourselves fully to God in response to all that we have been given. But during this season of Advent, let's not miss out on the truth that there is nothing we could ever do that would merit the gift we have received in Jesus Christ. Before you consider all that you might do for God, stand in awe of all that God has so graciously done for you.



BUT THEY WOULD NOT LISTEN, BUT WERE STUBBORN, AS THEIR FATHERS HAD BEEN, WHO DID NOT BELIEVE IN THE LORD THEIR GOD. THEY DESPISED HIS STATUTES AND HIS COVENANT THAT HE MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS AND THE WARNINGS THAT HE GAVE THEM. THEY WENT AFTER FALSE IDOLS AND BECAME FALSE, AND THEY FOLLOWED THE NATIONS THAT WERE AROUND THEM, CONCERNING WHOM THE LORD HAD COMMANDED THEM THAT THEY SHOULD NOT DO LIKE THEM.

2 KINGS 17:14-15

FINALLY HOME

Thursday, December 8 | 2 Kings 17:1–23 | Wayne Splawn

In 1943, Bing Crosby recorded the well-loved Christmas song “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” The song has remained a favorite of many over the years, thanks in large part to the way in which the song captures the importance of place in the human experience. Many of us will celebrate Christmas no matter where we find ourselves on December 25, but we long to be with a particular group of people in a particular place on this important day.

Here in 2 Kings 17:1–23, we read of the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. Due to their repeated sinful behavior and rejection of the Lord, God expels them from the Promised Land and exiles them in Assyria. They are kicked out of the home that signified God’s protection, provision, and blessing in their lives.

Why did God send them into exile? The writer of 2 Kings 17 indicates that they were being punished because of the way they had rejected the Lord and His ways for many years, choosing instead to worship the false gods and adopt the cultural values of the pagan peoples around them. Where did the people learn this sinful behavior? They were surely to blame for their own sinful choices, but idolatry was modeled for them

by most every king that had risen to power in Israel (2 Kings 17:7–8). The people had hoped a human king would lead them to flourish in the land, but the kings modeled a way of life that would ultimately result in their expulsion from the land.

Our longing to be home at Christmas points to a deeper longing we all have to be at home with the Lord. All of the comforts of this world will eventually fade away. Our possessions will break or become obsolete over time. Our family and friends will one day pass away. Through death and decay, we will all come face-to-face with the truth that here we have no abiding home, but are seeking a city that is to come (Hebrews 13:13–14). In a sense, we are all in exile, longing for a land we have not yet known. However, we have reason to be hopeful during Advent, because it is during this season of the year that we celebrate the birth of the King who has come to lead us into our eternal home. The same Jesus who came into our world that first Christmas morning to lay down His life for our sins will one day return to earth and make His dwelling place with men. And on that day, you and I will truly be at home for the first time in our lives.



THE LORD, THE GOD OF THEIR
FATHERS, SENT PERSISTENTLY TO THEM BY HIS
MESSENGERS, BECAUSE HE HAD COMPASSION
ON HIS PEOPLE AND ON HIS DWELLING PLACE.
BUT THEY KEPT MOCKING THE MESSENGERS OF
GOD, DESPISING HIS WORDS AND SCOFFING
AT HIS PROPHETS, UNTIL THE WRATH OF THE
LORD ROSE AGAINST HIS PEOPLE, UNTIL
THERE WAS NO REMEDY.

2 CHRONICLES 36:15-16

LISTEN CLOSELY

Friday, December 9 | 2 Chronicles 36:1–21 | Wayne Splawn

A compassionate, loving parent usually gives his or her children multiple warnings before punishing them for something they are doing wrong. However, such warnings are not always as effective as a parent would hope. Rather than heeding the words of warning they have received, children often persist in their bad behavior until their parents are forced to carry out the punishment they had been warning would come.

Yesterday, we read a passage of Scripture detailing the events that led to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. In today's passage, we read of the fall and exile of the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah had a few good kings, but the overwhelming majority of them rejected the Lord's will and ultimately led the people to their demise. The people of Judah should not have been surprised by the punishment they were receiving at the hands of the Babylonians. Just as a good parent provides warnings along the way, so the Lord repeatedly reminded the kings and people of Judah of the judgement they would receive if they failed to repent of their sins and return to Him with their whole hearts (2 Chronicles 36:15–16). The people of Judah failed to heed the warning messages to their own peril.

Just as God spoke to His people in the Old Testament, so our God continues to speak to us today. In Hebrews 1:1–2, the author of Hebrews writes, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” And throughout Hebrews, the writer pleads with his audience to listen closely to all that God has said through the person and work of Jesus and to respond in faith.

Christmas is a celebration of the word that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. During this season of the year, our tendency is to focus exclusively on the messages of love, hope, and peace that we receive from the Lord in the gift of Jesus. However, the message we receive in Jesus Christ is also a word warning us of the judgment that will come at Jesus' second coming, and we must take seriously our need to repent and respond to God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus entered the world that first Christmas as a baby in the manger, but He will return the second time as our righteous ruler, the One to whom every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. Lean in and listen closely to all that God is saying to us through Jesus, and do not despise this most precious word.



SONGS *of* WAITING

Did you know that the book of Psalms was a songbook for the Israelites? Many of these songs were used in worship in the Temple, for festivals or holy days, and for corporate or private prayer. But they aren't all songs of joy. Over one-third of the Psalms are lament psalms—songs crying out to God for forgiveness or help. Many of these Psalms echo the heart's cry for waiting as the Israelites waited for God to deliver them. We, too, can sing these songs of waiting, knowing that God hears the cries of our hearts and knows our need for Him.



BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON,
THERE WE SAT DOWN AND WEPT,
WHEN WE REMEMBERED ZION.

PSALM 137:1



HONEST FEELINGS AND GOD'S HELP

Monday, December 12 | Psalm 137 | Kely Hatley

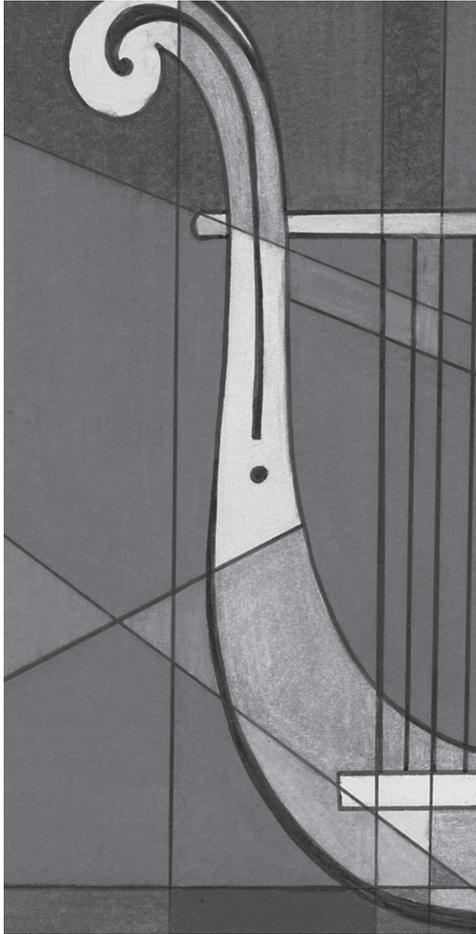
Today's reading is a hard one for us. Most often, we look at Psalms as expressions of praise and joy before the Lord. Yet, this psalm has no such joy in it. Rather, the reader is surrounded by the anguished, heartbroken, honest feelings of the psalmist.

When thinking and praying about what to write as a devotional for this psalm, the only thing that continued to come to my mind was that this psalm expresses in real and raw descriptions exactly what the psalmist feels inside. In no-holds-barred language, we get insight into what the psalmist feels regarding the Jewish captivity in Babylon. It was real. It was harsh. It was . . . honest.

How does this relate to us in the season of Advent today? As you read this, you could turn on your radio right now and be bombarded with songs of happiness. "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" or "Feliz Navidad" or "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays" or even "Joy to the World!" The reality for us is that no one is completely happy all the time. Yet, we

are often chided if we let people see our true feelings of hurt, despair, or dejectedness. Instead, we often put on "faces" of warm politeness, thus not allowing people to see the hurt we feel inside.

Advent is a time of telling the good news of our Savior's birth. The song of the angels was, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill to all." Our good news for Advent today is that we celebrate Jesus Christ, who came to this world to save us from our sins. This same Jesus whom we celebrate during the season is also the same Jesus who is not afraid of our honesty. Jesus knows our hearts and weaknesses, and we can be honest with Him. We may be feeling sadness or anger during this season. God isn't afraid of that. Bring that sadness or anger to Him and pray for the Lord to work in your life to transform your harsh emotions into peace and joy. As we wait for our celebration of the birth of Christ, know that He can and will do miraculous transforming works in our hearts if we surrender our honest feelings to Him.



SING PRAISES TO THE LORD,
O YOU HIS SAINTS,
AND GIVE THANKS TO HIS HOLY NAME.
FOR HIS ANGER IS BUT FOR A MOMENT,
AND HIS FAVOR IS FOR A LIFETIME.
WEeping MAY TARRY FOR THE NIGHT,
BUT JOY COMES WITH THE MORNING.

PSALM 30:4-5

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

Tuesday, December 13 | Psalm 30 | Kely Hatley

Psalm 30 is a beautiful song of thanks and deliverance penned by David. While it is designated for the “dedication of the temple,” we know that the temple referred to must have been the second temple, or perhaps for its rededication during the Maccabean era. Solomon’s great Temple had not yet been constructed at the time this psalm was written.

Most commentaries consulted agree that David wrote this psalm in response to God’s healing him from a sickness. Verses 1–3 acknowledge that God has healed and delivered David and saved him from the pit or Sheol (referring to the grave or the abode of the dead). Following this praise, David invites us all to join in praise to the Lord because God’s favor lasts for a lifetime—much longer than His brief moments of anger.

No sooner has David expressed his praise to the Lord for His favor toward him, than he changes the tide of the psalm, thereby expressing dismay for when he felt abandoned by God, signified by “when You hid Your face . . .” Verses 7–9 express the depth of emotion David felt when his good times turned to bad times. In verse 10, we see David turn toward God, the source of his strength, asking for God to

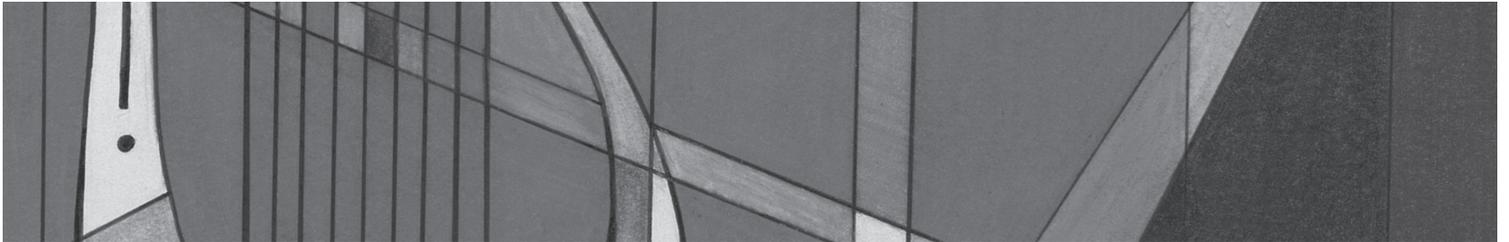
hear his cries. In the final verses (Psalm 30:11–12), we get to see that God did hear David, and that David’s response is to continually pour forth thanks to the Lord as long as he lives.

This psalm is poignant for us during Advent as we “wait” for our Savior. Our waiting is not just for the baby Jesus, but for the second coming of our Lord. Titus 2:11–13 says, “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.” In today’s world, it is easy to feel like David in that we could seemingly make a good case for saying that God has hidden His face from us. However, we know that when Jesus returns, He will defeat Satan and will establish His reign. In that day, we will be able to echo the words of David, saying, “You turned my wailing into dancing.” And we will give thanks to the Lord forever.

OH, GUARD MY SOUL, AND DELIVER ME!
LET ME NOT BE PUT TO SHAME, FOR I TAKE REFUGE IN YOU.
MAY INTEGRITY AND UPRIGHTNESS PRESERVE ME,
FOR I WAIT FOR YOU.

REDEEM ISRAEL, O GOD,
OUT OF ALL HIS TROUBLES.

PSALM 25:20-22



ENJOY THE RIDE

Wednesday, December 14 | Psalm 25 | Mary Splawn

I have a lead foot when it comes to driving. But recently, I have been convicted that speeding is a sin because of conversations with my son. Now, I pay attention to the speed limits and try to obey them. As you can imagine, this has really required a change in my mindset. Instead of trying to get somewhere as quickly as I can, I make a conscious effort to slow down and enjoy the ride.

I think that my old driving philosophy pours over into my relationship with God. I know that the Lord calls us to slow down and to wait on Him in prayer, allowing space and quiet for Him to speak. And yet, I prefer to speed on through or take the fast lane around my time with God, even though Scripture reminds me that prayer and meditation on God's truths are most needed in every season of life. We see thoughtful prayer modeled clearly in Psalm 25. In this psalm, David is in an incredibly stressful

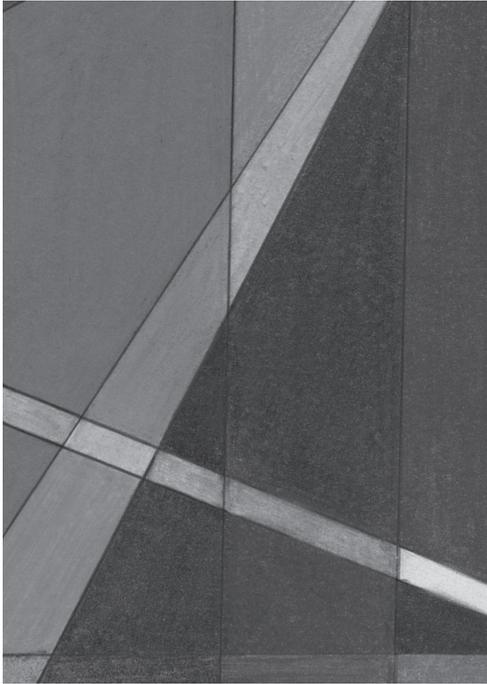
situation (verses 16–18). Still, he slows down

- to proclaim his trust in God (verses 1–2),
- to recall his need for God's guidance (verses 4–5),
- and to recount God's great love and mercy in forgiveness (verses 7–11).

David also

- brings petitions to God concerning things that trouble him (verses 16–20)
- and asks the Lord to help him live with integrity while he waits on God to act (verse 21).

Use Psalm 25 as a pattern for your time in prayer today. Go back to the bullet points in the last two paragraphs and pray accordingly. In this Advent season where everything is so fast-paced, let's make a conscious effort to slow down and enjoy time with God. Draw near to the One who, in His compassion and great love, offers freedom from sin through Christ our Lord.



FOR THEIR SAKE HE
REMEMBERED HIS COVENANT,
AND RELENDED ACCORDING TO THE
ABUNDANCE OF HIS STEADFAST LOVE.

PSALM 106:45

REMEMBER WHILE YOU WAIT

Thursday, December 15 | Psalm 106 | Wayne Splawn

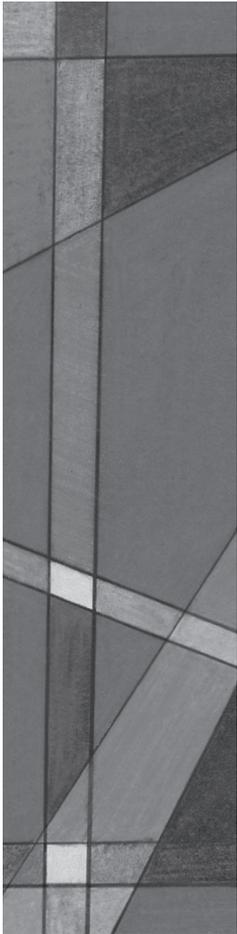
I admit that I often have a hard time remembering things. This is one reason I find the calendar on my smartphone so helpful. If I put an upcoming appointment on my calendar and set a reminder, then chances are I will not let it slip past me. However, if it is not on my calendar, there is a good chance that I will miss an important meeting or appointment.

Forgetting an important meeting is something that will cause you embarrassment in the short term, but will usually not carry consequences that last a lifetime. But there are other things in life you and I simply cannot afford to forget. One of those things is the mighty ways we have seen God at work in our lives in the past. When we forget God's faithfulness to us in the past, we often fail to seek after the Lord with all of our hearts in the present while we wait for Him to act again in the future.

Here in Psalm 106, the psalmist writes about some of the times God's people forgot the ways God

had saved them and shown Himself faithful to them (Psalm 106:7, 13). When they failed to remember the ways God had shown them His steadfast love over the years, they engaged in sinful behavior, choosing to put their trust in idols rather than the living God (Psalm 106:20). One of the most beautiful truths in this psalm is that even though the people forgot God, He never forgot them. Instead, the psalmist writes that God remembered the covenant He made with His people and continued to love them with a steadfast love (Psalm 106:45).

Most of us will go through seasons in life when we struggle to sense God's presence. While we wait for God in such seasons, we must do what people of faith have had to do in every generation—namely, draw on our experiences of God's faithfulness in the past to assure us of His faithfulness in the present. And, during this busy Advent season, let us not forget to schedule time on our calendars to remember the loving kindness of God our Savior!



O ISRAEL, HOPE IN THE LORD!
FOR WITH THE LORD THERE IS STEADFAST LOVE,
AND WITH HIM IS PLENTIFUL REDEMPTION.
AND HE WILL REDEEM ISRAEL
FROM ALL HIS INIQUITIES.

PSALM 130:7-8

OUR RESCUER

Friday, December 16 | Psalm 130 | Mary Splawn

Several years ago, I got stuck in a walk-in freezer. I forgot to engage the safety latch, and when the door closed behind me, the suction caused the door to seal tightly. Even though the door wasn't locked, I couldn't get out. I tried to push and kick the door open, but I couldn't get it to budge. Finally, after many failed attempts to force my way out, I did the only thing I had left to do—cry out and wait!

This is right where we find the psalmist in this song. He is in a desperate situation and has no other recourse than to cry out to the Lord.

Like the psalmist, I cried out in the freezer that day for help and began to bang on the door. I was desperate for someone to help me. Like the watchmen of verse 6, I was waiting not for morning, but for someone to help me.

After what seemed like an hour but was probably 15 minutes, someone heard my cry and came to my rescue. When he opened the door, I screamed,

“You saved me!” I knew in that instant that my rescuer had done something for me that I couldn't do for myself. The writer of Psalm 130 understands this type of salvation! He knows that he can't fix or cover his wrongs. Only God can free him, forgive him, and redeem his situation.

I love this psalm because of the hope it gives me. I often grapple with the depth of my sin, and I am comforted by the truth of God's mercy revealed in these verses. Like the author, I need the reminder that God doesn't keep a record like the world does. While I might have to pay for my mistakes on earth, by His mercy and justice, God can look over my sins because He Himself has paid the penalty.

The writer of the psalm knows that his only hope is in God's Word—His Word of forgiveness and rescue. Even today, our only hope is the same! We put our trust in God's promises and the true “Word [who] became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).



WAITING *for* PEACE

Most of the Old Testament prophets highlight a dark time in Israel's history. Despite receiving the land they were promised, the Israelites find themselves exiled because of their idolatry under the leadership of such unrighteous rulers. Times are desperate; God's people have been torn away from their homes and their lifestyles of worship and taken into foreign lands to live under their enemies' oppression. But the prophets point to a hope that is coming in the midst of the grief: that God has not abandoned His people. Even as they wait for peace, they are reminded that He will continue to keep His covenant with them. Despite their unfaithfulness, He remains faithful. This is the shining beacon of hope in the midst of the darkness of idolatry—that God's love goes deeper than sin. God will bring peace to their land again, but this peace will not just be a political peace for only Israel; He will bring peace to all mankind, because He will make peace between man and God through Jesus' atoning work on the cross.



THE PEOPLE WHO WALKED IN DARKNESS
HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT;
THOSE WHO DWELT IN A LAND OF DEEP DARKNESS,
ON THEM HAS LIGHT SHONE.

ISAIAH 9:2



LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

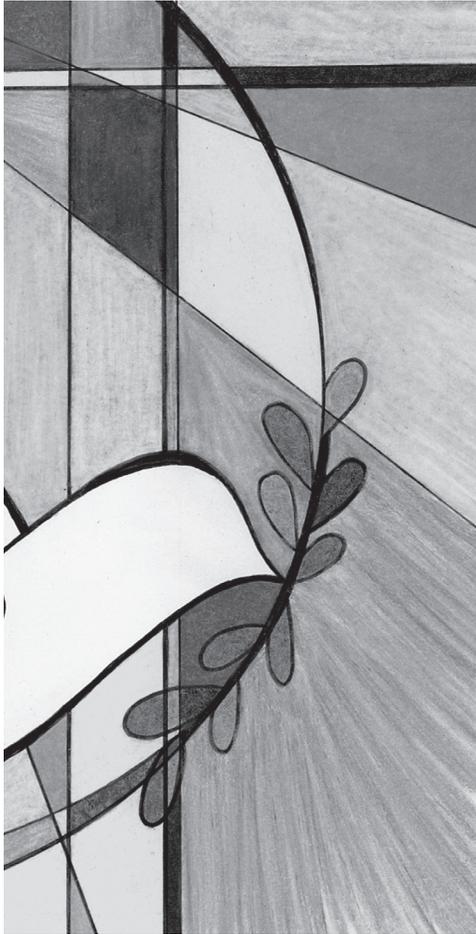
Monday, December 19 | Isaiah 9:1–7 | Amy Jackson

Sometimes, to appreciate light, we have to sit in darkness. This is true for us as we walk through the prophets. The light of Isaiah 9 shines brilliantly against the darkness in the book—the prophecies that Israel and Judah would be exiled from their land and taken from their homes by the strong arms of their enemies. And, Isaiah makes it clear that Israel and Judah aren't innocent either; Assyria and Babylon are an instrument in God's hands to bring about His punishment on His people. The Israelites repeatedly break the covenant, worshiping idols rather than the God who brought them out of Egypt, gave them the Promised Land, and called them His “treasured possession among all peoples” (Exodus 19:5).

So, we sit in the darkness of judgment and gloom as enemies wage war on the Promised Land and strip God's people of all that they hold dear—their land, their homes, their communities, and even their cultural identity. Some are enslaved, taken to serve in a land foreign to them. Others are killed.

But in the midst of the despair and anguish, in the midst of walking in deep darkness, Isaiah promises that light will break through.

Isaiah describes this light breaking through as the promise of a new King with a new empire of peace. But this won't just be an era of peaceful rule, free from war; this King will end all war (Isaiah 9:4). There won't be a need for a peaceful transfer of power, because this King will rule forever. He will fulfill God's promise to David that his kingdom would be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16; Isaiah 9:7). But, this peace isn't just political peace. Isaiah points forward to an all-encompassing, comprehensive, eternal peace in every sense of the word—peace between nations and peace between individuals. But most importantly, this King will bring peace between God and His people. God's people sit in the darkness, in judgment for idolatry. But, Isaiah points forward to the light of a new day for God's people when there will be “peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”



BUT YOU, O BETHLEHEM EPHRATHAH,
WHO ARE TOO LITTLE TO BE AMONG THE
CLANS OF JUDAH, FROM YOU SHALL COME
FORTH FOR ME ONE WHO IS TO BE RULER IN
ISRAEL, WHOSE COMING FORTH IS FROM OF
OLD, FROM ANCIENT DAYS.

MICAH 5:2

A MIGHTY RULER FROM A SMALL TOWN

Tuesday, December 20 | Micah 5:1–5 | Amy Jackson

I love paradoxes, which are statements seeming to say two contradictory things that are simultaneously true (like “bittersweet”). Micah prophesies about the coming destruction in store for Israel and Judah because of their sin. He even describes the torment as an “incurable wound” (Micah 1:9). Yet in the midst of prophecies about exile, we hear whispers of hope. One theme of Scripture is that God indeed judges His people, but He also gives grace. He judges for the purpose of restoration, to bring a remnant back to Himself.

This is the good news of Micah 5, but it’s not given in quite the way we might expect. Micah declares a Deliverer will come from Bethlehem. Now, when we read the rest of the story, we know Jesus was born in Bethlehem—we even sing about Bethlehem in Christmas carols! But the Israelites probably called Micah crazy. Bethlehem was too small to even be named among Judah’s towns in Judges (see Micah 5:2). Yet we are reminded that God works in unexpected

ways—even in paradoxes. This same God brought life to Abraham’s lineage through elderly Sarah’s barren womb. He promised an eternal kingship to David—a small, insignificant shepherd boy. And the paradox of paradoxes is that we find salvation through a King who makes Himself low! The God of the universe put on flesh and entered into the world in the most humbling of ways: as a baby, born in a stable in a tiny town to poor parents, to die a criminal’s death for sin.

But this God isn’t weak. Yes, He empties Himself and puts on flesh, but He is also recognized as a sovereign, ancient, and eternal ruler who will gather His people from exile. He even calls the Gentiles to Himself. He rules and shepherds His people with authority and care. When He comes again, He will come to rule. His people will live in peace, because He will be their peace. This is the best kind of news and the best kind of paradox, because it is a paradox that changes everything—for the Israelites and also for us Gentiles grafted into God’s family.

THUS SAYS THE LORD: "A VOICE IS HEARD IN RAMAH, LAMENTATION AND BITTER WEEPING. RACHEL IS WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; SHE REFUSES TO BE COMFORTED FOR HER CHILDREN, BECAUSE THEY ARE NO MORE. THUS SAYS THE LORD: KEEP YOUR VOICE FROM WEEPING, AND YOUR EYES FROM TEARS, FOR THERE IS A REWARD FOR YOUR WORK, DECLARES THE LORD, AND THEY SHALL COME BACK FROM THE LAND OF THE ENEMY."

JEREMIAH 31:15-16



WE WILL WEEP NO MORE

Wednesday, December 21 | Jeremiah 31:1–26 | Amy Jackson

The image of Rachel bitterly lamenting over her children is moving. Rachel was Jacob's wife and mother to Joseph and Benjamin (ancestors of the northern tribes). While this weeping points back to her death in childbirth (Genesis 35:16–19), Jeremiah uses the image to remind us of Israel's anguish in exile. Rachel weeps because her children have been exiled by Assyria. And during Jeremiah's time, Ramah—a city north of Jerusalem—was home to a refugee camp for Judah's prisoners, a place where Judah's citizens would be chained together to march to Babylon.

The good news is that this suffering is temporary. God declares that His people will be restored; they will return to Him in repentance, and He will show mercy on them. God tells Rachel she can rejoice because He is doing a new work, even though she cannot see it. He tells Rachel that she can trust Him, not because she knows His plan, but because she knows His character.

I love that we see God's character as He speaks of His people. He loves His dear and darling children

(Jeremiah 31:20) with “an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3); even in exile, they will experience His grace (Jeremiah 31:1). This covenant love is a never-ending love, defined not as a promise, but as a fact. It is who God is and what He promises for His people, even when they fail to keep His covenant. He will ransom them and bring them back to Himself, and they will “sing aloud with gladness” (Jeremiah 31:7).

The historical fulfillment of this passage comes when God's people are finally released from exile. Yet we also sometimes find ourselves as Rachel, weeping over the world's suffering. Sometimes, we weep over suffering directly brought on by sin, and sometimes, we weep because we realize that everything in the world is broken because of sin. Jeremiah himself wakes up from this vision still in prison, where he will spend the rest of his days. But he is comforted that this is not the end of the story. God comes to comfort the Rachels of this world, promising that, in Jesus, He will give us everlasting comfort, because one day, all suffering will end, and He will make all things right.



“FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL
MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER
THOSE DAYS,” DECLARES THE LORD: “I WILL
PUT MY LAW WITHIN THEM, AND I WILL
WRITE IT ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE
THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.”

JEREMIAH 31:33

THE PROMISE OF A NEW COVENANT

Thursday, December 22 | Jeremiah 31:27–40 | Amy Jackson

I think it's easy for us to read these prophetic passages and conclude that the Israelites' problem was exile. But it wasn't. In reality, their problem was sin. Looking back on Israelite history, we see the issue of disobedience over and over again. The Israelites receive the law at Sinai, and soon after, find themselves fashioning a cow idol out of their jewelry and worshiping it as "the gods who brought them out of Egypt." They end up at the Promised Land, doubt God, and are forced to wander in the wilderness. Eventually they get to Canaan, but the allure of foreign worship gets the best of them, and led by unrighteous kings and false prophets, they eventually find themselves enslaved by foreign nations sent by God to punish them. Yes, at the end of the day, their sin is the issue—and it's our issue, too.

But Jeremiah says one day, everything will be different; a new day is coming when God will make a new covenant with His people. This is the only time that a "new covenant" is specifically mentioned in the Old Testament. Jeremiah connects this

covenant with the covenant made at Sinai—with some differences. Instead of the law being written on stones, it will be written on hearts. Circumcision will not be merely a physical act, but a spiritual reality: God's people will have circumcised hearts (Deuteronomy 30:6). No longer will priests or prophets intercede for them. God will be their God, and they will know Him directly.

This same new covenant is mentioned in the New Testament. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus tells His disciples that the bread and wine they drink symbolize the new covenant made in His blood. Jesus fulfills the expectations of Jeremiah 31. Through His death, Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God. God dwells in the saints through the work of the Holy Spirit and writes His law on the hearts of His children. You see, God doesn't solve the sin problem by telling us to stop sinning; He solves the problem by providing a once-and-for-all sacrifice for us through the cross, and He gives us new hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit.



BUT ZION SAID, "THE LORD HAS FORSAKEN ME;
MY LORD HAS FORGOTTEN ME." CAN A WOMAN FORGET HER
NURSING CHILD, THAT SHE SHOULD HAVE NO COMPASSION ON
THE SON OF HER WOMB? EVEN THESE MAY FORGET, YET I WILL
NOT FORGET YOU.

ISAIAH 49:14-15

THE GOD WHO NEVER FORGETS

Friday, December 23 | Isaiah 49:14–26 | Amy Jackson

Have you ever been forgotten? Granted, it's an inconvenience to sit in line for a while and realize that the receptionist has forgotten to call you back, but it's much more painful when someone you love forgets you in some way. In Isaiah 49, the Israelites despair that God has forgotten them. Zion cries out to the Lord in the midst of her exile and punishment, mourning that, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me" (Isaiah 49:14).

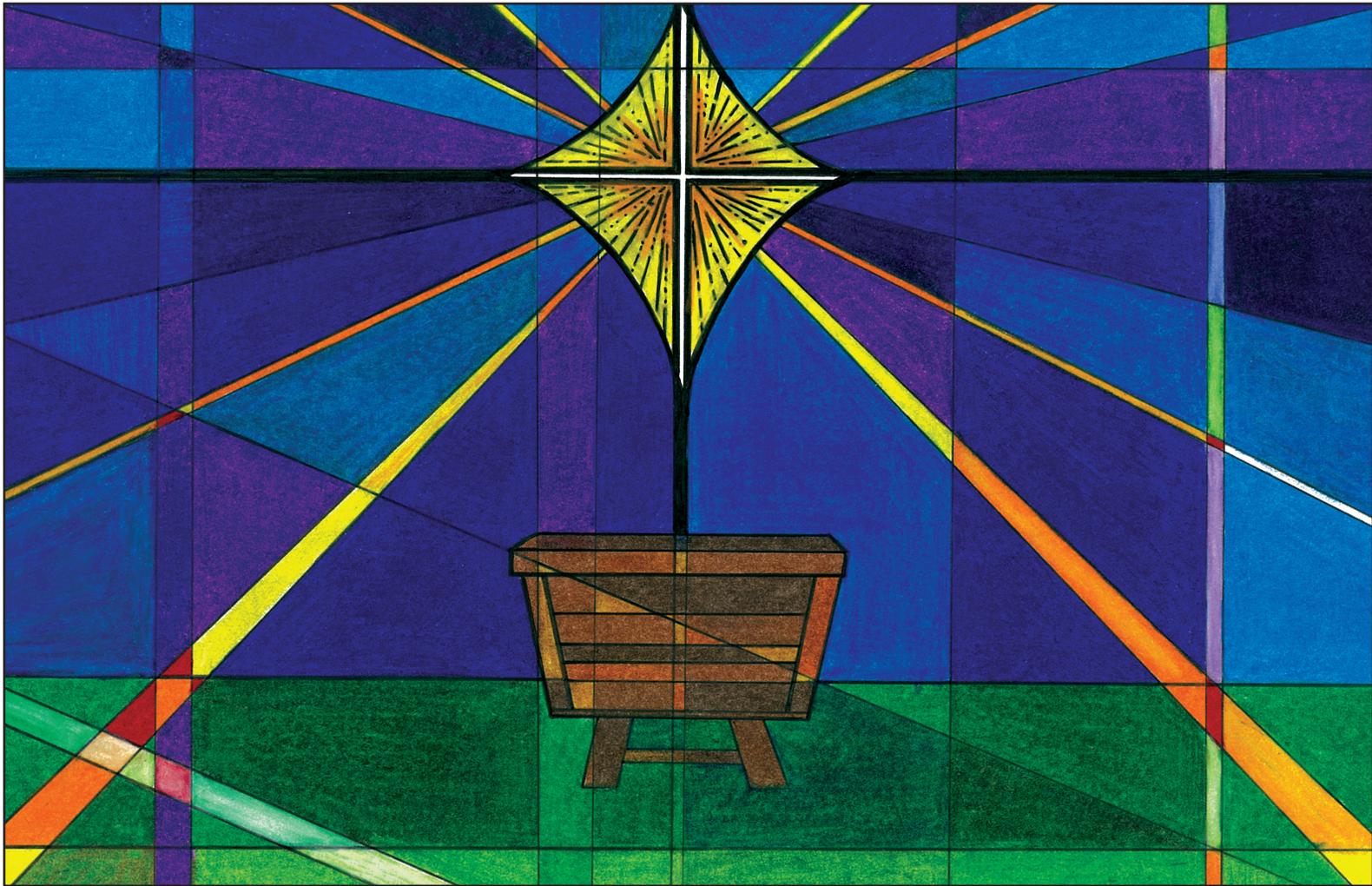
I can't wrap my mind around the pain the Israelites feel as they watch their enemies take over their towns, plunder their homes, and tear their families apart. Though they realize they have broken God's covenant and are facing just retribution for their sins, in the midst of the punishment, it seems as if God has also abandoned them.

God answers Zion by declaring that His love for His children goes deeper than the love mothers have for their nursing infants. Even if mothers might forget their children, God never forgets. In fact, He says their names are engraved on His hands, on the same hands

that placed each of the stars in the heavens and hold all things together.

The Lord imagines a future day when all of these promises in Isaiah 49 will come to pass, when the Servant's work (Isaiah 49:1–7) will be complete and Zion will pass from bereavement to joy as God's people gather in new Jerusalem. Grief will be no more; instead, Zion will exclaim, "I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these?" (Isaiah 49:21) as she looks out on a city filled with children from all the nations.

I don't know where you are today, but take heart that God doesn't forget His children. He isn't like an absentminded receptionist who forgets to respond to voicemails. He isn't the delinquent dad who forgets to pick up his kids for the weekend. Whatever pain or grief or loneliness you are facing, hold fast to the truth that God knows, that He doesn't ever forget His children, and that those who wait for Him will never be put to shame (Isaiah 49:23).



WAITING *for the* PROMISED CHILD

At last, we come to the week that we—and all of Israel—have been waiting for with anticipation. God breaks into human history, not coming as a conquering king on a white horse, but coming instead as a defenseless child, born in a stable to humble parents. In our readings this week, we'll meet several faithful saints who see with their own eyes the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel—for which they have been longing for many years. As you reflect on Christmas, treasure this truth in your heart, that those who wait for God are never disappointed. God has kept His promises to Abraham and to David through the birth of the Christ child. The incarnation is proof that God will do whatever it takes to bring His people back to Himself.



BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO HIM, “DO NOT BE AFRAID,
ZECHARIAH, FOR YOUR PRAYER HAS BEEN HEARD, AND
YOUR WIFE ELIZABETH WILL BEAR YOU A SON, AND YOU
SHALL CALL HIS NAME JOHN. AND YOU WILL HAVE JOY AND
GLADNESS, AND MANY WILL REJOICE AT HIS BIRTH.”

LUKE 1:13-14



A PROMISED CHILD

Monday, December 26 | Luke 1:1–25 | Hayden Walker

During the weeks of Advent, we saw that the people of Israel frequently had to wait. They waited for land, a king, freedom, and hope. Their waiting was met with political oppression by the Roman Empire, a puppet king, and a temple that was no match for Solomon's.

They were in the land, but under the rule of the Roman Empire. They had a king, but he was a puppet of the Empire, not a friend of God's people. Their place of worship had been rebuilt, but to inferior standards. Furthermore, the people waited in silence. It had been 400 years since the prophet Malachi had spoken. They must have felt abandoned, helpless, and hopeless.

In this context, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, a righteous couple for whom things haven't gone right. They are old, and Elizabeth is barren. This is a heartbreak in every era, but barrenness carries the additional weight of disgrace in their days. All natural means of conception have long passed for this couple.

It is into this silence, this perceived abandonment, that God speaks. It is time for a child. It certainly isn't Zechariah and Elizabeth's timing, but it is God's timing. He will bring joy, hope, and healing in a

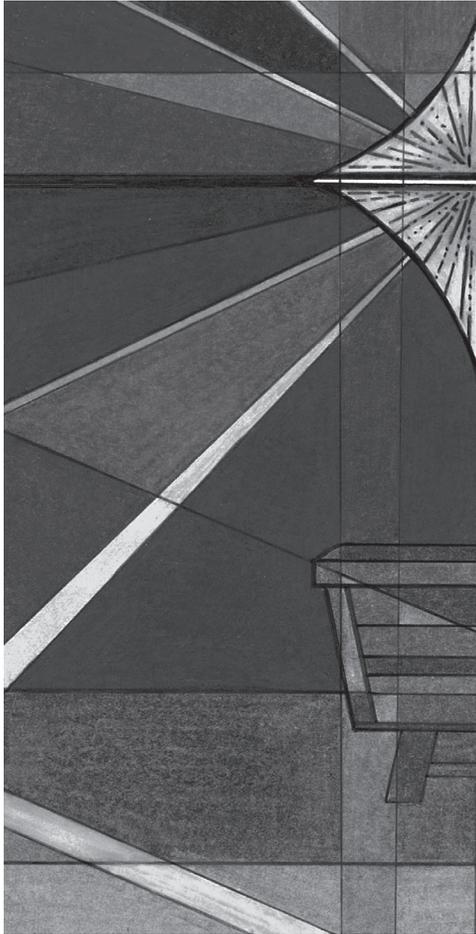
totally unexpected way. God will send a child. A gift, not a right. A miracle.

Their story serves as a microcosm of the people of Israel.

When the people are most broken, struck down by the weight of political oppression and spiritual silence, God speaks. When Israel is at the end of her rope with no natural means by which she might be saved, God will send the promised child.

This story is also our story. Maybe this year, you've come to the end of your rope. Maybe Christmas doesn't really seem much like Christmas to you. Things are different, and your heart is heavy. You may feel like old Zechariah, having waited for so long with no real hope. You may identify with the people of Israel who waited for hundreds of years with no answer.

It seems that delayed dreams and broken hearts are often the exact path that the Messiah uses to fulfill His plan. With all natural means extinguished, the promised child of Bethlehem becomes our only hope. He is the One who speaks into the barren places of our souls with life.



HE HAS HELPED HIS SERVANT ISRAEL,
IN REMEMBRANCE OF HIS MERCY,
AS HE SPOKE TO OUR FATHERS,
TO ABRAHAM AND TO HIS
OFFSPRING FOREVER.

LUKE 1:54-55

FAITH OVER FEAR

Tuesday, December 27 | Luke 1:26–56 | Hayden Walker

Yesterday, our passage highlighted one miraculous pregnancy. An old, barren Elizabeth conceived! Today's reading records an even more miraculous pregnancy—a teenage virgin conceived! If there ever was a brave, young, unwed mother, it was Mary.

In response to Gabriel's announcement, Mary could have reacted in fear—fear that Joseph might end their engagement, fear that her parents would reject her, fear that she might even be stoned to death. Instead of fear, Mary responds in faith. Her faith is clearly expressed in several ways: she trusts the word of God (Luke 1:38), she goes with haste to see Elizabeth (Luke 1:39), and she praises God with a hymn (Luke 1:46–55).

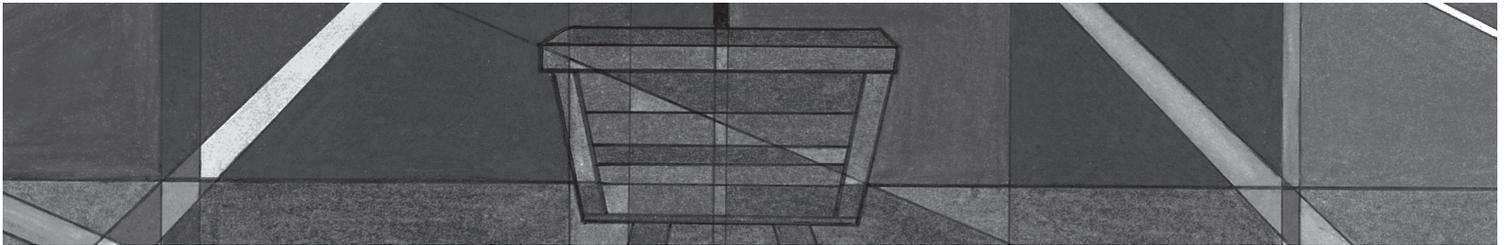
Mary believes the word of God is trustworthy

even when it is confusing. It doesn't make sense that she or Elizabeth could be pregnant. Moreover, it is perplexing that God would become man. Mary does not understand it all, but she trusts God.

Isn't that what we are all called to do? Our lives are confusing and chaotic. We don't understand why God allows many things to happen. Our confusion could lead us to fear an omnipotent God. However, we cannot separate His sovereignty from the Bethlehem manger. We do not serve a distant, angry deity. Our God came near. The Creator of heaven and earth wrapped Himself in flesh. The One who is outside of time was born into time for us and our salvation. It is this knowledge of God that empowers us to respond to any perplexing situation of life with faith instead of fear.

AND THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, "FEAR NOT, FOR BEHOLD, I BRING YOU
GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE."

LUKE 2:10



SPEAKING SHEPHERDS

Wednesday, December 28 | Luke 2:1–21 | Hayden Walker

As you read this familiar Christmas passage, what images come to your mind? In my mind, I can hear the recording of Dr. Nelson’s distinctive voice narrating our MBBC Living Nativity. Many of you have participated in these special productions. You may recall that as the cast of characters gathers together in the CLC gym, we pray and remind everyone to be very quiet during the show.

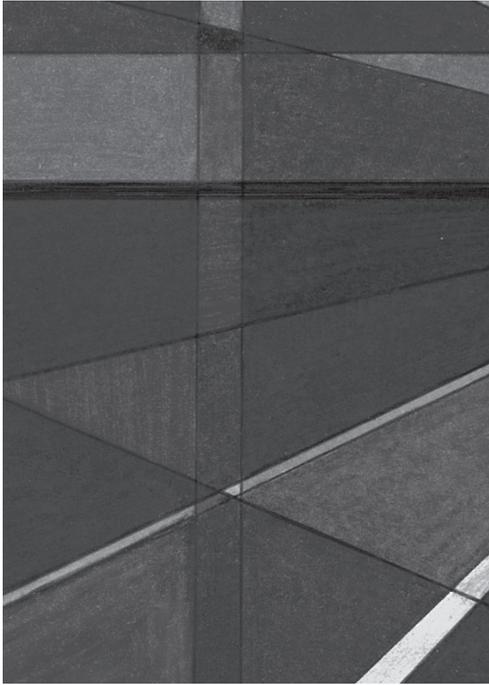
However, it seems there are always some shepherds who forget that rule. It usually happens whenever a sheep comes close or the smoke of the fire blows toward them. Their murmuring is met by hushed pleas for silence. We don’t like a disturbance!

The shepherds in the real Christmas story cause a bit of a stir themselves. They do not keep silent, but share what God has spoken to them

(Luke 2:17–18). Perhaps there are people who hear the shepherds speaking and think they have lost their minds. Maybe they tell the shepherds to hush, just as we do at the Living Nativity.

But these shepherds do not care if they sound crazy. They have seen and heard miraculous things, and they want to tell everyone. They go forth in praise after they see the Christ child (Luke 2:20).

This Christmas, I hope that you, like the shepherds, have experienced the presence of Jesus and the marvelous reassurance that He has come for all people (Luke 2:10). This news is so good that we cannot keep it to ourselves—we cannot stay silent! The brave shepherds show us how to speak this good news of great joy to the hurting world around us.



AND COMING UP AT THAT VERY HOUR SHE
BEGAN TO GIVE THANKS TO GOD AND TO
SPEAK OF HIM TO ALL WHO WERE WAITING
FOR THE REDEMPTION OF JERUSALEM.

LUKE 2:38

A DISCIPLINED FAITH

Thursday, December 29 | Luke 2:22–38 | Hayden Walker

A painting housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna has captured my heart for a decade. Rembrandt painted many famous masterpieces, but this oft forgotten portrait is my favorite. When I first saw this painting, I felt a deep connection with the woman represented. There was something in her eyes that was so real. They seemed to portray a glimmer of hope finally breaking in on decades of waiting.

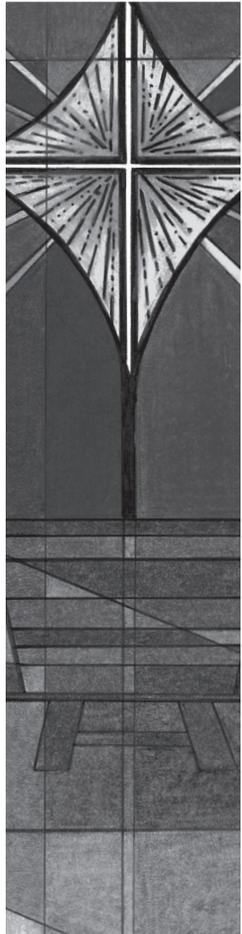
I searched my Bible for the prophetess Anna. I wanted to read the story of the woman with those patiently hopeful eyes. Anna's story is only three verses in Scripture: Luke 2:36–38. Anna was married when she was a young girl. After only seven years of marriage, her husband died. For over 60 years, Anna was alone.

Perhaps on the outside, things do not look great for Anna. Though seemingly forgotten, she

never gives up on hope. I believe this is because Anna spends the bulk of her time in worship, fasting, and prayer. Though outwardly wasting away, she is being renewed inwardly day by day. This is the kind of eternally-focused faith Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4:16.

The spiritual disciplines sustain Anna in spite of her circumstances. And when the unlikely Redeemer—a six-week-old baby—passes by, Anna is spiritually sensitive enough to recognize the Christ child. Her hopes are finally realized and she is able to thank God and share with others.

We will not be ready for the activity of God in our lives if we are not pursuing Him consistently. As the new year approaches, might you consider a steady implementation of the spiritual disciplines Anna practiced? When God shows up in unlikely ways, which He is certain to do, you don't want to miss Him.



IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD,
AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD,
AND THE WORD WAS GOD.

JOHN 1:1

PLAN A

Friday, December 30 | John 1:1–18 | Hayden Walker

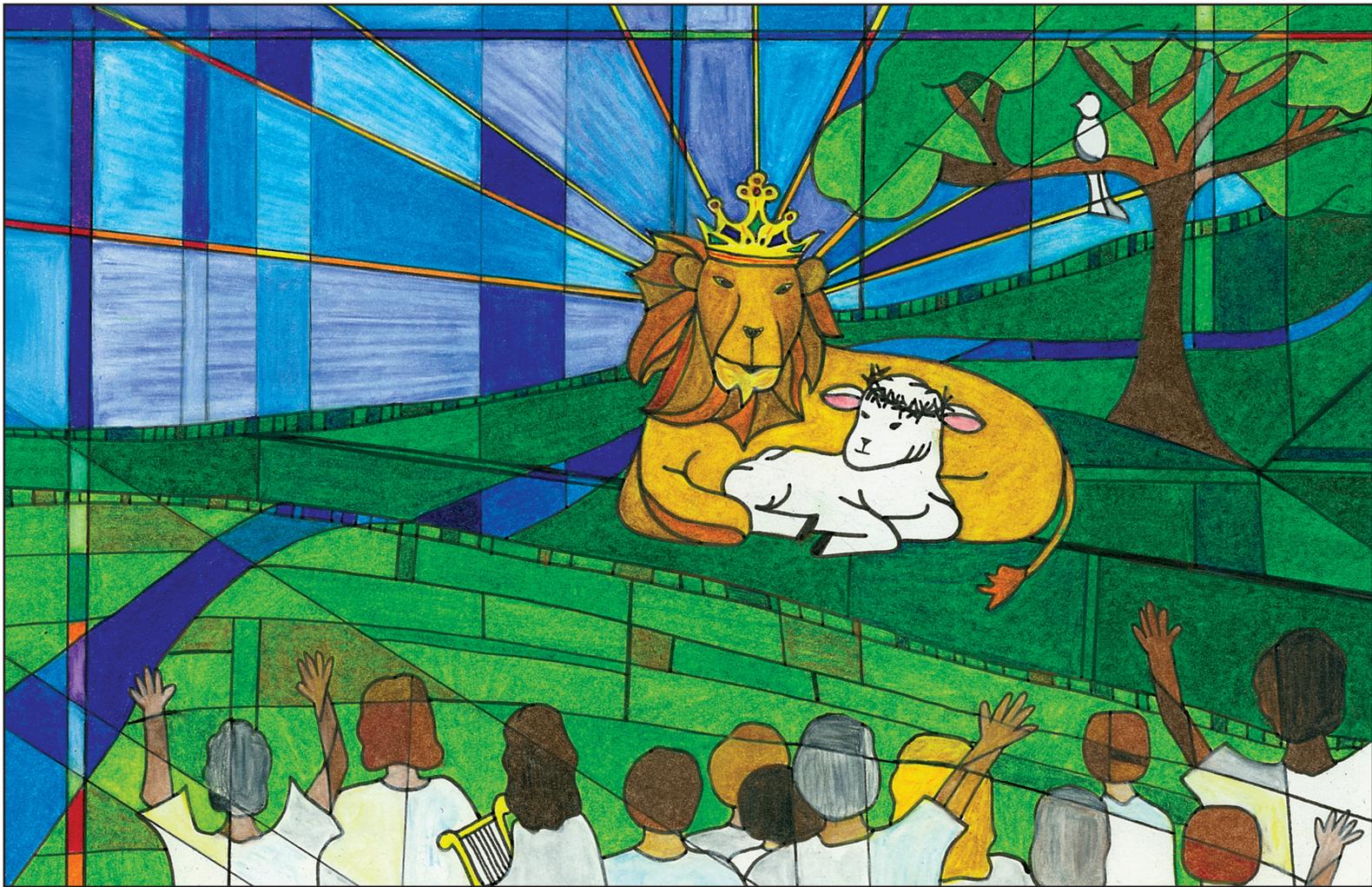
Our passage for today may not seem particularly “Christmasy” to you. However, I actually believe it is the most important Christmas passage you have read this week. That is because John develops for us a Christology that is robust and essential to our salvation. We need a few important details about the Bethlehem baby.

During this season, we like to see Jesus as the cutest, littlest member of our nativity sets. It would be easy to think that, as a last resort, God had to end up coming Himself to fix things.

John 1 corrects us. As you read this passage, remember that “the Word” is Jesus. Jesus was not created; it was through Him that all things were made (John 1:3)! He did not first come into being in Mary’s womb; He was in the beginning with God (John 1:2). The second person of the Trinity is eternally pre-existent.

The Word became flesh. The earth cannot contain God, the universe cannot keep Him, His big toe wouldn’t fit in the Temple . . . and yet, He became a baby. The fullness of God wrapped in flesh. Completely divine, completely human. This is essential to our salvation. Jesus must be fully God to be able to atone for our sins and must be fully human to be our substitute. At the dawn of creation, God knew the work of redemption would come only through Jesus. The baby in Bethlehem was sent to be crucified on Calvary. Jesus was never God’s backup plan.

It is the miracle of all miracles: the King of all ages, the Creator of heaven and earth put on the flesh of His creation. God became man, so that we might live in restored and eternal relationship with Him. Praise be to God!



WAITING *for the* KING'S RETURN

“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” This liturgical confession also guides us as we move forward to the realization of our hope in Jesus—not just that Christ came once at Christmas and died on Good Friday, but also that He was raised to life on Easter Sunday and is coming again. When He comes, we will dwell with Him as His people. Our broken, mortal bodies will be transformed into resurrected bodies like His, and all of creation will be set free from its bondage to sin. Until that day, we wait with eager longing, knowing that, just as God kept His promise to the Israelites that He would intervene and send a Savior, He will also keep His promise to us that He will come again. Even so, come Lord Jesus!



AND WHILE THEY WERE GAZING INTO HEAVEN AS HE WENT,
BEHOLD, TWO MEN STOOD BY THEM IN WHITE ROBES, AND
SAID, “MEN OF GALILEE, WHY DO YOU STAND LOOKING
INTO HEAVEN? THIS JESUS, WHO WAS TAKEN UP FROM YOU
INTO HEAVEN, WILL COME IN THE SAME WAY AS YOU SAW
HIM GO INTO HEAVEN.”

ACTS 1:10-11



WHAT TO DO WHILE YOU WAIT

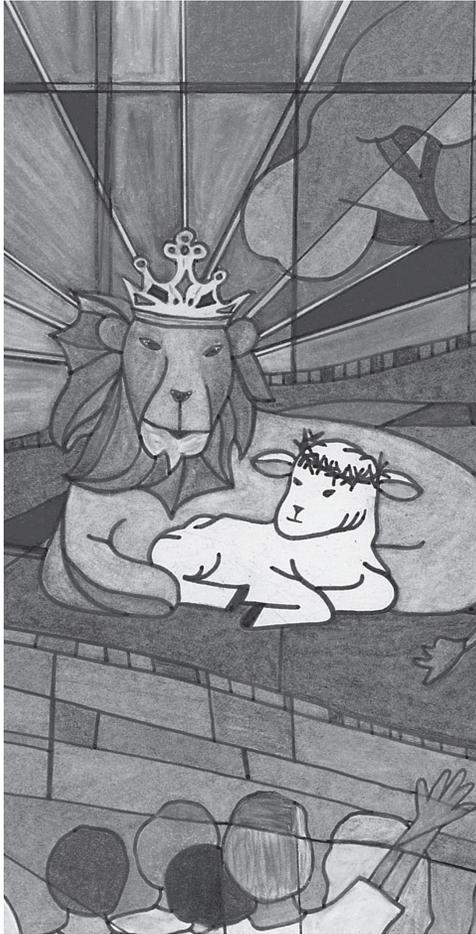
Monday, January 2 | Acts 1:1–11 | Amy Jackson

The disciples had spent most of their lives waiting for the coming Messiah. I can imagine the slight letdown they feel here as they realized that Jesus isn't "restoring the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6) quite yet. Instead, He leaves to return to His Father, inaugurating a second period of waiting for believers—a period that has continued for two thousand years, and that we also enter into as believers today. Like the disciples, we are waiting for Christ's return.

There's good news here for us as we enter into this waiting. First, Jesus promises that He will never leave nor forsake His followers. He promises the disciples that they will be "baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5), and we see that happen on the day of Pentecost. And, this is true for believers today! If you trust in Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in you, which means that even as we wait for Jesus to return, He has not left us alone to our own devices! His Spirit guides,

teaches, convicts, and comforts us; His Word equips and corrects us.

Second, Jesus also promises that we don't have to wait around in boredom for Him to return; there's work to do while we wait! He sends the Holy Spirit so the disciples will be equipped to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. I also love the good news the angel gives at the end of this passage. As the disciples stare into heaven (probably feeling a little dumbstruck, to be honest!), the angel asks them why they are standing there gazing into the skies, reminding them that Jesus "will come [again] in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). When we read the rest of the New Testament, we see that the disciples trusted—with certainty—that Christ would come again. They took the angel's words to heart. In the same way, we can trust that Christ will return again, and this truth should move us to action today as we consider how we are also called to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.



AND NOT ONLY THE CREATION, BUT WE
OURSELVES, WHO HAVE THE FIRSTFRUITS
OF THE SPIRIT, GROAN INWARDLY AS WE
WAIT EAGERLY FOR ADOPTION AS SONS,
THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODIES.

ROMANS 8:23

GOOD NEWS IN THE GROANING

Tuesday, January 3 | Romans 8:18–39 | Amy Jackson

What does it mean to groan? The dictionary defines groaning as “deep, inarticulate sounds made in response to despair or pain.” I love this imagery! Paul doesn’t describe waiting for Christ’s return as fun and fancy-free. Rather, he tells us that even creation groans, waiting for the return of the Lord (Romans 8:22). Why would creation groan? According to Genesis 3, sin’s curse has touched everything. Even creation, made by God and declared to be good, lives under the fetters of a world wrecked by sin. Creation waits for the day when Christ will return and sin will be no more, and when creation will be restored fully in the new heaven and earth.

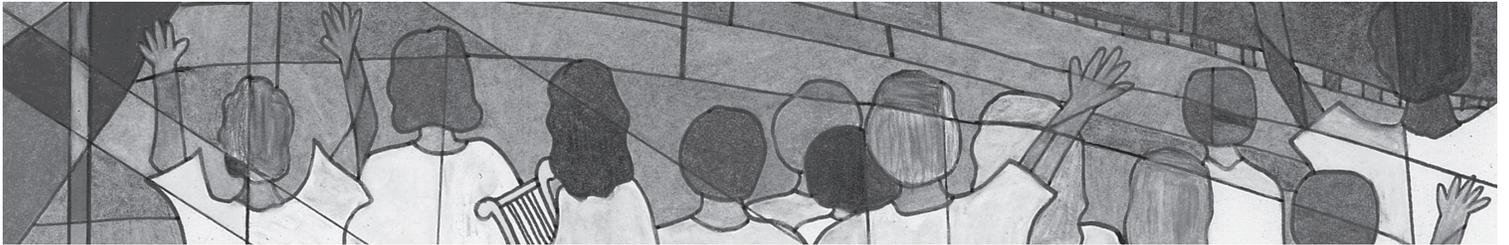
But creation isn’t alone. Believers also “groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons” (Romans 8:23). While we are recipients of grace who find forgiveness through Jesus’ death on the cross, we still live in a world tainted by the effects of the Fall. Our broken bodies will one day fail. We live in a world where sin seems to reign, and we suffer because of others’ sin. And, even as

believers, we still struggle with sin; while sin is no longer our master, the process of sanctification is hard. We groan in anticipation of the day when we will be set free.

There’s a third kind of groaning, though, which is good news for us groaners: the Holy Spirit is also groaning (Romans 8:26)! But His groaning isn’t just over the brokenness of the world. He groans alongside us, but He also groans for us to the Father. As we groan and mourn and long for Christ’s return, and experience moments where we can’t even put our heart’s sufferings into words, the Holy Spirit searches our hearts, interpreting our wordless cries to the Father. What’s more, Paul also encourages us by reminding us that God works in all things, even our groanings in the waiting, for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28–30), and that nothing—not even our groanings—can separate us from His love (Romans 8:31–39). Take heart today that these groanings are temporary, pointing to a day when there will be no need to groan and when our faith will be made sight.

FOR SINCE WE BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED AND ROSE AGAIN, EVEN SO, THROUGH
JESUS, GOD WILL BRING WITH HIM THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:14



HOPE IN THE FACE OF DEATH

Wednesday, January 4 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 | Amy Jackson

What do we have in common with people who lived thousands of years ago? Although our lives may look very different, one thing we have in common is that we all face the reality of death. Even with medical advancements, we can still only delay the inevitable. While we can now prevent deaths from simple infections, the prevention is still only a delay. All people in all times will eventually face death as a result of our fallen condition. We live in perishable bodies broken by sin.

For this reason, Paul gives the Thessalonians some practical instruction, educating them about what death means in light of Jesus. We will all die, yes, but Paul reminds us that we can have hope as we face death, because we know the One who defeated death (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Jesus' resurrection is a promise for those who trust in Christ, that we, too, will be raised to life and given resurrection bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of Jesus' resurrection like a deposit on our own resurrection—His resurrection is the firstfruits

of many resurrections to come!

Notice that Paul doesn't discourage believers from grieving; rather, he tells them that knowing Jesus and trusting that He will return changes how we grieve. It doesn't mean we grieve less. Tim Keller argues that our grief may be deeper than an unbeliever's, because death reminds us that sin has broken everything. Death was never God's intention. At the same time, our grief is also temporary, because we trust that for God's children, death isn't the end of the story. We are not without hope. We will be raised to life and given new bodies to live in a land unbroken by sin, where everything sad will come untrue.

Paul tells us to encourage and comfort one another with these words—that we will see again those we love who are in Christ. But more than that, our greater comfort comes in knowing that we will be with the Lord forever. As we wait for that day with longing, we cling to the truth that “all things and all people are in His hands” (Leon Morris, 1 Thessalonians).



AND THEY HAVE CONQUERED HIM BY THE
BLOOD OF THE LAMB AND BY THE WORD OF
THEIR TESTIMONY, FOR THEY LOVED NOT
THEIR LIVES EVEN UNTO DEATH.

REVELATION 12:11

THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

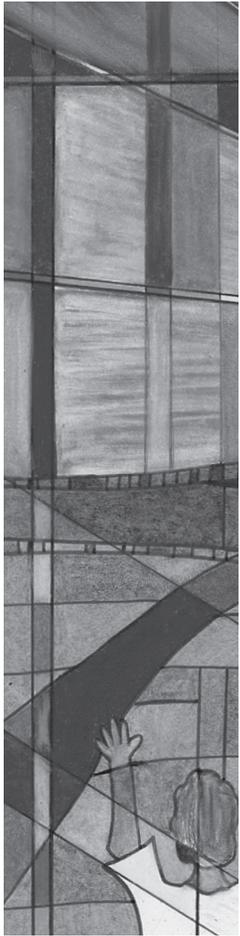
Thursday, January 5 | Revelation 12:1–17 | Amy Jackson

Sometimes, the Bible spells out things for us clearly, but occasionally, the Lord will use a descriptive story to demonstrate His point. John's scene of spiritual warfare paints Satan, the Schemer and Deceiver, who wants nothing more than to harm God's children.

A woman—the picture of Israel's messianic hope—gives birth to “a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Revelation 12:5). The dragon—the devil—longs to defeat this child, because he knows that He is the anticipated promise of Genesis 3:15, the One who will crush the serpent's head and restore God and man. He is Jesus. If we look back to the New Testament, we see specific moments where Satan plots to destroy Jesus: through Herod's murder of baby boys, through the wicked schemes of the religious leaders, and ultimately through Christ's condemnation and Crucifixion. Yet Satan doesn't win, because Jesus is “caught up to God and his throne” (Revelation 12:5). God raises Jesus from the dead and, through the Resurrection, Satan's plans are forever thwarted.

The bad news is that Satan doesn't just want to harm the child; realizing his eventual defeat, he comes after the rest of the woman's offspring—the church—in an attempt to destroy whatever he can before his defeat is finally and fully realized. This, too, is part of the waiting. We recognize that there is spiritual warfare happening every day, and that Satan hates the things of God and abhors seeing the gospel go forth. He will continue to attack until the end, because he knows his time is short (Revelation 12:12).

But the good news is that followers of Christ overcome Satan because of “the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony” (Revelation 12:11). Paul reminds us in Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from God's love, not even Satan's schemes and plans to deceive and harm God's children. And, John reminds us here that we overcome by our testimony as we hold fast to Jesus, our only hope, knowing that the war we experience now is only temporary and that Christ is coming again to put a final end to all evil, including Satan.



AND I HEARD A LOUD VOICE FROM THE THRONE SAYING,
BEHOLD, THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD IS WITH MAN. HE WILL
DWELL WITH THEM, AND THEY WILL BE HIS PEOPLE, AND GOD
HIMSELF WILL BE WITH THEM AS THEIR GOD.

REVELATION 21:3

WHEN OUR WAITING ENDS

Friday, January 6 | Revelation 21:1–8 | Amy Jackson

At last, we've come to the day when we'll receive what we've been waiting for. Honestly, one of the scariest parts of waiting is wondering if what we are waiting for will ever happen. Will God bring healing in the midst of an illness? Will this relationship be restored? Will we ever feel at home anywhere? What will the future hold for us if these longings continue unfulfilled?

The good news is that our hearts' longings point forward to this day when all will be made right, because we will be with God; our waiting will come to an end. We will be at home with the Lord in the holy city, New Jerusalem—the true Promised Land we've always longed for. No earthly king will reign over us; instead, God Himself will be our God, the perfect righteous Ruler. And, being in God's presence forever means “the absence of all that is evil and disruptive to shalom [peace]: tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain” (Scott Duvall, Revelation). We will live in perfect peace with God and one another.

It's hard to imagine a day when there really will be no more sin or suffering or brokenness or pain. But this is our great hope as believers; we cling to His promise of the One we are waiting for, the God who declares “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5). He says His words are trustworthy and true; we look forward to the day when all waiting will end as our hopes are realized, standing in the presence of our Lord. These are words of true comfort—that He is our God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, who holds time in His hands. He also holds us in His hands, and one day, the Lord Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Sorrow and waiting will be no more.

Even so, come Lord Jesus! Stir up hope in our hearts and help us hold to the truth that the same God who broke into time and history as Jesus, the promised child, will come again. The conquering King will come again, and we will be at home with Him forever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

General Editor AMY JACKSON

Artwork and Booklet Design ELIZABETH HELMS

Copy Editor JESSICA GRAHAM

Printed by SHELBY PRINTING

Writing Contributors

MOUNTAIN BROOK BAPTIST CHURCH STAFF



MOUNTAIN BROOK BAPTIST CHURCH
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA
