

*Journey through
Advent*

2020



A Disciples Seminary Foundation Devotional



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An Invitation:

Advent is a time of preparation and expectation where we step back from chaos and challenges to remember what is truly important and to prepare for the One that is born anew in our hearts each Christmas, the One we call Christ. The devotions that you find inside these pages represent the beautiful diversity of the DSF Family. There are devotions from DSF staff, students, graduates, friends, and board members sharing with us from their various theological, cultural, and social perspectives. Thank you for journeying with us!

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If you're like me, you probably grew up in fear of passages like this one: dire visions of turmoil and violence in which the world is overturned by divine intervention. Apocalyptic texts give us a glimpse of what the world might look like when things begin to fall apart, and that hits a little close to home in these days of political strife and pandemic. God's dramatic interruption into history has never felt very much like something to be hoped for, to me. But recently, I have been noticing the distance between my fear of this and other apocalyptic texts, and the way they are presented in the Bible. I have usually felt afraid of them, but in the Bible, apocalyptic texts are hopeful, spoken and prophesied to articulate a radically different kind of world, and a different kind of future. When Jesus quotes the prophets in this passage, he's quoting them as an expression of hope. This and other apocalyptic texts are thinking about the upheaval of God's intervention as evidence of God's justice, not God's wrath. Apocalypse only seems scary if you're invested in the status quo. As someone who occupies positions of privilege in our world, the overturning of our world seems scary to me. I (and others like me) benefit from the way the world is, so these visions of the world's disintegration threaten our way of life. For most of the biblical authors, though, God's intervention into the world was a hopeful possibility because they were on the bottom of the world already. If you are disenfranchised and disinherited, living under the heel of your oppressors, an apocalypse that promises the re-ordering of the world looks hopeful, not scary. This Advent, we should take the words of Jesus in Mark 13 seriously. We should give ourselves to the reordering of the world, and we should work to intervene in all the systems and powers and principalities that perpetuate injustice. The pandemic and toxic politics have already begun to change our world, and in this moment, we have the power to change it further, in the movement for Black lives, the fight against climate change, the struggle for economic justice, advocacy for refugees and immigrants, and in the agenda Jesus set forth: speaking good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free.

Prayer: *God give us the courage to see change as a gift. Give us the strength to follow Jesus, even when he leads us into resistance against the powers of this world. Give us the hope that comes from imagining a new way. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Eric C. Smith is Assistant Professor of Early Christianity and Contemporary Christian Practices at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, CO, where he is also the DSF liaison for that campus. Ordained in the DOC, he is active in the Central Rocky Mountain Region and serves part-time as Teaching Minister at First Plymouth Congregational Church.

Isaiah 62 speaks of walls, neglected infrastructure, displaced people, fair compensation for labor, and the quest for international respect. Such aspirations and frustrations span many lands, centuries, and campaigns. In this context of the human condition, Isaiah's command to "prepare the way" offers an Advent text.

In the first ministry Cathy and I served, our congregation hosted an ensemble of Congolese Disciples. The *Mama Beyeke Chorale* had come to the States to sing at the General Assembly of the Christian Church and to visit North American Disciples. We asked our guests what they noticed about the United States. The consensus answer: "You throw away so much food, and the roads are so good." Years later, I went to Africa with North American Disciples to visit Congolese Disciples. We learned in our travels that unpaved roads to remote villages might have muddy sections with deep ruts, a tree down, or another large obstacle blocking the way. On such journeys, the travelers become the road crew without warning or tools. Their spontaneous work allows their own passage and prepares the way for others on another day.

Isaiah 62:10 says, "Go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones." The prophet anticipates the needs of those who will come later. Prophets recognize necessary transitions, the need to "go through the gates." Prophets envision the destination and recognize the obstacles, realizing pathways must be established or cleared to reach the goal. In Advent, we "prepare the way" of the Christ child who is to come. Often heard as a call to internal transformation, the prophet's call also envisions external changes. Grain will nourish local families who raise it. The land will not merely grow grapes for the strong to sip elsewhere (v.8-9). No way. Prophetically, the phrase "farm to table" includes tables and food for farmers and farm laborers.

Isaiah 62 says to "prepare the way for the people." In this pandemic Advent season, how might we remove obstacles for one another and for those who come later? For such heavy lifting, we need each other and prophetic vision. Prepare ye the way.

Prayer: *God, may this very different Advent season reveal what matters most. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Doug Wirt serves with Rev. Dr. Cathy Myers Wirt as Co-Regional Minister for the Christian Church in Oregon and SW Idaho. He is Vice Chair of the DSF Board.

As we move through the season of Advent, people of faith strive to go within to contemplate the arrival of the Christ child. For some, the time is marked with fasting and prayer as the days shorten and the nights grow longer. In the darkness of the winter season, we go within and anticipate with hope the joy of the mystery of Immanuel, God among us.

This year the contemplation of darkness as we travel to the manger is not a rhetorical exercise. Indeed, the journey in this season of unknowns is darker and because of a lack of sleep for many, the nights are undeniably longer. Like the psalmist before us, we are in a national disaster. For those who have recently had a loved one die or lost their job, it can feel much like it felt to the psalmist, like God is angry with us. In this heaviness our pastors are working hard to keep us together and remind us of God's steadfast love. To remind us that no, God is not angry with us.

How do we hold on to the knowledge that God is still with us, even in the darkness?

A few months ago, my adult daughter called to ask, "Mom, is it going to be okay?" She called because she was worried and scared about the pandemic and the racial and political tensions. For the first time as a mother, I had to admit to one of my children that I didn't know if things were going to be alright. But what I did know was that God was still among us. If she needed proof all she had to do was look around and see those who are doing good amid the darkness. I asked my daughter to continue to do good for others, even when her actions felt small in relation to the dark unknown. For it is in those small acts that we can see the light of the Holy among us.

Prayer: *Loving God, remind us through your still small voice that your face is always shining upon us. Remind us your promises are fulfilled when we, and other faithful people like us, reach out to help one another other. Amen.*



Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros is a DSF/CST graduate (M.Div./2012) and an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. She currently serves as Associate Conference Minister in the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC.

When Paul wrote to the church of Corinth, the content and intent of his letter was with concern, maybe some anger or rebuke, we can't say for sure. There were things happening in Corinth that Paul just wasn't in agreement with and needed to vocalize what was wrong and his advice around that. We would expect that with the content of Paul's letter, then it would either jump right into the "Hey, this is what's wrong and this is what you need to do to make it right" or just start off cold or standoffish. Paul, however, greets the church in a way I find beautiful and something to model.

Paul gives thanks. Although he's been hearing all these things about what Corinth is doing, which he doesn't agree with, he starts off by thanking God for grace, for love, for the holy spirit, and for bestowing this on his friends at Corinth.

Sometimes, when we are presented with people or situations who are less than favorable and who we just don't agree with that bother us slightly, we're quick to judge or be angry at the person or situation. And it makes sense to do so. When something bothers us, it's going to bother us. As Evanescence says in their song "The End of the Dream," "As much as it hurts, ain't it wonderful to feel?" I think it's important to keep in mind that we should be thankful for all the feelings, people, and situations that God gives us, day in and day out. They can be lessons, memories, or revelations to us sent from God in covert or overt ways. And thanking God for every moment of life we have is so wonderful.

As we anticipate the new life coming to this world in the form of Christ, we give thanks to God that God gave us, and Jesus, the opportunity to feel. Jesus came into this world, fully fleshed as human, just like you and me. We could only imagine he had small conflicts like we do day in and day out. We see this throughout the text in the Bible. Jesus felt too, and I'm sure he gave thanks to God for those feelings, though frustrating at times.

Give thanks this Advent season for all that happens.

Prayer: *Divine Creator, we give thanks for all that has happened, all that is happening, and all that is to come. We pray that through contemplation and thoughtfulness, we may see the goodness of your creation in all that we experience and continue to see your light throughout the ages. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



Raphael Guillen is a second-year M.Div. Journey student attending Iliff School of Theology. They recently moved to the suburbs of Detroit, MI, where they live with their best friend and their chub orange cat.

For many of us, the single, solitary, one-of-a-kind gift of grace alone, all by itself, is still AMAZING! Yet coupled with an appearance of salvation to every mortal on the planet, Grace remains the undisputed champion of the value and worth of all life made in the image and likeness of God.

As an intimate part of a group of New Testament books in the Holy Bible (along with I & II Timothy) called the Pastoral Epistles, Titus, himself a pastor in Crete, receives instructions from a knowledgeable church planter and prolific writer. He is being schooled, taught, and tutored on how to deal with false teachers who knowingly create problems for the growth of the Christian community he has been called, appointed, and set aside to serve as spiritual leader. Graphic lessons are presented to him on the pros and cons of disorganization and moreover on best practices in confronting hostile opponents to his authority and leadership.

Grace has appeared sufficient to show this young pastor how to live a holy, righteous, and godly life in the context of his present environment. Holiness is right, for it leads to the blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, the writer continues.

The appearance of grace to all, together with wholesome instructions taught plainly, provide a clear path toward understanding the gift which paid in full the redemption of people whose minds, hearts, and actions are eagerly staid on good works.

In our present-day context in the year 2020, pandemic, hostilities, divisiveness and challenges untold, integrity STILL matters. Speaking truth matters. Trusting God and devotion to what we know to be right in all circumstances and situations MATTERS!

These paths ultimately lead to a clearer understanding of lessons, which are essential protocols for those who shelter in grace...the kindness and love of God through mercy, saves. Indeed, Jesus appears in this season for the express reason: to save, to the utmost! Amen.

Prayer: *Almighty God, thank you for the appearance of Jesus, your grace-filled gift to all humanity, who lovingly and faithfully reminds us "WE ARE ONE." In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen!*



Rev. Clarence Johnson is a fourth-generation member of the CC(DOC) in the United States and Canada and Senior Minister/Pastor of Mills Grove Christian Church (DOC) in Oakland, CA. He is the newly elected Moderator of the Christian Church Northern California-Nevada region (CCNC-N), member of the National Benevolent Association (NBA) Board of Trustees, and D. Min. candidate at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

☞ Friday, December 4, 2020 ☞
Hebrews 1:1-12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (Heb. 1:1-4).

I am particularly struck by the very first verses of The Letter to the Hebrews, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” I am struck by the idea that God spoke through the prophets in “many and various ways” for generations, long before the incarnation of Jesus. We often forget just how varied the early Jesus communities were, and this scripture takes us back even further to early Hebrew communities. They each had their own spirit or spark, their own focus, their own concerns to contend with. And yet, each of the “many and various” community prophets moved their people forward to a place where they could receive the wisdom that the incarnation of Jesus brings to the world.

As we meander through the shadow and light of the Advent season, let's allow this simple phrase to stir a hope in us that the words that God's Spirit has spoken over and across the generations have taken root in open hearts in “many and various ways.” In the season of Advent, we celebrate and prepare for the infant light of Christ Jesus. This year, as we celebrate His light, let's ask ourselves how we are incarnating God's Spirit in our lives. In this uncommon Advent year, let's dig deep and ask what in us is ready to be birthed into this world? And when we feel the sting of isolation, let's reach out and remember the “many and various ways” our God has spoken to us through the generations.

Prayer: *Holy God of the Ages, in the tradition of the gospel writers, we look to the heavens and we ask your Spirit to speak through us, to a world in need of your healing, your joy, and your justice. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*



Rev. Sadie Cullumber serves as the Senior Pastor of Harbor Christian Church in Newport Beach. She comes to ministry after a long career in education as a teacher and counselor. She lives in Costa Mesa with her husband and two young daughters. Sadie is a DSF/CST graduate (M.Div./2015) and a member of the DSF Board of Trustees.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our[a] hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Galatians 4:4-7).

I have thought for some time the church should re-consider its liturgical calendar. At least in the US, where beginning in late October the “official” season is Hal-lowThanksMas. Doing so, of course, would leave Epiphany out in the cold, but that’s where the Magi are thought to have traveled anyway.

As it happens, deriving an Advent meditation from Paul’s letter to the Galatians seems more appropriate to the above-mentioned “official” season than to the traditional one. After all, Paul thought the Galatians had been bewitched (3:1), omitted his customary thanksgiving, and managed to squeeze only the briefest Advent/Christmas theme into a lengthy—and bitter—defense of his message to the Gentiles. In short, the Galatian letter is not the kind of Christmas card many of us would like to receive!

Yet there it is: “born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem...” The Christmas message. The coming of Christ. And he brings three gifts. Not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but adoption as God’s children, the presence of the Spirit, and—finally—freedom. All that leads Paul from the first, accomplished Advent to the second: the Galatians have received all this from God in Christ so they may inherit God’s present-and-coming kingdom. But they—and we—must trust and be faithful.

Prayer: *Merciful God, for your gracious gifts, and the hope they bring we give thanks. Help us to live into your kingdom. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Rod Parrott was on the DSF staff from 1979 to 2005, serving as Assistant Dean, Associate Dean, and finally Dean and Professor of Disciples Studies and New Testament. He is married to Mary Anne and lives in retirement in Hood River, Oregon.

"I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." What does baptism have to do with the season of Advent in 2020? We are immediately drawn into the good news, which parallels promises from the Jewish past to the present. John's baptism of Jesus mirrors "grace in the wilderness," to the future. Historically, during the Roman Emperor Nero's reign, these baptisms occurred when Christian persecution reached their climax, a time laden with political corruption, greed, chaos, and human strife. The subsequent devastation carried a collective consciousness of apprehension for who or what to believe. Have we returned to yesterday?

This Advent season definitely feels like that kind of wilderness. 2020 is a metaphor for our collective suffering of grief, civil unrest, and the necessary reckoning that has emerged around racial reconciliation and the continued marginalization of the least among us amidst systemic forces of oppression that seeks to sow divisions.

During this Advent season, may we call upon the memory of grace in the wilderness, where baptism serves as a reminder of the welcoming ritual for believers into the Kin-dom of God desperately wanting to change the course of our trajectory. The Kin-dom spatially is both near and far, but also infinitely present, openly inviting the body on earth to listen, act, and follow the way of the cross today. Yet, it is far away, with a promise for the soul's eternal life. May we end the metaphor of 2020 during Advent, remembering that Christianity and the Kin-dom are like the final harvest; baptism is the sowing of the seed, a form of dying and leaving the ways of the world behind. Becoming ripe is living and following Christ, the final harvest is mortal death, and baptism serves as a promise of renewal for eternal life in the expansive and inclusive Kin-dom of God.

Prayer: *Loving God of salvation, hear our collective voices as we cry out for peace, justice, and healing during this Advent season. May we remember our baptism of your Holy Spirit that promises renewal and everlasting life in your Kin-dom, finding grace in today's wilderness for all of creation to survive, heal, and thrive.*



Zade Evans is in his second year of the Hybrid M.Div. program at CST. Serving as Resident Seminarian to Foothills Christian Fellowship in Phoenix, AZ, he remains committed to justice-oriented ministry and mission. Zade is also a Kid's yoga instructor passionate about teaching youth about the spiritual nature of embodiment to help them cope and regulate everyday life stressors.

On March 2, 2020, I got a haircut. I was set to give a conference paper that weekend and wanted to look halfway decent. As the barber cut my hair, we made small talk and I admitted that I was a little nervous about getting my haircut because I had heard rumors that the coronavirus had made its way to Southern California. I asked her if she was nervous about constantly being in close contact with her customers. She admitted that she was glad for work but becoming more nervous. We both joked about the coming apocalypse and what we would do if the world indeed ended. Whether due to nativity or misplaced optimism, we both seemed to think it would all be over in a month or two. We could not have predicted the loss that was coming. Isaiah 39 ends Proto-Isaiah with an ominous story of King Hezekiah welcoming envoys from Babylon into Jerusalem, where he shows them all of the glory and riches of the Kingdom. After the envoys leave, Isaiah questions Hezekiah about the meeting. “You didn’t show them everything you have, did you?”¹ “Should I not have done that?” Hezekiah responds. Isaiah 40 picks up 150 years after the preceding chapter. Judah has been destroyed and her people exiled to Mesopotamia. The final warning of Isaiah 39 proved true and darkness had come over the land. Yet Isaiah 40 begins with a repeated command. “Comfort, O Comfort, my people.” The LORD is making a path in the desert, a path that will lead the survivors of Israel back home. Zion will rise again. YHWH commands the people to shout out and lift their voices. For we are like the grass of the fields. Grass withers and grass dies but the arrival of our God is imminent. YHWH comes to feed us, to carry us, and to lead us to safety. That day is coming. At the time of this writing, it has been 252 days since I got my haircut. My hair has grown long and unkempt. During that same time, over a million people have died of the coronavirus. This morning the news rang with the hope of a new vaccine that will hopefully be open to wide use by next summer. There is a glimmer of hope; but it has not yet arrived. The pandemic still rages on. Yet we hope for a future where we can all gather as one and lift our voices. A society where the LORD reigns.

Prayer: *Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, we await your coming with eagerness. We lift our voices in preparation of your reign.*



Leland Merrit is a third-year Ph.D. student in Hebrew Bible at Claremont School of Theology. His current research focuses on using Horror Theory to understand certain texts in the Hebrew Bible. He currently lives in Pasadena, CA with his spouse and child.

¹ My paraphrase

We are going through the second week of Advent. Psalms and old songs sing about the desire for a more righteous and peaceful world. For the past 2,000 years, the church has been singing the songs that Israel had sung, longing for the Messiah. Still, there are many issues and hurtful wounds in the world today, so our songs become more desperate.

Psalm 85 says: "Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; You pardoned all their sin" (Psalm 85:1-2, NRSV). Now we sing this song as our prayer. "Lord, free us from slavery and forgive our sins." Many powers still capture us and lead us to sin. Our lives are so vulnerable to violence, exclusion, discrimination, discord, hostility, poverty, and suffering. We are all involved in a complicated relationship with sin, whether we recognize it or not, in the community and the world where we live with others. Our greed and indifference make the evil connection stronger.

Nevertheless, we are not buried under the power of darkness and death! Because we look forward to Jesus, who came to the earth as the ultimate peace. We hope for a new beginning of righteousness and peace in us through Jesus Christ. Psalm 85 describes righteousness and peace in the human figure. It says: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.... Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps" (Psalm 85:10, 13, NRSV). We can imagine that justice and peace kiss and righteousness run before us and prepare for the Lord's way. Justice and peace are not the concepts expressed only by words and thoughts but those still living and moving in us. Our wait for the coming of Jesus this Advent is a prayer that vibrant justice and peace can be fulfilled in our lives. I sincerely hope that the coming of Jesus will be good news for all creation on the earth longing for justice, peace, and love.

Prayer: *God of righteousness, restore all the places of violence, injustice, discrimination, exclusion, and suffering in the world, and make them full of the Lord's justice and peace.*



Rev. Geonyul Byeon is a second-year M.Div. student at Claremont School of Theology and a member of Salem First Christian Church and Sallims Church.

"Don't let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives" (2 Peter 3:8-9).

As our days of staying at home, in quarantine, or social-distancing stretch on and on, it seems like our internal clocks have all gone haywire. Our sense of time has become distorted. Some days fly by, while others drag on and on. Some researchers suggest that we have lost "temporal anchors," those dependable, recurring events in our normal days and weeks that help orient us have simply gone away.

In this reality, I'm not sure if I find Peter's description of God's sense of time as "a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day" comforting or disheartening. I think Peter is trying to encourage us to think about time differently and to find our "temporal anchors" in God's promises. It may seem like we've been waiting forever, but God hasn't forgotten. God wants everyone to experience the realm of love, justice, and peace. So, God is patient, beyond our own internal sense of time.

In this season, we have the space to deeply consider the question Peter places before us: "What sort of people ought we be?" His question resonates down the years to us as we make choices in our daily lives, often on a small scale, that have eternal resonance. While we wait for the fullness of God's promise to be embodied in the world, we can choose to be peaceful and patient, holy and alert. We can choose to anchor ourselves in God's timing. We can choose, even in the doldrums of quarantine or sacrificial boredom, to be faithful.

Prayer: *God beyond time, help us to remain steady, even when we seem adrift in our own concepts of time. Anchor us in your time, your promises, and give us the patience to wait. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Kara Markell is a DSF graduate (D.Min./Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry) and serves as Pastor of Lake Washington Christian Church in Kirkland, WA.

This is a unique time in our history, where the world at large is grieving. We witness a country divided, confusion and panic as we fight a global pandemic, and ultimately underlying anxiety about what's next. But you know, we're not the only ones who've felt lost in grief.

Way back in the eighth century BCE, the mighty prophet Micah felt this way too. He was a war-torn refugee, forced to flee his home for Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. As the Assyrian army advanced, he spoke truth to power, condemning and lamenting his nation's state before God! Yet despite his situation and doomsday rhetoric, we find in Micah 5:2 a turn towards hope with one simple word: "But..."

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." (Mic. 5:2)

Amidst the rubble of his fallen nation, Micah foresaw a powerful ruler, springing up from Bethlehem, who would "...be the one of peace" (Micah 5:5). He prophesied a new king, grounded in King David's lineage, but unlike any king before. This "king" would liberate the captives, empty himself for the sake of others, and establish a new kin-dom amongst the Earth. This kingly shepherd and majesty of God-revealed are who we find laying in a Bethlehem manger, the Christ. As we re-anticipate the birth of Christ into our reality, we remember, like Micah, that even when all seems lost, God is for us, responding to and restoring humanity in unexpected ways. God is not done with us yet! The light of Christ continues to enter into our darkness, foretold from prophets past, and carried forward through disciples today. God is for us; God is truly for us.

Prayer: *Loving God, help us experience your peace in our grieving. Like prophets of old, we know you are intimately present and ultimately for us when all seems lost. May the Advent season be a powerful reminder of the way you enter into our suffering to show us the way of peace, love, and justice. Continue to call us forward as we retell and re-experience your coming into the world. Amen.*



Alex Kip serves as the Associate Pastor at Oceanside Sanctuary. He is also an inspirational speaker who has given keynotes to United Healthcare, the University of Michigan, the United Nations Culture of Peace, and more. His content has appeared in the Huffington Post, PBS, NPR, and NBC. Previously, his top-rated podcast, SoulFeed, reached over 1 million downloads in over 130 countries. Alex is currently earning a Master of Divinity at Claremont School of Theology.

Pseudo-Paul's pastoral letter to Titus is intended to be encouraging and challenging for the early church leader of Crete. It often misses the mark of these intentions. Especially when read anachronistically, as it has been and continues to be. Yet that Spirit-filled intent is recoverable. Perhaps nowhere more than the scripture at hand, qualified by a line just before it, and a line just after it.

In chapter 2 verse 11, Paul pointedly claims that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." Encouraging words, especially to the gentile in Titus, whom given his circumstance of being uncircumcised and the contextual tensions therein, would be further affirmed of his place as pastor with this *universalist* suggestion. Later, in the scripture at hand, Paul states that this universally poured forth grace – that is, poured on *all* – is what justifies ourselves as heirs to the kin-dom of God. This justification is likewise a making-right-with-God for all. We are *all* given grace. We are *all* heirs. Our receiving the kin-dom is not conditional – "*not because of any works*" – but through mercy, rebirth, and renewal poured freely onto us, into us, and *out of and through us*. In the Spirit, through the Advent of God's anointed. We are *all* refreshed by this living water because God is *that* good. Encouraging indeed.

Yet is there no challenge? As in, is there nothing *to be done* with this good news of the universal kin-dom? Not so. Paul tells us in verse 8 what it means to be heirs to such a reality – "to devote (our)selves to good works... excellent and profitable to all." An unconditional gift, a conditional discipleship. The condition to be workers in actualizing the ever-becoming and liberating kin-dom of God. May it be so.

Prayer: *Source of All,
Be with us now.*

*In absence, be presence. Amidst violence, be peace. Amongst discord,
sow harmony. Where there is injustice, bring about liberation.*

*Sharpen our minds. Soften our hearts. Fortify our spirits. Protect our
bodies. For there is kin-dom work to be done.*

Be with us now.

Amen.



Richard Jon Lucchesi is in his final year of a dual degree M.Div./MTS at Claremont School of Theology, with plans to pursue a Ph.D. He is an entrepreneur by occupation, and pastor-theologian by vocation, currently launching a non-profit with fellow Disciples ministers. He lives in San Diego with his wife Andrea and dog Neo.

The Psalms were written to accompany acts of worship. In Psalm 97, we read the power of God over the lands and people of the earth. The first verse reads: "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice!" Rejoicing is a theme of the Advent season as we prepare for the coming of the baby Jesus in the midst of the darkest time of the year. This year, we have had many trials and challenges. We have worked hard to be healthy, safe, to care for our families and community. It may well be that for the past months most of us, even those of us in communities of faith, the dominant attention to our daily life has been worry and anxiety. Our text invites us from the beginning verse to "Rejoice!" Even in challenging times, as those detailed in the Psalm, the task of the faithful community is to REJOICE! At times filled with discouraging news and personal challenges, worry, distress, and the constant need to set and re-set priorities, the text asks us to rejoice in the life that we have and in the faith that sustains us. In his letter to the people at Philippi, the Apostle Paul reminds the early followers of Jesus to hold on, hold out. The psalmist and Paul submit, do this by rejoicing!

Rejoicing is not exactly the same things as celebrating. It is not speaking or singing happiness for the moment. Rejoicing is expressing gladness or delight, not so much on a particular occasion or for a special event, but gladness for the gifts life offers! To drop out of the worrisome complaints of our corporate troubles and take a long deep and hard look at what we have and who we are in this world simply demands a bone deep, truth telling, spirit shaking in depth and courageous review of what we have and who we are as individuals and in community. Rejoice! Paul, from prison, tells us what to do! He says, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Prayer: *Creator of all life, in this time of waiting, give us patience, forbearance, insight, vision, and a spirit of thankfulness as we rejoice in the life of faith. We give thanks for what we have and are hopeful for what is to come. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Claudia Ann Highbaugh is a 1985 D.Min. graduate of Claremont School of Theology. Recently retired, she is spending her COVID days on lockdown at home, reading, reflecting, and recovering from 45 years of ministry and chaplaincy in higher education.

Who are you? In the beginning of this book, our author provides the Johannine community with the when and where. If we need a contemporary image, we could imagine a climate or environment hungry for a witness of the divine at work. We all know that the elements of a historic event should also contain the who, what, and why. It is genius for the next verses to record groups of religious leaders armed with these same questions. They had an interest in John's actions and the bringing about of changes in their society's conditions. In Advent, it would be well to reflect upon our own role, call, and commission. Questions are known to be gifts and with them I suspect John wants us not to lose our focus on the one coming. Although where would we be without those who have prepared the way for Jesus? In this season, let us not forget all of the faithful who have gone before, our unsung heroes in the church. Those who were like John, who witnessed and served.

Who are you? John's response to the religious leaders was not very common and almost rare. His response was one of great humility. John helped this group understand less about who he was and more about who he was not. He pointed to the one who was coming after and not having been worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. Amid a society driven by self-promotion, busy schedules, achievements, and titles, etc., I wonder if we might consider our own voices or actions, whether if we are lifting up more the deeds of the divine, helping others, serving and witnessing, ensuring that there are more visible works of the divine upon the earth. We can always count on a group with awkward questions about the who's, what's, and why's. But, with a bold or courageous witness, we can help them reverse those kinds of questions into real interests and good works for the community. *Who are you?* I hope you are poised to be a witness and servant as well.

Prayer: *Eternal God, may we find strength and courage in these difficult times to become servants and witnesses to your love, making a difference for all people. In your Holy name we pray, Amen.*



Rev. Richie Sanchez is the Regional Minister and President – CEO of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Pacific Southwest Region, which includes the states of Southern California, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Hawaii.

We can read these Isaiah verses in the Gospel of Luke 4:18-19. Jesus started his ministry of the Kingdom of God by proclaiming these Isaiah verses. After 40 days of fasting and praying in the wilderness, Jesus read these Isaiah texts and declared a new religious and socio-political movement. Jesus' movement was a challenge for religious nomism and the concomitant socio-political injustice. Jesus clearly recognized that God's presence was not only revealed in the religious building and institution but dynamically in the middle of ordinary people. It was a paradigm shift to suggest a new way of spirituality. The provocative statement of Jesus that the Sabbath exists for humans (Mark 2:23-28) also shows the core value of the Kingdom of God movement by Jesus. In this vein, Isaiah 61 is a bridge to connect the prophetic spirit and the Kingdom of God movement in order to reveal God's salvific purpose in the world.

It can be said that the keywords in Isaiah 61 are righteousness, love, and liberation. Why did God incarnate in the life of Jesus? God always wants to realize love and justice in the world. Jesus understood God's salvific purpose through Isaiah 61 and established the self-identity as Christ who embodies the divine values in a harsh reality. Accordingly, that becomes good news for the downtrodden, poor, and marginalized. We can see the metaphor of a servant in the entire chapters of Isaiah. Servanthood is deeply related to the prophetic spirit. Given that the prophetic voices aimed for God's love and justice, it could be possible by self-sacrifice based on altruistic spirit. Jesus came to the world in the figure of a servant. Jesus embodied God's love and justice by the altruistic spirituality of loving neighbors and God. Salvation, that is, liberation needs two ways of love and justice. We are living with those in need of liberation around the world. God calls upon us to embody love and justice here and now in the middle of an inhumane reality. In the season of Advent, it will be a meaningful way to contemplate our altruistic spirituality as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: *May God help us to live only in a way of love and justice and become co-workers of God's ongoing salvific work here and now.*



Rev. Kyungmok Lee is a Ph.D. student at Claremont School of Theology (Comparative Theology and Philosophy). He is also the Associate Pastor at Downey Memorial Christian Church and Sallims Church.

Most nights before bed, I have been reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* to my six-year-old daughter. About 2/3 of the way through *Prince Caspian*, Lucy finally sees Aslan and tells the lion that she thought he would “come roaring in and frighten all the enemies away—like last time.” He responds to her saying, “things never happen the same way twice.”

In today’s psalm, the poet reflects back on God’s work and presence with Israel in their freedom from Babylonian captivity and return to their land. God restored their fortune, and they were like those who dream. In verse 4, we discover that now the land is dry, and the people are suffering. The psalmist petitions God to once again restore their fortunes. There is hope found in the reflection of God’s prior participation in their freedom and anticipation of future joy.

For many of us, 2020 has been marked by loss. Loss of dreams, hopes, plans, expectations, relationships, and loved ones. Like the psalmist, we find ourselves in a collective season of weeping as we sow. We are encouraged, however, to continue to sow. To sow seeds of good work for dignity and justice and to water those seeds with our own tears, waiting with anticipation that the divine will eventually bring us a harvest of joy, a morning that follows the dark night of our collective soul.

Advent is a season of waiting in expectation. In this third week of Advent, we focus on the theme of joy. This text gives us a glimpse of what joy looks like in seasons of pain. The divine is with us in the pain and will continue to be with us on the journey to restoration. Like Aslan in *Prince Caspian*, and like God’s story in the history of Israel, the restoration will not look the same as it did before. We plant those seeds and wait for God to guide us into a better future, one that will surely look different than our past.

Prayer: *Spirit of restoration, comfort us in our tears, restore our fortunes, hopes, and dreams, and guide us through contemplation to a better future filled with joy, justice, and equity. May it be so.*



Bobby Marchessault is an MAST/M.Div. student at PSR. He lives in Watsonville, CA with his wife and 3 children where they started an organic church, Missio Dei Community.

“I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I’m not happy. I don’t feel the way I’m supposed to feel” (Charlie Brown, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*). I’m with you, Charlie Brown.

Like the psalmist, we are waiting. Waiting for our “circumstances to be changed for the better” and waiting for “great things” (v. 3-4, CEB). At this point in 2020, I would settle for, “not bad things.” Christmas brings back so many memories. Nostalgia is in the air. I remember the excitement of childhood with the mystery and wonder of the stories, music, and lights of Christmas. I remember my grandma’s cherry pie and the house being filled with music from my parent’s 1984 Christmas album by The Carpenters.

The science suggests nostalgia may be a good thing.¹ It helps us feel more connected when we are lonely, gives us meaning, and soothes negative emotions like fear and sadness. Maybe the psalmist was onto something by tapping into memories and looking at the past. Maybe looking back helps us look ahead. When was a time you laughed so hard you cried? When was a time you felt overjoyed, content, grateful, or a “this is the life” feeling? What were the sounds, tastes, people, and feelings present in those moments? Where was God present in those moments?

While we are waiting for better things to come in this season of Advent, may we remember the great things that have already been done in our lives. The people who have loved us into being. The moments of grace that have taught us how to love. May we remember the mystery and wonder of the God of the universe embodying a child to show us *God is here with you*. Dusting off the old family videos and photo albums this time of year could be healing for the soul. I’m going to download that 1984 Carpenters Christmas album.

Prayer: *O source of joy and God of the past, present, and future, remind me of the moments in my life where You were present so that I may become more aware of Your healing and joyful presence today. May we bring your inclusive joy to all people and places. Amen.*



Devin Wright is the Pastor of Missiongathering Christian Church in Issaquah, WA and an M.Div. student at Claremont School of Theology.

¹ Valentina Stoycheva, Ph.D., “Why Nostalgia? The Amazing Power of Reminiscing,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-everyday-unconscious/202009/why-nostalgia-the-amazing-power-reminiscing>.

2020 is definitely a different time to celebrate Advent and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It seems somewhat out of place this year, like maybe it's not yet time. We are still seeing the baby Jesus in cages; our soul is not at peace right now. How do we take these scriptures and feel at ease? It's very easy to wake up in the midst of COVID-19, racial injustice, and a political environment that is purely toxic and not want to rejoice or pray. Some of us feel like hiding and hibernating away from life and the unrest happening in our world around us. Yet today and every day, I see Disciples fighting for their rights and the rights of their brothers and sisters. I see them speaking out, marching, and yes, voting. We are a people of movement; we are powered by God to test everything and abstain from evil. We walk in the spirit of light, justice, equity, and equality for all who have breath in their bodies. Christ calls us to be faithful, to love your neighbor as you love yourself. That can be a challenge at times depending on who our neighbor is. One of the ways that I have tried to practice this is remembering what I used to tell my son when he was being unruly: "I love you, but I do not have to like your behavior." Can we try this with those who have been unjust to us, to our friends, to our immigrants, to our country? What can we do to promote peace, equality, and justice? Can we show more love? There is peace in knowing we are never alone in Christ. We are always loved and cared for in all we do, even if we are being unruly. God gave us Jesus Christ to walk alongside us as we journey through our lives, through the good times and the bad. That, my friends, is grace. Today, I am grateful for the voice I am developing, to stand up for others who seem to have lost their voice. I have learned from those who have come before me that through all of this turmoil, God's heavenly spirit is wrapped around me, and I am loved, faith-full, and sound.

Prayer: *Lord, I pray in your grace and mercy here on earth and deep in our souls, may we give that same grace to those whom we cross paths with. We thank you for the gift of your love. Amen.*



Renae Earl is a proud Disciple Woman and DSF/Berkely School of Theology student currently working towards her M.Div. and Certificate in Public Theology. She served on CCNC-N's Women's Ministries for eight years and is a current active member of First Christian Church in Concord, CA.

Friday, December 18, 2020
Psalm 96 – The Sanctuary of Strength & Beauty

Psalm 96:6b, "... strength and beauty are in his sanctuary."

We are a week away from December 25, and if we have not already done so, we are encouraged to find a time of sanctuary in this Advent season, sanctuary in God's presence.

This is not to say we are in a Quasimodo (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*) moment in our life where we feel misunderstood. Nor does the call to be in sanctuary suggest that we are in a time and place where we are seeking a better and safer life in which to live. It might simply be indicating that there is something to be found in God's presence. According to Psalm 96, we will find strength and beauty.

This is relevant because it has been a tough year! We have been either beaten up or drained by the division in our country, by racism, by a deadly virus, and as a country, we are not coming out of this looking good. The year is not even over yet, and it might be starting to show in our appearance.

If we plan on showing up for the sacred event called Christmas Day, we are going to need some strength and beauty, some sanctuary.

However, we have been taught that "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." That means we come to December 25 as we are, even if we look like a Quasimodo-version of ourselves.

Prayer: *God of Advent and of all seasons, we give thanks that no matter what we have gone through this year and no matter how we did, you are ready to strengthen us for today's journey and the journey ahead. Remind us, that in your beauty, we find our beauty. Amen.*



Rev. Darren T. Galindo is a graduate of Claremont School of Theology, married to Liza (school teacher), proud father of three girls (an artist, a seminarian, and an artistic entrepreneur), and an ordained Disciples of Christ minister and Senior Pastor at United Church of Christ, Honolulu, HI.

Isaiah 9:2-7 is a hymn of hope. The prophet Isaiah offered this celebratory hymn to God on behalf of the people. The song accounted for the devastation of military and political oppression, and it looked confidently forward to salvation under a reign of justice and righteousness. It expressed praise for release from tyranny and the birth of a rescuer.

1. “For the yoke of their burden...the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken...”
2. “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and...garments rolled in blood shall be burned...”
3. “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...”(NRSV)

These original words were probably intended to celebrate the birth of a specific king in Judah. Today, these words are more well received as a later proclamation of the birth of a messiah, fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. In this season of joy and celebration, we may resist paying attention to the prophet’s acknowledgement of the people having “walked in darkness...who lived in a land of deep darkness.” We may feel compelled to put aside reflections on our own recent national events, ignoring images of tramping boots and bloodied garments. But if we resist paying attention, if we ignore the horrifying images that come to mind, we may also forget that “authority rests on his shoulders,” and that “his authority shall grow continually.” In our anxious contemporary moments, we may lose sight of the promise that a future is coming when he will reign with justice and righteousness, and “there shall be endless peace.” This promise should be the basis for our confidence in the future God has planned for us. Jesus was given to us with a promise *for us*; justice, righteousness, and perpetual peace. Jesus left the earth with a promise to us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27 NRSV). Paul wrote, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7 NRSV). This is my prayer for us. This is a hymn of hope!

Prayer: *God, help us to be purveyors of your peace. Give us the wisdom and courage to pursue justice, righteousness, and peace and as we do your will and your work in the world, surround us with your peace that surpasses all understanding and guards our hearts and minds. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.*



LaDonna Harris serves at Mills Grove Christian Church in Oakland, CA. She is a D.Min. student at the Berkeley School of Theology.

☞ **Sunday, December 20, 2020** ☞
Luke 1:26-38 – Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!

Today's world is different than it was a year ago and yet at the same time, we find ourselves gazing into similar past times. There is still pain and suffering, there is injustice and offences, the world is in a climate crisis, and yet this year feels different. It's hard to say what hurts most this year – the many elements of hate and unrest, or the fact that we've been kept from our loved ones for the sake of health and safety. Many lives have been lost and many lives have been turned upside down. Without a doubt, 2020 has brought uncertainty. When Mary's unexpected guest arrived, the angel Gabriel told her, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you." What came next turned her world upside down. The angel Gabriel must have known that his very presence was a surprise, and his words were heavy with wonder. She was confused and uncertain as to what was to unfold. As much as these words can bring confront, Mary was thrown into a dangerous situation. Yes, God was blessing her, but she was also young, pregnant, and unmarried. Her very life could have been in danger. To her community and tradition, she could be the object of widespread ridicule, exclusion, scandal, and even death. "How will this happen?" says Mary. Confused and scared, she questions this message. It isn't that she doesn't trust what God has for her, but rather it is the knowledge she has of the world around her. Her culture and her tradition have already set a map as to how difficult this will be. Could it be that God is more present in our doubts and uncertainties than in our comfort and peace? Experiencing what we have experienced, this year alone, we know that the presence of the church, the hands and feet of Jesus, is more important and powerful now more the ever. Is God more present now in our online worship than our physical worship? Mary and Elizabeth must have shared similar feelings of doubt and uncertainties of the forthcoming months, but Mary found God's presence in Elizabeth's friendship and their scared bond. Mary found God's presence through her son, his life, and even to his death. You see God's presence in all of her difficult situations. Even so...she had found favor in the eyes of God.

Prayer: *Loving God, may we be reminded of your presence in the midst of our fear, doubts, confusion, and uncertainty. In all that we experience, may we find your presence in the middle of it. May you continue to give us resilience as we wait for your peace and comfort.*



Rev. Siobhan Lopez serves as Co-Pastor with her husband at Iglesia Cristiana del Este de Whittier. She is a DSF/CST graduate (M.Div./2016).

☞ Monday, December 21, 2020 ☞
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 – Will you make me a house?

God had blessed, protected, and secured David as King. In 2 Samuel 7, David is reminded that *his* success was not the ultimate goal. David had his house and privileges, and God's people were given equal portion to take to their own homes. Meanwhile, the ark of the covenant was held in a tent.

“Will you make me a house?” the Lord asks David: a question that has as much to say symbolically as it does literally. For some time, it was David's preservation that seemingly held God's attention. Now we read a shift in perspective. God is asking David to provide for him.

As followers of Jesus, it seems strange that God would ask David to build a house for the Lord. One day the temple would be comprised of the people themselves. However, God's request here is more than a material project. The time had come for David to activate his blessing to a higher degree. Would David hold his privilege for his own or give focus back to God?

Standing at this crossroad, we can ask ourselves in what ways we hold privilege for our own. We may justify holding our privileges by doing that which blesses others as often as possible, further securing the impact *WE* make in the lives of those living in the kin-dom. What God is asking for is a reconstruction of our community. A house for the Lord is a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality: we welcome God to live supremely in our lives and communities. A tent will no longer cut it.

This Advent season, we have the opportunity to reflect on the quality of housing we provide God in our lives. Shall we ask God to work harder, to move to a different neighborhood, or to be grateful for that which he has been given? Or will we decide a tent does not suffice?

“Will you make me a house?” the Lord asks us.

Prayer: *God, we welcome you with more than friendliness and smiles, with more than kind words and gestures, with more than a donation and simple act. Lord, be active in our communities, to guide our hearts and minds to be focused on what it means to live for you. May we be a house of cedar: strong, reliable, and true. Amen.*



Rev. Benjamin J. Barlow graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary (M.Div.) as a Regional DSF Scholar in 2015. He currently serves as PSW Associate Regional Minister and Pastor of First Christian Church of Ontario, CA. He and his wife, Megan, reside in San Gabriel, CA.

In a year that seems like it's lasted multiple decades, it's good for us to read these verses so committed to the word "forever." This pandemic that started in the season of Lent has brought us back around to another season of waiting. Advent is a good time to contemplate "forever," especially when we feel so trapped in the present, indeterminately long moment. "Long lay the world," the song goes, "in sin and error pining." When will He appear, so our souls can feel their worth again?

To step back from what is right in front of us and consider our lives and our world from God's perspective is a helpful way to re-center ourselves in our faith. Once we realize that what we're going through is not "forever," we can remember that God has been with us this whole time. God's covenant of love stands firm.

What does God's faithfulness look like in the midst of a pandemic? What would it mean to proclaim God's faithfulness to all generations as survivors of a pandemic? How will we tell the stories of this time and how God's steadfast love carried us through, when future generations ask us what it was like?

Perhaps this Advent season can invite us to re-frame this pandemic not as simply a trial to be endured, but as an opportunity to seek out signs of God's faithfulness and proclaim them. The Holy One is coming into our midst regardless of where or how our congregations are gathered. The steadfast love that was sung by holiday-enlarged choirs in past years will be sung instead by multitudes of solos and duets and trios, in homes and front yards and cars. We will sing of the mercies of the Lord!

Prayer: *Loving, Faithful God, grant that our mouths might sing your praise, that all the moments of our waiting might be opportunities to witness to your healing mercy and compassion. In the name of the One coming into the world, Amen.*



Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn has served as Pastor of Vista La Mesa Christian Church in East San Diego County since 2011. A native of Illinois, where she attended Eureka Christian Church and Camp Walter Scott, she graduated from Pacific School of Religion (M.Div.) in 2001. Prior to moving to the PSWR, she served First Christian Church in Anniston, AL.

✧ Wednesday, December 23, 2020 ✧
Romans 16:25-27

This scripture is a doxology, an expression of love and thanksgiving for the good news, generally recited at the end of an event or a service. The apostle Paul concludes his letter to the church in Rome, as we conclude a difficult year. This doxology is provocative in that it also summons an opportunity to “begin again.” I had a difficult year marked by the death of my father to COVID-19. Many of our brothers and sisters have suffered and have had to hold their grief as we have often been unable to congregate due to the virus!

This ending reminds us that God has become manifest and “made known to all nations” and we celebrate this profound gift of grace every Advent. This year in particular calls for “the revelation of mystery that was kept secret for long ages.” Indeed, we have been through some dark and difficult times and as Disciples of Christ, we celebrate and live in awe and gratitude of the coming of the Christ-child and the humble way Christ “was made known” and born into history. We are then directed “in obedience to faith” to the breaking forth of the light and love to our “only wise God.”

On the second day after the solstice, as the light returns, we are granted the gift to “begin again”! As the world turns, Paul reminds us that the revelation of God’s love will be made known in the new beginnings that await us. Faith through the difficult times allows us to begin again! May we honor the difficulties of this year and yet allow ourselves to revel and renew in God’s love made manifest! We hold those who have suffered through this pandemic in our hearts and pray for the full expression of their grief so that in turn, they create a new space, a new spark that can rekindle the fullness of life and love.

Prayer: *Gracious God may our fears of the darkness and the world and our own lives rest in you. As we relinquish the past help us rise us up to begin again! Freshen our faith, deepen our love and magnify our hope as we bow to the coming birth of Christ! Amen.*



Curt Williams is a third-year M.Div. student at Seattle University’s School of Theology and Ministry, seeking to provide spiritual care in a hospital setting. He is a member of Welcome Table Christian Church and is currently a per diem chaplain at Harborview Medical Center.

Where would Jesus be born today? Our scripture speaks of the power brokers of the day: Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, the governor of Syria, who were spreading the reach of *Pax Romana*. As lands were conquered, messengers would arrive announcing that Caesar is Savior and Lord. Our scripture flips this imperial propaganda when angels and messengers announce the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem far away from the centers of power.

What if, while votes are being recounted and disputed, angels appeared tonight to a group of fishermen in American Samoa, or perhaps in Guam or Puerto Rico, proclaiming that the Leader of the Free World had just been born to parents, counted in the recent decennial census but without the right to vote in the election?

Yes, I engaged in a bit of fantasy to distract from election malaise. And yet, is the good news that we profess any less fantastical?

During this global pandemic, I often feel gripped with fear and weighed down by grief. It is not uncommon for me to distract myself with fantasy. I long for all those special occasions and for simple gatherings with friends and family. I wish for another conversation with friends and congregants who have died to COVID-19.

I wonder if this fantastical gospel can penetrate the tightness I feel in my chest. Just like the inn, it feels as if there is no room this year for joy to be born. This good news seems more wishful thinking than reality.

Perhaps, the bleakness of 2020 brings us closer to the mystery of the incarnation. The hope that God will set the world right side up seems as fragile as a newborn “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” God comes near amid hopelessness and despair. Yes, this hope is fragile. This hope is entrusted to us for our nurture and care.

Prayer: *Holy One, may this fantastical tale of Emmanuel redeem our imaginations, so that hope is born anew that your life-giving presence is stirring in unexpected places. Give us the courage to nurture this hope with the joy of a parent cooing over their newborn. Amen.*



Rev. Bentley Stewart serves as Pastor of the Christian Church of Vacaville (Disciples of Christ). He is a DSF/SFTS alumnus (M.Div./2015).

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. Jn 1:9 NIV

The 10-year old in my household practiced his four musical lines for weeks. In a time when we do not gather in person, he was tasked with singing these four lines in tempo, in the correct key, using what we hoped was the same cadence and phrasing as the other seven kids in our congregation. Once recorded, the choir director skillfully put together the perfect recording to add to the voices of the adult choir for Christmas morning.

“Hark! the herald angels sing. Jesus the light of the world. Glory to the newborn King, Jesus the light of world.”

That was it. That was all he was assigned to sing. This angelic announcement of the Holy birth was arranged to give way to the voices in the adult choir.

“We’ll walk in the light, beautiful light, Come where the dewdrops of mercy shine bright. Oh, shine all around us, by day and by night. Jesus, the light of the world.”

John 1:1-14 tells the Christmas story through a prism of light. It may sound simple - *the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world* - but this light is complicated. In the dictionary "light" is labeled a noun, an adjective, and a verb. The word is thought of as an element that not only luminates, brightens, shows the way, but is also associated with weightiness, being upbeat, and in some cases thought of as trivial.

In John, the true light – Jesus – who gives light to everyone, comes into the world as anything but trivial. It is light that luminates our way to do the work of Christmas far beyond the day. In the words of the theologian Howard Thurman, the work is “to find the lost; to heal the broken; to feed the hungry; to release the prisoner; to rebuild the nations; to bring peace among others; to make music in the heart.” Christmas Day 2020 is here! With our children let us sing out the glorious news! Let us be the light that makes justice and peace a reality in the world.

Prayer: *May the light of God in Jesus keep us on the paths for justice and mercy and peace for a world that is disparately in need of truth, healing, and wholeness. Amen.*



Rev. Belva Brown Jordan is the Interim President at Disciples Seminary Foundation (January 2020 – present).