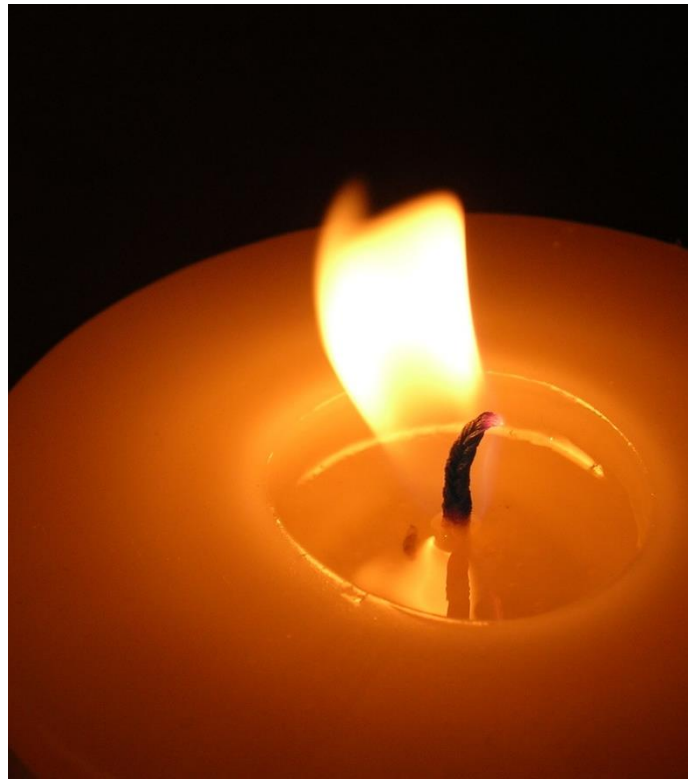


Sacred Stories: An Advent Devotional Guide



“The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Sacred Stories

Westminster Presbyterian Church

2017

We hope you will enjoy these daily reflections, written by members and friends of the Westminster congregation. Each writer spent time with a specific scripture passage, and then prepared a reflection about that passage to share with you during Advent. You are invited to read one reflection each day, beginning Sunday, December 3. As we wait and prepare for the birth of the Christ Child, may these thoughts and words be a blessing to you in this sacred Advent season.

Sunday, December 3 – Isaiah 2:1-4

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us his ways and that we may walk in her paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Let it be easier today than it was yesterday and even more so in the future to be in agreement with one another, that there's no need for violence in resolving one's pain and distress. There is hope. Every day we have a fresh chance to take our swords and spears of unacceptable impulses or idealizations and transform them into plowshares and pruning hooks of socially acceptable actions or behavior.

Come on people now
Smile on your brother
Everybody get together
Try to love one another
Right now

-The Youngbloods, Get Together

Jill Obata

Monday, December 4 – Micah 4:1-5

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. God shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.

When I was a young boy my mother decided to raise me as a Catholic. It was an unusual choice since my Dad was Jewish and my mother was Lutheran. But since my parents were divorced maybe it made more sense that I realized.

I went to Catholic grade school and Catholic high school. My religious education was very black and white: you must believe in the Word or you are wrong. The teachings had a very similar theme: you are a sinner and must work hard to gain God's forgiveness and grace to enter Heaven.

Whenever I read some of the passages in the Old Testament the cold fear of catechism runs down my spine. Micah 4:1-5 begins with "In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it." The end of this passage reads "Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever." I can feel Sister Mary's ruler poised over my hand already!

To me this passage means the believers of the one true God will have a wonderful life sitting "under their own vine and their own fig tree." The passage implies that those that follow other gods will not.

My vision of God is that he is very understanding. God made us as imperfect human beings and as such He understands the difficulty of us grasping what God is and fully believing the human interpretations of what God wants.

One of the reasons I attend a Presbyterian church is that I feel it is less dogmatic than the religion in which I was raised. I feel that being a Presbyterian means accepting other peoples' beliefs. It means not feeling that there is only one answer, namely our own, to religious questions but that there are a lot of maybes. Whether you are Presbyterian, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or any of the thousands of religions in the world, I think all that God asks of you is to be good, do the best you can and follow an ethical life.

By God's grace we live and breathe on this planet. No matter your religious beliefs or personal actions God loves you. My slight twist on the Micah passage is "You are born sitting under your own vine and fig tree. Go forth and be all that you can be."

Merry Christmas to All! Jeff Slavitz

Tuesday, December 5 – Micah 5:1-5a

Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Micah was a prophet. There are many ways in which people think of the prophets. Sometimes they are described as predictors of the future, and while many prophetic passages were actually written *after* the events they “foretold,” there are times when they do seem to be pointing to possible futures. Indeed, many Christians have understood passages such as this to be pointing to Jesus. Other times, prophets are remembered for their fiery challenges to the powers that be. Amos is scathing in his critique of various ruling authorities. Others still, recognize prophets for the comfort and hope they offer. 2nd Isaiah (chapters 40 on) contain such memorable refrains as “Comfort, O comfort my people” (40:1), and “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength and mount up with wings like eagles” (40:31).

Most of all, however, I think prophets are professional “surprisers.” They are constantly confronting what we think we know or expect with something totally different. They shake us from our accepted understandings of how things are and call us to a new (or old) way of being as individuals and as communities, a way more in tune with God’s desire for us.

This passage is no different. First, this season often leads us to pull in, gather with loved ones, and revel into singing “Silent Night.” This is certainly not bad, but Micah doesn’t allow us to stay there. As commentator Philip King puts it, Micah reminded his people that, “Religious worship without social justice was meaningless.”¹ The prophet doesn’t want us to pull in without also reaching out to those who suffer injustice.

Second, Micah questions the methods to which people turn for safety and wellbeing. He opens our passage saying, “Now you are walled around with a wall,” referring to fortifications erected against the potential incursion of the enemy Assyrians. Micah condemns the approach, noting that these opponents are an instrument of God used to expose the corruption of the peoples’ *own* leaders. Safety is in righteous leadership not in fortifying against a trumped-up “other.”

Third, Micah surprises yet again not by promising a warrior king to set things right. He doesn’t even use the word for king, opting instead for “ruler,” and speaking in terms of a shepherd.² This ruler will defy expectations, in Micah’s words, “and he shall be one of peace” (5:5).

May you allow this season to surprise you, to both draw you in *and* draw you out, to concern you with your own wellbeing *and* the plight of your neighbor, to call out wrong where you see it, and to long for the one of peace and to join in the way of peace.

Rob McClellan

¹ See *The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version* introduction to Micah.

² *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. VII, p. 570-571.

Wednesday, December 6 – Psalm 85:8-13

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for God will speak peace to God's people, to God's faithful, to those who turn to God in their hearts. Surely God's salvation is at hand for those who fear God, that God's glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before God, and will make a path for God's steps.

This is a psalm talking about peace, speaking about bringing love and faithfulness together, and it speaks about God giving goodness back to the people. The things spoken about in the Psalm still apply heavily to today. As more and more headlines speak to conflict and unrest throughout the world, it's important sometimes to remember such writings such as Psalm 85:8-13 and to remind ourselves that there is a promise of peace from God; however, the promise of peace sometimes is a little hard to hear. Phones, emails, all the various duties and technology of modern life steal our attention and it's important to take a step back sometimes and to just listen. This year as my "challenge," when you light the candle on Sunday or throughout this season of advent take 5, 10, maybe even 30 minutes and turn off your phone, find a nice quiet room without distractions, and listen. You can do it alone or with people - it doesn't really matter. What matters is listening and finding a moment of peace in the swirling vortex of today's modern world.

Grayson Spangenberg (Junior at Redwood)

Thursday, December 7 – 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for God's Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica around 50 A.D., just 20 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, and very early in Paul's ministry. The church in Thessalonica was one of the first strong congregations and Paul describes their faith in powerful terms. The "gospel came to you... with power, ...Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. ... Your faith in God has become known everywhere." Wow.

When people first come to know the gospel and feel the Holy Spirit, there is an excitement and energy that can sometimes be astounding. Over time, youthful exuberance often fades. It was like this for me. Now I find peace and guidance in hearing God's word and reflecting on Jesus, but the Lord's message is definitely not "ringing out from me in all the land," as Paul describes the effect of the Thessalonians.

This passage has brought me to reflect on how I might be a little more like the church in Thessalonica so that people might know I'm a Christian through my deeds, my faith, and by the way I receive others. It reminds me of this song I learned in nursery school many years ago, "They will know we are Christians by our Love, by our Love. They will know we are Christians by our Love."

How can I show and reflect the Love of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in MY day? My days are filled with tasks: pick-ups, drop-offs, homework, dinner, kids to bed, (repeat!), with an occasional coffee talk. So, within the structure of my current reality, how can I reflect the Holy Spirit? How will they know I'm a Christian? How can I show more Love right here, today?

Whether you're a student, a parent, an executive, whatever your occupation, think about how you can show that you're a Christian, in the activities you already do every day. Maybe you're the type of person who loves to share your faith with others. Bless you. Maybe you prefer to be a quiet imitator of Jesus' teachings. Either way, think of at least one concrete thing you can do to show more Love in your day, and ask God to bring you more inspirations.

Teala Warga

Friday, December 8 – Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy;’ for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” Then the LORD put out a hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

To Live is to Inherit the Earth

God empowers us, strengthens our resolve as we push forth

Into the falling grains of time and history, our legacy is mounted on the monument of our actions

No matter our age, abilities, and economic status, God has endowed us with the ability to strive for positive change in our community and society at large and calls us to do so. It is not our duty to fear the problems that plague our world, but instead our moral obligation to bring forth God’s love and beauty where problems exist by allowing God’s grace to inspire our hearts and enlighten our souls.

I am only a young teenager, but I have already learned that while there are many difficult problems society needs to solve, on a daily basis we can still make a significant and positive difference in the lives of others. Every lunch in middle school, I would volunteer my time in the special education classroom, where I would tutor, eat lunch with, and enjoy the company of students learning there. I believe I received as much love from them as I gave to them. Additionally, I was part of the Teaching Equity and Acceptance Club, where I learned that the words we choose to use can have an immense impact on those around us. We can choose to use divisive and hurtful words or words that connote acceptance and love. Without thinking, it is easy to choose words poorly. It was through these experiences that I learned that even through seemingly small actions, we can create significant positive change and begin to fulfill the will of God.

Strat Tolmie (Freshman at Branson)

Saturday, December 9 – Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

I really love the word "comfort" at the beginning of this passage, and I cherish the way God wants to comfort each of us. We all know that we live in turbulent times, and in order to keep our focus on God and not to give in to despair, we need a daily, even hourly, dose of comfort from our God. Jesus modeled for us how to turn to God in times of stress and how to live doing God's will not our own. It is from this place of comfort and of knowing that we are deeply loved by God that we are able to take divine love into a troubled world.

"Glory" is a beautiful and a powerful word. "The glory of the Lord" that Isaiah promises us was revealed in a rustic stable in Bethlehem when God took on human form. With the coming of Jesus, God gave all humanity the opportunity of being chosen, of being loved, and of creating a life affirming relationship with the divine. That glory was too big to be put in any box. It wasn't just for Israel or for followers of Jesus; it was all people everywhere in the entire world. That glory was so powerful that it changed the ancient world and continues to change our world today. "Fear not for I have redeemed you (says the Lord); I have summoned you by name; you are mine." (Is 43:1) That is a promise worth hanging on to, not only during Advent, but during the rest of the year as well.

Judy Friede

Sunday, December 10 – Isaiah 40:6-11

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and God's arm rules for God; God's reward is with God, and God's recompense before God. God will feed God's flock like a shepherd; God will gather the lambs in God's arms, and carry them in God's bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Surely the people are grass that withers and all their faithfulness, like the flowers of the field, falls because the breath of the Lord blows on them?! What!? How can the breath of the Lord do such a thing?

But then verse 8 shows us the truth - 'but the word of our God endures forever.' No matter what challenges happen in our lives - the disappointment of not getting that promotion at work, a difficult relationship, chronic health problems, financial stress, the loss of someone close to us, our unmet expectations, - GOD's word is everlasting and we can always trust and have faith in his Word that will comfort us in our life's journey. When life's storms come our way, we will weather them more bravely through praying and reading the word of God and having faith that the Lord is watching over us and will help us through.

The last three verses bring it home. The good news of the Lord should be shouted from the mountain top and we clearly see, through our unwavering faith and belief in His word, that all things will be ok and we will be rewarded by the love of our Almighty God.

As we wait and prepare for the birth of Jesus this Advent season, let's be remindful of the healing power of God's word and the enduring spirit that lives in all of us this holiday season.

Mike Shekoyan

Monday, December 11 – Psalm 27:1-6

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh - my adversaries and foes - they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in the LORD's temple. For the LORD will hide me in the LORD's shelter in the day of trouble; the LORD will conceal me under the cover of the LORD's tent; the LORD will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in the LORD's tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Rather than reading a written reflection today, you are invited to engage in the Benedictine practice of Lectio Divina (Divine Reading).

- 1) Find a space where you can sit quietly for several minutes. Take a few deep breaths to welcome your body, mind, heart, and soul to this space.
- 2) Read through the passage slowly. What word or phrase do you notice? Sit with that word or phrase for several minutes.
- 3) Read the passage again. What word or phrase do you notice this time? It might be the same or it might be different. Sit with that word or phrase for several minutes.
- 4) Read the passage a third time. In the silence that follows, reflect on the invitation for your life that this scripture offers.
- 5) Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for this time of contemplation and prayer.

This is but one way to practice Lectio Divina. There is no one “right” way to practice Lectio Divina. Don't worry about being right or wrong, simply rejoice in the opportunity to be quiet with God for a few moments in your day.

Tuesday, December 12 – Psalm 27:7-14

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! “Come,” my heart says, “seek God’s face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up. Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

The 27th Psalm emboldens us in the promise of Jesus Christ, of everlasting life, of patient strength in the face of the adversities that threaten to derail us from our blessed call. How do we remain steadfast in our commitment to our families and our community regardless of the challenges that face us? The psalmist reminds us that through prayer and faith, we find paths to our partnership with Christ, the Spirit and ultimately, God.

“There is nothing like the believing hope of eternal life, the foresights of that glory, and foretaste of those pleasures, to keep us from fainting under all calamities.” – Matthew Henry

Vince DeQuattro

Wednesday, December 13 – Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

To me, this Psalm is about the joy and laughter and happiness we get when God brings us where we are supposed to be. His will for us. Joy and happiness not from material things, but from being true to God's vision for us. Laughter, not as in a funny joke, but as being so full of happiness at God's way for us to "live the dream"! It's about being so happy that people around you want "what you're having"!

The second half describes to me that God can restore water in the desert and those who have been sad and crying can then shout (laugh) and be happy by having a God centered life.

Sue Traver

Thursday, December 14 - Philippians 3:12-16

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

When I agreed to write an Advent reflection, I was hoping to write on a really juicy passage, perhaps part of the Christmas story. Instead, I was assigned this excerpt from Paul's letter to the early church at Philippi. Paul does not typically put me in the Christmas spirit, I have to admit. Paul's admonition to "press on" and "[strain] forward" toward the goal is exhausting; at this time of year, I'm more in the mood for a leisurely stroll than a sprint. And what's the fun of "forgetting what lies behind"? It's much more tempting to live with one foot in the past and the other in the present – though that's a tough way to run a race.

But the verses that got my attention come at the end of the passage: ". . . if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained." There are two parts to this message: first, that God will let us know if there's something we've got wrong; and, second, that we need to act consistently with what we understand, even though our comprehension is incomplete or imperfect. That speaks to me in my everyday confusion. We are called to follow our internal compass as best we can, with the assurance that God will nudge us in the right direction.

And that, for me, is the Christmas gift of this passage. The Advent story is full of mysteries and misunderstandings. Think of Mary, who discovered that she was pregnant. What doubts and fears must she have had? And what about her husband-to-be Joseph, who was inclined to "dismiss her quietly"? Think of the shepherds in the fields, who were overwhelmed when "the glory of the Lord shone round around them" on Christmas Eve. In each case, God sent his angels to explain, to comfort, to nudge. And all three times, the angel message began with the same words: "Do not be afraid".

Where would we be if God hadn't provided those nudges to Mary and Joseph? What would be left of the Advent story if they hadn't "held fast" and been obedient to what God revealed to them?

What message does God have for each of us this Advent season? What goal should we be reaching toward? And what do we need to leave behind?

Jim Snipes

Friday, December 15 – John 1:1-5

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

In 4th grade, my daughter Elsa is studying energy and light. She was excited to finally get to use her long-memorized list to recite the colors of the visible spectrum, and who can blame her? The joy we feel from witnessing the spectacle of a rainbow is undeniable.

She was also fascinated to learn that humans see one spectrum of light, but other species can see light we cannot. And that there is a huge amount of light our eyes can't see, like x-rays and infrared light.

For my part, I was super excited to get to be the person to blow Elsa's mind about how color works:

"A red stop sign, for example, is not actually red..." I told her, pausing for maximum dramatic effect. "The light bounces off the stop sign into our eyes, and we "see" that wavelength as red. The same light bounces off the grass in a different wavelength, and we "see" that as green!"

I waited for her to be awestruck. Instead, she began to pelt me with hard questions:

"What color is the grass when it's night time? What if someone else is looking at the grass - is their green the same as my green? Can you use up all the light if there are a million people looking at the grass at the same time?"

I mumbled something about infinite amounts of light, and reminded her that humans aren't transparent, so really only a couple hundred people could be looking at the grass at the same time anyway, right?

She begrudgingly moved on.

"What happens to the light that doesn't bounce off of anything? Does it just keep going into space, and no one ever sees it? Is it light if no one sees it?"

I announced it was time for her bath.

After bath time (and some speedy googling on my part), I showed Elsa a picture of deep space, and explained that *we cannot see light, even the visible spectrum, unless it has an object to bounce off of.*

Frowning, she jabbed her finger at my screen, at the very darkest part of the space between the galaxies.

*"So, there is **VISIBLE** light **right there**?"* she demanded.

"Yep," I said, "loads of it!"

*"But I can't see it.. **no one** sees it?"*

"Right... but, if we put something in that space – even a **tiny speck of dust** – the light would bounce off the speck, and then we could see it!"

“Well that’s just sad, then,” she said, deflated, “All that light. Just wasted.”

And that’s when I realized what John 1:1-5 might be about.

God’s Light, when visible, is a joyful thing. It is love, it is comfort, it is grace. We are grateful for it, and – especially at Christmas – we see evidence of it all around us. Like the visible spectrum of the rainbow, there is so much beauty, and wonder, in what we can see of God’s light.

But perhaps there is even more wonder, and challenge, in all of God’s light that we cannot see.

Our faith tells us that even when all we see is Darkness, the Light is still there, ever-present, in abundance. “The Darkness does not overcome the Light” means that the Light is there, even when it is impossible to see. But we have a part to play in making it visible, too.

What if – just like visible light – God’s Light just keeps going off into space, imperceptible, until it finds something or someone to reflect it?

Our faith means believing that the Light is there, even in the inky darkness between stars.

**Perhaps our faith *also* means we must do our best to be the speck of dust
that the Light can bounce off of, making it visible to others.**

Porter Merriman

Saturday, December 16 – John 1:6-8

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

I will admit that I have a bit of a negative bias about the word “testify.” When I hear the word “testify” in a religious sense (as opposed to in a courtroom), I can’t help but think of a slick televangelist, with a very fundamentalist theology, giving his testimony to an auditorium filled with adoring fans. He (aren’t most televangelists male?) recounts how he has been saved, and then tells the people in attendance what they need to do to achieve their own salvation. In my mind, it is all very produced, very fake, and not at all Spirit-filled.

I am not proud of this stereotype, and I have worked to become better friends with the idea of testimony. At its most basic, to testify simply means to bear witness to, to give evidence of, or to make known. There is nothing wrong with that! In fact, testimony is crucial to our faith. Though we all have personal, individual experiences of God, so much of our faith journey happens in community ... through our relationships with one another. One of my most favorite ways to learn more about God’s love is by hearing someone else describe how they have experienced God’s love. I find that I am a better follower of Jesus when I am inspired by how others have decided to follow Jesus. I am more aware of the Holy Spirit blowing and dancing through my life when I hear from others how they have been touched by the Spirit.

The Advent season is about waiting and preparing for the birth of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this year, one of the ways we might prepare is by sharing our testimony. Why is Jesus’ birth important to you? How do you experience Christ’s light shining in the darkness ... a light that no darkness can overcome? How might sharing your experience of God’s love made known to us in a tiny baby help someone else to experience God’s abundant and unconditional love?

Bethany Nelson

Sunday, December 17 – Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

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

Nothing like a simple little bible passage from Matthew - one that any of us has heard hundreds of times - to get my head spinning deep into contemplation in the Advent season! For me this can be one of the most challenging excerpts in the good book and one that I am humbled to even comment on as a layman or even a man for that matter.

Our faith is not alone in the story of miraculous birth and I choose not to focus on debating that particular aspect of this passage. My understanding of the Trinity is limited as well. My feeling is one of mystery that language and semantics are woefully ill equipped to explain. This passage really boils down to faith for me.

Here Joseph is confronted with a situation as puzzling as the most esoteric Zen koan (and of course we are as well). He has a marriage "contract" with Mary and learns she is pregnant even though they have not been a couple. He contemplates a quiet divorce to spare her the incredible shame in the community as well as the possibility of being stoned to death (completely acceptable at that time for such a situation)! Or he can move forward with his life to witness the unfolding conundrum we all share as human beings.

In my life I am constantly amazed by existence of life here on earth and in the cosmos. What rings true for me during Advent and Christmas is that God is the source of all life be it you, a star, a lamb, or Jesus. Nothing happens without the life force emanating from the one true source. Joseph chose to embrace the Holy Spirit in a monumental way. My wish is that all of us are able to accept even a fraction of God's blessing and share it as we are able. As it has been said, let the peace which passes all understanding be with you now and forever. Amen.

Steve Anderson

Monday, December 18 – Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

God sent an angel to Mary

The angel told Mary she would have a child, Jesus, the son of God

Mary was perplexed

"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

You feel that God is calling you

You should do something, deep down, you know it is right

But you are unsure

Where are the angels, for you hear no voice?

Mary had faith in God

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"

She promised to be the Lord's servant

Believed in God's plan for her.

You must have faith in God, listen to God's call

Be a servant of the Lord, believe in God's plan for you

Do not be afraid

"For nothing will be impossible with God."

Maria Adkins (7th grader at Mill Valley Middle)

Tuesday, December 19 – Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

One, Elizabeth, is an older woman who has been barren throughout her marriage; the other, Mary, is a virgin about to be married. Each is visited by an angel who tells her that God has selected her to bear a child who will do wonderful things. Although mystified by the angel's message, each woman is humbled that God has so honored her and has faith that the promised son will be borne to her. It is each woman's unshakable trust in God's improbable promise that resonates deeply in me during this Christmas season.

Elizabeth, who had been unable to conceive for many, many years, trusted that she had been selected by God to give birth to John the Baptist. Mary, who was still a virgin, truly believed that she would become the mother of Jesus, the long-awaited Son of God. Given the improbability of their situations, these were pure acts of faith that truly inspire. Each woman, while perplexed when the angel first shared God's plan with her, completely embraced her unlikely role and joyously served her purpose.

The miraculous nature of so much of the story of Christ's birth overwhelms the analytical, circumspect part of me that often finds reason to doubt. The selection of Elizabeth and Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the appearance of the star, the birth in the manger, the visit by the wise men, Herod's inability to locate the site of Christ's birth – these are not facts to be scrutinized but rather manifestations of a trust in God's grand design. It is right to give God glory and praise; Christ the Savior is born in Bethlehem. Hallelujah!!

Ted Bayer

Wednesday, December 20 - Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to God's descendants forever."

As we move through our (mostly) comfortable lives, it is tempting to dedicate our time and attention to filling ourselves up, collecting emblems of our own worth: personal achievements, professional success, beautiful homes, fashionable clothes, amazing experiences. In the midst of these efforts, we risk losing sight of the fear and reverence that God's grace merits.

God has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

In the passage, humility, fear and reverence lead to mercy. Pride and attention focused inward lead to sorrow, to being scattered and sent away, empty. When our focus is misdirected, we risk missing the good things that the Lord offers to fill us.

Throughout the Advent season, we see beautiful decorations, enjoy festive celebrations and reflect on the last year. We count our blessings as we consider what we desire, or what we've secured or achieved or obtained. In the same season, we encounter increased reminders of the needy in our communities and elsewhere, and we face opportunities to participate in God's work of filling up. Perhaps this contrast is not so different from the passage---on the one hand, we celebrate, adorn, take pride; on the other, we encounter need and hurt and grief.

Mary's song is an inspiration to reframe how we experience the near-constant reminders of the holiday, to remember that the season is ultimately a time for appreciating the humble: a young couple with no safe place to welcome a life into the world; the vulnerability of a newborn baby; our fundamental imperfection and need for grace. As we reflect on the reality of our flawed condition and the power of God's love, may we recognize our hunger for the good things and the emptiness of our own pursuits. May we glorify God and our spirits rejoice in the mercy and blessings of the Lord.

Amanda Busch

Thursday, December 21 - Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

1185076

That was my student ID number in college. Whenever I went to the Registrar's office or had to conduct some sort of official business with the school they never asked for my name, they asked for my number. I was just a number.

204

That was my number for our dinner order at the O'Hare Airport the other night. I have the receipt to prove it. We ordered chicken nuggets, french fries, and a drink. When our order was ready they didn't say they said, "204!" I knew they were referring to me.

H3400545571

That was our Hertz car rental reservation number. At the time you'll be reading this we will have long returned the car and paid the bill so I'm hoping you can't do any damage with it. But when I called to double check if they had two car seats for us they didn't ask for my name. They asked for that number.

I also have other numbers that some people refer to me as. Driver license numbers, social security numbers, credit card account numbers, etc which I choose not to share with you. Sorry.

It's a very impersonal thing don't you think? Parents go to great lengths to pick the right name for you. The name means something to them, to your loved ones, and even to you personally. Yet many times we're referred to as a number.

How impersonal. How disrespectful. How sad.

Jesus was a number.

Jeff Shankle

Friday, December 22 - Luke 2:8-14

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”*

When we first read this, we immediately felt compassion for the shepherds in the field and the terror they must have felt when the angel of the Lord approached them. We related to a similar fear we had after getting the call from our adoption social worker seemingly out of nowhere, with reports of a newborn that would be coming into our lives with only two weeks to prepare. We imagine the shepherds must have felt immediate terror and continued trepidation as they received the message of the angel and even after, as the arrival of Jesus perhaps left them feeling unprepared and not knowing what to expect. This was very much how we felt when approached with the prospect of becoming “insta-parents.” After receiving word of the impending birth of our son, we were filled with joy, anxiety, and the immediate urge to go on a super market sweep through Target to make sure we had everything we needed for baby’s arrival. Ultimately, similar to Jesus’s arrival, we realized there were minimal things we needed to “prepare” and the most important was going to be readying ourselves to offer love and adoration to this child. Similarly, that is really what the Lord wants of us – love and adoration – for Jesus and each other. The Lord also asks for one other item though and that is faith. Lauren and I felt “keeping the faith” is another message seen in this scripture. The angel asks the shepherds not to have fear, but to have faith that the blessed arrival of Jesus will bring “good news” and “great joy.” These words can be applicable to many phases of life in which the other side of a decision or life change is unknown and carries intrinsic fear and anxiety. But, when we are faced with such unknowns, we should remember the scripture above and work towards faith that the Lord has a plan and while the signs may not be as obvious as a baby laying in a manger, he will provide and bring peace to those that have faith. And, when your faith falters and fear creeps in, think of those unexpected shepherds in Luke 2:8-14 and how scared they must have been, but also remember the reassurance and message of love the Lord provided those shepherds and know the Lord offers you the same.

Cassie and Lauren Kline-Nunnally

Saturday, December 23 - Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

How does the Lord call us?

How do we know we are following the path God intends for us?

This passage describes the actions the shepherds took after an angel of the Lord told them what was happening at this incredible time and what they should do in response. It seems very easy as I read this chapter in Luke to know exactly what God intended the shepherds to do here and what path they were expected to take. I wonder if it was that clear to them. I wonder what the angel of the Lord looked like standing before them. I wonder if an angel of the Lord has stood before me, and I did not notice. Have I been called and did not listen?

My family recently made the significant move from Colorado to California and while it was certainly a nice job offer that initiated the move and Marin is certainly a wonderful place to live, that doesn't entirely explain the decision. We were very happy in Colorado with a good job and good schools and a strong social network. I believe God called us to San Francisco, and yet I struggle to explain how I know this. I wonder as I read this passage if the shepherds struggled to explain how they knew this child was Christ the Lord.

God has a plan and a path for us. I believe this absolutely. There are days I feel I know exactly what it is and other days I feel lost and struggle to find any greater purpose. An angel of the Lord stood before these shepherds and told them the path they were to take. Why can't that happen to me? Why can't, after my first cup of coffee of course, an angel stand before me each morning and tell me where I need to go and what I need to do that day to follow God's path? Every day I am challenged with making decisions regarding what is best for my patients, both the one in front of me and the many that our hospital cares for, and an angel of the Lord could make those decisions much easier.

How do I know every day for everything I do that I am following God's path? What was it like for the shepherds in this passage to follow one of the most incredible paths I can imagine? Perhaps I have the opportunity to do exactly that. Perhaps God is speaking to me in plain sight, and I am not seeing, or in a clear voice and I am not hearing.

May God grant me the ability to see and hear my direction, and the wisdom and ability to follow it.

Chris Colwell

Sunday, December 24 – Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Bethany shared a wonderful message in her November 12th sermon that provides relevance for me as I reflect on these verses. Her message was that uncertainty and confusion exist when one has yet to trust in God’s love. A clear path comes into view once the choice is made. Since of course God has already chosen us.

One can only imagine the curious “calling” these foreigners must have felt to prepare their camels, pack precious riches and begin a long and uncharted journey to an uncertain destination. But they must have had a sense of their power and true destiny when they were led to go, even with so much uncertainty.

Much about these Wise Men remain a mystery even today. Were there 2 or 3 of them? Did they even know one another when they started their journey? How did they band together since it seems they were from different countries? These mysteries indeed add a richness and wonder to this magical story. However, these unknowns feel less important to the actual story as it unfolded. Especially how full of certainty these men must have felt once they departed from King Herod’s mandatory meeting. Surely they could sense Herod’s fear of another more powerful king’s imminent arrival.

God placed a clear sign—a brilliant star into a cloudless night— to illuminate this path for the Wise Men to their final destination to greet the true King. By not returning to Herod with the Great News, indeed they had been emboldened through their important series of choices. Which of course charted the path for our collective destiny.

What a gift these Wise Men gave to us all!

Erin Elliott