



NEW BRUNSWICK  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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# LOOKING UP, LOOKING FORWARD

ADVENT-CHRISTMAS DAILY DEVOTIONAL  
DECEMBER 3-25, 2023

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## Foreword

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Grace and peace! Community and Friends of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, As we begin this holy season of Advent and Christmas, we also begin a new year of the liturgical calendar. When we consider a new year, like another birthday, we come ready for the party celebration. We dress up, we buy gifts, we mark our calendars, we are filled with excitement.

This devotional booklet comes to us with daily headlines of entrenched warfare in Israel and Gaza, Ukraine and Russia, and deep polarization in our country. The realities of existential death, loss, hurt, and pain are palpable. We cannot minimize this, nor ought we. This is the fragile, fractured world for which God's unfailing and unending love pursues. Amidst the glitter of Christmas lights, choral cantatas, gift-giving, and all the traditional happenings of this season, we are mindful and ever heartfelt of the orphaned, the widowed, the houseless, the war-ravaged, the grieving, the dying, the lonely, the sick, the one who is at their wit's end to hold down a job, keep a family together, saying goodbye to a marriage that once was. This is our story. This is the human history that lives on today, clothed in hope. Our soul's longing and yearning cascade heavenward as whispered prayers, with feet planted in the very world which the Christ-Child was born.

It is fitting, then, that our Doctor of Ministry student (in Transformational Preaching), Ann Tait, came up with our devotional booklet theme, "Looking Up, Looking Forward." This theme is inspired by the art installation outside Mast Chapel depicting orange flames. That sculpture serves as this booklet's front cover. This devotional booklet has been sponsored by the Student Society of Inquiry and Ministry (SSIM), the elected student leadership of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The SSIM, in partnership with the Office of Student Affairs, invited current students, faculty, and staff to contribute a reflection or a prayer based on one of the Scripture lectionary texts for that designated day of the Advent-Christmas calendar, Year B.

May you, your loved ones, and communities be blessed by these daily devotionals and prayers. Let us recommit to loving, serving, and living for the Word who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

In the One, Jesus the Christ,



**Rev. Neal D. Presa, PhD**

*Vice President of Student Affairs and Vocational Outreach  
Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

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# First Sunday of Advent December 3, 2023

## 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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As we head into this season of waiting, we anticipate the most exciting thing possible – the birth of Jesus. We wait in hope that at last, as promised in the birth of the Messiah, the suffering of this world will give way to the glory of God’s kingdom in the return of the Messiah.

But are we waiting confidently and in conviction of the truth? While we wait, are we able to live out our faith in the context of our broken world?

In his greeting to the Corinthians, Paul reminds a struggling people that because of God’s grace, even as they wait for the coming of Jesus Christ, they are not lacking in any spiritual gifts. He reminds them that God will strengthen them even as they struggle, right to the end.

Paul’s words are an invitation to the Corinthians to look up and to look forward – to look up to God, to seek God’s grace, and to look forward to the revelation of Jesus Christ. His words are an invitation to us, too. When we are discouraged by the times we live in, when we are so frustrated, so full of sorrow, Paul invites us to look up to God’s grace, and to look forward to Jesus’ coming, to let God strengthen us right to the end. Paul invites us to reignite the light of God inside of us so that we may let it shine throughout the world, one in such great need of that beautiful light.

### Prayer

Precious and redeeming God, we wait in heady anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. We rejoice in the redemptive gift we receive in Jesus Christ, and praise your holy name for it. We ask you in this time of waiting to inspire us to seek your grace, to look up to you. We ask you to strengthen us in this time of struggle and uncertainty, so that we may look forward to when Christ comes again, and your glory truly comes on earth. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

*Heather Wilson is a student in the Master of Divinity program*

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Monday, December 4, 2023

**Micah 4:1-5**

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Maybe it is just me, but sometimes I skip over reading the Bible passage in devotional readings. So, if you are anything like me, let me encourage you to take a moment with Micah 4:1-5 before continuing.

We look forward to the day when everything is plowshares and pruning hooks, but today is not that day. For those in Ukraine, the Holy Land, Myanmar, Sudan, and countless other places it continues to be spears and swords. The prophet Micah speaks of the “days to come,” the days of the coming Messiah. Our hearts and our imaginations quickly jump to verses that talk of not developing the industry of war, to words of security and contentment in our own gardens, and to days of peace – “no one shall make them afraid.” It is beautiful imagery and yet has the scent of unrealistic idealism.

This Advent, I encourage you to sit for a moment not in the vision of what is to come, not in the heartache of today, but in the in-between. What is between here and there is a mountain that is higher than all the hills. A place where people flock, and one group says to another, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.” To make it forward, we must look up!

Advent is a season of waiting (and retailers show how desperately our society wants Christmas to arrive). In waiting, let us not fix our eyes into the future, but shift our view up to the highest mountain. It is no physical place here on earth, but it is the most profound truths here on earth. It is the instruction we need brought by the Hebrew scriptures, by the New Testament writers, and by the One whose birth we celebrate each Christmas – Jesus Christ. This highest of high is where “he may teach us his way.” With this knowledge “we may walk in his paths.” This is what flows from the highest mountain.

As you wait for what will be, seek once again the truth that transforms and “walk in the name of the Lord our God.” Do not focus on the problems of the world, nor the promise of peace, but look to the Word of the Lord. To make it forward, we must look up!

**Prayer**

Lord God, teach me your ways that are higher, instruct me in your truths that are eternal, and guide me in this world that I may fully walk in your ways. I lift up my vision that I may see the One who is high and lifted up – the author and perfecter of my faith – so that I may make it through my seasons of waiting and experience your glory. In the name of Christ, Amen.

*Dirk Gieser is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry-Transformational Preaching program*

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Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Psalm 79

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**“True Love and True Justice”**

This lament, this cry to YHWH, echo Psalms 44 and 74. Central to this lamentation is the question of YHWH’s perceived anger toward the chosen people of the Fire of Sinai. This psalm questions, prays, and hopes. It is a model for our supplication and petitions.

Begin with lament (79:1–4). Focus on your grief caused by being human and having to endure human pain and trials. Remember your losses and the ones you have lost. But also remember you are the godly remnant. Remember your enemies do not care that you belong to YHWH. They disregard your life and the lives of those you love. Lament that many who joined the Ship of Zion are overwhelmed with the reproach and scorn of a world that questions even the existence of YHWH.

Know you have cause to question the wounding and turmoil of those receiving severe blows of loss, suffering, poverty, oppression, and disenfranchisement. Know that YHWH is intensely aware and consumed by the pain of your village.

After a breath of grace and release of the pain and sorrow from your lament, remember and own your failures and iniquities. Then ask YHWH to have compassion on those who call out for strength and faith. Work, internally, to find compassion for those you love without regret or remorse. Work to love yourself and accept YHWH’s grace and forgiveness for your desiring vengeance and punishment on those who harm you and yours. Work to move beyond your hatred and your tendency to reject your enemies. Work to avoid retribution; replace that desire with a strong urge for justice.

Accept the truth, that through YHWH we find love, compassion, mercy, and grace for all people. Know that as recipients of YHWH’s grace and mercy, we are called to offer grace and mercy to all others during this Advent season. Even our enemies are at peace with us because we have love, compassion, and mercy toward them.

Prayer

YHWH, we give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise. Help us remember that You love all people and that we are called to do the same. Amen.

Reflection Question

As you grapple with life’s challenges and search for solutions, how do you celebrate and embody YHWH’s call to love and to justice?

*Micah L. McCreary is President, RCA General Synod Professor,  
and the McCreary–Livingston Professor of Theology*

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Wednesday, December 6, 2023

Micah 5:1-5a

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**“The One of Peace”**

In this fragmented time and space in which we live, we bemoan the absence of peace in our world, our country, our community, and in our lives. The recent world events give pause to consider if chaos is all that can be expected. How can such a polarized society find a way to wholeness?

This is the season of expectation and anticipation. It is a time to be reminded of the lowly entrance into the world of the promised Messiah in a most unlikely place and under less-than-ideal conditions. Yet, with the human entrance of Jesus, came our divine eternal peace.

The prophet Micah declared that “he shall be the one of peace.” Amid the chaos that so engulfs our present existence, we look with hope to the promise ushered into the world that is still being fulfilled.

Peace is our inheritance. Our wholeness lies within as we embrace the peace Christ offers. When we pass “the one who is peace,” we can expect transformation to follow. With great joy we share our peace. With great hope we reclaim our wholeness. With great faith we expect change.

Come, Lord Jesus!

**Prayer**

Great and loving God, we are excited to rehearse your Son, Jesus, coming into this world and offering us his peace. Amen.

*Faye Taylor is Assistant Professor of Spiritual Formation & Field Education  
and Director of Field Education & Career Services*

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# Thursday, December 7, 2023

## Psalm 85

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### Reflective Poem

With the Lord there is only light  
No more Darkness, No more Night.  
Look to the Lord, for the Lord is in your sight  
And the Lord will win the fight.  
Sin is all around  
But with the Lord, you are safe, you are sound.  
Hear these words my dear  
The Lord is always near.  
For the Lord is faithful and  
With the Lord there is no fear.  
For the Lord knows your name,  
With the Lord, there is no blame,  
With the Lord, there is no shame.  
As the Lord holds your hand,  
Know that you are part of the eternal plan.  
So be prepared and be awake  
Stay strong as you wait.

Listen to what I say  
The Lord is faithful and does not play  
Know that the Lord is the one true love  
And you are loved from above.  
Feel the kiss of peace  
But do not fall asleep,  
Because righteousness is yours  
As you turn the knob and open the door.

*Janet Cardillo is a student in the Master of Divinity program*

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# Friday, December 8, 2023

## Psalm 85

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Psalm 85:8-12 (NIV) says “I will listen to what God of the Lord will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints, let them not return to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, and his glory may dwell in our land, love and faithfulness, meet together, righteousness in peace kiss each other faithfulness, brings forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from the heavens. The Lord will, indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him, and prepare the way for his steps.”

As we are coming off of the fall harvest, and still benefiting from its goodness, I think about the theme of this series and these verses together. We thank God when the harvest is bountiful, and then we say, “Where are you God?” when there is drought. We need to remember to continually look up and look forward.

My mother was incredibly optimistic, and most of that has rubbed off on me, but there are dry spells, and dark days that can still rattle me. There have been some of those days this last year. With God’s faithfulness and God’s promises, we continue to move forward, remembering of the birth of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. When the world around us seems to be wrought with hate, war, and uncertainty, we must look to God. When the days are bright and cheery and wonderful, we must look to God as we approach the birth. It is good to wonder and marvel at the great God we serve. There is joy this season, we are reminded of this during Advent. God will bring light in the midst of darkness in the world.

### Prayer

God our Savior, prepare us this season and every moment to remember and witness the coming of Your light in Jesus Christ. Direct our heart and our vision to You. Amen.

*Laura Osborne is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry–Missiology & Global Christianity program*

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Saturday, December 9, 2023

**Ezekiel 36:24-28**

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“I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (NRSV)

It can be difficult, nay impossible to look up or look forward when we are feeling weighed down, when our bodies feel sluggish and our feet seem to be sinking into the ground, when the daily obligations and burdens are piled upon us, when we are overwhelmed by all that is happening to and around us. It can be impossible to simply look up, to look forward. Our eyes are squarely focused on the ground beneath us.

In a time such as this in our nation and our world, with war and violence raging, with colonialism and racial inequity festering, with socio-economic injustice spreading, we may find ourselves feeling weighed down and staring at the small bit of ground at our feet. Yet, we are reminded by this text from the prophet Ezekiel, that we need not stay in this place. Writing to a people in Exile who had ceased listening to God’s word for them, Ezekiel reminds the people that God’s promises are greater than their current troubles and transgressions. God’s promises will allow them, nay compel them to look up and look forward to the fulfillment of their hope.

This, I believe is the word we need from God this day, for we need to be reminded that a heart made like stone by our own concerns and the concerns of the world, need not continue to weigh us down. For God promises to give us a new heart, one that is filled with the hope and joy of God’s promises fulfilled in our lives.

### Prayer

God of hope and promise, help us to lift our eyes to see the possibilities for something different in our lives. Enliven our spirits that we might be filled with renewed energy to live as you have called us to live. Jolt our hearts to beat for you and for your people each and every day. Amen.

*Mark Pettis is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry-Missiology & Global Christianity program*

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## Second Sunday of Advent December 10, 2023

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

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Who would have thought that in our lifetime over 21 centuries following God's creation, we would witness yet another Holocaust? At the outset of America, European colonizers killed over 56 million Indigenous Americans in their quest to dominate North America. Was that not a Holocaust? During the transatlantic slave trade when Africans were stolen from their native lands and shipped to America it is estimated that almost 60 million lives were lost during this African Holocaust. For those that survived the grave conditions of the middle passage they were sold into chattel slavery for almost 350 years resulting in the loss of millions of lives at the hands of White Christian Imperialism slave traders. This harsh inhumane treatment and senseless loss of lives continues to be perpetuated for over 150 years of racial persecution, police brutality, violence and untold loss of lives. During WWII, between 1941-1945, the German Nazi regime incinerated over 6 million men, women, children, gay, and disabled European Jews during the Jewish Holocaust. After all these atrocities, who would have thought the world would be dealing with the second year of unprovoked Russian military aggression towards the people of Ukraine?

With so much pain, grief, despair, wars, violence and hate crimes being presently perpetrated in our world today, humanity is in desperate need of Peace. In the Book of Psalms, David provides a clear description of how to receive the supernatural Peace that only God can grant which far surpasses humanities' understanding and takes away all doubt, darkness, and fears. David proclaims, "God the Lord will speak peace to God 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" (Psalm 85:8-9).

Let all who love God and all who desire to love God continue to seek God's Peace individually in their hearts as they seek God's Peace to end conflict and destruction around the world.

### Prayer Of Lament

Spirit of the Living God, Creator of all life; You are a mighty God and the Prince of Peace. Look upon our world, with all the evil-driven violence, both Initiated and perpetrated by the unregenerated heart. Transform the hearts of humanity. Make us new creatures willing to fight for your justice. Give us courage to right the wrongs of cruelty.

For those families and friends of loved ones who have been ripped out of existence far too soon, grant your comfort. For those who are experiencing overwhelming grief over the loss of everything including their homes and countries, be their Peace. For those who are looking for hope in a strange land, miraculously make ways of provision.

In the Name of the mighty one, the soon coming King, who loves us all, Amen.

*Kelly Williams is a student in both the Master of Divinity  
and the Master of Arts in Pastoral Care & Counseling programs*

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# Monday, December 11, 2023

## Isaiah 26:7-15 and Acts 2:37-42

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Trouble surrounds Isaiah's prophetic assurances of a "level path" for the righteous. Situated amid what is often called Isaiah's "Little Apocalypse," affirmations of what is yet to come are by no means hollow. The prophet proclaims justice for all earth and all creation not in the "best of times," but in the "worst of times." How much more then, during this season of Advent, do we recall that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ comes in the sequence of a long and tortured history of the world and of God's people. In like manner, the Holy Spirit and the new fellowship of believers in Acts 2:37-42 comes during turbulent and threatening political orders.

Christ comes that we might experience security amid our own conflicts and polarities in the world. Still, a world rife with unresolved conflict challenges our spiritual well-being. Often, we anchor self-worth through winning arguments or trying to find solace through avoiding reckoning with devastation, sadness, and grief. Quickly, we find these paths lead to only more anxiety and stress. Yet by leaning into the reality of Christ's presence within us, we find higher ground, a level path, upon which we touch base with the Divine's largesse of heart and mind. Through Christ's coming we can embrace the world's polarities to be agents of understanding, reconciliation, and healing. We find meaning and purpose in our shared humanity. We experience hope, compassion and the courage with gifts from the Divine to serve others and act justly.

### Prayer

O Divine One, show us through your Spirit how to be a peacemaker, not merely a peacekeeper, as Jesus taught us "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God." As we encounter conflicts, give us understanding and compassion to walk the level-ground of the righteous in Christ. Give us wisdom to accept and apply our appointed gifts to enact justice where it is within our ability to do. Give us a vision for the betterment of those within our communities and the love to move forward in action. In the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

*Charles M. Rix is Director of the M.A. in  
Theological Studies & Ministry Studies programs*

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# Tuesday, December 12, 2023

## Psalm 27

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King David was familiar with peril. He understood that crises were periods of instability. He knew that fleeing impending danger meant finding a place to attend to his basic needs and to connect with The Sacred. David was deeply connected to his body, his wild soul, and the Creator of that soul. He had an uncanny ability to see himself through the eyes of his Lord - his Great Protector, Nurturer, and Ally. This deep, sacred connection provided the space for David to delve into fear, anguish, and uncertainty. Grief, loss, betrayal, abandonment, and rejection left him raw and exposed. His heart was broken. "Don't leave me now; don't abandon me", <sup>1</sup> he petitioned.

Vulnerability weaves a web throughout this text. Oprah Winfrey describes vulnerability as, "Being willing to express the truth no matter what, the truth of who you are... the core of what you're feeling at any given moment. It's being able to open up your soul and let it flow." <sup>2</sup> Vulnerability is having the courage to express an intimate need, desire, question, or holy longing. It is equally being unsure of oneself and one's ability to persevere, to change, or to create something new. It is questioning whether healing and wholeness is possible. It is emotional exposure. It is asking the Great Communicator, "Where do I go from here?", and patiently waiting for the answer.

Vulnerability can be a gateway to transcendence. Through it, we recognize our limitations, we open ourselves to seeking wise counsel, and to experience wholeness. We see ourselves with clarity, communicate pain, shame, and discomfort, and take courage in the One who permeates our in-breath and out-breath. It allows us to ask for help, to use discernment, and to walk forward with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that aid us in our journey. It is the opportunity to see Grace, Mercy, and Wisdom in all things.

## Prayer

Great Protector, hold me in the palm of Your hand. Wrap Your fingers around me. Press me to Your chest so that the rhythm of Your heartbeat calms my fears. Remind me that darkness holds the great mysteries of life, and that I can trust You to carry me to the light. Surround me with Your love.

*Rae Johnson-Moonstone is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry-Pastoral Care and Counseling program*

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 27:9

<sup>2</sup> Brown, B. (2018, April 20). SuperSoul Conversations: Oprah's Moving Definition of Vulnerability [Interview of Oprah Winfrey]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMRI6SrCWXg>

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Wednesday, December 13, 2023

**Malachi 2:17-3:1**

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“You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, “How have we wearied [God]?”  
By saying, “All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and [God] delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to [God’s] temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, is coming, says the Lord of hosts.” (NRSV)

The last section of this Malachi passage reminds me of a conversation between a child and a parent. Imagine a parent who has been worn down by their child. The child continues to disobey, have excuses, or just make stuff up that isn’t true. The parent looks for ways to help the child grow past this. They try to meet the needs of the child where they are at and to speak truth to them. They may try several different tactics, just as God tried many different ways of dealing with the Israelites including sending prophets like Malachi to speak truth to them. At this point though God knows something more is needed, which is when God says “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to God’s temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come”, at the beginning of chapter 3.”

God sent Jesus as a fulfillment of the covenant, knowing that we as a people had a need and desire for a savior. This advent season we wait in anticipation to celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ, the answer to our need.

Let us pray together:

**Prayer**

Almighty God, thank you for listening to us. Thank you for being an ever-attentive parent, even when we make you weary. Thank you for sending your Son to fulfill your covenant with us. We praise you for your amazing grace and love that you have shown to us. Give us the power and strength to show our appreciate through our lives. It is in your glorious name we pray, Amen.

*Amanda Bruehl is Vice President and Chief Operations Officer*

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Thursday, December 14, 2023

**Habakkuk 2:1-5**

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My students know that my favorite prophet is Habakkuk. This book is often grouped in the collection called “Minor Prophets” as the book is only three chapters long, sandwiched between Nahum and Zephaniah. Habakkuk is not as well known as the usual majors – Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah.

But Habakkuk is far from being in the minor leagues; he belongs in the majors. He is one whom I characterized as Job minus three meddling friends (see my volume on *Habakkuk and Ascension Theology*, Palgrave 2018). Habakkuk resolves in three chapters what it took Job in 42 chapters. Habakkuk is the honest, no-holds barred advocate whom you would want on your side in a courtroom, in a back alley brawl, in arguing with that intransigent church elder who just won’t back down, or that stubborn relative who insists on doing Christmas their way. Habakkuk knows his community, he knows that justice and righteousness ought to prevail. Habakkuk knows God. And more importantly, God knows Habakkuk.

It’s on the basis of that strong, steadfast relationship that Habakkuk can unleash his and his community’s complaints in the opening salvo, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (Hab 1:2) You can feel the frustration, you can sense the bewilderment. Has the living God been asleep at the wheel? Pay attention, Lord. Look around.

Here’s what the lectionary text says: “Then the Lord answered me and said, ‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time, it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay’” (Hab 2:2-3). Countless generations of God’s people have picked up this book and read that passage. Today, in this Advent season in 2023, we read that passage and ask, what is God’s vision, God’s message for us? We don’t want that to be delayed.

It’s enough for me to have the timeless message that the living God, revealed in Christ, abides with us still. That’s enough for me. It’s not a glittery message; it’s the gift of faith, which as Advent prepares us, makes the way to receive and trust in that message again and again. As Habakkuk’s message says, the vision written on tablets needs a runner to read it and to share it. Come on beloved, let’s get to it.

### Prayer

We turn to You, living God for we trust in You, and in You only. Help us in our unbelief, to behold of Your presence and of Your love that never let’s us go. Amen.

*Neal D. Presa is Vice President of Student Affairs & Vocational Outreach  
and Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

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# Friday, December 15, 2023

## Psalm 126

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Psalm 126 is the seventh psalm of the collection of fifteen psalms known as “A Song of Ascents” and it is one of two in this collection identified as a community lament. The Song of Ascents were sung by “psalm-singers” of the past in remembrance of God’s promises and power of restoration for their future. These heartfelt lyrics of trust, petition, and praise for encouragement, joy, and peace could still be felt today.

<sup>3</sup> We as God’s children can receive the same encouragement, joy, and peace from the “Same God” of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I believe as we reflect on the following song lyrics from a contemporary praise song, we will be reminded of God’s goodness, God’s promises, and God’s power of restoration in our daily lives.

### “The Same God” <sup>4</sup> (abridged)

*You heard Your children then  
You hear Your children now  
You are the same God*

*You moved in power then  
God, move in power now  
You are the same God*

*You answered prayers back then  
And You will answer now  
You are the same God*

*You were a healer then  
You are a healer now  
You are the same God*

*You were providing then  
You are providing now  
You are the same God*

*You were a savior then  
You are a savior now  
You are the same God*

So together, during this second week of Advent, let us continue to be inspired, empowered, and encouraged, as well as joyful, through our expressions of worship and love by singing songs of remembrance, celebration, and commemoration about the birth of Jesus and in anticipation of the second coming of Christ.

## Prayer

Gracious and righteous God, You are our true joy, hope, and confidence for daily encouragement. We can trust You with the details of our lives as the Creator of life, as the “Same God!” Hear our prayers dear Lord, as we stay connected to You. Lord, You are our hope and redeemer, we thank you for Jesus Christ! Amen.

*Wilma Porter is a student in the Master of Arts in Theological Studies program*

<sup>3</sup> Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, and Beth Tanner, 913.

<sup>4</sup> Elevation Worship 2022. Featuring Jonsal Barrientes. “Same God,” by Steven Furtick, Brandon Lake, Pat Barrett, Chris Brown. Recorded January 21, 2022. Lion. Capitol Cmg Genesis, Be Essential Songs, Bethel Music Publishing, Housefires Sounds, Maverick City Publishing Worldwide, Brandon Lake Music.

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# December 16, 2023

## Habakkuk 3: 17-19

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<sup>17</sup> Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.

### Reflection

Sometimes when I hear about a great saint I am overwhelmed by the magnitude of the holy works for which they are remembered. But one day in 2013 I was attending a brief, weekday Eucharist service in an Episcopal Church in my home state of Florida when I felt strangely close and connected to the woman whose death was being commemorated: Lillian Hunt Trasher. The minister shared the story of a young girl from Florida who by the eve of her death, December 16, 1961, was widely known in her adopted community of Egypt as “Mama” and celebrated internationally as the “Nile Mother” of Egypt. How did the Lord call and lead her to such heights?

When Trasher was in her late teens, reading the Bible led her to commit her life to Jesus Christ. She attended Bible college in North Carolina, worked at an orphanage, and attended Bible school in South Carolina where she received the infilling of the Holy Spirit. I identified with her story. I went to college in North Carolina and had schooling in South Carolina. Now comes the part of her story that gives me goosebumps. She pastored a Pentecostal church in 1910, but just ten days before her wedding day she opened her Bible for inspiration. It opened to Acts 7:34: “I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you to Egypt.” Her fiancé Tom Jordan did not experience the call that Trasher surely heard. God was calling her to Egypt. They broke off the engagement, and Trasher sailed for Assiut, in Africa, with her sister Jennie and less than \$100.

When Trasher arrived in Egypt, a dying Egyptian mother gave her baby to Trasher to care for. Soon afterward a man came with an infant whose mother was dying. The man asked her to care for the girl. Thus became the Lillian Trasher Orphanage. Trasher promised no child would ever be turned away. And no child was. Despite no ready source of income, food, or clothing, and throughout epidemics of cholera, polio, two world wars and the challenge of being Christian in a Muslim majority country, Trasher endured, sharing her light with those less fortunate right up until the day the Lord called her to eternal rest. During her 50 years in ministry 25,000 children came under her care while she brought everything to God in prayer.

### Prayer

God, whose everlasting arms support the universe: We thank you for moving the heart of Lillian Trasher to heroic hospitality on behalf of orphaned children in great need, and we pray this Advent that we also may find our hearts awakened and our compassion stirred to care for your little ones, through the example of our Savior Jesus Christ and by the energy of your Holy Spirit, who broods over the world like a mother over her children; for they live and reign with you, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*T. Patrick Milas is Director of the Gardner A. Sage Library  
and Assistant Professor of Theological Bibliography & Research*

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# Third Sunday of Advent

## December 17, 2023

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

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Reading this Advent text, we may be reminded of Jesus reading in the synagogue. But before we assign these words to Jesus, let us pause, lest we silence another voice that echoes down from an earlier time.

These words, attributed to Isaiah, are thought to be derived from many voices – male and female. Pertaining to the post-exilic period, is it any wonder the words convey so many mixed emotions? It is generational trauma and grief compounded by a return to a home that appears to have been disappointing at best. The stories heard at the knees of parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents harkened back to the good old days. But what if there were no “good ole” days? We may well wonder when words such as vengeance and images of devastation intermingle with comfort and repair. Robbery and wrongdoing lie beneath a call to justice and recompense. Without the bad, there would be no need to mention the good. There is so much pain, anger, and hurt.

Has much changed? Considering the state of the world today, perhaps these verses are aspirational. Except when we view them through an Advent lens that proclaims not just a Reign of God to come but one that has already begun (even if it has not come in its fullness yet) perhaps we can grasp some of that hope that echoes through the years.

While those first four verses often remind us of our own call, could it be the verses following that keep our feet on the ground, and our hands outstretched to the one who sustains us? Advent is a season of waiting, waiting for the not yet. Amongst the oppressed and brokenhearted, we may fall into their ranks, crying out for mercy, wondering if our cries are heard. But let us find hope in this voice from Isaiah. S/he does not give up; but rather continues: to listen to the calling from God, the conversation with God, to believe they can make a difference and share God’s love beyond their borders to the whole earth.

### Prayer (Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

Listening One, who like a great ear bends down to hear our every word. Thank you for loving us in all our messy, brilliant, striving, grieving, and vulnerable humanity. Sanctify us, keep us – spirit, soul and body – sound and blameless, so we may remain in your hope as we proclaim your peace and justice. Amen.

*Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne is Assistant Professor  
of Worship and Preaching and Director of the Chapel*

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# Monday, December 18, 2023

## Ephesians 6:10-17

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I was pastoring already, newly married with one baby son and another on the way, when I received a second master's from Princeton Seminary en route to a PhD program. My graduating class in 2004 was the last one of Princeton Seminary's fifth president, Tom Gillespie. President Gillespie's final commencement sermon was memorable because he spoke about dragons. President Gillespie recounted of an art piece that hung on the wall over the coffee maker in the president's office with the caption:

No matter how hard you work,  
No matter how right you are,  
Sometimes the dragon wins.

He described how some old maps had at their edges the words "Beyond this point, there be dragons." He then said this:

Pastorates are terminated.  
Marriages fail.  
Professorships flounder.  
Children disappoint.  
Wars continue.  
Injustice prevails.  
Poverty persists.  
Racism endures.  
The point is that sometimes the dragon wins.

But then he told the story of another painting depicting Goethe's Faust, who made a pact with the devil Mephistopheles and lost, as he is playing chess with devil. Faust has been reduced to a few pawns, a knight and the king. Chess players from around the world studied the painting and agreed the situation was lost. The painting's title was called "Checkmate." One person, a chess master, studied the painting. The chess master blurted out, "It's a lie. The king and the knight have another move."

Gillespie concluded: No matter how hard you work, no matter how right you are, sometimes the dragon wins. But only sometimes. Our faith tells us, God always has the final winning move. Ephesians 6:10-17 is about God winning and enabling us to hold fast when the powers and principalities that challenge God's love seem to be winning. When we feel that faith, hope, and love seem defeated, ...then boom! God comes in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Prayers

In the power of Your love, You came to us, living Christ. So help us to look to You and Your love when it seems like the dragon is winning. Amen.

*Neal D. Presa is Vice President of Student Affairs and Vocational Outreach  
and Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

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# Tuesday, December 19, 2023

## Psalm 125:2

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Psalm 125:2 places a focus on protection, strength, and ceaselessness. The word “surrounds” indicates that there are strong pillars of mountainous stone all around us. Throughout this year, humanity has been faced with challenges that look like they came to kill, to steal and destroy our mountain. We have been faced with continuous health struggles from the long-term COVID 19 virus. We are sadly witnessing wars that place attacks on the innocent. There are constant school and mass shootings. People with mental health issues are at an all-time high, and the list goes on and on. So much seems to be constantly happening.

In this Advent season I am glad our focus gets placed on God, the One who knew and always knows what humanity needs. We need a Savior! We need One who is so mighty and constant in showing love even when love seems to be drowned out by hate. One who is constant in showing strength even when everyone feels weak and discouraged. The word tells us “...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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11, NRSV). In the midst of all the challenges we face, let us remember we have a high mountain who is able to constantly protect, strengthen and surround us all. We call our mountain, Jesus!

### Prayer

Dear Lord,  
We thank you for this season of celebration of your darling son, Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the gift to this world that perpetually gives us what we need, the Presence of God. Thank you for an assurance that in any test or trial we encounter, we do not encounter them alone. The image of mountains surrounding Jerusalem assures us of your one-of-a-kind protection, comfort, and strength. Thank you for surrounding us with Strong Love from this time and forever more. Amen!

*Judith Freeman is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry-Transformational Preaching program*

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# Wednesday, December 20, 2023

## Mark 9:9-13

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It seems a bit awkward to talk about the transfiguration during this time of Advent. Not to spoil the end of the Advent story, but God comes to save the world. What is powerful about this story is this self-revelation of God to the world is manifested as hope, an anxiously restless expected hope. It is this self-revelation of hope that connects the transfiguration story with Advent. Now, in this narrative, the disciples must unravel this experience as they descend from the mountain.

The descent from the mountain of the transfiguration might be one of the most difficult things the disciples have to make. After they have experienced this heavenly reality, returning to the conditions humanity has worked so diligently to devise, are not the ones the disciples are eager to return to. Jesus embodies a God reality of hope, and even more, he is this hope expected.

The experience of hope the transfiguration brings becomes the challenge of Advent, because Advent is the time of not only reflecting on this hope but living it out. In this narrative, the challenge of living out this hope is met immediately as Jesus descended from the mountain. And so the promise of Elijah, the hope of restoration, the intervening of the divine within our reality, all seem to merge in this narrative and the disciples are challenged to unravel it all.

Just as the disciples, we, who have experienced God's revelation of hope, are met with some serious challenges as we live out this hope: the hope of the migrants seeking a better life; the hope of the workers seeking a living wage; the hope of the vulnerable seeking protection from systems that dominate and oppress; the hope of the incarcerated in search for reconciliation and restoration; the hope of the struggling student seeking to find freedom in an education; the hope of our planet crying out to be treated as God's creation; the hope of integrity, love, solidarity, fellowship, and hospitality.

As we continue to meditate upon and celebrate Advent, let us affirm that Jesus is the embodiment of the hope of our faith and live it out as best we can.

### Prayer

We praise you, Lord, for this hope we have received from you, and we affirm it as we live out this faith. Help us unravel the uncertainty, the risk, the challenges. Help us proclaim this hope each day in the midst of all we face in our journey. Amen

*Carlos González is a student in the  
Master of Arts in Pastoral Care & Counseling program*

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Thursday, December 21, 2023

**Psalm 89:1-4, 19-25; 2 Samuel 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4**

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During the Advent season, the enduring love and faithfulness of God take center stage. The Psalmist enthusiastically sings and proclaims God's *hesed*, a Hebrew word signifying steadfast love and kindness, which God extends to all generations. This divine love is something God establishes for eternity and is likened to being "as firm as the heavens" (Psalm 89:2). King David bore witness that even in times of uncertainty and doubt, our human insecurities and fears do not diminish God's unwavering love for us. God faithfully upheld God's covenantal promises to David, and for this reason, we can be assured of God's promises to us. As we anticipate celebrating the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3), we also acknowledge and honor the unwavering love of a God who cared deeply for us, choosing to manifest divinity in the most fragile form of humanity, a newborn baby. This Advent season, let us, like the Psalmist, declare that we will "sing of your steadfast love, O LORD forever and proclaim your faithfulness to all generations."

### Prayer

Eternal God, we offer this prayer as a grateful and reverent community acknowledging your enduring love and unwavering faithfulness towards us. Your mercies, O God, are new every morning. Like the angels, we sing 'Holy, Holy, Holy' as we exalt your name and celebrate this Advent season, affirming that you alone, O Lord, are truly worthy of our adoration. We express our gratitude for the gift of our Savior, extend our blessings for your boundless love, and offer our praises for the wonderful and marvelous things you have done.

Hallelujah and Amen!

*Terry Ann Smith is Associate Dean of Institutional Assessment,  
Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, and Director of the Certificate Program*

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Friday, December 22, 2023

Psalm 89:1-4

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This introductory section of Psalm 89 reminds us of the faithfulness of God in establishing God's covenant. Consequently, it movingly reflects David's gratitude towards this faithful God. In contemplative worship, I consider how a faithful, omnipotent, all-knowing, and sovereign God, would be faithful to me who the Bible declares that "...we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." It was this very uncleanness that is the reason Jesus came. (John 3:16) The Psalmist promises to sing of the steadfast love, *hesed* of GOD. (v.1) *Hesed* is a Hebrew word for love. It has many meanings and is defined as showing kindness above and beyond. That is what God has done for you and me. We love God *because* God first loved us (I John 4:19), but our God loves you and me, my sisters and my brothers, without a "because", just because: *Hesed!* CHRISTmas is a lot of things: gift-giving, and CHRISTmas trees and lights and cookies and caroling. But let's remember the Advent, and its true meaning which celebrates the coming of Jesus CHRIST, simply because of *hesed*, God's love going above and beyond – looking beyond our faults and seeing the need for a savior to redeem us; to buy us back. Advent represents expectation, and reflection. Can we take a moment and reflect on the steadfast love of God? Can we, too, reflect on the faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God? As they were many years ago (c. 6-4 BCE), in Bethlehem of Judea, we should be expectant. Expect God to do a miracle in your life as was the birth of Jesus to a virgin girl named Mary. Finally, because Advent represents the faithfulness of God, who in the genesis of time promised the Messiah (Genesis 3: 15), practice faithfulness in all that you do. Rehearse this Psalm of David and then respond with the same declaration. Finally, as we are buying and giving gifts during this joyous season, ask yourself, "What shall I render unto the LORD, for all of his benefits unto me?" Psalm 116:12

Prayer

Dear God, THANK YOU! Thank you for keeping your promises. Thank you that you would even make us mere, sinful, filthy rag wearing "Saints" a covenant. But you have and you do. And we pause to say, "THANK YOU." I pray that in our busyness and buying that we are mindful of why we even celebrate, and that is because you loved us enough to give us your very best – Your only begotten. You demonstrated then, and you continue to demonstrate now your *hesed*. Prick our hearts that we do not frustrate the very grace of GOD. Give us a song like you gave David. We will sing and we will give. It is the least we can do! It's in Jesus' of Nazareth's name we pray. AMEN!

*Ann C. Tait is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry-Transformational Preaching program*

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Saturday, December 23, 2023

**Psalm 89**

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The psalm for the day is Psalm 89, but the lectionary cuts it so that it appears to be a psalm of praise and it is for the first 45 verses, then it turns to become one of the darkest laments in the psalter. It seems jarring, but is it really? We often pretend that the season is only full of light and joy, but the Gospel story has overtones of Empire in the census and evil in the Matthew account of Herod's actions.

This is a season of joy and sorrow. For some, celebrations continue with an empty chair at the table. For others, they are alone or far from family and home. For all of us, the lights of Christmas cannot erase the horror of war and death as the nations rage. God knows the joy and suffering in the life of Jesus and in lives. God has been there with us all along. Darkness and light, joy and sorrow, plenty and want are the things of this season.

In 48 hours, we will all declare, "Joy to the World, The Lord has Come." Let us bring our whole selves to that celebration: our joy, fears, sorrows, and thanksgivings. Knowing we are all blessed and loved by God. We can sing together in joy for the gifts of the Spirit and God's presence even in the darkest of nights.

**Prayer**

God of all, teach us to be open to ourselves and the world, even when it hurts. Grant us the ability to see the beauty of God's creation and God's presence with us as we wait for Christmas morning when we can know again the joy of God's incarnate grace among us. Grant us the peace and goodwill of which the angels sing. Amen

*Beth L. Tanner is Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs and  
The Rev. Dr. Norman and Mrs. Mary Kansfield Professor of Old Testament Studies*

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# Fourth Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve Sunday, December 24, 2023

Luke 1:39-56

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Family gatherings can be the highlight or the terror of the holidays. In this familiar passage from Luke's gospel, Mary knows she *belongs* in her cousin Elizabeth's house. What a treat to gather with family without anxiety, without worrying about whether you will be welcomed, accepted, tolerated, or rejected. Indeed, Mary's faith is rewarded when, after greeting Elizabeth, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth addresses Mary as the mother of her Lord. Unfazed to learn she is mysteriously pregnant, Mary is not in a hurry to flee Elizabeth's house before neighbors learn of her pregnancy. Instead, she is elated as she responds in obedience to the heavenly message (Luke 1:36). This experience is pure spiritual joy and jubilation. This mutual celebration is what we wish every Christmas Eve and celebration with family could be—leaping across generations with outbursts that resemble Pentecost. The mission and method that John would display as “the Baptist” are manifest already in his mother's womb. This prenatal cognition attests to the truth and fulfillment of the angel Gabriel's prophecy (Luke 1:31–33, 35).

Amid this powerful celebration is the reality that Elizabeth is the wife of Zechariah. Priest Zechariah has his own story—a Temple priest who was childless for many years (Luke 1:5–25). But unlike Mary, he responds with disbelief when the angel visits him and announces that he will have a son. This incredulity leads to his being mute during most of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Because of his doubt, he is unable to fully share in the celebration of new life, healing, and potential for victory over Israel's oppressors.

In contrast, Elizabeth, who has *not* had a visitation from an angel, welcomes her cousin Mary, who is also carrying a child. After her prenatal child leaps for joy, Elizabeth recognizes Mary's expectant state, exclaiming that the One to come is here now, growing in his mother's womb. What a way to begin Advent, by celebrating the children. What if when we give gifts to our children and loved ones, we see the gifts that are *in them*? What would happen if we focused on *the relationships* among our children, siblings, and friends, and focused less on what we received or did not receive? In so manner, we would be preparing the way for Christ the King. Let's leap with joy along with these unborn children in Luke 1. Let's recognize the miracles of life this Advent season. Let's expect a miracle this Christmas as we live into the hope that is Jesus, the babe born in Bethlehem. Reflect upon: What miracle is YHWH waiting to bestow on us this Advent season?

## Prayer

Emmanuel, open our eyes and hearts to watch for the unexpected during these last days of Advent. May our spirits leap for joy at the recognition of your presence in our lives and in this world. Amen.

*Micah L. McCreary is President, RCA General Synod Professor,  
and the McCreary-Livingston Professor of Theology*

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# Christmas Day – Proper I Monday, December 25, 2023

Luke 2:15-19

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Have you ever been told something well in advance of its happening, something quite amazing, but hard to fully believe? We want to embrace God's plans for us, so we look for signs to confirm we have *understood the assignment*. These could come via the Holy Spirit's whispers or during prayer time. Confirmation might also come via people or situations. It is a natural, humble, human instinct to seek these. Take Mary, for example. Remember her interaction with the angel Gabriel, and then with Cousin Elizabeth? Mary was *blessed for believing* as she proclaimed her "song". She was confident in her calling.

Fast forward to Bethlehem, Jesus is born in very humble surroundings. And then, lo, the shepherds come, ready to share the *good news of great joy for all the people*. Mary, in her weary, post-partum state, surrounded by barn animals, must have been grateful and relieved; yes, she *had* heard rightly! Does she proclaim it aloud? Not this time. Rather, she *treasures* the shepherd's words and *ponders them in her heart*. It is a quiet, powerful, deeply affirming moment. This isn't the last time she tucks prophetic words away in her heart. It's just the beginning of journeying with Jesus through his life, death and onto the formation of the early church. Mary offers a powerful model of what it means to embrace a God-given calling – to wonder, look for – and receive – signs of confirmation, and then treasure and ponder them in our hearts. In our human frailty, it is okay to need encouragement and affirmation on the journey. What a beautiful gift from God.

## Prayer

Loving, gracious God, thank you for the gift of Jesus and the example of his mama, Mary. Thank you for helping us see, through her story, that you affirm our need for signs that we have understood you correctly. We gratefully embrace the opportunity to treasure and ponder them in our hearts. May we, too, be blessed to believe that what you have for us will indeed be fulfilled. By your Spirit, may we embrace your plans and purposes for us, staying attentive to the encouragement from those you place in our midst. In the mighty, matchless and precious name of Jesus, the Light of the World. Amen.

*Elizabeth "Liz" Testa is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry-Transformational Preaching program*

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# Christmas Day – Proper II

## Monday, December 25, 2023

### Luke 2

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But Joseph, I'm nine months pregnant! I can't go anywhere at this late stage, let alone walk to Bethlehem!

I imagine this could have been Mary's response when she heard they'd suddenly be traveling to Bethlehem for the census. A journey of roughly ninety miles, at just two and a half miles per hour, traveling seven to eight hours a day for four to five days, is it any wonder that a pregnant Mary would give birth shortly after arriving in Bethlehem? Not exactly the place they'd envisioned Mary would give birth to her first-born child, I'm sure. Bethlehem was so far from their home in Nazareth and the familiar comforts of their own surroundings. It must have been anxiety producing news for this first-time mother, who surely must have envisioned her own home as the place this would occur... and especially so with no prior, personal experience of giving birth to a child.

But what Mary and Joseph did not know as they left their home in Nazareth and set out for the town of Bethlehem is that the purpose of this journey was not merely to comply with the decree of Caesar Augustus. This was to fulfill the words of the prophet, Micah, who had uttered them so many years before.

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* (Micah 5:2)

How often do we lament the unexpected inconveniences of life: those inconvenient things that seem to pull us away from those places, people, and things we think we are supposed to be going to and doing? How often we complain about the unexpected monkey-wrenches that complicate our lives and the plans we make. But, if we look to this familiar narrative about the birth of Jesus, we discover that God's plans are always being carried out, often in ways that we cannot comprehend. When we are sent to places that are not on our own "to do" list, perhaps we will pause to ask what God may be accomplishing for the world and God's greater purposes through those "inconvenient" times.

### Prayer

Holy God, help us to be open to what you reveal to us in ways seen and unseen, beyond our thinking and imagining, when we least expect it. In doing so, train our hearts to welcome the presence of Christ. Amen.

*Arlene Romaine is a student in the  
Doctor of Ministry–Pastoral Care & Counseling program*

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## Christmas Day – Proper III Monday, December 25, 2023

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A new way of speaking: God sends us a Son,  
the Word from before what began was begun,  
to call out hope, buried and dead, to arise  
with “Let there be light!” in a babe’s wordless cries.

A new way of speaking: not prophet or priest  
but one who says “Come” to the last, lost, and least,  
afraid, grieving, wronged, empty, cold, short on rent,  
who finds our faith, stays with us, pitching a tent.

A new way of speaking where love outlasts hate,  
calls everyone “neighbor,” refuses the weight  
of old, rotting grudges; if we wish to live  
both fully and freely, then fiercely forgive.

A new way of speaking that overcomes death  
is offered to us by the same Holy Breath  
who animates clay to be co-heirs who praise  
in justice and joy as we speak in new ways.

### Prayer

Almighty God, you have poured upon us  
the new light of your incarnate Word:  
Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts,  
may shine forth in our lives,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.

-James Hart Brumm

*James Hart Brumm is Director of the Reformed Center  
and the Theological Writing Center*



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