



2009 Advent Devotional Guide

The Annunciation by He Qi

The painting on the front of our Advent Devotional is by He Qi. Mr. Qi is a Chinese Christian who paints in oils on paper. The majority of his work captures biblical scenes in a style that *Christianity Today* calls a “mixture of Raphael, Picasso, and medieval art.” His website says he “hopes to help change the “foreign image” of Christianity in China by using artistic language, and at the same time, to supplement Chinese Art the way Buddhist art did in ancient times. In his works, He Qi has blended together Chinese folk customs and traditional Chinese painting techniques with the western art of the Middle and Modern Ages, and has created an artistic style of color-on-paper painting.”

Mr. Qi is involved in the act of translating the Christian story into the language of his story. His vocation, his calling, is to bring who he is, a Chinese, and what he does, painting, together to renew his culture with the gospel. He does this as he tells the biblical story through images.

In this way he is a model for us all this Advent as we prepare for the Incarnation. We take the different pieces of our lives, who we are and what we do, and present them to God. We pray that he will take them and bring them in his plan to renew all things.

Go to <http://www.heqigallery.com/index.html> for more information.

O Come, Let us adore him,

Griff Gatewood



Introduction	David Dunderdale	
Nov. 29	Alex & Melissa Hartemink	Introduction
30	Jeff McSwain	Moses
Dec. 1	Paula Rinehart	Isaiah
2	Lauren Holahan	Jeremiah
3	Bob & Donna Mutter	Elizabeth
4	Nisrine Pineo	John the Baptist
5	Amanda Wallace	the Innkeeper
6	Brad Turnage	the Shepherds
7	Terry Simpson	Angels
8	Dave Stuntz	Simeon
9	Caroline Inazu	Simeon
10	Traci Hoover	Anna
11	J.D. Bartkovich	the Animals
12	Warren Kinghorn	Gabriel
13	Tim Wardle	the Magi
14	Alice Wisler	the Magi
15	Paul Immanuel	Herod
16	Rebecca Gurney	Herod
17	Susan McSwain	Rachel
18	Peter Feaver	Joseph
19	JD Bartkovich	Joseph
20	David Dunderdale	Mary & Joseph
21	Nora Dunderdale	Mary
22	Griff Gatewood	Jesus
23	Griff Gatewood	Jesus
24	Margot Hausmann	Jesus
25	Allan Poole	Jesus

AN INTRODUCTION AND INVITATION TO ADVENT

What kind of a play would include among its *Dramatis Personae* a young peasant couple, Magi from Persia, a king, an elderly priest and his wife, an old man, a group of shepherds (Everyman?), an old widow, an archangel, a grieving foremother, some prophets from long ago, an innkeeper, a chorus of angels, and even a donkey and a cow and a few camels and a bunch of sheep,? Oh, and we can't forget the star of this drama — a newborn baby who is King of Kings and whose prop is a manger.

What kind of a play is this? A morality play with a clear “moral of the story”? It has a list of characters that resemble a Shakespeare play (the shepherds and innkeeper to provide comic relief and ghosts from the past). It has angels and kings and prophets and wise men and that newborn which all suggest to us that this is a cosmic drama. This is a drama that is bigger than a romantic comedy or sentimental love story.

What kind of a drama is this? It is **our** drama. It is **our** story. It is the play that invites us to enter into it. Not just as the audience but as the actors and actresses. There is a part for us in this play.

This year for Advent we have organized our devotional guide according to the *Dramatis Personae* of this play. Members of our community have each selected a character in this drama and reflected on how we are invited into this story by that character.

Feel free to use this devotional in whatever way that fits for you. Here is a suggestion of how you can use the devotional in a time of worship each day.

Opening Prayer

Light the appropriate candle(s) on the Advent Wreath

Sing a favorite Advent hymn or carol

Read the scripture lesson for the day

Read the day's devotion

Sing a favorite Advent hymn or carol

Closing prayer

This story is **our** story. We did not write it or make it up. It has been given to us. Accept its invitation. Enter into it. Write your own reflections on the various characters in this drama and share them with another. It is not your story. It is not my story. It is **ours!** Thanks be to God!

David Dunderdale

Prayer: *O Wisdom,
Holy Word of God
You rule all creation with power and true concern.
-Come teach us the way of salvation.*

Scripture: Revelation 21:3, 4

Advent means arrival. It's a time when we — like the Magi, like Anna and Simeon, like all of Israel after Isaiah — wait expectantly for an arrival. But we should be honest: what arrival are we expectantly awaiting?

Some of us are awaiting the familiar and comforting sights and sounds of the season: lights on rooftops, a white blanket of snow, ornaments and tinsel on fragrant firs, Santa Claus displays, outdoor nativities, Salvation Army bells jingling, gaudy red sweaters worn only once a year.

Some of us are awaiting the familiar and comforting tastes of the season: hot cocoa and cider, Christmas cookies in the shapes of angels and reindeer, candy canes, ham or goose, plum or figgy pudding. Others of us are not-so-expectantly waiting for the extra pounds to arrive, followed by the well-intentioned but under-utilized gym membership.

Some of us are awaiting the familiar and comforting activities of the season: office parties, caroling, Christmas cookie exchanges, performances of the Nutcracker or the Messiah, strolls through the mall (or sprints if you're behind on shopping), visits with dear relatives, wrapping gifts, and if we're fortunate, sledding.

Being in Kenya for the holidays means that we can expect none of these things. Instead our holidays will be unfamiliar and uncomfortable: weather that is hot and dry, trees that are palm and cactus, cattle that are lowing, donkeys, camels, and shepherds tending their sheep under skies filled with twinkling stars.

But wait: why should these things be uncomfortable or unfamiliar? After all, they are far more similar to what Jesus knew. It's partly because we've so utterly infused/confused Christmas with the culture in which we celebrate it—not simply the crass commercialism so easily criticized, but also the cultural images that bring us comfort and joy, like visions of a rosy-cheeked family gathered 'round an ornamented spruce, sipping cider after a hard day's tobogganing.

Prayer: *Comfort and joy — O, these are truly tidings of comfort and joy: Let nothing you dismay, / For Jesus Christ our Savior / Was born upon this day, / To save us all from Satan's power / When we were gone astray. Amen.*

Alex and Melissa Hartemink
Alex and Melissa (and Abby and Andrew) are on sabbatical in Kenya, teaching at Rift Valley Academy

Prayer: *O Sacred Lord*

and leader of ancient Israel

You communicated with Moses at the burning bush

and gave him the law on Mount Sinai

-Come to set us free by Your mighty arm.

Scripture: Exodus 34:6-7a, John 1:14-15

The Visible Expression of the Invisible God

We used to have a crucial passage from the Bible posted in our breakfast room. Our family would recite it together. It's from Exodus and is related to God's revelation to Moses. Can you guess what it is? It is not the Ten Commandments. No, the Exodus passage we learned together is even more important than the Ten Commandments, because it provides the backdrop against which all of God's commandments are given. The passage in question is Exodus 34: 6-7. Here we find God describing himself as "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..." What could be more important than teaching our children the truth about God's character? Hopefully, they will begin to see that the Christian faith is not primarily about a list of rules but about a relationship with a God who loves them unconditionally. If we are reminded that all of God's rules are couched in his love, we will remember that when he says "No" he always has a bigger "Yes" in mind!

How does this all relate to Christmas? Well, our passage from Exodus 34 is like a scarlet thread that laces its way through the whole Old Testament and right up to the advent of Christ. Starting here in the Pentateuch, it re-appears in the History, Poetry, and Prophets sections of the Scriptures (see Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2). In marvelous fashion we can follow our scarlet thread all the way to the manger of Jesus, for the phrase from Exodus 34 in the Hebrew Old Testament "abounding in love and faithfulness" is the same phrase that reads "full of grace and truth" in the Greek New Testament! *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He came from the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God, but [Jesus Christ]... has made him known* (John 1:14-15).

So do you see? God told us what he is like in the Old Testament, and he *shows* us what he is like in the New Testament; the God of Exodus is the One and Only Jesus Christ! We don't have to worry that God's attitude towards us is different from Jesus' attitude towards us. We can trust the picture of God that we see in Jesus.

Prayer: *Thank you God for not leaving us to guess what you are like. Thank you for telling us and showing us.*

Jeff McSwain

Prayer: *O Root of Jesse
Raised up as a sign of all peoples
In Your presence kings become mute
And the nations worship before You
-Come to deliver us and do not delay.*

What do the words of Isaiah, the prophet, have to do with the classic Christmas story about a little girl named Awful Abigail? I read this story every year to my children. I read it now to their children. From time to time and especially during Christmas, I pull it out and read it to myself. And I think of Isaiah's words: *"Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, 'Here I am.'"* [Isaiah 52:6]

The children's story of "Awful Abigail" paints her as the wild-child daughter of the innkeeper where Joseph and Mary came seeking a room.

In Bethlehem there lived a girl, Abigail by name,
And any place she showed her face was never quite the same.
For Abigail was mean as mean, a dreadful little girl
And most of all she loved to put the townfolks in a whirl.

Her parents were busy innkeepers. So Abigail tended to roam the town with her pet goat, "Meangoat."

She teased their dogs and cats and birds and set their donkeys free;
She trampled on their flower beds, stole oranges from their trees.
Made faces at the little kids until they cried and then...
She went back where she started from and did it all again.

Abigail admits to her only friend, Meangoat, that she sees absolutely no reason to be good because "no one loves her anyway." So after she has wreaked havoc in town and havoc at home, her parents give up and send her upstairs to bed.

But Abigail doesn't go to sleep. She peers out over her small balcony and notices a man with his very pregnant wife on a donkey. The man is talking to her father. "I need a room," he says. "My wife will soon give birth." But there is no room in her father's inn. Abigail wonders why God would let these people have their baby in a stable.

[Over]

Night falls and still Abigail can't sleep. She hears music outside, beautiful voices singing about a child being born. And Abigail sees a light just outside her window, a star shining brightly. She gets up from her bed and follows the light. Oh wow — the light is coming from inside the stable. Abigail cracks open the door. It's a baby! Her story ends on these words:

There on the hay a new baby lay;
The animals knelt down beside Him...
As Abigail stared, she felt rather scared
And lost in the wonder around her.
For somehow she knew a dream had come true
And Someone who loved her had found her.

That is Christmas in one sentence. *Someone who loves us has found us.* We search down a thousand empty paths for a love powerful enough to heal our “awfulness.” Every Christmas we come home to the glorious irony that God came...and found us.

Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, “Here I am.”

Isaiah 52: 6

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, we thank you that you have come and found us and by this we know that you love us. Help us to know Your name — who you are — and to know your voice speaking to us, “Here I am.”*

Paula Rinehart

Prayer: *O Key of David
And Royal Power of Israel,
You open what no man can shut,
And You shut what no man can open.
-Come and deliver Your people
Imprisoned by darkness and the shadow of death*

Scripture: Jeremiah 7:9-11

Nothing stalls a baseball game like a runner trying to steal. Coiled for action, hands hanging down in that wide stance, the runner inches back and forth eight feet off the bag. The pitcher takes the sign from the catcher, cuts his eyes over his shoulder (he's a righty), starts the wind—no! —he spins and throws to first. The runner scurries back on his belly, his hand reaching the bag just under the tag. Safe. He calls time to release the dirt from the nether regions, and somewhere in the stands a mother thinks, "I've got to wash that uniform."

This can go on for a long time, this back and forth, this dance between stealing and safety, this repeated laying in the dirt and brushing off. Baseball is a game of advancement, though; we want to see the runner move on. Maybe that's what Jeremiah was getting at: "Are you going to spend your life getting dirty, doing what the world does, and then skitter back to church or your Christian friends and declare yourself safe? God sees it all, you know."

The people of Jerusalem didn't listen to Jeremiah. They mistook God for the pitcher on the mound—trying to strike them out or pick them off at first — so, they clung to the temple and ritual for safety. But, Jeremiah and all the prophets, right up to John the Baptist, saw God differently. They saw Him watching from the stands, eager to jump to His feet, whooping and spilling his box of popcorn everywhere, and, as the runner crosses home plate, shouting for all creation to hear, "That's My kid!"

God wants us to advance. His watching is about wanting us to come home. He wants to dwell with us and for it to go well with us. Nearly six hundred years after He tried saying this through Jeremiah, God sent his ace, his son Jesus, son of Joseph, son of David, to rescue us from lives stalled out on the bases.

Prayer: *Lord, this Advent, help us stop settling for safety and turn for home. Set our heart, mind, strength, and soul on Jesus, who has run out ahead and leads us to You. Amen.*

Lauren Holahan

Prayer: *O Radiant Dawn*

*You are the brightness of eternal light
And the Sun of justice.*

*-Come to enlighten those who sit in darkness
And in the shadow of death.*

Scripture: Luke 1:5, 24, 36

Ah, Elizabeth. Where is the justice? So, you and your husband were, “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” Well, to all outward appearances, perhaps. But in the secret recesses of your heart, Elizabeth? That place that you harbored your deep longing to have a child? How many years passed before you abandoned your desire in the barren wasteland of unfulfillment? How many prayers did you pray? How many offerings, sacrifices and vows did you make? How many promises did you “claim”? Face it - uprightness did not gain you God’s favor and bring about His opening of your womb. Did it? What were you then to do? The dream of bearing a child died slowly. But, oh...it most certainly died. Gone. Darkness. And then, in the silent darkness of that death came a glimmering shard of hope filled light. It grew brighter and stronger and flamed into a warm fire. Impossible!!! Five months of seclusion later and it was confirmed. A child!!!

Ah, Elizabeth. Now you know... nothing is impossible with God.

To eek by, just coping,
In silent dark groping.
To live with despair,
Afraid just to care.
To remember a dream,
Now not what it seemed.
Helplessly dry of belief in a blessing.
Vapid, bleak, empty and often distressing,
We dare not to hope. We wrestle our minds,
Useless to dull the sad echoes of hope left behind.

Then what we couldn’t conceive
Came!
A child personifying hope was named!
Once disgraced, we have now seen His grace
in a beautiful baby’s face!
Now we echo Gabriel’s laud:
“Nothing’s impossible with God!”

Prayer: *“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)*

Bob and Donna Mutter

Prayer: *Father, in the wilderness of the Jordan you sent a messenger to prepare people’s hearts for the coming of your son. Help me to hear his words and repent of my sins, so that I may clearly see the way to walk, the truth to speak, and the life to live for Him, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.

Malachi 3:1-2

John the Baptist was a simple man whose work on earth made people more receptive to Jesus Christ.

God, I now prepare a straight path for you in my heart. Come into your church and we will be ready for you.

A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 40:3-5

Nisrene Pineo

Prayer: *O King of the Gentiles
And the longed-for Ruler of the nations,
You are the cornerstone Who makes all one.
-Come and save those whom You have created.*

Scripture: Luke 2:7

When I think of the Inn that Mary and Joseph visited, I wonder what story we do not know about. Did the innkeeper have any idea that the people he did not have room for were the family of Jesus Christ? I'm not mad at the innkeeper because I believe he or she was doing their job. Perhaps it was his or her idea to direct them to the next best thing to a bed...a stable. Perhaps it is better than being in the wide open starry night when the pains of birth are pressing hard.

This year, my husband and I had the opportunity of becoming an innkeeper as well - we purchased our first house. We were so excited; it was the perfect house to "fix up" and make ours. We are proud owners now for 6 months. Around month three, the constant thought in my head was: "This house has absolutely worn me out! I don't want this old house!" Thinking and even admitting this was huge for me; it was a huge clump of pride that I had to try to swallow.

I shared this thought with a dear friend and she listened empathically. I was glad to get my thought out in the open for it was true. The next day, I received an email message from this friend with "House from God" in the subject line. Her message kindly reminded me of conversations the two of us had at the beginning of the year when I was so excited about this house and how I proclaimed over and over that this was the perfect house for us and the entire process (from searching to closing) was an answer to prayer.

My friend's message began a process of reflection. Two vivid things came immediately to mind about the ownership and renovation process that was wearing me out. The first was the renovation process of our downstairs bathroom. The conversations (ahem, squabbles) that the two of us shared during this process tired both of us, but now that the project is 98% percent done, we're able to look back and see how God has strengthened the two of us. We have learned so much about each other and, because of the grace demonstrated by both, our relationship is preserved and stronger! (Renovating a house with your spouse is a sure fire way to learn more about each other than you thought you ever would).

The second is a series of thoughts all occurring on Saturday mornings. I would spend this time of the week working on our porch on the current project. This time spent on the porch was the way that I initially and continue to get to know my

neighbors. I learned their schedules and about their lives. I got to know little 3 year old Quinn and about his daily walk with Daddy and about some neighbors that are going through a really hard time and really need support and friendship. Learning about these things and the house itself were in God's plans. I had failed to leave room for God.

Back to the innkeeper...God was present at his front door, and had to spend the night outside because there was no room. This reminds me that I need to leave room for God. But even if I don't, His plans won't be altered. If we do, our hopes (whether it is for the perfect old house or something else) will be granted to us in a creative way.

Prayer: *God, please remind us that nothing could prevent Christ from being born that night, and nothing can keep you from residing in our lives...even if there appears to be no room. Amen.*

Amanda Wallace

Prayer: *O Emmanuel
our King and our Lawgiver
You are the Desired of the nations
and the Savior of all men.
-Come to save us, O Lord, our God!*

Scripture: Luke 2:8-10 *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”*

I remember the first time I participated in my church’s Christmas pageant. I remember it because I hated it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a scrooge or anything like that. I just didn’t like the part that was assigned to me. I was asked to be a shepherd and that was the only role I did not want to play. The wise men wore crowns. The shepherds wore bathrobes tied with a rope. The angels had wings. The shepherds had a towel on their head. Joseph was one of the main characters. The shepherds seemed little more than background scenery. I would have never chosen to be someone whose main purpose was watching stinky sheep.

But God did.

He chose to send His message of hope and joy using the least likely messengers. A message that would change the entire world was delivered by poor, uneducated, lowly shepherds. Anybody else would have chosen kings or scholars. Not God. He did the unimaginable, He chose the shepherds.

Now, as I’ve grown up some, I’m thankful he did. I am certain that if God used shepherds to change the world, He can certainly use me. Not because I’m very smart or I have significant influence, but because if He calls me then He will work through me. It’s not about me, it’s about Him. That’s the beautiful part of this story. God is willing to work through anybody. Even the most unlikely of servants.

Even the shepherds. Even me. Even you.

Prayer: *O God, help us to lay our lives before you –that you might have your way in us. May we rejoice in the plan of your salvation through Jesus. You are the Desired of the nations and our Savior. Amen.*

Brad Turnage

Prayer: *Lord, I have come to know You in faith; may I have unending joy when You come again in glory. Amen.*

Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-2

Once, in an episode of the TV show, “Good Times”, J. J. painted a portrait of Jesus and received much admiration for his work. His younger brother, Michael, walked in and declared it, “Black Jesus”. Their mother, however, didn’t like a non-traditional representation and her dislike only increased when she recognized the model as Ned the Wino.

In the first chapter of Luke, Gabriel appears twice: Once to Zechariah and again to Mary. Reactions to angels vary. I seem to read where angels have to say, “Be not afraid!” My guess is that their appearance is different from other humans in some peculiar way that the people recognize as non-human. Clothes that “gleam like lightning” may help with the fear factor. Zechariah could have been startled by Gabriel’s non-human characteristics in addition to the fact that his routine was disrupted when he expected to be alone at the altar of incense in the Holy Place. Mary, however, was troubled at his words, not necessarily his appearance, and wondered, “What kind of greeting is this?”

Deities and demons don’t always appear in their glorified or grotesque selves. Jesus altered his appearance to those who would know him on the road to Emmaus and Satan appeared to Adam and Eve as a serpent that did not cause alarm until he was cursed as an “eew, yuck” snake. We are told in Hebrews 13:2 to “not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Modern film representations of deities and demons may seem humorous by contrast: John Travolta as Michael in a trench coat leaving a trail of white feathers, or Al Pacino laughing as he puts his finger in holy water causing it to boil.

We do know this: when God decides to reveal Himself, we will see his weight, or glory that is best described by human eyes in the Bible as consuming fire, blinding light or lightning. Angels that stand in the presence of God may carry remnants of that glory. It is the glory of God we will recognize, not the faces of John Travolta, Jim Caviezel or Ned the Wino.

Prayer: *Father, we know that we will not always recognize your presence, but we do pray that our everyday interactions with friends, enemies or strangers are pleasing to your sight and will further the glory of your Kingdom. Amen.*

Terry Simpson

Prayer: *God our Father, you loved the world so much you gave your only Son to free us from the ancient power of sin and death. Help us who wait for his coming and lead us to true liberty. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.*

Scripture: Luke 2:25

How long had old Simeon been waiting? When Luke tells us that Simeon was “waiting for the consolation of Israel,” it seems that he was also waiting for his own consoling. I’m guessing that there were days when he simply ached – How long, O Lord? When will you come and set us (and me) free from this burden of pain, of sin, of...

And then the day arrives. Standing in the temple, as he had done every day for years, he senses the Lord’s quickening call: “Get ready.” His pulse quickens a bit, his eyes darting across the temple courtyard – “Is it today? Which one of these men is The One?” In walks a young couple with an infant, and Simeon catches his breath. He never would have guessed – “It’s not a *man*, it’s a *Child!*” He walks, perhaps favoring an arthritic hip, and stands before the young mother; their eyes lock; she knows, and trusts that it is safe to hand her infant to this stranger. With trembling hands and swimming eyes, Simeon beholds “the consolation of Israel.” He looks on that little face, and perceives the enormity of the plan: “a light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of Your people Israel.”

Each of us is like one of the two picture of Simeon – perhaps painfully waiting for release, perhaps full of gratitude and joy. In Romans, Paul talks about the “sufferings of this present time” juxtaposed with a “glory about to be revealed.” Give yourself permission – permission to groan, and permission to sing.

Use “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and do both. The verses allow us to give voice to our longing for God to come and make all things right (starting with us). And the refrain allows us to sing for joy as we see the inbreaking Incarnational truth – Emmanuel *shall* come. Our groans and longings may be real, but they are not the last word. Groan, and let your cries be full of hope; sing, and let your songs be full of joyful longing.

Prayer:

*“Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.”*

David Stuntz

Prayer: *God our Father, you loved the world so much you gave your only Son to free us from the ancient power of sin and death. Help us who wait for his coming and lead us to true liberty. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen*

Scripture: Luke 2:25

Our two-year-old Lauren recently moved from her crib to a toddler bed, leaving her free to roam around her room upon awakening. Thankfully, we have doorknobs that are old and small and hard for little hands to open, so she must wait for someone to open the door before she can get out of the room. Lately, I've been struck by how she waits. She stands expectantly right behind the door, waiting to greet her rescuer with a big smile. No matter how long she waits, she is always nudged against the door, waiting to hear the telltale click of the doorknob as it starts to turn, trusting that someone will come.

Lauren waits each morning for a few minutes. Simeon waited for years for the arrival of God's promised rescuer. I'm willing to bet he might have been a little surprised to see the answer in an infant, and yet he remained confident that Jesus was, in fact, the consolation of Israel that God had promised. God proved faithful. Simeon waited, trusting that someone would come, trusting in God's history of provision for His people.

As we enter this time of Advent, preparing to celebrate Christ's birth, we also wait for something else. Things here are not as they should be. People we know are sick and frail, others have lost loved ones. Deep hurt and insecurity rests among us. Ultimately, we know that we are waiting for Christ to come again, when He will reconcile all things and make all things new. Yet, sometimes the wait seems so long.

Yet like Simeon, we can trust in God's history of provision for His people. We can wait expectantly in the day to day, knowing that God has been faithful. Our expectancy is not based on anything we do, but on the faithfulness of the God upon whom we wait. Each of us can tell stories of God showing up in big and small ways.

Just as Lauren waits expectantly for the click of the doorknob each day, just as Simeon waited expectantly for Christ's arrival, we wait expectantly for his Second Coming. Let us hold onto the hope of God's faithfulness to us here and now, that God is faithful and will be faithful.

Prayer: *Lord, we wait expectantly for you to come again. Until that day, give us eyes to see your faithfulness and hope that does not fail. Amen.*

Caroline Inazu

Prayer: *All-powerful God, help us to look forward in hope to the coming of our Savior. May we live as he taught, ready to welcome him with burning love and faith. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your son. Amen.*

Scripture: Lamentations 3:19-32 (The Message)

What Anna might have prayed before she saw the baby:

I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness,
the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed.

I remember it all--oh, how well I remember--
the feeling of hitting the bottom.

But there's one other thing I remember,
and remembering, I keep a grip on hope:

GOD'S loyal love couldn't have run out,
his merciful love couldn't have dried up.

They're created new every morning.

How great your faithfulness!
I'm sticking with GOD (I say it over and over),
He's all I've got left.

God proves to be good to the *woman* who passionately waits,
to the woman who diligently seeks.

It's a good thing to quietly hope,
quietly hope for help from GOD.

It's a good thing when you're young
to stick it out through the hard times.

When life is heavy and hard to take,
go off by yourself. Enter the silence.

Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions:
Wait for hope to appear.

Don't run from trouble. Take it full-face.
The "worst" is never the worst.

Why? Because the Master won't ever
walk out and fail to return.

If he works severely, he also works tenderly.
His stockpiles of loyal love are immense.

Prayer: *Dear Father, may I be one who passionately waits, who diligently seeks, and who quietly hopes. Thank you that you will come. Your loyal love is immense. It does not run out. It will never dry up. You are all that I have. Amen.*

Traci Hoover

Prayer: *Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the paths of thine Only-begotten Son: that we may worthily serve thee with hearts purified by His coming. Amen.*

Scripture: Genesis 6.18-21 (TNIV) *But I will establish my covenant with you and you will enter the ark--you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.*

That was a big boat! Did you every stop to think how big and stinky it must have been? Just imagine all those animals and all their animally smells. It must have taken a lot of energy and organization and faith to build that boat, to get it ready, to make sure everybody had their own stuff, their own food, and their own space. When you think about it... why did it have to be that big? The bible says that among all the people in the world, the Lord found Noah righteous. Wouldn't it have been so much easier for Noah just to build a small house boat for himself and his family? Why all the animals?

We have a small black dog named Jazz. She is a delight to all of us. Sure she gets in trouble and chews on things she shouldn't. She sheds everywhere and she gets excited and tinkles on the floor at the wrong time. Jazz watches everything that we eat with big soulful eyes, and wags her tail, hoping for a small bite or two. She licks our faces with her big, wet tongue when we are sad and snuggles down beside us at night. She is not a kid, made in our image, but she is a definite part of the family and we love her.

On that first Christmas long ago, it was too crowded and there was no room left at the inn. So Jesus was born in a stable and wrapped up and slept in a manger. And the stable animals (goats and donkeys and I don't know what all else) were able to watch the Kingdom of God bursting forth as a babe. And a bit later the sheep came with the shepherds, and a bit after that the camels with the wise men. The people and the animals both got to celebrate the birth of the one who created and loves them. One made in the very image of God, and the other an outpouring of His imagination and creativity.

Prayer: *Father God, help us this season to prepare our hearts for the celebration of your birth. Thank you for the animals you created, especially those that bring us delight and help us. Thank you for giving us a spark of your imagination and creativity and love. Help us to use these gifts for the world's good and your glory. Amen.*

JD Bartkovich

Prayer: *We beseech thee to listen to our prayers, O Lord, and by the grace of thy coming enlighten our darkened minds. Amen.*

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

The Bible describes the angel Gabriel as God's "go-to" angel for communicating particularly important things to people. God sent Gabriel to people numerous times, like when the prophet Daniel couldn't understand a vision from God (Dan. 8:15-17) or a writing of Jeremiah (Dan. 9:20-27). But there was one job that Gabriel surely enjoyed most: sometimes, when people had great difficulty having children, God would send Gabriel to tell them that they would be having a baby. Gabriel had lots of practice with these announcements. Before he appeared to Zechariah (Luke 1:8-20), he had appeared to Samson's parents (Judg. 13:2-25) and may have appeared to Hagar and to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16:7-13; 18:1-15).

We can imagine that Gabriel felt a little superior to these humans. He might have even felt a bit sorry for them – *trapped in a body, bound by sin, prisoners to their own appetites*. Gabriel, after all, wasn't limited to a body and could live in the presence of God already. *God may love them*, he may have thought, *but God's definitely not like them*.

You can imagine Gabriel's surprise, then, when one morning he got a very surprising order. God had told him to bring some news to a poor young rural woman named Mary who didn't have children and wasn't even *trying* to have them! *What is God possibly doing here?* he must have thought as he delivered the words to the surprised young woman: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you! ... You have found favor with God... you will bear a son... he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:28-33).

"Let it be with me according to your word," the woman said – and with that, Gabriel must have known that things would always be different in God's heavenly court. *God was becoming human*, and so humans – lowly, embodied humans! – were being invited to participate in God's very life.

It's hard to know how Gabriel would have felt at that moment. Maybe he was a little jealous, like the older brother of the prodigal son: *God, I've always been here for you, and you do something like this for them?* Maybe he was a little dismayed that these dirty God-loved humans would someday be judging even him (1 Cor. 6:3). Or maybe he was simply overcome with joy at the thought that humans would join him someday (Rev. 5) in singing eternal praises to Mary's humble, poor, crucified, risen, exalted Son.

Prayer: *God, you have made us a little lower than the angels, and yet love us so much that you became one of us. Make us receptive like Mary to your coming, and grant that we may join with her and the angels in giving praise and glory to You. Amen.*

Warren Kinghorn

The Magi – Sunday, December 13

12 days to Christmas

Prayer: *We beseech thee to listen to our prayers, O Lord, and by the grace of thy coming enlighten our darkened minds. Amen.*

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-2 *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him”*

As a child, the Magi often struck me as a bit odd. Who were these strange characters who packed up their belongings on camels and trudged from somewhere in “the east” because they saw a star? It was much easier to relate to the excitement of the shepherds as they came bounding in from the fields to see the baby Jesus. The Magi, on the other hand, seemed so solemn and brought gifts that no boy in their right mind would know what to do with. How exactly does one play with gold, incense, and myrrh?

My views of the Magi have changed in recent years. I have become more intrigued by Matthew’s simple, yet profound, introduction of the Magi in Matthew 2:1-2. They saw a star and they came. So matter of fact; so full of purpose. We hear nothing regarding deliberations of the sensibility of this decision, arguments over logistics, or grief at the ensuing separation from family for several months. We are simply told that they came because they saw a star. In Christian-speak, one might say that they came out of obedience to a message from God.

This type of faithfulness, of obedience to a divine call, reminded me of Abraham and Sarah, who left their home and set out for Canaan because God told them to “get up and go.” It made me think of Ruth, who left her country and followed Naomi to Bethlehem, not knowing what the future would hold. It also made me think of Jesus, who left his “home” and came to earth out of obedience to his father. And it made me wonder how willing I am to “get up and go” when the call of God comes. The Magi did so. Will I?

Prayer: *Lord, help us to hear your call and to respond in faith and obedience. Amen.*

Tim Wardle

Prayer: *We beseech thee to listen to our prayers, O Lord, and by the grace of thy coming enlighten our darkened minds. Amen.*

Scripture: Matthew 2:2, 11 (NIV) *““Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” ... On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”*

The Magi’s Invitation

Our invitation to see this King is written brightly in the sky;
An unusual star, lustrous, beckoning us to travel where it shines best
Curious, we venture, our expectations increasing with each step.
We have scanned the skies for generations
Yet nothing has captivated us with this kind of awe.
We follow, sleep, dream, and rise—our journey continues.
Arriving, we enter—but find no ordinary King, no common royalty.
Moved toward worship, we bow before the Christ child
Eagerly we give, although our gifts seem meager in His presence
Rejoicing in His light, receiving more than we expected
O Holy Child, mercy, grace, hope, and peace
Have been born to us tonight!

~Alice J. Wisler

Prayer: *Dear God, our hearts are filled with thanksgiving for the gift of Jesus Christ. Help us to continue our journey each day — seeking to live in Your mercy, grace, hope, and peace. Like the Magi, may we come before You, and take the time to adore, and worship who You are. Amen.*

Prayer: *Lamb of God, You once came to rid the world of sin: cleanse me now from every stain of sin. Amen.*

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-18

We often overlook the cost that folks paid for the incarnation. Oh yes, I know we praise God for the Incarnation and are simply amazed that the One by whom the world was created decided to come into this earth as a helpless babe in a manger. But what about the price paid by the ones in Bethlehem who were slaughtered by King Herod. Why was that necessary?

King Herod was a person who missed the coming of the real King. And he did not want the real King to come. The king of Judea, or more accurately the under-King of a very large Roman empire was not a likable person. He was guilty of many murders including at least one wife and three sons. Even though he professed to be a Jew, he really did not believe in anything, as his actions show. He was somewhat of a cynic, but he knew the traditions of Israel. He only half-believed them. Having someone from afar come asking to see the King of the Jews in his palace was more than he could handle. He was aware that these folks were talking about the Messiah that was promised of old. But no one was born in the palace recently and if there was another person who was going to try to be King that would, as a minimum threaten him and his way of life.

He cunningly decided to do something about it. Even though he knew of the significance of the birth, he was willing to sacrifice babies to ensure his lifestyle. He missed what could have been a life changing event because of his self interest.

But what about us? Are we really unlike King Herod at times? Are we threatened by the Lord coming into our secret corners and questioning our actions, our loves and our motives? Are we really happy that He came and are we looking expectantly for His return? Or are we busy trying to protect ourselves from the real King who wants to rule in our hearts and lives?

Prayer: *Lord, help us to put what we recite every Sunday into practice and receive You as the King of our lives...in every area of our lives. In Your Name we pray, Amen.*

Paul Immanuel

Prayer: *Stir up thy power, O Lord, and come, that by thy protection we may be rescued from the dangers that beset us through our sins; and be a Redeemer to deliver us. Amen.*

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:13-17, Matthew 2:16-18

Verse sixteen in the passage from Jeremiah refers to a voice “heard in Ramah,” the place where Jews waited to begin marching toward exile in Babylon. By describing the Hebrew matriarch Rachel, who weeps inconsolably for generations of Jewish children, Jeremiah emphasizes the absolute desolation felt among God’s people. Matthew uses this image of Jeremiah’s to illustrate the great sorrow coursing throughout Jerusalem when Herod orders the slaughter of all male children under two. The children murdered by Herod are often referred to as the Holy Innocents, the first martyrs for Christ — the first, but certainly not the last. Those who follow Christ often find themselves suffering. It is appropriate then that the Christmas story is no idyllic tale of Christ’s birth and ministry, but one in which Mary, blessed among women, is assured that a sword will pierce her soul and John the Baptist, the man chosen to prepare the way for the Lord, ends up with his head on a platter. We know one thing for certain: when God’s kingdom came with Christ, it didn’t put an end to Rachel’s weeping and it didn’t put an end to ours either.

Jeremiah’s powerful description of mourning remains poised, however, between two incredibly hopeful pieces of prophetic poetry. In the same way, Matthew’s gospel pairs the glorious event of the incarnation, the “good news of great joy,” with a violent act that affects all of Judea. Even in its earliest days, life with Christ was an invitation to both deep joy and true heartbreak. And so, advent is a time to look with wonder and gratitude on the coming of Christ, to find ourselves steeped in the hope Jeremiah speaks about, but it is also a time to grieve. I am thankful for that permission, and, whether I am mourning the death of a person or relationship or just having a small holiday breakdown on the streets of Southpoint, I know that this too is part of the story. The grief reminds me that I am still waiting, that Christ’s kingdom has not come in full, and while I celebrate his first coming, I am eager for the next. Until that day, I am grateful Christ himself pronounced blessing on those of us who mourn.

Prayer: *Father, thank you for the permission to grieve. Give us the courage to mourn what you would have us mourn this advent season, and give us joy in the knowledge that you have died, you have risen, and you will come again. Amen.*

Rebecca Gurney

Prayer: *May your grace enliven us, strengthen us, and defend us, as we await your coming in glory. Amen.*

Scripture: Matthew 1:19-20 (The Message)

You just gotta love Joseph. *Chagrined but noble*, looking out for Mary’s reputation, just trying to do the right thing...what a decent guy.

I mean, put yourself in his shoes. He’s just gotten just about the most humiliating and life-altering bad news he never expected. He’s getting real excited about marrying this great, sweet, innocent gal and then...bam. It’s all up in smoke. She’s pregnant, and he sure as heck knows he isn’t the father. Ouch.

But he doesn’t want to get back at her for making him look like an idiot; he wants to make it as painless as possible for her, even though he’s surely in some gut-wrenching pain himself.

And then God steps in.

While good ol’ Joseph, bless his heart, is *trying to figure a way out*, God shows him in a dream what’s up:

Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus-‘God saves’-because he will save his people from their sins.

Holy smoke! What Joseph had thought was the absolutely worst thing that could happen to him turns out to be the miracle for which his whole race had been longing for centuries! Suddenly Joseph goes from “God has abandoned me” to “*God is with us!*”(Mt 1:23)

Notice that God chose to reveal this to Joseph in stages. He could have let Joseph be there when the angel came to Mary right off the bat so that he didn’t have to spend that time in angst and turmoil, thinking that he’d been betrayed by the one he loved. But God didn’t do that. He chose, for reasons we don’t know, to pull back the curtain bit by bit.

God had his beautiful plan all along; Joseph just couldn’t see it. The good lesson for me here is to remember that with our God, there’s always more than meets the eye.

Prayer: *Father, this blessed season, give us grace in your perfect timing to see above the circumstances, beyond the pain, underneath the hurt and evident betrayal to your plan. Help us to know that regardless of what we see with our eyes and how much it hurts, that you are ever and always WITH us, Immanuel. Amen.*

Susan McSwain

Prayer: *May your grace enliven us, strengthen us, and defend us, as we await your coming in glory. Amen.*

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-24 *“...When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...”*

This Advent, let us reflect on the miraculous way God’s plan disrupted the plans of men.

Joseph had a plan for his life: an honorable trade, a good job, a young fiancée of exceptional quality. Soon enough, they could have kids and raise a family. So far as we know, he had no higher ambition than this. Then his exceptional fiancée came to him with shocking news that would bring discredit on Joseph and ruin all of his plans.

In this passage, we see Joseph wrestling with several options, including some that would punish Mary for shaming him in this way. But he leans towards the one that will get him back on track with his original plan as soon as possible. I’ll break off the engagement, he tells himself, and start over.

Then an angel meets Joseph and explains more of God’s plan. How much more? The Bible does not say, but probably not the whole Gospel story of crucifixion and resurrection – atoning sacrifice and triumph over death. The angel tells Joseph just enough to see that the plan he wants to follow is not God’s plan, which calls for some hard-to-explain steps in another direction.

Joseph chooses wisely, setting aside his own plan. Because he does we mark Advent today. But doesn’t the way we mark Advent confront us with the same set of choices Joseph faced: our plans or God’s plans? Left to our own devices, isn’t Advent a time for us to polish our own plans –for Christmas travel, for gifts we want to buy, better yet, for gifts we want to get? And isn’t Christmastide when we polish our New Year’s resolutions, those up-to-the-date refinements to our master plan of self-fulfillment?

Joseph’s essential role in the Christmas story as Jesus’ adoptive father reminds us that it is good to have your own plan, but it is better to follow God’s plan. Joseph held his plan lightly and grabbed God’s plan tightly. Let’s take time this Advent to ask God what He has planned for us, and let’s pray we have the courage of Joseph to embrace it, whatever it is.

Prayer: *Lord, we give you our plans and we do pray that we will have the courage of Joseph to embrace your plan. Amen.*

Peter Feaver

Prayer: *May your grace enliven us, strengthen us, and defend us, as we await your coming in glory. Amen.*

Scripture: Matthew 1.19 (TNIV) *Because Joseph, her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

The heading in my bible for this section reads, "Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son." I think I often gloss over this part of the Christmas story. A very real man, faced with a pretty big problem. A pregnant, not-yet wife. A child who is not his. Will he agree to adopt this little one? A child who will be different from him and must be accepted not because of kinship or blood but by his choice? Within the bounds of the law and culture Joseph can refuse and remain righteous. He is on the brink of doing just that when the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and convinces him to do exactly the opposite.

I've been thinking recently and in the last few years about fostering and adoption. There are 10,000 kids who need foster care in North Carolina alone. A third of those kids need adoptive homes. Yet, as moved as I am to the plight of these children.... something holds me back. I quietly divorce myself from these little ones in need who are different from me, who would require commitment and energy and the crossing of boundaries. I refuse the engagement that tugs on my heart. And I feel, even without a smack from an angel, to be the lesser for it. Within the church and our culture, just as with Joseph, this hesitancy, this refusal, brings forth no condemnation. Perhaps, just perhaps it should.

This Advent season, as we prepare our hearts for the celebration of Jesus' birth, I can't help but cheer that Joseph made the better choice. To open his home to Mary, to Jesus.

Prayer: *Father God, help us this Advent season to see the world through your eyes. To struggle where you would have us struggle, to be content when you would bring us rest. To love those you bring into our lives. To give us courage to open our hearts and to seek out those who are yet waiting to be embraced by your love. Amen.*

JD Bartkovich

Mary – Sunday, December 20

5 days to Christmas

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, who is, who was, and who is to come, we pray for the virtue of hope, that amidst the trials and difficulties of this world, we may keep our hearts fixed upon you, who reigns over the cosmos. Amen.*

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

O Sapientia

It was from Joseph first I learned
Of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
Me from his house; but, unafraid,
He put me not away from him
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.

The Child's first cry came like a bell:
God's Word aloud, God's Word in deed.
The angel spoke: so it befell,
And Joseph with me in my need.
O Child whose father came from heaven,
To you another gift was given,
Your earthly father chosen well.

With Joseph I was always warmed
And cherished. Even in the stable
I knew that I would not be harmed.
And, though above the angels swarmed,
Man's love it was that made me able
To bear God's Love, wild, formidable,
To bear God's Will, through me performed.

Madeleine L'Engle

Prayer: *O Heavenly Father, grant that we may be Josephs to one another, standing with one another, giving courage to one another, making one another able to bear Your Love, to bear Your Will so that Your Word would be made known. Amen.*

David Dunderdale

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, who is, who was, and who is to come, we pray for the virtue of hope, that amidst the trials and difficulties of this world, we may keep our hearts fixed upon you, who reigns over the cosmos. Amen*

Scripture: Luke 1:39-56

I can remember when I was really young, probably three or four, I didn't like my name at all. I thought it was ugly and I wanted to change it to Mary. I didn't actually think that Mary was that pretty of a name, I just thought that she was the prettiest woman. In all the pictures, in all the stories she is just the best girl. She's Jesus' mom. And her head tilts to one side and she looks so soft and light and she has a baby. I can actually remember thinking her name would be best because she was the most special girl ever, the luckiest.

I grew up. I grew into my name and I learned more about Mary and how she probably didn't wear pink. I learned how she didn't understand why Jesus would be at the temple, and how she had to watch her baby, Jesus, die on the cross. I learned how hard her life must have been after Gabriel left, how hard to tell her parents and Joseph what was happening, to have a baby in a stable. And suddenly, Mary didn't seem so lucky any more.

This advent, I want to unlearn. At four, I maybe didn't know all of the details, but I did know who Mary really was. In Luke, Elizabeth says, "Blessed are you among women!" as soon as she sees Mary. And Mary when she replies, she doesn't seem depressed, or upset, or like a suffering servant of the Lord. No, she's happy, she's singing. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me." Mary IS blessed. She is grateful, overjoyed, because God is saving her and because he has given her a role in His plan to save the world.

How often do we feel like being Christians, taking part in God's plan, is a burden? How often do we focus too much on what's hard and forget the immense joy of being a part of Jesus' life? Let's remember, this advent, how beautiful Mary was, not because of the way her head tilts, or because she gets to wear pink, but because of WHO she got to carry inside of her, and in her arms. And let's remember that we too carry Jesus inside of us! This advent, let's glorify the Lord and rejoice in God our Savior.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for sending us your son, for giving him to us to carry in our hearts. Please help us to be full of joy this season, remembering how you have done great things for us. We love you. Amen.*

Nora Dunderdale

Prayer: *O Key of David
And Royal Power of Israel,
You open what no man can shut,
And You shut what no man can open.
-Come and deliver Your people
Imprisoned by darkness and the shadow of death.*

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:26-30

Into The Darkest Hour

It was a time like this,
War & tumult of war,
a horror in the air.
Hungry yawned the abyss-
and yet there came the star
and the child most wonderfully there.

It was time like this
of fear & lust for power,
license & greed and blight-
and yet the Prince of bliss
came into the darkest hour
in quiet & silent light.

And in a time like this
how celebrate his birth
when all things fall apart?
Ah! Wonderful it is
with no room on the earth

by Madeleine L'Engle

Prayer: *O LORD, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through the satisfaction of thy Son our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honour and glory, world without end. Amen. (From the Book of Common Prayer, 1928)*

Griff Gatewood

Prayer: *O Radiant Dawn*

*You are the brightness of eternal light
And the Sun of justice.*

*-Come to enlighten those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death.*

Scripture: Colossians 1:15-23

Advent calls on our imagination to enter into the familiar stories whose gravity can be lost in the cliché of commercials and the familiarity of routine and tradition. This poem calls us to look again at the manger scene.

A poem for Christmas

From Nativity Poems by Joseph Brodsky
(translated from Russian by Seamus Heaney).

Imagine striking a match that night in the cave:
use the cracks in the floor to feel the cold.
Use crockery in order to feel the hunger.
And to feel the desert - but the desert is everywhere.
Imagine striking a match in that midnight cave,
the fire, the farm beasts in outline, the farm tools and stuff;
and imagine, as you towel your face in the towel's folds,
the bundled up Infant. And Mary and Joseph.
Imagine the kings, the caravans' stilted procession
as they make for the cave, or rather three beams closing in
and in on the star; the creaking of loads, the clink of a cowbell;
(but in the cerulean thickening over the Infant
no bell and no echo of bell: He hasn't earned it yet.)
Imagine the Lord, for the first time, from darkness, and stranded
immensely in distance, recognizing Himself in the Son,
of Man: homeless, going out to Himself in a homeless one.

Prayer: *ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen (from the Book of Common Prayer, 1928)*

Griff Gatewood

Prayer: *O King of the Gentiles
And the longed-for Ruler of the nations,
You are the cornerstone Who makes all one.
- Come and save those whom You have created.*

Scripture: Leviticus 26:12 (NIV)

Warm-up question: If you were the Pope, or President Obama, or Wonder Woman, how would you want to get around? (i.e. Popemobile, black SUV, Invisible Jet, etc.)

When I begin to read the gospels — which is something I do *much* more frequently than *finishing* them — I sort of like to get right to the good part. I like to “fast forward” to the part where Jesus *does* stuff. I skim quickly over the birth narratives, zoom through genealogies, and beeline to the parts about Jesus partying with sinners, opening the eyes of the blind, and feeding the hungry.

‘Cause that’s some good stuff.

Everything that happens at the beginning is sort of nutty anyway. God enters the world the same way that each one of us has: in and through a human body. God, in Jesus Christ, is born into a human family that probably wasn’t so different from the ones in which we find ourselves. He chose to take on human flesh, with its aches, pains, longings, and indigestion. In the person of Jesus, God chose to know what our lives are like by being *with* us. Isn’t that a weird unlikely plan?

I think I said it was nutty.

The Almighty One who sculpted the octopus and painted the sunflower came to us in the form of a helpless infant. He nursed at human breasts. He was held in the strong arms of his adoptive father. He crawled on dusty floors. He learned to walk the same way we do. Ultimately he was disabled, on the cross, out of love for us.

Did you catch that? He passed into the world through a *birth canal*, covered in mucus. Messy, right? Though it’s not the way I would have done it — (picture something more like the Partridge Family bus or a spaceship with flashing lights) — God chose to identify with us, entirely. The very very good news of Christmas is that Jesus came to us in human form, walks among us, and knows what our lives are like.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” John 1:14 (NIV)

Prayer: *Father of Jesus & Father of ours,
Thank you that you chose to take on human flesh to be with us. You know what it is to weep and to rejoice, to celebrate and to grieve, to laugh and to suffer anguish.
~Teach us about the meaning of your first coming.
~Comfort us with your present nearness.
~Point us toward the reality of your second coming. Amen.*

Margot Hausmann

Prayer: *O Emmanuel
our King and our Lawgiver
You are the Desired of the nations
And the Savior of all men.
-Come to save us, O Lord, our God!*

We know the story of those who gathered round the cribside of the Newborn on Christmas Day and after. Angels and beasts, shepherds and Persian astrologer-“kings”, the locals and the foreigners – in other words, all of creation - were present at that birth. Matthew especially wants us to remember that the Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled with the appearance of those philosophers from the east, that with their coming, the words of the prophet Isaiah came to pass: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (60.3) With the coming of this Child, everything is beginning to change. A new day is beginning to dawn; the old structures can never be seen in quite the same way again.

There were others, however, who *should* have known to gather there in that humble space, but didn’t. The troubling reality is that they were the ones we might think most likely to recognize the importance of the moment. The scribes, the teachers of the law (Mt. 2.4), knew where the Messiah was to be born, having studied so carefully the Prophets. They were able to tell the inquiring strangers from the east where they could find him! But there they sat, glued to their Jerusalem stools, charts and texts in front of them.

If ever there was a time to move, it was then. Get up! Let us go see this child who was born! But no. There they sat. Who can know why? Ironic. And tragic.

Today is Christmas Day; Christ is born anew in our hearts and imaginations as we remember his first coming. The old is dying; the new day has begun. So stop what you are doing. Set aside the new tie, the new toy. Forget for a moment about Christmas dinner and the football games. The LORD has come! If you are alone, or surrounded by others, lift your voice in praise and adoration: Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel, God-With-Us, has come to you!

Prayer: *Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and so to be born today of Mary. Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit, through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.*

Merry Christmas!

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