



## **Week 1**

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear



Jeremiah 23:1-6

## **As We Wait in Paradox** | Pastor Gabe Kasper

There's an odd paradox in the ethos of contemporary American life. On the one hand, there's a type of moral relativism that encourages us to live our own truths and just do what makes us happy regardless of cultural mores or tradition. And, simultaneously, there are loud cries for justice and for people to do what's right.

It's challenging to make sense of this paradox. How does one simultaneously live a libertine life and insist that we all do what's right? There's this tension in our world between the limits of human freedom and the inescapable reality that we are moral creatures.

How do we resolve this tension?

The ancient prophet Jeremiah points a way forward. He writes: 5 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Jeremiah tells the people of Israel that one day God is going to send a king who will wisely sort through what's right and wrong. He will make sense of the tensions between human freedom and justice. He will show us how to live fully human lives.

Of course, Jeremiah is referencing the arrival of Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see what it is to be fully human. He extended grace to those who failed to follow God's law and simultaneously invited them to live into the true justice of his kingdom.

Even now, Jesus extends grace to us when we disregard God's Law and simultaneously invites us to live our whole lives following after His way of life.

This Advent season, as we wait for Jesus's return when He fully brings about God's justice and righteousness, may we rest in His grace and seek to follow Him with our whole lives.

**Reflection:** How do you navigate the paradox of resting in God's grace and seeking to follow Jesus?

Isaiah 9:6-7

**Abba, You Know** | Rachel Olson

"Life is hard," a co-worker of mine exclaimed a few weeks ago without any explanation or context. Honestly, no context was needed because life is hard: paying bills, meeting deadlines, dealing with illness ... and the list could go on and on. In fact, I would argue that almost every person on the planet would agree that life is hard.

So that do we do with this? How do we as God's people live this hard life?

In Isaiah 9, Isaiah is writing to God's people of the hope they have as they themselves walk through an incredibly tough season of life. He assures them that all their burdens will be carried on the shoulders of the Messiah: "And the government shall be upon his shoulders."

Not only would the Messiah about whom Isaiah prophesied carry their burdens, but He would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

If you are like me, reading these words might leave you feeling a little frustrated. While Jesus is our "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," life is still not easy. In the now, we are faced with pain and loss. We experience fear and sorrow. We encounter physical and mental health challenges. Life in the now is hard, and yet we have a God who meets us here and who promises that the now will not be forever. Like the people of God before Jesus, we, too, are waiting for Him to come again and make all things new.

Living in this waiting is hard, but remember that whatever hard thing you are facing right now, Jesus meets you there, as a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, and a Prince of Peace.

**Reflection:** What do you find most challenging about waiting and how could you invite God into the midst of it?

Isaiah 40:1-5

## **Clearing the Path** | Lydia Will

*“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”*

The pre-Christmas shuffle: Every parent knows the strain of it; every student, the stress of it. The end-of-year concerts, parties, remembering gifts for teachers, hosting family events. Baking, figuring out travel, wrapping up exams. It is a lot. We try to balance all of that with remembering the true reason of the season while striving to find quiet moments here and there to reflect on it. If I’m honest, it can feel like just more work added on to my already full plate. But for the kids? It is pure magic—maybe because they are expecting that all will be wonderful, so all they need to do is wait in anticipation.

In the reading today, we see the tenderness of God for his people (v.1). In a world of darkness, sin, and toil, He not only promises the lofty riches of absolute forgiveness (v.2), but He also promises to make straight and easy the path (v.4). To a people who have never known ease, who know what it is to see a mountain in their way, His promise that it will be flattened and the Lord will meet them there speaks volumes. You don’t have to break your back to find Him. He is coming to you. You don’t have to travel the world or climb the highest mountain. He doesn’t need it. He’ll cross the deserts, the mountains, traverse every obstacle in the way—for you. It is in His *accessibility* to every human heart that God reveals how He is different from anyone or anything else. You need not prove your worthiness. You don’t need to earn it with hard work or achievements, not even with a perfectly executed Christmas season.

He is accessible to everyone, and desires only that we all witness His glory, together (v.5).

Maybe the kids have it right after all? Set striving aside, and expectantly wait for the comfort and joy that is already ours. Pure gift.

**Reflection:** How can I set aside striving and clear the path to witnessing the glory of God this season?

Luke 1:5-25

## **Blessings Too Good to Believe** | Todd Baker

Have you ever received a gift or blessing that you wanted and cherished, but then couldn't fully believe that you deserved it? Perhaps you got into the university you always wanted to attend, but when you opened the admission letter, you felt like it had been sent to the wrong address. Or maybe you have a spouse or friend that blesses you beyond words. Or maybe you got your dream job that you always wanted. Or you found out that you and your spouse were having a child that you'd been praying for.

In verses 13 through 17 in our reading today, the angel informs Zechariah that he and his wife would be having a son. Zechariah responds in the following verse with disbelief. This gift sounded too impossible and undeserved for Zechariah to believe. Yet the blessing from God of a child to Zechariah and Elizabeth was real. Their son John would go on to be great before the Lord and many would rejoice at his birth. Zechariah's initial disbelief would go on to be proven wrong.

In Zechariah's brokenness, he doubted God's ability to provide for him. He doubted that the gift he wanted could be provided by God. In fact, his vision of God's ability to bless His children with good things in this life was too limited. At times, we share Zechariah's limited understanding of God's boundless gifts. We can get caught up in the busyness of life and not fully count our gifts and marvel at God's provision for us. Just as John would go on to be a great joy for others and point them to Christ, the gifts that God gives us go on to bless others tremendously.

**Reflection:** Take a moment to think about all the blessings God has given you. This Advent, rest knowing that God has given you even the smallest of these blessings for your joy and the joy of others.

Luke 1:26-33

## **An Annunciation for All Time** | William Cannon

It is profoundly appropriate that this passage, which announces the most magnificent miracles of all time, starts with a list of mundane details. Luke takes concern to note the date, location, lineage, and characters involved before getting to the good stuff. Some refer to this mingling of the profound (that which is of God) and the profane (that which is of humans) as "The Great Condescension": the God of all creation, the highest being imaginable, lowering himself to become a man.

Gabriel's sweeping and grand announcement proclaims that the child Mary would bear will reign forever and ever, His kingdom will have no end, and He will be the Son of the Most High. Mary, a poor, engaged teenager, probably had some assumptions as to how the rest of her life and the child's would go without knowing the progression of the story. For us who know the full story, we see that in His greatness, Jesus becomes a carpenter that quits his job to roam the countryside to heal and preach with a few followers. He takes His seat on His Father's throne by being crucified to a cross, and He initiates His everlasting kingdom by keeping the same politically oppressive regime in power.

The ways God's kingdom manifests itself in this world rarely looks the way we expect: it is the poor virgin teenager giving birth in a stable; it is a carpenter refusing to revolt by willingly giving his life over to an angry mob; it is a small group of poorly educated people choosing to live lives of radical love that infiltrate powerful cultures around the globe.

Gabriel's message to Mary was the first announcement that every follower of Jesus carries: "Do not be afraid! Jesus reigns over your life and the whole world." Let's prepare the mundane and profound areas of our lives and our world to receive Him!

**Reflection:** What do you imagine when you consider God's kingdom being established on Earth? Do your expectations align with the story of Jesus in the Scriptures and throughout history? Followers of Jesus have taken the announcement of Gabriel to all nations. Who might the Lord want you to share the miracle of the incarnation with?

Luke 1:34-38

## **Peace and Rest in the Unknown** | Carley Baker

Do the unknown and unanswered questions of life keep you anxious? Do you struggle with a sense of futility in life when you don't have explanations for where exactly you are going, how long your journey will take, or why you have certain struggles? You may ask yourself, why do I have this medical problem? Why and for how long will I have the pain of this mental illness? Why do I struggle with this spiritual problem and how do I fix it?

Listen to the similarities and differences between Mary's and Zechariah's questions. Mary asks, *"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"* while Zechariah asks, *"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."* Mary's question inquires, *"How will God bring about this pregnancy and birth?"* It is a question rooted in faith in God's power, plan, and provision. Zechariah's question demands, *"How can I trust God and know what He will do?"* Pretty much all of us want to know the proof, explanations, and details that Zechariah was looking for rather than resting in the love and care of God to carry out his promises and work.

Do you believe that you are a treasured son or daughter of God? Do you know that God wants you? Do you know that it was for the joy of being in a healed relationship with you that Jesus chose to be born into humility and poverty? Mary answers in verse 38, *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*

**Reflection:** Take a moment to think about the areas of life where it is easier and harder for you to trust God's plan. Can you rest in the unknown, unanswered question of your journey by looking at the love, sacrifice, and care that God joyfully gives you, His treasured child?





## **Week 2**

O come, thou Wisdom from on high  
Who ord'rest all things mightily;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach ius in her ways to go.

Psalm 4

**As We Wait for Rest** | Pastor Chris Troxel

Rest is elusive. In Psalm 4, David writes from a place of knowing the kind of rest that can only flow from peace and understanding that trying to find rest any other way is fruitless. Can you resonate with that vibe? What I know is that the older I get, the more difficult it is for me to sleep. Upon reading *The Body Keeps The Score*, I realized that perhaps it's in the moments when I stop moving that my body is striving to tell me something my mind is desperate to ignore. I think David knows this. He's certainly acquainted with the God who *"gives [him] relief when [he] was in distress"* (verse 1).

Rest is a gift. David knows this gift and cries out to God for him to restore it. Through David's psalm, God also invites you to cry out to Him, whether in distress or not. God's invitation to a rest that flows from peace is the disposition of the Father toward his creation.

Rest cares for God's creation. Rest for humans allows the body to replenish and repair depleted, damaged, and/or deprived parts and areas of the body. When your body does not get rest, when that restoration does not happen, it begins to compensate in other ways. This only works in the short term; sooner or later, your body begins to pay the steep price for a lack of rest. So Jesus yokes his life, energy, and rest to you. On our own, we never have enough, even when we're living life to the fullest.

Sleep ≠ rest. Peace = rest. Peace only comes from the God who knows your need and well-provides for it. *"You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound."*

**Reflection:** Are you in a moment, series, or season of distress? Can you name your pain? If you're struggling with this, lean into people, pastors, or professionals you trust to listen and care for you. You are not alone. God provides people in your life so that together we can bear each other's burdens in genuine, safe, grace-filled relationships. And when people fail us, Jesus is always enough. Jesus is always more than enough.

Luke 1:39-45

## **Waiting in Community** | Melissa Kasper

My youngest son is four and has been asking, "How many more days until Christmas?" since June! The concept of time is very difficult to explain to a child, especially when s/he really wants something right now. As much as I want him to learn patience and how to wait calmly for things, I also understand his frustration. Christmas is an exciting time! The lights! The tree! The presents! Why can't it all be here right now? It is so hard to wait!

As hard as it is to wait for exciting things to come, it can be even harder to wait through difficult times when the future seems unclear. Test results, job offers, healing, God's will to be made known. These are the times when waiting is not only frustrating, but also fear-inducing. Waiting can make us anxious, distrusting, and doubtful of the promises of God.

When Mary, the teen mother of Jesus, received the message that she would give birth to the Savior of the world, she said, "*May your word to me be fulfilled.*" But immediately after this passage, Scripture says she hurried to Elizabeth's house. Maybe she hurried out of excitement to share this good news! Maybe she hurried because she was fearful of the weight of this responsibility on her shoulders. Maybe, a few days removed from her miraculous encounter with an angel, she started doubting God's purpose and plan for her after all. Whatever the reason, Mary hurried to her cousin Elizabeth's house. Her purpose? To seek community.

As Mary arrives and greets her, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims a blessing over Mary. She blesses her and her unborn child saying, "*Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!*" Elizabeth meets Mary where she is at. Whether she is anxious, excited, fearful, or doubtful, Elizabeth bestows a blessing, affirms the promise of God to Mary, and encourages her in that promise. What a beautiful picture of waiting in community! May we all wait with our fellow brothers and sisters with blessing, affirmation, and encouragement.

**Reflection:** How have I greeted a struggling friend recently with blessing, affirmation, or encouragement? How can I practice this more?

Luke 1:46-56

## **God Chooses and Uses the Unexpected** | Jeaneen Wyly

There is something in us that loves an underdog. The Cinderella teams in March Madness capture the imagination and dominate sports conversations. In fact, almost every sports movie ever made is the story of the underdog overcoming. Even rom-coms celebrate the nerdy girl who transforms into the breath-taking beauty or the geeky guy who captures the heart of the popular girl. We love to see the unexpected and overlooked win.

God's choice of Mary, a poor, unmarried girl of an outcast ethnic group, to carry His Son seems to be the ultimate Cinderella story. It was no fairy tale, though, and even endangered her life. Still, Mary sings a joyful song to the Lord, "*rejoicing*" and "*glorifying*" Him for being "*mindful ... of His servant.*" She praises Him for "*lift[ing] up the humble*" and "*fill[ing] the hungry with good things.*" Clearly, God loves an underdog story, too!

In fact, the Bible is filled with stories of God using the unexpected: a stutterer to lead (Moses), an adopted daughter to become queen (Esther), a shepherd boy as king (David), a slave to save a kingdom (Joseph), a prostitute to save His people (Rahab), a womanizer to defeat the enemy (Samson). Instead of the pedigreed, the famous, or the rich, God chooses the ordinary (and highly flawed) to do His extraordinary work.

And we, too, personally know that He chooses the unfit and unexceptional because we all were hopelessly out of the running for heaven. Dead in our sin, we had no chance to win the crown of life or to spend eternity with our God. But God has "*remembered to be merciful*" and "*performed mighty deeds with His arm*" by sending this very Child whom Mary is celebrating. During this Advent season, we, who were the ultimate underdogs, remember that Jesus's birth and sacrificial life and death have given us the victory. Let us, also, glorify the Lord and rejoice in God, our Savior!

**Reflection:** Sometimes we feel like we are overlooked and maybe even outcast. How can our knowledge that God uses for His glory what the world rejects or discounts help us to rejoice in our daily lives? How does God's sending of His Son to Mary and to our world impact you directly?

Luke 1:5-66

**Expectation** | Peter Bruenger

For people who emphasize being individualistic in this time period, we spend a lot of time asking people what to do. College students sift through hundreds of majors before they finally settle on one. Adults end up looking to their parents for how to do life—for better or worse. Teenagers and young adults look online for what it takes to be cool or different. Everybody wants to do what everybody else is doing.

This isn't some crazy idea in today's culture that needs to be fixed; in fact, it can even be understood that this is how human beings process any sort of thought about doing anything. There are these things called "mirror neurons" in the human brain. The significance of mirror neurons is that people need to do what those around them are doing in order to understand it.

It was custom during the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth to name children after their fathers or one of the men in their family. We see this become an issue when Elizabeth wants to name her child differently than anyone expects. This goes completely against the culture of the time which dictated that the child be named after one of the males in the family. Instead of listening to the people, she instead listens to an angel who has come to her husband. It was God's will and intention that the child be named John.

Verses like this help us realize and remember that God works completely differently from human expectations. He isn't subject to mirror neurons. He silences the loud, raises the meek, and puts His own son in a manger. In a holiday season filled with familial expectations and tradition, remember that God does not work in the same ways that people do. Try to let go of the reins a little bit and remember that God is going to do his greatest work in the last way that you'd expect.

**Reflection:** Do you find yourself struggling to let things happen as they will, or do you try to white-knuckle life and make it fit your expectations? What if God's plan is greater than anything you could ever expect?

Luke 1:67-80

**Grace is Born** | Ashleigh Creeden

Ashleigh is wife to Tony, and mom to 16-month-old Evelyn. She loves being creative via art and writing, serving others, and sharing the Gospel. She works as Executive Director of a nonprofit organization.

Zechariah's prophecy, or commonly referred to as Zechariah's song, takes place within the context of his son's birth. He had previously been visited by an angel, who told him that regardless of his advanced years, he and his wife would have a child who was to be named John, and that this child would be a great and favored prophet of the Lord. Zechariah, much like his ancestor Abraham, questioned the validity of this statement, and was therefore made mute for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. After Elizabeth had the baby, Zechariah was preparing to confirm that the boy's name would be John, despite the cultural custom and the lack of familial name in his lineage. This was a commitment honoring the Lord, since the name had been chosen by God. As Zechariah wrote the confirmation, his voice returned.

What comes next is striking. The Bible doesn't record Zechariah's surprise, or any sort of celebration that his own ability to speak had returned. Instead, it records his song of blessing to the Lord. Like a typical arrangement of music, as the ascent and crescendo of a song gives light and anticipation for what is to come next, Zechariah's prophecy brings light to what is to come next in the world. Promises kept, grace, salvation, mercy, deliverance, forgiveness for all.

Zechariah's resounding prophecy reminds God's people that He is a God who keeps His promises. He is a God who blesses His people. He is a God who will bring deliverance and salvation to His people. He is a God who shows grace and mercy to His people through His abundant and abounding love. Through the birth of Jesus, in about six months' time from that moment, the world would change forever. A thrill of hope, a light to the world is coming.

Zechariah is praising the Lord for what he is preparing to do through the baby in Mary's womb; he is praising the Lord for what He is to do through his own son, who was born to point people to Jesus; and he is praising the Lord for who He is, for the promises kept, the grace, salvation, mercy, deliverance, and forgiveness He will bring to His people. To you. To me.

See, Zechariah's song is your song. Our song. God has brought salvation through

the birth of His son, Jesus. And through that Son, He extends His grace, mercy, and forgiveness to you, now and always. A thrill of hope, a light has come. Grace is born.

**Reflection:** Reflect on what that kind of anticipation must have felt like—to be Zechariah or Elizabeth, or even Mary or Joseph, and to know that the world is about to change forever: that salvation is coming to the world through a baby boy that they will soon hold in their arms. Pray today that you could hold that same kind of anticipation throughout this Advent season, knowing what is coming on Christmas morning. It's more than family traditions or a beautifully lit tree; it's the salvation of the world brought personally to you.

Luke 2:1-7

## **The Humble Birth of Jesus** | Bob Grese

When we read this account of Jesus's birth each year at Christmas, it brings back warm memories from many Christmases in my past. As a child, I could have recited this passage by heart from hearing or reading it at so many Christmas programs. Still, each time I read this account, I feel a sense of wonder at the humble circumstances around Jesus's birth, the historical/political context at the time, and the situation of His earthly parents.

The Palestine of Jesus's time was part of the Roman Empire and residents were subjected to the whims of Roman emperors. Caesar Augustus issued such a decree, requiring residents to return to their ancestral hometowns for the periodic census. For Mary and Joseph, this obviously came at a very difficult time, for Mary at an advanced stage of pregnancy and for Joseph to whom she was pledged to be married, although she carried someone else's child.

Rather than balk at the decree, Joseph and Mary chose to be obedient, following Caesar's orders that forced them to make the roughly eighty to ninety-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It had to be a very uncomfortable journey of at least four to five days over the rocky terrain. Once they arrived in Bethlehem, they found that all the inns were full and so resorted to staying in a stable, perhaps a cave where animals were kept. When Jesus was born, He was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in an animals' feeding trough. These things fulfilled the details noted in many prophecies, including Micah 5:2 (that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem).

What is remarkable to me here is how God worked to bring our Savior into the world, not as a triumphant king but as a lowly child, born to poor, ordinary people. Joseph and Mary lived in an occupied land and under an oppressive government that constantly made their lives more difficult. Yet, they trusted in God's promises despite the difficult circumstances surrounding their lives. In the process, they helped fulfill God's longstanding promise to bring joy and salvation to our sinful world.

**Reflection:** How can you, in the relative comfort and convenience of our modern world, be an instrument, bringing joy and salvation to those around you? When has God asked you to be obedient, doing things you disliked, and then worked to provide a blessing to you and others in your life?





### **Week 3**

O come, O come, thou Lord of might,  
Who to thy tribes on Sinai's height  
In ancient times didst give the law,  
In cloud, and majesty, and awe.

Psalm 11

**As we wait, take refuge in the LORD** | Norma Polk

In the past few years I have grown to love the Psalms. It is my go-to book when I am in distress or when I don't know how to pray. I see God's heart in the Psalms—His compassion, love, grace, mercy, passion, even anger. The Psalms are filled with God's promises of His steadfastness and forgiveness. Meditating on the Psalms center me in God.

Today's Psalm gives me comfort and assurance in three ways (shout out to our Pastors for reminding me that when things come in threes, they are easier to digest!).

First, verses 1-3 assure me that even in the midst of the enemy's attacks, the Lord is my refuge. He is my protector. The evil one lies to me. At times he tries to convince me that I have no control over whatever unpleasant situation I am in. Or, he tries to steer me away from God's promise that in Christ we have hope in the glory of God. What can be better than that? I often forget that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12-ESV) Focusing on the character and promises of God can help us to trust Him, even when things get tough. God's promises, delivered through His Son, Jesus, are an indestructible foundation!

Second, verses 4-6 remind me that He watches over me AND the situation around me. He watches over the world, He watches over His people. He knows what is going on in my life. This gives me comfort. If He knows what is going on, He surely knows how to help, comfort, and guide me, even in the most dire situation. And He has also sent us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit!

Third, the last verse reminds me that only the Lord is righteous. Our righteousness is the result of His grace, in freely giving us His Son, Jesus the Christ, who came down from heaven as Mary's baby, who called His disciples (and He is still in the business of calling disciples!), and who died on the cross. His death pays for our sins; His death has made us righteous before God. Because of this righteousness we can approach God on His throne, sit at His feet, and unload our burdens and cares.

**Reflection:** As we wait, let us meditate on His words and soak up His promises. Try meditating on the Psalms.

Luke 2:8-20

## **Where is God in the Waiting?** | Angela Post

This past February, a couple of friends and I went to Brite Winter, an all-day, outdoor music festival in Cleveland, Ohio. That evening, while waiting for our next scheduled band to start, our eyes and ears were drawn to the sounds of electronic dance music and a ten-foot ice sculpture. As one of my friends extravagantly danced to the music with hundreds of strangers, the rest of the crowd soaked up the heat that was radiating off of the ice sculpture. As a group, we took bets on how long the structure would stay upright and what would bring this beast to the ground. Standing there, I considered my own ten-foot ice structure: singleness.

Everyone has an opinion about singleness. On one hand, I have my 80-year-old friend who set me up on a blind date with a young man who lives in her subdivision. On the other hand, I have had married people tell me to enjoy the season that I am in because I will never get this level of freedom back. Alongside these external pressures, I also ask myself, "Am I waiting well enough?"

Truth be told, as in singleness and in many other life experiences, waiting sucks. However, today's verses remind us that God is present in the waiting and comforts us when we are facing the unknown. These sets of verses also remind us of the importance of praising God in the midst of it all. He reminds us of His presence and timing perfectly in the birth of Emmanuel.

**Reflection:** What is something you are waiting for?

Matthew 2:6-12

## **What Do We Put in Front of God?** | Monica Schneggenburger

After King Herod charged the wise men to find the location of the child foretold to be King of the Jews and then return to him, they instead continued traveling to find Him to worship Him; so God invites each of us to journey through life, trusting in His promise of salvation given to each of us through Jesus's death and resurrection. The wise men heard and obeyed the Holy Spirit speaking to them not to return to the king, despite the possible consequences to themselves, so they obeyed the Holy Spirit and diverted their course.

Are we willing to divert our course, despite the hardship or annoyance to ourselves, to demonstrate our love for God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and love our neighbors as we love ourselves? God has called us to be Jesus's disciples. What do we put before our relationship with God? Do we love God first before our jobs, our possessions, and our children? Do we seek God in all aspects of life from the smallest to the largest situations? Do we praise God for His steadfastness even when it may differ from our own vision or opinion of how we thought something should go or has gone? Do we pray and allow God to direct our steps?

**Reflection:** What things do you find that you put before God in your life? Let's refocus our priorities during this Advent season and pray for help to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind.

Psalm 98

**Jubilant Worship During Advent** | Kyle Gontjes

When was the last time when you were left bursting with joy? Was it when you received a good test score, a college admission letter, or an offer for your dream job? Have you also found yourself enamored by the mundane activities of life, such as eating a warm chocolate chip cookie, petting a dog, or enjoying a scrumptious cup of coffee with an old friend?

Today's text, Psalm 98, provides us with a jubilant call to sing a *"new song, for He has done marvelous things."* We are reminded that our Lord has *"revealed His righteousness to the nations"* and *"all the ends of the earth."* His handiwork is interwoven throughout all of history and all of creation.

What should our response be to our Lord's handiwork and mighty actions? In today's text, we are called to *"shout for joy to the Lord"* and *"burst into jubilant song!"* This victory song is to be noisy, loud, and vibrant! Singing, harps, trumpets, and ram's horns all intermix to *"make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!"* All the earth is to sing praise to Him. Seas are to roar, rivers to clap, and the hills are to *"sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge!"*

Amidst this season's anticipation to celebrate Jesus's birth and our waiting for His triumphant return, it can be easy to live a life of ambivalence or despondency. I'll admit that I find it hard to patiently wait for events or plans to transpire, especially those that could bring great joy or warmth. I am reminded of Relient K's play on Mr. Tumnus's famous words from the Chronicles of Narnia: "It is always winter, but never Christmas. It seems this curse just can't be lifted." Amidst this season of waiting and cold weather, today's Psalm gives us another option. Our hearts are to be warmed by reverence and faith in our Lord and King. Let us join and participate in God's symphony by trumpeting a worship song that is full of jubilant hope!

**Reflection:** Where do you find Christ's handiwork in your life? How can you find beauty and worship in the ordinary and mundane?

John 1:1-14

**Bittersweet** | Krissa Rumsey

I'm often a fan of professor and writer Brene Brown. In her books and podcasts, she discusses the notion of "bittersweet." She quotes Marc Parent when she defines it as "appreciating life's most precious moments and the unbearable awareness that those moments are passing." This is how I approach Advent. I love the anticipation of Christmas, yet I know, with certainty, there will be disappointment. Beyond disappointment, there may be hurt. There may be loneliness. There may be illness. This is the reality of living in a world poisoned by sin. And it's a joy-killer.

When the anticipation of something dark hangs over you like a thick, October morning fog, embracing a joyful moment feels risky because it could turn to pain with the next phone call or with the absence of one you've been desperately waiting for. Pain, disappointment, grief, or shame feels inevitable. It's coming. Or maybe for you, reader, it's here. Perhaps every breath feels hard to draw because of the weight that you are bearing. Advent invites more of this, especially as we anticipate Christmas celebrations reflective of Hallmark movies, where broken relationships are repaired, illness is healed, and bank accounts runneth over. Yet, pain and disappointment persist.

In five decades of life, I'm acutely aware of the dark shadow that follows Joy. But, I'm also aware of how we are not swallowed up by the things that are hard. The verses in John 1 remind me of that and I have clung to them at times when there's been little else to cling to. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (v.5). Jesus came, as was promised. He did the unimaginable and defeated death, as was promised. He always prevails, and in Him, so will we. Darkness does not have the final say. Light does. Yes, there will be darkness, but there will also always be light.

My prayer this season is that the Light of the World will eliminate whatever shadows lurk, and will show us moments of Joy that we cannot help but bask in.

**Reflection:** What are the moments that brought you joy this week? That first cup of coffee in the morning? A warm hug? A walk through a snowy landscape? A quiet moment with God's Word? Where do you see the Light peeking in?

Isaiah 53:1-7

## **Isaiah's Impossible Prophecy** | Nathanael Zuellig

Prophecy is unnerving. It disrupts our security in the idea that we are fully in control, shaping our own destinies as we go along. In our self-created, synthetic world, many have come to believe in a universe that operates solely because we make it operate. We hold the remote. In that universe without Spirit, our souls witness the death of God by neglect.

In today's passage, Isaiah the prophet predicts this turning against the Lord of Creation and belts out the verdict: God has acted—He has secured a way out of a self-inflicted destiny void of Spirit and joy. No other prophecy in the Old Testament seems to be fulfilled so completely, so undeniably, as Isaiah's words in chapter 53. A passage like this shouldn't be possible, not in a purely objective world. It is as if Isaiah peered through a window in time and saw exactly what would take place 700 years later; he saw a vivid, painful vision of the Messiah who would soon come to save His people: *"But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed"* (v.5).

Here, the eternal Word of God enters into a prophet. Here, the timeless, spiritual dimension penetrates powerfully into the material world. In Jesus the Messiah, too, we discover a Person defined by this same fusion, of Spirit entering into and illuminating matter. And today, the truth of His Word and Spirit penetrate our world with the very same transcendent power and light.

This passage and the Messiah it announces prove to us the reality of the Spirit, which not only disrupts the idea that our universe is a mere mechanism but also breaks the worldly belief that our destinies are entirely in our own hands. *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"* (v. 6). We have neglected and pushed out the Spirit from our lives, bringing about the "death" of God, but Christ has taken our punishment on Himself and given us back mercy and life. God has acted. Our destinies are in His hands, not our own. And thanks be to God that they are, because through Jesus, we are reborn as the Spirit of God enters our hearts and leads us to carry out His work of illuminating this darkened world with the light of His love.

**Reflection:** What is God asking you to trust into His hands this season? How has He proven that He has come through before?







#### **Week 4**

O come, thou Rod of Jesse's stem,  
From every foe deliver them  
That trust thy mighty power to save,  
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.

Psalm 18

**From the Mountains to a Manger** | Allie Milot

David describes the Lord as his rock, refuge, and fortress. The God of the Old Testament was a mighty God, seated on a heavenly throne, only to be truly known by priests and prophets. No average man or woman could come before Him. He was powerful, killing off the enemies of David, bringing Israel back to Himself again and again as David describes in Psalm 18. The Lord was to be exalted high above any king or any prophet. Israel was aware of the power and might of their Lord, but what they didn't know was that the Lord was also capable of humbling Himself and would one day be approached by average men and women, day after day.

When Jesus came into the world, He was the son of a poor woman in the city of Bethlehem, as the Old Testament had foretold. He grew up, not with *"devouring fire from his mouth,"* but with the still and small voice of a carpenter's son. Jesus was the polar opposite of the Lord who *"thundered in the heavens"* in the Psalms. But that does not make Him any less great. Jesus came to be one of us—to step into our lives, to know us intimately. We often expect the Lord to work His jaw-dropping, miraculous ways, and sometimes He does. But the Lord often works in more hidden ways, through the people around us, no fire needed. Jesus is the Savior we needed, even when we thought we wanted a war champion who would crush our enemies under His feet.

We have a God who knew what we needed and gave us just that. The Lord knows us; He sees us; He hears us. We may not always feel heard or seen, but we can trust the Lord's promises and the work that He has already done for His people through the sacrifice of His Son.

**Reflection:** What are our personal expectations of Jesus? How can we align them more closely to what God promises to us through the gift of His Son?

Jeremiah 31:31-34

## **The New Covenant—Why Wait? God Promises Are Yours!** | Larry Frank

Devotion warning: Lots of required Bible reading: Read Jer. 31:31-34

Q/A: Who are the real persons with whom this covenant is made? Read Galatians 6:16. How and when is the new covenant put into effect? Read Heb 9:16-18. This promise of God was fulfilled through his Son, the mediator of the new covenant. Read Mark 14:22-24; Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:14-16.

If only God Himself had given a clear, straightforward definition of the new covenant. But He did! Read Deuteronomy 5:27-29; Matthew 28:19-20; John 12:32; Hebrews 4:2.

God's grace is at work in this promise, and Jesus's new covenant promises assure that everyone who will not resist the continual drawing of the Holy Spirit on their hearts will be drawn to Jesus through repentance and faith, be reconciled to God, forgiven of their sins, and sanctified through the writing of His law on their hearts, resulting in "a long obedience in the same direction." This New Covenant promises the internal working of the Spirit!

It is your Pentecost, a personal celebration of the day that the Holy Spirit came to dwell in the hearts of Christ's followers. Read Acts 2:1-40.

Now read Hebrews 8:6-13 where God defines the "new covenant" as four promises He makes to His people: **1:** He promises that He will write His laws in their hearts, to sanctify them, to make them holy, aligning their hearts and characters with His. **2:** He promises to be their God and make them His people to reconcile them to Himself through Christ's death on the cross. Then, read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. **3:** God promises to reveal Himself to the whole world, inviting those who already know Him to team up with Him and other believers in His mission to make Himself known within their own circles of influence. Read Matthew 28:19-20. **4:** God promises to forgive our sins and remember them no more.

These promises of redemption by God, now written on your heart and based on God's grace, have Jesus Christ as the mediator of those New Covenant promises. And Christ has fulfilled that promise: He is yours!

**Reflection:** The idea of writing divine revelation on the human heart is hard to understand, but that is where and how the Holy Spirit does His work. So, what has He written on your heart?

Matthew 1:18-25

**To Have the Faith of Joseph** | Tony Creeden

"I know this looks bad, but let me explain..." What usually follows those nine words is a long and convoluted story that attempts to adequately explain or justify the events preceding them. In films, it commonly creates the conflict in the story arc that either propels the main characters into a comedic flashback or, in the case of a drama, moves the characters into despair and disarray. For Joseph, those words move his story somewhere very different.

Joseph has had a rough few weeks. Mary is pregnant. Joseph is supposed to, by Law, lead a party to stone her. Instead, Joseph has decided to have mercy, but that's tricky since pregnancy is one of those secrets that eventually outs itself. He's frustrated, sad, and confused over the events that have occurred. That's when Joseph encounters an "angel of the Lord" who, for all intents and purposes, makes use of our famous movie line.

The angel explains that Mary did not, in fact, have an illicit affair but instead is pregnant with the child of the almighty God. Joseph is supposed to remain with Mary to legitimize the child in society and raise Him as his own so that this Son, who will be named Jesus, can save the world.

Yeah... that's better?

At this point, no one would fault Joseph for waving his hands in the air and ranting, "This is too much! I can't do this. I'm out!" Instead, Joseph says something even weirder. "Oh, thank the Lord! That's far better than what I thought. I'm in!"

When you stop to think about the reality of the Christmas season, there is quite a bit of absurdity associated with the celebration. God impregnated a human woman to give birth to the Son of the God of the universe so that He could, eventually, die a horrible and torturous death in order to save all of humanity from the mess we made for ourselves in sin. Then, this same God-man, Jesus, promises that He will one day return and restore the world to a state where sin and death no longer exist. It would be easy for us to say, "This is too much! I can't do this. I'm out!" Yet here we are, like Joseph, still in.

The faith of Joseph is remarkable. A man of God who trusts in a promise even when the details of that promise don't always make sense or make life easy. While not in

the exact same scenario, we too are asked to have faith and believe the promise even when the world tells us it's odd or when that faith makes life complicated or difficult to navigate. As we enter into this Christmas season, may we share in the faith of Joseph that finds hope in the midst of sadness and certainty in a confusing world.

Reflection: Reflect on or share a time when your faith gave you strength in a confusing or difficult life event.

John 1:14-18

## **The Word Became Flesh** | Anna & David Dickhudt

How impressed we are when we have an opportunity to interact with a celebrity, a professor, or a top executive at our employment who seems "down to earth" or otherwise able to connect and interact with us on our level! And yet, here is Jesus, one with the Father, the Creator of the universe, who comes to live with us: "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*" (John 1:14).

Jesus came to us to testify to the true nature of God and to encourage and empower us to establish a personal relationship with Him and with our heavenly Father. The disciples, including one who may have been Jesus's half-brother, testified to His humanity, glory, and truth.

These eyewitnesses testify to us today through God's Word. Through Jesus's teaching in the Word, we hear how Jesus came to fulfill the Law for us with His sacrifice. Through the undeserved grace of Jesus' sacrifice, we and all who believe in Him come before God washed clean by His blood. Praise God for His grace and for the truth of Jesus!

**Reflection:** Take a moment to imagine what it would have been like to be a disciple to witness in person Jesus's miracles: feeding thousands, healing with a touch or with a word, and seeing Jesus raise to life someone who had died! What would you have done? Who would you have told about what you witnessed? Tell them today!

Psalm 113

**On Praise and Crowns** | Margaret Baker

Queen Victoria had the proper perspective! As related by Billy Graham when he received an honorary knighthood from the British crown in 2012, the queen had once spoken of her desire for the Lord's return in her lifetime. When asked why, she responded, "I should like to lay my crown at His feet." The woman who was one of the most powerful earthly rulers in history (and who wore an actual crown!) rightly understood her poverty before the Lord and longed to give Him all glory and praise.

She may as well have been preaching from Psalm 113, today's reading. It reminds us, His servants, of our poverty before Him. We are invited to praise His name always, both now and forevermore, and everywhere, from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, because He is indeed the only God, exalted over all the nations with glory above the heavens, enthroned on high. "Who could be like this God?" the psalmist asks rhetorically. Indeed. Just being invited to praise this One and Only God would be enough.

Psalm 113 continues, however, reminding us of the central Gospel truth. In His glory, His power, His majesty enthroned on high, He stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth, [raising] the poor from the dust and [lifting] the needy from the ash heap. Then, and this is the real shocker, [He] seats them with princes. Seats us with princes. Princes! With the very Prince of Peace Himself. At His table. Forever and ever.

For this is our God: the One who empties Himself of royalty, comes down to earth, dies for us, then ascends, raising us up to be with Him at His eternal banquet. We can have only one response. Now, and eventually, on that amazing day, we can lay at His feet our crowns, any tiny honors or accomplishments from our earthly lives. We will then have bestowed on us by Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 2:5). I cannot wait to wear THAT crown!

**Reflection:** Praise the Lord for His majesty and then marvel that He invites you, through Christ on the cross, to share in that majesty. Be in awe that you are certainly part of a royal priesthood!

Romans 15:8-13

**The Hope of the World** | Pastor Marcus Lane

Have you ever noticed how often the things that give us hope are almost always the same things that fill us with fear and anxiety? Starting college may be a hopeful experience as you think about a new community and the opportunities that will be available, but it is also an uncertain one. What will the expectations be? Can I measure up? A new job may fill us with hope about meaningful work, stable income, and a healthier work environment, but there is also the fear of losing a job, having a harsh boss, or working with difficult people. As strange as it may seem, hope and fear seem to go hand-in-hand.

This seems to get at the idea in the line from "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." You see, when our hope is placed in our ability to get things right and keep things together, it is always going to be accompanied by fear. When our hope is in what we can do to make the world right, with it will always come the fear of our failure to do so. Sarah Condon writes, "Fleeting moments of self-perceived perfection tell us nothing about the God who saved us. They only tell us that our souls are groaning for a God that we cannot fully comprehend. We look to virtues to save us. When really, we are longing for a God who has given us absolute perfection in his utterly remarkable love."

In Romans 15:8-13, Paul says that Jesus came to be perfect for you. By fulfilling God's promises to Israel, He opened the door so that you would be included in those promises. He did it all so that you would have hope. You don't have to put things right because He already did. Now, as Paul says, *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."*

**Reflection:** What hopes and fears do you have this Christmas season?

How does the promise that God has come to be with us in Jesus speak to both your hopes and fears?