



SERMONS
THAT WORK



SERMONS FOR
*Advent and
Christmas 2020*

An offering of
Sermons That Work

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

Advent 2020

Dear Reader,

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I cannot count how often I have heard, over the last several months, phrases like, "In these unprecedented times," – phrases that are now, ironically, extremely precedented. These phrases are usually followed by an invitation to consume more of a product, alone or online. Alas, this too is an extremely precedented message.

This message, well-meaning as it may once have been, has sought to dislodge in my mind the familiar way markers of the year; being grounded in a particular tradition is difficult without a community to celebrate and mourn and live in the ways we have found to be good and true together. Holy Week and Easter were hard, but as I write this in early October, I still cannot envision a Christmas without the

familiar haze of incense, without a tightly packed little church, without a crowd raising their voices as one in celebration, without that sudden remembering while walking to the car in the cold of the night that all of this is true.

I do not know what Christmas will look like in 2020. I do not imagine I will look back at it in longing, though I have been wrong frequently this year. What I do know is that Jesus will come anew into our prepared - and still unprepared - hearts. And I know that the world is particularly suited at this moment to hear hope from the Church, as from the maidens in one of my favorite Advent hymns: "The time has come, O maidens wise! Rise up, and give us light."

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Advent and a merry Christmas.

Your brother in Christ,

Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church

First Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 64:1-9; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; I CORINTHIANS 1:3-9;
MARK 13:24-37

WAITING UPON THE LORD

by the Rev. Canon Whitney Rice

Waiting is the hardest thing to do because it feels like you're not doing anything. And it seems twice as hard when you're young. When we're children, Christmas always seems eons away and we think the end of school or our birthday will never arrive.

And we 21st-century folks certainly have an ever-shrinking attention span; our wealth and technology allow us to access virtually anything we want any time we want. Everything is sooner, faster, now. And boy, do we love that speed, especially technological speed. Wait ten seconds to let a webpage load? Are you kidding? Get a faster connection! Wait five seconds for a document to print? What the heck is wrong with this printer? Wait to let yourself cool down before sending that email or posting that social media rant? Are you kidding? Go, go, go! You snooze, you lose, that's our motto. If anyone needs to learn the Advent virtue of waiting upon the Lord, it's us.

Virtually the only things we haven't been able to speed up or shorten are our basic biological processes. It still takes nine long months to have a baby, whether we want to wait that long or not. And so, if we want to be with Mary in her journey toward giving birth to Jesus, we need to settle into the long haul. We've already been busy doing other things for the first eight months, and now in her last month of pregnancy, we're just going to have to take these four weeks of Advent and wait.

Our scripture from Isaiah today has an interesting take on waiting. The writer is marveling at how different the God of Israel is from the other gods in the cultures of the time. And then the writer remembers, "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."

The prophet is surprised not just by the mighty deeds like earthquakes – the writer is equally stunned that here is a God who works for the people, and the people for whom God works are the people who wait for God.

What is it like to wait for God? Many of us know exactly what that is like. We wait for God to explain why a family member died too young. We wait for God to open a path out of a marriage that has ended, into a new place where healing might begin. We wait for God to reveal an open door back into a faith community when we've been hurt by so many churches before.

And of course, virtually this entire year has been a time of waiting. We've waited during lockdowns and quarantines. We've waited on masks and respirators and toilet paper. We've waited on test results for the coronavirus, wondering whether we are positive or not. We've waited endless weeks and months, not able to visit our loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes, in order to protect them.

We've waited on our kids going back to school and waited to see if our jobs would hold out during the crisis. We've waited on unemployment checks and stimulus checks. We've waited in line to vote and waited to see if our mail-in ballot went through, and then waited on the results of the election. We've waited for a vaccine. And we've waited and waited and waited to go back to church in the old ways that were familiar and comfortable to us.

2020 has been nothing but a year of waiting. Perhaps we are better equipped now than we ever have been to understand the oft-repeated Biblical mandate to wait upon the Lord. The Good News shared with us today is that God is working for us as we wait for God.

And we're actually doing two kinds of spiritual waiting right now. We're waiting for the coming of the Christ Child on Christmas Day, that glorious moment of incarnation when God comes to be with us in human form. That's a fixed endpoint that we know ahead of time. Come December 25, we will be celebrating Jesus' arrival.

But we're doing another kind of waiting. We're waiting for the signs of the Incarnation in our own lives. We're waiting to see the new and next way that God will be manifest in our own individual time and place. God is with us, but where and how? That is how we keep company with Mary: as the watchful sentinels always on the lookout for the new revelation waiting to be discovered among the everyday.

Patience is a hard-earned virtue, and many of us are deeply wearied by all the waiting we've had to do, all the times we've had to say no to ourselves and our children this year in order to stay safe and keep others safe. It might feel like 2020 is a year out of time, a wasted and empty expanse that consisted of nothing but life on hold.

But is that true? Was this time of waiting really wasted? Mary's time of waiting was almost as long as ours has been. What has been blossoming and growing in your heart during this time of waiting? What new thing is ready to be born in your spiritual community after having been forced to slow down and really ask what is most important about church? How has your family found new strengths and graces by the call to adapt and the sudden multiplication of time together and new challenges with school and work?

Mary's time of waiting was to a purpose. It had a goal and an end, and she faithfully pursued it with God's help. As you reflect on your waiting this year, what has God grown in you? What will be the gift you offer the world this Christmas as Mary did? It takes awake and alert eyes to see the grace even amid the suffering we've endured.

But the Good News is that the slow, necessary, at times painful work of being changed, of being made ready for incarnation, is not up to us alone. God is the agent of our transformation as we wait. Knowing that reminds us that we don't have to figure this out on our own. There is peace and comfort in the truth that as the endless days of waiting crawl by, God is active within us and our communities. Isaiah tells us in our scripture today, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We are God's work of art, being painstakingly shaped into the vessel of incarnation that will bring the presence of Christ to the world. You are a masterwork. And a masterwork takes time.

And Paul reminds us of what we most need to hold on to through the long weary days of waiting for grace: "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end." Look back on this year and see the strength with which you endured its trials. See the creativity with which your spiritual community sought to

walk together in new ways. See the call to justice and peace that rang even through our most bitter divides in society. And know that it has all led to this, the season of Advent, the time of upheaval and waiting, of change and pause, of grace and truth.

And so, we pray, and we stick together, and we love one another, and we wait upon the Lord. And Isaiah, the great prophet of the Advent season, announces the Good News: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Amen.

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Diocese of Missouri. See more of her work at www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com.

1. Compared to when you were a child, how do you handle waiting now? Are you more patient? Less patient? Why? Write your answer below.

2. Waiting upon the Lord is no easy task – especially given our rapidly-shrinking attention spans and the particular challenges of this past year. What is one thing you can do to wait more patiently and lovingly? Write your answer below.

Second Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 40:1-11; PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 PETER 3:8-15A; MARK 1:1-8

POINTING TO CHRIST

by Michael Toy

The perennial challenge during Advent and Christmastime is to hear anew the familiar story we all know. We all know the story. We've all seen the Christmas pageants. We've set up the Nativity crèche with the holy family, cow, donkey, and shepherds. It's become almost too familiar. In part, that's why we have the season of Advent. These four weeks serve to prepare the way to Christmas via a bit of liturgical wilderness. The penitential season provides a time of reflection and contemplation so that we can hear the good news of Jesus' incarnation afresh and let the gospel sink more deeply into our lives.

This year is a bit different, to say the least. For many, this does not feel like the usual joyous march toward Christmastide. Hundreds of thousands around the globe will be spending their first Christmas without a loved one who has passed on due to the pandemic. Millions more will be attempting a celebration without their usual large and festive gathering, due to travel restrictions. For almost the entirety of the year, we have all been a people anxious and waiting in a lockdown-long Advent. And with no cure or vaccine, there is no clear path forward out of this dark season.

This has been a year full of novel experiences, and every little thing is cast in new perspective. And yet, while the harshness of wilderness may be felt more deeply this year, the same ageless truths remain constant. We are just able to see them more clearly. The fundamental truth of these wilderness seasons

is that we are waiting on an imperfect and broken world to pass. The season of Advent reminds us that no matter who we are or where we are in time or space, all earthly things will come to an end.

Nearly 30 centuries ago, Isaiah wrote to God's exiled people, who were longing to return home. God's message to them is one of comfort. The Lord is coming. On first hearing, Isaiah's message hardly seems one of comfort: "The grass withers, the flower fades... surely the people are grass." That does not sound like a fairytale ending – and it's not. The comfort offered in these verses is more complex than a "happily ever after" coda. The comfort comes by putting things into a divine and cosmic perspective. All people will fade like grass, but God is mighty and endures forever. The goodness of God will prevail. The prophet does not give an immediate timeframe or an immediate solution to the heartbreak and suffering of the people in exile; what is offered instead is a message of hope for the future.

Second Peter is also written to a people longing for God's return. The author's message is not unlike Isaiah's: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire." All things will, in the end, pass away. And in the end, God's justice will prevail. While we don't know the exact date of its writing, we do know that this epistle was written to the fledgling Christian community experiencing persecution at the hands of the ruling empire. They are looking for Jesus' return and immediate relief from their suffering. But God does not descend with thunder from the clouds in triumphant material salvation. Instead, God's word instructs the early Church to step back and seek a divine and cosmic perspective. A thousand years is like a day, and a day is like a thousand years to God. Again, this does not seem like a happy fairytale message for a people experiencing immediate pain and anguish. The author goes so far as to say that God's lack of thunderous return is not to cause more suffering but instead is an act of love and patience. Once again, we are given a word of hope for the future, but we are also given instructions on how to live in the present: "Strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish."

In our gospel reading, we read the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Without much prelude or fanfare, we are thrust into the action in the desert. The prophet John the Baptizer proclaims in the wilderness a familiar message. At this point in history, Israel has been invaded and occupied by the Roman Empire. And now John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Though crowds flock to John—the reading says, "People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out

to him”—John still points away from himself and toward someone greater to come. John points to a hopeful future by promising one who will come baptizing, not with mere water but with the eternal Holy Spirit.

Our readings also show us that waiting is not a passive action. We are to live out our hope. In waiting for the fullness of the Kingdom of God, we proclaim God’s message of justice. We name sin. We turn toward justice. We stand in the wilderness, pointing to the one more powerful than us. As the psalmist writes, “Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.” Where righteousness and peace are actively enacted, God is there.

Our Advent message from John the Baptizer is not to adopt a bug-and-honey diet or de-clutter the closet to make room for the camel skins. The message isn’t even to level mountains or make a straight highway running through the desert! Our Advent message is that we are called to be a people that await the coming of the Lord. We are always in waiting—through victory and defeat, triumph and loss. It is certainly our job as the church to proclaim peace on earth, goodwill towards all, and joy to the world. But it is just as much our job to be visible in the wilderness, naming injustice, oppression, and apathy as sins. We name these things as sin not to cast judgment or humiliate or ridicule. And least of all do we name sin in order to exclude people from our “in” group; it is precisely the opposite. We stand in the wilderness and welcome all to journey with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. We point to something better. We point to the Christ, the one who is more powerful, more patient, and more loving. We point to the Christ, the one who is to come.

This Advent, many of us are already in the wilderness. Let us step back and pray for a glimpse of the divine and cosmic perspective. We remember that all things here on earth are temporary and ephemeral, and we work to embody God’s patience and love here in this world. Let our lives be shaped by our hope in the truth that God is coming. As our collect says, let us live in such a way so that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Michael Toy, an alumnus of Princeton Theological Seminary, has worked in Christian formation since 2013. He now spends his time writing, blogging, and trying to live out the radical call to love our neighbors.

1. There is a tendency in many cultures to paper over the revolutionary nature of Christmas with saccharine sentimentality, soft lights, and picture-perfect meals with picture-perfect families. Do these images impede or obstruct the joy of Christ’s coming among us? Do they enhance it or are they indifferent to it? Why?

2. How can you, like John the Baptist, point people toward Jesus Christ? Commit to an action this week in which you will proclaim the Good News of God in Christ in word and deed. Write that commitment below.

Third Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; PSALM 126 OR CANTICLE 15 OR 3;
I THESSALONIANS 5:16-24; JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

EMPTINESS

by the Rev. Phil Hooper

If you have ever stood at the rim of a canyon, you know what it is to comprehend the immense majesty of emptiness. These clefts in the earth, carved by the incessant flow of water over millennia, are rocky vessels holding a world unto themselves.

Peer over the edge and look down into the sky held between the canyon walls—a highway for the howling wind and winged creatures of the air.

Look down upon the stubborn shrubs clinging to the ledges, where tiny crawling things seek their precarious shelter.

And then look down, down, down to the bottom, to the river—the sinuous originator of this landscape, still eroding and shaping the earth in its insistent passage towards a distant sea.

In the canyon, we perceive how negative space has its own power; we find that we are just as compelled by the vastness of what is missing, what has been hollowed out, as we are by what remains. There is a potentiality in the chasm, a certain thick luminousness, a sense of seeing deep into the heart of things that are usually hidden under the surface.

And perhaps it is in just such a wilderness place that we might imagine John the Baptist, his voice crying out, echoing off of the wizened rockface, mingling with dust and birdsong, proclaiming a coming that will soon carve its own path through the petrification of the human heart. A coming that will strip us bare of falsehood and pretension. A coming that will carve out an authentic understanding of ourselves in the cosmic landscape.

Like the emptiness of the canyon, though, our authenticity is predicated, first, upon an honest assessment of that which is not there, in order to reveal the deep truth that remains.

“Who are you?” John is asked.

“I am not the Messiah,” he says.

Are you Elijah? “I am not.”

The prophet? “No.”

Relinquishment of these identity markers is his first act of truth-telling. John knows that he must name the roles to which he is not called before he can affirm that to which he is. And so must we.

How often we wish that we were the Messiah, the long-expected sovereign of our own small dominions. How often we take on the titles offered to us, not because they fit, but because they make us feel more real to ourselves. And how readily we assign these roles to others in order to suit our purposes. But just as the canyon only becomes itself in the void, so, too, with us: in each of our own negations, we get closer to the spare, essential truth of our identity.

“I am,” John admits, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” A voice, an invisible resonance piercing the air. Nothing more and nothing less than this. And this is exactly what God needs him to be.

John, the man of the empty wilderness, is himself a canyon-like figure, characterized more by spaciousness and depth than by any agenda of self-aggrandizement. He is one whose existence has been shaped to its depths by the Divine flow, and he embodies the way in which giving

ourselves over to that movement is the pathway to honest, purposeful existence. He is the exemplar of how our lives become conformed to the shape of Christ—the Way-Made-Clear for the advent of God’s Living Water.

There is much for us to learn from him here, in the watery depths of the canyon, especially in this frenetic and anxious season. Faced with the multiplying needs of our families, our communities, and our planet, we are frequently tempted to take on far more than what we can actually do or be. And even as many of us attempt to slow down and be more attentive in this liturgical season, the world continues to surround us and shout, “Who are you? Who are you?”

But, like John, if we are ever to cultivate the space in ourselves for God to accomplish God’s work, then we must respond with:

I am not the Messiah.

I am not.

No.

We must be willing to disappoint the expectant throng. We must be willing to embrace the emptiness of what we were never meant to be.

And then, perhaps, we will find the one voice that was ours to claim all along.

For John, the purpose of his own voice is clear: the announcement of God’s incarnate promise. And so he baptizes in the river, that agent of transformative power, inviting others to let themselves be scoured by it—to let their layers of defensiveness and artifice be stripped away, to hollow out a space in their hearts in preparation for “the one who is coming after,” the Christ, the one who is making all things new.

And here, in another time and in another wilderness, John’s invitation remains open to us, and it is as urgent as ever because we are still learning who we are and who we are not. Like the canyon, we are still being shaped, still being laid bare to the wind and the light, still becoming as deep and open and vast as God imagines we can become. And, like John, it is only in the cultivation of our own holy emptiness that we will, at last, be the vessels of God’s inbreaking purpose:

to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

The Rev. Phil Hooper was ordained to the priesthood in 2019 and currently serves as Curate at Trinity Episcopal Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. A native of the west coast and a graduate of Church Divinity School of the Pacific (M.Div., 2019), he is passionate about spiritual formation, contemplative prayer, and the ways that these things impact our discipleship. Outside of church, you will likely find him in a local bookshop or on a road trip exploring the Midwest. His sermons and other writings are available at www.byanotherroad.com.

1. Have you been baptized? If so, what do you think the people around you felt in that moment? If you are old enough to remember, how did you feel? How do you think God felt?

2. Is there something you can let go of this week? An attitude, a bit of unnecessary busy work, a grudge? Take time this week to set a bit of the busyness aside and instead, meditate on the passage from Isaiah: “He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.”

Fourth Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16; CANTICLE 3 OR CANTICLE 15 OR
PSALM 89:1-4, 19-26; ROMANS 16:25-27; LUKE 1:26-38

HERE AM I

by the Rt. Rev. Frank S. Logue

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” With these words, the Angel Gabriel announces God’s call to Mary. Mary is unique in all creation with the young woman from Nazareth being offered a pivotal role in the redemption of all creation. We see in Mary’s faithfulness the model for the way the grace of God can and will, albeit in smaller ways, use each of us.

Look at the many ways God had already acted in scripture. God used Miriam’s bravery as she kept an eye on her brother Moses, floating in a basket. She would go on to lead her people in praising God after they were brought out of Egypt. God raised up Deborah to free her people from the Canaanite king, Sisera. Esther discovered that she had been placed in King Xerxes’ palace in order to rescue her people from death. The prophetess Anna saw the infant Jesus in the Temple and praised God, speaking of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. An unnamed woman at a well in Samaria heard Jesus speaking and became an evangelist, bringing her village to faith. The wealthy businesswoman Lydia heard the Good News from Paul and became the first of her people to follow Jesus, using her means to support the new faith taking root in the Roman Empire.

Mary’s call came through the appearance of the Angel Gabriel. Even in biblical times, hearing God speak audibly or having an angel appear with a message from God was a rare event. While her call was singular, Mary’s response of “Here am I” is part of a pattern woven into scripture. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and others heard God’s call and responded with those words.

Isaiah was in the temple when he had a vision of God on the throne with seraphim, six-winged angels, flying around the throne, calling out, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The voice of the Lord calls to Isaiah and says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:1-8).

Then we come to Mary in our Gospel reading for today. Gabriel lays out the plan for Mary, explaining how she is to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary’s response is the time-tested response of those who answered God’s call before her: “Here am I.”

The people of faith whose stories we named share the common attribute of making themselves available to God. God calls and they reply, “Here am I,” before they even know what God has in mind for them.

In this, Mary is part of an ongoing pattern: God’s plan always involves using ordinary people to bring about extraordinary changes. In a dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, a statement emerged that named how Mary forms a template. Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ explains, “The pattern of hope and grace already foreshadowed in Mary will be fulfilled in the new creation in Christ when all the redeemed will participate in the full glory of the Lord.”

Mary’s call to be the *Theotokos*—the God-bearer—was unlike any other in all creation, with the exception of the fact that God calls and uses ordinary and flawed me and ordinary and flawed you, fitting the pattern we see working its way through human history. Every Christian shares a common call to use the gifts God has given us toward the reconciliation of all the world.

But how might we hear God's call? What is it like to discern how the Holy Spirit might use you? First, know that this is common. Your own life has been shaped by those who were in some ways responding to how the Holy Spirit was moving in their lives.

But how do you know when it is the Holy Spirit who is guiding you? After all, we know that God can use your own interests and desires to call you, but your own interest and desire alone are not God's call.

Second, know that a call happens in community. If you are being led toward something, test whether or not it is God calling you – with prayer, by surrounding yourself with godly people who are also praying for your discernment. Then ask God to make a way or close the way. This is not about ordained ministry, certainly not that alone. God may call you to something – a vocation, whether as a teacher or physician or real estate agent, or as a foster parent or scout leader, or even just to reach out to one person on a given day. In fact, the Holy Spirit can use you anywhere to touch the lives of those around you.

It takes some spiritual discernment, though, to determine when it is God and when it is just our own desires at play. When the Holy Spirit is really working to get your attention, God will use others to affirm what one is hearing. Ask your priest or a trusted friend to pray about it with you. God speaks in stereo, using more than one method at once—God will use what you read, hear on television or the radio, and the passing comment of a friend. God will also use those various means to show that it is not the Holy Spirit. If I come up with a great idea, or a terrible idea I think is great, I can try to baptize my idea as God's.

Ask God to direct your path. Attend to what that might be. When something arises, test it and continue to listen. If something is of God, ask for the Holy Spirit to open doors, even though it seems impossible. And also ask God that if it is not of him, to close the doors, no matter how promising that path seems, and make it impossible, even if it had been a sure thing. It is important when discerning God's will to surround yourself with godly people and to ask them to pray as well.

Praying for God to close doors is hard. After all, the thing you are praying about may be just your own will and desires talking. Still, you

should pray for the opportunity to fall through if it is not God's will.

But what if you have never experienced God calling you to do anything – ever? Fear not. Every Christian has been there. The appropriate response is still, “Here am I.” Offer your life to God and let the Holy Spirit guide you. While none of us will experience a call as world changing as the one Gabriel announced to Mary, the effect of each follower of Jesus listening and discerning how God will use them is what the Holy Spirit uses to reconcile all creation to God. Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue is the Bishop of Georgia. He previously served on the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and was the church planter for King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia.

1. Who in scripture inspires you with their faithfulness? Draw a picture below of the moment in their ministry you find particularly moving.

2. Tear a bit of this page off and write, “Here am I.” Carry this message with you this week – perhaps in your wallet or your pocket or even your shoe! – to remind you of that God’s call can (and will) happen at any time. Listen attentively for the call and consider using the discernment ideas mentioned in this sermon.

Christmas Day (I)

COLLECT

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 9:2-7; PSALM 96; TITUS 2:11-14; LUKE 2:1-14 (15-20)

IN THE FLESH

by the Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson

Luke's nativity story is familiar to most of us, whether we know it or not. That famous account of Jesus' birth that we hear, year-in and year-out, begins with those ever-so recognizable lines, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered..." You know where this one's going right from the very beginning.

Christians don't memorize much scripture anymore. Smartphone in hand, any one of us can command verse after verse with a few swipes of our thumb. Come to think of it, nobody memorizes much of anything at all anymore. Yet even today, the children in the Christmas pageant commit themselves to those words that seem to rain down from heaven: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The words from the letter to Titus, on the other hand, are not very well known to most of us. We are simply not as well acquainted with them as we are with Luke's. They don't provoke the same visceral awareness within us. They don't transport us into the past quite as

suddenly. They don't put us in mind of singing carols or baking pies or unwrapping new pajamas.

The truth is, we often forget about the letter to Titus, and not just at Christmas time. "What's your favorite book of the Bible?" "Oh, Titus, for sure!" (said no one, ever.)

Another sentiment never overheard: "Oh, how I love Christmas Eve services each year! The family gathered together, the church glowing with candlelight, and just before the sequence hymn... the reading from Titus!" Something about it just doesn't sound quite right.

And yet here is Titus, enfolded neatly into our Christmas liturgy. Even at one of the most well-attended services of the year, I doubt if anyone leaves with Titus on their mind (or the sermon, for that matter). So, if you didn't recognize the passage, you're not alone. Titus makes a rare appearance in our common worship. In fact, Christmas is the only time the letter appears in the lectionary cycle. Because of that, and because this particular passage is so brief, it might just bear repeating.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds."

Even though these words from Titus might not be quite as memorable as some others, they are surely just as applicable as we gather not only to observe the nativity but to celebrate the Incarnation.

You see, Christmas is just as much about giving birth to a firstborn son and wrapping him in bands of cloth and laying him in a manger as it is about the grace of God appearing, bringing salvation to all. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin, one in the very same.

At Christmas, God's grace appears like never before: in the flesh. By coming in the flesh, God is making sure we understand how very close to us the holy presence really is. God not only wants us to see that

presence, God invites us to feel it—in the flesh! And so that is precisely where grace appears.

Sure, we may catch the occasional glimpse of grace in other places: the rainbow-sherbet sky at dusk, the music of the song thrush, or looking down on the clouds from the view of a mountaintop perch. But all such moments of grace are happenstance, fleeting, sheer coincidence. But grace appearing in flesh? That is with us always! Because the flesh in which grace appears is our flesh. Becoming one of us is God's way of telling us that our lives matter. It is to us, in these bodies, at this time and always, that grace appears.

Through the miracle of the Incarnation, God did away with the silly notion that we are mere drones slogging our way toward some heavenly home, slowly but surely trudging through the earthly muck and mire. By becoming flesh in this world, God sanctifies our flesh, making it possible for us to be agents of God's grace – right here on earth. In other words, eternal life starts now. You don't have to wait to get to heaven to live in God's kingdom.

Ever since God appeared in a flesh like ours, and lived a life like ours, humanity and divinity have been inextricably linked. I know it's hard to believe. The paradox of this great mystery is certainly worth considering, but on this holy night, we do not come to worship in order to ponder exactly how the Incarnation is possible. We come to worship to renew our commitment to living in the world as if it is true.

“A child has been born for us, a son given to us.”

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

None of this means that the world is perfect. If you weren't already convinced, 2020 should have taken care of that. If ever any year was filled with earthly muck and mire, it was this one. So much so, in fact, that not all Christians—not even some of the most privileged Episcopalians—will be able to worship together tonight, to pass the peace, to break the bread. A year ago, we could never have imagined

the number of lives that would be lost or hearts that would be broken.

Jesus doesn't guarantee that the world will be perfect, but he does supply the grace that we need in order to live like we ought to live. The author of the letter to Titus reminds us that it is this grace that teaches us how to live a life that is self-controlled, upright, and godly. Will this be a faultless life? No. A flawless life? No. A totally unspoiled life? Absolutely not! But it will be a life in which we can respond following the example of the one who appeared to us in flesh.

Because God became flesh and dwelt among us, each and every one of us, our bodies, our lives, our selves, are conformed to God during the good times and the bad. In the manger baby, God sanctifies all that we experience, even our suffering.

Perhaps at this point, it's best to get specific. The life that God's grace makes possible for us is not a life in which we go around blaming gay people for hurricanes or rioters for wildfires. It is not a world in which COVID-19 can simply be chalked up to God's wrath upon all those people who are different from us.

The life that God's grace makes possible for us is a life in which we, as Christians, operate from a place of compassion and love. It is a life in which we recognize the turmoil and the tragedy, the trauma, and the deep grief of the world and simply ask how we can help.

“What do you need? Where can I meet you? Stay right there. I'm on the way!” The world cries out for a response rooted in the grace of God's appearing. Not, “What did you do to deserve this?” More like, “Given these circumstances, where do we go from here? How do we walk forward together?”

That is grace in the flesh, dear friends. That is what the world needs. That is what God offers us in Jesus: the grace of gifts given, not gifts earned; grace that comes to us in our own image and inspires us to live the Christmas life. Amen.

The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson is a priest of the Diocese of West Missouri, currently serving as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of four yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. Warren is also Visiting Instructor of Rhetoric at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. His research interests include queer theology, homiletics, and American presidential rhetoric. Warren holds both Master of Divinity and Master of Sacred Theology degrees from The School of Theology in Sewanee, where he resides with his husband, Walker. Together they enjoy lingering back-porch conversations, racking up frequent flyer miles, and doting on their niece and nephews from afar.

1. What does it mean to you that God became actual flesh and dwelt among us? What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about humanity?

2. The Letter to Titus can be a challenging book to read from beginning to end. It assumes practices and societal structures that in some cases we've discarded as a society and others that we wholeheartedly rebuke. Still, there is much wisdom to be found in the short book. Read all three chapters and make a list below of three things you appreciate in the text and three you do not. Is there a pattern?

Christmas Day (II)

COLLECT

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born this day of a pure virgin: 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.

READINGS

ISAIAH 62:6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:(1-7) 8-20

THE SHEPHERDS

by the Rev. Jazzy Bostock

Dear people of God - Happy Christmas! After a long Advent, here we are - hearing the well-worn story of Jesus coming into the world. Hearing, again, the hope of the light which breaks into the least likely of places. And, no matter how many times we hear it - no matter how many Christmas services we attend - this is always news we need to hear. And it is always good.

This year, perhaps more than any other, we need to hear about the way the light comes in. We need to hear that darkness doesn't have the final word. We need to hear about this Son of God, this piece of Divinity who enters into the mess of a stable, just to remind us that we do not walk alone.

This year more than others has probably felt like an extended Advent - or even like Lent. As we've traveled through a pandemic, we have been profoundly together - and yet kept a physical distance. We have all been affected, and yet we know that our own disparities in race and class have been brought to the surface. We have been in something that probably feels more like a season of waiting, minding the dark,

and reminding one another of God's goodness. This Christmas Day, we come out of that darkness - we come out of the waiting - and we celebrate.

Each year, it seems that there is a different part of the story that demands our attention. Perhaps this year, it is the shepherds. The shepherds are likely the most modest of all the characters in our story. In Christmas pageants, there are those who wish to be angels, and wise men, and of course Mary and Joseph. Even the innkeeper stands alone, given an important role of turning the family away. But this group, the shepherds and their animals, is often the least popular. Their grouping means no single one is more important than another. We don't know their names or their origins. It can be easy to assume they are passive in the story - told news by the angels and then left, consigned to be on the outside of the action.

This year, let us be drawn to these humble ones. We've just been through a national election - which, no matter what side of the political spectrum you fall on, or what your personal feelings may be, has been stressful. We've been through and are still living with a global pandemic - likely the first in our lifetimes. Our world has been noisy. It's been full of individual characters yelling to get attention. Our hearts yearn for humble ones like these shepherds - quietly minding their own business when the angels surround them.

Can you imagine it? This is the moment which shows us the absolute beauty of God - the paradox of a supreme being, of one who is known simply as, I AM, deciding to announce the birth of Godself into the world by going into the field and finding these shepherds.

The angels could have gone into the city. They could have gone to the town square, or to the houses of the rich and famous. I'm sure they could have announced to many more people, much more efficiently, that Jesus was born.

And yet, God sends word first to the humble. To those out in the field, probably smelling from a day - a week - a month - of tending their animals. God's word comes down into a field, announcing the light in the world to a small, inconspicuous group.

And, the announcement is anything but simple. It begins with one angel - singing the glory of the Lord and telling them not to be afraid. After the good news is announced, there is suddenly with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God in word and song. What an elaborate and unexpected announcement!

The next part of the story gets glossed over. Sometimes we focus on the way that God comes to those whom society deems least worthy, but rarely do we look at the response of the shepherds. They have been terrified in the field - suddenly surrounded by angels and a multitude of the heavenly host - and yet, despite their fear, they decide to go to Bethlehem, to see the baby the angels announced to them.

In our gospels, we aren't given the text of that conversation. We don't know if one of them wants to go and has to talk the others into it - or if they come to a consensus. Perhaps there is no need for conversation - all their hearts having been transformed in their interaction, and all ready, now, to go.

How do we respond, when we're given invitations from God? It would be unusual for any one of us to have experienced a multitude of the heavenly host announcing to us the birth of the Messiah - but we receive invitations all the time. Invitations to follow, to come, and see - invitations to step deeper into relationship with our neighbors, to practice blessing our enemies, to spend time with God. How do we respond to those invitations?

In the shepherds' response, going to Bethlehem and visiting Mary, the effect of the angel visit is multiplied. They tell all who will listen about the baby they have seen, and speak words that are, to Mary, so important that she treasures and ponders them in her heart.

The shepherds call to us. They remind us that the invitations God sends us are always to be multiplied, and increased, and shared. These unassuming men, sitting in the fields and minding their sheep, are suddenly surrounded by an angelic light. The birth of the Savior is announced to them, and their hearts are transformed.

This year, as we again visit the well-worn fabric of this story, I invite you to pay attention to the less showy thread. Allow the shepherds,

these background characters, to teach you something new about who God is, and to whom God pays attention. Allow them to speak to you about transformation and increasing joy. This year, we remember - God sees these humble ones, and gives them a voice, a role in the story of light breaking through the darkness. And, if God sees and uses even the shepherds - then surely God sees you and me, too. Amen.

The Rev. Jazzy Bostock is a recently ordained kanaka maoli woman, serving her curacy at St Peter's Episcopal Church in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is thrilled to be back in the 'aina, the land, which raised her, and the waves of the Pacific Ocean. She loves the warm sun, gardening, cooking, laughing, and seeing God at work. She strives to love God more deeply, more fully, with every breath she takes.

1. With whom do you identify when you read the Christmas story? Pick two characters and write a paragraph below describing how each is feeling throughout the story.

2. Ask someone – in person or over the phone or over the Internet – to read Luke 2:1-20 to you. Close your eyes and resist the temptation to follow the text in a book. What do you hear anew from this well-worn story? Write a sentence below that has new or amplified meaning for you this year.

Christmas Day (III)

COLLECT

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-4, (5-12); JOHN 1:1-14

UNDERSTANDING THE WORD

by the Rev. Kathleen Walker

Merry Christmas!

Today is a beautiful day in which we celebrate the incarnation of God through the birth of a baby boy by the name of Jesus. In a year that has been beset with unanticipated challenges and the spread of a virus, we still have so much for which to be grateful.

Today, many presents will be exchanged. Some were shipped well in advance of this day in order to ensure timely delivery. Others will be offered in person. Nationwide, spending this year is expected to surpass last year's gift-giving by a wide margin. Dinner may look a little different as we share meals over Zoom instead of large family-style gatherings, and indeed, we are still grateful. Our normal traditions have been greatly altered, and yet the day is just as special.

This is also the time in which we are called to celebrate the magic that is Christmas. We rejoice as we recall the miraculous birth of the baby born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary. We retell the story of the incarnation of God – the God the world did not know and who came into the world in the humblest of circumstances. Jesus was born in a barn, wrapped in a blanket, and laid in an animal trough as his bed.

His humble start did not begin to reflect the story of his true nature. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson used to sing a beautiful rendition of the hymn, *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*:

Sweet little Jesus boy,
They made you be born in a manger.
Sweet little holy child,
We didn't know who you were -
Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord,
To take our sins away.
Our eyes were blind, we could not see -
We didn't know who you were.

The Gospel of John offers us a profound explanation of who that sweet little Jesus boy was. He writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." We are told from the outset that Jesus was the Word, Son eternal and present before Creation itself. Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John does not recount the story of the birth of Jesus. He draws our attention to who Jesus is. Through John's account, it is clear that Jesus is the manifestation of God. He was with God and he was God. Even though the notion of Jesus both being God and being with God may sound confusing, our faith informs our belief. Jesus was sent to deliver a powerful message to God's people, yet he was a different kind of messenger. He was more than a prophet and he was a bigger force than angels.

The Word was God – and yet, people did not understand.

Jesus came into the world to know human suffering and to teach important lessons that would serve humankind forever. Ultimately, Jesus, the light of the world, came to deliver his people from sinful ways and point them toward salvation.

John the Baptist was a messenger from God who came ahead of the Christ to announce the coming of the Messiah. John informed the people that one much greater than he was coming and that the one coming behind him would be the savior of the world. John came to "testify to the light" so that all would believe. The baptizer also offered

people an opportunity to repent and to be baptized with water so they would be prepared when the Lord arrived.

The people were filled with expectation, and still, they didn't recognize Jesus when he appeared to them. They did not know the one who had been sent to deliver peace to a fractured world. They could not comprehend the rabbi who preached forgiveness and hope. They would not accept the teachings of the carpenter's son who talked about love as the most important guiding principle for life.

In these tumultuous times, there are those who are still grappling with the incarnational God who calls us all children of the Holy One. We find ourselves struggling with what it means to be God's shining light in the world. On this day when we shower our friends and loved ones with presents, how have we gifted the world? What have we offered those with much less? How have we remembered the poor and the suffering? What is our gift to God?

COVID shuttered many of our small businesses this year. COVID forced major layoffs at many of our larger places of employment. There is a tremendous fear that many will be left homeless in the aftermath of this global pandemic. COVID has left countless widowed and orphaned.

As we wonder how and why God came to earth, let us be reminded of the grace that has been shown to us simply by God's presence. Our gift to God is our response to the human condition. It is personified in the ways we offer grace to our neighbors, near and far. During Jesus' physical time on earth, we were shown how to care for those with the greatest need. Jesus did not spend time dining with nobility, despite his divine status. Jesus was never to be crowned an earthly king, which was very confounding to the people of his day. Jesus dined instead with the marginalized and the outcasts. Like a laser beam, Jesus shined a light on injustice and forced his disciples to look inwardly, examining their hearts and minds to find the true meaning of life.

It is God's hope that present-day disciples will take time from the hustle and bustle of a busy holiday season to shine a light on the urgent matters of the day. Just like in ancient times, this world is in need of healing. So many are feeling exhausted after a year of fractured

relationships, mistrust, and disruption of normal life. The Word is still with us and the shining light of Christ will guide us out of the wilderness and despair.

God is nudging us, beloved, to take on the mantle of discipleship and serve the world in the name of his loving Son. There are numerous issues demanding our attention and there are many ways to get involved in helping all of God's children get to the Promised Land. You are needed now more than ever. Share the love of Christ with others who have been waiting a lifetime to hear the good news of Christmas that offers love and compassion. Rescue those in need just as you have been delivered by the power of God's everlasting mercy.

Today, we celebrate this holiday, the birth of Jesus, with festivities to whatever extent we deem appropriate. We give thanks for those who gather with us and those whom the Lord received into eternity. Make it a joyous occasion. The God of Creation invites us to recreate the meaning of this wonderful season in which miracles can truly happen. It is possible to live in a world filled with love and peace. As faith followers, you must believe that better days are ahead and then work to make that a reality.

After the celebrations end this season, let us draw our attention once again to creating the world that God intended. Let us commit ourselves to continuing the pilgrimage to the Promised Land with the assurance that God's light will show us the way and all we need to do is follow the directives of the Word.

Howard Thurman, an African American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader created a stunning poem called *The Work of Christmas* and it really defines the work before us:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

May we all celebrate the joy of the Christmas season and give thanks for the continuing presence of the Creator. May the light of Jesus bring new life into this world and may it shine brightly forever. Amen.

The Rev. Kathleen Walker is the missioner for black ministries in the Diocese of North Carolina. She works from the diocesan house in downtown Raleigh. She joined the bishop's staff in 2020 to focus on the vitality of historically Black congregations by helping to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018 and shortly thereafter joined the clergy team at St. John's Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Florida, as associate rector for pastoral care and parish life. She is originally from South Florida and was an active layperson in that diocese prior to discerning the call to ordained ministry.

I. Have you ever seen – actually seen – Jesus in another person? Perhaps in a flicker of the eye or in a strong embrace? What did you feel in that moment?

2. Despite the Valentine's Day commercials that will be airing in just a few hours, it is important to remember that Christmas is a 12-day celebration. We don't insist on that to be interesting or to provide a reason to roll our eyes when Christmas trees are by the road on December 27 – but because the Incarnation is worthy of such a long and good celebration. Try your very hardest to keep the decorations up and your spirit joyful at least until the Twelfth Night (January 5, 2021).

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