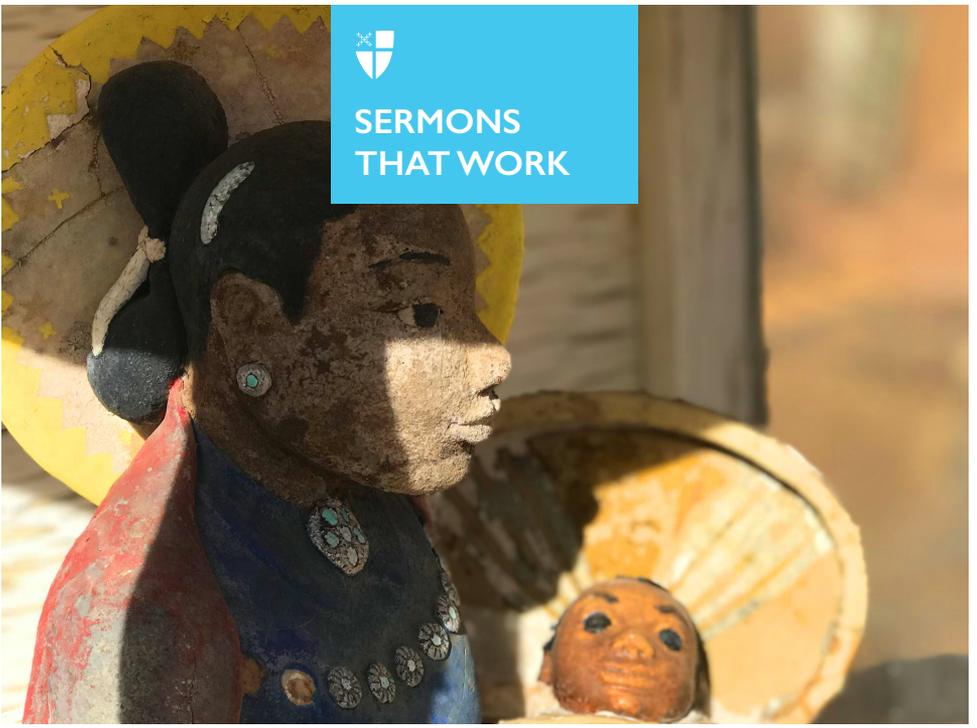




SERMONS  
THAT WORK



SERMONS FOR  
*Advent and  
Christmas 2021*

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An offering of  
Sermons That Work

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

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## Advent 2021

Dear Reader:

Thank you for downloading “Sermons for Advent and Christmas,” a collection of materials prepared by some of the best preachers from across The Episcopal Church.

Sermons That Work, a ministry of The Episcopal Church Office of Communication, has provided free and high-quality sermons, Bible studies, and bulletin inserts since 1995. Every week, it is our pleasure to source, review, and publish these pieces; we hope they are edifying as you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these and their corresponding Scriptures.

In Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Christmas Oratorio,” you will find a haunting melody that seems somewhat out of place in the majestic and entrancing piece. The 17th century text, originally penned in German by Paul Gerhardt, addresses our Lord directly, saying,

“How shall I fitly meet Thee,  
And give Thee welcome due?  
The nations long to greet Thee,  
And I would greet Thee too.  
O Fount of light, shine brightly  
Upon my darken’d heart;  
That I may serve Thee rightly,  
And know Thee as Thou art.”

The tune, which you may have already known or which you may have discerned from the pattern of the lyrics, will be sung again in a few months – beginning with the phrase, “O sacred head, sore wounded.” What are we to make of this?

Briefly, I would suggest two things. First, the reminder that the Lord whom we meet at Bethlehem, lying among the animals in the cool of the night, is the same Lord who will grow and teach and heal and, eventually, give himself over to humiliation and death for love of us – that this simple golden thread of love characterizes the entire life of the One we greet anew this season. And second, that we are to be about our work – preparing ourselves and this beautiful, broken world to meet him. Moreover, we are to expect that we will meet him, coming closer and closer until we see him as he truly is. What a mission! What joy!

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church 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

JEREMIAH 33:14-16; PSALM 25:1-9; I THESSALONIANS 3:9-13;  
LUKE 21:25-36

## WAITING

by Michael Toy

It's Advent again! It is that season where we are oriented—in everyday life as well as liturgically—toward Christmas. And yet, there are some stops we must make along the way. In today's waypoint, our readings look forward to Jesus' triumphant return. Today, we look to the apocalypse. The prophecy from Jeremiah signals the coming of the fulfillment of God's promise when all shall live in peace and justice. This era of justice and flourishing for all people, we can all probably agree, has not yet come to pass. The coming Messiah was meant to usher in this age of peace on earth, end to war, and an end to the woes of humanity. And yet, in our gospel reading from Luke, Jesus says that time has not yet come. Instead, he is declaring prophecies of distress, roaring of waves, fear and foreboding. This time of distress of the Son of Man's return is not far away in the future, according to Jesus, who teaches, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place."

Reading this sentence plainly or literally surely is a bit embarrassing. A bit embarrassing not just for us, but for Jesus as well. It certainly seems like he is saying that his return will be imminent. Here we are, nearly two thousand years later, and the second coming of Jesus has still not occurred. So, was Jesus wrong?

Our impulse is to rush to the answer, "No!" We want to rush to an explanation of how this surely was not what Jesus could have meant. We want a clarification that meshes with our ideas of orthodoxy and our theological commitments. We want to say, as we all too often do, "That's not what Jesus meant." We're not good at waiting. We rush for answers. We rush for explanations.

But to be seasonal, let us engage with the text using an "Advent hermeneutic." Hermeneutic is the word used to describe an approach to and interpretation of Scripture. Thus, in this season of waiting, let us hold off from that immediate jump to making this make sense. Instead, let us wait. Let us sit with the discomfort that these passages bring us.

Was Jesus wrong? What would it mean if Jesus were wrong about this? His generation certainly did pass away before seeing him returning, descending in a cloud with power and great glory. If he were wrong, would that change the way we see Jesus as fully divine? If we maintain that Jesus was fully divine but wrong about the timing of the apocalypse, would it change the way we think of divine omniscience? If Jesus were wrong about the timing, could he have been wrong about other aspects of the great return?

These questions are not easy to sit with. And yet, they are important questions to ask—especially for that generation to whom Jesus was speaking. Imagine being part of that first generation of Jesus' followers. Jesus has promised that he would return. But now, people are dying, and understandably, the church is a bit confused. These questions we've been raising, these are the questions that the community in Thessaloniki was asking as well. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is about precisely this issue. Jesus was expected to have come back before this generation passed away. Now, people are dying, and the community is concerned about the place those who have passed will have in the coming kingdom. When is Jesus coming back? Was Jesus wrong? Is Jesus coming back at all? Has Jesus left us alone with our death and our suffering? Words from today's psalm surely capture some of that anxiety, "My God, I put my trust in you; let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me." And what enemy seems more triumphant than death? Weren't you supposed to come by now? Weren't you supposed to come save us?

These are the questions that come up while we sit with this conundrum using our Advent lens. Paul's response to the Thessalonians is simultaneously theological and pastoral. Further on in the letter, he addresses the community's fear about those who have already died, affirming that they will experience resurrection and have a place in the coming kingdom of God. He

also acknowledges those feelings of grief, helplessness, and powerlessness that accompany that feeling that God has abandoned or forgotten us. He declares that we wait with faith.

To wait with faith is to acknowledge that the waiting is not pointless. It is to believe that the waiting will be worth it. In addition to cognitive belief, waiting is a time for feeling. We see in Paul's letter that he himself is waiting to see this community again. But his faith influences the way that he waits to be reunited. While apart, he reaches for that feeling of joy found in each other's presence: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith." Here, Paul is naming the joy of Christian connection, but he is also naming the fact that he misses this community of his friends.

Waiting is a time to look around and recognize that all is not as it should be or could be. Waiting is the time to lean into these feelings of longing. It is a time to lean into those feelings that not all is right, and that there is something better to come. It is a time to dream; it is a time to imagine. When we wait, though it seems that death and suffering run rampant and unrestrained through our world, we dream of being comforted. We dream of being reunited with loved ones. We dream of a time when God is going to make everything alright. To echo the words of Jeremiah, we dream of a time when God's promise is fulfilled, and all will live in safety and in flourishing. We dream of a day when God will execute justice and righteousness throughout the land.

In the coming weeks of Advent, we will hear of the prophets who came to prepare the way for Jesus, especially John the Baptizer. We will hear a message of repentance and of a baptism of fire. And of course, we will hear of Mary and Elizabeth. The task before us is to read and hear these stories in the spirit of Advent.

Advent is a time to stop and to hesitate. It is a time to dig into the discomfort and seeming incongruities Scripture presents to us. It is a time to linger with questions rather than rush to answers. These moments of delay or disruption create space to feel. In these coming weeks leading up to Christmas, may we all pause and look around. May we notice those things which are and those things we wish would be. Certainly, we believe in Christmas and the theologies of Incarnation and of God's presence with us. But we also believe in the not-yet. We hold onto those feelings of discomfort and of doubt. We believe in Christmas, but let us also believe in Advent.

What does it mean to believe in Advent? To believe in Advent is to believe in

waiting. And may our waiting be full of dreams for a better world, full of God's justice and love made present to all. 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) Compared to even a few years ago, what is your relationship with waiting? Are you more patient? Less patient? Why? Write your answer below.

“To wait with faith is to acknowledge that the waiting is not pointless.”

– Michael Toy

2) When you find yourself becoming impatient this week – with a friend or family member, with a colleague, with God – slowly repeat this prayer: “Come, Lord Jesus.”

## 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

BARUCH 5:1-9 OR MALACHI 3:1-4; CANTICLE 4 OR 16;  
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11; LUKE 3:1-6

### PREPARE THE WAY

by the Rev. Lucy Strandlund

There's a method of calling to a crowd and catching its attention in which a speaker says, "If you can hear the sound of my voice, clap once." Usually, in a gathered group, only a few closest to the speaker hear the instruction and clap. The unexpected sound of several people clapping once, however, catches the attention of a few more. The speaker then says, "If you can hear the sound of my voice, clap twice." And a few more people catch on. It continues until the crowd is hushed as more and more people clap in unison, three times, then four times. It's an effective way to gather the attention of a crowd without having to be the loudest one in the room, but it only works with the participation of more and more people. The speaker might talk in vain at an unresponsive, noisy crowd all day if the following of their instructions doesn't spread throughout the group.

While the prophets of scripture may have felt at times that they were speaking in vain, they caught enough attention that we continue to hear their words reverberate today. "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God," we hear from Micah 6:8. "Comfort, O comfort my people" encourages Isaiah 40:1. What was it about them that captured the attention of the people around them? Was there some kind of magnetic quality about them? Was it a fierce or wild look in their eyes? Or were their words from God simply so true in times so desperate that listening to them felt like solid ground in a shifting time?

We know theirs were not the only voices people could listen to. While the prophets were encouraging people to return to God, to care for the vulnerable, to be restored in relationship with one another, there were surely then, as now, competing voices for the people's attention—voices of power, greed, despair, or complacency that were louder than the prophets' call. And yet the prophets were heard through the generations.

The words of Isaiah were resonating so powerfully that John the Baptizer picked them up and echoed them centuries later: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" John heeded Isaiah and lived these words, calling those who heard him to repent and to begin anew, to prepare the way. In so doing, he invited more and more people to live Isaiah's words with him.

Yet John's voice was not the only one people heard. Today's passage from Luke begins with some of the other voices that competed for the attention of the crowds in the region near Judea and Galilee in the first century: Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip the ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias the ruler of Abilene. And yet amid these rulers' claims to power and voice, people were drawn to John the Baptizer. John, who heard the word of God in the wilderness and went around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John, who answers in Luke 3:10 when the crowds ask, "What then should we do?" by saying, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." John, who showed them that valleys are filled and the mountains and hills made low when those with plenty share with those in need. They heard something they knew to be true in his words and the crowds flocked to him, hushing as they approached and listening. In his words, they heard restoration, justice, and hope.

But John was not the source of the words. Nor was Isaiah the source of the words. Isaiah and then John were like the ones standing nearby who hear the sound of the speaker's voice and clap in response. Because of their clapping, more and more people can identify and heed the speaker's voice. They, too, can join in the clapping to draw attention to the speaker, so that more and more people in turn can hear the words.

The voice to which they draw our attention may not be the loudest in the room, but it is steady. It is persistent. It is the voice of God who continually invites us all to return, to care for the vulnerable, to be in relationship with one another.

After all, prophets' words are not an end unto themselves; they point us back to God. They show the way when we've gotten a little turned around. They draw our attention when we've been distracted by the clamoring of other voices. Prophets tell the truth about things as they are and remind us that there is a better way. Prophets call us to notice where we've gotten off the path and call us to return to relationship with God and with one another—to share a coat when we have two, to share food when we have extra. Prophets are channels for the words of God so that we might hear those words, live them, and be channels too.

Listening to them can help us live the words of God in our own time, as they endeavored to do in theirs. Across the generations, we participate in the call to return to God, to care for the vulnerable, to restore relationship with one another. And we are called to trust that none of this is done in vain, but rather prepares the way.

When we attune our ears to and live the words shared by the prophets, we are able to better recognize the One who is to come, the Word who is restoration, justice, and hope. We are able to recognize the Christ who reconciles us and for whom we wait in this season of Advent with hopeful expectation.

So, today, let us focus our attention and allow a hush to fall over us so that we may hear the voice calling from the wilderness: "Prepare the way."

Amen.

**The Rev. Lucy Strandlund** currently serves as curate at St. John's Episcopal Church in New Braunfels, Texas. She holds a Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Spiritual Formation from the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. When not working, she loves to be outside, hiking, or growing vegetables and flowers.

“Across the generations,  
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with one another.”

– The Rev. Lucy Strandlund

1) It can be easy, especially now that December has begun, to fall into busyness, filling our hours with all the things that must be done. Stop intentionally for an hour this week from the busyness and meditate on where you can find the voices of John and Jesus through the noise. How did it feel? Could you try it again this week?

2) Who do you know who speaks God’s truth even when it’s unpopular? Consider how you can encourage and pray for that person. Then, let them know how important their ministry is to you.

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## 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

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; CANTICLE 9; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7;  
LUKE 3:7-18

### ADVENT JOY

by the Rev. Marcea Paul

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete,” when translated from Latin, means “rejoice”. We know that Advent is a season of waiting and today we are called to be joyful as we await the coming of Jesus Christ.

God, through Zephaniah, offers us glimpses of a hopeful future and calls us to “Rejoice and exult with all our heart.” Isaiah reminds us of the ways God has delivered us, is delivering us, and will deliver us. He invites us to shout aloud and sing for joy because we shall “draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.” And our cheerleader, St. Paul, strongly urges us to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

We have been experiencing tough times these last few years. With the suffering, loss, uncertainty, and state of our beautiful and broken world, how can we hear these words and rejoice?

In our minds, joy tends to overlap with happiness. Happiness is often connected with what is happening to us and around us. Happiness usually lasts for just a season. When we are discouraged and afraid, rejoicing in the Lord can be a hard sell. But the truth is that joy is not usually inspired by happy circumstances. Poet and author David Whyte

writes, “To feel a full and untrammled joy is to have become fully generous; to allow our selves to be joyful is to have walked through the doorway of fear.” And joy, unlike happiness, lasts – no matter what the challenges.

The prophets looked forward to the day of the Lord’s coming as a time of great joy. Even Zephaniah, who has been called the most despondent of the prophets, kept the last word for joy—joy over the Lord’s presence, joy over renewal and restoration, and joy over coming home. While Isaiah also speaks of doom and gloom, he looks forward to the Lord’s coming as a time for shouting joyfully, “Surely God is my salvation.” Isaiah looks forward to the Lord’s coming as a day when the people would drink their fill of salvation like someone drawing fresh water from a well – certainly a day of great rejoicing.

It is believed that the Apostle Paul was under house arrest when he wrote the words we heard from his letter to the Philippians. And still, Paul could say, “Rejoice!” One might wonder what he had to rejoice about in that situation. Well, Paul rejoiced because he looked forward to the Lord’s coming, but he also rejoiced because the Lord is always near. Paul seemed to have experienced the Lord’s constant presence in his imprisonment. And so, he could say, “Rejoice!” Paul carried the joy of Advent with him wherever he went – even in a Roman jail.

Advent is not only a season for waiting. It is also a time of preparation – a time of looking for the coming of the Lord, for the fulfillment of God’s promised restoration, for the peace that overcomes all violence, and for that perfect love that casts out fear.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He was sent into difficult, complicated times – times like we are experiencing. And his message was simple: repent; turn your lives around; turn back to God. For John, repentance was not about beating ourselves up for things done or left undone; to repent meant total transformation – transformation that bears fruit.

Snakes are what John the Baptist calls the people who venture into the desert: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Yet, they do not turn and run. Instead, they listen to

his sermon. You must bear fruit, he tells them. Do not rely on your ancestry, your tradition, or your history. This is about you preparing yourselves for the One who is to come. When John finished preaching, they asked “How do we repent?” “What should we do?”

John doesn't ask the people to change the world, but rather to change themselves. He doesn't tell them to leave their lives and stay with him or start a revolution; he tells the crowds who came to him to consider sharing what they have with the cold and hungry. He told the tax collectors to be honest and fair. The soldiers, he cautioned to act with integrity, avoiding abuse of their power. “Go home,” John told them. Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your friends. Go home and live your lives as deeply and as generously as you can right now. Do what the Lord requires of you and do it now. Be generous now - Be merciful now - Do justice now.

What does this all mean for us? In this Advent season, are we seeking the answers to the question “What should we do?” As we wait and as we look forward to the coming of the Messiah, are we engaging in the kind of deep self-reflection that leads to action? Or have we fallen into complacency? Are we gathering like the crowds in John's story, moving toward genuine repentance? Or are we turning away? In our baptisms, we are marked as Christ's own forever, and it is the meaning of this mark that John called his followers to embrace – and is calling us to embrace. Through baptism, we are cleansed and renewed with water from the springs of salvation before being sent out to serve.

We might think that focusing our attention on what we long for but do not yet have might be a cause for discouragement rather than joy. But, perhaps, it is that very act of watching and waiting and looking for the coming of God that inspires great joy. The Gospel writer calls John's exhortation “good news.” And it is, especially if we believe that we are not worthy of God's saving grace. Nothing in our lives is beyond redemption. Knowing and accepting this is reason enough for rejoicing.

This is not easy. That's why it takes intentional preparation and repentance – which means amending our lives and turning toward God. That is what we must do to prepare in this holy season. Advent is beckoning us to do just that, and it encourages us with a promise,

rather than a threat: the promise of the coming embrace of Christ and the gift of abundant life that he brings.

John the Baptist appeared as an itinerant preacher. Yet, ironically, he is remembered by the Church as the patron saint of spiritual joy. Perhaps he earned that title since, earlier in Luke's gospel, Elizabeth voiced how the baby in her womb leaped for joy at the presence of Mary and Jesus. It was John's great joy to always be pointing to Jesus. Today, it is our great joy to be waiting for the coming of Jesus.

On this Gaudete Sunday, as we wait and prepare, we are also called to rejoice. The coming of the Messiah and the Gospel of Jesus Christ are the Good News the angel will speak of when appearing to the shepherds, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” This brings us hope even amid our struggles so that when the Christ child arrives at the manger, we can rejoice and sing with gusto, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come.” For now, we pray, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.”

**The Rev. Marcea Paul** is Priest for Pastoral Care at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Austin, Texas. She also serves on the Texas Pauli Murray Scholarship Committee. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018. Prior to attending seminary, Marcea had a career as an accountant and also served as Parish Administrator at St. Faith's Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida.

“Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your friends. Go home and live your lives as deeply and as generously as you can right now.”

– The Rev. Marcea Paul

1) When was the last time you felt joy as the Rev. Marcea Paul describes it? Where were you? Describe the place, its look, its smell, its sounds. Who else was there? Give God thanks for this joy and the people who were part of it.

2) Take a small piece of paper and write, “Rejoice!” on it. Carry it with you – in your pocket or purse or wallet or even shoe! – to remind you of the joy that characterizes this week.

## 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

MICAH 5:2-5A; CANTICLE 15 (OR 3) OR PSALM 80:1-7;  
HEBREWS 10:5-10; LUKE 1:39-45, (46-55)

### THE HOPE-SONG

by the Rev. Phil Hooper

The Rev. Pauli Murray once wrote that “hope is a song in a weary throat,” and amid this hopeful season, amid this weary age, we would do well to consider what such a song sounds like. It’s easy to miss sometimes, the hope-song, because it doesn’t always sound the way we might expect. We are too easily distracted by the proud aria or the ironic riff to listen for the soft, tremulous music that hope makes.

Hope is the song of empty karaoke bars, of late nights and of last dances, of a husky voice crying out a melody to defy the encroaching night. It is the song one sings under the breath, an insistent memory, perhaps, or a reassurance on the lonely walk home. It is the warbling note that has no obvious splendor other than its defiant insistence to be heard. The hope-song is not elegant, but it is faithful. It is honest. It is the song one offers up when the song is all that’s left to offer.

Consider this music, then, as we travel with Mary to Elizabeth’s house. Forget for a moment the lush choral arrangements of the Magnificat. Don’t be fooled by the prophetic boldness of the words alone. Remember that there is a fearful precariousness to her position. She is a young woman walking uphill in every sense of the word, seeking the comfort of a familiar face when everything else has suddenly become so very unfamiliar. We might wonder: did Mary sing to herself on the dusty road to the hill country? Was it a song that her own parents once

taught her that she practiced on parched lips? Or did she call it up from somewhere deeper within, from the Spirit-infused cells of her very depths, determined to give voice to what was true, even when her life seemed to be caught in uncertainty?

Regardless, she sings, and it is indeed hope in a weary throat, reverberating into eternity: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Like any hope-song, there is defiance here, along with the joy and the fear. Yes, Mary says, yes, my soul, my very self magnifies the inexpressible holy name of God. The soul that belongs to this body in all its frailty and in all its fecundity—this is a place where God is revealed. Obscure, vulnerable, enmeshed in the tragic history of my people—I may be all of those things, but God is disclosed in them, not despite them, and God has chosen to take part in this world through me.

And so, I will sing!

I will sing though I am weary, though I am frightened, because in the singing I place myself within a story, not just a circumstance. I sing a song of victory, not of victimhood. I am a teller of hard truths and I am the bearer of hard hope, the type that survives—it is my people’s hope, and my own.

Do we sing a new reality into being, or do we sing to pierce the veil of delusions, to uncover what is already true? The Kingdom is already, and it is not yet, but either way, Mary knows what must be sung, both because she carries the King within her womb, and because she is herself the Queen—a wisdom-figure, worthy in her own deep humanity, as each of us is, to discover and proclaim the hidden, unfolding power of God. Her song belongs to her ancestors, and it belongs to the child she will nurture. It belongs to all of us. It is ancient, and it is new. It is forever.

And thanks be to God for that, because we need hope-songs now, just as desperately as Mary did then. We need to be reminded of the dream that is encased in the tender core of humanity—the dream that God has placed therein, the dream that God invites us to bear into the

world, the dream which refuses to be dispelled even by centuries of disappointment and degradation.

And it is especially important for us to remember, in the cacophonous holiday season, that the song that tells of this dream is not always the loudest or the most popular. It is, instead, the one borne of deep, soul-stirring wisdom. The one that, when you hear it—even when the throat is dry and the voice is garbled by tears—still the melody is recognizable because we have been singing it forever.

*His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

But what do we do with this song of Mary's? How do we make it truly our own in a new and urgent time? Do we put it on a t-shirt or a bumper sticker? Do we write a few more books about it? Host a conference to assess the meaning of the words? Arrange it into a new musical setting?

We could. We do. We protect ourselves, sometimes, by turning Mary's song into an ornament when, in truth, it demands everything we have.

Because that's the thing about the hope-song: you don't really know it, you can't really claim it until you yourself have sung it with a weary throat. You can't grasp the words until life has grasped at you, until you have been forced to walk up a few hills of your own, whether by choice or chance. And so, if we really want to sing the song, if we really want to mean it, we must first ask ourselves how attuned we are to the precarity of our lives and those of our neighbors. We must examine how vulnerable we are, and how open we have been to the risk of Jesus' invitation to follow him, on the path first trod by his mother.

And in our self-examination, we might find that we have indeed been brought down low by life, that we are hungry for good things, and that

this song of hope will lift us up if we have the courage to trust in its promise and lend our voices to its chorus. For the weary among us, the challenge is to show the world that we are more than our present despair.

Or it may be, for many of us, that we find ourselves to be the ones already in high, comfortable places, the ones who have never relied so much on hope as we have referred to it, because we are ensconced in other, richer melodies—the ones that lull rather than vivify. If so, it is time for us to wake up. It is time for us to come back down to earth and stand on holy ground. Because it is only from there, where Christ abides, that we can truly begin to live in the way God dreams we might.

Either way, Mary's voice is calling out to you. So, whoever you are, wherever you find yourself, follow the sound of the hope-song. Let it guide you into the place of encounter with your most unencumbered self, and into relationship with the Holy One who calls you onward.

Mary has shown us the way, she has shown us the words, and she has shown us that while hope may be well-acquainted with weariness, it points beyond it, too, toward the place and time when a new song will be born—one of hope fulfilled, of rejoicing, and of rest. We are still learning how to sing that new song, but it is coming. And it is now here.

**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](http://www.byanotherroad.com).

“Mary’s voice is calling out to you. So, whoever you are, wherever you find yourself, follow the sound of the hope-song.” – The Rev. Phil Hooper

1) Use the space below to write out the Magnificat in your own handwriting. You can find versions in both the Book of Common Prayer (p. 65 or 119) and in the Bible (Luke 1:46-55).

2) What do you think the Rev. Pauli Murray meant when she wrote, “Hope is a song in a weary throat”? Learn more about the story of this Episcopal saint and her joy. Where do you see similarities between her life and Mary’s song?

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# 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)

## THE BEGINNING

by the Rev. Bertie Pearson

Students of history often find themselves confronted by difficult realities: there are wars, famines, stories of human tragedy and strife, but undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges to anyone beginning to explore our past is the whole B.C. versus A.D. thing.

If you think about it, it's really crazy! Who in the world would come up with this kind of system? I say, "In the year 50..." and immediately, you have to stop and say, "Wait, which year 50? A.D. 50, like the 50 that comes *before* A.D. 70? Or 50 B.C., which comes after 70 B.C. but *before* A.D. 70?" It is like an unlimited stream of "Who's on first?" jokes just waiting to happen.

B.C. starts with whenever time began, maybe the year 16 billion B.C., and then you have to count backward so that the year 400 is the past for people living in the year 300, and their unimaginably distant future is the year 10. And then, at an apparently arbitrary place, time just starts over again, and we keep on going with A.D. for two thousand twenty-one years. Common sense, and untold thousands of school children, would tell us that this is the worst system of dating ever.

But as confusing as it may be, the B.C./A.D. system is not only

reasonable, it's also unavoidable: because on Christmas Eve, in a stable, in the little town of Bethlehem, at the very turn of A.D. 1, literally everything changed — so much so that our conceptions of time and history and even what it is to be a human being all had to go back to the drawing board as time started anew.

In the account of Creation in Genesis, we see the Garden of Eden: a world in which humanity lives in perfect harmony and friendship with God. All that they could want is freely given to them — they reach up like children to their Father, and pluck their food from the trees; they are at peace with all the world. There is no violence, no bloodshed, no darkness, no sickness, nor death, but only peace, light, and joy.

Until one day, Adam and Eve get a bright idea: They have been told that there is one tree in the Garden of which they cannot eat, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for if they eat of it, death will enter the world. But then... along comes the serpent.

God knows the reality of evil, God knows that there is something that attempts to turn from him and worship itself, and God had sought to shield Adam and Eve from the horror of this reality, but on the day that they ate the fruit, their eyes were opened. At that moment, Adam and Eve became the reality of that rebellion against God, they enact the evil from which God had sought to protect them. At that moment, Adam and Eve rejected God and turned away from him.

But turning away from God is no easy task because literally everything that is comes from God: everything that is is created by God, sustained by God. The whole creation is held together from millisecond to millisecond by God's goodness and love. So, when you try to turn away from God, there is literally no place to go where he is not. There is nothing that is not a sign of his love, of his presence — and so you literally have to turn to that which does not exist — to nothingness, to darkness, to death.

Death, sickness, and strife were ushered into the world in the fall of Adam and Eve, not as a punishment, not as a curse from God, but simply as the necessary result of turning away from the source of all that is. In turning away from life, all that is left to us is death. And so,

from the prehistoric story of the Fall, through ancient times, right on down until the first Christmas Eve, things continued in the same vein: people were born and lived, were plagued by ignorance and selfishness, and eventually died.

In St. Athanasius' book *On the Incarnation*, he asks why it is that God let this happen. Couldn't he just rewind time to right before Adam and Eve made the decision to reject him? Couldn't he just hit the reset button and make it all okay again? He could, says Athanasius, but then it would all have happened again, and again, and again. Humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, would be a never-ending loop of rejecting God. So, what's a loving creator to do?

A staple conceit of American sitcoms and road trip movies are the brother and sister in the back of the minivan who spend hours arguing over electronics, radio stations, and elbow space, until an exasperated parent finally says, "Don't make me come back there!"

For all of B.C., for the whole of human history, the Word of God came to the prophets, commanding each to proclaim to God's people, "Repent! Return to the Lord – Don't make me come down there!" But after millions of years of us not listening, the all-knowing, Almighty, eternal God the Son, through whom all things were created, *stopped the minivan of time*, descended from the infinity of the captain's chair into the spatio-temporality of the *furthest* reaches of the backseat, and was born as a tiny, helpless baby to a poor family in middle-of-nowhere Palestine, and the angels all held their breath as time, reality, and human history screeched to a grinding halt.

Jesus was born. Fully human and fully God. And when we say fully human, we don't just mean a regular Joe — we mean *fully* human! You and I are partially human, a tiny reflection of the image and likeness of God that each of us was created to be: we are the shadow of human, we are human light — but in Jesus, we see what it is to be a full human, a one-hundred percent human: Jesus is a person so full of prayer, so full of love, so connected with God that sickness cannot stand to be around him, and everywhere he goes, healing flows from him. He is so human that he has dominion over Creation and evil flees in terror from him. He is so human that the winds and the waters obey him, and death

suddenly becomes powerless when he is around.

And he is *fully* God — he is not someone with good ideas who teaches us about God, or someone who spiritually has God within him. He is actually God the Son, incarnate. The immortal, invisible, inconceivable God, walking with us, talking to us, hearing our sad stories, and laughing at our jokes. He is God with a human face, God with human hands and human feet.

We would not return to God, so God came down to us, not to chastise us or punish us; not to take away our phones or switch the dial to talk radio: instead, God came down to eternally unite his nature with ours, the Human and the Divine, perfectly united in the one person of Jesus Christ, so that we would begin to be cured of sin, cured of sickness, cured of evil, cured of death. Jesus is our Savior, and through him, human nature is liberated for the love, the peace, and the joy of union with God. One sometimes hears Christmas referred to as Jesus' birthday, but this night is so much more than that: it is the birthday of true humanity, of life itself. It is the beginning of the total defeat of evil, the total defeat of death.

We are sometimes tempted to spend Christmas either attempting to enact a Norman Rockwell painting of the perfect Christmas or overwhelmed with sorrow because of our total failure to make it work, but I am here tonight to tell you: Christmas is not a holiday about food, family, and friends (that was Thanksgiving). Christmas is not a celebration of consumerism and shopping (that's basically every day). Christmas is not a day to salute the flag or plant a tree or bake a ham or watch the game.

Christmas is the most monumental, catastrophic, astonishing, bizarre event in the whole history of time. For on this night, God became human, that humankind might be forever united with God. Let all earth keep silence before this sacred mystery, and let all of us stand in awe, with the angels and shepherds, before the astonishing love revealed in this Baby Jesus, our Lord and our God.

**Fr. Bertie Pearson** serves as Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown, Texas, and as Dean of the Austin Area Convocation of Clergy. He also produces the popular podcast *The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson*. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played drums in the band *Poolside*, and toured as a DJ. He now lives a much more sedate life with his wife, Dr. Rahel Pearson, their two children, a small room full of dusty records, and a very goodhearted Australian Shepard named *Ida*.

“[Christmas] is the birthday of true humanity, of life itself. It is the beginning of the total defeat of evil, the total defeat of death.” – Fr. Bertie Pearson

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) Keep the feast. Christmas – as Fr. Pearson writes, “the most monumental, catastrophic, astonishing, bizarre event in the whole history of time” – begins today. It does not end tonight, nor tomorrow night, nor the night after. Until January 6, try to keep the Incarnation at the front of your mind. If it’s true that Jesus is fully God and fully human (and we believe it is), what impact must that have on your life?



Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2021:  
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