

CREATING A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

Meditations for Each Day in the Season of Advent

Composed by the Communities of St Andrew's Church, Abu Dhabi
St Martin's Church, Sharjah • Christ Church, Jebel Ali

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Advent 2023

About the Serigraph Reproduced on the Cover

PEACEABLE KINGDOM

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Serigraph, 30" x 22.5"

www.JohnAugustSwanson.com

John Swanson's much loved serigraph "Peaceable Kingdom" was created in 1994 and has been out of print for over 15 years. It's one of Swanson's most popular images and embodies one of the central themes of his art: the hope that people can live together in harmony basing their lives on the Christian values of kindness, love and peace.

"Peaceable Kingdom" is a visual illustration of Isaiah 11:6-8: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them..." John Swanson's creative, visual re-telling of this biblical vision enables us to see the story through new eyes and rediscover the power and meaning of the story for our own lives. He challenges us to look at our lives, to re-examine our world-view, and see if we're living as we should be.

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Forward

This year's collection of Advent reflections *Creating A New Heaven and A New Earth* meditates on the theme from Isaiah 65:17-25.

*"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."
(Isaiah 65:17, New International Version)*

The concept of creating a new heaven and a new earth finds deep roots in religious and spiritual traditions, including the Christian faith. Often associated with themes of renewal, redemption, and the fulfillment of divine promises, this concept holds particular significance in the context of Advent—the liturgical season which marks the anticipation of the coming of Christ and the consummation of all creation and the cosmos.

During Advent, believers reflect not only on the historical anticipation of Christ's first coming but also on the anticipation of his second coming, which is often associated with the idea of creating a new heaven and a new earth. This symbolizes a future state of spiritual perfection, harmony, and peace—where, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, things on earth are as they are in heaven.

In this season, we are especially encouraged to prepare our hearts and minds, embracing qualities like

hope, love, joy, and peace. The anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth serves as a reminder of the ultimate redemption and restoration of all things, emphasizing the transformative power of faith and hope in a better future.

As you engage in self-examination and spiritual growth during Advent, you align yourself with the hope for a renewed world where love, justice, and peace prevail—a world reflective of God’s kingdom ideals. This anticipation inspires acts of kindness, generosity, and compassion, fostering a sense of community and unity among people as we all work toward creating a better world in our own lives and communities.

A Note About the Cover Design

John August Swanson’s much-loved serigraph “Peaceable Kingdom” was created in 1994. One of Swanson’s most popular images, the subject matter embodies one of the central themes of his art: the hope that people can live together in harmony basing their lives on the Christian values of kindness, love and peace.

“Peaceable Kingdom” is a visual illustration of Isaiah 11:6-8: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...” His creative, visual re-telling of this biblical vision enables us to see the story through new eyes and to rediscover the power and meaning of the story for our own lives. He challenges us to look at our lives, to re-examine our worldview, and to see if we are living as we should be.

The image of Swanson's print "Peaceable Kingdom" is set inside a gold-colored border, with a splash of metallic gold accenting the frame. This combination of matte gold and jeweled gold symbolizes the two realities of our human nature—that we mortals are once earthed creatures *and* we are striving to walk in the divine Way of Christ. Like fine gold, our human nature is refined and tried in the Creator's fire as we open ourselves to the creative forces of our God.

This both/and quality acknowledges the complexity of human nature, encompassing both our worldly instincts and our aspirations for spiritual growth and enlightenment. Balancing these aspects and striving to align our actions with our higher, divine aspiration is often considered a fundamental part of the journey to evermore faithfully reflect the image of God, the *imago Dei*.

During the season of Advent, we can take up this concept of refining fire and polishing to perfection as analogies for the practice of self-examination, through exercises like the ones laid out here:

1. Purification: Just as refining fire purifies gold by removing impurities, self-examination during Advent allows us to identify and confront our shortcomings, purifying our hearts and minds for spiritual growth.

2. Heat of Challenges: Refining fire subjects the metal to intense heat, melting away impurities. Similarly, the challenging insights faced during self-examination can be emotionally and spiritually intense, pushing us to confront difficult truths about ourselves and our actions.

3. Transformation: The refining process transforms raw material into something valuable. Likewise, self-examination and growth during Advent transforms us, helping us become more compassionate, understanding, and spiritually enlightened.

4. Patience and Perseverance: The process of refining gold takes time; it requires patience and careful attention. Similarly, self-examination and growth require patience, perseverance, and a willingness to confront discomfort and uncertainty.

5. Clarity: The process of refining allows artisans to see their progress as impurities are removed. Likewise, self-examination provides clarity, allowing us to reflect on our progress, acknowledging areas of improvement and celebrating personal victories.

6. Reflection: As the gold is refined, as impurities are removed, and as the finish is ever more polished, the precious metal better reflects the image of the one beholding this treasure.

7. Value: The purified gold holds greater value. In the same way, the insights gained and the personal growth achieved through self-examination during Advent enhance our spiritual quest and connection with our faith.

During this season of Advent, you are invited to embark on this journey of self-examination and the process of refining as you prepare heart, body, and mind for the new creation coming in Christ.

A Note About This Year's Contributors

This year's Advent devotional represents a partnership of three parishes from across Anglican parishes in the Emirates. Members of the communities of St Andrew's Church in Abu Dhabi, St Martin's Anglican Church in Sharjah, and Christ Church in Jebel Ali, created this collection of meditations based on the Advent lectionary texts. This booklet of reflections is designed to be used by individuals, households, and small groups to use together, as part of their communal or at-home practices.

The response for contributing submissions was overwhelmingly positive and spontaneous and showed a live spirit of creativity in these communities and an eagerness to share the journey in Christ with others. You will see a range of styles and perspectives and hear a variety of voices. Writers submitted pieces that proclaimed their beliefs and that captured special moments of their lives. Each submission was crafted with care and love for you, the reader.

Advent is a time of reflection, taking stock, and intentional preparation. Think about how you want to use this little book and incorporate it into your daily life as you wait and make yourself ready again for the coming of Christ.

ADVENT WEEK ONE



Sunday, December 3

Isaiah 2.1–5; Psalm 122; Romans 13.11–14; MT 24.36–44

*“Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the
potter;
we are all the work of your hand.”
(Isaiah 64:8)*

And so, it begins....

“So, It Begins” is a memorable quote uttered by the character King Théoden in the 2002 fantasy adventure film *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. “So, it begins” can also be our catchphrase as we begin another season of Advent. Once again, we enter this season of hope and anticipation. As we begin our journey, it is critical to be prepared. “To be prepared” means being willing and able to do something. What are you willing and prepared to do this Advent? For what are you being prepared? Where do you hear and experience God’s call?

In a related fashion, given the context of the region in which we live, I am curious. If I were to ask you the following question, how would you respond: “What are the expectations of a faithful Muslim?” Most of us, no doubt, would have some fairly standard answers, saying things such as the following: “Pray five times a day.” “Fast during the daylight hours of Ramadan.” “If possible, make a pilgrimage to Mecca in your lifetime.”

But now, if I were to ask: “What are the expectations of a faithful Christian? Most likely, after an initial awkward silence, someone might tentatively say: “Go to church on most Sundays and try to live a good life.” We would probably see a lot of nodding heads in agreement. Many people would be satisfied with that answer.

In addition, all too often, many believe that it is sufficient just to have the right beliefs. But Christianity is more than simply believing the right things. In our Anglican tradition, there are more expectations than simply attending church on most Sundays and living a good life. There is the weekly participation in the Eucharist, daily prayer using some form of the Daily Office, and the regular practices of service “to the least of these” and seeking justice in the world. And that is just for starters. Review the Baptismal Covenant and the promises we make. As Anglicans, we are strongly incarnational in living our faith, finding God particularly in the people, things, and circumstances of our lives.

Christianity is about practices, disciplines, ways of being that help form us into the image and likeness of Jesus as we surrender to him and to his call. “We are the clay, you are the potter.” God continually calls us to new life and to transformation.

During this season, we are invited to rediscover, and recover, our relationship with God. We are invited to practice our faith in real, tangible, and practical ways to grow closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christianity is a way or a path of transformation. The earliest name of the Christian

movement in the years after Easter, according to the Book of Acts at the beginning of the ninth chapter, is “followers of the Way.” Christianity is about this path or Way of transformation. And transformation involves practice.

Monday, December 4

Psalm 124; Genesis 8.1–19; Romans 6.1–11

Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ

The book of Romans is a treasure trove of spiritual wisdom and guidance. In Romans 6:1-2, the Apostle Paul addresses a profound question that many believers have pondered throughout the ages: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" In other words, can we take God's forgiveness for granted and continue living in a sinful manner? Paul's response to this question is unequivocal: "By no means!" This phrase emphasizes the strong rejection of such a notion. It is clear that grace is not a license to sin, but rather a powerful agent of transformation in the life of a believer.

As humans, we are prone to sin, again and again; however we must not let this dishearten us. It is important to understand that God's grace is boundless. His love and forgiveness are not limited or swayed by the magnitude of our sins. In fact, it is precisely because of God's grace that we can be set free from the power and penalty of sin. As we embrace His grace, we experience forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

Furthermore, we must understand that we are no longer bound to death by our sin. When we accept Christ as our Savior, we are united with Him in His death and resurrection. This means that the power of sin over our

lives has been broken. We are no longer slaves to sin's dominion. Sin's chains have been shattered by the cross of Christ. Therefore, by being mindful of our death in sin, we are called to live a life that reflects our new identity in Christ.

We are not meant to continue in a lifestyle characterized by sin and rebellion. Instead, we should live in a manner that honors and glorifies God. This transformation is an ongoing process, and it's empowered by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. The expectation for us as believers is clear. We are to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). This new life is marked by righteousness, holiness, and a desire to align our will with God's will. It is a life that seeks to please God, not because we have to, but because we want to out of gratitude for His grace.

In conclusion, Romans 6:1-2 reminds us of the profound change that takes place in the life of a believer. We are no longer slaves to sin, but recipients of God's amazing grace, given to us by His Son Jesus Christ. Let us embrace this grace with gratitude and commit to living a life that is worthy of the sacrifice Christ made for us on the cross. God's grace is not a license to sin, but a call to live in the freedom and righteousness that only He can provide.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the abundant grace that has set us free from sin; we pray that our lives may be a testament to the transformation your love has wrought in us. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5

Psalm 124; Genesis 9.1–17; Hebrews 11.32–40

*“Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.”
(Psalm 124:8)*

Why are you worried?

By being human and operating in our current social norms we cannot help but feel worried, anxious or a little uncertain about the future. Some examples spring to my mind – finding the right job; dealing with workplace politics; health of our family members; demanding social obligations; and many more.

In many cases, these worries or anxieties tend to cause us to be dependent on God as these pose situations beyond our control. Effectively, they can lead us to a point of helplessness – just like the disciples on the boat during the storm. What did Jesus say when he woke up? “And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?’” (Matthew 8:26a).

Why are we afraid, worried, or anxious? Don’t we know there is someone who is looking after us? If He takes care of the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, how much more will He care of those that are made in his image?

The psalm appointed for today encourages us to meditate on the context of our anxiety taken up in the providence of God. Take a moment to think deeply of a time – just like the disciples – where you were completely

dependent on God, a time wherein you needed Him to come through for you. You may wish to recall a situation where, if God really didn't catch you, you might surely fall as described in verse 2, "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side."

As a next step, reflect on and seek to implement these three practices:

- 1) Affirm the impact God makes in your life
- 2) Praise God for His protection and deliverance and
- 3) Tell others how God has helped you.

The main crux of Psalm 124 revolves around our depending on God, and that we must rely on him to reach safely to the other side. It's easy to look to God at times of crisis, but the truth is we need God and we need Him every day and for all things. We are dependent on Him all the time.

Worried? Anxious? "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). Read it again, again and again.

Wednesday, December 6

Psalm 124; Isaiah 54.1–10; MT 24.23–35

“Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 124:8)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. God created everything in it and saw that it was good, and blessed it. The soil so fertile and pure, the waters full of life and healing, the air so pure and clean. There is life and healing, joy and gladness in all the earth, created in perfect beauty and harmony, a peaceful coexistence among all the creation of God. The tangible presence of God covered the whole earth. There was light, life and love in every atom.

In a quiet place sit back with your eyes closed and visualize yourself being in this perfect world, in the Garden of Eden, amidst lush green trees, birds singing, fragrance of flowers, gushing waters, the cool mist from the earth, golden ground with precious stones everywhere.¹ God created mortals in this beautiful, peaceful place to have an intimate fellowship with him. There was no sickness, no crying, no pain, nor any sorrow—there was only life and life in all its fullness. Later, through the Fall of Adam, curse and every form of evil came on earth. Man lost access to this precious land. But the good news is that through Jesus Christ we have all the blessings restored. We can experience the blessings of this peaceful resting place, the presence of the Lord, again here on earth. In the Presence of

the Lord there is healing, deliverance, joy, peace and every help that we may need. It means, in the midst of troubles, we can receive grace and help to withstand. When the spiritual in man is revived, the physical in humanity is also revived. Healing and restoration in the Spirit is transferred to the soul and body of the person.²

The Word of God teaches us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind. Only when we love the Lord, will we seek the Lord sincerely and yearn to have an intimate fellowship with him. There will come a day when we will leave this mortal tent. And on that day we won't be carrying any luggage, status, or wealth with us. The materials of this earth and the cares of this world will be left behind, and the inner self will move on. But, one of the things that will continue beyond this earth and shine even brighter and be even louder is our love for God and the fellowship that we share with him here on earth. Life without fellowship with God is void.

*"Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."
(Psalm 16:11)*

As we await the coming of the Lord and the manifestation of the new heaven and new earth, where no one harms the other,³ let us practice the Kingdom lifestyle⁴ from now on and be beacons of God's love, mercy, and peace on earth.

¹Genesis 2:6, 11, 12, Genesis 3:8; ²3 John 1:2; ³Isaiah 11; ⁴Matthew chapters 5, 6, 7.

Thursday, December 7

Psalms 72.1–7, 18–19; Isaiah 40.1–11; JN 1.1–18

*“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs
with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead
those who are with young.”
(Isaiah 40:11)*

The words of Emily Dickenson “Hope is a thing with feathers” rings true in many ways. Hope is indeed a thing with feathers; it makes the difference between plummeting through life in a free fall and the graceful flight of a bird.

In a world filled with uncertainty and turmoil, the concept of hope holds profound significance for us. Our Christian hope is not mere wistful thinking but rather a confident expectation anchored in the promises of God that he will carry us through the hardships of a lifetime. It is a natural progression of our Faith. Because we have faith in the all-encompassing goodness of our Creator, we can have hope for the things to come. From Daniel’s friends walking boldly into a furnace to Paul and Silas singing in prison, the bible showcases the uncrushable hope that fills the hearts of those that have faith in him.

The passages for today’s devotion remind us that the story of the nation of Israel is an epic tale of hope. In times of war, famine, slavery and exile, the Hebrews wrote about restoration and new beginnings. They looked to God for comfort and to heal their brokenness, like a shepherd caring for his flock. They turned to song and worship to renew their spirits. To remind themselves, and each other, to hold

fast to the promises of God. They were a displaced people; uprooted from their homes, scattered across nations, lacking community and stability. The deck was stacked against them. But time and time again they returned to their land and had the courage to start afresh.

I have often wondered how they found the strength to continue. After all, in the face of severe hardship it is easy to feel discouraged, beat up and worn down. But God reminds us, later in the same passage that “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.”

When we look back at our lives and reflect on the goodness and protection that God has extended to us thus far, it becomes easier to rekindle our hope and marvel at the strength that God grants us. In my experience, it’s often the case that God weathers the storms of life on our behalf if only we have the courage, like Peter, to reach for his already extended hand.

When we have rock-solid faith, we won’t be moved by what’s happening around us. We have peace in our hearts and minds because our hope is in God!

Though weeping endures the night, joy will come in the morning. So, we do not lose hope.

Friday, December 8

Psalms 72.1–7, 18–19; Isaiah 30.19–26; Acts 13.16–25

“Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any longer, but your eyes shall see your Teacher.”
(Isaiah 30:20)

I woke up at 3:30 am to give myself enough time to run 18 kilometers and still make it to work on time. Training for a half marathon required gradually increasing my distance over several months, and I had done my due diligence. I had achieved my distance target about two weeks ahead of schedule, so I went out into the humid pre-dawn air, confident I would quickly run the 18 without challenges.

I was wrong. Within the first kilometer, I felt the strangest twinge in my knee. It didn't hurt, but it was annoying and distracting. My Samsung Galaxy music app playlist cut in and out, so I struggled to find my rhythm. The rhythm and beat of my carefully curated playlist were essential to my run. I was using a handheld water bottle and did not anticipate how much I would need to drink, so I ran out of water too quickly. At one point, I squeezed the bottle too hard and lost most of the needed water. As a final crushing blow, the little packet of gummy bears I packed in my pocket fell to the ground, leaving me with no sustenance.

I stopped after 4K, decided to take a short leisurely walk, and went home feeling defeated and down.

As I think of this memory in light of Isaiah 30, I am reminded of the importance of adversity and affliction in my life. When I recall the hard times and challenges of my past, in hindsight, I see how those moments were the fuel to push me to new places, new challenges, new seasons, and new opportunities.

The promise of “heaven on earth,” as I reflect on the birth of Jesus Christ, is not a straightforward path or an easy victory. It isn’t about winning and losing anything; instead, it’s a recognition of a promise of what is yet to come. Hidden behind the images of some crushed gummy bears and spilled water on the concrete is a promise that the lessons learned will, in time, reap a great harvest of blessings.

I completed my half-marathon goal, just barely. The knee pain persisted for a time, but I bought a bigger water bottle and managed my gummy bears more carefully. In affliction and adversity come great lessons and opportunities.

Saturday, December 9

Psalm 72.1–7, 18–19; Isaiah 40.1–11; JN 1.19–28

A critically ill patient with some very serious gut-related issues recently came under my care. Despite immediately being given the best available medications, she was deteriorating rapidly. A decision had to be made whether to perform a complex operation that could save her life, but would greatly impact her quality of life and require many adjustments in her remaining years. To complicate everything, the weekend was about to begin. Then the tissue biopsies that had been despatched for urgent attention were misplaced. The situation was dire.

Now, this patient came from a Christian home and had a guileless faith, which neither her husband nor I shared in this particular situation. There were some very serious realities that had to be dealt with. Yet despite our doubts, she prayed fervently and trusted that God would come through for her.

And God was faithful. In fact, a miracle began to unfold in front of our very eyes. First, the pathologist phoned to say that the missing tissue biopsies had been located and would be processed immediately, even though it was Friday. I could expect to hear from him by the following afternoon. True to his word, the pathologist contacted me mid-afternoon on Saturday. (I'd been waiting anxiously for his call). By sunset, the appropriate

medication was being administered to my patient. By Sunday morning, she was already feeling much better.

The pathologist came to see me afterwards. "This woman was most fortunate that I happened to be the doctor who received her tissue specimen," he said. "As it happens, her extremely rare condition was the focus of my doctoral studies. I'm convinced it was this patient's destiny to survive. I want to tell you that, although I'm not a Christian, I studied at a Christian medical college in India, and for several years, I worked at a mission hospital. During those years, I found that a strong faith and prayer could help people to heal, even in the most serious of cases. In this patient's case, I was in the right place at the right time because it was her destiny to live, and today I came to tell you this."

There's no doubt in my mind that God had gone before this patient and arranged things to save her life. He'd also been with her throughout the entire ordeal. Her case reminds me of a quote by Saint Patrick that my mother used to repeat: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise"¹

An Advent Reading by Dr Anoni Maus
(*Anonymous*)

¹ *St Patrick's Breastplate*

ADVENT WEEK TWO



Sunday, December 10

Isaiah 11.1–10; Psalm 72.1–7, 18–19; Romans 15.4–13; MT 3.1–12

A Message of Hope in Difficult Times.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to a people who thought everything was hopeless. They were in Babylon, far from their home in Jerusalem, and everything looked bleak.

When we read the news, we, too, often feel powerless. We can feel so small. “What can I do as an individual to effect change?” we can wonder.

I think, too, of the people who see no hope for their future, due to ill health, or debt, or being stuck in abusive relationships, or being too old and feeling of little use to society.

The prophet Isaiah is bringing the people a beautiful message from God that despite all their unfaithfulness, and guilt and despite all the suffering they have been through, God still cares for them. In so many ways, the suffering had the effect of bringing them closer to God, as they saw when they looked back at their history God’s incredible grace at work in their lives.

The message of this passage is so often similar for us. Wherever you are, whatever the situation you are in, whatever you have done, God always, and still, cares. God loves you, and in the midst of your suffering, he comes to

you with words of hope: “Comfort, O comfort my people” (verse 1) says the Lord.

You may even feel like a little lost sheep in your troubles. All alone and desperate. God is the one who “will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead” (verse 11). Despite everything you and I have done, in everything that we are going through, know and believe this: God still loves you abundantly, and, as St Paul reminds us, there is nothing that can separate us from his love (Romans 8:38-39).

It is very difficult to live without hope. But hope doesn’t start with us; it starts with God, who is love and offers nothing but love.

This reminds me of the story of Mother Teresa, who had an amazing ministry following God’s call to care for people in hopeless situations. However, when she died in 1997, her diaries, once discovered, revealed that she had been living with deep depression and hopelessness for many years.

In one instance, she wrote in her diary, “The place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me.”

There had to be only one thing that kept her committed to the work she believed in, and that was God’s call to ‘hope,’ full of the knowledge that He was with her in it all.

In other words, hope that His every promise made to her in the Bible was true. Hope that the silence was part of her journey of faith. Hope that one day she would hear His voice again. Hope that He would show His face and love

and mercy to the people she served every single day. The paradox is that for Mother Teresa to be a light, she was to be in darkness, (spiritually) for much of her life.

In our own lives, instead of looking down at those desert places where we don't feel strong, or where we are reminded of all that is confusing, and painful, let us ask: What is the desert in my life that God wants to use to create a future of hope in my life and in the lives of those I encounter?

Monday, December 11

Psalm 21; Isaiah 24.1–16a; I Thessalonians 4.1.12

*“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:11)*

As a young adult, I often see certain people my age boasting about the cars and money they have, but usually, their material affluence is due to familial wealth. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians chapter 4 clearly advises to keep your head down, work diligently and, most importantly, do so quietly. Most children who lead flamboyant lifestyles lack the motivation to work hard, hindered by their endowed parents who indulge them with never-ending gifts, and eradicate the self-respecting rewards of earned accomplishment and hard work.

Many places in scripture celebrate labour when it is done with integrity, with purpose, and in service to others. Indeed, one of the words for “work” in Hebrew is also the same word for “worship” (*evahd*). Ideally, our work will not be toil (*amal*), but worship. The disciples were each called by Jesus in the midst of their work—as fishermen, tax collectors, homemakers, carpenters, and physicians.

Furthermore, leading a quiet life does not necessarily mean a reclusive or disengaged lifestyle. Instead, such a style of living can act as an antidote to the contemporary churn of entertainment, distraction, and invasive

connectivity. As the Teacher concludes in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the constant need for individuals to distract themselves from the troubles they are enduring will not be satisfied through worldly pleasure; such endeavors will only ever be a chasing after wind. True grounded-ness comes in centered-ness in God (Ecclesiastes 1:14), for he provides the everlasting peace in which our souls can find rest.

Chasing after the next shiny thing may offer a quick jolt of adrenaline or a mode of distraction, but once it is over and quiet again, do you find peace? Reading the word of God offers peace and understanding and instils in you the will to go on; but more importantly, it strengthens your soul and replenishes it.

With the never-ending opportunities in our lives and the fast-paced lifestyle in Dubai, we rarely stop and appreciate what God has bestowed upon us. Reading the headlines this past month has been horrifying and incredibly unsettling. The immediate hope of world peace seems to be retreating further and further away day by day. So, for this season of Advent, let us pray for peace from the Lord God as we prepare to honour his birth into this world and continue to circulate the message he preaches.

God bless.

Tuesday, December 12

Psalm 21; Isaiah 41.14–20; Romans 15.14–21

Babies are born helpless. They need a family, a caregiver to support and love them until they can have some grasp on the world that they live in. In short, they can't do anything themselves. In this way, we are like babies. Without Christ, without the conviction of the spirit and the Word of the Lord, we are unable to do anything. The strength that we have is given unto us from the Lord, because of his love for us.

Have there ever been times where you just thought it was impossible to figure things out? You feel clueless and helpless. Well think about it now—are you still as clueless and as helpless? Are you the same person you were, say, three months ago? You might be, or you might not be, for we all grow at different speeds; and that's okay.

If we do it with Christ, in Christ and for Christ.

In Isaiah 41:14, the Lord declares

“For I myself will help you....”

Sometimes I believe we skim over things too quickly, because if we took a minute to appreciate that message from Isaiah in its entirety, how great would that be? The Creator, the Maker of heaven and earth himself has appointed you as his child and will love and help you until the end of time. He has poured out his strength unto you, so that you may figure things out; but you may also turn to him in times of need. In this chapter, the Lord defies all

impossibilities. He will create 'pools of water' in the desert, and rivers into the barren valleys. All things that we consider to be impossible are possible through our Amazing Father.

As followers of Christ, it is our heavenly duty to pour out his glory everywhere we go. St. Paul mentions in Romans 15:14-21, despite his bold and courageous instructions to the Roman Christians, that he understands and knows that they are full of goodness and intelligence. Paul understands that they also know this, but it is his duty to instruct and remind them. This is a reflection on us. We understand the Word of the Lord. It is also our job to instruct and remind others.

We have a mission as Christians: it should be your "ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known."

Your service is praised. You *should* plant the seed in others by living and walking through Christ and by sharing the Word. You *should* be an inspiration to others, to create that firm foundation not only for yourself, but others.

You have been told about the beauty of Christ, you've heard about it, understood it and have seen it.

Therefore, it is written:

"Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard him will understand" (Romans 15:21).

Wednesday, December 13

Psalms 21; Genesis 15.1–18; MT 12.33–37

“God brought Abram outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’”
(Genesis 15:15)

Around 90 minutes drive from the city of Abu Dhabi, off the road that travels towards Al Ain, one can find the Al Quaa Milky Way Spot—a dark sky reserve where you can see the star-spangled heavens in their full, twinkling array.

For millennia the stars have served as navigational guides in many cultures among many peoples. It was by a star that the magi, known astronomers, were led to a humble manger where the savior of the whole cosmos was born in the Judean backwater of Bethlehem. Even today these ancient beacons guide us on our earthly journeys. Reflecting on this passage from Genesis (15:1-18), the multitude of stars reminds us of their role as orienting touchstones for guidance and point us to the enduring covenant between God and Abraham—between humanity and the divine.

Abraham, the esteemed patriarch in the three faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, sired descendants described to be as “countless as the stars.” Each star, then, serves as a testament to God's particular—a yet infinite—creation. These gleaming beacons represent an enduring pledge of hope, resilience, continuity, and connection.

Just as Abraham trusted in the promise of giving genesis to countless descendants, we are encouraged to trust in the glimmers of light that illuminate our lives. The stars in the desert sky remind us that even in the vast expanse of uncertainty, God's promises shine brightly, guiding us and inspiring us to keep moving forward.

In the vastness of the desert where silence envelops and the night sky stretches infinitely, we find a profound sense of awe and wonder. It is in this stillness—the still, small voice of God (1 Kings 19:13) that we can hear the whisper of divine promise echoing through the ages.

As we light the Advent candles, their flickering flames, too, remind us of the enduring hope that comes from the Light to enlighten all nations. May we, like Abraham, find confidence in God's promises, embracing the journey ahead with steadfast trust, knowing that we are guided by the same unchanging and faithful Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of the cosmos.

Thursday, December 14

Psalm 146.5–10; Ruth 1.6–18; 2 Peter 3.1–10

“But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!’”
(Ruth 1:16-18)

The story of Ruth and Naomi contains some of the most beautiful verses in scripture. Their story is unique, representing the only dialogue between two women that does not concern a man—a father, a husband, or a son—but one another’s welfare. We can reasonably presume that women of ancient Israel had such conversations all the time, but they are seldom recorded. This caring moment between an Israelite woman and her Moabite daughter-in-law stands in for dozens of missing portrayals of sisters, mothers, daughters, and friends. It also stands in for us, women and men, whose lives will not be recorded in the annals of history, describing our joys and sorrows, our failures or triumphs, the absence, or the presence of thousands upon thousands of small, seemingly insignificant, acts that define us.

The story begins in loss, in absence. The death of a spouse is a tragic event with emotional, social, and financial consequences; but, in a society where women often have no

property rights or access to jobs, the death of a husband can be financially ruinous. A palpable fear accompanies this absence.

There is a dynamic interplay between presence and absence in our lives today. We also experience something similar when we listen to music. Debussy wrote that the music is not in the notes, but in the spaces between them. In a similar fashion, Miles Davis said, "It's not the notes you play; it's the notes you don't play." It is about the silence, the space, *between* the notes.

It is not always a literal silence. Each note is usually still ringing before the next one is played. But something is happening that relates to silence. A note is written or played; where does the next note come from? It emerges from the silence, but only if we are listening. Otherwise, the music becomes a stream of run-on note with no cadence. No subtlety. *No breath*. Next time you listen to your favorite piece of music become aware of the silence between the notes.

This Advent, we are invited to feel God's love in the midst of absence and presence. What or who is missing in your life? What or who is present? Many of us in this country are expats. And as expats, we are acutely aware of presence and absence. We may be away from our families and friends. Be aware of the silence, the space between absence and presence; what notes touch you within? Where in the empty spaces and places of your life, do you find God? In the silence, pay attention to the new creation that is being born within you, in love.

Friday, December 15

Psalm 146.5–10; Ruth 4.13–17; 2 Peter 3.11–18

It is like hell broke loose and there is no end to it. War erupting everywhere. Everywhere you look there is someone grieving. War does not spare the innocent. It does not spare the children. It does not spare the elderly. It does not spare the families—the families that grieve for the loss of someone. Death, pain and grieving on any side are the same. What makes my heart heavier is the duality of the responses of many; the tendency to side with one or the other, to be compassionate with one and not the other. In such thinking, it is okay for some to witness hunger, starvation, deportation, ethnic cleansing, suffering but not the other. If only people can realize that pain and death are shared human experiences. If you lose someone, you are as heartbroken as anyone else regardless of your affiliation or political views.

It is the same with joy—the same joy that you experience at the birth of a new child, or the joy of satisfaction with a task done well, or joy in the ability to make someone's life better. It is the same for anyone, regardless of your political affiliation, your religion, your faith, your ethnicity. It is the same peace that you feel when you hold your baby for the first time. The baby opens their eyes, smiles at you and your heart is filled with such warmth. If only people can remember that feeling. If only people can remember that this love they have for this baby, sustain it and not let it succumb to animosity toward

others in the name of protecting the ones you love. Everyone wants to protect their baby. Everyone wants to protect their child. Everyone wants to protect their loved ones. If only people can remember that “Peace” (when looking at a baby smiling in their arms) and understand that what they feel, others feel too. What joy they feel, others feel too. What sadness and grievance they feel, others feel too; again, regardless of color, faith, religion, gender, ethnicity...

How can we overcome hate? Is it possible?

This world has never known peace. There is always a war going on somewhere. Throughout history, throughout time, there may have been pockets of ‘Peaceful Moments,’ but this world has always been at war.

I worry. I worry for the future of my kids. I worry for them going through war, through these hateful experiences that I have seen, that I have witnessed and gone through; a world that is full of hatred and full of anger.

Yet, I am hopeful. Hopeful that the world will wake up and realize that hatred can only bring hatred, resentment can only bring resentment and love can only bring love.

In this season as we contemplate the arrival of the newborn, the King of Peace, our Messiah, we try to remember the love and the peace that he brings. The love that drove him to sacrifice all his wealth, glory, power for our sake. He had it all and let go of it all to be born as a baby into a modest family, to live through war, deprivation, persecution. And yet, not stop there but also to live a life of giving, teaching, healing, caring and spreading his message

of Love. And more, He gave his life for us on a cross. But then, His work was not finished. He conquered death and rose to give us hope and deliverance.

I am hopeful!

Our heavenly Father, maker of heaven and earth,
We ask for your Peace! We ask for your Love!

We ask you, Lord, to fill our heart with that Peace and satisfaction of holding a baby in one's arms and seeing them smile.

May our hearts be always filled with that love and peace and may it radiate to everyone around us and become contagious feeling so that others may enjoy this peace.

We ask all these things,
In Jesus's name.
Amen!

Saturday, December 16

Psalm 146.5–10; I Samuel 2.1–8; LK 3.1–18

*“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”
(Luke 3:2-3)*

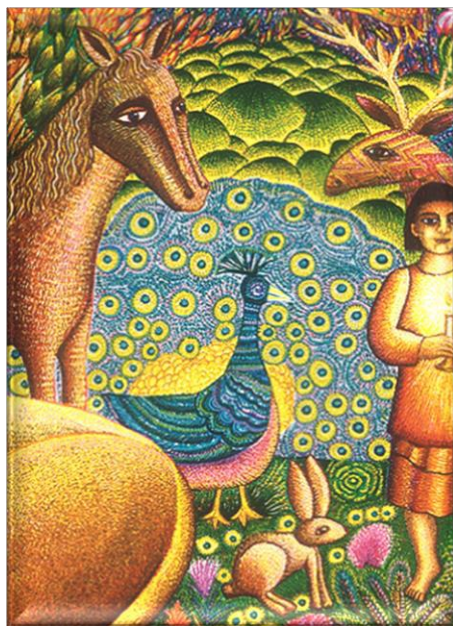
Luke’s Gospel begins with the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist, a miracle in itself, considering the age of his parents. The news is imparted to the father-to-be Zechariah by an angel, who responds to his (not unreasonable) incredulity by striking him dumb until the birth takes place. The Annunciation by Gabriel to Mary follows directly, but Mary’s doubts are addressed less abruptly, and she travels to visit her cousin Elizabeth, where the foetal John ‘leaps for joy’ in the womb, recognising the presence of his cousin and Saviour. Mary uses her voice to praise and thank God for his mercy in the beautiful words of the Magnificat. This first chapter of Luke is so full of joy, celebration and hope, family bonds and love, angelic intervention, acceptance and recognition.

Two chapters and some 30 years on, and John is now a grown man, travelling Judea, preaching repentance and baptism, “preparing the way for the Lord”; “a voice crying in the wilderness,” he is a strange and forbidding outsider who wears strange uncomfortable clothes, eats peculiar food, and harangues his followers, calling them a “brood of

vipers,” and warning them that “the axe is already at the root of the trees.” The tone is ominous and a little frightening. However, when asked how to avoid this fate, John’s responses are practical and simple: care for your neighbour by sharing from what you have been given, do your job with integrity, and don’t allow greed and self-service to get in the way. These are not onerous strictures, but merely the corollary of loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself.

As we travel through Advent, let us pray to God to hear the call of John the Baptist, to recognise and open our hearts to Jesus, and to serve Him by serving our neighbours, sharing what blessings we have received freely, joyfully, hopefully and with love.

ADVENT WEEK THREE



Sunday, December 17

Isaiah 35. 1–10; Psalm 146.5–10; MT 11.2–11

*“The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.”
(Psalm 126:3)*

On Halloween night, my wife, daughter, and I pushed an old table covered in fake spider webs and a giant, red beady-eyed spider off our front porch and onto the ground below, and we carefully placed several glass bowls of mini candy bars, chewy fruit snacks, and marshmallow candies shaped like ice cream cones on top, to the delight of at least 15 small children and their parents who rushed to grab a handful. After the parents made the little ones say their customary “thank you’s,” they were on their way to the next house, and the three of us could finally start our hunt for candy throughout the neighborhood.

As we walked, friendly neighbors waved, smiled, shouted “Happy Halloween” across a crowded street, and shared treats. My wife and I dressed in theme costumes: I was “salsa,” and my wife was “chips.” We could barely walk a few houses down the block before yet another group would wave and smile, remarking on the creativity of our costumes. And of course, everyone “oohed” and “aahed” at our 8-year-old dressed like a black cat, with a pinned-on tail and whiskers painted on her little face. We would also comment at the creativity of others, even the giggling

teenage girls with fake blood dripping from their mouths, which was a strange combination to say the least!

For that hour as we roamed our neighborhood, there was spirited, joyful community everywhere we turned. I have no idea what motivated everyone to participate, but the collective effervescence in our village was palpable that night. Sharing, laughter, and pure joy amongst friends and neighbors. Particularly striking was how much fun we had with complete strangers, bonding over this collective adventure of dressing up, enjoying our children, and eating sweets.

I never could have imagined that Halloween could point me to Christmas, but here it is—this purely happy moment reminded me so much of the joy that often comes with the holiday.

I would love to think that this collective experience of joy was God's gift to us, and as a result, we rejoiced. Did we all, in this communal spirit of giving candy and dressing up, somehow point one another to the material blessings that God has given us? I could have never imagined that the spookiest holiday on the calendar could do that so viscerally. But with all the fun, merriment amongst strangers, and people gathered from all over the world, it was likely a more accurate depiction of heaven that I have seen in a long time, spider webs and all.

Monday, December 18

Psalm 42; Isaiah 29.17–24; Acts 5.12–16

We are at present deep within the darkness of Advent. The faithful have been sermonized on the virtues of waiting for weeks now, if not for years. For more than two millennia, Christians have believed that heaven came to earth in the form of a Judean infant. The rare saints among us are blessedly patient in expecting another such miracle. Perhaps that describes you, but as a parish minister it's been my experience that the church is more of "a hospital for sinners than a museum of saints." Whether this line can be attributed to St. Augustine or to the once-famous "Dear Abby" columnist isn't important. It is the truth.

For just as the church is populated by the imperfect, it is also made up of those impatient for equity and peace on earth. They are, and I am, frustrated by economic or racial injustice, or by climate change, as well as the current wars in Ukraine and in the Holy Land. *Every single day* we see images of the following glowing from our hand-held devices: people under occupation queued up for kilometers at barbed-wired border crossings; entire cities splintered by hurricane winds seldom seen in recorded history; the blood of innocents sprayed by bullets or bombs on shattered city walls.

Since St. Paul's directive to "be patient in tribulation, but be joyful in hope," there has been a valorizing of endurance as a premier Christian virtue. Experience bears

that out, too, but know also that some of the most courageous contemporary exemplars of our faith have acted otherwise. In the 1960's, Martin Luther King Jr entitled a book on nonviolent protest against second-class citizenship for Black Americans *Why We Can't Wait*. King's friend the Reverend William Sloane Coffin, maverick chaplain at Yale University, bade Christians to "be angry, but do not sin" in dissenting against the Vietnam War. And Coffin, who said that "a feminist is someone who refuses to be a masochist," lit a path for clergy like widely admired author, speaker advocate, and Presbyterian minister the Reverend Jennifer Butler. She tells us to "stand in a pose that gives you strength" in praying and then works for justice for women across the globe.

The Lutheran bible scholar Matthew Skinner reminds us that "Christianity is, at root, an Advent religion. The season," he continues, "urges us to soak up Divine wonder while it simultaneously refuses to ignore the frustration that can result from waiting on God."

Recall Psalm 42 in today's lectionary, as the poet wails,

*My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

Perseverance prevails at the song's end: "that by day the Lord commands his steadfast love." Advent is inextricably linked to Nativity, the one meaningless

without the other. While waiting in peace or passion for divinity to arrive on earth, stand in a pose that gives you strength in prayer.

After Christmas morn, let's follow St. Francis and

*build the Church—not heaps of stone
in safe, immobile, measured walls,
but friends of Jesus, Spirit-blown,
and fit to travel where He calls.*

Tuesday, December 19

Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47.1–12; Jude 17. 25

Only five more days to go in the run-up to Christmas Eve. In today's scripture reading, Jude persuades believers not to be passive in their Christian walk. We have a high calling in our lives to be transformed day by day into the image of Christ and to fulfill what God wants to do through us, by the help and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Any kind of 'progress' for this requires constantly pushing back and overcoming resistance from the flesh. We are caught in an arm wrestle with the enemy every time we need to choose between being faithful to the call or quitting and giving up.

Each time we arrive at a new level of our faith journey, we encounter a new devil. These can be dark and testing seasons in our lives that we may face while we are on our way to the next leg of the journey. Anyone who thinks they've never had any of these moments is probably living in some spiritual la-la land! These are times when our 'unshakeable faith' begins to falter and questions like "Why, God, why are You allowing this?" or "Have I done something wrong?" arise.

It is in moments like these, when crisis strikes, when our world may collapse, when waters seem to swell up beyond our control and our feet may fail that we need to shift focus on the Lord—past the mist—believe and hang on to His promises (Matthew 14:28-32). Faith in the Word of God is what makes the waters beneath us concrete stepping

ground. When bad news comes, be encouraged to wax your surfboard and ride the wave knowing that it's already under your feet (Ephesians 1:22), rather than trying to outswim it.

God does not waste pain. While in this world, we will have tribulation. We look forward towards a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more pain, every loss restored, and God rewards those who remain faithful to the call and writes their names forever in His Hall of Fame (Hebrews 11).

One of my favorite actors, Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, recites these inspiring words from Walt Huntley's poem "God's Hall of Fame":

*Your name may not appear down here
In this world's Hall of Fame,
In fact you may be so unknown
that no one knows your name;
The Oscars and the praise of men
May never come your way,
But don't forget GOD has rewards
That he'll hand out someday.*

*This Hall of Fame is only good
As long as time shall be;
But keep in mind, God's Hall of Fame
Is for eternity;
To have your name inscribed up there
Is greater more by far*

*Than all the fame and all the praise
Of ev'ry man-made star.*

*This crowd on earth they soon forget
When you're not up at the top,
They'll cheer like mad until you fall
And then their praise will stop;
Not God, he never does forget,
and in his Hall of Fame,
By just believing on his Son,
Forever -- there's your name.*

*I tell you, friend, I wouldn't trade
My name, however small,
That's written there beyond the stars
in that celestial Hall,
For all the famous names on earth,
Or the glory that they share;
I'd rather be an unknown here,
And have my name up there!*

Wednesday, December 20

Psalms 42; Zechariah 8.1–17; MT 8.14–17, 28–34

*“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.”
(Psalm 42:11)*

Prayer of Preparation:

*Dear Heavenly Father,
As I prepare to face the challenges of this day, I surrender
my worries and fears to You. Grant me wisdom, patience, and
strength. May Your peace guard my heart and Your light guide
my steps. I trust in Your plan and embrace Your grace. Amen.*

It's simple to let the storms of worry, uncertainty, and dread carry us away in the middle of the daily rush. God asks us to remain still during these times and acknowledge that He is God. This short yet powerful verse serves as a reminder of the need of calm when approaching God.

Silencing the noise both inside and around us is what it means to be still, not to be idle. It involves letting go of our fears and giving them to God. We discover power, safety, and unchanging serenity in the stillness. The power of God becomes clear and His divine light brightens our path when we surrender our need for control.

The fundamental truth that God is a personal, loving Father who is concerned about every aspect of our life rather than just a distant, cosmic power becomes apparent

to us in the calm. He is aware of our hardships, anxieties, and aspirations. He knows our hearts by heart. We allow His transformational grace to enter our lives when we remain still before Him. He shapes and molds us into vessels of His love, grace, and compassion.

Furthermore, it cultivates a profound sense of faith to stand still before God. We put our faith in His compassion, faithfulness, and timing. Knowing that our God is in control allows us to stand steady and unwavering even in the face of life's most violent storms.

Let us remember the ever-relevant advice found in Psalm 42 today. Let us make space for silence in our busy lives. Let us approach God in those times with open hearts, prepared to feel His amazing peace. May His love be our strength and joy. Simply remain still and recognize that He is God—our haven, our stronghold, and our source of eternal peace.

Thursday, December 21

Psalms 80.1–7, 17–19; 2 Samuel 7.1–17; Galatians 4.1–7

*“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel.”
(Psalm 80:1)*

During recent travels, we passed through vast green fields dotted with black and white sheep. They were usually either grazing or resting and were rather unanimated. The only time we saw any vibrancy and heard lots of bleating was when they were following their shepherd home at the end of the day.

Sheep follow their shepherd because they know and trust him and readily identify with him. It is to their advantage for protection and comfort in terms of food, water and rest.

In fact, sheep are completely defenseless against predators. It is the shepherd who protects and keeps them safe and keeps the flock intact. It is the shepherd who leads them to pastures for grazing and to still waters so they can quench their thirst. Without their shepherd they would have to fend for themselves and that would leave them defenseless and vulnerable.

The Psalmist knew the power of the mighty shepherd. He says: “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth....Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

The Psalmist prayed that God almighty in all His majestic glory would shine forth on His people and redeem and restore them. He knew they were vulnerable and defenseless, and that only their shepherd could lead them to safety.

Three times the Psalmist desperately pleads: "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." The Israelites were in dismal circumstances because they had not been right before God. The psalmist sensed God's anger at them and sensed an anger even with their prayers. It must have been so grievous to have God's anger "smolder against the prayers" of the people. And yet, the Psalmist knew that only God could turn their circumstances around. So, on behalf of the nation, he begged and pleaded with God to return to them, restore them and make his goodness shine upon them.

To be restored is to be brought back to a former condition. To have their circumstances restored, they needed their hearts to be turned first. Spurgeon says "when the Lord turns his people he will soon turn their condition."

When circumstances are dire and when all hope seems lost, we too can know for sure that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

This period of Advent is a fitting time to examine our hearts' attitude to God. He is our Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us. He calls us by name. Will we heed His call? Like the nation in crisis yearned for God's light to dispel their darkness and gloom, do we yearn for Him to shine His face upon us?

Only through Christ Jesus are we saved.

Friday, December 22

Psalm 80.1–7, 17–19; 2 Samuel 7.18–22; Galatians 4.1–7

*“Restore us O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”
(Psalm 80:19)*

A strong case can be made for defining human experience according to opposites. If we had no experience of ‘cold’ would our experience of ‘hot’ be complete? If there were no such thing as ‘slow’ would it make sense to describe something as ‘fast’? You can extend this mental exercise almost indefinitely – ‘left’ and ‘right,’ ‘up’ and ‘down,’ ‘before’ and ‘after,’ ‘open’ and ‘closed,’ and so on. Of all the possible combinations of opposites, which one might be the most fundamental? The Biblical answer to that question, and therefore the most truthful one, is ‘darkness’ and ‘light.’ Genesis 1:1 and 3 “darkness covered the face of the deep....”

Then God said “Let there be light.”

St John, in Chapter 1 verse 5, as part of the evangelist’s deliberate echoing of Genesis 1, gives this a Christological twist. Speaking of the Word, who is Jesus, he declares: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome (or understand) it.” Later, he puts the same thing even more explicitly as he records Jesus saying: “I am the light of the world (John 8:12).”

When the great painters of the 17th and 18th centuries depicted the Nativity, they often painted the baby lying in a manger as if he himself were suffused with radiant light, so

that Mary's, Joseph's, and the shepherds' faces were illuminated not by some lantern or candle away to the side, but by the baby himself as they gazed down on him. The artists were making a theological statement. This is the source of light itself. In and through this person darkness is banished.

St Paul then develops this idea as he follows through the logic of Jesus' self-giving. Ephesians 5:14: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." He who is light will illuminate (banish the darkness from) those who are his. He puts this quite explicitly in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:6), "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The shining that originates in God is gifted to us that it may shine from us, radiating the reality of Jesus in this dark world. Philippians 2:15: "... so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world."

No need then to hanker after stardom. Followers of the Light of the World are, by definition, already stars, through whom the Light of the world shines for the sake of the world.

Saturday, December 23

Psalm 80.1–7, 17–19; 2 Samuel 7.23–29; JN 3.31–36

Is God Relevant?

The topic of God's relevancy was recently discussed and debated in a seminar at one of the eastern universities.

In the postmodern world, many people, especially of the younger generation in our universities, confront a labyrinth of voices when it comes to questions of truth. The University's very name derives from this goal of seeking after truth (*Uni*-single, *Veritas*-truth). Yet the various methods of inquiry espoused in universities often promote a heightened attitude of skepticism. Deconstruction and analysis does not always lead to reconstruction and ethical foundation. Confidence in The Truth can founder in a morass of equally-weighted relevancies.

As a result, we the people of postmodern society are largely skeptical of the world around us. A kind of scientism has become the "truth" for many who believe that God has nothing to do with the world we live in. We hesitate to make conclusions about the world and would prefer to investigate and form our opinions based on what we discover, and on our personal experience. This overconfidence breeds a belief that we can live without God.

John the Baptizer says, "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all." Here, St John brings out a clear distinction between earthly teaching and teaching from above.

He goes on to say, “You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” From our holy scripture’s first book of Genesis, the Word makes its preeminent mark and becomes the very medium for communicating and revealing God, expressing His immense love for His creation. Faith in God is the destiny of our soul, the everlasting life. Our Way, our life, our truth.

The Baptist’s testimony could be ridiculed by many, and *has* been ridiculed by many, through the ages. Each age has seen its own variety of skeptics. But those who receive this testimony will answer the opening question with a resounding, “Yes.” God is relevant to those who respond to the teaching from “above” and navigate their way out of the cacophonous labyrinth of earthly mutterings. Surely, the divine truth demands admittance into the heart, piercing right through our conscience and reasoning. For God endorses the truth through his testimony (verse 33), and we cross our hearts with it.

ADVENT WEEK FOUR



Sunday, December 24

Isaiah 7.10–16; Psalm 80.1–7, 17–19; Romans 1.1–7; MT 1.18–25

Two thousand years ago, today was a day of great significance for the chosen ones. The time of waiting for the promised messiah was almost over, and the time of celebration was drawing near. Sadly, for the others it remained just another ordinary day. Gladly for us it is a time of gratitude, remembrance, reflection, and celebration of the marvelous deeds of God commemorating the birth of Jesus our Messiah. It's also a time of waiting for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth forever.

Today, let's ponder on God's plan of salvation, symbolized by "A Promise and A New Beginning," revealing two components of God's character: His love and faithfulness. At this point I encourage you to read 2 Samuel 7:1-16, Psalm 89:3-4; 19-26, and Luke 1:26-38 for a deeper understanding.

The "Promise" is a crucial element of the Davidic covenant, an act of God's love for David. In 2 Samuel 7, David expresses his gratitude to God with a desire to build a permanent house for Him. God, out of His abundant love for David, honored this humble desire with a broader perspective by making a profound promise of "establishing his house and kingdom forever through his descendant" Furthermore, the annunciation of Jesus' birth seen in Luke 1, is a confirmation of the 'Promise' made to David, an act of God's faithfulness in keeping His promises. The Birth of

Jesus is truly the embodiment of God's love and faithfulness to David.

God's great plan started with a Promise and finds its accomplishment in Christ with a 'New Beginning.'

A New Beginning is a spiritual transformational experience and a renewed relationship with God through Jesus. God is in the process of making all things new in Christ, a new life, a transformed nature, and a New Kingdom. God transforming us into the image of Christ His Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22 specifies God's love and faithfulness as the components of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. As children of God, we are expected to witness and inherit the characteristics of God in our lives. The transformative journey in the New Beginning embodies God's act of love and faithfulness toward humanity.

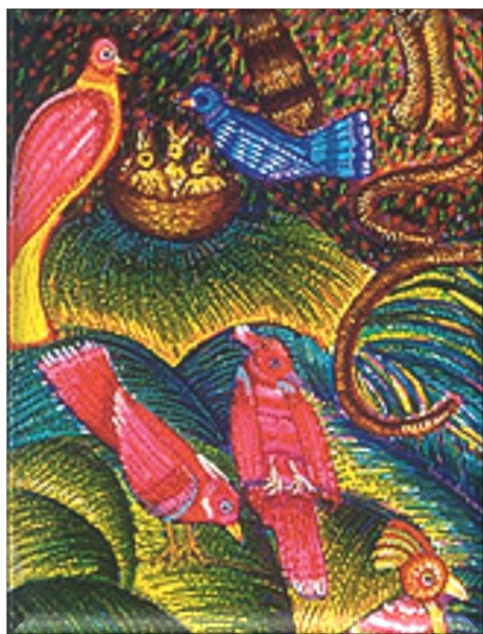
It's time for some introspection:

Like David should we just witness God's love and faithfulness with a Promise? or

Should we be witnesses of God's love and faithfulness by inheriting His characteristics into our lives with a New Beginning?

My prayer is that this time of celebration would become a time of transformation into the image of Christ by surrendering our lives to the working of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, as we await the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus' second coming as King and Judge may we demonstrate God's characteristics to the world around us.

CHRISTMAS EVE



Sunday, December 24

LK 1.46b–55; Isaiah 9:2-7; LK 1.67–80

In the hush of Christmas Eve, the words of Isaiah 9:2-7 resound with profound resonance, pulsing through the night with a timeless message of hope and redemption, capturing the essence of the Christmas spirit. These prophetic verses, penned centuries before the birth of Jesus, serve as a beacon guiding us to the heart of this holy season.

Isaiah's words paint a vivid picture of a world submerged in darkness, a metaphor for the spiritual and moral obscurity that shrouds humanity. Yet, in the midst of this darkness, a glimmer of hope emerges—a shimmering light piercing through the gloom. This light heralds the arrival of Jesus Christ, ushering in a new era of divine grace and salvation.

Describing the joy and freedom that accompany the appearance of this extraordinary light, Isaiah's prophecy speaks of burdens lifted, yokes broken, and oppression ended, foretelling the profound impact of Jesus' incarnation, and his living breathing, teaching, and dwelling among us.

The pivotal line, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given," encapsulates the essence of Christmas. The birth of this divine child signifies God's ultimate gift to humanity—a precious offering of love, compassion, and redemption. The arrival of Jesus as the Son of God in the

flesh bridges the gap between the divine and the mortal, offering us a path to reconciliation, forgiveness, fullest realization, and eternal life.

Isaiah's prophecy also touches upon the qualities of this remarkable child: "And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." These titles unveil the multifaceted nature of Jesus, portraying him not just as an historical figure but as The Source of wisdom, strength, eternal love, and reconciliation. As we gather on Christmas Eve, we are reminded of these divine qualities embodied in the baby born in Bethlehem, inspiring us to seek his guidance, draw strength from his might, embrace and ever strive to embody in ourselves the peace he brings.

The passage concludes by highlighting the eternal nature of Christ's kingdom and his reign of peace. It paints a vision of a world where justice and righteousness prevail, where harmony and love triumph over discord and hatred—over all the “-isms” of this world that delimit and dehumanize. This vision, although articulated in ancient times, continues to resonate deeply, offering a timeless message of hope and encouragement.

Tonight, we again welcome the invaluable gift of the light of Christ into our lives, allowing it to dispel the darkness within and around us. In the quiet moments of this sacred night, let us reaffirm our faith, finding solace in the promise of a Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Source of New Life, and Prince of Peace. May the spirit of Christmas Eve inspire us to emulate these divine qualities, spreading love, kindness, and compassion

to all, just as the light of Christ continues to shine brightly,
guiding us on our spiritual journey.

CHRISTMAS DAY



Monday, December 25

Isaiah 9.2–7; Psalm 98; Titus 2.11–14; LK 2.1–14[15–20]

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Today Christians celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, the birth of Jesus! “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). The season of Advent was waiting for this day. The 400 years of silence from after the prophet Malachi was waiting for this day. The entire Old Testament was waiting for this day. In fact, all of creation was groaning for the day when the “dayspring from on high will break upon us” (Luke 1:78), when the God of all creation became one of his own creation, when the eternal “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). At last, Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary to save us, “not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:5). In that same mercy and love, Isaiah tells us “they will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord” (Isaiah 62:12). This means that today, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we who follow him become his holy people, his redeemed. Today we receive the greatest gift, the long-expected Jesus, arriving for each of us—for you and for me, with salvation wide-open for all who receive him.

So, what should our response to the birth of Jesus be? In the words of the famous hymn by Christina Georgina Rossetti in 1905, “What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; Yet what I can I give Him: give

my heart." Today on the birthday of Jesus we receive Him and worship Him by going to Mass, by hearing the story of salvation once again, by receiving the Sacrament of His most precious Body and Blood, by singing carols of praise, by thanking God for his wonderful gift, by sharing the Good News of Jesus with others around us. It should be like that of the angels who praised God saying, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth" (Luke 2:14); it should be like that of the shepherds who "glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20); it should be like that of Mary who "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19); and it should be like that of the magi who when they saw Jesus, "bowed down and worshiped him, presenting him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11). Today heaven and earth resound and sing, in the words of John Francis Wade's hymn "Adeste fideles," O Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

And so, to one and all, we at St. Andrew's, Christ Church and St. Martin's wish you a blessed Christmas!



**May each day going forward continue creating a new
heaven and a new earth for the glory of God in Christ!**

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A Note on Style

There were many decisions to be made in editing this little booklet. As a guiding principle, style choices sought consistency and fluidity, while trying to maintain the character of distinct voices.

Punctuation, grammar, and style in this manuscript follow the Chicago Manual of Style because it is regarded as the most popular and comprehensive option currently available in the publishing industry. Spelling follows the preferences of the author.

Biblical quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

