



*Journey through
Advent*

2019



A Disciples Seminary Foundation Devotional



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An Invitation:

Advent is a time of preparation and expectation where we step back from chaos and challenges to remember what is truly important and to prepare for the One that is born anew in our hearts each Christmas, the One we call Christ. The devotions that you find inside these pages represent the beautiful diversity of the DSF Family. There are devotions from DSF staff, students, graduates, and board members sharing with us from their various theological, cultural, and social perspectives. Thank you for deciding to journey with us!

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☞ **Sunday, December 1, 2019** ☞
Matthew 24:3-44 – Expecting the Unexpected

“. . .when you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it. . ." were the words of Shug Avery, in Alice Walker's highly acclaimed novel *The Color Purple*. Shug's statement is a succinct, yet profound revelation of expecting the unexpected. God's masterful, creative genius displayed on earth's canvass is a marvel to behold. A glorious revelation of the divine in a space and place where it may not be readily apparent, appropriate, or even welcome.

It is an essential component of the Advent season; a historical expectation manifested in a stable, yet shockingly unexpected. The extraordinary pierced the ordinary. The infinite became finite for a season and moved into the neighborhood of humanity. That is the essential nature of the Advent season; expecting the unexpected. An image swaddled gently in the words of an old spiritual, "Sweet lil Jesus boy... and we didn't know who you wuz."

Matthew 24:3-44 outlines in graphic detail the apocalyptic events in which the reign of God will be revealed. "Expect it," says Jesus but there will be no indication of exactly when, where, or how such events will ultimately transpire. Look for the signs, yet, it is impossible to fully comprehend the time parameters for the events described. The message then is to craft lives, live in a way that reflects the teachings of the unexpected One of Bethlehem. Kindness in the midst of chaos and brutality, comfort in the midst of despair, reason when absurdity rules, and apathy allows it to be acceptable.

In this season of Advent, may we consider again the worshipful work that is offered to God through our lives as we bear witness to the transformative power of lives bound to Jesus. We live in expectation and grateful surprise, and we see the wonders of God.

Prayer: *God of all advents, may our hearts be filled again with wonder, amazement, and awe when we see the glories of the Christ-child. May we expect it, welcome it, and live by the example that has been revealed to us through your Son, our friend, our brother, and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Rev. Marilyn S. Fiddmont is an ordained minister of the DOC and currently serves as Chair of the DSF Board of Trustees. She is working towards the completion of her D.Min., with a specialization in preaching. She has been on staff with the Christian Church Foundation since January 2001 and serves the Southwest Zone and the Northeastern Region. She and her husband, Rev. Normans S. Fiddmont, live in Houston, TX.

I love Advent! It thrusts us into a season of expectation, waiting, hoping, and anticipation that something wonderful is about to happen in our lives. Advent is about being influenced into a future that is better for us. We get excited about the future, like little kids living in expectation that this one day – Christmas – will bring us what makes us joy-full.

Isaiah reveals what is God's better future for us. A beloved space and place where "*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more*" (vs 4b). Look at our world today. Wars are everywhere, including: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Israel-Palestine, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, Ukraine, India-Pakistan. Wars in our own communities where lives are destroyed just because of how we worship, the color of our skin, who we love, the fact that we are female, and what we believe or don't. How can God's people be a people of peace and not war?

Isaiah provides us with a GPS to accomplish this holy work. Very simply, Isaiah directs us to go to God. Go to God to learn the ways of God in order to walk in God's paths (vs 3). And so it was that God entered our world to influence us into a better future. Showing us how to come to God. Through the gift of a baby named Jesus, God came to show us how to come to God. To learn how to be people of peace, not war. How to be people of grace, not hate.

Prayer: *God, show us how to come to you. Show us how to be a better people and create a better future for all people to know they are "beloved." In Jesus name, Amen.*



Rev. Joan Bell-Haynes is the Executive Regional Minister of the Central Rocky Mountain Region, which includes the states of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Northern New Mexico, and Eastern Idaho (311,000 square miles of territory).

Where are your feet standing? For the psalmist, they are standing in the gates of Jerusalem, the city of peace. For most of us, our feet are rarely standing still. They are running here, doing this errand, etc.

The psalmist continues, “May there be peace within your wall.” Unfortunately, for much of its history and that of human history, the city of peace has not known peace. For many, this season brings out emotions of instability, family disunity, relationships within which we feel inadequate, heartbreak, the first Christmas without a loved one, and much more.

During this holy season, what if you could focus on where your feet take you? What if you could bring some element of *hope* to situations of despair? What if you could bring some element of *love* when someone feels lonely? What if you could bring *joy* when others only see pessimism? What if you could bring *peace* into the walls of your neighborhood? If so, you may not only be lighting the Advent candles – hope, love, joy, peace – but also bringing peace within the walls that seem to be built between us at times.

For some of us, the talk of feet can be “faux pas.” We spent much of our time hiding our feet because we might not see them as beautiful. As a pastor, I have seen how the service of washing feet is often one of the least participated in. Yet, it is within our tradition to say, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces *peace*, who brings *good news*, who announces *salvation*, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’” (Isaiah 52:7).

In this season of preparation, your feet are beautiful and ready for you.

Prayer: *Gracious God, may you take my feet and, more importantly, my awareness to the places that, and the individuals who, need to know peace. Also, help me to stand still long enough to know a moment of peace. In Christ’s footsteps, Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Jonathan Hall serves as the Senior Pastor at First Christian Church (DOC) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He received his D. Min., thanks to DSF, from Claremont School of Theology in 2014. You can find him across various social platforms at [@JonathanBHall](#) or read his blog on [medium.com/@OrganicSpirituality](#).

I'm not a morning person by nature. I spent a good portion of my younger years working, playing, and living in the evening hours. I loved moonazing, and I loved sleep (I still love both of those things). But over the years, it has become necessary for me to wake up and get to work early in the morning. I still hate getting up before dawn when it's still cold and dark, which happens often this time of year because of the short Illinois winter days. But when I do have to be up and out in the early morning hours, I sometimes get to see the sun rise. And it can be spectacular.

In this part of his letter to the Romans, Paul is imploring people to let go of nighttime and to get up and face the day. Put on the armor of light, he tells them. Let go of bickering. Let go of licentiousness. Let go of the things that are not of the light. It's time to be ready for Christ to come into our lives. It's not easy to get out of bed in the morning. But it's so worth it when we do.

In our world that seems to be filled with increasing ugliness, what does it mean for us to shake off the night and clothe ourselves with the Light of Christ? What would it look like for each of us to live as Christ's daytime people, avoiding all the darkness that wants to creep in? It is no small feat but it's our calling, especially as we enter this Advent season.

Prayer: *Life-giving God, break into our darkened souls and wake us from our cynical ways. Show us how to be people clothed in light and life and love. Empower us to be selfless and loving, people worthy of the name Christian.*



Robin Robinson is in her third year at Claremont School of Theology, working on her M.Div. through the hybrid program. She lives in Eureka, Illinois with her husband, two teenage children, and way too many houseplants.

Unless you're exceptionally knowledgeable about trees, most people will look at a stump and declare it lifeless. However, Isaiah 11 claims otherwise. This prophetic text gives us hope of a Messiah to come. The branch burst forth from the roots as a sign of new life, hope in an Israel that would be restored.

As we move through the Advent season, I encourage us to consider what God's kingdom on earth looks like in the here and now. Isaiah 11 calls for a Messiah that with "righteousness, he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth (v.4). That the predator and prey will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (v. 9).

As Jesus was the Redeemer of Life, we are the extension of that same grace in our world today. We are the branch extending from the resurrected Christ. We are called to embody a spirituality that looks and feels like that of Jesus. We must not be stagnant in the face of oppression, but instead, work to create a world in which predator and prey are non-existent. We must fight for a kin-dom on earth that reflects the vision God has for ALL people. We must adopt an attitude of hospitality so that ALL feel welcome to the Table.

What better way to celebrate the birth of Jesus than to emanate his light to others? Perhaps you share a meal with your neighbor, maybe you hold the door for a stranger, or maybe you protest on the front lines fighting for humans and an earth that are consistently overlooked. We are not lifeless stumps but instead rooted in a Jesus that dwells within us!

Will you venture with me this Advent season and be the "branch burst forth from the roots" that this world badly needs?

Prayer: *God, please open our hearts to the ways in which we can serve you, the ways in which we can radiate the light of Jesus in our world. Give us the courage to step out of our comfort and say YES when you call. In the beautiful name of Jesus we pray, Amen!*



Shannon Kitchens is a student at Pacific School of Religion pursuing an M.Div. and MA degree in Biblical Languages.

Psalm 72:1-6, 18-19 is a powerful Advent season message of hope. We can only speculate if King David wrote the Psalm in reference to his son Solomon, or if Solomon, as praise, wrote the Psalm about David. Yet in the context of Advent, this Psalm can truly be understood as a reference to the one described in Isaiah as the "Messiah," and known as Immanuel or Jesus Christ.

The petitions threaded throughout the Psalm asks for a King who is both "righteous" and "just" in his relationship and governance of God's people. Present-day, there are too many of our sisters and brothers making this same plea. Sadly, their voices resonate from a location seeking relief from the oppressive systems that have normalized the marginalization and inhumane treatment of God's children. Daily, we encounter precious members of God's family who have little to no hope of refuge from the afflictions of homelessness, poverty, hunger, and all of the "-isms" being perpetrated. Relief, however, comes by way of that which is righteous and in human form we often seek a King to call righteous. God in God's patient and loving presence gifted us with the perfection of not a king but, in its place, the Messiah.

Jesus knew well the depth of the 72nd Psalm's meaning and fully embraced defending the needy against all oppressors. He comforts us with both the warmth of the sun and light of the moon. We are cleansed and baptized by the falling rain and, thus, continually embraced by the promises that exist through Advent. What a marvelous deed God has done in filling the earth with God's glory through the tangible existence of Jesus Christ. Run, jump, shout, and make a joyful noise, this is the perpetual hope and righteous promise of the Advent!

Prayer: *Merciful God, thank you for the gift of your presence in our lives through the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. May the afflicted be comforted with the sweet taste of Advent's righteous fruit. Humbly we lay our petition before you. Amen.*



Rev. Darryl E. Searuggs is the Central Rocky Mountain Region's (DOC) Reconciliation Minister. He holds an M.Div. with emphasis in Religion and Social Change, from Denver's Iliff School of Theology. Darryl lives in Aurora, CO and is a member of Lakewood Christian Church. He also serves on the DSF Board of Trustees.

Two thousand years later, the words of the Apostle Paul addressed to Rome's Church still resonate in our Christian communities. He confronted the believers about their differences between Jews and Gentiles. The two groups in Rome's Church were vastly different in what they ate, how they dressed, how they worshipped, their languages, and social customs. Nowadays, we are experiencing a similar situation. In a society sharply polarized and fragmented by systemic racism, the Scripture challenges us to embody this word:

"May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that **together** you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

I want to point out the word translated as "together," in the original Greek, is ὁμοθυμαδὸν (*homothymadon*), a compound word from *homo*, "same," and *thymós*, "passion" – **with the same passion or fervor**. This word is also used by Luke in Acts 1. On the day of Pentecost, 120 believers prayed in the upper room *with the same passion*. As a result, they received Jesus' promise. The Holy Spirit was poured out on them bringing a revival to the Church.

Maybe you have been waiting for fulfillment of God's promises in your life, in your family, or in your ministry. I invite you to grab this Spiritual truth: when we are together with the same passion, beyond our prejudices of political ideology, race, social status, gender identity, or social customs, God's promises become true. The Holy Spirit comes and brings a new revival.

Many of us are longing for a new Pentecost day. In this season of Advent, I challenge you to abide united in one passion. Where there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, there is neither black nor white, there is neither citizen nor immigrant, there is neither poor nor rich; all of us will be one in Christ Jesus, and justice will be manifested.

Prayer: *God of justice and love, we praise you for who you are. Give us wisdom to understand the system dynamics that separate us and the courage to dismantle them. Let us see your kingdom on earth. Amen.*



Nadia Tavera is a DSF student at Pacific School of Religion. She moved from Mexico City to California to pursue an M.Div. degree. She has a deep passion for Biblical exegesis and is interested in exploring new ways to do Church in the postmodern world.

☞ **Sunday, December 8, 2019** ☞
Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist is an intriguing figure in the Gospels. According to Matthew, John appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming repentance while wearing clothes of camel's hair, a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey. Can we imagine ourselves in the wilderness proclaiming God's work and wearing what John wore? What about proclaiming repentance while munching on locusts and wild honey? Many of us would not do what John did because we value how we are viewed by our peers and the general public. However, John the Baptist was not afraid, and this is what made him special.

Besides his bizarre wardrobe and diet, the location of his ministry is also interesting. John did not minister in the Temple or a holy site, rather a location that contrasts those places - the wilderness. It was considered the bad lands in eastern Judah, where the land expanded towards the Jordan Valley. During John's time, wild animals pervaded this region. It was probably a place that few humans chose to live. Yet, John decided to do his work there and nevertheless, people still came from Jerusalem and the region along the Jordan to get baptized in the river Jordan. We even learn from Matthew's version about another group of interesting people who went to John to get baptized, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Even these "holy ones" of Jerusalem were willing to leave the holy city and set foot into the wilderness.

Why the wilderness? John could have started his work in the safety of the Temple or a holy site, but he decided to minister in the wilderness. Was it due to potential distractions of city life? Whatever John's reason may have been, I believe his actions teach us all a very valuable lesson. As we prepare for Advent, let this story be a reminder that our ministries can go beyond the walls of a church or temple. It can be anywhere we want it to be, and we can do it in whatever enigmatic way we choose. We can do ministry at a park, the streets, and even at shelters. Where will your wilderness be?

Prayer: *Gracious and loving God, may we find the courage and openness to reach out to others during this Advent season and not limit Your good works within closed spaces.*



Sharma Sapolu is a MAST student at Pacific School of Religion. She is from Oahu, HI and is of Samoan descent. Sharma is a member of the First Samoan Christian Church of Alameda DOC/UCC.

Mystically, our
Universal God is born
Simply among us,
Incarnated as
Christ in human form, Jesus.

Ever since the
Very beginning, all created things continually
Express their unique life-sounds to fill the spheres
Robustly with both their glorious harmonies and barbaric
Yawps melding together into universal choruses that
Waft eternally—never ceasing, never fatiguing—
Heavenward, back toward their Creative Point: You.
Eternal God, we give You thanks for these
Restorative companions, Musical Sounds of Praise,
Ever leading us back to You.

Prayer: *O God of ever-surrounding Musical Sounds, we thank You for embodying Yourself in our brother Jesus and of giving us His example of unconditional love, joy, and inner peace. May we continually follow His Way in this Advent season and throughout our lives. Amen.*



Dr. Richard J. Follett, Professor of English, Los Angeles Pierce College (Retired), has taught The English Bible as Literature for over 30 years. He is a member of First Christian Church of North Hollywood and has served five years on the DSF Board, four of those as Chair of the Education Committee.

Waiting can be one of the most challenging things that we are dealing with nowadays. Waiting is becoming synonymous with stress, anxiety, and anger. We can't be away from our phones for too long; otherwise, our bodies start itching. At a cognitive level, we are becoming more and more addicted to constant shots of dopamine, which we get from our posts' likes' on Facebook, the red siren light alerting us of breaking news, and even our one-day deliveries from Amazon. Could it be that while technology is making our lives comfortable, it's at the same time destroying our sense of wonder? Are younger generations equipped to wait, to build up hope in anticipation of something beautiful and amazing that's coming? At a spiritual level, I wonder if we are still able to perceive the blessed power that God gives us as we await.

Advent is waiting, and that's good news for us, the modern world. The mystery of Advent is about building up and giving hope to God's people—*construir y dar esperanza al pueblo de Dios*. The prophet's words could not be more exciting for the season of Advent. According to Isaiah 62, the work of waiting should be active, passionate, impatient, urgent, and a little noisy. Sentinels that, "shall never be silent," is an interesting paradox. A sentinel usually watches out quietly, but these sentinels, like the prophet, will not be silent or rest until the people have seen their salvation.

Have you ever tried noise as a spiritual practice or as a form of meditation? I find it interesting that as we prepare to sing "Silent Night" at our Christmas Eve services, God is also calling us to speak out day and night, to be restless when we see injustice around us. If we ever imagined that being, "a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world" would be a quiet thing, today's Advent scripture correct us. Let us grow ever more impatient and start proclaiming God's promises of salvation to all people.

Prayer: *While waiting, O God, let us build up a highway paved with justice and hope for all people, and open our eyes of faith to see you at work in the world and our salvation.*



Rev. Pedro Ramos-Goycolea serves on DSF's Board of Trustees and is the Pastor of Desert Dove Christian Church in Tucson, Arizona.

In some ways, Advent can become a routine for us because we think we know what is waiting for us after all of the waiting. We know how the story ends, and we pantomime the tension of the “now and not yet.” What will we do when what we are waiting for is better than what we have anticipated?

Even within a letter with plenty of questionable material, a saying of the early church is preserved in Titus 3:4-7 and offers a glimpse of the scandalous power of the gospel: we are extravagantly loved by God and given a new type of life in the spirit of Christ. Following up on another saying in 2:11, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people,” the radical nature of the Christian faith remains, even if it struggles to break through its surrounding context (and, quite literally, its text).

This saying is reliable: “when God our savior’s kindness and love appeared, [God] saved us because of [God’s] mercy, not because of righteous things we had done. [God] did it through the washing of new birth and the renewing by the Holy Spirit, which God poured out upon us generously through Jesus Christ our savior. So, since we have been made righteous by [God’s] grace, we can inherit the hope for eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7,8 CEB).

What if we recognized that the hope of Advent is not a small flickering candle, but a supernova of extravagant love that reverberates through our atoms with its unshakable confidence that we have always been loved as we are? That *when* God appeared, kindness and love were “poured out generously through Jesus Christ our savior!” Our personal transformation and the transformation of our communities all depend on this truth that is deeper than any separation or injustice that we have experienced.

Prayer: *God of generosity and extravagance, inspire our imaginations for a glimpse of your love for us, our communities, and creation. Empower us to center this truth in our lives as we celebrate the ways that we are being transformed in the grace and spirit of Christ.*



Michael Shepherd is the Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies and Political Science at Hope International University and an elder at First Christian Church, Fullerton. He is a part of the Disciples Seminary Foundation family through participating in webinars and interacting with social media.

Isaiah 35

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and support the unsteady knees.

4 Say to those who are panicking:
“Be strong! Don’t fear...
God will come to save you.”

All of us, at some point in our lives, feel dried out, dried up. We have wandered in the wilderness and wasteland. The people for whom these words were written were facing the absolute upheaval of their whole lives. The prophet’s words would have assured them that whatever might come, God would not abandon them. This hope in God’s promises is a source of strength for those weakened by fear and overcome with anxiety.

Advent is a time of waiting. Not of anxious waiting but intentional waiting. Waiting for what *will* happen. If you read all of Isaiah 35, you’ll notice that the prophet doesn’t use the word *might*, he uses the word *will*. He has absolute confidence in the midst of dryness, and weakness, and panic, that God will find a way when there seems to be no way. The wilderness will rejoice. The burning sand will become a pool. The lame will leap like a deer. And thanks be to God, a highway, a Holy Way, will appear and no one will get lost!

In this season, we await the incarnation of God’s loving faithfulness, Jesus the Christ, believing that he *will* come. Even though, right now, the sand may be burning our feet, and the spring may appear to be dry. He will restore, refresh, and enliven our souls. Love will find a way. Be strong, don’t fear. God is on the way!

Prayer: *God, give us confidence in our faith so that we may wait knowing that you are coming. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Kara Markell is DSF's Director of Pastoral Formation in Seattle.

Psalm 146, verses 3-4, the two verses before this passage, remind us that we live in a world that is always changing, a mortal world where people fail us and where trust is hard to secure. This earth we live on is breath and dust, vanishing and insubstantial. These conditions challenge and teach us. We want control. We want to know what to expect. We want to plan and to invest in things that are solid and unmoving. But everything we see can pass away.

Anxiety turns to joy when we turn from the mortal to the divine. Uncertainty melts away when we submit ourselves to the God of absolutes—the God “who keeps faith forever.” “Forever” is God’s soothing comfort. The God who was there at the earth’s beginning and at our beginning will be with us through the middle and to the end. *Forever*. God is not of this breath-and-dust world but *over* it. God made everything we see, from the dimmest stars in the farthest galaxy to the smallest microorganisms in the deepest, sunless oceans. While these creations pass away, our creator never fails.

God does not forget his creations and never gives up on us. When we are abused, God restores us to wholeness. When we are hungry, God feeds us with food both spiritual and physical. When we are isolated, locked up, or marginalized, God works the locks that release us to freedom. When we are beaten down, abandoned, estranged, and wandering, God finds us, and makes a way for justice.

God always will. *Forever*.

Prayer: *God, help us to be ever more aware of your eternal presence. When we fear, when we flag, and when we flourish—at all these times remind us that you are forever.*



Julie Davis is a third-year M.Div. student at Claremont School of Theology studying Interfaith Chaplaincy. She is a member and sometime-preacher at the Little White Chapel in Burbank, California. Julia shifted to ministry work after 17 years as a college and high school English teacher.

Some things haven't changed much in the last few thousand years. There have always been those who will take what they can and happily impoverish others. The story of the rich man teaches us that greedily piling up stuff for ourselves without regard for other people's needs will leave us in torment. But it also illustrates that those who suffer will be comforted.

Oppression flies in the face of the universe. Jesus said the poor would always be with us, and, hence, we will always have oppression because poverty is the direct result of oppression. But oppressions always fail. God calls us to remember that tyranny is temporary, and to keep our mind on what endures. Then we will stand together in the unfailing power of love. Then we will not be divided by oppressive systems and institution. Then we will not succumb to the deceitfulness of scarcity. Will we be found with our hands at one another's throats and our mouths filled with hate when this night is over? Or will we be found helping one another endure when the Judge opens the door to our liberation? Let love and patience be the rule that keeps us through the long dark night.

It is crucial now more than ever that we pray for one another and forgive one another. And, when one of us allows fear or hate or despair to invade their heart, we must remember to love and not forsake them as we would want to be loved and not forsaken. The Lord is indeed full of compassion and mercy. As we stand firm and wait patiently for God's refreshing and justice, we can rest assured that God will not fail.

Prayer: *Gracious Mother/Father, who is ever faithful and just, help us to wait patiently for Your coming into this moment to be manifest in justice and peace, and make our hearts truly generous and compassionate as we continue to trust in You. Amen.*



Godfree McIntyre is a house church pastor, parent, DSF student at CST, and chaplain resident living in Sacramento, CA.

As I pen down this Advent reflection, I am not able to pause the incessant humming of “Hold on Just A Little Longer,” a most captivating classical Spiritual I have recently fallen for. The possibility of “everything” turning out alright after “just a little while longer” is as exciting as it is elusive. Waiting is not easy. Particularly, when circumstances necessitate that we wait for way longer than anticipated; the suspense and tension that attend the intervening period can become unbearably disorienting. And I should know this first hand, as an international student currently awaiting the final adjudication of a major immigration issue by the USCIS. The waiting can get inestimably unnerving! And so the greatest challenge becomes how best to steward the present point in the process (in my case, finding the motivation to stay focused in my studies) to the end that our prolonged wait does not cripple us into inaction, further jeopardizing our potential to live fruitfully, now and at the time our hopes and patience are vindicated. Relating this to our text, I could as well title it “The Blessedness of Contradictions!” John the Baptist had been waiting patiently for “the promised One.” Evidently, his personal circumstances had brought him to the edge, so much so that he categorically expressed his desire to get the fact/s clear once and for all: Was Jesus “The One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (v.4 NRSV). Jesus’ swift response was greatly illuminating, albeit somewhat insensitive (and dodgy?); to paraphrase, it went something like this: It is not really about *who* but *what* is being accomplished—it’s all about the *mission* rather than the *missionary*! And even if it were to be about the latter, Jesus turned the spotlight on the inquirer—John—whom he identified as the greatest, “among those born of women” (v.11). Talk of the doctor waiting—oblivious of their potential—for a cure! Questions to ponder: What are some of the ways and/or areas in which we may need to focus our attention more on the innate resources so richly deposited in our lives: Can we diligently summon them for the task at hand, even as we continue to patiently and painstakingly await those momentous manifestations of divine favor and glory?

Prayer: *All wise and most compassionate Orchestrator of Life; O that you would open our eyes to see the rich reservoir of boundless blessing that we are, and in seeing, to ACT accordingly.*



Rev. Gideon M. Mbui is a first-year Ph.D. (Theology and Ethics) student at the GTU. He is also a recording artist/singer-musician and the Founding Director of Kilele Africa Ministry.

Tina Turner brought the phrase “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” into our collective vernacular back in 1984. But in today’s scripture, we read the Magnificat, where Mary, the mother of Jesus, found the answer to that question.

Imagine being a 14-year-old unmarried girl and having a vision from an angel telling you that you have been chosen to bear God’s child. Wait, what? Who’s going to believe this? Her fiancé was going to break their engagement. How was she going to manage without the protection of a husband and family? Mary had to be filled with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Then came the trip to her cousin Elizabeth’s house, her cousin who was also pregnant with an unlikely child. No one truly believed that either could or should be pregnant, yet here they were both pregnant.

What’s love got to do with it? For the first time since learning that she was pregnant, Mary experiences understanding. Elizabeth’s baby is even excited about Mary’s pregnancy. And in that moment, when Mary is embraced, loved and seen, her uncertainty is lifted. And like a scene from a Broadway musical, Mary breaks out in song, declaring, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord!” There in that moment, Mary embraces who she is, no more uncertainty, no more anxiety. That’s what love has to do with it.

What’s love got to do with it? Love has everything to do with it! In this season of Advent, our season of waiting, may we all remember that at times we are Mary, in need of love and understanding and at other times we are Elizabeth, in a place to give love and understanding.

Prayer: *Lord, help us to be both Mary and Elizabeth, receiving love from others when we are in need and passing that same love to those around us. Always mindful that true love comes from You and that as we share that love, we also share You with others. Amen and Amen.*

View/listen to DC's response to this text here – <https://youtu.be/4O8ejgQYr60>



DC Sills is a graduating senior at Iliff School of Theology, where she will receive her M.Div. and is working towards ordination in the Great River Region of the Disciples of Christ. DC leads several alternative worship services that include: Thirsty Thursday-Worship + Beer + Community and Eat, Pray, Slay-Gospel Drag Brunch-Gospel, with a side of sparkle & sass + Brunch + Community. DC and her wife are active members of First Christian Church-Alexandria/Pineville.

In the midst of carnage and devastation, corrupt individuals and corrupt systems, dead bodies piling up, destroyed houses all around the block, the smell of death and destruction, and terror so real it was felt in the bodies of the people, God sends a word of hope and promise through the prophet Jeremiah. “The days are coming when I will fulfill the promise I spoke long ago...” God tells Jeremiah to remind the people of God’s former promise. In the midst of destruction and corruption, devastation and terror, God is saying, “remember what I told your ancestors about freedom and restoration; remember what I told them about justice on earth and a perfect relationship with ME...soon that will be your reality.” Yahweh, God of covenant, reminds the oppressed that restoration of relationship and fortunes would come. Restoration would not just appear, but God would raise up leaders to do the work of justice. The community would know when the leaders were raised up because the community would start to look differently. People who used to hide due to the terror would be out in the open. There would be no more bodies piled up on the streets. Wealth would be distributed in a way in which no one lacked what they needed. The smell of death would be replaced with the fragrance of life. The name of the community would be the same name as God, displaying the same characteristics, “God our Righteousness.” Some of us are still looking at the injustice in our communities, families, country, organizations, and the world, wondering when God will answer. You are one of the leaders God is calling to live in righteousness and to work toward justice. Those of us who name God as our God and Jesus as our Savior, are called to be righteous and to do the work of justice. Let us renew our commitment this day.

Prayer: *Righteous God, teach us to do your righteous will and make us communities of justice. Amen.*



Rev. Larry J. Morris III is a servant of Jesus Christ, and a graduate of DSF and CST.

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

-Luke 1:68-79

God does not forget God's promises to God's people! God has redeemed Israel repeatedly from their oppressors. God again promised to redeem God's people through Jesus. Zechariah's son, John, will go before Jesus to prepare the way for him, to prepare the people for Jesus' ministry, and to preach, "Repent the kin-dom of God is at hand." God again will redeem God's people from powers that oppress them.

Friends, we are God's people. God will redeem us from the powers and people who oppress us. God will send us a Jesus in our life to free us, to redeem us.

Prayer: *Dear God, you always remind us that our prayers and our cries are not left unanswered. You remind us that you will send Jesus in our lives to liberate us from everything that oppresses us. Keep us protected as we patiently wait for your answer. Amen.*



Eula Nicola Pagdilao is a third-Year M.Div. student at CST.

☞ Thursday, December 19, 2019 ☞
Isaiah 7:10-16

"Therefore the Lord alone shall give you a sign; LOOK, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall call his name IMMANUEL." - Isaiah 7:14

A sign is a necessity for all who seek to successfully navigate the simplicity and complexity of life. It provides important information for global movement. It is confirmation of a directional promise. A sign is a visible representation, an app, a breadcrumb trail, a freeway of multiple lanes leading to greater knowledge of the fulfillment of a call to pay close attention to activity where people live. It is a product of power, which leads the observer to a choice of either a political solution to a crisis or a faith-based solution to a crisis. The prophet Isaiah shows us a sign in a singular NAME: Immanuel. The NAME Immanuel is a sign of authority. It is a signal of imminent deliverance, which is given whether there is an ask or a refusal to ask. It is a gift, wrapped in trust and held together by strings of hope. The NAME Immanuel connects people of multiple political affiliations and faith traditions to a young woman who gave birth to a child named Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The NAME Immanuel guides us to perpetual peace, which establishes an eternal foundation of justice with righteousness. The NAME Immanuel charts a course from punishment of boasting and high-minded pride to perceiving the power, love, and forgiveness of the Sovereign Creator. The NAME Immanuel envisions a branch from a common ancestor upon whom will rest the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and respect for the Holy One in whose image mortals are wonderfully made. The NAME Immanuel brings us through 42 generations to the Holy Spirit conceived birth of JESUS, who was born to save his people. Jesus Christ is the sign of deliverance, a reminder of God's faithfulness to all of humanity. JESUS embodies the NAME Emmanuel meaning "GOD IS WITH US." JESUS, born to make mortals aware of that comfort, help and healing always appears in time for a good reversal of fortunes because of Almighty God's grace, thanksgiving and praise will flow gratefully from heartfelt voices proclaiming the greatness of the Savior who has come to restore order in creation.

Prayer: *Thank you God for Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.*



Rev. Clarence L. Johnson is a 4th generation ordained minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the CC(DOC) in the U.S. and Canada. Father of three and grandfather of seven. A graduate of Tougaloo College, Christian Theological Seminary, and currently a candidate of the D. Min. degree at the University of Redlands Graduate School of Theology (GST), home of San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, CA; and Senior Minister-Pastor, Mills Grove Christian Church (DOC) in Oakland, CA.

I distinctly remember laying there. As I began to realize what transpired, I found I had been blindsided by a Ford 250 while riding my motorcycle down the freeway on a sunny day in southern California. I began to yell in excruciating pain as I noticed I had severely broken my right leg. All I could do in that moment was cry out to God. Lord, have mercy on me. It is a scary moment when we understand that life is truly out of our hands. Oddly, it is in the place of poverty where our spiritual life begins (Matthew 5:3). While tragedy is something that none of us wish upon ourselves or others, it is something that offers us profound spiritual lessons if we are attentive. In this Hebrew scripture, Israel is suffering from oppression, division, and captivity and is learning to find their liberation in G-d alone. They model for us the posture of dependence or “begging.” For it is in the paradoxical realization of our limitations, we see that our finitude is not a curse, but a window of opportunity inviting us to salvation and redemption. We are currently facing many seemingly insurmountable injustices in our world: racism, sexism, classism, militarism, ableism, homophobia, ecological devastation, and the sins of pride, greed, and avoidance abound. These problems arise from an unwillingness to admit our need personally and collectively. We rush to seek control rather than assume the posture of vulnerability and humility. This passage calls us to a faith that lays down pride and instead offers our lives fully to the purposes of the divine. Faith means we will not know how or when things will turn around, yet a blessed assurance that our humble offering will not be wasted. If we do, the One who commands heavenly forces of justice, righteousness, and peace will surely save us and make all things right. Take some time today and practice faith by offering your life, your community, and even your enemies to divine care. Surrender your thoughts, desires, and expectations. Receive the mysterious peace of knowing you are a finite being who is yet infinitely cared for.

Prayer: *Divine creator and sustainer of life, we are in need for deliverance from the tragedies we face. We cry out for healing. Mend the division in our hearts, minds, and communities. We beg for your mercy to create in us clean hearts and pure hands that trust in you for joy and strength. Grant us the peace, comfort, and wisdom of your Spirit as we commit to holding the world in nonviolent love and compassion.*



Aizaiah Yong is a Christian minister, scholar, and international speaker who is passionate about works of peace, justice, and intercultural community. Aizaiah has experience serving in a variety of leadership roles within non-profit, educational, and religious institutions and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Practical Theology at Claremont School of Theology.

Romans 1:1-7 seems like an odd choice for Advent. We want happiness and joy at Christmastime, to put away thoughts of discord and division, to attend that Christmas party! Romans 1:1-7. Seven verses, that small beginning? What does that have to do with Christmas?

The apostle Paul writes to the Roman church as they experience discord. Jews and Gentile Christians within the church are unhappy. The Jews worry that their religious identity as God's chosen is being taken away, and the new Christians are sometimes unaware of Jewish scripture. Paul prepares to visit and, having never visited the Roman church before, writes his own introduction, tightly packed with credentials and theology. "Servant" (or "slave") is used as a self-description by Paul, in being submissive to Christ's will. Paul also states that he has been called to be an apostle by Christ himself.

Paul lifts up the Jewish heritage of the church, along with the promises of the future gospel made through the prophets in the Old Testament. God's Son is a descendant of David in human flesh and declared as the Son of God at the resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds the Roman church that they are also called to be saints in that they belong to Jesus Christ. Paul closes this part of the letter with a twist on the usual salutation: Instead of using the words "joy" and "prosperity" as was common in Greek/Roman salutations, the words "Grace" and "Peace" (shalom) are inserted: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Seven verses, small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, or stuff into the toe of your Christmas stocking. As you greet the baby Jesus, remember that you are one of his saints. The gift of Christmas remains year-round as we work toward peace and reconciliation in a troubled world.

Prayer: *Bringer of healing, help us to remember that we are the saints called to address the needs of those around us. Let hearts and minds be healed by your presence that works through us, that celebrates new life and connections. Amen.*



Sandy Roberts is a third-year seminarian at Claremont School of Theology, working toward her M.Div. in the hybrid program. She currently serves as the Director of Children's Education at Pacific Beach Christian Church in San Diego, CA.

Throughout Latin America, the *Posadas* are nightly processions that reenact Mary and Joseph’s search for lodging. Walking from home to home, families are led by children dressed as the Holy Family. At each door, they sing a song asking for “posada,” or lodging:

Holy Family: *In the name of the heavens / I beg you for lodging / Because my beloved wife / Can no longer bear walking.*

Those outside the home sing asking for refuge; those inside sing in response as callous innkeepers:

Joseph: *I am a carpenter / Whose name is Joseph* **Inn Keeper:** *I don’t really care what your name is / I’m going to sleep / As I already told you / There’s no room here for you...*

The *Posadas* help me hear the Christmas story in the context of today’s migration crisis. The journey and birth we celebrate this Christmas is a very unlikely one. It begins in the troubling circumstances of a young woman becoming pregnant while engaged to someone who is not the father of her child. The Holy Spirit helps Joseph to understand “the story behind the story.” How do we understand what is happening at our border, in our communities, around the world that is forcing thousands to migrate? Do we understand the circumstances that are driving people into situation and choices that would in any other circumstance raise eyebrows? Do we understand the story behind the story?

Because Joseph listened, he was able to understand that “what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Eventually an innkeeper saw beyond the liabilities and the lack of room and housed a homeless couple on a night when their firstborn child was born.

Inn Keeper: *You are Joseph / Your wife is Mary / Come in travelers! / I now see who you truly are.* **Joseph:** *May God bless you / For our kindness / And may heaven overwhelm you / With joy!*

Prayer: *Gracious God, this season as thousands around the world seek welcome, may we seek to see your fullness in the face of a refugee family and be transformed by the power of that recognition. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. David Vasquez-Levy is the President of Pacific School of Religion.

This scripture says to me that we all have different beliefs and views about God but what is important is that we "accept one another, as Christ accepted you." I believe that this is the heart of what it means to be a member of the Disciples of Christ. The individual beliefs and disagreements are all acceptable if they do not prevent anyone from joining our community and sitting around the fellowship table. It is not important what your particular views are on religion but what is important is that we come together across our differences to form a community that celebrates Jesus and his ministry.

There is nothing more powerful about being a Disciple than the image of everyone being welcomed around the communion table. We come together as community, no matter where we are from or who we choose to love because that is what Jesus taught his disciples to do. We are no longer "Jew or Gentile" but members of the body of Christ that all have something to contribute to further the vision of creating the Kingdom of God. We as Disciples of Christ have an obligation to allow God to work through us to help create the conditions for this just community.

Being at Claremont School of Theology has given me renewed insight and the tools to work in the world to help make this vision a reality. The great professors at CST along with my amazing classmates give me hope that there are many voices shouting out for justice and reconciliation. I plan on being a part of this struggle to create the Kingdom of God. Thank you for your continued support of DSF to make this dream a reality.

Prayer: *Please allow each of us to be an instrument of God in order to create the Kingdom of God in our corner of the world. There is too much suffering in this world for us to not take actions as Disciples of Christ.*



Ryan Cullumber is an M.Div. student at CST and currently lives with his wife, Sadie, and their two daughters, Willow and Indigo, in Costa Mesa, CA. They attend Harbor Christian Church in Newport Beach where they work in ministries to help alleviate the suffering of homelessness and racial divisions.

Psalm 96 overflows with anticipation and expectation. As well it should; it anticipates the arrival and life of a world-changer. Resounding through the text are the hopes of the world, eagerly awaiting a righteous Lord who will make everyone tremble with awe.

It's an awful lot, isn't it?

We remember that he came to us as an infant, the smallest and meekest of us, without cognizance of the weight he would carry. He didn't know, but we do. And we placed onto a baby all the heaviness of our expectations and hopes. What a burden they can be.

But we know that that child can, did, and continues to change the world through his presence and in everyone who invested in him with their own hopes and expectations. They are now our hopes and expectations, and we feel them on our own shoulders and in our own hearts, calling us to be world-changers in reflection of the world-changer who came before. We await his coming now.

We cannot remember this anticipation without remembering its fulfillment. That tiny baby was able to carry the burden of our hopes and expectations, and so, I imagine, can we. We remember each year, and we feel once again the taking-on of the burdens of changing the world, of being fully present in it, and living into the very ideals we anticipate. How renewing, to shift weight and stance until we are ready, waiting, and eager to accept the comforting heaviness of moving with God in the world. Let us sing, indeed.

Prayer: *O welcome God, we sing to you an everlasting song. We eagerly await you in this full moment of anticipation, this pregnant pause that comes before you move through us and with us in the world once more. Thank you for the gift of expectation, for the opportunity to share and carry within us the hopes of the world ready for change. With all our hearts we welcome you, Amen.*



Teresa Crist is a doctoral student in the DU/Iliff Joint Doctoral Program studying Religion and Social Change. She is currently writing her dissertation, a qualitative work exploring the decolonization of Interfaith Interaction in America.

Luke’s telling of the Nativity juxtaposes competing notions of power, worldly and divine. In the end, the story intends to disturb our ideas concerning what real power is. The story opens with worldly power, naming Augustus and Quirinius—two embodiments of worldly power. Then, these A-list celebrities are countered, rather abruptly, by a lowly carpenter (Joseph) and his unwed fiancé in labor (Mary). Shortly thereafter, the newborn is placed not in royal chambers lined with mahogany, but in a manger constructed of scrap lumber.

Herein lies the revealing irony of Christmas. The messiah is not born into a Roman or Syrian palace, nor is he dressed in royal vestiture. Instead, his throne is a Bethlehem manger; his royal attire, swaddling blankets. And yet, this vulnerable child, born into the world’s poverty, has a power that outlasts imperial dynasties, that is, the power *to save*: “to you is born this day...a Savior” (v. 11). Christmas (indeed, the whole gospel) is ultimately a usurping reversal of power: exploiters are stripped of their ultimacy; and the exploited become God’s ultimate concern.

The story ends with an angelic choir. For every revolution comes with its anthem and protest chant: “Glory to God in the highest” (v. 14). And the angels, by the way, sing not to palatial audiences but to lowly shepherds. Sure, Augustus can summon armies, but only Christ can orchestrate the angels’ praise.

How do we respond to Christmas? We begin by joining the angels, “Glory to God in the highest!” Then, we can sing the second line of the angels’ song with our hands and feet, “and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” (v. 14) Christmas calls us to proclaim peace on earth *first* among “the wretched of the earth” (F. Fanon)—poor carpenters, pregnant teens, and third-shift shepherds. And we are to struggle toward peace until that day when all of creation is transformed into a beautiful manger full of fragile yet absolute life.

Prayer: *God, you are our salvation. Fill us with your Spirit that we might become mangers containing within us the Promise of peace for the wretched of the earth. In Christ’s Name, Amen.*



Rev. Dr. José F. Morales Jr. is the Acting President and Director of Pastoral Formation at Disciples Seminary Foundation in Claremont, CA. He completed his Ph.D. in Comparative Theology at Claremont School of Theology (CST) and has been named Assistant Professor of Historical and Comparative Theology at CST.