

CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 25<sup>TH</sup>

JOHN 1:1-14

I heard a sermon series once that imagines what Christmas would be like at the houses of each of the four gospel writers. We got to “John’s house” on Christmas Eve, and no one was quite sure how this sermon was going to go. John does not give any concrete account of Jesus’s birth. There are no shepherds in the hills, no stars, no angels, no manger – there is only the Word and the Light. John does not give us a story of Christ’s birth, instead he gives us a poem. Jesus is the light of all people. The thing about light is that without the darkness, we can’t recognize it. There is no light without the contrast of the dark, you can’t see the stars under a streetlamp. That Christmas Eve, John’s house was deep in the woods, on one of those long driveways that winds until you can’t see the road anymore and all that’s left is the faint glow from the windows. John’s decorations are just that light – and it is beautiful and warm and shines bright in the night. John doesn’t tell us the Christmas story because that story doesn’t sum up what Christmas means. Prose cannot explain Christ’s glory, so John doesn’t use it. His poem reminds us of not only the beauty and the hope of Jesus’s birth and God’s decision to enter the world, but also the importance of the state of the world he entered. It was dark. It is easy for us now to pretend that things are okay, to try and dispel the darkness by creating our own light, but that is not the point of this story. The true light, the light of all people, shines brightest in the dark, and it is glorious. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

*As we move into this Christmas season, let us try to stop avoiding the dark and trust that the Light is enough to reach even the darkest parts of our world.*

REESE TORSTRICK '22

*Rejoice, Rejoice*

*Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!*

**Merry Christmas, PCM+ Family!**

December 1-25

2019



## An Advent Devotional



**DUKE PCM+**

(+) means open to all  
Presbyterian Church (USA),  
United Church of Christ,  
and you!



By Members and Friends of Duke University Presbyterian Campus  
Ministry

## ISAIAH 2:1-5

It's hard to slow down and stop preparing for life's challenges.

Every day, after lunch, I leave the chapel basement, push open the heavy oak chapel doors, and mentally arm myself for the day at Duke. Checklists flash through my mind as I think about the things I should've said, the things I *didn't* do, the things I *need* to do...

And then the day goes on, with my mental lists keeping me sharp and (mostly) on top of things. I walk from class to class, talking to one friend and then another, studying first for biology and then chemistry, and all of the sudden the day ends. As I fall asleep I say prayers for my friends and for my sister and for my mom and for whatever else is going on and then I wake up drag my feet out of bed and prepare to fight through another day.

It's hectic.

I spend most of my time arming myself to fight through all of the challenges that life brings. But, in doing so, I often fail to take a step back, slow down, and enjoy all of the beautiful things God placed in this world.

One such beauty is this quote that I see as I exit those heavy wooden doors:

They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Advent is a time for reflection, rejoicing, and reconciliation. A time to set aside our mental weapons and use our minds to build community. A time to open our hearts and embrace things that make life wonderful and that bring people together.

*Isn't that what it means to walk into the light of the Lord?*

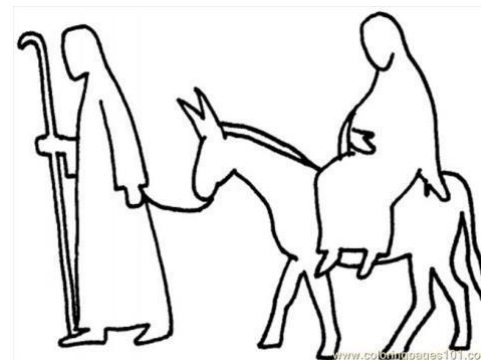
**JOHN BOOM '22**

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

## LUKE 2:8-20

Advent season is a time of waiting for the best news – the birth of Jesus. However, sometimes the best news leaves us terrified. Think about a time when something so great happened, you knew your life would be changed forever. You were probably scared of what that meant for the future, but you did it anyway. I think a moment like this is exactly what the shepherds experienced. They were just going about their normal, mundane routines of watching their sheep and suddenly they see an angel of the Lord. Imagine this blinding radiance of light paired with a booming voice telling these lowly shepherds that their life would never be the same because the Messiah, the Lord has been born. Then this message is followed by a choir of angels singing about how great God is. Can you really blame them for being terrified? In that moment, they could have done anything: run away, hide, or just continued to tend to their flocks, but they didn't. They were terrified, but they went to see what had happened anyway. When they arrived they were met by Mary and Joseph – two new parents who just gave birth to the son of God in a stable. Now, they have this group of strange men coming to see their son. They must have been confused, scared, and overwhelmed. They could have turned them away and prevented them from seeing Jesus, but, Mary, invited these men into the stable and listened to their story anyway. In fact, she listened so intently that she pondered their words and treasured them in her heart. Because the shepherds had the courage to go despite their fears, and Mary invited them to witness the miracle that had just occurred, despite her reservations, they both left that night changed forever and praising God.

*I challenge you this advent season to do it anyway, despite your fears. Sometimes the best news leaves us terrified, but if we accept it anyway, I believe God's glory will shine through and leave us changed forever.*



**DANIELLE LODGE '20**

Advent 2019

## GALATIANS 3:6-14

When I first read this verse, I was puzzled as to how I was going to interpret it into an advent devotional because it mentions nothing about Christ's birth. Then I was reminded that when translated, "advent" means "to come." The season of advent is centered around the coming of Christ to earth to be incarnated as a man. I have the tendency to become so enraptured with the ritual and joy of Christmas that I forget why Christmas even exists: because God's plan to save humanity finally became real. That plan ends in the death and resurrection of Christ, and with that death is also the death of the curse of the law. Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." When Christ died, he not only took on the curse, he *became* the curse and therefore we as Christians are freed from the curse. Earlier in the verse Paul explains that Abraham was righteous because he "believed God," and it was through that faith alone that he was blessed. Paul says, "The law is not based on faith" but that faith is based on the law. The spiritual order of operations, so to speak, makes it so that faith is primordial and that if the faith is in place a following of the law will follow, not the other way around. Christ died so that human relationship with God is not categorized by a contrite following of the law, making Him the perfect intercessor. As Christmas Day nears, please indulge yourselves with cookies and cocoa and enjoy whichever traditions you hold dear, but also remember the reason for Christmas. The birth of Christ is the first step in the plan to save humanity from the curse of sin, so that we may be blessed with the promise of Abraham and "so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

Please join in prayer:

*Merciful God,  
We come to you in thanksgiving for the gift of your son and the freedom from the curse of sin.  
During this Christmas season, we ask that you help us remember the salvation you won for us through the death of your son and of the hope that awaits in the resurrection. Please enter our hearts this Christmas and grant us peace in knowing that we do not have to earn your love because it is, and always has been, ours.  
In Christ's name we pray,  
Amen.*

**HOPE MUTTER, '23**

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

## GENESIS 8:1-19

It's so easy to get caught up in the wild story of Noah with the ark and all of the animals and the massive flood that you might miss the opening three words of chapter eight: "But God remembered." In the midst of the action, we can't forget that in the center of the story is God. And God doesn't forget God's beloved creation. Yes, the flood was an act of God's judgement on the world, but God also remembers the promise of protection and mercy. And God doesn't just *remember* the people, God thinks of creation and then *acts* accordingly. In the verse after "God remembers," we see that God moves through the world and restores it. No doubt, there were times that Noah felt forgotten by God and wondered if God still cared about him. There may have been moments when Noah wondered if he would be saved by God or if the world would ever be brought back to life. But even if Noah didn't believe in God's promises, we can see that God never forgets or fails to act on a promise.

The same is true of God today. Even here at Duke University, even in moments when we feel discouraged or insignificant, God remembers us. God acts on our behalf. And God is for us. May this bring us hope as we wait to celebrate the ultimate way in which God remembered and acted for creation---in the life of Jesus Christ.

*Let's pray: God of all creation, We pray that in this moment, you might remember us and move in our lives so that we might grow in faith and love for you and one another. Amen.*



**REV. LIBBY BOEHNE  
CAMPUS MINISTER**



God gave us everything  
 God gave us the plants that we eat  
 God gave us the animals that we tend  
 God gave us the Covenant

In response nothing is asked of us  
 We are only to not harm each other

Now we attack the planet  
 We destroy the animals that God gave us  
 We eliminate species by burning down their homes  
 We scar the earth with mining  
 We poison our oceans  
 We desecrate what was once sacred  
     what was once given

Truly all living things should fear and dread us

*We are the flood  
 Only we can stop ourselves*



In the context of today's passage, Syria has joined forces with Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel, and these two kingdoms are threatening to conquer Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. From a worldly perspective, Judah—a weak and small territory—cannot compare to the combined might of these two nations. And thus, Ahaz, the king of Judah, is totally overcome with fear. However, God has promised Ahaz that God will not allow these strong nations to conquer Judah.

In our passage today, God gives Ahaz a sign in order that Ahaz might trust in this divine promise. The sign is a virgin who shall bear a son, named Immanuel, or "God with us." God's sign that God is with Ahaz and Judah is a baby. If I were Ahaz, I would not necessarily consider this sign a confidence booster. Babies are fragile, small, and utterly dependent. So how is a baby supposed to give me hope that two powerful nations will not crush my seemingly puny one? Perhaps, God could have offered an indestructible being or a mighty weapon as a more convincing sign? Unable to trust in God's strength, Ahaz ends up rejecting God's promise and appealing to a different foreign nation for help.

Several centuries later, a similar situation occurs. In the midst of a small town in Galilee, another virgin births a baby, named Jesus. This time, the baby is not only the sign, but the actual embodiment of God's presence with us. I wonder if the people of that time struggled to believe that God's saving work could occur through this small-town baby. And yet, it is through this baby, that God dwells amongst the world, that God redeems the world, that God saves. What seemed small and ordinary in the eyes of humans is actually Immanuel—God with us.

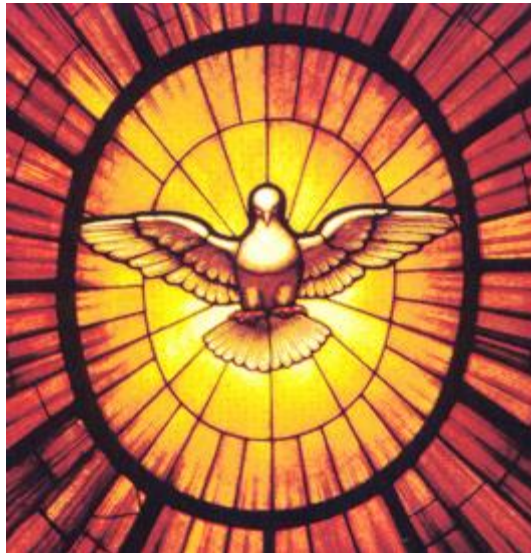
*During this advent season, let us open our eyes and our hearts to the signs that God is with us. God will be with us in a hug from a friend, a cozy blanket, or a meal shared with loved ones. Whatever it may be, I pray that we would consider nothing too small for God to enter in and make God's unending love and saving work known to us.*

## JOHN 3:31-35

Our time is limited. Every day we have new demands upon our attention which threaten to limit us from communion with our family, friends, and God. It becomes too easy during the holiday season to focus on finals or end-of-year metrics while neglecting our relationships. But physical gifts and intangible numbers are never enough to satisfy our deep yearning for spiritual connection. As we rush about completing our last-minute Christmas shopping lists, John reminds us that “God gives the Spirit without limit” (3: 34). Not just on Christmas, or our birthday, or when it is convenient for us, but every day, God gifts us with an animating Spirit which empowers us to think outside of our earthly responsibilities and go beyond our human capacity for grace and love. As we wait in line behind the fifth indecisive customer that day or anxiously await the results of our last final, let us remember that we share the gift of the Spirit with every difficult customer and exam writer. It is a gift to be shared, impossible to repay.

Through the grace of a limitless Spirit, we have the power to re-center our spiritual connections this Advent season, remembering that our shopping lists are not the most important gifts we can share with others. The gift of the Christ’s birth is fast approaching.

*Are you ready to share it?*



**KATE WATKINS, '19**

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

## MATTHEW 24:23-27

Perhaps it is the mini-class on rappers and religion I took a couple of winters ago at Montreat, or my overuse of the “Top Hits” album on Spotify this semester, but this passage from Matthew cannot stop reminding me of the chart-topping song “Jesus in LA” released by Alec Benjamin this year. Even though the artist claims the song is nonreligious, the lyrics about a young man seeking inner-peace through stardom in Los Angeles and falling into a lifestyle that leaves him feeling empty closely relates to the messages from Matthew 24.

Many of us tend to occasionally be distracted by our own substitute for stardom in Los Angeles. We often believe that certain professional and social opportunities are the path to joy and comfort. In a rush to create the right “networks”, we focus on our relationships with other mentors place of our relationship with God. Whether it be a dream job in the perfect city, a certain number of likes on social media, or getting academic honors for the semester, we seek fulfillment from other sources than our connection to God.

Sometimes, we finish these things feeling great, but other times, as expressed in this song, lead to emptiness and isolation. Matthew 24 warns against these false messages from society, the ones that tell us that it is not enough to be a child of God, and says that they should not be trusted and can be deceptive.

The Holidays are a time where more than ever we can be fed messages from “false prophets”. The hustle and bustle creates a lot of pressures for the right gifts, perfect family meals, and post-worthy family photos. However, after all of the craziness, extra-time to ourselves encourages both rest and self-reflection. Often these are calming moments, but at times, thinking back on our actions can leave us feeling conflicted and in need of perspective.

One of the most powerful verses in Matthew 24:23-27 claims, “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man”. While at first glance, this might suggest that God’s signs are so clear that they are hard to miss, a daunting thought for any of us who have ever felt a bit lost in our faith. I think a closer look highlights that even if our lifestyle and current perspective may be feel distant and far away from our ideals, God can still guide us towards the best path.

*As with every Christmas season, diversions from our faith will be rampant, but I think that Matthew 24 challenges us to seek a fulfilling relationship with God even in times when societal pressures tell us we must do otherwise.*

**SARA COTSAKIS '20**

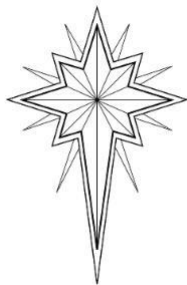
Advent 2019

## Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

This semester we have been reminded that not every leader will “judge [their] people with righteousness, and [their] poor with justice.” We have been bombarded with messages about injustices all over the United States, China, Bolivia, Sudan, Chile, Syria, Venezuela, and so many other countries. I myself have found myself trapped in the midst of one of the largest historical protests in Santiago, Chile, a city now paralyzed by the violence of a few in reaction to the intolerable systemic injustices the Chilean government has condoned for far too long.

So our world is far from perfect. And what can we say from this? We can recognize the humble truth that humankind, and each one of us, is broken without God. None of us, left to our own devices, can lead any nation or group of people in full righteousness. The one good thing we can count on is that our God DOES know how to solve all our injustices, and is coming to our rescue, very, very soon! We can take this time to acknowledge our powerlessness before God and to give Them/Her/Him our trust and pray for guidance from the only one capable of ending all oppression.

*This Advent I hope we can challenge ourselves to actively inform ourselves and pray for those all around the world who are facing injustice at the hands of other children of God, and for God to bring them prosperity and righteousness. Because the Christmas season is not only about celebration, but is a period of waiting that reminds us that we are lost without our God—that we must wait for the arrival of our Savior to heal all things.*



## 2 SAMUEL 7:18-22

David's Prayer of Thanksgiving is a classic Old Testament passage in that it is daunting in scope yet intensely relatable. David, a mighty king who wants neither wealth nor power, is reduced to the confused humility we all possess when basking in the glory of God. Despite benefiting firsthand from God's love, David has difficulty concealing his amazement at his Lord's awesome power. “You have given me a kingdom!” David cries out. “You have made me mighty and important, but I am just a taste of your glory.” David, truly the biggest of men, is but a “small thing” in the eyes of God. And while the at times self-congratulatory praises of an ancient king hold little resemblance to our daily lives, our trials and tribulations, our small victories and hard-fought accomplishments, this Prayer of Thanksgiving holds wisdom valuable to each and every one of us.

David's actually reacting to something very specific here. In the previous verse, God entered into a covenant with the King of Israel, promising David that he and his descendants would from that day forth bask forever in God's love. David's lineage would last forever as a testament to God's eternal love for him. Through Jesus Christ, God's limitless love is extended to each and every one of us, and therein lies the beauty of David's Thanksgiving. No matter our mistakes, no matter how great or terrible our lives have been, God loves us. God protects us--as he always has and always will. David's Prayer of Thanksgiving is not just an adulation of prestige and good fortune, but a recognition of our unconditional covenant with God.

Pray:

*Oh Lord, thank you. Thank you for creating us and this beautiful world we live in. Thank you for your compassion, for sticking by your children when we are lost and have sinned against you. Thank you for leaving us the inheritance of your covenant with David, a kingdom of undying love where everyone, regardless of their privilege or merit, their sins or salvations, basks in your greatness in the house of the Lord. In your name we pray, amen.*

## GALATIANS 3:23-29

The book of Galatians reminds us that salvation is made possible by the grace of God and his unconditional love. Before Christ came, the law served the purpose of letting sinners see their sins, but it didn't save them from it. The law controlled them, but didn't save them. The law punished them, but didn't save them. The law was like a moral framework, but the salvation that Christ could provide was the final puzzle piece. Since he came and brought along salvation, through faith in Christ, we are all able to be children of God.

Often times, we as people have a tendency to separate ourselves into groups or put ourselves into categories. We notice the ways in which we are different rather than the ways in which we are the same. Sometimes it is hard to remember to give thanks for the gift of God that we all share and unite ourselves in it. Fights, oppression, and injustices arise and it's hard to see light at the end of the tunnel. The love of Christ is the light and it builds bridges and breaks barriers.

We are all loved and cherished, and we get to live knowing that regardless of our race, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, God's love does not discriminate, and we are made one in Christ; which is pretty cool.

*During this day in advent, enjoy the challenge of thinking about the ways that you can break barriers share and the gift of God in your daily life.*



## ACTS 13:16-25

Paul's speech in Acts 13 reminds us that God is faithful to God's promises. Paul begins by offering a reminder of God's work throughout Israel's history: liberating them from Egypt, leading them through the wilderness, delivering them their promised land, and so on. The list culminates in the greatest act of God's faithful provision: the arrival of a Savior, Jesus.

Who is this Savior? In citing the words of John the Baptist, Paul offers a piece of the puzzle. Though John is revered as a great man and prophet, Jesus is the one whose sandals John is not even worthy to untie. This Savior Jesus is worthy of our highest praise and worship. We will find our lives when we bow before him in adoration.

As John the Baptist says, Jesus is indeed worthy of our adoration, but, remarkably, Jesus does not use his power and majesty to remove himself from us and stay in lofty places. Rather, Jesus humbles himself to an extraordinary degree. Remember, in this season of Advent, we await the birth of a *baby*. The one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie is the same one who becomes a human baby, endures the difficulties of life, and humbles himself to the point of death on a cross. No wonder we wait with such great expectation for December 25! Who else loves us and uses power in this way?

Prayer:

*Lord, help us see You rightly. Help us revere You as we ought. You are worthy of our highest praise. But help us also see Your humility. You love each of us deeply. You draw near to us in our struggles, able to sympathize with our human challenges. Let us rejoice in Your great love and faithfulness. Amen*



## JOHN 1:19-28: A Story of Worth

I'm not a theologian, and I'll be honest: I don't know much about why the Pharisees were so interested in figuring out who John was or why it was a big deal that he was baptizing people. But the first time I read this passage, I was struck by the way they seemed to confront him about what he was doing: "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

In other words, why are you trying to do something that's supposed to be done only by the most exalted of individuals? Who are you to perform baptisms, when you're just some *guy*? (That's the technical term.)

As a Duke student, this attitude was a little *too* familiar. Why are you trying to apply for this internship, or take this class, when you're just an undergrad with no experience? Who are you to have these goals or take on this project, when you're just some *kid*? Our entire college experience, as fantastic and enriching as it is, constantly runs us up against barriers of status, whether it's because of our age, resume, background, or something else.

But my interpretation of the tone of this story — as one of doubt and contempt — might also be missing the mark. In a sermon c.1520, Martin Luther talks about this passage as a story of temptation and reverence:

"They do not offer him a present, nor ordinary glory, but the highest glory of all, the kingdom and all authority, being ready to accept him as the Christ. Surely a mighty and sweet temptation! [...] When he would not accept this honor they tried him with another, and were ready to take him for Elijah. [...] Seeing that he would not be Elijah, they go on tempting him and offer him the homage due to an ordinary prophet. [...] Not knowing of any more honors, they left him to choose, as to who or what he wished to be regarded, for they greatly desired to do him homage."

This casts the story in an entirely different light, making it a little harder to relate to John here. Rarely do we meet people so eager to treat us with honor and respect, and even less frequently do we turn down such an opportunity. Again, the temptation of focusing on status — titles, accolades, lines on resumes — can distract us from devoting time and energy to things that are more important in the long run.

Through both of these interpretations of this narrative — one of suspicion and one of praise — we see the twin dangers of holding ourselves in too low or too high regard. I know that in my own life, I often switch between feeling that I am unimportant, incapable, and unworthy to believing that I am the best and most amazing person I know. Neither perception is accurate, and neither is helpful.

Yet in the passage, John does not fall into either trap. He does not become defensive or frustrated at being derided and disparaged, nor does he claim the honor of the titles that are offered to him. Instead, he is secure in his knowledge of himself and his role in the greater story being told. He replies only that he is preparing a path for Jesus, whose glory far exceeds his own. John is oriented towards Christ, and he directs the others in that same direction. He feels no need to justify his actions or seek out honor for himself, because he knows that his purpose is to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus.

*As we do the same during this time of Advent, we can take solace in the words of John (both the writer and the Baptist). Be secure in knowing that you were created to be good, and that you are good; remain humble and loving towards others regardless of status or qualifications; and orient yourselves and others towards Christ — a task that anyone, and everyone, is worthy of doing.*

*"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"*

## PSALM 42

This passage reminds me of an excerpt of the poem *Desire of God* by Frederick W. Faber.

But none honors God like the thirst of desire,  
Nor possesses the heart so completely with Him;  
For it burns the world out with the swift ease of fire,  
And fills life with good works till it runs o'er the brim.

Then pray for desire, for love's wistfullest yearning,  
For the beautiful pining of holy desire;  
Yes, pray for a soul that is ceaselessly burning  
With the soft, fragrant flames of this thrice happy fire.

*Dear God,*

*Thank You for giving us this season of advent, a time to slow down and to remember, to be mindful and to wait. Help us, this day, to rest in the comfort of your coming Son and the joy of the holiday. But more than this, God, hear us as we pray with the poet Faber, that we may more fully know the beautiful pining of holy desire and that our souls may ceaselessly burn in our love and hope for You.*

*Amen.*



## ZECHARIAH 8:1-17

In the text today we see God in all His glory—from his anger and divine frustration to his unconditional love. To the people of Zion in the passage, Israel was just a barren land torn apart by strife and chaos, but when God looks upon the nation, he sees a bright future of children playing in the streets and the elderly smiling from the sides.

Just as we condemn things in our own lives, the Israelites distrusted God's vision for the world. Yet in His unending mercy, God gave His people yet another chance: follow these rules I set forth for you, and watch your nation flourish. Speak truth, work for peace, and bear no evil in your heart, and My love will know no bounds.

*Lord, help us recognize that our perspective is nothing compared to Yours. As we march onwards towards the birth of Your son, let us give thanks for all the gifts you have given us, even when we don't recognize them ourselves. The days prior to Christmas became brighter and brighter in anticipation of Jesus; our days become brighter and brighter in anticipation of your vision for the world.*

*With praise and thanksgiving,  
Amen.*



## ROMANS 15:4-13

The words from this scripture that compel me the most are 15:5-7 (please reread these). Paul expresses his wish for God to grant the Romans the ability to approach one another with the mindset with which Jesus approached his contemporaries. That mindset is one of gentleness, compassion, understanding, and, as Paul emphasizes, acceptance. Acceptance seems to me an extraordinarily important aim. But as I see it, acceptance is often a challenge, because it requires relinquishing a (possibly very tight) grasp on our ideas of how we want things or people or even ourselves to be. Acceptance as letting go of expectations seems slightly impossible to me, but maybe a feasible form of acceptance means allowing expectations to exist while not allowing them to ruin our connections with the world at large, with others, with ourselves.

Let's engage in some comparative literature. Buddy the Elf (you may be familiar with him from the American Christmas film canon!) arrives to New York City with a lot of expectations: that NYC will be equally magical as, if not more magical than, the winter wonderland he calls home; that his father, Walter Hobbs, will be a wonderful man who loves him unconditionally; that a shop advertising its coffee as the best in the world really will serve a cup of coffee objectively superior to all other cups of coffee in the world. Frankly, none of these expectations are met. Yet what makes Buddy so lovable is that he doesn't allow those expectations to totally spoil his efforts at connection with others (and enjoyment of the world). Two exceptions are the brawl at the coffee shop and the instance when Buddy snarls, "You sit on a throne of lies!" to the Santa impostor, *but* some of the most moving and beautiful parts of *Elf* are when Buddy turns an ordinary department store into a wonderland of its own (dancing on pianos, etc.!) and, most importantly, when we see Buddy persisting in his love for his father despite Walter Hobbs's considerable naughtiness. In the same vein, more of the most smiley moments in the movie come when Buddy's stepmother, half-brother, and romantic interest accept Buddy in all his bizarreness in spite of their expectations of what a stepson or brother or boyfriend should look like. We find that Buddy's acceptance of the people around him combines with their acceptance of him to create a powerful glue that binds them all to each other and to the Christmas spirit in general. The motif of singing in *Elf* (with Will Ferrell's bad voice front and center!) marks the coming together of diverse, flawed people (good singers, bad singers all included) to "spread Christmas cheer."

Buddy is as far from the North Pole as we are from Eden, but as he can accept NYC and the people he meets there, we can accept where we are and the people we meet here. As Susan and Michael accept a newly discovered family member in spite of his enormous eccentricities, we can accept a family member, a friend, a professor, or ourselves despite their or our own imperfections or misdeeds or annoying idiosyncrasies. Doing so allows us to sing aloud "so that with one mind and one voice [we] may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

*"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."*

## ISAIAH 30:19-26

Earlier in this chapter of Isaiah, God stated how his people had gone to Egypt for help without asking him if that was the right thing to do (verse 2), and he described them as a “children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord” (verse 9). Then the passage shifts to talking about the coming redemption. In verse 18, both God and his people are waiting. “Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” In advent, the church assumes a posture of waiting, preparing to celebrate the mystery that God became a human. Through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, God has shown mercy and grace to us. He faces the brokenness of this world with us. Chapter 30 of Isaiah also discusses God’s judgement. When Jesus came as a person to earth, he came to face God’s judgement with the people of God; “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5).

Verse 21 stuck out to me from this passage: “And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.” I suppose this verse looks forward to the New Testament when Jesus came to earth to bring the shalom (peace) of God’s kingdom, and how after Jesus ascended into heaven the Holy Spirit came to be with the people of God. The guidance this verse speaks of offers encouragement to me. As I go about my life in Durham, I don’t quite know what I am doing, what I am supposed to do, and what it looks for the kingdom of God to come into my broken life and this broken world. But, God has come to be with his people and tell a story of redemption that goes beyond what his people can do or imagine themselves.

*God, help us this advent season to discern what you would be telling us, and help us truly know that you “wait to be gracious” to us.*

## ISAIAH 29:17-24

I have always loved Advent. I love the season’s special promise, the sense of anticipation that there is something better coming. Even as a child, what I enjoyed about the Christmas season was the excitement of looking forward to something, much more than the actual celebration on Christmas Day.

And yet, over the last couple of years, I’ve come out of each Advent season feeling a little bit disappointed. Each year, we proclaim that Christ is coming and that the Kingdom of God is nigh. Yet, each January, those promises ring a little more hollow for me.

I work as a Spanish interpreter for undocumented immigrants at a legal clinic. I spend a lot of time with asylum seekers, migrant farmworkers, and immigrant victims of crime and trafficking. In other words, I work on the frontlines of this administration’s war on our immigrant sisters and brothers.

And let me tell you: from where I stand, things have gotten worse, not better. In the twelve months that have elapsed since last Christmas, this administration has introduced a plethora of new obstacles for immigrants. So how can I tell myself, each year, that the Kingdom of God—a place where the tyrant is no more, where those who deny justice shall be cut off—is coming? To be perfectly honest, it feels naïve.

When I begin to think this way, I renew my commitment to what Howard Thurman calls “the work of Christmas.” Thurman writes: *When the song of the angels is stilled...the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart.*

Zebulon Highben, the new Director of Chapel Music at Duke, puts this another way: *Messiah comes to those who toil, bestowing God’s own favor.*

The truth is that, without a commitment to the *work* of Christmas, the *hope* of Advent is baseless. It’s an empty promise. On the other hand, without the *hope* of Advent, the *work* of Christmas is unsustainable. It’s a recipe for burnout. So, this Advent season, I invite you to commit yourself to the earthly work of Christmas, energized by the divine hope of Advent.

*How will you toil this year? When the song of the angels is stilled, what work will you do? What hope will guide you?*

## LUKE 1:46b -55

Today's scripture is Luke 1:46b-55, referred to as Mary's Song of Praise, or in Latin, the Magnificat, taken from Mary's refrain, "My soul magnifies the Lord." To accompany this reading, I have included an excerpt from "Mary's Song: A Poem" by Lisa Sharon Harper (Find the full poem here: <https://sojo.net/articles/marys-song-poem>).

Mary watched and waited  
The powerless, harassed young girl – 13.  
Barely a foot in the world  
On the run  
Chased down by power  
Death surrounded her  
Wrapped in the stench of King Herod's dying  
babies

But

Into the darkness Mary sang!

"My soul doth magnify the Lord!  
My soul doth magnify the Lord!  
The one more mighty than darkness has done  
great things!"

For resting in her belly  
Turning in her belly  
Pressing on her belly  
Light was being born

"God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their  
hearts,"

Mary says!  
"God brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts  
the lowly,"

Mary proclaims!  
And the man with feet peeking from his shoes will be lifted  
up.

He will stand up!  
And the baby covered in fumes will be lifted up.  
She will stand up! Up!

And the green giants laying with dead eyes —  
yes, even they will be lifted up!

They will stand!  
Blessed are they now, for they are ready to be lifted up.  
They will lock hands  
With their sisters and brothers and ...

Our souls will magnify the Lord.  
Our souls will magnify the Lord.  
Our souls will magnify the Lord ...  
... together!  
And our spirits will rejoice in God our savior!  
Amen.

Lisa Sharon Harper, the author of this poem, has taken Mary's millenias-old hymn and reframed it in a modern context. She finds aspects of Mary's story, such as poverty, persecution, and prejudice not just relics of an ancient time, but rampant in our modern world. I am sure each one of us could immediately name the injustices in the world that weigh on us most heavily. For Harper in this poem, these are issues of environmental injustice, exploitation, and homelessness. And yet, Harper does not stay stuck in the anger and indignation that these issues stir up but remembers Mary's words: "My soul will magnify the Lord." Mary's work of magnifying the Lord was done by bringing Jesus into the world, that most precious gift given to us by God. I believe we can do our own magnifying when we remember this gift, and in remembering, are spurred to action. We can magnify – make greater, intensify – this gift when we do our part to make the world a better place, as it was made better for us with Jesus's birth.

*It will not look the same for every one of us as it did for Mary or Lisa Sharon Harper, but I urge in this advent season, let us remember what was done for us so long ago, and consider how we can magnify the gift we have received in our own lives by finding ways to address the issues that weigh on us the most.*

**ASHTON CARR '20**

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

## ROMANS 15:14-21

In this passage, Paul speaks of the goals of his ministry, namely, to preach to those who do not yet have a foundation in Christ. Though they may not have yet accepted Christ as their own, Paul keeps faith that members of his audience are filled with a fundamental goodness. This goodness underlies what may appear to be a mix of differing and sometimes contradictory beliefs, but it aligns with a message to love and act kindly toward one another. Such goodness is thus present in everyone and is fortified in Paul's teaching of the word of Jesus Christ.

*Dear Lord,  
Thank you for this opportunity to come before you and to consider the message that you delivered through Jesus Christ. Guide us to identify and use the goodness within ourselves for the benefit of others, even as we need our own reminders toward discipleship and fellowship in you. As Paul, help us to see the goodness in those with whom we agree and with whom we disagree, and to love each of those. The world can seem increasingly divided, whether between nations, classes, or belief systems, yet guide us not lose sight of the goodness that each of us shares. Guide us to use our gifts to find unity among disunity and peace among tension, and in doing so, to ground our actions in your love.  
Amen.*



**CHARLIE DANIEL '20**

Advent 2019

DECEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

GENESIS 15:1-18

Genesis 15 cuts deep and directly into a long-standing confusion in my faith. Namely, how does God involve himself in earthly affairs? It is all too easy for me to fall into thinking he's not there because I can't see his impact on the world. Reading Genesis 15 re-orientes me towards this question by telling me a story. In the story, just as Abram gives up on thinking that Sarai and he will bear any children, God assures him that in fact Abram's descendants will be as numerous as the stars above! Crucially, God made the promise to bless Abram 3 chapters and many years earlier. Abram had to wait for his blessing

What is so striking to me about this story is more than just the importance of patience. Rather it is a reminder that God does keep his promises, though it won't always seem like it. The story here only becomes interesting and worthwhile by being about a tension, which here is about God not fulfilling his promise when Abram had expected him to. God, of course, fulfills it in the end, but he reminds us here that a large part of life will be spent wondering "Why God? Why are things not going as I wanted them to?" Whether life was better in the Garden of Eden is beyond me, but the fact of the matter is that we fell, and so part of our life will be spent wandering around in confusion as to why God is not helping us out. The key factor, to me, is persistence in one's belief in the existence of God. For, at the end of the day being able to live out stories with one's life in an incredible opportunity and God will stay good by his word if we maintain right relationship with him.

*So, I want to challenge us all to stay faithful through tough times and even allow ourselves to question God without doubting God, as Abram does in Genesis.*



AUSTIN SMITH '23

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

DECEMBER 14<sup>TH</sup>

1 SAMUEL 2:1-8

1 Samuel 2:1-8 is a prayer of awe and wonder prayed by Hannah after she gives birth to a son who she had prayed for to God for many years. This prayer of rejoicing and thankfulness reminds me of a blessing from the book *To Bless the Space Between Us* called 'In Praise of the Earth'. This blessing goes "Let us bless the imagination of the Earth. That knew early the patience to harness the mind of time, waited for the seas to warm, ready to welcome the emergence of things dreaming of voyaging among the stillness of land. And how light knew to nurse the growth until the face of the Earth brightened beneath a vision of color. When the ages of ice come and sealed the Earth inside an endless coma of cold, the heart of the Earth held hope, storing fragments of memory, ready for the return of the sun. Let us thank the Earth that offers ground for home and holds our feet firm to walk in space open to infinite galaxies. Let us salute the silence and certainty of mountains: their sublime stillness, their dream-filled hearts. The wonder of a garden trusting the first warmth of spring until its black infinity of cells becomes charged with dream; then the silent, slow nurture of the seed's self, coaxing it to trust the act of death. The humility of the Earth that transfigures all that has fallen of outlived growth. The kindness of the Earth, opening to receive our worn forms into the final stillness. Let us ask forgiveness of the Earth for all our sins against her: for our violence and poisonings of her beauty. Let us remember within us the ancient clay, holding the memory of seasons, the passion of the wind, the fluency of water, that warmth of fire, the quiver-touch of the sun and shadowed sureness of the moon. That we may awaken, to live to the full the dream of the Earth who chose us to emerge and incarnate its hidden night in mind, spirit and light." The author of this book seems to have the same relationship with Earth that Hannah has with God in this passage. In this blessing Earth reflects the role that God plays in all our lives and played in Hannah's life.

*The season of advent always seems like a great time to reflect on the great works that God has done and to see the way God works in our lives like Hannah did in her prayer. I challenge you to join me in doing this.*

OLIVIA SMITH '21

Advent 2019



SPACE FOR NOTES/REFLECTION

SPACE FOR NOTES/REFLECTION

RUTH 1:6-18

In a scene from A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*, Winnie and Piglet check on their friend Eeyore, who confesses to feeling “really rather Sad, and Alone, and Not Much Fun To Be Around At All.” Eeyore says that to be near him would be a waste, that Winnie and Piglet should go on and enjoy themselves. But Winnie and Piglet look at each other and they sit. Just sit. And, Milne writes, “Eeyore started to feel a very tiny little bit better. Because Pooh and Piglet were There. No more; no less”

In this passage, we see a woman, desperate and hopeless. Naomi is mourning – she is Mara, bitter. She’s empty. We might even say that Naomi is “really rather Sad, and Alone, and Not Much Fun To Be Around At All.” But. Ruth gives her a gift that goes beyond words: her presence. Ruth commits to an unknown future among an unknown people worshipping an unknown God, for Naomi. To be There. “No more; no less.”

As we await the birth of our Savior, let us not hurry to the cross and the glory of the empty tomb. Let’s remember the gift that Christ gave us first, for thirty-three beautiful and difficult years. Jesus came down to save and to preach and to perform miracles, but also to Be. Simply be. To live and grow, speak and listen. To dwell among us. To give the gift that goes beyond words, that heals even hopelessness.

*God, as we near the manger and prepare for your Arrival, we remember the gifts that You have given us, not only by healing and preaching, living and dying, but also by Being. As Ruth gave to Naomi, so You give to us the gift of Presence. Thank You.*



2 PETER 3:8-13

The season of Advent is a season of waiting and preparation, not only for Christmas but for the second coming of Jesus. For us humans, waiting and being patient does not come easily. On a much smaller scale, waiting for the Second Coming is similar to waiting for a final. If I have a test that I don’t think will happen for a while, then I put off studying and preparing myself for it. Often, I find myself waiting as long as possible before the test, until I realize the test is in two days and I have to cram. Well, unlike a test, we don’t know when Jesus will come again to judge us or if we will even be there for that time. Therefore, we can find ourselves living as if we have all the time in the world. Maybe we feel guilty about a certain sin that keeps reoccurring in our lives, but we don’t want to take action quite yet, or we are struggling in our relationship with God, so we choose to ignore and deal with it later. While it might seem like we have all the time in the world, this passage reminds us that we don’t know. It feels like we’ve been waiting an eternity, but to God time is relative and he does what is right in his time. Our judgement could come any day, as the passage says “the day of the Lord will come like a thief.” However, unlike a thief, when the Lord comes it will be a day to celebrate, but we need to be prepared by continually repenting and living our lives the way we know God wants us to. Our relationship with the Lord is the most important one in our lives and one we should always be cultivating.

*As we enter the season of waiting, I challenge us not to wait idly but keep our relationship with God in the forefront of our minds.*

