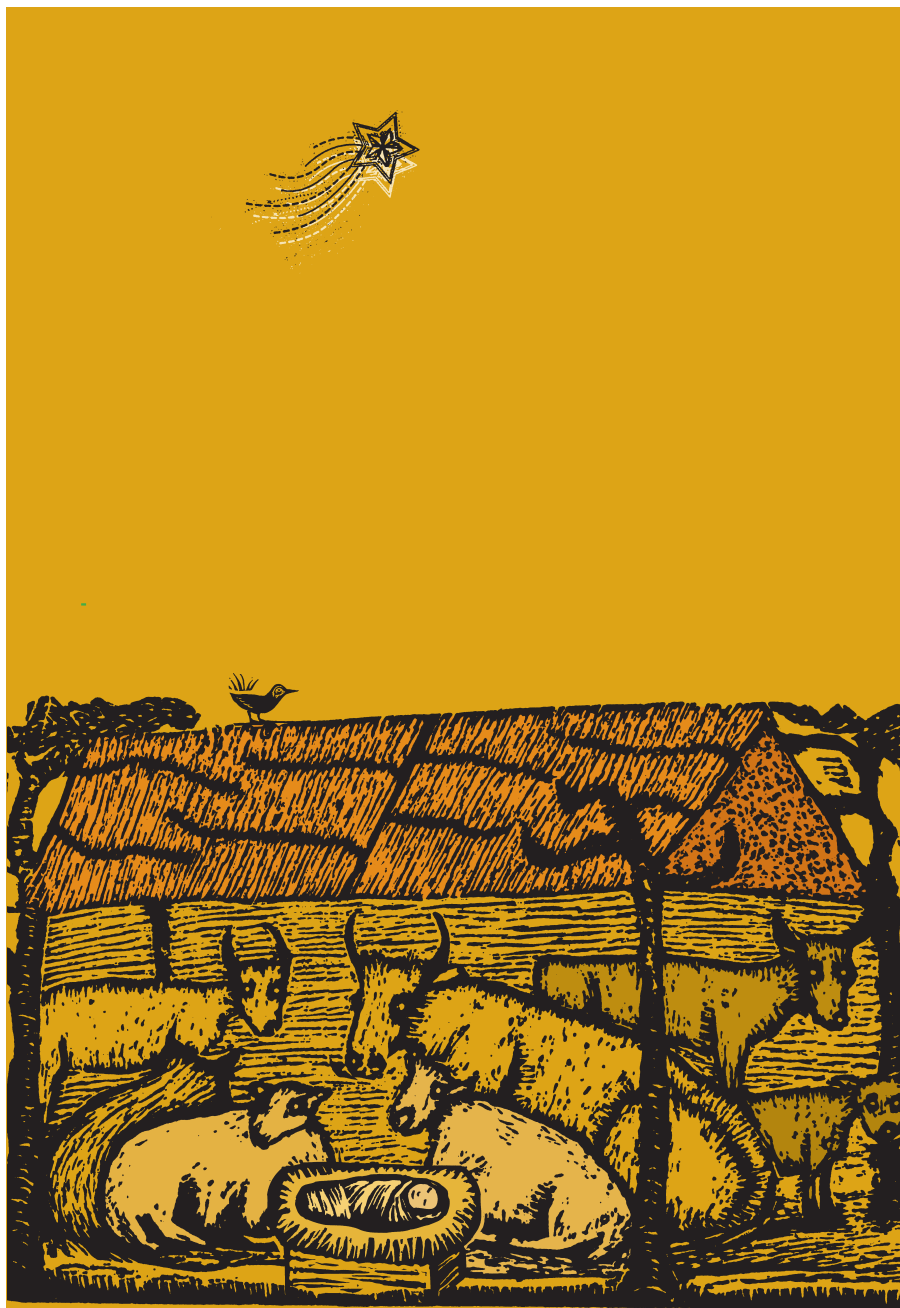


FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF ATLANTA  
ADVENT DEVOTIONAL BOOK, 2021



Characters at the Crèche



**W**elcome to the 2021 First Presbyterian Church Advent Devotional. We hope that these words may nourish, transform, and inspire your faith as we move as a community toward Christmas. The theme for this year's devotional is *Characters at the Crèche*. Over the four weeks of Advent, the sermon series will highlight characters crucial to the birth narratives of Jesus Christ. This devotional offers interpretations of scripture passages in the hopes that we find ourselves within the Christ Child's story too.

We are so grateful for the many members and friends of First Presbyterian Church who took time to reflect and write about this year's theme and passages from the Bible.

We wish you blessings and deeper faith this Advent season!



# ANGELS OF THE LORD

By Bill Todd

## *Luke 2:8-14*

It has always astounded me that each time an angel appears to any character in scripture the first words are “Do not be afraid.”

There is the improbable announcement to the teenage Mary that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. There is the angel who questions the women who come to the empty tomb to anoint the body of the slain Jesus for burial. And there are many more.

One of the most recognizable passages in the Bible is when an angel appears to the shepherds “keeping watch over their flocks” (Luke 2:8) in the nativity narrative to announce the good news. Despite these entreaties from the angels to not be afraid, it would have been frightening indeed for lowly shepherds to see and hear a celestial being on a hilltop on a cold December night under a starry sky.

It is the personal touch to be visited by an angel. Angels of the Lord seem to appear to the little people — teenagers, second-class citizen women, and shepherds — while kings, governors, and wise men receive their instructions through dreams. These angels, including the ones who appeared to the shepherds, were clearly messengers from God, undoubtedly instructed to locate just the right one to receive the news and directions for the next steps.

Perhaps the charge to appear to the humble in society was a presage of the style that Jesus would adopt in his own ministry: to engage with the poor, lepers, tax collectors, children and more.

Do not be afraid.

# THE FIRE NEXT TIME

By Kathleen Brewin Lewis

*2 Peter 3:1-18*

**W**hen you read 2 Peter 3, it's hard not to think of the daily news. Heavy rains and destructive floods from New York City to the Deep South. Western wildfires. Global warming. Then, too, the news of the world often seems full of the "scoffers" and "false teachers" Peter writes about.

Peter echoes the words of the prophets when he confirms that the world, once destroyed by water, will next be destroyed by fire. But God does not want us to perish, Peter says, God wants us to repent. If we wish to be among the righteous who remain to witness Jesus's second coming, Peter advises us to lead good and holy lives, blameless and spotless . . . as an infant.

As we stand beside the manger, witnessing the first coming of the son of God, we realize that if Christ can come once, teach us how to live, be crucified, miraculously resurrected, then ascendant, Christ can surely come again. It could be 1,000 years from now; it could be tomorrow. The question is "Are we ready for him?"

*How should we dream of this place without us?*  
— Richard Wilbur, "Advice to a Prophet"

# APPROACHING THE MANGER

By David Dantzler

## *1 Thessalonians 5:12-22*

**A**s we approach the manger, we expect to hear the angels singing, the cattle lowing. We will see the shepherds kneeling. We will encounter the Christ child, sleeping under the loving watch of his parents. Silent night. Holy night.

But on the way, we encounter Paul, who is in no way subtle. In clear, straightforward language, he reminds us that in claiming this most precious gift, we are called to be different and to make a difference. As followers of Christ, we must engage with each other, with the world and with God. Respect. Encourage. Admonish. Help. Be patient. Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. Listen. Test. Hold fast to the good. Abstain from the evil.

In this Advent season, it is easy to be weighed down by isolation, anger, helplessness, and despair. The needs are great, and our abilities are limited. In these days, Paul's exhortation is especially poignant. He challenges us and cheers us on as we make our way to the manger. This birth changed the world. Through his life, death, and resurrection, this child changes us, so that we will be active participants in the building of God's kingdom. No matter how dark these days seem, there is light at the manger – the Light of the World. Paul encourages us to reflect that light.

# CRÈCHE MEMORIES

By Emily Beard

## *Psalm 90*

**M**y earliest Christmas memories are carols, nativities and Advent calendars. I loved sitting in my grandmother's living room unwrapping her crèche scenes from around the world. My favorite was from Mexico with an abstractly formed ceramic holy family inside a sparse shelter. The baby was tiny even in my little hands, and I was mesmerized by how the mica glinting from the clay surface made him shine. I am told I was uncharacteristically reverent, mixing and matching the animal pieces from the various sets, and I can only imagine how comical it was to see the delicate Bavarian china donkey placed next to the oversized wooden shepherd carved in the Amazon! As the years went on and I became familiar with the meaning of the Christmas story, my mind would return to those beautiful pieces – Mary, Joseph, Jesus and animals – all crafted by many an artist's hand, representing the nativity.

Another excitement was opening a glittering little door on the Advent calendar each evening as carols played. As I reflect now, I recognize this was not to “count down” to Christmas but to mark the ritual waiting and as the scripture says to “number our days,” all to the tune of *Adeste Fideles*.

Whatever your memories, I pray that this Advent we kneel in childlike wonder at the nativity, the glorious story foretold by the prophets through the poetry of the psalms, and prepare to welcome a holy infant so tender and mild, Jesus, the Light of the World.



# PEOPLE GET READY

By Bill Cheatham

## Malachi 3:1-4

**T**he first thing I thought of when reading this scripture passage were the lyrics of singer/songwriter Curtis Mayfield's *People Get Ready*.

<i>So people get ready</i>	<i>There ain't no room</i>
<i>There's a train to Jordan</i>	<i>For the hopeless sinner</i>
<i>Picking up passengers</i>	<i>Who would hurt all mankind</i>
<i>Coast to coast</i>	<i>Just to save his own</i>
<i>Faith is the key</i>	<i>Have pity on those whose</i>
<i>Open the doors and board them</i>	<i>Chances grow thinner</i>
<i>There's hope for all</i>	<i>There's no hiding place</i>
<i>Among those loved the most</i>	<i>Against the Kingdom's throne</i>

In Malachi, people may have seen no immediate reward for obeying God and giving generous gifts. They question only what is right for them and their self-satisfaction. But the prophet says that God will send a messenger to “prepare the way,” to judge evil and reward good. God assured the righteous that their efforts to serve would be rewarded. Righteousness is something that is very, very good. Only God has it, but God shares it with the people. God will burn away the “dirt” in all who are unholy. God will be like soap and water and wash them clean.

The prophet raises a challenge for each of us. As we wait at the manger with Advent expectation, the promise of Christ's arrival should prompt us to self-reflection and even make us uncomfortable. People, are we ready?

# JOYFUL COMMITMENT

By Chris Holmes

## *Philippians 1:18b-26*

Our text today seems awkwardly out of place with the theme of this year's Advent devotional and with the season of Advent itself. A letter from prison doesn't jive with the arrival of the magi or the angels' appearance to the shepherds. In our text today, Paul vacillates between his desire to "depart and be with Christ" (Phil 1:23) and the need to "remain in the flesh" (Phil 1:24) for the sake of the church in Philippi. This passage is not about the manger or the start of Jesus's story at all. It is really about Paul's story, likely near the end of it.

So what do we do with this text? How do we find ourselves in it and read it in light of the miracle of Christ's birth? Two things stand out to me. First, Paul speaks frequently of his joy. Joy in the midst of imprisonment. Joy in uncertainty and anxiety and exhaustion. Joy even in the face of death. Paul's words remind me that Advent is also a season of joy, and that the true source of our joy is the good news of God entering fully into the human condition. Second, Paul's commitment to the Philippians reminds me that we are in this Christian life together. Christmas can be a stressful and hard time for many. Just like Paul supported the Philippians and was supported by them, may we show up for each other through our prayers, encouragement, and acts of love.

## ADD ONE MORE

By Bruce Gregory

*Luke 1:68-79*

**A**s we approach the Christmas season through the eyes of the “Characters at the Crèche,” today’s scripture passage presents the inspired prophecy of Zechariah, the righteous and blameless priest, chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

The Angel Gabriel appeared before him and announced that his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son to be named John, who would turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

When John, whom we now call “The Baptist” or “The Baptizer,” was born, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke a prophecy extolling and blessing the Lord God of Israel for looking favorably on the people, redeeming them, and raising up “a mighty savior for us” who would save Israel from its enemies and “all who hate us,” giving “light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,” and guiding “our feet into the way of peace.”

Zechariah also blessed his infant son, “...You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

Do we normally place statues of Zechariah, John the Baptist, and the Lord God in our crèche? No, but maybe we should, and add *one more*, to represent our self in adoration of the Christ Child.

# THE SHEPHERDS

By Tim English

*Luke 2:8-18*

**A**lpharetta Elementary School announcements came over a loudspeaker mounted on the classroom wall. I still remember the blaring voice: “Attention, Mr. Trammel please come to the school office.” We were always surprised by the interruption, even though the much — loved custodian was summoned almost daily. It was exciting — the introduction of something new and important to our routine.

So, just imagine the surprise of the shepherds huddling in a cave with their sheep and lambs as they waited out a cold night near Bethlehem. Overhead is a soot-covered ceiling from a smoky fire lit to keep themselves warm. Suddenly an angel pops in with an announcement. “I bring you good news. A pretty amazing baby has been born in town. He is the Savior, the Lord.” Then, a whole bunch of angels swoop in and start singing praises. That would blow my mind – just saying.

During my family’s visit to Bethlehem, a Palestinian Christian guide explained to me that the field between the shepherds’ cave and Bethlehem town is the same field where Boaz first saw Ruth gleaning wheat. Later, we learn that Ruth’s faith was rewarded. She appears in Jesus’s own genealogy, an ancestor of the child to be born on Christmas Day.

Wherever you stand this season — in classroom, cave or field — listen for the announcement. It’s a disruption to the regular routine. The promise of great importance and praise. The fulfillment of faith — the reward.

Listen! Do you hear it? “Peace on earth to those whom God favors.”  
Let it be so.

# LABOR PAINS

By Mary Claire Allvine

*Romans 8:22-25*

**T**he Christmas nativity scene captures the simplicity and vulnerability we associate with Christ coming into this world. Christians and non-Christians universally recognize the figures of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, and the menagerie surrounding them in a barn. Vulnerable, bewildered, barely sheltered but serene.

While we find the scene emanates peace, that quiet occurred after the action. Paul pulled early Christians in more forcefully to the birth miracle. In Romans 8:22-25, he wrote, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

This image is more searing, more exciting! Paul asks us not to be by-standers but for each of us to be laboring mothers. Birthing the miracle of peace does not occur quietly but with impatience and pain? And we are asked to see ourselves, all of us, as the mother who must work, cry, bleed to bring hope into the world.

Parenting does not end at birth. Extend the metaphor into the question, how are we continuing to nurture the hope of Christ in this world today? What do we not yet see in this world that we must labor into existence?

# COMFORT

By Mark Myette

*Isaiah 40:1-11*

**S**ome refer to this text as the most important text in all of Isaiah, and it could be said the text has relevance to today.

The current period is but a blip on the time continuum. It just seems long — akin to driving to a cherished destination and wondering aloud with anticipation and excitement, “Are we there yet?”

What makes it even more challenging is having to deal with the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, upheaval, setbacks, and conflict.

And yet, through it all, a baby is born  
to give us hope...  
to show us the way...  
to bring us light...  
to be our hope for the future...  
to give us comfort.

May this Christmas season aim us toward that feeling of comfort.

# SONG FOR ALL SEASONS

By Cason Given

## *Psalm 126*

**C** OVID time: when will the sorrow end? The Advent: we joyfully anticipate his coming.

In 2021, we are not all too different from our early Christian brothers and sisters who also experienced cycles of sadness and joy. In Psalm 126, the psalmists write, “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion... our tongues [were filled] with songs of joy.” They go on to remind us that “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.”

Indeed, doesn't this song ring true today? We have wept, we have isolated, we have quarantined, we have masked. We have made progress, we have joined together, we have felt *free*. Perhaps your experience with COVID has been much like mine: a yo-yo bounding and rebounding from some set of polar opposites. Collectively, we have taken eight steps forward only to take five steps back.

And yet in all the uncertainty is the unchanging truth that *the Lord is good*. He will restore our fortunes. We have, and we will sing songs of joy.

How great is the Lord who delivers to us a savior, a child and king who ensures our communion with him? Wherever we find ourselves in the ups and downs of any given stage, year, or day, let us remember that God is good! And Christ is coming.

# SUMMER OF PROSPERITY TO WINTER OF SORROW

By Guerry Mashburn

*Luke 7:18-30*

**T**he people in this scripture had heard about the signs and wonders that Jesus was performing and came to meet him. Jesus's popularity kept increasing. Jesus pointed to people who had great faith in order to show what God desires for his people.

We learn that John the Baptist was in prison and that he sent disciples to see if Jesus was or was not the expected one. While Luke doesn't mention this, I wonder if John or his disciples had started to doubt the things that others were saying about Jesus. Jesus's works and embrace of publicans and sinners did not clearly fit with his anticipation of the expected one. John had already declared Jesus to be mightier than himself, but maybe his faith was wavering. And so he reached out to Jesus.

Like John, we may experience healing if we carry our doubts to be cleared by Jesus. John's "prison" thoughts may teach us how much our faith can be affected by external thoughts and changing temperaments. They can also teach us to be more lenient with those whose trust may falter when a strain arises and hits them "head-on."

Finally, it may teach us not to belittle ourselves when we are challenged with the roller coaster of the religious experience and the challenges and the uncertainties of our lives. Instead, may we stay focused on the Christ Child, as he comes to us, both in the summer of prosperity and the winter of sorrow.

Thanks be to God for that unwavering hope.



# BETHLEHEM STAR

By Jeff Chilcutt

*Isaiah 12: 2-6*

**F**or Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid:  
For the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song.

— Isaiah 12:2, KJV

The passage from Isaiah 12 is a song of praise, declaring to the whole world all the great things that God has done. The King James Version (above) translates the last word in verse two as *song*. The praise song of Isaiah reminds me of singing in the Christmas Eve service. The singing of favorite Christmas hymns, the red berry and green garland, the Christmas trees with brightly decorated ornaments, and the special combination of the choir and orchestra make the evening very meaningful and the hallmark of the Christmas season.

Two years ago, while singing in the chancel choir for the services at our church, I seemed more aware of the people coming to the church at Christmas Eve with their families and friends to attend the midnight candlelight service to remember and relive the birth of the Christ Child. Amidst the glow of the candles from people scattered throughout the church, everyone sang the familiar song of the candle lighting tradition, *O Holy Night*: “O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of the dear Savior’s birth” (Adolphe Adam).

May we all find “Peace on Earth” this Christmas Eve and pass it on to others in search of the bright star shining over Bethlehem this night.

# THE BEAUTY OF FAITH

By Eric Twombly

*Luke 1:57-66*

**L**ike the entire Gospel of Luke, the story of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth provides a guiding opportunity for growth in our lives today. The event itself — a blessed birth of a child to older parents who had great desire but little hope to conceive — is divine, but its contemporary lesson is truly rooted in the relentless, rejuvenating, restorative power of faith.

We all remember that the Angel Gabriel told Zechariah to have faith that God, in his gracious glory, would deliver a baby to Elizabeth and him, and that baby would be forever touched by God. And it happened. And the seed planted by that faith allowed John the Baptist to grow into a man who imparted and influenced countless people with the good word of God.

So today, in our world of good and bad, in this season of Advent, let's exercise and nurture our faith in God, in one another, in family, and community and see what beauty grows from it.

# JOSEPH

By Tallulah Lyons

*Luke 2:1-7*

**W**e set up a little crèche in 1957, the first Christmas we were married. We bought four little figures from Woolworths Five and Dime: Mary, Baby Jesus, Joseph, and one cow. Through the years we added figures from places we visited around the world. We never replaced the original Holy Family from Woolworths because of the simple and genuine expressions of love that radiate from their faces.

I've always been intrigued by Joseph. As I place him in the crèche behind Mary, who kneels before the baby in the manger, I feel Joseph's loving, protective presence. He's there to provide a supportive, nourishing home for Mary and the baby and to assure safe passage for Jesus through childhood. Aren't we all asked to assume this role? Aren't we all asked to be a nourishing home and protector for the new-born and ever-growing Christ within?

Luke traces Joseph's ancestors back to King David. Citing the genealogy confirms ancient prophecy that the Messiah would come from the line of David. For me, the emphasis on Joseph's genealogy affirms Joseph's role as essential to the Holy Child. It reminds us all of our own unique, essential roles in bringing Christ into this present world.

Joseph listened to his dreams and followed their guidance. With unwavering faith, he trusted God's direction. Like Joseph, may we all have courage to listen to God's guidance. And may we respond with joy as we daily participate in unending new birth.

# ORDER OF THINGS

By Paul Dimmick

## *Isaiah 11:1-9*

**T**his familiar passage from Isaiah is read every Christmas season as prophesizing the birth of Jesus and marking his genealogy. We expect that prophecy will come to us in some extraordinary, contorted story that requires interpretation. The enduring fascination is the ability to see new messages with each reading.

This year I came to the passage with COVID eyes. For the past 18 months I have been struggling to find God's justice in this pandemic. The people who have suffered the most have been the exact people whom you would expect God to favor. The haughty have not been made low. As I pondered the passage, it struck me that the ending illusion informs us how to read the first sections. "The wolf will live with the lamb." This defies all natural behavior. "The lion shall eat straw like the ox." This defies biology. We are not talking about this earthly world order of things as we know them.

Then what is God's order of things? "...He will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears..." God's judgement, then, will not follow the earth-bound logic of man. "Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist." We will find God's justice in reconciliation with God's love and faithfulness.

## ON MESSAGE

By Kristen Holtz

*Acts 28:23-31*

In modern parlance, Paul is an influencer. In today's world of social media and quick turning news cycles, getting the right person to endorse and amplify your product, idea, or viewpoint is often a make-or-break marketing technique. When Paul set out to share the story of Jesus and Christianity, he kept his message simple — God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles. As someone who works in communications, I've always enjoyed stories of Paul's important role in the early church; he had a crisp, powerful message that helped the good news of Jesus spread. It also helped that he captured people's attention first by surviving a viper bite and healing the sick!

In this passage, Paul implores people to listen and see in a different way and accept the wonderful gift of Jesus to the world. He boldly asks people to understand with their hearts and allow the Holy Spirit to heal them. Isn't this the very essence of faith? To believe in that which you cannot see, hear, or touch?

As we move through advent, I pray that you find your own "simple message" about the joy in this season of the church, that you listen with your heart to the cadence of these mysterious days leading up the birth of Jesus, and that you share the good news of Jesu's gift to the world in your own unique way.

# TRANSFORMATIVE LOVE

By Margaret Cobb

*Psalm 80:1-7*

Perhaps our first fear as babies is the fear of abandonment, and our second is the fear of being found out when we fall short of expectations. We fear humiliation, having short-comings revealed. Psalm 80:1-7 finds the Israelites expressing that same sick feeling of having fallen short of expectations, being found out, and believing they have been abandoned by God. God's chosen people beg for a reprieve, and do not yet fully comprehend the full depth of God's love, assuming that God willingly causes them painful punishment.

Christ reveals God's plan: consequences as loving guidance toward wiser, healthier ways of living and serving. Consequences flow from having free will. God has lovingly given us freedom to choose badly. With space for evil in our lives, more often than not, evil spills onto the innocent.

Although this passage seems to throw a wet blanket upon yuletide spirits, it tees up a more complete celebration to come as God's face shines upon us when we turn back towards God and achieve our high calling in Christ. Christ paid for our failings, and infuses us with the sweet smell of hope and knowledge of having been lovingly made and guided. Christ wishes to be king of our hearts and wants our commitment and participation in realizing his kingdom on earth as in heaven. Amen.

# THE NEW COVENANT

By Frank Brannon

*Jeremiah 31:31-34*

**W**hen I read Jeremiah's story about God's new covenant with God's people, it is not obvious at first to fully see what this means and where this will lead. After further study it becomes clearer what the story is saying, and how it changed the path of our faith through the times leading up to the birth of Christ and his crucifixion and resurrection.

The new covenant said God would have a personal relationship with humanity, that God would forgive their sins, and would be in people's hearts and minds forever. I can also read this passage as God foretelling the coming of his Son, coming to earth in human form, becoming the fulfillment of God's new relationship with us. And that started with the miraculous birth of Christ.

Certainly, the shepherds and wise men in the manger story knew that something bigger had happened as they gazed down on the Christ Child in that humble setting. What they were witnessing was the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise that God had given to us many years before. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we know that we are part of God's kingdom, that we have a creator that loves us and cares for us all the days of our lives.

# CHALLENGE OF FAITH

By Andre Myette

*Hebrews 10:32-39*

**D**o you remember when every week you dropped a ball on the ground to see if gravity still existed? Probably not. Why? Because you had faith. You BELIEVED gravity was constant. But faith isn't just a belief in scientific principles or concrete facts. It is a core affirmation that is central to one's being. Hebrews conveys that during times of struggle, times that you feel like no one is there, it is hard. And that's okay.

The characters surrounding Jesus had their doubts, too. Ups and downs happen, such is the nature of life. The text illustrates the Jews' exposure to abuse, persecution, and plundering. And in an often smaller but important way, we relate to this as well. I think we can become frustrated when we don't see a "sign" from God. But God can often be in things we don't necessarily see. And the way to endure through those times is to have faith that God is there, EVEN IF we don't see it.

Now that doesn't mean faith has to be unquestioning. Our knowledge of what it means to know God is not static. One of our duties as Christians is to question and challenge; that's how we grow. To me, Christianity is not about an absolute acceptance of what is SAID to be Christian. It is a CONSTANT and CRITICAL evaluation that strives for a resolute confidence in what we hold true. A resolute confidence in our love for God and in God's love for us.



## A GREAT LIGHT

By Dorothy Sussman

*Isaiah 9:2-7*

**T**his passage from the 8th century BCE writer of Isaiah acknowledges the dark and relentless chaos of war, subjugation, and oppression affecting the people of Israel. “The people have walked in darkness,” says Isaiah, who then offers the Israelites a way through this terrible time with “a great light,” and words that shine like a beacon, evoking a different path, one filled with “justice and with righteousness.” This is the Lord’s doing, he counsels.

It’s easy enough to conflate this writing with the Christmas story; anyone who has ever listened to a service of the *Nine Lessons and Carols* on Christmas Eve knows it well. First-century wise men followed a star to Bethlehem to praise the infant Jesus who would become the Prince of Peace; shepherds in the fields witnessed the “glory of the Lord” as a shining light and came to see with their own eyes this astounding vision: a newborn, whom John called “the light of all people,” the embodiment of God, wrapped in rags in a manger among barnyard animals.

Here we are in the twenty-first century almost to the crèche, searching for peace and justice in a world that seems to offer little of either. Let’s not miss this moment! Light, if we follow it, allows us to see the reality in front of us and to know what we must do. Jesus, the light of the world, stretches out his hand, and we can walk with him, our miraculous companion, in hope on this journey.

# MARY

By Cheryl Hughes

*Luke 2:26-56*

**W**hen we see Mary holding baby Jesus, she looks peaceful and calm. But the previous nine months had been anything BUT peaceful and calm for her. During that time, this amazing girl (probably a teenager) had done all of this:

- Met an angel face to face
- Found out she was pregnant while being a virgin
- Was told that this was not just any baby,  
but the SON OF GOD!
- Had to tell her parents about this
- Had to tell JOSEPH about this
- Left her home and traveled to Bethlehem

Just think of the range of emotions she must have experienced — shock, fear, embarrassment, giving way to joy, thankfulness, and praise. Some of us would have needed time to process this and begged the angel to “give me a minute.” But we don’t read that Mary did that. Yes, she asked the most obvious question, “How will this be since I am a virgin?” But perhaps you and I would have had 1,000 questions for that angel.

Mary’s next recorded words were, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” Those words describe Mary’s total submission to God’s will. They tell of her complete acceptance of whatever God was calling her to do.

Today when I look at Mary in the crèche, I will think of how brave she was as she accepted and embraced God’s plan for her, even though it seemed unbelievable. May the same be said of us.

# BLESS THIS MESS

By Leigh Bonner

*Genesis 25:19-28*

**T**he whole arc of the story involving Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Keturah, and their descendants definitely muddies the oft-repeated phrase “Biblical family values.”

Abraham fathered at least eight sons with three different women. With Hagar, he conceived a child, Ishmael, before Isaac was born to him and Sarah. Sarah banished Ishmael and Hagar to the desert. After Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah and had six more sons with her. Just before today’s Genesis passage, we learn that Abraham gave everything he owned to Isaac, leaving nothing to his other seven sons before banishing them.

Today’s passage shows us that Isaac and Rebekah continued Isaac’s family-honored traditions. Esau, favored by Jacob, became the head of Israel’s rival Edom. Rebekah and Jacob tricked Isaac and stole Esau’s inheritance. Jacob fathered twelve children from four women and those were the twelve tribes of Israel, the line of people that became Jesus’s lineage.

If “Biblical family values” means reacting to infertility by fathering children inside and outside of marriage, creating deep-seated, generational family rivalries, and banishing and disinheriting children, I don’t want any part of that!

But here’s the catch: Despite all these damaging and oppressive human choices, God acts in redemption. God took even the most dysfunctional, manipulative, adulterous, disinheriting, and disowning families and created from their offspring the One who would redeem all the world. Jesus comes out of the mess, lives in the mess with us, invites us out of the mess, and redeems the mess. Thanks be to God that Jesus is the Redeemer!

## RE-AFFIRMATIONS

By Tom Greene

*Psalm 25:1-10*

**T**he Christmas story presents numerous opportunities for Christians to re-affirm our faith. Psalm 25 illustrates the major themes inherent in the story. And, it reminds us of the incredible faith demonstrated by each of the characters in our story.

**Faith** (Mary): Imagine the fear of carrying the son of God. Rather than give into the fear, Mary surrendered to God and had faith in God's plan. *How will you demonstrate faith in the Holy Spirit during the Christmas season?*

**Hope** (Baby Jesus): His mere arrival on Earth brought hope to a hopeless and troubled world. *How will your actions bring hope to others during the Christmas season?*

**Shame** (Joseph): Mary's fiancé knew that people would consider him the father. He knew that he would likely face some shame and criticism as some people would assume that he slept with Mary before they got married. Instead of giving in to the shame, Joseph became the quiet and constant protector. *How does shame keep you from spreading the Gospel?*

**Humility** (The Shepherds): The shepherds were simple, humble people. They could have ignored the angels' voices. But they didn't. They eagerly went to see the baby Jesus and humbly became God's messengers of the good news. *How will you be a humble messenger of God during this season?*

**Trust** (Simeon): He was promised that he would see the Messiah in his lifetime. The only thing Simeon did not know was when. So, he simply trusted the Lord. *In what ways do you trust in the Lord?*

# MOTHER MARY

By Miriam Bratton (5th grade)

*Luke 1:46b–55*

**C**an you imagine being the mother of the most important person in the world? It seems like it would be really stressful.

But Mary isn't stressed. She's rejoicing and grateful that she gets to carry Jesus. She feels special that she gets to do this and clearly loves God. Mary talks about how God lifts up the lowly, gives to the poor, and sends away the rich. Also, he's faithful to his promises.

Mary shows us how to be a good Christian, by being faithful to what God asked her to do. When I think of Christmas, I think about Jesus and his birth. But we should think about the woman who birthed him. I think Mary is a very important part of the Christmas story.

Dear God. Please help us be more like Mary. When you ask us to do something, we should be happy you thought of us and see the request as a blessing. Thank you for Mary and what she teaches us. Amen.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

By Florida Ellis

## *2 Peter 1:16-21*

**T**he Christmas story is filled with unexpected announcements. Zechariah was going about his assigned duties at the Temple when an angel of the Lord appeared to him with the message that his aged wife Elizabeth would bear him a son.

Another day we watch as a scene narrows and focuses: we see the Angel Gabriel sent by God to a town in Galilee, and within Galilee to the town of Nazareth, and within Nazareth to a virgin, engaged to a man named Joseph, whose name was Mary. Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear a son by the power of the Holy Spirit who would be called the Son of God.

One night, shepherds were going about their ordinary tasks out in the fields when an angel showed up in full glory bringing good news of great joy that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem. Suddenly a whole heavenly host joined the angel in praising God.

So many startling announcements! In the passage for today Peter describes being an eyewitness to an announcement about Jesus so astonishing that his words tumble over one another to describe it: Jesus received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In the Gospel accounts of this announcement, the declaration is followed by the command, "Listen to him." And so, the question to us: Will we listen to the testimony of angels? Will we see in Jesus the beloved Son of God? Will we hear him say to us that we also are God's beloved daughters and sons?

# NATIVITY SCENES

By Rebekah LeMon

*Luke 2:1-20*

**A**s I read Luke's Gospel, I picture the nativity scenes we put up in our home during Advent. Joel and I got married right after Christmas, and we received seven(!) nativity scenes as wedding gifts. They are very different—some wood, some ceramic, one glass, and one pottery set from South America. But each crèche includes the same characters. Each has a shelter, a Mary, a Joseph, and a baby Jesus. When we set them up (just one or two each year), we leave a little distance between the parents gazing at their son and the shepherds who have left their fields and rushed to Bethlehem. We try to place the angels so they seem to be watching this prophesied scene unfold. Animals rest serenely around the edge of the manger, some displaced from their trough because our Lord needed to be born, some tired from carrying shepherds.

Each character has an essential role in this story. Angels bring urgent news and glorious praise. Shepherds are interrupted and terrified but get up and go anyway. Mary and Joseph endure hardships—an inconvenient census, having no shelter, and delivering a baby in a manger among them—to become our Lord's parents. And after (or in spite of) all that fear and disruption and hardship, these characters come together in a moment that is nothing short of a miracle. This Christmas, through the fear and disruption and hardship we know, may the holy wonder of the crèche come to us, too.

# YOU CAN STAY WITH ME

By Tony Sundermeier

*Isaiah 62:6-12*

Several years ago, the great Riverside Church of New York City was having its usual Christmas Eve services. William Sloan Coffin, one of the great preachers of the 20th Century, was slated to deliver the sermon immediately following the annual Christmas pageant. Like many church pageants, Riverside's would include all the children of the church to act out the story of the first Christmas. Well, for this particular year, as the children's pastor was casting the production she realized that she would have to find a part for little Timmy. Timmy was a sweet kid but had some impulse control issues, was easily distracted, and had a few major meltdowns in Sunday school throughout his time at the church.

The children's pastor decided that the best role for Timmy would be that of the innkeeper. The character's appearance was brief, containing only one line. When Mary and Joseph knock on the door and request lodging, the innkeeper simply says, "Sorry, there is no room in the inn," and then points and directs them to the stable. Christmas Eve arrived and the annual Riverside Church pageant production got underway. When the time came for Timmy to come on stage, he properly got in position behind the makeshift inn door. Mary and Joseph knocked and Timmy answered right on cue. Timmy's parents and the children's pastor and his Sunday school teachers all held their collective breath as it was time for Timmy to deliver his line. Timmy spoke, "There is no room at the inn." Then he pointed and directed Mary and Joseph to the stable. He had done it! But then, as Mary and Joseph turned their backs to him, Timmy went off script. He said, "Hold on!



Mary and Joseph! Mary and Joseph!” The actors playing the young couple froze. They didn’t know what to do. Little Timmy ran up to them and said, “Mary and Joseph! Mary and Joseph! You and your baby can stay at my house for Christmas.” The congregation let out a collective laugh that was prompted by both the unexpectedness and tenderness of the moment. The great preacher, William Sloane Coffin, began to weep. When it came time for the sermon, he climbed into the pulpit, and said, “You and your baby can stay at my house. Amen.” He sat down. It was the shortest sermon he ever preached.

On Christmas Day, sermons ought to be short and sweet. The preacher does not need to be especially clever or winsome or funny or creative. The preacher simply must tell the story and invite the congregation to receive it once more. Or, perhaps, receive it for the very first time. The God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who created you and me and every sprout and seed and star, every creature and tree and mountain and valley and plain — that God — that God took on flesh and dwelt among us. That God closed the gap, bridged the crisis, and demonstrated and declared with palpable presence that, “I am for you and for this world. I am not far off. I am with you, always, even to the end of the age.” And our response to this Gospel — this good news — doesn’t have to be verbose either. “Yes, Jesus, you can come and live with me.”

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