

A large, stylized, light blue 'JP' logo serves as the background for the entire page. The letters are thick and blocky, with a slight shadow effect.

JP

Journal for Preachers

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Advent 2026

Published quarterly in time for Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, the *Journal* is a unique resource for the high calling of proclaiming the gospel. Articles are thematically arranged and coordinated with the church calendar.

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Publisher's Foreword

As we begin our fiftieth year of publication, *Journal for Preachers* is going fully online. This move away from printing and mailing costs allows us both to continue publishing *JP* and to offer the journal at no charge to anyone who wishes to receive it. We hope this change will help make *JP*'s resources more readily accessible to existing and new audiences—especially younger preachers.

The new website (journalforpreachers.com) is slated to launch in the early fall of 2026. There, you will be able to browse our latest issue or download a pdf of the entire journal.

Please share this opportunity with anyone you know who may benefit from what we seek to offer everyone preaching today.

This issue also welcomes Ryan Bonfiglio as our new editor. I am so appreciative of Ryan for taking this assignment on—and for his prodigious energy, insight, and imagination about how *Journal for Preachers* can serve the church and its preachers in the years to come.

Randal Whittington has served as our editorial associate for several years now and literally, nothing would be produced for us without her careful and caring guidance. Along with our whole Ministry Collaborative team, we look forward to another year of faithfully imaginative content to support preachers in their calling.

— Mark Ramsey

Editor's Foreword

For fifty years, *Journal for Preachers* has sought to inspire fresh, Spirit-filled preaching in churches across the globe. Our content aims to foster the very best of what preaching can be: wise, creative, theologically nimble, rooted in rigorous biblical reflection, and attentive to thoughtful social analysis. In a world awash with sound-bites, hot-takes, and half-truths, what *JP* offers is needed now more than ever before.

But *JP* is more than just a rich archive of sermons and articles. We strive to nurture a community of preachers who are committed to dialogue, collaboration, and thinking together about what it means to preach the gospel faithfully in our complex and conflicted world. As one of *JP*'s former contributing editors, Barbara Brown Taylor once put it, "Reading *Journal for Preachers* is like talking with wise colleagues about how and why we do what we do." Our aim is to convene the type of conversations preachers are longing to have with the hopes that doing so helps you find your authentic preaching voice and re-discover joy in ministry.

Mindful of the history and legacy of this journal, I consider it a tremendous privilege to take on the role as *JP*'s next editor. Those who have gone before me are towering figures in the church and the academy—Erskine Clarke, Cam Murchison, Walter Brueggemann, Tom Long, Ted Wardlaw, Jessica Patchett, and Mark Ramsey. I want to faithfully steward what they and others have built even as I also hope to extend the journal's reach and impact. In the issues to come, you will see us doing that in two ways.

First, we will seek to curate content from an ever-wider range of preachers and scholars who represent diverse cultural, racial, and theological traditions. We want to hear from tall steeple pastors as well as those serving in rural parishes or planting new church startups. We are eager to engage ordained clergy as well as lay preachers, bi-vocational pastors, chaplains, artists, scholars, and others whose unique voices and experiences can deepen our sense of what transformative preaching looks like today.

Second, while we will continue to engage our long-time readers we also want to reach new audiences. One of the ways we will do that is through our new, user-friendly website that was created through a partnership between *JP* and Emory's Center for Digital Scholarship. The website will give you access to a searchable archive of the nearly 2,000 articles and sermons that have appeared in *JP* since 1977. You will be able to filter by year and liturgical season, or search by themes and topics—all without having to log in through a library system.

I am excited to be a part of this new chapter of *JP*'s history, and hopeful about what God might do through our collective work.

— Ryan Bonfiglio

Advent: Here Comes the Judge

Will Willimon

Durham, North Carolina

Doing time as teacher of a sixth-grade Sunday School class, I one time casually referred to the return of Christ and his final judgment. A kid blurted out, “You mean he’s coming back?” The innocent little Methodist did not appear to receive word of Christ’s Parousia as good news.

First Sunday of Advent, first of new church year, first lesson, the church makes us preach the good news of Christ’s judgment: “If only you would tear open the heavens and come down! ... make your name known to your enemies, the nations would tremble in your presence ... you were angry when we sinned ... We have all become like the unclean; all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag ... Don’t rage so fiercely, Lord; don’t hold our sins against us forever ...” (Isa 64:1-9, CEB).

Judgmental Isaiah preps us for threatening Mark: “In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. The stars will fall ... Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor ... He will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth ... But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert!” (Mark 13:24-33, CEB).

Although he denies us final judgment upon others or ourselves (Matt. 7:1–2), Jesus publicly and repeatedly proclaims himself as judge. Most of his parables are about judgment, as if judgment is the most difficult idea for him to get across.¹ Jesus’s first followers had debates over when he would finally judge; none doubted that Jesus would judge.

Isaiah 64 voices a frequent prophetic theme: the “day of the LORD” when God would at last “tear open the heavens and come down.” What’s the Day of the Lord? Judgement upon the disobedient and healing the righteous (Mal 3:1–5).

Judgment Given to the Son

The Father “has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22): “Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor ... He will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth ...” (Mark 13:26-27).

The notion that Christ has been appointed “as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42), has always been tough for pagans (like us) to swal-

low. Modern, Western, relatively affluent, fairly self-satisfied people (like me) chafe at the notion that there are limits on living our lives anyway we please and that we are ultimately accountable to anything greater than our own, sweet, individual consciences: Nobody can judge me but me. Mistakes were made, but it wasn't my fault. My mother messed me up. Etc.

Early in ministry I helped craft a new United Methodist Service of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Pushback came from progressive Methodists upset over our inclusion of the historic affirmation, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again*." (Italics mine.) They thought it downright antediluvian to bring up judgment.

Dismissal of divine judgment is hypocritical in an age of "Cancel Culture." Though my church is loath to make judgements on behavior in a bedroom, we gleefully condemn to hell the hijinks on the floor of the Senate. "Prophetic preaching" is when the preacher brings down the gavel upon everyone but the preacher. Why did you leave your congregation? "For four Sundays our preacher failed to condemn ICE. Even in the prayers."

Divine judgment collides with our image of Christ as indulgent, all-affirming and non-retributive. No way affable Jesus would critique creatures so innocent and well-meaning as we. Nonjudgmental Jesus murmurs, "Don't bother submitting to redemption. I love you just the way you are. Promise me you won't change a thing."

Belief in Jesus as judge is affirmation that Jesus is God and we aren't. Fleming Rutledge once declared in an Advent sermon, "The world does not belong to us; it belongs to the One who is coming," and because the world—past, present, and future—is his world, "he is free to judge."² Not to judge Jesus as Judge is sign of true faith in Jesus, says Fleming.

God has created us without the freedom to concoct a meaningful life any way we want; God reserves the right to hold us accountable.

We so want to be our own judge. Some evangelical interpretations of divine judgment put the free, personally responsible human agent front and center instead of the wrathful/merciful, free-to-judge God. No one is sent anywhere into eternity against your will. Your future with God is up to you.

"You are here tonight to make the most important decision of your life," the evangelist told the gathered youth. "Don't say, 'I'm only sixteen. I can wait.' A kid died in a car wreck in Huntsville last week. Where will you spend eternity? Decide! Close your eyes and say the words with me before it's too late, 'Tonight ... I give ... my life to Jesus ... so I can be ... with him in heaven when I die.'"

I growled, *Christ's connection with a sixteen-year-old kid is determined by the decisions of the kid? Do you know the stupid decisions they are capable of making?*

What should the youth evangelist have said? “Good news. Your relationship with God isn’t dependent upon you. Fine, make decisions about Christ. Just remember: the most important decision is Jesus Christ’s choice to be for you.”

Judgment has been either jettisoned by embarrassed, mainline, sophisticated preachers or neutralized by evangelicals. Both present the Christian faith as mainly what you think, feel, or do. We rework Christ’s forensic finale into a contemporary program of human self-improvement, giving the false impression that you are the key to your future, accountable only to you.

The church of my youth made us repeat every week, “He shall come again ...” but we crossed our fingers at “to judge the quick and the dead.” Buncombe Street Methodist Church had gone on record opposing “racial mixing.” Who wanted Christ to show up anytime soon and render a just verdict on life in Greenville?

God Setting Things Right

Whether judgment is good news or bad depends in part on where you happen to be standing when you hear the news. “Holy and true Master, how long will you wait before you pass judgment and take revenge for our blood ...?” (Rev. 6:10) cry the victims. In her Magnificat, Mary claimed that God hears the wails of the wounded and, in the birth of her baby, is setting things right (Luke. 1:51–53). Wrongs can’t be made right without judgment. Mary’s song discomferts those of us who have little to gain and much to lose at the prospect of God’s recompense of the powerful and mighty, but the harassed and helpless join Mary in clenching their fists and crying out, “Rise up, God! Judge the earth because you hold all nations in your possession!” (Psalm 82:8; see also Psalm 96:13).

Vindicating victims and correcting perpetrators is more than reward and punishment, it’s the victory of God’s creative justice over all that is godless. God not only creates and loves the world; God promises to set a fallen world right side up.

Paul tells beleaguered Roman Christians, “Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them” (Rom 12:14), a tough assignment for the oppressed, who already have their hands full just surviving. Paul commands in light of God’s, “Vengeance and payback are mine” (Deut 32:35). The harassed can courageously live non-retributive, nonviolent lives, confident of a future in which God vows to repay.

What’s remarkable is not that God makes judgments, but the types of judgments God makes. While God is slow to anger, note what makes God’s blood boil: injustice, idolatry, and infidelity, for starters. On at least one occasion, God goes so far as to “hate.” The reason? Worship gone bad. Read Amos 5:21–24.

In Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats, the final judgment is not on the basis of biblical fidelity, correct doctrine, sexual orientation, or decisions for Christ but rather our response to the bodily needs of others: visiting the prisoner, giving a cup of water, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger (Matt 25:31–46).

We could have an interesting discussion about whether or not God will judge one political party as superior to another. Unfortunately, there can be no debate over God's assessment of rich people like me; Jesus made too many judgmental statements on the matter.

Rather than wonder why Judge Jesus angrily whipped the money changers out of the temple (Matt 21:12–13), better to ask, "Why are we so calm when God's house is perverted into a supermarket selling nationalism, prosperity gospel, militarism, virtue-signaling self-righteous posturing, or feel-good self-care?"

Maybe our judgment in eternity will be to stand before the mirror of truth and for the first time take an honest look at ourselves. Admitting the truth about me may take a while, still, I'll have all eternity to do it.

Or perhaps the Judge will put us next to those we've betrayed, hurt, or wounded. Made to see how our misdeeds have put in pain our siblings in Christ, we'll be forced to look on the saddened face of Jesus (1 Cor 13:12). To at last see all the ways that we have frustrated and disappointed his love for us.

The Judge Is the Lamb

Why doesn't God just let us be? Because judgment is part and parcel of the relationship with a God who promises, "I'll be yours and you'll be mine" (Jer 31:33). Christ's judgmentalism is a function of his having entrusted to a bunch of servants the display of his kingdom. How many of Jesus's parables end with the boss asking, "What have you done with what you have been given?"³ The Judge takes it personally when we give him a poor return on his investment.

I may not be caring, courageous, or indignant enough to set all things right, but I know that someday, somehow, the Judge will. Why should I not start today setting right some of the things within my reach?

"Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him" (Matt 25:31). The one who sits upon the judgment seat is none other than a crucified Lamb who, "will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev 7:17).

If we think of the Judge as a humorless jurist in a black robe, cool, dispassionate, objective, at a distance from the accused, we will misunderstand

Christ as Judge. I'm all for the art of Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel, but when I see Michelangelo's Judge, it's difficult to recognize that the Judge is the forgiving, crucified Lamb of God.

The Judge is the one who taught love of enemies and praised a God who graciously makes the "sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45); who told of the waiting Father eager to receive the prodigal home (Luke 15:11–32); the patient and forgiving God who, though slow to anger (Num 14:18), "isn't slow to keep his promise ... but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives" (2 Pet 3:9); the savior who urged his disciples to imitate God's forgiveness and patience, forgiving seventy-seven times (Matt 18:22); the same God who cried from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Karl Barth said that we so want to be our own judge, justifying ourselves, condemning others, determining what's right or wrong. To save us from ourselves, Jesus displaces us both on the judgment seat and on the gallows. To our surprise, the Judge does not condemn us to the damnation we deserve, but rather, in his Incarnation, becomes one of the guilty, taking our place, receiving our sin, simultaneously becoming "the judge, the judged, and the judgment."⁴

Sin isn't excused; it is judged with a resounding "No" that is based upon God's eternal "Yes." The cross is both condemnation of all our sin and a way that God makes for us to come back to God. Jesus the obedient Son, offers to God the faithful human response that humanity refused to give. "So now the righteous requirements necessary for life are met for everyone through the righteous act of one person, just as judgment fell on everyone through the failure of one person" (Rom 5:18). "God has locked up all people in disobedience, in order to have mercy on all of them" (Rom 11:32).

Already Judged

"But nobody knows when that day or hour will come ... Watch out! Stay alert! (Mark 12:33).

Maybe we are already being judged by our multiple slippery evasions of Jesus that so often land us up to our necks in misery. Perhaps, when we suffer the consequences of our human stupidity, we are being judged.

Maybe we, the accused, do not stand in solitary judgment before the Judge, as is done in human criminal courts, but in the solitary torments of conscience. The victims stand with perpetrators, the perpetrators with the victims. Think Bishop Desmond Tutu and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, not Nazi judge Roland Freisler at the People's Court show trials.

The separation of all created beings from God shall be separated from our ultimate destiny by God. Our various rejections of God shall be rejected. Our

repeated refusals refused by the Judge who, “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:3–4). At the Last Judgment, God at last gets what God wants. Us.

Just heard a stirring sermon during which the preacher chided us for “not modifying your lifestyle in one detail, even though you know that your lifestyle imperils God’s Creation.”

That sunny Sunday about 11:30 was, proleptically, my Judgment Day.

We invited students over to our house for lunch after a Sunday service where I had preached. (Call me old-fashioned, but I feel it’s important to have students in faculty homes.) After lunch, as some played basketball in our backyard, a student said, “You have a beautiful place. This is the first time I’ve ever been in a Duke faculty home.”

“That’s terrible,” I replied with indignation.

“You aren’t typical of Duke faculty in being so hospitable to students,” said the student.

I beamed.

“Let me ask,” he continued, “as a Christian, how do you justify having such a nice house? Wasn’t Jesus kind of hard on people with this much property?”

I should have been alert for the coming of my day of judgment.

One more: I was on a rant about the new denomination that had been formed by purloining congregations from my UMC, saying that the breakaways ought to be ashamed of themselves for tearing apart our church and taking what didn’t belong to them. And their spurious use of Scripture! Don’t get me started.

A divinity student interrupted, “So you are sure that there’s no way that the Holy Spirit might be behind some of this? Could it be that Jesus doesn’t need the UMC as much as you?”

Even if Jesus is my only Judge, I was judged.

Notes

1. The Weeds among the Wheat — Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43; The Net — Matthew 13:47–50; The Unforgiving Servant — Matthew 18:23–35; The Wicked Tenants — Matthew 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19; The Wedding Banquet — Matthew 22:1–14; The Faithful and Unfaithful Servant — Matthew 24:45–51; Luke 12:42–48; The Ten Bridesmaids — Matthew 25:1–13; The Talents — Matthew 25:14–30; The Sheep and the Goats — Matthew 25:31–46; The Rich Fool — Luke 12:16–21; The Barren Fig Tree — Luke 13:6–9; The Rich Man and Lazarus — Luke 16:19–31; The Minas/Pounds — Luke 19:11–27

2. Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

3. Matthew 25:31–46 — The Sheep and the Goats; Matthew 25:14–30 — The Talents; Luke 19:11–27 — The Pounds (Minas) come immediately to mind.

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), §59.2, 211–283, esp. 222–23.

None of the Candles Go Out: Advent Hope in a Nation's Anniversary Year

Carla Jones Brown
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

One of my favorite elements of worship during Advent is the lighting of the Advent candles. As the pastor and preacher, I hope that the congregation will grow into the light that brightens each week, even as we extinguish the candles at the end of every service. The candles don't just get brighter; they accumulate. The previous candles continue to burn as new ones are added. As the one who prepares the bulletin and liturgy, I have a luxury not every worshiper has: I get to sit with all four Sundays not only individually, but as a single unfolding story. This story has a particular arc which unfolds each year in a new and different way. This year, the Advent arc sits within the arc of the history of the United States of America. The United States offers but one example. Other nations have their own founding myths, independence celebrations, national tragedies, liberation narratives, and unresolved promises. How might Advent teach Christians to inhabit the story of their own nation without allowing the story of the nation to become the church's ultimate story?

The Revised Common Lectionary does not require us to manufacture a theological response to what is happening in the nation, but it gives us the vocabulary that we need to think theologically when national narratives compete for our congregations' imaginations. Advent 2026 falls in the closing weeks of a year the United States has spent marking 250 years since the Declaration of Independence—a semiquincentennial of fireworks, festivals, and pageantry, particularly in Philadelphia. That anniversary hands the American church three familiar postures: bathe the celebration in religious triumphalism, declare the whole civic celebration beneath the church's notice, or take a third way—one that reckons honestly with a nation forged in hope and promises, some of which have not yet come to pass. Not every preacher will stand in a pulpit in this particular national frame this Advent, but for those of us who do, this year hands us more than a headline. It hands us a counterpoint.

Advent hope is forged in that same soil—exile and unfulfilled promise. But unlike this nation's history, it does not depend on rugged individualism or on an achievement already secured. Advent hope is not a monument; it is an arc, moving across four weeks of the liturgical calendar through lament, comfort, justice, and a great reversal. American civic hope is different because it imagines a better nation through human achievement. Advent hope

gives preachers a way to practice critical solidarity. That is the work of loving one's nation enough to tell the truth about it. We can celebrate what is worthy of celebration while refusing to call unfinished work finished. We can give thanks for genuine freedom while naming those who remain unfree.

Advent 1 - Isaiah 64:1-9 - Lament

When we commemorate the semiquincentennial, the words "Oh say can you see, by the dawn's early light,"¹ linger in the air, but Advent calls for a different song. The cry is "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens," and these are the words of a people who still believe, still hope, that God will act as God has promised. This lament is rooted not in doubt but in the certainty that God fulfills God's promises even when the timeline is not our own. Isaiah's people confess, "we have become like one who is unclean"; they declare, "you have hidden your face from us." The confession comes first—not because people have lost hope, but because naming what is broken is how hope earns the right to ask for anything at all. Scholars call this kind of prayer a communal lament. This is not one voice grieving alone but a whole people speaking as "we." This one arises not from exile itself, but from the years after their return when the restoration they had been promised had not yet arrived the way it was promised.²

This text, when set against the pageantry celebrated in Philadelphia, asks us to look beyond City Hall to North Philadelphia, where the promises of the Declaration of Independence have not yet been fully realized. Commemorating a nation's founding celebrates an achievement already secured. For some, that achievement reads less like a finished sentence and more like an ellipsis ... a promise still trailing off, unresolved. Isaiah speaks instead to people of a covenant. A people with a hope and a trust in the God of the covenant and in that covenant's fulfillment.

Whether our Advent preaching reaches the ears of those who have inherited founders' promises or the ears of those still waiting to see those promises kept, this first week of Advent reminds us that lament belongs inside Advent hope. The prophet reminds us that our lament is rooted not in fear of a promise unfulfilled but in the faith of promises we have already seen kept, both in our own lives and in the lives of others. Trusting in a covenant with God is different from trusting in founding documents of a nation. The Declaration of Independence is not a covenant. The church's identity is covenantal rather than national. The task of the preacher is not to decide whether the nation is "good" or "bad" but rather to ask, What does scripture allow us to see that our patriotic celebration cannot see by itself?

Advent 2 - Isaiah 40:1-11 - Comfort

This arc takes us from a lament rooted in history and brings us face to face with God telling the prophet, "Comfort my people." It is worth noting that

this text opens what scholars call Second Isaiah. These words were spoken to a people living under Babylonian rule and captivity. As we light the second candle and are reminded of the light entering the world, the prophet—and I'd say the preacher, too—is called to comfort God's people.

This comfort is not isolated. It comes alongside the naming of the very tragedies that necessitate God's comfort. The celebration of the nation's founding tends to happen without the same naming. Perhaps Advent is our opportunity to name the difficulties of human existence, both in the United States and abroad, and to name the comfort available to God's people wherever they are. God's comfort does not require pretending that the suffering did not happen. Providing comfort without naming the tragedy skips a step. Advent invites us to slow our pace and to pay attention to every step. There is a difference between saying that everything will be fine and declaring that God will make all things new. Trite phrases attempt to offer comfort but fail, whereas God's comfort comes from a different source and does different work, for the one whose lament requires something more substantive than easy phrases applied hastily and without care.

In this passage, the prophet's naming of the hard thing also acknowledges that the fulfillment of the promise has not been fully realized by God's people. The comfort is not immediate. And now, the God who comes near to the exiled people is not announcing restoration from on high. God's presence is part of the restoration.

Our nation's founding ideals articulated claims about equality, freedom, and human rights whose realization remains unfinished. What Isaiah describes to a people in exile is an ongoing movement of God, and it is safe to trust in the work that God is still doing.

Advent 3 - Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 - Good News

In the light cast by the third Advent candle, modern readers may feel a tug from each of the Testaments when they read or hear Isaiah 61. These are the same words that Jesus read from the scroll as he stepped into his messianic role. The third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday when we celebrate joy, and it is from this text that we learn of the categories for that joy: God has sent the prophet "to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." Good news comes to those who most need to hear it, and it arrives carrying God's liberation.

This is not a promise rooted in a document but rather a promise lived out in the covenant between God and God's people. As the United States celebrates what it has accomplished in 250 years in the name of freedom, liberty, and justice for all, a question remains. Who is still waiting to be free, and why? Isaiah's good news is that the covenant makes this freedom available, and those who have heard it are charged not only to speak it but also to live it.

How might preachers in this third week of Advent allow their hearers to live into the good news? Liberation disrupts the systems that have benefited from another person's bondage or oppression. In some contexts, when the gospel liberates people, it challenges systems that depend upon their lack of freedom. In some contexts, liberty to captives means economic instability for the *captors*. In other communities, binding the brokenhearted damages the economic stability of those who profit from brokenheartedness. In still other communities, restoring sight to the blind threatens the economic security found by those who profit from others' blindness. Where, then, is the good news?

Perhaps the good news is in our ability to reimagine God's covenant community where liberation makes us more expansive and less restricted. This good news makes room for a covenant community of interdependent individuals who work for the good of one other. This is not necessarily our current reality and may require something more from the preacher's imagination. In this week of Joy and good news, the preacher must ask who is made uncomfortable. What assumptions will be and need to be challenged? What does it mean to preach good news instead of delivering a lecture on national politics? It means beginning with scripture and exposing false claims to ultimate power. It means announcing God's promise. It means inviting the congregation to a faithful response. The preacher who works within this arc knows that the great reversal is coming in week four and must find a way to hold onto the good news of week three with the accompaniment of weeks one and two. The arc does not proceed with each week's work replacing that of the previous week. Instead, the candles accumulate, and none replaces the other. They are present together.

Advent 4 - Luke 1:46b-55 - The Magnificat

As we light the fourth candle, we notice a distinct height difference among the four candles. The first candle, lit for lament, has grown the shortest because it has burned the longest. The second, lit for comfort, has also been burning and stands a bit shorter. The third candle, lit for joy, still holds most of its wax. Finally, we light the fourth candle. In Year B, as we light this candle, we hear Mary's Magnificat. Perhaps as we read and hear the Magnificat, we also hear the lament of the women who have come before Mary. We hear the voice of Hannah, the once-barren woman turned prophet whose praise shares the Magnificat's bones so closely that Mary's song almost reads as a response to her call, "my heart exults in the Lord ... my strength is exalted in my God." Perhaps we hear the songs of other women whose voices have carried both high notes and whispers throughout the witness of scripture. And perhaps, having sat with three weeks of good news for the downtrodden, we hear the Magnificat in the voice of a young woman whose body has suddenly become

the site of God's promise. Mary, in this moment, is presented by Luke as lowly, but she speaks with great theological authority. Hers is a voice that carries the community across the arc of Advent. Those with the greatest reason for lament. Those in greatest need of comfort. Those needing to hear a word of good news that will bring them joy. Yes, this Magnificat is the perfect fourth voice in a four-part harmony of the Sundays of Advent.

The nation sings, "Oh say, can you see, by the dawn's early light," and we sing along with pride and celebration. Mary, however, does not sing with a pride rooted in a nation. She sings, instead, "the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name," and that "indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." She sings that "he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." She sings of the hungry being filled and the rich being sent away empty. She sings of a reversal that points to the promise that God made to our ancestors and to our descendants. She sings of the light that was in the beginning and is not diminished. The light has not completed its work and therefore has not gone out; there remains one candle which will be lit on Christmas Day. And we are reminded that this is not all there is. The nation's song asks whether the emblem still waves over the land of the free and the home of the brave. Mary's Song declares that God's promises continue to be fulfilled in a people and not simply in a symbol waving above their heads—still unfulfilled. Mary's song carries us through the lament of a people naming the hard things, names the comfort that God promises to provide, points to the joy available to God's people, and reminds us that the promise extends far beyond the present moment.

What This Means for the Pulpit

These Advent texts hand the preacher—particularly the preacher within the American experiment—something more useful than a history lesson. We are handed a way to tell the truth the way Advent has always told it. A national anniversary invites nostalgia, a fond remembrance of the way things were. Advent asks us to set nostalgia down and face an unfinished future instead. It asks us to name what is difficult, then ground ourselves in God's promises as we carry that difficulty forward.

This is what I mean by critical solidarity: a love for one's country substantial enough to risk telling it the truth, in the same key the prophets used on Israel. It is the same key that Mary's song uses to locate power in the God of her ancestors and not in the power structures of the land. It calls us to keep our eyes open even as we wait, and to build a good news wide enough to walk into the future together.

By the fourth Sunday, the candles in most Advent wreaths are burning unevenly—one grown short from weeks of lament, another still holding most

of its wax, joy having only just been lit. The sermon emerges from that unevenness. Advent's light does not arrive on a nation's schedule. It does not culminate in one triumphant evening of fireworks. It has not finished its work. It has not gone out. Our task as preachers is not to extinguish love for the nation but to preach until our people can lament what is broken, participate in what is just, and live faithfully into the future God has promised.

Notes

1. "O Say, Can You See (The Star-Spangled Banner)." n.d. Hymnary.Org. Accessed August 12, 2026. https://hymnary.org/text/o_say_can_you_see_by_the_dawns_early_lig.
2. Elna K. Solvang, "Commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9," *Working Preacher*, Luther Seminary, November 11, 2020, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-641-9>.

The Story Today Tells—Making Peace with the “Messy Middle”

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A Tangled Reality

The church lives a complicated existence. We often feel the sting of decline: how church attendance decreases, finance dwindles, and enthusiasm diminishes. Yet, studies such as one conducted by the Barna Group, tell a story of renewed engagement with Jesus-centered spirituality and theological inquiry, particularly in the young adult population.¹ And while it is true that many churches have closed in recent years, many have also been planted.

Likewise, in recent decades, large mainline denominations in the US (such as the United Methodist Church and the Southern Baptist Convention) have experienced painful internal rupture. Yet, last year in 2025, the World Council of Churches observed the 1700th anniversary of the first Christian ecumenical council with a celebration of and commitment to more visible unity between diverse parts of the body of Christ.² And over the course of the last sixty years, the church has witnessed the slow and hard work of reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

The conclusion we draw from these paradoxical testimonies is clear, albeit ironic: the church is messy. And yet, acknowledgement of our own messiness might be more life-giving than we suppose. When we think about not just what the church is, but *when* the church is, messy becomes a little less shameful and a little more matter-of-fact.

This insight was sparked from reading *The Messy Middle: Finding Your Way through the Hardest and Most Crucial Part of Any Bold Venture* by Scott Belsky. Belsky’s book might seem a strange place to find inspiration for preaching and faith. His book focuses on start-up companies and entrepreneurial projects rather than churches and seminaries! And yet, St. Augustine reminds us that “all truth belongs to God.” We are wise to accept truth wherever we encounter it. Belsky observes that a lot of attention is placed on beginnings and endings. The beginning is usually marked by excitement and adrenaline. The ending of a project is a time to celebrate success, like selling a company for a large profit or a design being accepted for widespread use. But the middle of any venture—building a company, raising a family, or writing a book—comprises the biggest and most important part of the undertaking. It is also the least glamorous, the most frightening, and requires the most effort. Writes Belsky, “the middle is the least discussed part of any enterprise.” His

advice is that we acknowledge and accept *when* we are: “The middle isn’t pretty, but it is ... full of essential realizations to finish whatever it is you set out to start. It’s time we start talking about it.”³

The Messiness of “Today” in Luke’s Gospel

Theologically, we might think of the church essentially as Jesus’s own “messy middle.” Consider that the Christian faith starts with quite a bit of drama and adrenaline (crucifixion and resurrection seem fairly dramatic). And the eschatological finish line of the church is for Christ to return and for God to redeem the world in an ultimate sense. This ending also never fails to capture the Christian imagination. And so, the middle part of God’s project in Jesus is the church, striving to discern how to bear witness to the gospel, and often failing at it.

Less we pathologize the middle and only think of it as a place of mistakes and tedium, we should remember that the holy work the church has been called to is that of proclamation. And proclamation is ever only a “middle” activity. *Preaching always takes place between what God has done and what God demands to be done.* So, while the middle is certainly messy and riddled with mistakes, it is no less holy for the very reason that God has called us to it.

In the gospel narratives, Jesus demonstrates this notion of proclamation by consistently grounding his message on God’s prior established faithfulness and by simultaneously pointing toward the coming kingdom of God. Luke’s Gospel in particular highlights this by Jesus’s repetition of the word “today” in his proclamations to all kinds of people. “Today” is always in the middle, always existing between yesterday and tomorrow, between past promises and future hope.

The beauty of the word “today” in any story is that it can apply to two different times: today in the story and today when the story is told. As such, each of Jesus’s pronouncements on “today” in the Gospel of Luke has the capability of breaking out of the story proper and into whatever “today” readers find themselves. In each of the following four Lukan uses of “today,” we see the potential for Jesus’s proclamation to reach across time and challenge the church to hear a different story. While we tend to read all these passages and interpret “today” as the mere description of when certain events happen (fulfilling Scripture, betrayal, etc.), this method asks that we flip it around and see “today” as the object being described by the events. To hear Jesus tell it, you would think that today was a pretty important day.

A Pregnant Clause—Luke 4:2

Upon returning from the wilderness and being tempted by the devil, Jesus preaches in his hometown of Nazareth and reads from the Isaiah scroll—a fitting passage for a prophet beginning his public ministry:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18-19).

Jesus turns Scripture recitation into preaching by commenting on the passage: “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing ...” (4:21). He is not merely reading the words but enacting them. As the final line from Isaiah declares that he “proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor,” Jesus, in effect, tells the audience, “Consider it proclaimed!”

Now, I challenge us to consider how we understand the word “fulfilled.” The Greek word here πληρώω (*pleroō*) means “to fill, make full, or fulfill.” Unfortunately, often when we use the term “fulfill” we mean something to be over or finished. For example, when we say that we have “fulfilled” an obligation, we mean that we have satisfied and so concluded it.

But when we look at one of the possible connotations of the word *pleroō*, one nuance of this word means *to make pregnant*.⁴ What if, rather than understanding “fulfilled” as indicating that Scripture has reached its endpoint, we might imagine Jesus’s words as filling Isaiah’s promise anew—making it pregnant with meaning and new possibility for those who hear it?

We should notice that Jesus says that Isaiah’s words find this fullness not in Jesus speaking them, but in the people “hearing them.” If fulfillment occurs in the hearing of the Scripture (and in the Bible, hearing usually implies active reception), then fulfillment is not merely an event locked in the past. It happens whenever Scripture meets listeners in their own present circumstances.

Thus, this story in Luke finds even fuller meaning when it describes what happens right now when readers experience this passage. Such perspective helps combat the myth of decline, that the church’s beginning was pristine and then everything went downhill afterward. Luke’s emphasis on today communicates to whomever is reading that their historical situation—in the middle—can be viewed as a time of even further divine revelation and fuller meaning of Scripture.

Salvation that Sits Down—Luke 19:5, 9

The next passage where Jesus speaks the word “today” is in Luke 19, the story of a tax collector named Zacchaeus. After Jesus dines with this tax collector—both a Roman collaborator and notorious cheat and thus loathed by his community—Zacchaeus moves to repair the damaged relationship between himself and his neighbors. He declares that he will repay everyone he has cheated many times over; in addition, he will give a portion of his money to the poor.

Upon this declaration, Jesus makes his own declaration: “today salvation has come to this house.” What does Jesus mean that salvation has arrived *today*? The Greek word for salvation (*soterion*) also means “healing” or “restoration to wholeness/wellness.” We might argue that Zacchaeus’s relationship with his community is being healed. But in the story, Zacchaeus has not actually done these righteous acts yet, only declared an intention. Often, Christians see Jesus’s death as the definition of salvation; yet in this story, Jesus has not yet reached Jerusalem and his cross.

So, what is salvific about the “today” that occurred in Jericho? When we examine salvation throughout Luke’s Gospel, it seems to best describe the physical presence of Jesus (Luke 2:30; 3:6; 19:9). In other words, Jesus sitting himself down at the table, eating and drinking, talking and laughing brings about God’s salvation *today*.

Readers would do well to recognize a pattern: presence and fellowship that culminate in a meal that signals salvation. In a few short chapters, Jesus will sit again at the table, this time with his disciples. He will eat and drink, pray and sing. And he will establish a practice for his followers to reenact this meal (22:14-23). That meal—the Eucharist—becomes the hallmark of Christian worship and the enduring symbol of salvation.⁵

In this practice, Jesus claims that the followers will remember him. We might think of remembering as recognizing the presence of someone who is considered absent. When the risen Jesus meets two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, they only finally recognize him when they sit at table with the bread and wine (24:28-32).

The salvation that comes in the presence of Jesus is still created in this “today.” The words to Zacchaeus—that today salvation sat down at this table—reaches across time and speaks the same truth to those still recreating that moment. As communities of faith sit at table with each other and recognize the physical presence of Jesus in bread and wine, in song and prayer, “today” salvation comes to their homes. Today becomes the middle moment, sometime between Zacchaeus’s table and the feast Isaiah imagines at the culmination of God’s reign:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear
(Isa 25:6).

Here we see the wholeness and restoration that the word *soteria* conveys. Each Eucharist meal, every chair pulled up to the table, points forward to God’s vision for all to eat together.

Failure ... and Grammatical Encouragement—Luke 22:34, 61

The gospel narratives do not downplay the disciples' failures. This is especially true of Peter, who not only denies following Jesus but even knowing him. So, it is fitting that Jesus's next use of "today" refers to failure:

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."³³ And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!"³⁴ Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow today, until you have denied three times that you know me" (22:31-34)

While all the other gospel writers record the story of Peter's denial, none of the other gospel writers use the word "today" in their telling of it.⁶ Jesus clearly states that he does not want Peter to fail; in fact, Jesus prays for his disciples to stand firm. And then Jesus says, "when you have turned back." So, while certainly not desiring his friends to desert him, Jesus acknowledges its inevitability. Even Jesus's most faithful followers will fail in their commitments. They will stray from the gospel and its path.

But Jesus doesn't stop at the certainty of Peter's failure. Here, Greek verb forms help us appreciate the energy in Jesus's encouragement of Peter. When Jesus says that he prays that Peter's trust "might not fail," Jesus speaks in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood describes a possibility, something that has potential to happen but has not yet occurred. When Jesus says "once you have turned back," he uses the aorist verb form which points to simple, completed action. In other words, Jesus grammatically expresses more confidence in Peter's repentance than in Peter's faithlessness!

Finally, after being reestablished, Jesus calls Peter to "strengthen your brothers and sisters." This verb, strengthen, is in the imperative, a command. Jesus does not merely predict Peter's failure, but he also assures Peter that his failure will not be the final word about him. Later, in Luke's telling of the resurrection story, the other disciples tell this story to the two disciples who encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus: "They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, *and he has appeared to Simon!*'" (24:34). The reader is never told what happened in that encounter between Peter and the risen Jesus. But when we read Luke's sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, we see Peter as an empowered preacher and a courageous leader.

The church boasts a host of failure stories throughout its tenure—many of which resemble the initial ones: cowardice, betrayal, exploitation, desire for power. We would be remiss to ignore the fact that Jesus describes "today" as a time when his followers will falter in their commitment and fail in their responsibility. But failure is not the final word on today—not then, and not now.

To the reader, this exchange between Peter and Jesus suggests that Jesus not only desires the Church's faith and trust, but Jesus entrusts the Church with his presence and power regardless! What more could bolster the Church's resolve in the messy middle than to know that even when their faith in Christ falters, he continues to keep faith with them?

On the Cross, In the Garden—Luke 23:43

Luke 23:43 marks the final “today” spoken by Jesus in Luke's gospel—a word from the cross to a criminal on another cross: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” A common interpretation of this verse is that Jesus promises the thief that he will be with Jesus in heaven after he dies. But there is more going on here than a comment on the afterlife.

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), “paradise” (παράδεισος, *paradesios*) is the word for the Garden of Eden—the birthplace of humanity and its partnership with the Lord God (Gen 2:5). Jesus's words promising the criminal a place in Eden evoke a beginning, odd considering the people on crosses are meeting their ending. When we look at how Luke builds Jesus's identity throughout the Gospel and then look at the aftermath of the crucifixion, we will see how “truly” these words ring for the church, both then and now.

Throughout the gospel narrative, Luke consistently reinforces Jesus's identity as the “new Adam.” In Luke's telling of the birth narrative, Jesus is declared a savior for “all people” (2:10). Thereafter, his genealogy traces him back to Adam—the first human (3:38). Immediately declared a descendent of Adam, Jesus resists the devil's temptations to stray from God's desire for human beings: worship of God and care for the world (4:1-13). Now, on the cross, Jesus himself declares the intention of returning to the place and posture that humans were created for.

Luke takes great pains to demonstrate that Jesus's crucifixion is a direct result of Jesus's faithful obedience to God. Jesus does not cry out that God has abandoned him but instead forgives those who execute him (23:34). And as soon as Jesus dies, the centurion does not utter the sarcastic comment that Mark has him say, “surely this was God's son,” but rather, “this man was righteous” (23:47). Someone finally got it right.

In Jesus's death and resurrection humanity gets a chance to start over. One event in Luke's final chapter confirms this. When the two disciples going to Emmaus recognize the resurrected Jesus, it is in the context of a meal: “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (24:31). Luke's language mimics the language used for another meal, in Gen. 3 when Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (3:7). In the saving presence of Jesus, who has returned to the garden via the cross, Eden is reclaimed and the story of humankind reset.

This rebirth was possible because Jesus committed to suffering for it, just as any birth comes through pain. Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus consistently describes himself as a "suffering messiah" (9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26; 24:46). Tasked with rebooting humankind, Jesus understood that the only way was through suffering, ultimately the cross.

This "today" might be the hardest one for the church to hear right now—that to be included in this work of new humanity, we must be willing to suffer and sacrifice for it. We are called to follow Jesus in obedience to God, rendering our privilege, preference, and power—both individually and collectively. In a culture that prioritizes comfort and convenience, this message is a hard sell.

But the good news for the church is that "today" is both the day of the cross and of the garden. And we follow someone who knows the way to both.

Conclusion: Preaching To and From the "Messy Middle"

Having heard the words of Jesus "today," we now reflect again on the very "middle" assignment of proclamation. The task of preaching in and to the middle becomes more expansive as well when we establish the church as the middle of Jesus's mission. A few things become more possible.

First, we might draw on a wider range of Scripture in worship and proclamation. Sermons and Bible studies are often confined to a list of usual (uncomplicated or compromising) suspects with which preachers are both familiar and comfortable. But understanding our own identity as complicated makes space for biblical stories and songs that are equally complex (and often downright sketchy!). Exploring texts of "heroes of the faith" whose moral choices are often unheroic might encourage the church as it wrestles with its own failings. Voicing the songs of violent lament and divine betrayal might increase the church's capacity for empathy and emotional intelligence.

Second, this acknowledgment of our messy "middle-ness" reminds us that the call to proclamation is not the call to problem-solving, question-answering, or complication-untangling. Preaching is bearing witness to the work God has done and continues to do in a messy world and through a messy church. We create so much needless stress (not to mention boring sermons) by assuming that our job is to fix the problems and clear the fog. From our survey of Jesus's proclamations of "today," it is clear that Jesus himself did not, in fact, clear everything up. We would do well to remember another of Jesus's sayings, "Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them" (John 13:16).

Third, we might preach more pastorally. This perspective might better help us calibrate our anxiety—and therefore our hearers'—about the current circumstances in which the church finds itself (mainly because it is the same situation in which the church has always been!). Ironically, we might be able

to comment when things go wrong that we are precisely where we are meant to be—the middle is messy! For example, what if a preacher discussed evangelism, benevolence, or activism with the leading question: “Why is this the *perfect* time to do what God has asked?” Such a shift may go far in calming the church’s nervous system.

Fourth, such proclamation reproduces itself. By making space for and addressing the inevitable mess, preachers educate hearers to articulate their own messy stories of sin and salvation, of fear and possibility. Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth noted: “The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the Church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach.” To be a proclaiming community, it must be an honest one, leaning into the difficulties. Preachers who tell the truth about the church coach the church itself to preach authentically.

Finally and most importantly, we—this proclaiming community—might also better discern and celebrate the presence of Christ, who is not bound to the today in the text but remains with us in every “today.” Rather than either defer God’s goodness to the future or mourn over our decline since the supposedly glorious past, we can receive the gift of our present time with gladness as further opportunity to mediate Jesus’s presence and manifest the good news *today*. Jesus entrusted this middle time to his church: “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). The middle may indeed be difficult and a bit disheveled ... but it is ours.

Notes

1. Barna Group. “New Research: Belief in Jesus Rises, Fueled by Younger Adults.” April 7, 2025.
2. World Council of Churches. *Annual Review 2025: Walking Toward Unity*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2026.
3. Belsky, Scott. *The Messy Middle: Finding Your Way through the Hardest and Most Crucial Part of Any Bold Venture* (New York: Portfolio, 2018), 8.
4. Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Revised and augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie. 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940. s.v. “πληρώω.”
5. See Paul’s similar presentation of the Eucharist, written decades earlier than this gospel in 1 Cor 11:34-40.
6. Compare Mark 14:27-31; Matthew 26:31-35; John 13:36-38.

A Righteous Reversal: Foretelling and Foretaste (Advent 3)

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[Isaiah 61:1-11](#)

Victor Hugo's classic French novel, Les Misérables, was published in 1862. Due to eight English translations, as well as multiple musical, stage, and film adaptations, many know the basic outline of the story.¹ This includes the critical encounter between the main character, Jean Valjean, who is recently released from an unjust prison sentence, and the Catholic priest Bishop Charles-François-Bienvenu Myriel. Bishop Myriel is extraordinarily gracious to Valjean, forgiving his theft of the bishop's silver cutlery after the bishop provided food and a bed. In addition, the bishop covers for that theft so that Valjean is not arrested and returned to prison. Then the bishop goes even further by giving the silver cutlery and silver candlesticks to Valjean so he can sell them, advance out of poverty, and become a new person. As the bishop offers Valjean this unbelievable gift, he challenges him, "Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man."² Through these astonishing actions, Bishop Myriel reverses the fortunes of Valjean, and by extension, everyone whom Valjean would come to encounter.

While this basic outline is well known, many are not as familiar with Hugo's extensive description of the bishop in the novel's opening chapters. Hugo presents the bishop as a sincerely devoted priest who is most concerned about the less fortunate. In fact, the bishop finds fault with society's most powerful, charging them with responsibility for the plight of the poor. In the bishop's judgment, society plays a critical role in the conditions of those named in the book's title: "the wretched" or "the dispossessed."

The bishop's perspective is summarized in a key passage that is rarely relayed in dramatic adaptations. The bishop explains, "Teach the ignorant as much as you can; society is guilty in not providing universal free education, and it must answer for the night it produces. If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness." This section ends with an observation from the narrator: "Clearly, he had his own strange way of judging things. I suspect he acquired it from the Gospels."³

Hugo has a view of social responsibility for societal conditions, and he expresses it through the character of Bishop Myriel. Hugo is not being evasive, however, when he places his view in the bishop's mouth. The reader should

have no doubt that on the issue of social responsibility the bishop embodies the author's perspective. This is made clear in Hugo's preface to the novel, where he refers to "a social condemnation" that "artificially creates a hell on earth." He then names "the three problems of the century" as exploitation of labor, inadequate food, and insufficient education. He refers to these deprivations as "social asphyxia." They choke the oxygen out of those under their grip. They are forms of oppression.⁴

While Hugo's social view is clearly spelled out in the original novel, it is often missed in many dramatic and musical adaptations.⁵ Some of this is undoubtedly due to the size of the book, numbering more than 1400 pages in English translations. Many things must be cut for an adaptation of reasonable length. Some of this may also be due to the choices made by the creators of the adaptations. Perhaps it is easier to focus on the isolated charity of the bishop and the resulting individual heroism of the main character than to see the plot developments around these characters as a commentary on the failure of society writ large, whether it be the original French society or any modern western society thereafter. Indeed, a creator of a dramatic adaptation needs it to be financially viable. That viability is certainly more plausible if the paying customers do not feel morally judged in the production.

What if something similar were true for Advent? What if the texts we read during Advent say more than we relay in our preaching of them? What is it that we say we are waiting on during the four Sundays before Christmas? If it is salvation in some spiritual and physical sense, what is it we hope to be saved from? What if we dug into our texts a little deeper to discover more? What if this Advent we started asking hard questions about forms of injustice around us? Are we willing to consider these questions honestly with prayer and discernment?

One important text for these questions is Isaiah 61, the first scriptural passage for the third Sunday of Advent. Isaiah 61 begins with the voice of a prophetic figure claiming God's spirit as an anointing for an assignment. This unnamed prophet asserts, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because God has anointed me" (61:1).⁶ Specifically, God has dispatched this messenger to declare a reversal of fortunes for those in confinement, whatever form it might take. This message of reversal is "good news to the oppressed;" it is to "bind up" or heal "the brokenhearted;" it is "liberty for the captives and release to the prisoners." Since these phrases are set in four poetically parallel lines, they should most likely be read as describing an overlapping situation: the oppressed are brokenhearted due to being captive prisoners. Yet, God is ending their suffering. That is the good news.

Isaiah 61:2 continues this theme by describing the prophet as anointed "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our

God.” Again, this is the prophet’s announcement of a divine reversal, which includes the calling “to comfort all who mourn.” The first half of Isaiah 61:3 explains that the mourners will be given “a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” Isaiah 61:3b continues describing this reversal, but with a shift in imagery. The change of the mourners’ status includes size and stability: “They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display [the LORD’s] glory.” The fourth verse expands this portrayal of reversal with another shift, this one focusing on rebuilding. Those who mourned will repair what had been destroyed, which is described in four parallel phrases: “the ancient ruins;” “the former devastations;” “the ruined cities;” and the “devastation of many generations.”

The mention of “Zion” in Isaiah 61:3 is the only explicit reference to Israel in this chapter’s eleven verses. Still, given the context in the book of Isaiah, it is clear that the reversal in vv. 1-4 refers to Israel’s situation. Indeed, scholars divide the book into three sections: the first section of chapters 1-39 is referred to as First Isaiah, set in Jerusalem in the 8th century BCE; the second section of chapters 40-55 is read as Second Isaiah, composed during the Babylonian Exile (587 to 539 BCE); and the third section of chapters 56-66 is interpreted as Third Isaiah, addressing those in Judah after the exile. Accordingly, Isaiah 61:1-4 refers to God’s promise to reverse the suffering Israel endured in that time of captivity.

In addition, the presentation of the prophetic figure in Isaiah 61 alludes to several themes from the Servant Songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) as well as broader themes in verses 40-55. These allusions include the spirit’s presence (40:1; 42:1; 44:3; 48:16); good news (40:9; 52:7); the release of prisoners (42:7; 49:9); comfort (40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12; 52:9); and rebuilding (49:16; 51:3; 52:9; 54:1). In fact, the prophet here in Isaiah 61 may be considered part of “the heritage of the servants of the LORD” (54:17). Thus, what was anticipated for Israel in Isa 40-55 is now coming to fruition in Isa 56-66. God’s promise of reversal is becoming reality.⁷

This theme of reversal in 61:1-4 continues in 61:5-7, where the imagery focuses directly on Israel’s relationship with the nations. Whereas the nations once subjugated Israel, now the nations will serve Israel. They will feed Israel’s flock, till her land, and dress her vines (v. 5). Likewise, Israel will serve as God’s representative to the nations. It will be “called priests of the Lord” and “ministers of our God” (v. 6a). Israel will also be blessed with the nation’s riches as a reversal of honor and shame (vv. 6b-7). While the Revised Common Lectionary omits vv. 5-7 from the reading for the third Sunday in Advent, it is still helpful to see that this section continues the motif of reversal with particular focus on the nation of Israel.⁸

In the chapter's next section (vv. 8-9), God explains the reason for this reversal. It is a matter of justice in God's sight. "For I, the LORD, love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing" (v. 8a). Israel has been mistreated. In response, God "will give them recompense and make an everlasting covenant with them" (v. 8b). God setting things right will also mean that Israel will be recognized as God's people. They will not appear to be abandoned by their God. Indeed, "all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD blessed" (v. 9).

The prophet celebrates God's just reversal in the final verses of the chapter (vv. 10-11). In fact, the prophet appreciates the privilege of proclaiming God's deliverance. In the prophet's striking imagery, being the bearer of God's good news is to be clothed with "the garments of salvation" and covered with "the robe of righteousness" (v. 10a). It is to be adorned with the most precious attire and accoutrements, like a bridegroom and bride on their day of matrimony (v. 10b). This is what it means to serve a righteous God, a God who will make things right. "The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (v. 11).

Isaiah 61 promises a God of redemptive reversal. This promise was originally intended for those recovering and rebuilding in Judah after the exile. Yet, even within Isaiah 56-66 there is a promise of redemption that will extend beyond Judah and include the nations. This is evident in Isaiah 56, where the people are commanded, "Maintain justice and do what is right" (56:1). This justice includes the foreigner and the eunuch (56:3-8) because God's temple "will be a house of prayer for all people" (56:7).

The justice called for in Isaiah 56 is expanded with a scathing rebuke in Isaiah 58. The worshipers' invocations are invalidated because of injustice. They are condemned as unjust, self-interested, and disingenuous: "Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day and oppress all your workers" (58:4). Thus, God demands that the bonds of injustice be loosened; the straps of the yoke be undone; and the oppressed be set free (58:6). Only then will there be genuine rebuilding and restoration (58:12). This condemnation continues in Isaiah 59. The Lord is dismayed that there is no justice among the people (59:15). Still, God promises restorative reversal in Isaiah 60, just as it is promised in Isaiah 61. These themes of justice, judgment, and reversal continue in chapters 62-66. This is where we see the divine promise of "new heavens and a new earth" (65:17), as well as the gathering of all nations (66:18-21).

Just as we see the theme of reversal in Isaiah 61, as well as its expansion in Isaiah 56-66, we see it expanded even further in the New Testament. We see this explicitly with Jesus as he quotes and reinterprets Isaiah 61:1-4 as being fulfilled in the good news of his own Messianic ministry; his healing

and teaching are good news to the poor and represent the arrival of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:16-19). Jesus leaves no doubt about his presence as the fulfillment of Isaiah's words, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:22). We also see the theme of reversal earlier in Luke's gospel with Mary's Magnificat, which is another Advent reading (Luke 1:46b-55). Mary proclaims that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (1:52-53).

For anyone who knows the gospels in any detail, this theme of reversal is not an isolated issue. In response to Peter's query after Jesus's encounter with the rich young man, Jesus teaches, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matthew 19:30; cf. Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30). Likewise, Jesus emphasizes that those who claim to be righteous should focus their attention on the least of these. Choices about how the most vulnerable are treated will be a basis for divine judgment (Matt 25:31-46).

This theme of reversal also extends to Gentile inclusion. This is foreshadowed in Jesus's teaching about food (Mark 7:1-23; Matt 15:1-20), in his encounter with the Canaanite woman (Mark 7:24-30; Matt 15:21-28), and in the parable about the banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24). These moments of foreshadowing become fully fleshed out with the explicit inclusion of Gentiles in Acts, Romans, and Galatians.

In addition, this theme of reversal includes economics. This was already evident in Isaiah 56-66, where we read about God's good news for the oppressed and God's condemnation of economic oppression (e.g., 56; 58; 61). Obviously, this is also an important issue in the prophets generally, with a definitive example in Amos 5, where the people are described as trampling on the poor (5:11). This is such an extensive problem that God declares hate for the people's worship due to unaddressed injustice (5:21-24).

Likewise, Jesus memorably demands that the rich young man engage in his own reversal of fortunes by selling what he owns and giving it to the poor (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30). Moreover, when Paul saw the wealthy mistreat the poor during the Lord's Supper in Corinth, he condemned it without hesitation. Paul raises this rhetorical question in judgment, "Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Cor 11:22). Paul also calls for sharing among Christians so that there is an element of reversal among fellow believers. "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (2 Cor 8:15).

James's epistle also offers striking commentary on economic oppression. He warns about favoritism toward the rich and against the poor (2:1-13), setting the context for his teaching about faith and works (2:14-26). James also

condemns the rich for oppressive wages (5:1-6). The book of Revelation closes the canon with a portrayal of reversal, as the ill-gotten gains of the Roman Empire will be taken in divine judgment (18:1-24).

Given the prevalence of this theme of reversal—from Isaiah 61 all the way through the Gospels and New Testament letters—how should we preach a fully informed message this Advent? Can we read the words about good news for the poor in Isa. 61, especially as those words are interpreted by Jesus, and not have our preaching include an emphasis on reversal, especially an economic one? Can we responsibly avoid proclaiming that the gospel should, in fact, be good news *for the poor*? Will we proclaim the dignity and worth of the least fortunate, in obedience to the emphasis on this issue in Holy Scripture? Surely, the proclamation of God’s advent, inaugurated in Jesus, must offer a foretaste of God’s love for justice amid God’s people gathered in the name of God’s Son? While we obviously cannot create the culmination of God’s coming deliverance, we can certainly, by the Holy Spirit’s power, do our best to create anticipatory glimpses of it by showing that we do, in fact, value what Jesus valued.

Let us be on guard against missing the deeper message of God’s word. Let us be aware of the risk of being like so many who love the musical version of *Les Misérables*, but who are unaware of, or are completely unconcerned about, the deeper message of the original book. Let us be watchful and dutiful so that our Advent worship is not akin to a musical version of the Bible, which may include some important moments, yet it has lost critical connections with indispensable aspects of the story’s narrative.

I pray that each of us will search our hearts and minds so that we can proclaim the advent of God’s good news in Jesus Christ, wisely and fully.

Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes; illumine me, Spirit divine!

Notes

1. On the eight English translations from 1862 to 2013, see Lucy Day Werts, “What’s the best translation of *Les Misérables*?” *We Love Translations*, July 29, 2021, <https://welovetranslations.com/2021/07/29/whats-the-best-translation-of-les-miserables/>.

2. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (Signet Classics; New York: Penguin, 1987), 104.

3. *Ibid.*, 14.

4. *Ibid.*, xv.

5. On the novel’s reception history, see, for example, David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of “Les Misérables”* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017).

6. Unless indicated otherwise, biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

7. For an overview of textual connections between Isaiah 61 and Isaiah 40-55, see, for example, Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 783-792.

8. No reason for the omission of Isaiah is offered in *The Revised Common Lectionary: Consultation on Common Texts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992, 2012). One might speculate that the explicit reference to Israel and the nations might be interpreted as inconsistent with a Christ-centered focus during Advent. In addition, the imagery of a nation serving another can be read as a form of oppression, one that would be contrary to the larger themes of liberation in Isaiah 61, as well as problematic in a modern Christian ethic.

Sermon: “Every Other Year” (Advent 2)

Kristy Farber
Mercer Island, Washington

[Mark 1:1-8](#)

I had a colleague at the first church I worked at who was a bit of a grinch.

He dreaded Christmas.

He was put off by the stress that Christmas produced in people —
the financial burdens felt by the congregation,
the mass consumerism of the season,
the obligatory gatherings
and the constant pressure to show some holiday cheer.

His reasons weren’t theological.

He was a *really* big fan of Jesus,
grateful that God decided to be known in the person of Christ.
The whole incarnation? He was all for it.

But the Christmas season? It was too much.

And so he tried to get the rest of the staff to consider the idea that maybe we should only celebrate Christmas every *other* year.

I laughed at first, but he made a couple of good points.

Easter, he pointed out, is central in all four Gospels.

Maundy Thursday, all of Holy week—also in all four Gospels—and so of course, we need to celebrate those every year. And all four Gospels record Jesus’s baptism. Let’s make that a big thing!

But Christmas? We only get that story in two Gospels.

John and Mark don’t have a birth story.

Only Matthew and Luke.

So celebrating Christmas every other year makes sense.

While I smiled at his unconventional logic,
our congregation continued celebrating Christmas every single year at church.

We may not get a birth story in Mark, BUT, *if you are really looking for a birth story,*

there is a nod, in these opening lines of the Gospel, to the celebration of someone’s birth.

Let me read, again, the first sentence of the Gospel of Mark:

“The beginning of the **good news** of Jesus Christ, the Son of God ...”

“Good News” is a phrase that would have been significant to Mark’s readers. Not because it was a uniquely Christian phrase.

Nor was it a common phrase used in the early church. Not yet.

When Mark’s audience heard: “The Good News,” they would have immediately thought of the birth, not of Jesus, but of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor.

The birth of Caesar was known throughout the Empire as “the beginning of the good news.”

This is not because it actually *WAS* good news for everyone.

But because everyone was TOLD that it was good news.

Rome tried to pull a Jedi-Mind-trick on its people by telling them all,

“Augustus is the beginning of Good News for the world,”

and “the god Augustus is the savior of all people.”

They said it everywhere, proclaimed it throughout the land, and had scribes write it down on papyrus and stone tablets.

There are pieces of it that still exist today, which read: “the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of good news that came by reason of him.”¹

These bold statements were an attempt to convince people that the birth of Caesar Augustus was SO important to the world that a new calendar should begin with his birthday, that a new kingdom would begin with this political birth. These scribes proclaimed near and far that Caesar Augustus was, and would be, the bearer of good things for the people.

Good News was a political statement.

But that didn’t make it a reality.

Augustus’s birth was not, in fact, good news to all people living inside Roman occupied spaces. Yet to keep up the facade, everyone living under Roman rule was required to claim Caesar Augustus as a savior and gift to all people. They were asked to agree with it, or risk repercussions from the government.

For Rome, Good News was something that came from, and could only be found within, the structure of the political system. Good News was connected to power and military victory.

And the writer of Mark uses this phrase, the Good News, as his Gospel opener, completely transforming the meaning.

Mark isn't just trying to spite those in authority by taking their tagline.
He wants people to take note.
To consider what they have been told about Good News and see the possibility for something truly good.
He is pointing to the obvious contradiction between the promises of Augustus and the promises of Jesus.
To show what real hope looks like.
And that it doesn't come in the birth of a Roman Emperor.
But in the incarnation of the living God, the one the Lord prepared.

Mark starts off the Gospel with these words:
"The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."
And that line would have stopped readers in their tracks.
They would have paused right there.
At verse 1.
Early readers of this Gospel would have seen what Mark was doing as he relocates the promises of God, the hope, peace, joy and love of Jesus outside of the structures of Rome's Good News.
Outside of the way of life that they knew.

For Mark, this doesn't come through Jesus's birth in Bethlehem.
In Mark's Gospel, we have no Mary. No Joseph. No angels.
We don't even get a shepherd watching his flock by night.

We get the Good News, a stolen political statement,
taken from the place of power so that it could find its true power in the Gospel story.

Then we get John the Baptist, dropped into the story without much of an introduction, calling people to recognize the truth of their lives and of the world.
Calling people to come and be baptized.
To receive forgiveness.
To repent, to change direction in life.
To turn around and go a new way.
A message people flocked to, desperate for the promise of hope that might stick.

The poet WH Auden spent years searching for the thing to put his hope in.
He had seen the brutality of life, living through two world wars and Spanish flu.
Auden was notoriously untidy. He would show up to book readings in a stained and wrinkled suit that was covered with ash.
He drank excessively.
He wore the messiness of his own life on his sleeve.
He understood despair and fear and chaos because he had lived it;
it wasn't just something out there.

He longed for order in the world, even as he couldn't keep his own life in order.

Auden sought answers and solutions.

First in political movements.

And then in scientific progress.

Later he became fascinated by Freud and hoped
modern psychology could cure the brokenness he knew;
but in the end,

despite our best psychological theories

and our best political experiments,

Auden lamented at how everything was just as rotten as before.

And that is when he turned toward the Anglican church.

There he found a promise of hope that looked different than what these other
places were offering.

Something that was real and lasting.

Not based in who had power or the newest paper that was written,
but based in something that could outmatch the despair he saw.

And that was Christ.

Whose power wasn't anything he could fully describe, but was more real than
anything he'd found elsewhere in his life.

What John the Baptist saw were a lot of people like Auden,
searching for the something that would stick.

Desperate for a world where the broken things are made whole.

Needing hope that sticks and a love that is real and lasting.

This scene, this opening to Mark's Gospel story,
it takes place in the wilderness.

Outside of the familiar.

Outside of the decision-making arena of Rome

It's not a specific location,

but a symbol of somewhere outside the city and its jurisdictions.

Outside of the administrative structures.

The wilderness was a place of fragility.

Where life is a bit uncertain.

And that is precisely where Mark begins the Gospel.

Where the Good News is first proclaimed.

It meets the desperate hearts of people 2000 years ago.

And this Good News meets the longing and desperate hearts seeking God's
hope today.

One of the tv shows of my childhood was M.A.S.H,
the show about the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital staff during the Korean War.
I used to watch reruns with my grandmother.

There is an episode in season four where a wounded pilot is brought into the
hospital tent.

Radar, the officer who checks him in, asks his name.
The pilot responds saying "My name is Jesus Christ."

The pilot wasn't joking.
He believed he was Jesus.

Everyone in the episode responds differently to him.
Radar is strangely drawn to him,
while other doctors and nurses think the Jesus-pilot is conning them.
They think he is trying to work the system and get out of the war.

Eventually, they call in the Colonel to try to scare the pilot into telling the
truth.
But he never wavers from his story.
He believes himself to be Jesus.

The Colonel, holding in his frustration, finally asks:
"You say you are Christ, and yet here you are in a hospital in the middle of a war.
What would Jesus be doing here?"
And with quiet tears running down his face, the pilot responds:
"I am Christ the Lord. Where else should I be?"

He is absolutely right about the kind of place tear-stained Jesus would be
found.
A hospital in the middle of a war zone with the wounded.
In a shelter for people who don't have a home.
Right next to you when life doesn't make sense.

This is the proclamation of the beginning of Mark's Gospel.

That Good News has come and it is for all people who are desperate for it.
For all who find themselves longing for it.

The Good News offers a new path and a new hope with forgiveness and res-
toration for anyone and everyone.
And it does NOT begin in the palace of the emperor.

It is easy, today, to settle for the kind of promises of hope that Ancient Rome
was peddling—that our salvation, our hope, our promises of things being
made new would come from within our chosen systems.

These systems aren't bad—they will just leave us wanting.
And they aren't what Mark is pointing to in his Gospel.

Mark is reminding us that hope doesn't come from the assumed power structures.

Hope comes in Jesus Christ.

Mark relocates the Good News to Jesus, who is at loose in the world.
Showing up in places nobody expected.
Bringing hope to all.

On this second Sunday of Advent,
we find Mark pointing us toward a different kind of Christmas story.

One my colleague had suggested we preach in lieu of the birth narrative.
Change up the celebration.

But, honestly, this message is one we need to hear more than every few years.
More than *annually*.

This message of the Good News,
redefined and unleashed into the world,
this is a message that we need DAILY. We need to hear it again and again.

The message of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the son of God—
it is a message of hope, breaking into this world and your life,
this day, and in every season to come.
Amen.

Notes

1. My exegesis work on this text comes from a Preacher's Lab group I participated taught by Dr. Micheal Beth Dinkler in New Haven Connecticut in 2018.

Sermon: “We Are Better Together”

Reginald Blount
Chicago, Illinois

[1 Corinthians 12:12–31](#)

Beloved, I’ve been thinking lately about how easy it is to forget who we are when the world keeps telling us who we should be. We’re told our histories are divisive, that our stories don’t belong in classrooms, and that our pain is performance. We’re told our excellence is threatening, our advocacy is aggressive, and our very presence in certain spaces needs justification. The world whispers that we’re defined by our trauma, reduced to our struggle, limited by our zip codes, and confined by their expectations. The world tells us to hustle harder while it denies us rest; to pull ourselves up by bootstraps it never gave us, and to succeed individually in systems designed for collective failure. And beloved, dare I say, even our own faith communities sometimes tell us we must choose between authenticity and acceptance, between roots and respectability, between prophetic witness and cultural palatability.

Beloved, how easy it is to lose sight of our calling, our purpose, when the noise gets loud and the divisions run deep. How easy it is to believe we can make it on our own when everything around us is screaming isolation, independence, and self-sufficiency. We have been schooled in a gospel of self-reliance that owes more to the marketplace than to the manger, more to the algorithm than to the altar. So let us name it plainly, beloved: this hour does not call for another strategy for going it alone. It calls for a recovered memory of what it means to belong to one another.

And I do not preach this from outside the struggle. I preach it from inside it. Still learning. Still failing. Still tempted, some days, by the very isolation I stand here warning you against. Beloved, this word is for me before it is for you.

But beloved, as we gather here today in this sacred space—a community shaped by many traditions, many languages, many wounds, and many hopes—we pause to remember who we are and whose we are. Howard Thurman, standing in this very tradition in 1943, reminded a generation that it is the peculiar task of the preacher to recognize the deep urge within us toward a way of life that is worth living, and to call it to bear witness.¹ We are that generation now. And as we gather, we hear Paul speaking across the centuries with a message that sounds as if it were written for this very moment: “The body is one and has many members” (1 Cor 12:12).

Beloved, we are living in a time that feels disjointed. A time when the world is pulling apart at the seams: politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. A time when fear is loud, uncertainty is high, and division is intentional. It's a time when people are building walls faster than they're building bridges, when communities are fracturing under the weight of competing narratives, when we watch with deep moral unease as our nation wages war in distant lands and is told that destruction is diplomacy and that bombs are security. It's a time when even the church sometimes forgets that we were never meant to walk this journey alone. Yet beloved, when the world feels dismembered, the Spirit remembers how to put a body back together.

Paul gives us the theology. Our traditions give us the cultural memory. And the Spirit gives us the power to live it out. First Corinthians 12 reminds us what faith communities across generations and across this beautiful, complex room have always known. Something the world keeps forgetting: We survive together. We thrive together. We overcome together. We are better together!

Beloved, Paul addresses a community facing challenges not unlike ours: how to be united as one body despite our many diverse members; how to collaborate across different backgrounds; how to honor each other amid societal pressures to compete; and how to maintain connection in a culture that promotes individualism and encourages us to stand alone.

Beloved, Paul tells us, "The body is one and has many members." Beloved, not many bodies. Not many missions. Not many truths. One body. Many members. One Spirit. One Lord. One assignment.

You see, beloved, the church is a body, not a building. And there's a difference. A building can close. A body keeps moving. A building can be locked. A body finds another way. A building can be shaken. But a Spirit-bound body cannot be broken. A building depends on an address. A body depends on a heartbeat, and that heartbeat is the Holy Spirit, moving among us whether we are gathered in a sanctuary with stained glass or scattered in living rooms and prison cells and hospital waiting rooms, still connected, still one.

The early communities of faith understood this. They met in hush harbors and brush arbors, in upper rooms and open fields, not because they loved inconvenience, but because they knew the church is not where we gather; it is who we are when we leave. In the body of Christ, we are not individual believers. We are connected to something ancient, something breathing, something alive.

Beloved, when we walk through those doors, we are not just coming to a service. We are connecting to a network of grace. We are linking ourselves to a supply chain of spiritual strength. We are joining a community where our weaknesses find support and our strengths find purpose.

Beloved, I realize we live in a world that hands out trophies for individual achievement. I know it celebrates the self-made person, the independent person, the person who pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. But beloved, that is not what the Spirit celebrates! The Spirit celebrates shared strength. The Spirit honors mutual dependence. The Spirit anoints what Thurman called our “common destiny.” Because, as he wrote, not one of us can go our way alone.²

Paul says God designed us for interdependence, not individualism. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” And the hand cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you” (1 Cor 12:21, author’s paraphrase). And the Spirit steps in and says: “We fix what’s broken together.”

Beloved, communal work is not new for us. It is ancestral, spiritual, and biblical. When one mama couldn’t raise her children alone, the village stepped in. When one family lacked food, the church became the pantry. When one voice grew tired, the congregation became the chorus. When one marcher was jailed, another stepped into leadership. When one elder’s memory began to fail, the whole family became her memory, telling the stories back to her until she could rest in knowing she was still known.

This is not borrowed culture, beloved. This is remembered identity. Because communities of faith have always known: Your strength is my survival, and my survival is your responsibility. Interdependence is not a deficiency. It is God’s distribution plan for grace.

Beloved, Paul is clear: Every member has a gift, and every gift has a purpose. Gifts are not given for collection. Gifts are not given for hoarding. Gifts are not given for boasting. Beloved, gifts are given for sharing and healing and caring and renewing and restoring!

If God made you a thinker, we need your strategy. If God made you a builder, we need your hands to construct solutions. If God made you compassionate, we need your heart to hold the hurting. If God made you prophetic, we need your voice to speak truth to power. If God made you creative, we need your imagination to see a new way forward. If God made you steady, we need your presence to calm the anxious.

Paul says in verse 18, “God arranged the members, each one of them, in the body as God chose” (1 Cor 12:18, author’s paraphrase). You are not randomly gifted. You are strategically placed. The Spirit is saying: “I have already installed what the church needs for this hour.”

You’re not here by accident. You’re here by assignment. And that assignment is not to sit on the sidelines, wondering when someone else is going to fix what’s broken. That assignment is to step into your God-given role and work together with others who are doing the same. It is to ask, each morning, not “What can this body do for me?” but “What has God equipped me to do

for this body?” That is a harder question. It is also the only question that will get us where we need to go.

And here is where Paul gets really radical: The “weaker parts” are not worth less. They are worth more honor (1 Cor 12:22–23, author’s paraphrase).

Beloved, in a world obsessed with strength, status, and visibility, Paul flips the script. He says the parts that seem weaker are indispensable. The parts we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor. Scarcity culture protects the privileged. Kingdom culture protects the vulnerable.

In uncertain times, communities often ask: “Who’s the strongest?” “Who’s the loudest?” “Who has the platform?” But the Spirit asks: “Who’s hurting?” “Who’s overlooked?” “Who carries dignity without visibility?”

Howard Thurman saw this clearly. Writing in the shadow of World War II, watching fascism masquerade as patriotism and even Christianity, he warned that the appeal of every authoritarian movement, then and now, is that it offers ordinary people “a sense of collective destiny” while serving the few at the expense of the many. The fascist promise, Thurman wrote, is always built on the manipulation of fear and the targeting of the vulnerable. And his word to the church was unsparing: “The Church is irrevocably committed to a revolutionary ethic.”⁷ If it fails to live by that ethic, it leaves space for every masquerade to flourish.

Beloved, we do not have to strain to see the masquerade in our own moment. Watch, Thurman said, “for the signs in your community, whatever may be the banner or the masquerade.”⁸ When governments target the marginalized, when wars are waged on the world’s most vulnerable while the powerful grow fat, when the church is tempted to bless what God has not blessed. That is the hour that demands the body rise to its revolutionary calling. Not as theory—as testimony.

Beloved, I am told of a congregation in a neighborhood like many of ours that faced rising food insecurity and opened its pantry three days a week. Demand soon outstripped capacity. The pastor invited leaders to help expand the system. Instead, forty congregants showed up. A teenager said, “I can organize on social media.” An elder said, “I can pray while packing bags.” A truck driver said, “I can transport from the warehouse.” A chef said, “I can teach families how to cook what they receive.” A grandmother said, “I can watch babies while parents learn.” A retired teacher said, “I can help the children with their homework while they wait.” A man newly out of work said, “I don’t have much, but I have my hands and my Tuesdays.”

The pantry became a food chain for the whole body, each member feeding another, who fed the community. The impact multiplied when the Body stopped asking who was in charge and began asking who had a part to play. What some call small, God calls necessary. The miracle is not the gift. The miracle is the Body that receives it.

Beloved, I cannot overemphasize that we are living in very uncertain times. People are suffering. Some are suffering from economic pressure. Some are suffering from social isolation. Some are suffering from political anxiety. Some are suffering from spiritual fatigue. Some are suffering from ministry burnout. Some are suffering under the weight of doing too much on their own.

Paul says when one suffers, all suffer. The body of Christ says: The wound is ours to heal, the work is ours to share, and the responsibility is ours to carry. “I hurt” becomes “We heal.” “I’m gifted” becomes “We’re responsible.” “I’m not seen” becomes “I’m necessary.” The problems are ours. The strength is God’s.

We are built to carry it together. When systems collapse, the Spirit says: Become the system. Be the body.

Beloved, we are better together! Not as a slogan, but as a strategy for thriving and as a witness to the world. The question is not “Do we have what it takes?” but “Will we each take responsibility for our part?”

O beloved, in my sanctified imagination, I imagine a church where no one suffers alone. I imagine a community where every gift is activated, and every person is valued. I imagine a church that doesn’t just sing about being one body but actually functions as one. I imagine a place where our struggles are met with support before we even have to ask, because the body is so attuned to its members that it responds before the cry is finished. I imagine a fellowship where the young are not merely tolerated but trusted, where the elderly are not simply honored on a Sunday but consulted in the planning, where the newcomer is handed not a bulletin but a role.

I imagine a witness so powerful that the world stops and says, “Look at how they love one another. Look at how they work together. Look at how they carry one another’s burdens.” Thurman named it in 1943, and the call has not expired: the ultimate destiny of humankind is good.⁴ But to live into that good destiny, we must find in the present a way of life that is worth living. Together.

Beloved, this is not naivete. This is discipline. It is the daily, deliberate refusal to let the world’s dismemberment become our theology. It is choosing, again and again, to believe that the Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation is still hovering over us now. Still calling scattered fragments back into wholeness. Still saying, as at the beginning: Let there be.

Beloved, that’s the church God is calling us to be. That’s the vision Paul paints for us across the centuries. That’s the reality 1 Corinthians 12 invites us into.

We are not called to fix everything. We are called to do our part in a body that fixes what’s broken together. The church isn’t one voice. It’s a choir. And right now, the world needs a choir. The world needs all parts singing in glorious harmony!

So beloved: What part will you sing? What gift will you give? What responsibility will you accept?

Because we are better together. Not as theory, but as testimony. Not as wishful thinking, but as witnessed reality. Not as a sermon idea, but as a lived experience that transforms both the church and the world watching.

The world has felt painfully dismembered. And the truth is, it will feel like this for some time to come. But God is still God, and the Spirit still remembers how to put a body back together. And beloved, that work begins with us, right here, right now, choosing to be the body that God designed us to be.

You're not just a member. You're a necessary member. You're not just gifted. You're strategically placed. You're not just here. You're connected to something bigger than yourself: a Body that will outlast every division, every disappointment, every attempt to tear us apart. And no one, Thurman reminds us, can go their way alone.⁵

We are the body of Christ. One body. Many members. All necessary. All gifted. All called to work together to heal our communities and transform our world.

So, let's live so God can use us, anywhere, Lord, anytime!

We are better together!

We are better together!

We are better together!

Notes

1. Howard Thurman, "Religion in a Time of Crisis" (address, August 1, 1943), Howard Thurman Papers Project, <https://thurmanpapersproject.org/documents/682>.

2. Thurman, "Religion in a Time of Crisis."

3. Howard Thurman, "The Fascist Masquerade," in *The Church and Organized Movements: The Interseminary Series*, Volume Two, edited by Randolph Crump Miller (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 82–100. 8. Thurman, "The Fascist Masquerade."

4. Thurman, "Religion in a Time of Crisis."

5. Thurman, "Religion in a Time of Crisis."

Sermon: “On the Way to Bethlehem: Rome as A Place of Longing”¹

Mary Spradlin
Fort Worth, Texas

[Romans 8:18-19, 24-25; Luke 2:1-3](#)

It was on a rainy day in April, just weeks after war had broken out in Ukraine, that an aid worker named Olena Shula drove 522 miles across the country to rescue a mother and her baby, who was just seven days old. When the young mother, Galina, found out she was pregnant, she never imagined that she would have her baby under the risk of bombing, surrounded by the dangers of war. Olena reported, “We offered Galina to go to a safe place, but due to severe stress, the doctor said that she was in danger of premature birth. It was a terrible time; she was constantly having to go down to the bomb shelter during air raids. But she is a very strong woman. On April 6, (42 days after the war began), her beautiful daughter, Sofiya, was born.”² Just one week later, Galina and Olena began the journey back to a relatively safe place. Olena’s husband, like most able-bodied men, had left his civilian job to join the Ukrainian military to defend his country against Russia. So Olena, Galina, and the newborn Sofiya made the long journey to safety alone.

Today we begin a journey—not through a 21st-century war-torn country, but through a different empire, and a world that was no less hostile. Our Advent worship services will take us through the places that are significant in the nativity story. Our journey begins not in Nazareth or Bethlehem, but very unusually in Rome. And this does seem strange to us, since Rome isn’t specifically mentioned in the Advent story. But we begin in Rome, not so much as a location, but as a concept, as a representation of power. At the time of Jesus’s birth, the Roman Empire was a vast and powerful entity that ruled much of the known world, including Judea, where Mary and Joseph lived.

Our journey begins under the Pax Romana, one of the most stable and prosperous eras in Roman history. The Roman navy kept piracy at bay, and hundreds of thousands of Roman soldiers were spread throughout the land, which improved the safety of trade routes. This was a time of massive building projects, like Herod the Great’s palace at Caesarea Maritima, which functioned like a luxury seaside resort and was the home to Roman governors like Pontius Pilate. Buildings like this were designed to convey to the entire world a message of political power, wealth, Roman influence, human glory,

and imperial authority. Throughout the ages, we've seen leaders commission building projects like this to draw attention to human power and glory.

This term Pax Romana literally means "Roman peace," but this peace and prosperity wasn't for everyone. It came at a price. This period of relative stability and order in the land was enforced through military strength, strict governance, and oppression of the people. Living as a Jew under Roman rule wasn't easy. The empire relied heavily on taxation to fund its military campaigns and extravagant building projects, and the Jews—especially those living in Galilee, where Mary and Joseph came from—were heavily taxed, often to the point of hardship. They were allowed to practice their religion, but there were constant tensions. The Romans gave the Jews puppet kings like Herod the Great and Roman governors like Pontius Pilate, who often disregarded the Jewish laws and customs. Jews had no say in Roman politics and were at the mercy of imperial decrees.

Our journey today begins with such a decree: a census is being taken. All people were recalled to their birthplace to be counted. Now, I don't know about you, but even as a child, I thought that forcing everyone to travel around the country to be counted was a very odd way to run the government. But Roman censuses weren't just administrative exercises; they were tools of control and taxation. They disrupted daily life—which was very much a part of their purpose—and we can easily imagine that they were deeply resented by the people who were forced to comply. Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem was certainly not something of their own choosing. And this journey from Nazareth, which would have been about ninety miles, would have been very arduous, especially for pregnant Mary. The journey was long, roads were very basic, and safety from robbers or wild animals couldn't be guaranteed.

My whole life, I've seen images of Mary and Joseph alone on a lonely road to Bethlehem. But imagine the roads crowded with families, grandparents, children, merchants, laborers—everyone making their way to ancestral towns. The journey to Bethlehem wasn't simply *their* journey. It was part of a much larger human migration. Thousands of ordinary people were displaced by the decree of an emperor. This underscores the oppression the Jewish people experienced in their own land. And the journey that Joseph and Mary made represents this larger reality for all—then and now—who live under an empire that values power and control over human dignity.

It's not hard for us to think of places in our world today where people live in fear because of decisions that are made from on high. The years-long war in Ukraine, ongoing ethnic cleansing in Darfur, hostilities in Israel and Palestine, and the undercurrent of fear that exists among immigrants in our own country are just a few examples. We count ourselves fortunate to live in the United States of America. But even we who enjoy the freedoms our

country provides know what it is like when decisions made by people we will never meet have drastic implications on our lives, on our families, and on our communities. Every time our government decides to furlough federal workers, it impacts families across our nation as well as the economy in our local communities. When a city council passes a hardline ordinance requiring homeless encampments to be destroyed, people are left scrambling, without even a tent for shelter. A company's financially driven decision to relocate upends family life for a young man who is just starting his senior year of high school. The stakes aren't always life and death, but we've all had our lives in some way significantly impacted by decisions that are made by people who have power to influence our lives, whether we welcome it or not.

This season, as I've considered this story of Joseph and Mary setting off on their difficult journey out of obedience to a hostile government, I've seen clearly how God is able to use even this very unfortunate circumstance as part of a much larger, much more hopeful, story. And we know where this story is going ... it's going somewhere good! We know that, in spite of Mary and Joseph having to do hard things to please an empire, this baby will be born, and he will be Messiah for us all. And we are gathered here in this place today *because* this baby was born.

The challenge for the preacher is to not dismiss the reality of the hard thing—the hard things that we have to do, the hard things that people around the globe have to bear—and simply say, “You know, there's hard stuff out there; but God can use even the hard things for God's purposes!” Now, don't get me wrong: I believe God can do this. God can use even the evil plans of oppressors for good. But I'm not sure how helpful it is for me to stand here and say, “We should all rejoice in hardship, because God's going to make something good out of that.” Because of course it's true that we would rather not have the hardship. We would rather not see headlines that make our hearts ache and our stomachs hurt. We would rather not hear stories of children starving. We would rather not live under rules and laws that seem harmful, if not for us, than for others in our society. We would rather skip the bad stuff and move straight to the Kingdom of God.

Our theme today is Rome: a place of longing. This is the place where we realize things aren't as they should be, and we long for things to be ordered as God would have them. But here and now, we're in this time of imbalance. We're also right here at the beginning of Advent. Today is the first Sunday in the church calendar. This is the time that we reset and start over, and we remember again why it is that we need this baby. And every year, the Advent season is a period of waiting for Christ to be born, and it's a reminder that we live both in the already and the not yet. Paul used this birth imagery when he

wrote of present sufferings and future glory. He said: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.”³ And he spoke of hope, the kind of hope that you can only have if you believe that this world isn’t yet where God wants us to be.

God wants better for us than this, and we have a role to play in this hope that I speak of, this hope that Paul speaks of, this hope that surely Mary and Joseph had, that life for their child would be better than this very inauspicious beginning. We light this first candle of Advent as a reminder that we carry this hope out into the world. And we know that the darkness of this world is sometimes very bleak, but we recognize that this hope exists, even in the darkness, and God is in it all.

And we know that this hope doesn’t make the bad stuff go away. But here’s something I want you to know—something that I believe hope *can* do: Hope can provide an antidote to the fear that oppression creates. Because I believe that people who are in power and are wielding power to stay in power and are hurting others and oppressing others ... they do this so that their own glory may grow. Ironically, in spite of their power, I also believe that they do this from a place of fear and anxiety. Because they fear that they will lose this power, that they won’t have it anymore. So they wield this power to keep others in their place, so they can hold on to the power they have.

But here’s what hope says: Hope says, “It won’t always be like this.” Hope says, “There’s something bigger than you, tyrant!” Our God is greater than you. Our God has not abandoned us. Our God is with us in the hard times and in the times that are to come, and *we* are the bearers of that message. This is the story of hope that is told over and over again in scripture. This is the hope of the Israelites when they are slaves in Egypt. This is the hope of the exiles when they are driven from their land to Babylon. This is the hope of the Jews who were oppressed during Roman times. And this is the hope of our world today.

From its earliest days, the Christian church has been called to offer radical hope in the face of darkness, and across the centuries, Christians have sought to embody that hope in different ways. I shared with you earlier some thoughts about the Pax Romana, the “Roman peace” that brought stability and prosperity to the wealthy and powerful, often at the expense of the lowly and oppressed. In the history of the church, there is also the concept of the Pax Dei, the “Peace of God.” This is the name given to a movement that began in tenth-century medieval Europe, several centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire. In this era, much of Western Europe was politically decentralized, leaving local nobility to fight private wars. This is the age of the medieval knights, when land was seized for wealth and power; slights to one’s honor demanded retaliation; and justice was mostly local. Unfortunately, just

as under the Pax Romana, it was often ordinary people who bore the cost of peace maintained by the powerful.

Imagine: It is the year 1000. You're not a king or a knight—you're a farmer. You've spent months planting and tending wheat. Your children are helping gather the harvest. Suddenly, horsemen appear—not foreign invaders, but the soldiers of the neighboring lord. They burn your fields because your lord is feuding with theirs. They take your oxen, loot your grain, and ride away. By winter, your family may starve—not because of drought, but because powerful men settled their dispute on your land.

Into that world, the Christian church said, "Enough." Against the values of power and greed, the church encouraged peace through restraint and justice. Claiming the moral and spiritual authority of God, the church sought to place limits on violence. It declared that priests, monks, nuns, pilgrims, farmers, merchants, women, children, and the poor were not legitimate targets of warfare. Those who violated these protections could be excommunicated from the church.

The Pax Dei did not end war, but it did do something remarkable: it insisted that even the powerful are accountable to God. Drawing on centuries of Scripture and the Church's witness, Christian leaders spoke hope into the darkness by proclaiming that the vulnerable matter to God and are worthy of protection. In contrast to the Pax Romana, which maintained peace through imperial power, the Pax Dei sought to protect the lowly and the vulnerable by placing moral limits on the powerful. The questions we ask ourselves matter. Where the Pax Romana asked, "How do we preserve the empire?" The Pax Dei asked, "How do we protect the vulnerable?"

I shared a story at the beginning of my sermon about this young mother, Galina. Her husband, a civilian recruit in this unwelcome war, was injured early in the war. He went into a coma, and it was a terrifying time. Galina was able to go and be with him, and that journey itself would have been very difficult. Happily, her husband recovered, and the family was able to be together in a place of relative safety. Galina then started a child-care center in the town where she lives. Even as her country continues to be at war, she is working to create a safe space for women like herself, who come to this place having been displaced from their hometown because of the war. In the midst of chaos, she provides an opportunity for the children to receive loving care. "[These women] do not know what will happen next. They do not live in real time," Galina says. "They either stay in the past or hope for some distant future after the war. It's a postponed life." She speaks of the time that she was separated from her husband as a particularly painful time, and she says, "This is why I treasure this community that we can create because we are together and we can support each other and we can watch our children grow up togeth-

er. Above all, love helps me continue living.” Despite everything that she has been through, Galina has a bright outlook for her daughter’s future. “Sofiya’s children will live in a happy country,” she insists. “They will not know of the suffering we are going through right now.”⁴

I pray it may be so. This spark of hope that Galina carries is something that she is using to fuel a community where they can dream of a better life to come and improve their present reality as best they can. Her story reminds us that we, too, live in the already and the not yet. This Advent, as we share again the story of the coming of the longed-for Messiah, I pray we will all consider not just our present reality, but the life that is ahead of us. It’s not hard to encounter a litany of all of the things that are wrong in our world right now. But hope shines a light in the darkness. We are the bearers of this hope. This Advent season, I pray that we will look for and celebrate the ways where God’s dreams for us and our dreams for our world unite. I pray that we will ask the question of the Pax Dei: “How can we protect the vulnerable?” And I pray that we will consider how God is calling *us* to be bearers of hope for a world in need. In the name of the One who never fails us. Amen.

Notes

1. This sermon is the first of a series inspired by Rob Fuquay’s book *On the Way to Bethlehem: An Advent Study*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2024.
2. Kidsave, “Rescue Stories from Ukraine | Galina and Sofiya,” video, in “Generation of Hope,” accessed July 27, 2026, <https://www.kidsave.org/generation-of-hope/>
3. Romans 8:19 (NRSVUE)
4. Quotes from Chloe Fuller, “A Ukrainian Mother’s Strength,” *Kidsave*, March 7, 2024, accessed July 27, 2026, <https://www.kidsave.org/a-ukrainian-mothers-strength/>

Sermon: “The Way of Peace”

Lahronda Welch Little
Marietta, Georgia

[Luke 1: 68-79](#)

The strange thing about peace is that we do not light the candle because of what is; we light the candle for what we hope to become.

As the story goes, Zechariah was a priest of the temple, and Elizabeth, his wife, was of Aaron’s lineage. For these reasons, they were considered to be of the upper echelon in the Jewish community. Their positions gave them immediate social status, respect around the community, and religious authority. They had everything, except they did not have children. And they were well beyond child-bearing years.

But one day, Zechariah has duties in the Temple to burn the incense. As he goes inside, the Bible says there were worshipers standing outside praying. Going inside the temple was a serious matter. Going inside the temple was holy and sacred. Before the priests went inside the temple, they had to be sure that they were holy and pure. In the Temple, there was order. Because it was the House of God.

The people were standing outside waiting, and Zechariah, who had been preparing for his duties, goes into the temple and encounters an angel of the Lord. As you can imagine, Zechariah is shaken, trembling with fear. But the angel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.”

There is something to be said about the human call and divine response of prayer. Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s experience of prayer is a moving example of the power of prayer. Not that we get everything we pray for, but that there is a holy response invoked which we may look for, listen for, and make room for. We make room for possibilities; we make room for God’s loving, creative response. I still believe that when we pray with our whole hearts and when others pray on our behalf, things happen. Unexpectedly and suddenly. The appearance of the angel is God’s response to Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s prayers.

As Zechariah takes in what the angel has said, he doesn’t believe it. And who could blame him? He and Elizabeth are not spring chickens. But the angel says, Okay fine, but know this: I am Gabriel; I stand in God’s presence, or in other words, I represent God. So, after Zechariah’s question (call), Gabriel puts Zechariah in a proverbial timeout (divine response). And he is unable to speak until after the child is born.

I wonder if Zechariah's silence was more of an invitation than a punishment. An invitation to reflect (call) and to find what theologian and spiritual teacher Howard Thurman calls "the sound of the genuine" (divine response)—the true voice within us beneath the noise, fear, and expectations around us. The sound of our hearts in all of its complicated mass of issues.

Can you imagine not being able to talk for nine months? Some of us can't go nine minutes! What are the possibilities contained in nine months of silence?

Moreover, for nine months Elizabeth goes through her pregnancy in peace and quiet. The Bible says that when she got to five months, just as she began to show, she went into seclusion. Perhaps her seclusion is divinely inspired. I suggest that God will sometimes call us into seclusion so that God can work (divine response) within us to birth his purpose through us. Silence and isolation are not neutral, inactive endeavors. They prepare, shape, and form us into being. Sacred silence and isolation are spaces that develop faithfulness.

Zechariah's silence and Elizabeth's seclusion are holy invitations into communion in God's presence. An invitation to listen and discern what is to come. An invitation to separate from and quiet the noise of incredulity and disbelief. An invitation to still the voices of criticism and deal with one's feelings of worthiness.

Silence and seclusion are spiritual practices that give us space to breathe, rest, and cultivate inner peace. During his ministry, even Jesus went away to quiet places to rest.

Holy ordained silence and sacred seclusion are not punishment. Rather, they help us to become ... to become more discerning, more prayerful, more grounded, and more connected within ourselves through the Holy Spirit. This connection is not for material gain; it is for God's purpose of heralding the soon-coming Christ for the healing and flourishing of humankind.

Zechariah's holy silence and Elizabeth's sacred seclusion make way for their son's movement, voice, and vocation. Through silence and seclusion, we begin to experience how the call of John the Baptist makes way for Jesus the Christ.

Now, filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah's song prophesies, and we begin to hear whispers of his son's voice and vocation. That song is called *The Benedictus*, meaning *The Blessing of the Lord God*. Zechariah's song has two parts: the first is praise to God for salvation that is sure to come. And in the second part, under the power of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesies and prays over his son. Silence and seclusion usher us into holy insight for what is to come.

When my boys were little I would anoint them with oil and pray with them before they went to school. Then one morning, I saw them differently. I real-

ized that even though I birthed them, they didn't belong to me. They belonged to God. So, my prayers changed. One day during our time of prayer together, it was my younger son Kyle who said, "Mom, why are you talking like that?"

After silence and seclusion, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, as Zechariah was, we see things differently. We begin to pray differently. In his nine-month silence, I imagine that Zechariah finally surrendered his will to God's will. He surrendered his agenda for God's agenda. He surrendered his words for God's words. He gave up his partial understanding for God's wisdom and direction.

Now, remember, the people of Israel were oppressed and under Roman rule. They had gone to war with Rome and lost. So, it is under these circumstances that Zechariah sings God's praises, prophesies over his son, and in the last line says,

"Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

- Luke 1:78-79

Funny thing about peace, as lovely as it sounds, is that it only becomes a thing when there is no peace. Often, we do not recognize the peace that surpasses all understanding until we have experienced the opposite. In our human nature, we do not appreciate the warmth of the sun until we've experienced days and days of rain and cold.

Funny thing about peace is that the Way of Peace is rarely peaceful. I'm not talking about war because war has never brought peace. It's only after people begin to assess the damage and count bodies that peace becomes a consideration. And even then, peace has to be negotiated. I'm not talking about that. I am talking about the peace that only God gives. The peace that comes when we allow ourselves to turn inward, in silence and seclusion, allowing God's spirit to heal us from the inside out. The peace that comes when we realize that we belong to God, and we are not our own.

The external battles we engage in tend to leave us internally wounded, fearful, and angry with one another, grieving our losses, and lacking hope for the future. If we are not careful, our internal wounds can render us bitter and isolated, struggling to even see peace as a possibility.

The Way of Peace begins from within, in the space of silence and seclusion. Gabriel silenced Zechariah, not only because of what he questioned, but perhaps because Zechariah needed space to wrestle with the possibility of what God was bringing forth. When we wage war within ourselves, we eventually begin to affect everyone and everything around us. Our internal battles become external wars. Zechariah's silence and Elizabeth's seclusion can be understood as models of how God cultivates inner peace and peace among God's people.

How, then, do we experience the Peace of God intentionally? I would like to offer the spiritual practices of silence, seclusion, and surrender. From the outset, a regular practice of silence may sound pleasant and restful. While this could happen eventually, silence affords us the space to assess our emotions and internal dialogues. In silence, eventually our recurring thoughts will surface. If we allow them, the beliefs we hold about ourselves and others will emerge. Our beliefs about who God is can be revealed through our emotions. In silence, are you afraid? Are you anxious? Are you relaxed? Are you curious, hopeful, or convicted? From the perspective of silence as spiritual practice, we may begin to discover that the noise in our lives provides an escape from the holy confrontation necessary for peace and healing to come forth.

I imagine that Zechariah's silence gave him time to wrestle with his own disbeliefs about fatherhood and what such a task and title would be for a man his age. I imagine that in silence, Zechariah sensed the profound presence of God that burst forth in song when John was born and the silence was lifted.

We cannot talk about Zechariah's silence and not, at the same time, talk about Elizabeth's seclusion. Parallel to Zechariah's holy encounter is Elizabeth's seclusion. For she, too, wrestled with her emotions, her understanding of God, and her body that she thought was beyond its capacity to bear, grow, and raise a child. I imagine that in Elizabeth's seclusion she needed time to wrap her head around the miracle she carried. I imagine that she needed time to process that her baby is "the prophet of the Most High," who will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76).

For us, temporary, God-ordained seclusion means that we get to be alone with the Divine Spirit of God to catch up with ourselves, to notice and linger with the mundane and sublime happenings of life. Temporary seclusion is a necessary response to a busy world, a world in which it is easy to be swept up in busyness to the point we are at risk of losing touch with divine purpose.

Once we have entered the rituals of silence and seclusion, we may then take on a posture of surrender. This surrender is not defeat or giving up. Rather, it is surrender to confidence in knowing that we are God-created, image-bearers of the Divine, and beloved. Moreover, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are entrusted with Good News to share in the world. The practices of silence, seclusion, and surrender move us beyond ourselves to Christ.

Until this point, I have not mentioned the one who is coming, the one who is the center of Zechariah's silence and Elizabeth's seclusion—their son, John. John the Baptist, the herald of the Prince of Peace and Savior of the world, comes to us instructing us how the way of peace, though we are far from it, is possible.

Silence, seclusion, and surrender make possible the birth of things lying within us waiting to come forth. What is born is born from above and from within. Lasting peace is born through what we assess in silence, experience in seclusion, and gain through surrender. Peace waits within us. And may we know with the assurance of children of God that the Coming and Living Christ IS our peace.

Sermon: “Where Do You Stand?”

Joseph J. Clifford
Charlotte, North Carolina

[Isaiah 7:1-9, Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Two interesting characters lie at the heart of our Scripture readings for the morning, King Ahaz of Judah and Joseph, a simple man from Bethlehem. In some ways they are very different people. Ahaz is a king; Joseph is a carpenter. They are separated by over 700 years of history; Ahaz lived in the 8th century BCE, prior to the Babylonian exile; Joseph lived in the 1st century CE under the oppression of the Roman Empire. In many ways, Ahaz and Joseph are very different people.

But they share some things in common. In the first place, they’re kin, as I learned to say in the South. They are both members of the tribe of Judah, of the House of David, though that means much more to Ahaz than it did to Joseph. In 735 BCE, it made Ahaz a king. it made Joseph leave Nazareth and go down to Bethlehem to register for the emperor’s census. Connection to some ancient king meant nothing in Joseph’s world. I’m a descendent of John Winthrop, founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630—what would become Boston—but he had fourteen children so there’s probably a couple million of us in the United States today! None the less, Ahaz and Joseph are both of the House of David, Israel’s most beloved king. Go back seventeen generations in Joseph’s genealogy in Matthew 1 and you’ll find great-granddaddy King Ahaz.

And they both face serious predicaments. Ahaz’s is political in nature. He faces a threat from an alliance of two countries to his north; the Northern Kingdom of Israel, referred to as “Ephraim” in our reading, and Aram, today’s Syria. They threaten to invade Jerusalem. His heart, along with all his people, “shakes as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” Ahaz is anxious.

And they both are seeking peace, resolutions to their worldly predicaments. To ease his troubled mind, Anxious Ahaz considers making an alliance with Tiglath Pileser, the King of Assyria, a superpower of Ahaz’s day. This would be like Estonia seeking an alliance with the United States to protect them against Russia. Ahaz seeks the help of a superpower to protect him against military threat. This is what Anxious Ahaz resolves to do to find his peace.

Joseph’s predicament is much more personal. His fiancée is pregnant, and he knows he’s not the father. Joseph had a favorable reputation in the community. Matthew describes him as “a righteous man,” a *tzadik*. He’s a “Good

Joe,” to use contemporary language. All of that will go out the window if he marries a pregnant woman. The law says Mary should be stoned to death, along with the father if he can be found. Joseph doesn’t want to see that happen. He’s a Good Joe. Yet, if he marries her, he’ll be shamed because people will think they either had relations before marriage, or he’s raising a child that is not his own. Either way, his reputation will be shot. It takes a lifetime to build a good reputation and a moment to ruin it. Regardless of his decision, this Good Joe will most likely become a Shmo. He resolves to “put her away quietly,” in hopes the storm will blow over sooner than later. This is what the Good Joe resolves to do to find peace.

Both men find themselves in a predicament. Both resolve what they are to do. Then both are paid a visit by a messenger of God who throws a wrench in the works of their worldly resolutions. To Anxious Ahaz, God sends the prophet Isaiah. “Don’t do it!” proclaims Isaiah. “Don’t submit to that superpower Assyria over two nobodies to the north. This will all blow over, Ahaz. These two countries will be gone in sixty-five years, so don’t worry. Hold tight. Hang in there. Stand firm in faith or you will not stand at all. For God’s sake, don’t sell your soul to the Assyrian devil!”

Good Joe receives a similar message in a dream. An angel tells him, “Don’t panic, Joseph. Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Her child is God’s idea, conceived by the Holy Spirit. He’s going to be very special, part of God’s plan to save the world. Go ahead with the wedding plans, it will all be OK.”

Both Anxious Ahaz and the Good Joe are given the same sign to show that their predicaments will be resolved. And what is the sign? Pregnant women, whose babies will change the world. Babies are signs of God’s presence amid their predicaments. Sometimes babies are seen as predicaments in and of themselves, but here they embody God’s presence. Anxious Ahaz will not find his solution in making military alliances with a superpower. God’s power is not made known in bombs, but in babies. Ahaz is not to trust in swords, but in a baby, a baby to come whose name will be Immanuel, “God with us.” God with us, now that’s superpower!

Like his ancestor Anxious Ahaz, Good Joe gets the same sign, a baby. Joseph’s predicament is in fact God’s plan, God’s way of coming into the world to conquer our sin and restore us to life by reaching out to us in love. Well intentioned as he was, Good Joe will not resolve his predicament through the practical, by sweeping things under the rug, but by taking Mary as his wife, enduring the public shame, sacrificing his reputation, moving forward in faith that in this baby, God is with us.

So what do they do? Therein lies the most significant difference. Anxious Ahaz does not stand firm in faith. He makes his alliance with Assyria, trusting in their false gods more than in the living God and the promised child. But

God's will is not thwarted. Ahaz dies at age thirty-six, and his son, Hezekiah, born about nine months after Isaiah's prophecy, becomes king. Hezekiah is one of the few good kings in Judah's history, restoring faith in God to be God and getting rid of all the idols put in place by his father, not to mention miraculously surviving an Assyrian siege.

Good Joe, on the other hand, stands firm in faith, doing exactly as he was told; taking Mary as his wife, sacrificing his reputation, enduring the ridicule he no doubt received, naming the boy Jesus, just as he was told. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, we live in a world filled with predicaments, wars being waged, alliances being formed. Where is God in all of that? Closer to home, what about the predicaments faced by the church? Here at Myers Park Presbyterian, we continue to buck every trend of institutional religion. We are blessed by growth. We've welcomed ninety-nine adult members into our church this year, and seventy-one 8th grade confirmands. There's a lot of life here. Yet the realities of changing giving patterns, fewer households pledging, and more targeted, unpledged giving present challenges to funding the church's operating budget each year. Plenty of forces are aligned against the church's future. We know something about what Anxious Ahaz might have felt over 2,700 years ago. Where will we be in sixty-five years?

How should we respond? I read the other day about churches using AI to create chat lines for prayer. There's even a chatbot Jesus you can pose questions to. What could possibly go wrong there? What would it mean for the church to stand firm in faith amid so much existential angst instead of making alliances with AI and secular management strategies and marketing campaigns to attempt to secure our future? What would it mean to put our trust in all those babies we've been baptizing? How can we stand firm in faith for them amid the anxious world they have been born into?

These babies will grow into children and teenagers who face challenges the likes of which no other generation before them has known. Our younger generations are experiencing anxiety and depression at unprecedented rates.¹ Suffice to say, alliances among social media and achievement culture are not providing any help in the epidemic of mental health crises so many face these anxious days. With Joseph, too many people know far too well how reputations and relationships can be forever changed by one social media post or one rejection letter from the college of your dreams or one failure that becomes all too public. No wonder anxiety reigns over so many souls these days.

That doesn't even touch the anxieties brought by health crises, job pressures, financial pressures. It's not hard for us to imagine the realities of Anxious Ahaz and Good Joe. The question we face amid all the anxieties of life in this world, from the personal to the relational to the socio-political, is where

do we stand? Do we stand with Anxious Ahaz in fear? Or will we stand with Joseph in faith?

What might it mean to stand in faith? On a societal level, Ahaz was basically told that sixty-five years from his time, everything would be ok. Amid the socio-political realities of our day, can we imagine what the world will be like in 2090? Most of us will no longer be here. But what would it mean to not live in fear of the immediate threats we perceive, to make decisions based not on what is expedient today, but what will provide for a better tomorrow in 2090? What would it mean to operate not out of self-interest, but to be motivated by the legacy we wish to leave those who will come after us? How might trusting in a story that is so much bigger than our individual desires lead us to live amid the anxieties of our day? Faith often calls us not to act based on the practical, but on principles rooted in God's promised tomorrow, a tomorrow defined by justice and righteousness. Ahaz couldn't do that. Amid the anxieties of this world, can we?

What about on a personal level? Surely Joseph was afraid of what his marriage to Mary might mean for his reputation. Imagine what social media would have said about that! His world no doubt saw him as a fool; yet he stood firm in faith. He did what God called him to do. He trusted in God's presence. He trusted God's promise of Immanuel, first made to Ahaz, now made to him. God was with him. God was with Mary. God was with them both amid their predicament in a way the world could not fathom. And that was enough. God's presence amid the predicament was enough for Joseph.

Amid the anxiety and fears we face, can it be enough for us? Can it be enough for our church? Can we trust that our worth is not based in what we're able to achieve or fail to achieve, not on budgets or pledges or numbers, not in our grades, not in our skills, not in our athletic performance, not in what college we get into or don't get into, not in our job performance, not in our title at work, not in how many zeroes are included in our salaries, not in what any other human being thinks of us, but rather in God's presence with us, God's saving work among us and in us, God's love for us all?

In those days, Anxious Ahaz couldn't stand firm in faith. In his days, Good Joe did, thanks be to God, opening the way to the salvation of the world. Amid the anxieties of these days, where will we stand? With our brother Joseph, may we stand in faith. Amen.

Note

1. Contributing Factors to the Rise in Adolescent Anxiety and Associated Mental Health Disorders: A Narrative Review of Current Literature - PMC



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