



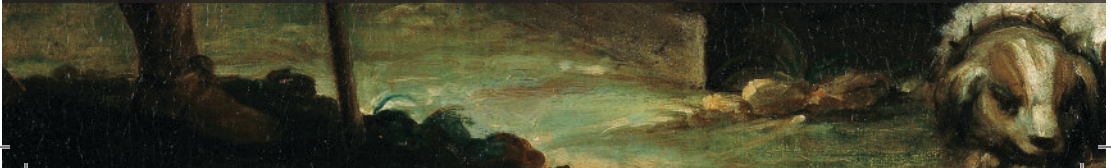
2022
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL

PRESENTED BY:

FIRST LIBERTY INITIATIVE



CENTER FOR RELIGION,
CULTURE & DEMOCRACY



CRCD Advent Devotional

Warm Advent greetings from the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy (CRCD)!

This year CRCD would like to offer you an advent devotional to help you anticipate the birth of our blessed Savior.

Every year, the Christmas traditions remind us that religion, and especially Christianity, is a public good that binds the hearts and lives of society. The whole festive season, unlike any other time of year, serves to strengthen social bonds and foundational freedoms. This devotional was written to that end, and we hope that this Advent collection encourages you and your family during this holiday season.

These Scripture readings and devotionals follow the lectionary readings for morning prayer in the 2019 Book of Common Prayer and bring together Old Testament and New Testament passages related to the birth of Christ. The contributors include individuals connected to the work of the CRCD including staff, fellows, students, and friends. They also represent many different Christian traditions and denominations and a variety of scholars, pastors, teachers, and students from various academic fields and vocations. This is truly an ecumenical effort that honors our religious differences and yet celebrates what unites us all—the reality that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

This Advent devotional is another small way that we see the Lord blessing the work of First Liberty Institute and the CRCD, as we work together to build a culture that reflects the virtues of our religious commitments.

Above all, the entire CRCD family wishes you and your family a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Cover photo: *The Visitation*, oil on canvas, by Gerónimo Antonio de Ezquerra (1660–1733). The painting depicts the scene of Luke 1:39–45, when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

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Sunday, November 27

Malachi 3:1-5, 4:4-6

3:1 Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. 5 "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me," says the Lord of hosts. 4:4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Luke 1:5-25

1:5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. 8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." 18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." 21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. 23 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, 25 "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

I will never forget the moment I read Malachi 3-4 in prison. After graduating with my doctorate, I landed a job teaching bible courses for a seminary training program in a maximum security state penitentiary. Each class was populated with about forty convicted felons dressed in grungy white jumpsuits and seated behind white, plastic tables. In one course on the Old Testament Prophets, I can still recall the moment we were discussing Malachi and read these words together, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stalls" (Mal. 4:2). The image of calves coming from their stalls landed. Before me sat convicted felons locked up and held captive—assuredly for sins they had committed—but locked up, nonetheless. Everything around us reminded us of this reality—the walls, the bars, and the smell of disinfectant and body odor.

The tension of that moment hung like a cloud over the room. I asked several of the men to talk about their experiences of incarceration and their struggles to stay connected to those in the free world outside. In that moment, communing with a room of convicted felons, I longed for the coming of Christ and the hope that we will be set free like calves coming forth from their stalls. After our discussion, we resolved to embrace hope. We closed our bibles and spent a few moments singing of the hope of the Lord's return.

Christmas time is the season in the liturgical calendar when we celebrate both the end and the beginning of the year and, as a result, celebrate both Christ's first advent and hope for his second. Today's reading reminds us that even though we are dead in our trespasses and sins, God promised a messenger would come to announce the arrival of the Lord who would save us from our sins. Malachi anticipates this hope when he writes, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal 3:1). Then a few lines later the prophet adds, "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes" (Mal. 4:4).

That messenger, the New Testament tells us, was John the Baptist who baptized the Lord and heralded his coming like a town crier. Luke reports that even while John the Baptist is still in Elizabeth's womb it was prophesied over him that he "will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17). Christ is the one who "will turn the hearts of the children back to their fathers and the hearts of their fathers to their children" (Mal. 4:4, Luke 1:17). John prepares the way and celebrates the goodness that Jesus Christ is here (Mal. 3:1).

Here at the beginning of the Advent season we reflect on the ministry of John the Baptist, who heralded the day of the Lord. John reminds us that we are now called to proclaim the coming of the Lord, both that he has come and redeemed his people and that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. All who were imprisoned by sin will be set free and "go out leaping like calves from the stalls" (Mal 4:2). The work of Christ is the basis upon which we think about life and liberties and casts a vision for the moral and theological foundations of our culture. May the joy of Christ go before us and guide us as we engage the world!

Stephen O. Presley, Senior Fellow

Monday, November 28

Isaiah 1:1-9

1:1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. 2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. 3 The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand!" 4 Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. 5 Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6 From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. 7 Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. 8 And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. 9 If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

Mark 1:1-8

1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" 4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Last year some friends of mine were hiking in Arches National Park in Utah. They were enjoying the clear day, the beauty of nature, and the vigorous exercise, when they happened upon an older gentleman who was in a completely different frame of mind. The man had gone for a hike by himself, lost his bearings, and did not know how to get back to the trailhead. He was alone, distressed, and lost in the barren high desert, the wilderness of Utah.

In the first verses of Isaiah's prophecy, the Lord presents his case against his wayward people, particularly the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Israel is described as a desolate wasteland, overthrown by a foreign power. Judah is battered and threatened by Assyria, and Jerusalem will soon be a "besieged city" (Isa. 1:8), the last city standing in Judah. Isaiah is very clear throughout his prophecy that Israel's dilapidation and destitution are the Lord's judgment on the people's rebellion and sin—a rebellion so severe that they have "despised" the Lord (v. 4). The nation is now a spiritual wilderness; the external and physical devastation of the land is a visible sign of the people's iniquity and estrangement.

But what if, as verse nine indicates, there is hope that the people's Judge is also their Savior? What if God enters the wilderness? What if there is good news for those lost in the wilderness?

The Gospel writer Mark points us to God's mission into the wilderness. The first thirteen verses of the narrative are saturated with the theme: John the Baptist was a man sent into the wilderness to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to a people lost in the wilderness (Mark 1:2-4). At that time the people of Israel are still in the wasteland of rebellion and sin, and still ruled by a foreign power, Rome. But God was at work. There was a great corporate movement of confession and repentance among the people of God (v. 5). And John's practice of baptism pointed to something still greater, something more necessary: the "mightier" one who would bear the Spirit without measure and cleanse his people from their sins (vv. 7-8). John pointed to one who would not merely go into the wilderness, but one who would overcome it and bring life and beauty where there had been only death and emptiness.

"In those days"—those days of God's new work in the wilderness—"Jesus came" (v. 9). The Spirit descends on him, and God publicly testifies that he is the beloved Son of the Father, uniquely loved, and uniquely empowered for his divine mission. Jesus is then driven into the wilderness—a natural wilderness signifying the spiritual wilderness and wasteland of sin and rebellion. God's people had rebelled in the time of Moses and were then driven into the wilderness. Now the New Israel, the sinless Servant of God, is driven into the wilderness to conquer sin and Satan on behalf of his people.

Our world today is in many ways a wilderness. People have made a wasteland of their lives by turning away from their Creator, and people have been left desolate by the sin and injustice committed by others. But what if there is good news in the wilderness—not merely for rescue out of the wilderness but for salvation in the wilderness even amid the desolation? This transformation of the wilderness into a place of salvation is precisely the work that God was doing in the sending his Son. By God's grace the wilderness will blossom with salvation, and those who trust in him can know refreshment and life in the midst of the wilderness. Isaiah saw this as well: "For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song" (Isa. 43:19-20).

Andrew M. McGinnis, Research Fellow

Tuesday, November 29

Isaiah 1:21-28

1:21 How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. 22 Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. 24 Therefore the Lord declares, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. 25 I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. 26 And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." 27 Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. 28 But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.

Mark 1:9-13

1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." 12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Isaiah gives us a timeless and universal message. We fall into sin, just as Jerusalem did eight hundred years before the birth of Christ. We languish in that state of sin, and we can only escape it through the grace of God. While he warns us that those who do not turn to God will perish, he also reminds us that that redemption awaits the people of God. Isaiah's preaching is as relevant today as when he delivered it nearly three thousand years ago. But it is particularly relevant during Advent—a time when we wait and prepare ourselves for Jesus' entry into our world and lives. The lesson preached by Isaiah will be preached in 2022 in churches throughout the world: no matter how much we have fallen into sin, we can always welcome God's redemptive healing back into our lives. And that healing will come if we wait and prepare in the right way.

Through today's Scripture reading, we see that Advent is about waiting, but as both Isaiah and John the Baptist revealed, waiting is not passive. Unquestionably, waiting is difficult for us. The modern world does not encourage or celebrate waiting. To the contrary, it casts waiting as an unnecessary burden and makes every effort to eliminate it from our lives. Isaiah and Mark, however, tell us that waiting in the proper way is an essential condition of humanity's relationship with God. We must learn to wait in a way that will prepare us to receive God's promise of redemption. It is active and involves taking the time to prepare oneself for the object of one's wait. For if we wait with repentance, as both Isaiah and John the Baptist proclaim, God will save us from our sins.

Waiting also involves mystery. With Advent, we await the mystery of God becoming human and assuming a physical presence in our world. But once again, mystery is not something our secular world embraces or even accepts. This is also why it can be difficult for us to remember that mystery is an inevitable feature in our relationship with God. No matter how much we study, we will never grasp the fullness of God. And so, we must wait, in faith and without reliance on support from the secular world, for the divine mystery to enter ever deeper into our souls and hearts.

While God is mystery, he gives us enough glimpses of his nature to be able to accept that mystery. Nearly eight hundred years before the ministry of John the Baptist, the same message of waiting and preparation for God's redemption was being preached by Isaiah. How could such a message persist over eight hundred years if not emanating from the mouth of God? Mark's Gospel shows us that our waiting pays off, that God never gives up on his promise of redemption.

Advent is a hopeful time, because it offers a mystery that transforms our waiting into a faithful welcoming of God into our lives.

Patrick Garry, Senior Fellow

Wednesday, November 30

Isaiah 2:6-19

2:6 For you have rejected your people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of things from the east and of fortune-tellers like the Philistines, and they strike hands with the children of foreigners. 7 Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. 8 Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. 9 So man is humbled, and each one is brought low—do not forgive them! 10 Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty. 11 The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. 12 For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low; 13 against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; 14 against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills; 15 against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; 16 against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. 17 And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. 18 And the idols shall utterly pass away. 19 And people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

Mark 1:29-39

1:29 And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. 31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door. 34 And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

We may be tempted to read tales of idol worship in the Old Testament and think that the whole subject is irrelevant to our day or that if it is, the subject could only apply to some kind of primitive people bowing before stone figures. The reality is that we are equally beguiled by the work of our hands (Isa. 2:8). Whether the work of our hands is fashion, technology, propaganda, money, or luxuries, we find ourselves easily enthralled.

Idols—these desirable, pleasurable, self-flattering things—are deeply and insidiously appealing. Before we know it, we have translated objects and ideas into idols that rule our lives. They are a snare for the unwary, set by our pride to draw us away from our first love. Our constant lack of discernment and obedience with regard to these idols and material things is offensive to God. Isaiah 2:11 tells us that “the lofty pride of men shall be humbled and the Lord alone will be exalted.” We will erect many edifices to our own glory and to our vices, but God will tear them all down. This same prophecy of destruction applies to our grand designs for nations that seek to supersede his rule or to declare it inapplicable or even offensive.

Our God is a breaker of bondage, whether to idols or to the demons that may be associated with them. Mark 1:39 summarizes a period of ministry by Jesus saying, “And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Jesus is the Lord who “will be exalted.” He has authority over the principalities and powers that seek to establish their reign over individuals and communities. In a time when those powers seem especially strong and formidable to us as we pray and fellowship in unfashionable churches despised by the culture, we need to look ever more confidently to Christ to set us free.

We will seek to be faithful. We will preach the gospel and engage in ministry as we have been commanded. Ultimately, the world will be confronted with its great liberator and one true King, the one revealed at Advent. Neither subtle arguments nor bold, deceptive ones will carry any weight when faced by the one who is exalted and risen. Rather, those who oppose him will seek to “hide in the dust” from “the terror of the Lord.”

Hunter Baker, Senior Fellow

Thursday, December 1

Isaiah 4:2-6

4:2 In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. 3 And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, 4 when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. 5 Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. 6 There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Mark 1:40-45

1:40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

Formed from natural streams in the Allegheny Mountains, the Elk River flows for 172 miles across central West Virginia. Native Americans named the river because of the many elk who gathered on its shores to drink its pure water. For hundreds of years, the river served as a source of clean drinking water and provided ample freshwater fishing. In January 2014, all that changed when a company negligently released into the river 7,500 gallons of a chemical foaming agent used to wash coal. This spill contaminated the water supply for up to 300,000 West Virginians, resulting in more than a dozen hospitalizations.

The 2014 Elk River chemical spill demonstrates a law of nature. When something unclean contacts something clean, the clean object is corrupted. The clean becomes unclean. Reflecting this law of nature, the Old Testament contains purity rules about unclean objects and people, including contact with those who have leprosy or other skin diseases (see, e.g., Lev. 13:45–46). If one touches an unclean object or person, the clean became unclean (see, e.g., Num. 19:22).

Our passage in Mark today shows an encounter between Jesus and a leper where something unexpected happens. Under Jewish law, lepers were ceremonially unclean (Lev. 13:45–46). As they still are in parts of the world today, lepers were considered outcasts, excluded from society, and dependent upon charity for their survival. Lepers were something healthy, clean people avoided. But not Jesus. From the beginning of time, when clean touches unclean, the clean is sullied, just like the Elk River when toxic chemicals were released into it. However, Mark tells us when Jesus touches the leper, the leper does not make Jesus unclean. Instead, the exact reverse happens. The “beautiful and glorious” one described in Isaiah 4:2 makes the unclean leper clean. Jesus changes everything! He touches the broken and sinful, the outcast, lonely and excluded. He takes me, and He takes you, with all of our impurities and cleanses us. Paul describes this miraculous transformation: “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Like the leper, we need only to ask Jesus in faith: “If you will, you can make me clean” (Mark 1:40). Jesus always responds to us in compassion, “moved with pity,” stretching out his hand toward us, and doing the unthinkable. He will touch us—the clean connecting with the unclean. He, however, is not defiled. Instead, He tells us “I will; be clean,” and we are cleansed! And as disciples of Jesus, having been purified by him, we can now be his agents in our world. Through His power, we can touch the unclean, and in doing so, cultivate free and flourishing communities and transform society.

Jeff Mateer, Executive Vice President & Chief Legal Officer

Friday, December 2

Isaiah 5:11-26

5:11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! 12 They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands. 13 Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge; their honored men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst. 14 Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exults in her. 15 Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low. 16 But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. 17 Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture, and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich. 18 Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes, 19 who say: "Let him be quick, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near, and let it come, that we may know it!" 20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! 22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, 23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right! 24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. 25 Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. 26 He will raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth; and behold, quickly, speedily they come!

Mark 2:1-12

2:1 And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. 5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— 11 "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." 12 And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

While on vacation in the country, a city dweller came upon a small farm. He had always wanted to ride a horse and seeing a particularly burly steed standing next to a nearby fence, he scaled the fence and climbed on the animal's back. The very next moment, he found himself on the ground, rolling frantically to avoid being trampled. The farmer suddenly appeared and dragged him to safety. "You saved my life!" the city dweller told the farmer. "What can I do to repay you?" The farmer looked at him sternly and responded, "You can stop trying to ride my bull."

Confusion about reality can have deadly consequences. And confusion about moral reality is no less dangerous than confusion about physical reality. Just as the city dweller placed himself in danger because he did not know a bull from a horse, we put ourselves in danger when do not know the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. The prophet Isaiah warns us, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness." Isaiah describes these kinds of people in detail. They accumulate land, plan their parties, and then stay up too late drinking wine. They build on every available plot and leave nothing for others. They honor each other and ignore both God and their neighbors.

These self-indulging, self-honoring monopolists act unjustly because they have convinced themselves that what satisfies their own desires is good, and therefore right. But to deny the poor any place to live and work is neither good nor right. God hears the cries of the unjustly injured. And He will not sit idly by. Isaiah declares that God will "raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth; and behold, quickly, speedily they come!" The revelers will not prepare for the invaders, so consumed are they in their music and wine and amusements. The invaders will easily prevail and strip the land bare. Then, "many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant." The fields from which the rich elite stripped every morsel of food will stop yielding grapes and grains. The honored men will starve and throats that swallowed wine to excess will thirst until they are parched. That will not be the end of their punishment. Many will be hauled off into exile. Others will die at home, and their corpses will pile up in the streets. The nomads, whom the hedonistic monopolists forced out, then "shall eat among the ruins of the rich."

How do we avoid the moral confusion described in Isaiah 5? We have a tool to help us know good from evil, right from wrong: the law. God gave us law so that we can know what is right and act justly. He did this because it is in His nature to be just. Isaiah tells us that "the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness." To know and obey His law is to live justly, to give to others what is theirs by right, and to enjoy the fruits of our own labors in good conscience. To obey God's law is to leave a little behind for the poor to glean, to develop only what land one needs, and to ensure that those who are wronged receive legal sanction and remedy against the wrongdoers. By contrast, the men whom Isaiah condemned deny the poor their right to glean, deny the injured their right to a legal remedy, acquit the guilty for a bribe, and then return to their drunken feasts.

As Mark relates in his Gospel, the same God who made all good things for us to enjoy, and who has power to restore life and health by his word, also has authority over all justice and law. God has authority to forgive our sins and God offers His forgiveness freely. But we will desire it only if we know what is good for us. And to know that one must meditate upon the law of God, which separates good from evil, light from darkness.

Adam MacLeod, Research Fellow

Saturday, December 3

Isaiah 7:1-9

7:1 In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. 2 When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. 3 And the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. 4 And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. 5 Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, 6 "Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it," 7 thus says the Lord God: 'It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. 8 For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. 9 And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."

Mark 2:13-22

2:13 He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. 15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." 18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. 22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.

And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!" (Matt. 25:6). Known to the public as "A Monk of the Eastern Church," Fr. Lev Gillet (1893-1980) described the "central idea" of Advent as the "coming" of the Lord Jesus. "One might perhaps feel that the term 'coming' is purely symbolic, for in fact Christ comes to us at all times, and even lives in us," he wrote. "Nevertheless, this approach and this presence of Christ, both of which are eternal, take on a special character in Adventide; they somehow acquire an 'intensity.' A special grace of the coming of the Lord is offered us."

Indeed, that intensity draws on a sense, an awareness by Christians in all times that the Incarnation changes forever man and creation. "The Christ-event is a cosmic event both because Christ is the Logos—and, therefore, in God the agent of creation—and because He is man, since man is a 'microcosm,'" observed theologian Fr. John Meyendorff (1926-1992). "Man's sin plunges Creation into death and decay, but man's restoration in Christ is a restoration of the cosmos to its original beauty." St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-391) understood the Incarnation not as a miracle of creation but of re-creation. In his oration for Christmas, he describes the Nativity of Christ as a perfecting, a return to man's former state, to the original Adam.

Revere the Nativity which releases you from the chains of evil. Honor this tiny Bethlehem which restores Paradise to you. Venerate the crib, because of it you who were deprived of meaning (logos) are fed by the divine Meaning, the divine Logos himself. Jesus is near us and in us, Fr. Gillet reminds us: "All the same, he makes himself known to us during (Advent) as 'He who comes,' that is to say he makes himself known as wanting to be with us, and as if adapting us better to his intimacy."

Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20)

John Couretas, Senior Editor

Sunday, December 4

Isaiah 52:5-7

52:5 Now therefore what have I here," declares the Lord, "seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail," declares the Lord, "and continually all the day my name is despised. 6 Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am." 7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Luke 1:26-56

1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. 39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

I never noticed the Jewishness of Mary and her beautiful Magnificat until a trip to Israel several decades ago when I discovered that Jesus praised the teachings of the Pharisees (Matt 23:3) and said God still dwelt in the temple (Matt. 23:21). I was shocked. This was contrary to everything I had read from scholars and heard from preachers. At that point I started a long journey of learning about the Jewishness of the Holy Family and the gospel.

I never noticed, for example, that just before this in Luke 1 the angel told Mary that God would give the royal throne of his father David (over the nation of Israel) to her son, and that he would reign over the house of Jacob forever. There was no mention, I suddenly noticed, of his reign over the world or the gentiles also. Only over Israel! Then at the end of the Magnificat itself Mary continued this Israel-only focus. She praises God not for sending the Messiah to the gentiles or the world but only to Israel: he has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our (Jewish) fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. There was no hint here that her son the Messiah would also help the gentiles or remember his promised mercy to future gentiles. Nor that the Church would be the New Israel (I discovered later that this idea is foreign to the New Testament).

As an Anglican, this soon changed my Advent focus. Traditionally, Advent is about waiting for the baby Messiah to come to our hearts to prepare for both our own end and the end of the world. Over the next few years, as I re-read over and over this magnificent Magnificat and its Jewish character, I thought about two things. First, the Messiah I was waiting for to come afresh to my heart was a Jewish messiah. He still retains the mark of being a circumcised Jew on his resurrected body in heaven. When I consume his body and blood in the Eucharist and thereby come closer to him, it is—mysteriously—a Jewish humanity that is drawing me closer. Not just his divinity but also his humanity.

Second, Advent prepares me for the end of the world. In these frightening times, it is a comfort to know that Jesus told the people of Jerusalem that one day they will welcome him (Luke 13:35), and that one day he will restore the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), as scholars are now beginning to recognize (see Isaac Oliver, *Luke's Jewish Eschatology*), in supernatural but nevertheless earthly ways.

Jesus' answer to the disciples question in the first chapter of Acts—Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?—was not a rebuke, as many scholars have suggested, but simply a statement that only the Father knows the time for that (Acts 1:6-7). Jesus had just finished conducting a 40-day by-invitation-only closed seminar for the apostles, and the subject of the seminar was the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). So the question was a natural one: When will it start? Jesus' answer was that he will restore the Kingdom to Israel in the Father's good time, probably about the time of the Son's second coming. So here's what we can look forward to: just as in the eschaton we will have renewed bodies, so too this earth will be renewed and its center will be Jerusalem, with the Jewish messiah at its head.

These are glorious things to ponder this Advent. Come, Lord Jesus, Jewish Messiah, King of Israel.

Gerald McDermott, Senior Fellow

Monday, December 5

Isaiah 8:5-8, 11-20

8:5 The Lord spoke to me again: 6 "Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, 7 therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, 8 and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel." 11 For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: 12 "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. 13 But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. 14 And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken." 16 Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples. 17 I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. 18 Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. 19 And when they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter," should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? 20 To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

Mark 2:23-3:6

2:23 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" 27 And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." 3:1 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." 4 And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5 And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

As much as things change, so much remains the same. A few years ago, I visited the grave of Jonathan Edwards in Princeton Cemetery in Princeton, New Jersey. The cemetery is very old, going back to the eighteenth century. Edwards died in 1758, and he is buried in President's Row, a section of the cemetery in which the bodies of the first several presidents have lain since they were buried over two and a half centuries ago.

I found a photograph taken in 1903 of the place where Edwards is buried along with the other eighteenth-century presidents. The scene is of the cemetery, but the surroundings look so different. In 1905, the cemetery was on the outskirts of the small town of Princeton, shaded by mature trees, with only a few signs of human activity in the background. But as I stood in the cemetery in 2018, holding that 1903 photograph, I was struck at how much had changed. The cemetery is surrounded by bustling human activity—cars and trucks go down the streets around the cemetery, and where there had been great trees and a house or two in 1905, the massive Princeton Public Library stands, and there are very few trees to be seen.

But the graves are all still there, all these years later. The people buried in those graves are still dead, just as they were in 1903. While so much has changed, many things remain the same—human nature is unchanged; we still face the consequences of our actions, and our bodies are still subject to the ramifications of that awful choice Adam and Eve made in the Garden: we all must die.

There are nine centuries between Isaiah's prophecy and Mark's Gospel. Isaiah's world witnessed the power of the Assyrian Empire as it swallowed up the peoples of what we now call the Middle East. Mark's world saw the titanic power of the Roman Empire as it ruled over Judea as a subject province. But the people in Isaiah's day and the people in Mark's day faced the same choice: would they trust the Lord, or would they follow their own human understanding and rebel against God?

God has always been a stone of stumbling and rock of offense to the proud. He was in Isaiah's day. And He was, in the form of Our Lord, in Mark's day. Let us take care to rest by the "waters of Shiloah" as we rest in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us turn to the Word of God with rejoicing, trusting the Author and Finisher of Our Faith. And let us, when tempted to go our own way and spurn guidance of the Spirit, find faithfulness as we put our trust in the Lord.

John D. Wilsey, Research Fellow

Tuesday, December 6

Isaiah 9:18-10:4

9:18 For wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns; it kindles the thickets of the forest, and they roll upward in a column of smoke. 19 Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire; no one spares another. 20 They slice meat on the right, but are still hungry, and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied; each devours the flesh of his own arm, 21 Manasseh devours Ephraim, and Ephraim devours Manasseh; together they are against Judah. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. 10:1 Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression,

2 to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey! 3 What will you do on the day of punishment, in the ruin that will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth? 4 Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

Mark 3:7-12

3:7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea 8 and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. 9 And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, 10 for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. 11 And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." 12 And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

The ninth chapter of the book of Isaiah contains what is perhaps the most wonderful promise in Scripture:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isa. 9:6-7).

Christians have long interpreted the promised child to be Jesus Christ, the celebration of whose birth we eagerly wait. Christ, through his death on the cross, enables us to be reconciled with God and enjoy an eternity with Him. When the Kingdom of God arrives in full, it will be characterized by peace and justice. When Christ rules, Isaiah tells us in an earlier passage, men "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Alas, our Old Testament passage for today is not about Christ's reign on earth. Instead, it is about God's judgement upon the people of Israel for their wickedness. We are presented with the startling images of people being burned by fire and slaughtering one another. Rulers who issue unrighteous decrees and oppress the needy are singled out for special condemnation.

In our New Testament reading, Christ has arrived and is calling His first followers. Our Savior has come, and yet has not been fully revealed. Indeed, even His closest disciples did not understand who Christ was until after His death and resurrection. Christ has come, and through His sacrifice on the cross we may be reconciled with God. But His Kingdom has not fully arrived. Scripture tells us, however, that it is advancing, and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

We are citizens of the Kingdom of God, but we are also citizens of nations. Our reading from Isaiah suggests that the people of Israel and their rulers could have avoided the evils for which they were punished. As citizens, we have God-given obligations to the nations in which we reside. To the extent to which we have participated in oppressing others, we must beg God's forgiveness. Affirmatively, we should love our neighbors by advocating for a more peaceful and just society. But we must never forget that our ultimate hope is in "The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

Mark David Hall, Senior Fellow

Wednesday, December 7

Isaiah 11:1-10

11:1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. 6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. 9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. 10 In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Mark 3:13-21

3:13 And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach 15 and have authority to cast out demons. 16 He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. 20 Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. 21 And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

As an economist, and one who often works with data, I spend much of my time thinking about complex “problems.” This isn’t unique to social scientists, certainly. Many people who love their families, serve their communities, or commit to their churches will also naturally identify problems that need solving. After all, identifying brokenness is a necessary step to seeking reconciliation in personal relationships and greater flourishing in our communities. And while we might not wish to dwell on the negative, it probably is not enough to just recognize what the problem is. It often benefits us to reflect on the nature of the problem and its causes before we pursue a solution. That we seek to improve situations for our families, neighbors, and ourselves is a good thing. We are, in fact, loved by God and so each one is infinitely valuable.

I noticed that the notes of Crossway’s ESV Study Bible summarize Isaiah 11:1–16 as “The Messiah will transform the world.” What an important message for Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the Messiah’s first coming just as we anticipate His second. That summary captures well the ten verses from the Old Testament in today’s reading. But its starkness also humbled me as I considered how much bigger is the vision of a transformed world than my nearsighted problem-solving. Even as I cognitively accept that Christ will fundamentally transform everything we know and in ways we cannot even imagine, as I read Isaiah 11:1–10, I admit, my mind wanders from the very glory of God that concludes the passage. The many metaphors in this passage represent real but yet-unimaginable transformations because of what Christ has done and will do.

But about this, Isaiah 11:3 is clear: Christ’s discernment is not one from human eyes and ears; He does not judge as we do. And I am once again reminded that I am not only limited in power, knowledge, and goodness in bringing about solutions, I probably do not even identify the problems correctly much of the time. The greatest injustices and evils that Christ identifies, how often are those at the center of my view? I read about the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and I think of this as the solution to our “unprecedented” political polarization or the “battles” within the institutions of Christian higher education to maintain our missions. And then I’m right back to thinking about how numerous our problems are and not that Christ is transforming our world. I might even think that “my side” are the sheep and find it all too easy to name some cobras and adders.

But Advent is a season of expectant waiting, and not just for the solution to the problems we correctly identify, and not just the ones, certainly, that we think we could fix if we had more of what we need, or the right people were in office, or our neighbors were more faithful, or if the person down the pew from us would just listen to what the sermon has for him or her. Mark 3:20 doesn’t tell us what was on the mind of the crowds that followed Christ and His disciples so relentlessly that they could not spare a moment to eat. Were they looking to be formed more like Christ by being in His presence? Or were they looking for Christ to solve their most immediate problems? If their hearts were like mine, it must have been some mixture of both. So, as we pursue Christ, and as we wait expectantly in this advent season, I pray we recognize problems and seek their solutions, but that we expectantly wait, too, for more than we can imagine for “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples— of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious” (v. 10).

Sarah M. Estelle, Research Fellow & RLS Director

Thursday, December 8

Isaiah 13:1-5, 17-22

13:1 The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. 2 On a bare hill raise a signal; cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. 3 I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. 4 The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude! The sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle. 5 They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the Lord and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. 17 Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. 18 Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children. 19 And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. 20 It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. 21 But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there wild goats will dance. 22 Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.

Mark 4:1-20

4:1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." 10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." 13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

In high school, one piece of literature that sparked my intellectual curiosity was T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The poem, which was written in the context of World War I, depicts a disillusioned world that is ravaged by war and spiritual drought. The Scripture readings for today remind me of the world Eliot describes in his poem and, in many ways, these readings also reflect our world today. Though we are not facing a world war, we are in a cultural battle on home turf. Straying from our moral and religious beginnings, we have become a misguided nation searching for something to fill a void and quench a thirst for deeper meaning in this wasteland.

As a college student in this environment, I often feel like an outsider in my own culture—a culture that finds satisfaction in things of the world rather than from the One who created it. However, as an outsider, I have learned an invaluable lesson: even in the wasteland, the joy of Christ can allow all people not just to grow but to flourish. The image of this wasteland reminds me of the infamous biblical city of Babylon. Babylon embodies man's rebellion against God's authority, in which Scripture predicts the final fall of the "great city." As Christians in a culture war in a kingdom like Babylon, it brings peace to remember God's authority over all things. The prophet Isaiah foresees that the Lord will judge Babylon. The prophecy, according to scholars, was an assurance to God's people that He is above it all, even in the dry seasons.

The prophecy also discusses an army coming against Babylon, in which we "lift up a banner on a barren mountain" and "the Lord of Hosts musters the army for battle" (Isa. 13:1,4). The "day of the Lord comes" in which Isaiah speaks in both temporal fulfillment (the day of judgment of Babylon) and the ultimate fulfillment (the day Jesus returns). Though a wasteland of a culture, Babylon is ultimately laid waste. Isaiah foresees that "it will never be inhabited" (Isa. 13:20). We might say that we live in kingdoms of Babylon, wastelands of temporal kingdoms in which we wait on the fulfillment of God's Holy Word and his coming. Until then, what do we do in a drought? Like farmers who merely plant seeds and nurture the soil, we are to cultivate not only our hearts but the hearts of others. Though in the desert, life can still grow—but only if we do the tilling and allow God to do the rest.

In the second reading, Jesus tells the parable of a Sower who scattered seeds on different soil types. The ones scattered on rocky ground and hard ground were "devoured," withered, and didn't "produce fruit." However, the seed which fell on good soil produced abundant fruit (Mark 4:4,9). Jesus used this story to illustrate that there are different responses to the seeds we plant, that is, the saving word of God. However, though we must plant seeds on good soil to cultivate life, that does not mean life does not grow in desolation. In our Babylonian wasteland of 2022, we can look around us and find others with the potential for seeds to take root. We must sprinkle the seeds so that others might know Him and the saving grace He extends to all types of soiled hearts.

Here at the beginning of the Advent season, we reflect on not only the authority of Christ, but that life does indeed grow as we wait on Him in dry seasons. We cannot change the hearts of others or even the culture that surrounds us; He alone can. He is our Sower and can create life out of the dust and a wasteland if we nurture the seeds. In *The Wasteland*, Eliot also recognizes that even amid that desolate wasteland, hope springs eternal in rebirth through faith. There is no better time to celebrate this hope than Christmas when we will sing together the words of "Joy to the World," "let ev'ry heart prepare Him room." May the joy of the coming Christ guide and prepare our hearts as we navigate the wasteland this Advent season!

Mia Gradick, 2022 Intern

Friday, December 9

Isaiah 24:14-16

24:14 They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the Lord they shout from the west. 15 Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. 16 From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One. But I say, "I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me! For the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed."

Mark 4:21-29

4:21 And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 24 And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. 25 For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." 26 And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The first reading from Isaiah opens with shouts of praise and depicts a world that we all long to see. In times of war, famine, and great shortages, we all hope that the tyranny of men will come to an end and that the glory of the Lord will shine over his creation. "From the ends of the earth," the passage reads, "we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One." One can hardly find a greater contrast than that between the wicked exploiters of innocent people and the Judge of the universe, who could not be bribed or tempted into sin. Christ, the "Righteous one," is worshipped with unending praise from every region of the world.

But this is not the world we know, a world plagued by duplicity, division, strife, violence, and death. When we celebrate Christ as the "Righteous One," we think of a King who can save us because He has made us in the first place. Our Redeemer is also our Creator. In times of great persecution of the early Church, St Irenaeus of Lyons describes what Christ accomplished and why he is worthy of all worship and glory saying,

the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.1)

It was only through the Word becoming flesh that we were adopted as children of God and will receive salvation and enjoy the blessings of eternal life.

In the meantime, we turn to the New Testament reading and see how the people of God must learn to live in the in-between times. The kingdom has not come, in its fullest sense, but we already participate in the work of God here and now. We are called to be lights to the world with the "lamps" of intellect burning in prayer, scriptural meditation, and natural contemplation. If Christianity is less relevant today than it was some centuries ago, this may be due to the fact that our prayers are less than convincing and that our passion for truth has diminished. The kingdom of God, we are told by Jesus, is like a man that scattered seeds on the ground and the seeds grow without man's knowledge.

What are we to learn from this message? That true virtue is enacted in a gracious state of self-forgetfulness. It is not us, but the Providence of God who makes our spiritual labor grow among our fellow Christians and non-Christians. In the words of the late Ronald Reagan, there is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit. The only source of true spiritual regeneration is to be found in God, and not in any of us, fallen creatures. This is not an invitation to apathy. On the contrary. The kingdom of God comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit, who invisibly touches our sincere testimony and our incessant work. The disciples of Christ are called to be gardeners, always planting and sowing the Word of God. Our work in the world, whether in church, academia, finance, business circles, culture, and arts, is a labor of love. It requires incessant faith and an unflinching sense of hope until the "harvest has come."

This advent we celebrate all these good things. Christ has come and redeemed us and transformed us, and now planted us in this world to display the mercy and justice of God.

Mihail Neamțu, Senior Fellow

Saturday, December 10

Isaiah 28:1-13

28:1 Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine! 2 Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters, he casts down to the earth with his hand. 3 The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trodden underfoot; 4 and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer: when someone sees it, he swallows it as soon as it is in his hand. 5 In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people, 6 and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate. 7 These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink; the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are swallowed by wine, they stagger with strong drink, they reel in vision, they stumble in giving judgment. 8 For all tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left. 9 To whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast? 10 For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little. 11 For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the Lord will speak to this people, 12 to whom he has said, "This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose"; yet they would not hear. 13 And the word of the Lord will be to them precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

Mark 4:30-32

4:30 And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

The first word that stands out in today's reading from Isaiah is the word "judgment." Judgment is pronounced on "the drunkards of Ephraim." Their "proud crown" will become "trodden underfoot." But by whom? "Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong...he casts down to the earth with his hand." That will not be a "priest" or "prophet" in any case, for even those "reel with strong drink", are swallowed by wine. When? "In that day," when the Lord will be "a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people." However, even though the Lord explained to these people how and where to find "rest," they did not listen. Now He speaks to them as "with a foreign tongue" and when they want to go, they "fall backward."

This reading could have been about the present, especially in the part of the world where we live: the West. After all, we Americans and Europeans were also once explained where to find peace. We, too, seem to ignore this message on a large scale and have put up our own "proud crowns." For this reason, comparisons are sometimes made with the Roman Empire's time before Christianity's rise. It is said that there is a 'new paganism'. However, this part of the text is about a considerably earlier period, so these problems seem to be universal. Not everything in the past was better, not even in the distant past.

What does this mean for those who do not want to participate in the state of drunkenness around us? For that, the two questions mentioned earlier, "By whom?" and "When?" are essential. It ends badly for "the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim" that is clear. However, even though the passage speaks of "those who turn back the battle at the gate" (Isa. 28:6), they are certainly not alone. The Lord will be their strength. Therefore, on the one hand, we are called to do what we can to turn the situation around. In doing so, to begin with, we will often seek out what is good around us. On the other hand, it is unrealistic to expect that we will be able to banish evil completely. After all, the dividing line between good and evil does not run between people but through all of us.

Moreover, it will not happen in the present but in the future: "In that day." It is here that a connection can be made with the Gospel reading. After all, that day will only dawn definitively with the return of Christ, and Advent reminds us of this hope. Nevertheless, we do not have to wait passively for that moment. Mark 4:30 is taken from the parable of the mustard seed. That teaches that the Kingdom of God begins as "the smallest of all the seeds on earth." Thus, it will not suddenly break through entirely in the future, but it is already taking partial shape in the present. That offers a perspective not only for our personal lives but also for the work we do in, for example, the CRCD context.

Hans-Martien ten Napel, Senior Fellow

Sunday, December 11

Jeremiah 1:4-10, 17-19

1:4 Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." 6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." 7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord." 9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. 17 But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. 18 And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you."

Luke 1:57-66

1:57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, 60 but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." 61 And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." 62 And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. 63 And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. 64 And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. 65 And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, 66 and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

When the time came for our first child to be born, we gave her the middle name of “Elisabeth” in honor of this matriarch of faith. This same daughter’s first name, incidentally, is Mary—Elizabeth’s first cousin and the mother of our Lord. These two names go together. When “the time came,” Luke reports how Elizabeth embraced her calling to be the mother of John the Baptist, the forerunner and foreteller of Mary’s Jesus.

“The time” here refers, of course, to the completion of nine-months gestation. “The time” is also a shorthand for how God works within the world. The Creator of time and space submits himself to time and space in order to bring about the Messianic moment, the earthly appearance of the One in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17). When life feels like it’s coming apart and when situations seem beyond reason, beyond redemption, and beyond reversal, God shows up, right on time.

Despite the fact that Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were considered to be beyond their procreative years, nothing can stop the miraculous grace that God works to bring the good news of Jesus to the world. Elizabeth accepts God’s childbearing and child-rearing assignment for John the Baptist. Under her love and tutelage “the child grew and became strong in spirit” (Luke 1:80). God’s promise is embedded within specific genealogical family-trees and within particular geographies so that we might share Jesus with those closest to us. God’s saving plan follows the known laws of obstetrical science so that we might make known how we have been born again.

God’s story of grace is written upon the natural processes of this world so that we, like John the Baptist, might tell this world about the One who breaks into ordinary time to transcend it extraordinarily for eternity, Jesus. Amen.

Rev Dr John Arthur Nunes, Senior Fellow

Monday, December 12

Isaiah 29:1-4, 9-14

29:1 Ah, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped! Add year to year; let the feasts run their round. 2 Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be moaning and lamentation, and she shall be to me like an Ariel. 3 And I will encamp against you all around, and will besiege you with towers and I will raise siegeworks against you. 4 And you will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak, and from the dust your speech will be bowed down; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and from the dust your speech shall whisper. 9 Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not with wine; stagger, but not with strong drink! 10 For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes (the prophets), and covered your heads (the seers). 11 And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." 12 And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot read." 13 And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, 14 therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."

Mark 5:1-20

5:1 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2 And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. 3 He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, 4 for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. 6 And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. 7 And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." 8 For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" 9 And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many." 10 And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, 12 and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." 13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea. 14 The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. 15 And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. 16 And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. 17 And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 And he did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." 20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marvelled.

I have always felt sorry for the pigs. A flock of some 2,000, minding their own business, and then this Jesus guy allows the demons to take over and the entire herd runs over the cliff and drown. We do not know who owns them and I do not suppose they were insured. This account reminds me of the flock of sheep chased off the cliff edge by a dog in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, destroying Gabriel's livelihood. Poor pigs, poor sheep.

The pigs play a remarkable role in Mark 5:1-20, though. They force the people and also compel us to ask the question, a very Advent question, "Who is Jesus?" We should be under no illusion about the depth of the alienation and despair of the man we later know to be Legion. Wild, crying out, unrestrainable, but God acts so often in the depths of human despair. We see the same theme in the passage from Isaiah, a lament over the way in which Jerusalem has so departed from the Lord's ways that the city, and the people, face judgement (Isa. 29:1-4).

We also see an example of this kind of suffering in the case of the English evangelical hymn-writer and poet William Cowper (pronounced 'Cooper') (1731-1800). He was a friend of John Newton (1725-1807), the former slave-trader who took up the campaign against the evil trade and counselled William Wilberforce. Cowper and Newton wrote the Olney Hymns, containing some 348 hymns and published in 1779 including *Amazing Grace*. Cowper suffered from severe mental illness and depression. Newton's diaries contain details of him being called to Mr. Cowper's side at 4am and remaining until he was calm at 8am. Cowper wrote, "O for a closer walk with God," which contains this verse:

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed,
How sweet the memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill!

The reference to the void where there was once peace is Cowper looking back on his mental illness and depression. Cowper knew that however deep the despair, it was only Jesus who could fill that void.

In Advent, we look towards both the first and the second coming of Jesus, we are reminded of the power of Jesus' name and his authority over all things. Why did Jesus allow the demons into the pigs? We do not really know, but it certainly emphasised his power over evil and ability to healing our suffering. The contrast could not be greater. We see the same in the Isaiah passage—after the judgement comes mercy, "Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder" (Isa. 29:14).

In Mark, sadly, the people pleaded with Jesus to go. There are times when the worst possible thing is for the Lord to grant our request (Psalm 106:15). In striking contrast is the attitude of the healed demoniac. Jesus told him to "go and tell" and so he "went and told" of what Jesus had done for him. He knew he was the recipient of divine mercy. Like him, William Cowper, despite those depths of despair, also knew the mercy of sweet Jesus. Do we?

Rev Dr Richard Turnbull, Senior Fellow

Tuesday, December 13

Isaiah 30:8-17

30:8 And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. 9 For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord; 10 who say to the seers, "Do not see," and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, 11 leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel." 12 Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, "Because you despise this word and trust in oppression and perverseness and rely on them, 13 therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant; 14 and its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a shard is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern." 15 For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." But you were unwilling, 16 and you said, "No! We will flee upon horses"; therefore you shall flee away; and, "We will ride upon swift steeds"; therefore your pursuers shall be swift. 17 A thousand shall flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you shall flee, till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill.

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

5:21 And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea. 22 Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet 23 and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." 24 And he went with him. And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. 35 While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" 36 But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." 37 And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. 38 They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39 And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." 40 And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. 41 Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." 42 And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. 43 And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Vox audita perit, litera scripta manet. This slogan, in various forms, has been hanging on the walls of printer's shops ever since the days of William Caxton in fifteenth-century England. And small wonder, even in the digital age, the slogan has not lost any of its power. "The heard voice perishes," the words tell us, "but the written letter remains." There could hardly be a better way of making the case for the superiority of the printed word, ink on paper. But the slogan is not just a sales pitch for printers.

Written words, whether inscribed in a book or chiseled into marble, have an imperishable and majestic quality about them, a fixity of meaning that points to the firmness and fixity of moral and theological truth. This comes in contrast to the fleetingness and fluidity of our words as spoken, or as pixels on a digital screen, and as subjected to the distortions of a culture that is all too willing to turn their meaning into mush, and make us ignore the moral corrective that was implicit in their original meaning. There is no substitute for the authority of the written word. Only the written word can stand fast against the depredations of time, and serve as a standard to which we can repair and reorient ourselves when we have gone astray. That is why we have statutes, why we have a written Constitution, why we have the Bible.

That is why, in Isaiah's passionate rebuke of the obstinate nation of Judah and its rebellious and disobedient people, the sovereign God commands that it all be written down, so that those living in the time to come will be able to remember what He had told them, and the consequences of the current generation's disobedience. The written word would survive the wrath that was coming, and with its help, God's people would be able to avail themselves not only of his instruction, but of his forgiveness and restoration. The sad fate that awaited them in the short term was inseparable from their perverse decision to "despise this word," and persist in iniquity.

There is a lesson for us today in this, as is nearly always the case in the Bible. We should distrust theological innovations that do not harmonize with, and preferably ground themselves in, the witness of Scripture, of God's Word written. We should be very slow to label any part of the teaching of Scripture as "outmoded," and remember that our task is not to reorient the Scriptures toward a changing world, but reorient the world toward the unchanging Scriptures. And we should remember that, important as it is to seek the Lord's hand and face during this Advent season, we must always check our perceptions against the testimony of the authoritative written words about Him, words that we know we can rely upon. The Lord for Whom we wait is not a creature of our eager imaginations. We have the "witness forever" of the Scriptures to make certain of that.

Wilfred McClay, Senior Fellow

Wednesday, December 14

Jeremiah 23:23-32

23:23 "Am I a God at hand," declares the Lord, "and not a God far away? 24 Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord. 25 I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' 26 How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, 27 who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? 28 Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the Lord. 29 Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? 30 Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another. 31 Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the Lord.' 32 Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all," declares the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

5:1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, 3 if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. 4 For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. 6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

In his work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John of the Cross writes,

On that glad night
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything
with no other light or guide
than the One that burned in my heart.
This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
—him I knew so well—
there in a place where no one appeared.

The fiery description of the passion that entered John of the Cross in his poem is reminiscent of the fiery tongues of Pentecost—signaling the descension of the Holy Spirit. In Jeremiah 23:29, the Lord even calls his very Word like that of fire—destroying our own natural tendencies to be prideful, while at the same time, lighting the way for union with God. The false prophets in Jeremiah were acting on natural, human tendencies of pride by declaring their dreams in the name of the Lord. Being in a position of authority, although illegitimately, this “recklessness” spread out unto the community like a poison, for it led many others away from God.

Everything that we do draws ourselves and others either closer or farther away from God. We have a daily choice to either set aside our own selfish desires and serve the physical and spiritual needs of others or give into these desires, causing our soul to be in disharmony with God, and dragging others into that separation as well. Because of our imperfection, it is impossible to reach perfect unity with God on our own. However, when we orient ourselves toward God, through a true desire to be in union with him, the Holy Spirit guides us towards that perfect unity. It is because of and through the Spirit that we can experience a deeper understanding of how the violation of His orders and rejection of grace creates separation between ourselves and God. Unlike the false prophets that declared only deceit, when we cooperate with and conform to His divine will, accepting his gifts of mercy and grace, we become more like him in our words and our deeds.

During this season of Advent, may we pray for a growth in spiritual maturity so we too, like St. John of the Cross, may come to understand our true desire to be in perfect union with God. As we await—in hope—the second coming of Christ, especially during this memorial of his first, may we also show each other authentic charity and mercy. The same Spirit that lives in me, lives in you, and lives in Christ.

Morgan Miller, Alumni Relations Manager

Thursday, December 15

Malachi 2:1-9

2:1 "And now, O priests, this command is for you. 2 If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. 3 Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. 4 So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. 5 My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. 6 True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. 7 For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. 8 But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the Lord of hosts, 9 "and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction."

Matthew 9:35-10:15

9:35 And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." 10:1 And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. 2 The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. 5 These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. 9 Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. 11 And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. 15 Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."

When Jesus first sent out the Apostles, he sent them with a very specific charge: they went out declaring the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven and ministering to those at the margins of society (Matt. 10:7-8). It is from these humble tasks that the church marked itself as a unique type of institution that expends its energy and resources engaging in two activities that make little sense to the world: (1) caring for those without means to care for themselves, let alone repay the kindness, and (2) declaring a message that is unintelligible to those fixated on earthly rather than heavenly power.

Jesus's charge to engage the world through a posture of love and service rather than selfishness and power was an approach radically different than any the world had seen. And as long as Christians have remained faithful to this, they have succeeded in building lives, institutions, and communities that have had far more influence on the shape of society than their numbers, wealth, or demographics should have provided. The measure of a faithful follower of Jesus was and remains the extent to which the message of God's Kingdom and the mission to the marginalized animates the lives, institutions, and communities that those followers have built.

On Christmas Eve, the first day of the new liturgical year, Anglican churches and many beyond gather together to remember the story of the coming of the Lord in the service known as "Lessons and Carols." There is no sermon and no Lord's Supper, just the reading of Scripture and the singing of songs. At the beginning of the service the minister offers a traditional prayer that says in part, "And because this of all things would rejoice his heart, let us remember, in his name, the poor and helpless, the cold, the hungry and the oppressed." In a world full of suffering that longs and groans for the second coming of the Lord to set the world aright, there are ample opportunities to "rejoice his heart" by serving those at the margins and announcing to the world in word and through service that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Trey Dimsdale, Executive Director

Friday, December 16

Isaiah 40:1-5

40:1 "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God. 2 "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." 3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Luke 3:1-6

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

In our first reading, Isaiah writes, “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.” These words remind us that we are like the grass that withers and the flowers that fade, but unlike the grass and the flowers, we are tethered to our God, who will stand forever. There is a specific time the Lord has ordained for each of us on earth and there are moments when we become soberly aware of our limited time. Often, these moments fill us with questions about our purpose and what we ought to do with the time we have been given.

When we read about John the Baptist, we encounter a man who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah and lives out his purpose to “prepare the way of the Lord.” It is easy to admire John the Baptist. He is steadfast in his purpose and walks in accordance with God. He lives by the word of God and does not waiver in his devotion. He did not let fear of what others would think stop him from proclaiming the Messiah or telling the crowds they needed to repent of their sins.

Many wrestle with doubts when they ponder their purpose or their vocation and remain continuously plagued by the what-ifs in their life. As we read these passages of Scripture, I am reminded how often we overcomplicate what we believe our purpose is or should be. God used both Isaiah and John the Baptist for a very significant and straightforward purpose. They spoke the word of the Lord and prepared others to receive the Lord. While we may be called to take this job or live in this place, all of us have a similar purpose in life. We are called to live in a way that prepares this world for the second coming of Christ. We make daily choices that either propel us toward this purpose or move us farther from it. Through our interactions with others and our dedication to the Lord, we have the joy of giving our lives to the One who is worthy. May we be the kind of people who help prepare the way for the coming of the Lord!

Jillian Barr, Programs Director

Saturday, December 17

Jeremiah 33:7-16

33:7 I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. 8 I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. 9 And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it. 10 Thus says the Lord: "In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without man or beast,' in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again 11 the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first," says the Lord. 12 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "In this place that is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks. 13 In the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the Shephelah, and in the cities of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them," says the Lord. 14 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The Advent season provides us the opportunity to reflect upon what we have lost through our sinfulness, the hope of the promise of his first coming, and the joy of his restoration of all things when he comes again. What we have lost through our sin is not merely personal, but it is communal, too. We live in a world where want, disorder, and chaos are never far, so we are never completely insulated from deprivation, suffering, and pain. As God's covenant people, Christians, however, are commanded to present to this world the good news that he has come and will come again. When he does, we are promised, he will "execute justice and righteousness," but in the meantime we are called to live faithful lives in a world that can seem quite hopeless and desolate. With our eyes fixed beyond the present circumstances, however, we can fulfill the command to proclaim his coming in tangible ways and not just through the verbal proclamation of the gospel.

Because of our sin the world knows poverty and want. Mankind's rejection of the Lord's reign is a rejection of the blessings of that lordship, too. A rightly ordered world that is oriented toward a just and virtuous end helps us to endure the hardships of this life, but in this life we can and should provide glimpses of what is to come to others, too. For what he provides to us, we should "give thanks to the Lord of hosts," we should make sure to acknowledge his goodness, and be the first to point out that anything good that we enjoy is a gift that we have received on account of his promise to care for us.

While this season is certainly one that should cause us to reflect deeply on our sinfulness and need for deliverance, it should also be a time of great public thanksgiving as we are reminded that we are so unworthy of all of the goodness that he has provided. In a world filled with desolation and hopelessness our gratitude will be a beacon of light and hope.

Lindy Dolenz, 2021 Shaftesbury Fellow



Sunday, December 18

Isaiah 40:6-11

40:6 A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. 9 Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Luke 3:7-17

3:7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 9 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" 11 And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." 15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, 16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

These readings communicate the very essence of the Advent season, a season of waiting and expectation. Just as we await Christ's second coming, John the Baptist and so many others were waiting for the promised Messiah to appear. In the book of Matthew, Jesus says that John the Baptist is "more than a prophet." Indeed, says Jesus, "among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:10-11). And what is John's task? We find that in the book of the prophet Isaiah: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" (Isa. 40:3). The greatest human being who had ever lived before Jesus' coming had a calling to prepare for that coming. John was the forerunner of Jesus, the voice crying out in the wilderness and in his prophetic task he was called to "make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40:3). John's calling was to wait on the Lord, and to work while he waited.

As John preached the coming of Christ and his judgment, that "the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:8), his hearers wondered: "What then shall we do?" John answered them by telling them to wait on the Lord and to work while they waited. The crowd was told to prepare the way for the kingdom, to make inroads for the coming king in this world. Those who have much are to share with those who have little. Tax collectors are to collect justly. Soldiers are to serve faithfully and honestly. And this message is the same for us as we await Christ's second coming. To wait and to work while we wait is our calling too. We wait for Jesus' return. And we are called to be working while we wait, in whatever place God has set us.

This calling is both humbling and thrilling. It is humbling because we realize that even the best of us and the best things we do are only preparing the way for the coming of the kingdom in its fullness. It is thrilling because God has given us something of significance to do while we wait for the consummation of his kingdom. The season of Advent is about waiting for Christ the King to come. At Christmas we celebrate Christ's first coming, his Incarnation and birth. And at the same time, we are waiting for Christ to come again as he promised, for then "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Isa. 40:4). So let us wait and let us work while we wait.

Jordan J. Ballor, Director of Research

Monday, December 19

Isaiah 33:13-16

33:13 Hear, you who are far off, what I have done; and you who are near, acknowledge my might. 14 The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: 'Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?' 15 He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, who despises the gain of oppressions, who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed and shuts his eyes from looking on evil, 16 he will dwell on the heights; his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks; his bread will be given him; his water will be sure."

Luke 1:5-25

1:5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. 8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." 18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." 21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. 23 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, 25 "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

We know that Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed and prayed throughout their marriage that God would bless them with children; the angel says so when he announces the good news: “Your prayer has been heard.” The Scripture reading makes it clear that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous people, and Zechariah was a faithful priest. And yet, when the angel of the Lord appeared to him, his response was fear. And when the angel told him not only that his prayers had been answered, but that God was doing this thing for a very specific and wonderful reason, he gave an unlikely response: “I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

Is this not a strange reply? After all his supplication, Zechariah was not really prepared for God to give him what he asked. Isaiah’s imperative, “Hear, you who are far off, what I have done; and you who are near, acknowledge my might,” seems particularly fitting for this story of Zechariah. Zechariah doubted that the God who made the universe could allow an old woman to be pregnant. But soon enough, everyone in the town would know what God had done! Similarly, the people of Israel were not ready for the Messiah either, even though they were impatient for his arrival! They needed John to prepare the way for the Lord. The angel does not mention the oppression of the Romans in his speech to Zechariah. Instead, he points to two areas that John’s ministry will address: the bitterness of heart between parents and children, and the stubbornness of the disobedient and unwise.

Have you ever known a person who was spiritually stuck? You can see their potential, the life they could be enjoying, if only they could forgive, if only they could let go of that addiction, if only they could receive loving correction. Their heart is like hard ground that cannot receive any seed until it is tilled up. Perhaps we have experienced being stuck like this ourselves; our own pride and resentment making us miserable. John the Baptist appealed to the crowds because he was honest. He told them that the Messiah was coming but that they were not ready to receive him. He awoke their spirits by calling them to repentance. He told them that they needed to be cleansed, not just ritually, but truly, in their souls. When Christ appeared, they had an inkling of just how badly they needed a Savior—not from Rome, but from themselves. How many of those who followed Christ had been prepared by John’s message of repentance? They were ready to learn from Jesus because they had humbled themselves.

John never got to see how God would accomplish salvation through Jesus. He tilled the soil faithfully and died a prophet’s death. When we confront evil in our culture, or sacrifice to build healthy alternative institutions, we may not see the fruit of our labors. We may even fail, or appear to have failed. But we will have obeyed. It is God who can bring new life when all hope is lost. Culture-building is a work of generations, but every contribution is needed. How can those of us who live just one life motivate ourselves to invest in efforts that may not come to fruition till long after we are gone? Like John, we trust God. John knew that God was not part of his project; rather, he was part of God’s project. And God will be faithful. Those who are far off will hear what he has done, and those who are near will acknowledge his might.

Rachel Ferguson, JRCD Editorial Board

Tuesday, December 20

Isaiah 25:1-9

25:1 O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. 2 For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the foreigners' palace is a city no more; it will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. 4 For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat; for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, 5 like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners; as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down. 6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. 7 And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Luke 1:26-38

1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Every Advent season I am struck anew by the paradoxes of God's breaking into history through the Incarnation. We believe in an almighty and sovereign God who reigns over the cosmos, the scope of which beggars our minds and exposes our finitude. We follow a God who has taken on flesh, condescending to be knitted together in a woman's womb (Psalm 139:13) and subjected to frailty, suffering, and death. We worship a God who transcends time and place, and yet nevertheless came to us in the ever so granular particularity of a specific place and the pinpoint exactitude of a long-anticipated but nevertheless surprising date and time.

The prophet begins our passage in the first person, exalting God for his faithfulness and wondrous deeds, but finishes in a communal voice, noting "this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation." The prophet starts as an individual, moves back and forth between God's power and goodness, and closes with the gratitude of God's people for his gift of salvation. In between the opening and concluding verses the prophet showcases the stark power of God, such that those who can perhaps only appreciate destructive power are compelled to acknowledge his greatness. But God's power is hardly captured by sheer might, as much of an impression as this makes. God upends our categories of how power manifests. He does not just contend with the powerful but protects the weak. He intervenes in our affairs so as to still "the song of the ruthless" but also prepares a banquet feast for "all peoples." His power unnerves us even while it comforts us through his goodness.

The prophet follows this tantalizing vision of the good banquet feast by turning back to God's destructive power, only now it is not mere cities or strongholds to be laid low but death itself, "the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations." Isaiah's words call us back to the original curse in the Garden promising that God "will swallow up death forever." We harken back to what theologians call the *protoevangelium*, the first uttering of the good news, insofar as the woman's offspring, the Son of Man, will crush the serpent's head, while the serpent will strike his heel (Gen. 3:15).

Were we to have been among the first hearers of Isaiah's prophecy we might be forgiven for asking the first portion of Mary's question, "How will this be?" How will God bring down the ruthless, exalt the downtrodden, provide a rich feast for all peoples, destroy the power of death, and wipe away the tears from all faces? (Isa. 25:8, Rev. 21:4) We who are blessed to be on this chronological side of the Incarnation know the answer to that question, which isn't to say that we can fully grasp it so long as we still see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).

Yet not even our limited vision can obscure the truth we who live in darkness have seen a great light. God is not limited by our limits, and "no word from God will ever fail." What may seem like paradoxes to us are not paradoxes to the Most High. Who is to say to what extent Mary the mother of Jesus fully grasped all that was to follow upon hearing the words of the angel? What she did grasp was what mattered most then and still calls to us now as we consider again in this familiar and yet surprising season our own response to God's call: "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled."

Micah Watson, 2022 Shaftesbury Fellowship Mentor



Wednesday, December 21

Zachariah 8:1-8, 20-23

8:1 And the word of the Lord of hosts came, saying, 2 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. 3 Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain. 4 Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. 5 And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. 6 Thus says the Lord of hosts: If it is marvelous in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvelous in my sight, declares the Lord of hosts? 7 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, 8 and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness." 20 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. 21 The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord and to seek the Lord of hosts; I myself am going.' 22 Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord. 23 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

Luke 1:39-45

1:39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Did you know that an oak tree can be a Christmas tree? While most in the West uses evergreen trees, such as a spruce or pine, the Serbian Orthodox decorate their homes at Christmas time with an oak tree (original: *badnjak*). This tradition was born from the events of the life of Saint Sava, who wanted to establish the Serbian Church among ancient churches of the east, as words of the prophet proclaim, "And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him" (Zech. 8:22).

Thanks to Saint Sava, the Church's first archbishop, the Serbian Church was established in 1219 during his journey to Nicaea. Upon his return, Saint Sava organized the Council of Zhicha, during which he addressed King Stefan the First-Crowned (his brother), members of nobility, and new bishops of the young church. Saint Sava spoke about one true Orthodox faith, establishing the covenant between God and Serbs saying, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you." He also traveled to Jerusalem and brought many icons and relics back from the Holy Land to his fatherland. Then he integrated these old Slavic symbols with deep Christian meaning, including the tradition of the oak tree, which stems from its association with the supreme Slavic God and became a symbol of welcoming baby Jesus into this world and Serbian homes.

The Serbs were filled with the Holy Spirit and overjoyed, like Elizabeth when she heard Mary's greeting and in a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" Mary's visit to Elizabeth shares symbolism with Saint Sava's journey to Nicaea to receive autocephaly from the Eastern Orthodox Church. A new young church was growing in the womb of Mother Church. Patriarch Manuel I of Constantinople (in exile at Nicaea) gave a tomos of autocephaly to Saint Sava, bringing Serbs closer to God saying, "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." This is the same Mary who, in our passage today, was blessed and highly favored.

Filled with Mother's love, a young Serbian Church, that was growing in the womb of the Mother Church, became mature and ready to serve its purpose like Jesus. Because of the birth of the Serbian Church, Serbs became another nation under God and erected one more tent among the tribes of Israel. May the Lord bless you and all nations this Advent season!

Jovan Tripkovic, 2021 Shaftesbury Fellow



Thursday, December 22

2 Samuel 7:8-18

7:8 Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. 9 And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." 17 In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David. 18 Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?"

Luke 1:46-56

1:46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

I learned the Hebrew word *chesed* in college. Since then, it has become a theme which God has faithfully interwoven into my life. It is often translated “steadfast lovingkindness, goodness, mercy,” and is frequently used in the context of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. *Chesed* is intrinsic to our Lord’s enduring character, as Micah 7:18 says, “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in *chesed*.”

2 Samuel 7 is one of the most distinct examples of the Lord’s *chesed* for his children. Here, the Lord promises David through the prophet Nathan that his kingdom will be established forever and that his *chesed* will never depart from the line of David. We see the fulfillment of this greatest promise in the eternal establishment of David’s glorious throne, which begins in the lowliness of the manger. In 2 Samuel 7:18, David responds to the promise of God with humility and gratitude saying, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?” David begins by humbling himself before the Lord, then contemplates what the Lord has done, worships Him (vv. 22 and 26), and anticipates and prays for the fulfillment of this promise in the future (v. 25). He prays this because he knows the One who will fulfill it. The reliability of this covenant—both its making and its fulfillment—stakes its claim on the character of Yahweh, who faithfully and continually makes himself known to David. In verse 21 of this chapter, David proclaims, “Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have brought about all this greatness, to make your servant know it.”

May our response to the promises of God mirror David’s. Let us come before him humbly, remember him for what he has done thus far, praise him for who he is, and pray in faith for the fulfillment of his promises, both now and in the future. What a wonderful truth that our hope rests in the character of our Savior and nothing else! He has brought us this far, and he will not fail to bless us with his *chesed* now. There is great treasure to be gained in anticipating the arrival of Messiah. He is the promise in which we find our greatest hope.

Now that the season of Advent is almost over, we look forward to celebrating the promise that has been fulfilled. And yet, we also look forward to the hope that we have in his future promises. Just as there is great treasure in awaiting the first advent of Messiah, there is also immense treasure in anticipating his coming again and meditating on His character which allows us to believe in this promise. Because we are intimately acquainted with Him, we have the profound privilege and responsibility of pointing the world to this eternal hope. Let our prayer be that we radiate the peace of Christ in a chaotic world. This reminds me of the verse in the old nineteenth-century hymn, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” which says:

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace;
The beauty of thy peace.

Let us take heart as we meditate on the character of God and his promises, and let our lives make known the beauty of his peace as we rejoice in the ultimate promise fulfilled—our Messiah!

Amanda Wunder, 2021 Shaftesbury Fellow



Friday, December 23

1 Samuel 2:1-10

2:1 And Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. 2 There is none holy like the Lord: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. 5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. 6 The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. 7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. 8 He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. 9 He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail. 10 The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed."

Luke 1:57-66

1:57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, 60 but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." 61 And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." 62 And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. 63 And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. 64 And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. 65 And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, 66 and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

The history of splitting the atom, which from ancient times until the end of the nineteenth century was supposed to be the smallest particle of matter, is a fascinating example of how something so small can produce energy so vast that it can endanger life on the whole earth. For scientists to reach that unfortunate point it required bold theories, dedicated research, and careful analysis of experimental data. At first, they had to believe that atoms really are there. The ideas and hypotheses required an endless series of experiments that sometimes were perilous to the scientist's health. The process slowly led to the physics of the atomic bomb that ended World War II.

The principle of little things leading to great things is true not only in nature but in the Kingdom of God as well. In the New Testament, Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to the mustard seed that grows into a large tree (Matt. 13:31-32). We find the same point in the life of Hannah in our Old Testament reading. From a political point of view, Hannah was an unimportant person; she was no queen mother, and her husband was no political personage. The birth of Samuel was surely a great answer to her prayer, but it required revelation and faith to connect this very personal and family event with the historical consequences described in her prayer: "The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven" (v. 10). By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, she saw in the birth of her son much greater and more far-reaching realities than just the immediate confirmation of her faith in the answer to her prayer.

Today we know that through Samuel the Messianic kingdom was introduced. Hannah anticipates this joy with a burst of prayer begins with an exultation in the Lord and his attributes of holiness, faithfulness, and omniscience (vv. 2-3). Then she goes on rejoicing in God's salvation which she describes as judgment and a large reversal of fortunes: the mighty and the rich will be brought low but the feeble and the poor will be made sit with princes (v. 8).

As we meditate on the birth of Jesus, what do we focus on? Influenced by the surrounding culture we are tempted to concentrate on what concerns us right now: the biblical story, individual salvation, or the Incarnation. But Hannah's prophetic words are echoed in the song of Mary before she gave birth to Jesus (Luke 1:46-55). In connection with Christmas, it is not easy to see both salvation and judgment, but at some point we believe that Christ's kingdom will break the kingdoms of this world into pieces as it is described in the Book of Daniel. Let us remember that in small things like a humble manger in Bethlehem, both salvation and the greatest cataclysmal events of the future have their beginning. Let us again commit our lives to the coming King!

Pavel Hanes, JRCD Editorial Board

Saturday, December 24

Isaiah 9:2-7

9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. 3 You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. 4 For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-20

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" 15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Today's two readings are very well-known, not only from church and personal readings but also from cultural references as diverse as Handel's *Messiah*, Linus' soliloquy in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and the Herdmans' introduction to the Christmas story in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. My family has a unique Christmas tradition which has made Luke's words very familiar—before opening our gifts, we first sing Luke 2:1-20; yes, sing it. My dad was a pastor and principal of a Christian school with training in music. Early in his career, realizing that music could be an invaluable memory aid prompted him to set much of the school's Bible memory program to music. Many times, he simply used a familiar hymn tune, and for Luke 2 he paired verse 1-7 to the tune of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," verses 8-14 with "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and verses 15-20 with "The First Noel." For many years, my siblings and I sang this passage with my parents, and now my children, nieces, and nephews join us as, singing by memory, we remind each other of God's gift of a child, the gift that now prompts us to give each other gifts.

While all our familiarity with these texts may not, as the saying goes, breed "contempt," perhaps it has bred inattention. So let us pause to consider Luke's brief narrative, Isaiah's lofty prophesy, and the many common themes they share. Luke's story tells of a mix of the commonplace and the miraculous. He mentions a census, a woman giving birth, shepherds caring for their flocks. Yet as Luke recounts that Mary and Joseph were simply betrothed, he reminds us that this is a virgin birth. Angels announce the birth! And while Caesar's census seems to proclaim the power of Rome, we realize that God's power moved the entire Roman empire to accomplish Mary and Joseph's timely arrival in Bethlehem in fulfillment of a prophesy that the Savior would be born in this city of David (Luke 2:4, 11; Micah 5:2).

The prophet Isaiah foretells the birth of this son (Isa. 9:6; Luke 2:7), but he goes far beyond recounting the miracles of the moment and prophesies about this child's place in history: He "shoulders responsibility" (Isa. 9:6, NET) and "shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:8). He will free the oppressed (Isa. 9:4) and bring judgment (Isa. 9:5).

While Luke's story of Jesus' birth recounts a moment far from the full accomplishment of Isaiah's prophesy, both Luke and Isaiah describe how the coming of this child brings light (Isa. 9:2; Luke 2:9), peace (Isa. 9:6, 7; Luke 2:14), and joy (Isa. 9:3; Luke 2:10, 20). As Luke recounts how the Son of God humbled Himself so far as to be birthed, bound in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger, he also proclaims with the angels, "He is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11), reminding us of the triumph promised by Isaiah, that one day this child will "establish [his kingdom] and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7). Finally, notice that just as "a great company of the heavenly hosts" announce the infant's birth (Luke 2:13), Isaiah tells us that the Lord of these same hosts is zealous to see this child's kingdom established (Isa. 9:7).

So, wherever you may hear the words of Isaiah 9 and Luke 2 this Advent season, "rejoice" (Isa. 9:3; Luke 2:10) because just as the shepherds found everything was "just as they had been told" (Luke 2:20), so we can be confident that someday the Lord of hosts will similarly bring about all that Isaiah foretold.

Becky Dummermuth, Counsel

Merry Christmas from the entire CRCD family!

We pray that these Scripture readings and devotionals ministered to you during this Advent season, and we hope that you are filled with the love of Christ and the joy of his birth. We also hope that this devotional reminded you of the ways that the birth of our Savior binds us and prepares us for the good work of cultural renewal that lays before us.

Now, until the Lord comes again, let us celebrate Christmas together and proclaim, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!"