



JOURNEY *to the* MANGER

ADVENT 5 2010

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PREPARED BY THE FACULTY
of
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*May these readings prepare your hearts
for the blessed Christmas season
and your celebration of the birth of the
Christ Child, the Savior of the world.*

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Theological Seminary

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This year Advent begins on Sunday, November 28th. But why Advent? And why an Advent devotional? The answer lies in the wisdom of the ages. Ancient Israelites established a yearly calendar in response to God’s instructions for special feast days. Lectionaries were developed—selected Scriptures to be read week by week and for special feast days. The Church gradually established lectionaries containing readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles and Gospels.

From the 6th century, Western Christians have been observing Advent as a four-week preparation for Christmas, celebrating our Lord’s Incarnation. Advent meditations begin with reflections on Christ’s second coming. Jesus asks us to prepare for that coming (Mark 13:32-37). And the aged Apostle John said:

“When he is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2b-3).

As Advent continues, our devotions focus on Christ’s first coming and, with saints like Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), we prepare a place for the Christ Child in ourselves—that we like saints of old may be Christ-bearers. May God enable us today, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to contemplate the way in which Christians of all ages have received grace and power to contemplate and follow God’s rich gift to us in his Son. May we, with them, experience a penitential and enriching Advent.

Dean Borgman

DAY PSALM 146

1 Ryan M. Reeves

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The Christian life is summed up in this short psalm. Praise, confession, conviction, comfort, exhortation—all of these sprout up from the soil of Psalm 146. The author begins in a posture of praise and worship, a worship that includes creating melodies and spiritual songs to the Lord. He then moves to the confession that God is, as our Christian creeds echo, “Maker of heaven and earth.”

But the heart of Psalm 146 is what flows out of this prayerful confession. “Do not trust human leaders,” he says, “for there is no deliverance from them.” The shock we receive from this harsh exhortation is matched only by the fact that it applies to all human authorities. The psalmist does not have in mind only pagan rulers, but his own kin as well. The limitations of human authority are a result of their being finite, human, frail—they offer hope for a brief moment and then crumble. Even those rulers who shroud themselves in an aura of godliness are unable to bring deliverance, for their “breath” (*ruah*) will soon stop and the powerful will return to the dust of the earth.

Our hopes, our prayers, our longings for the Lord to fix this broken and sinful world must rest in the “one who keeps faith forever.”

ISAIAH 1:10-20

Carol M. Kaminski

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Eight hundred years before the Advent of the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah is called to live among God’s people, whom he describes as rebellious and stubborn. They are a sinful nation; a people weighed down by iniquity; they are an offspring of evildoers. The prophet even likens God’s people to Sodom and Gomorrah. These are dark days indeed—full of gloom and despair as the prophet exposes in painstaking detail the extent of Israel’s waywardness. Yet amidst this backdrop of darkness and faithlessness described so poignantly by Isaiah in the opening chapters, this same prophet a few chapters later speaks of a time when those who walk in darkness will see a great light. This light will shine forth in the darkness. Those who are in anguish will be filled with gladness and rejoicing. Hope for this glorious restoration is to be found most profoundly in a child who will be born. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. The son to be born will reign on the throne of David. This king will establish righteousness and justice—precisely what is needed in a dark land. Let us rejoice this Advent season—for the child promised by Isaiah has been born. His light has come and shone into the darkness. This child born to us according to God’s plan of old is indeed our hope. He is the one who turns our gloom into rejoicing. Let us give thanks to God for the gift of his beloved Son.

DAY PSALM 5

1 *Jeffrey J. Niehaus*

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Hsalm 5 is what scholars call a lament, with what they call wisdom elements intermixed. The poet approaches God in prayer with his “lament” (“consider my sighing,” “listen to my cry for help”) which includes the fact that he has “enemies” (vs. 8) who cannot “be trusted,” whose “heart is filled with destruction,” whose “throat is an open grave” and who “speak deceit” with their tongue (vs. 9). David wants God to deal with his enemies, but before he asks God to do so, he builds his case before God.

He begins by establishing certain facts about God. First, God is the poet’s king and his God. If he were not David’s king and God, David could not presume to hope for his aid. Second, God is approachable. If he were not approachable, there would be no point to the prayer, “In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice.” Third, God is righteous—he takes no pleasure in evil; the wicked cannot dwell with him, he hates liars and destroys them; he abhors the bloodthirsty (vs. 4-6). By contrast, David can hope for God’s help and favorable judgment: God has, by his mercy, enabled David to worship the Lord in his “house” (i.e., temple), and ask that the Lord will guide him in righteousness (vs. 7-8).

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Once these facts are established—once the suppliant has built his case against his foes and for himself—he can call upon God to act according to his nature, which has been established in the preceding verses. David calls upon God, then, to “declare them guilty [and] banish them for their many sins.” He can ask God to do so because he has established that God is righteous and abhors, and judges, evil. He can also ask God to “spread [his] protection” over those who take refuge in him and love his name (name meaning, in the OT and ancient Near East, the essential nature, or character—hence, those who “love [God’s] name” love God for who he really is).

David can conclude with an avowal of confidence in God, who, being righteous, blesses the righteous and protects them (“You surround them with your favor as with a shield,” vs. 12). David began with a lament, but the wisdom that affirms God’s nature has enabled him to make a confident plea.

1 Alan Myatt

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3 **F**or centuries the people of Israel awaited the arrival
 4 of their Messiah with joyful expectation. Yet
 5 when he finally came, it was to a world filled with
 6 hostility. Many received him, but many others did not. Paul
 7 reminds the Thessalonians the persecution they are suffering
 8 is not unlike that experienced by Jesus himself. Everywhere
 9 the gospel goes there are those who oppose it. But Paul's
 10 purpose is to encourage, by pointing out that the power of
 11 God prevails. It prevails in the transformed and redeemed
 12 lives of those who receive his word. Unlike their persecutors,
 13 they are not motivated by jealousy and sin. They are no
 14 longer under the wrath of God. They have been brought
 15 into the fellowship of love which causes Paul to rejoice and
 16 eagerly desire to see them face-to-face.

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18 We too live in an age that is growing increasingly hostile
 19 to the gospel. Around the world Christians suffer grave
 20 persecution. Even in America there is growing intolerance of
 21 those who adhere to the truths of Scripture. But the power
 22 of God manifested in his Word remains as powerful today
 23 as in the days of the apostles. It changes our lives, and it
 24 has the power to transform those with whom we share it.
 25 And this gives us cause for rejoicing just as Paul rejoiced
 26 in the Thessalonians. As we see lives changed and prayers
 27 answered, we have confidence in the final triumph of the
 Lord. Let us share the good news with boldness!

Jeffrey Arthurs

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The Road Cutter and Puppies

3 **A**s we wait for the second Advent, Scripture tells us
 4 Satan prowls like a lion, or in the context of this
 5 passage, he is a “road cutter.” That term comes
 6 from 1 Thessalonians 2:18: “Satan hindered us.” The term
 7 “hinder” was originally a military term meaning to “chop”
 8 or “cut.” In the ancient world, retreating armies would chop
 9 up the road behind them to hinder the advancing army.
 10 That’s what Satan does. He hinders the advancement of the
 11 gospel by destroying the testimony of the messengers, by
 12 causing disunity and by persecuting the witnesses; and that
 13 can turn us into “puppies.” The word for “unsettled” in 3:3
 14 was used to describe the wriggling and shaking of puppies.
 15 No wonder the apostle thanks God that his dear people
 16 in Thessalonica were standing firm (vs. 8), and no wonder
 17 he prays that God would strengthen their hearts (vs. 13).
 18 As Satan tries to delay, hinder and stop the spread of the
 19 gospel, may you be strengthened, and may you be blameless
 20 and holy in the presence of God our Father when our Lord
 21 Jesus comes again (vs. 13).

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1 *Maria Boccia*

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3 “**M**ake it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind
4 your own business and to work with your hands,
5 just as we told you, so that your daily life may
6 win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be
7 dependent on anybody” (vs. 11-12).

8

9 In this season of Advent, we anticipate commemorating the
10 birth of Jesus, the infinite, Almighty God becoming a small,
11 helpless baby. When we think of Jesus, we often focus on
12 his divinity, and on his divine mission of redemption which
13 restores our peace with God. But this season reminds us that
14 the God-man came into the world in the ordinary way, and
15 grew in wisdom and stature in favor with God and man
16 (Luke 2:52) in the ordinary way. He reminds us that living
17 an ordinary life to the glory of God is a worthy ambition.

18

19 Our society worships celebrity. Our society worships
20 material success. A poll of young people found that over
21 40% would rather be a personal assistant to a celebrity than
22 the CEO of a major corporation, the president of Yale or
23 Harvard or a U.S. senator. Sometimes we Christians can
24 also get caught up in this focus on celebrity and material
25 success. But Paul says here that living an ordinary life to the
26 glory of God and doing our work with integrity is pleasing
27 to God. The God-man himself spent most of his life living
an ordinary life to the glory of God, starting with his birth.

Dean Borgman

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Here in this first week of Advent, we together prepare
our hearts for God’s great Incarnation, the Word
made flesh. We’re reminded of our great distance
from our Lord’s ideal. The world and its cultures, the church
and we Christians individually (like the ancient Israelites)
have departed or at least drifted from God’s intentions. As
a result, we stagger under God’s discipline as described in
Isaiah’s opening verses.

Today’s image or metaphor is that of a glorious branch (a
green sprout in Isaiah 11:1). This branch is pictured as a
protective and glorious canopy covering our weakness, our
limitations and our fears. The branch stands in contrast to
this world’s grand, proud cedars of Lebanon (2:13a) and
dry oaks of Bashan (1:29 and 2:13b). The arrogant leaders
and powers of this world will be cut down and burnt. Our
protection is under the royal branch described in such lovely
terms: a branch “beautiful and glorious,” fruit “proud and
glorious,” “shelter, bright and shining” and protection under
a “pavilion... shade from the heat... refuge from the storm.”

Here, early in Advent, we focus on Christ’s second coming.
Yet, even as we cry, “Maranatha,” we can, until Christ
comes, receive hope and encouragement in our struggles.
Often the Kingdom seems not to be winning, and we, falling

short in our mission. Today God wants to encourage us with the hope of his final plans and the power of his present protective cover.

We pray for one another in the words of Psalm 20:

*May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble,
the name of the God of Jacob defend you;
grant you your heart's desire and prosper all
your plans.*

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.

Psalm 148 describes God's inherent nature as deserving of worship and his sovereignty over all. Therefore, it is right and fitting that everything in and of the earth should give glory to God—both material and immaterial aspects of creation—the sun, moon, angels, mountains and kings. During this chilly winter month, it is an especially reassuring reminder that all of creation, even the snow and stormy winds (vs. 8) are subject to his bidding. Indeed, everyone should “praise the name of the Lord” (vs. 5).

How does this psalm declaring the power and sovereignty of God inform our understanding of Advent?

One of the great mysteries of our faith is the seemingly dialectical nature of our Lord—his sovereignty and his immanence. Cognitively, this complex duality offers a lifetime of rich exploration. Emotionally, the powerful God of the universe having “pitched his tent among us” supplies comfort and hope. He is simultaneously governing the entire universe and yet is as close, as human and as personal as a newborn baby. Today, during Advent, may God grant us a special awareness of his most intimate presence.

DAY ISAIAH 5:11-12

1 Rodney L. Cooper

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3 “**W**oe to those who rise early in the morning, that
4 they may run after strong drink, who tarry into
5 the evening as wine inflames them! They have lyre
6 and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, BUT
7 THEY DO NOT REGARD THE DEEDS OF THE LORD, OR SEE
8 THE WORK OF HIS HANDS” (VS. 11-12).

9

10 There are three pithy sayings I have heard that would seem
11 to summarize what Isaiah is communicating to Israel and by
12 implication to us, in this passage pregnant with meaning.

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14 Saying one: “YOUR PERSPECTIVE DETERMINES YOUR
15 PRIORITIES AND YOUR PRIORITIES DETERMINE YOUR
16 PRACTICE.”

17

18 Israel lost perspective. They were to be God’s covenant
19 people demonstrating to the nations around them what it
20 meant to be God’s people. God had put them in the land and
21 blessed them so that they might enhance God’s reputation.
22 Yet, instead of showing generosity to those around them,
23 like God, they became greedy; instead of pursuing justice
24 like God, they pursued their own joy and instead of showing
25 compassion like God, they dispensed condemnation. Isaiah
26 is saying you have forgotten your purpose—you are not here
27 to make a name—but here to glorify a name.

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Saying Two: “GOD MAY NOT PAY AT THE END OF EVERY
MONTH—BUT GOD PAYS.”

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Isaiah shows us in this passage that God is serious about
his reputation and his covenant. Israel broke covenant with
God. God was clear that they were to keep covenant with
one another and if they did not, there would be judgment.
The word “woe” is a term not only of judgment, but of
a lament at a funeral. The Israelites who broke covenant
would not enjoy their acquisitions (vs. 10-11) because they
themselves would be acquired in judgment by the Assyrians
(vs. 26).

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SAYING THREE: “GOD’S FAVORITE DEPARTMENT IS LOST AND
FOUND.”

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Advent reminds us that God being God does not end with
judgment but seeks reconciliation. The heart of God is
to bring us back to himself so that we might “regain our
perspective” and fulfill all that he has designed us to be.
May this season remind you to thank God for the one who
made us his priority, took on the judgment we were to face
and whose joy was to reconcile us with the Father.

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1 Scott M. Gibson

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3 *The Importance of Leaves*4 **W**hen fruit trees grow leaves in the spring, one
5 anticipates the final product—fruit. Jesus uses the
6 simple fig tree to sketch out for his listeners his
7 second coming and the coming of his Kingdom.8
9 The leaves of the tree signify the promise of things to come,
10 and Jesus can be counted on to fulfill his promises, just like
11 the much-expected fruit. He will come. He will return
12 again as the magnificent, glorious Son of Man.13
14 But we can be distracted from eagerly watching—living—for
15 him. Our focus easily shifts. We may become discouraged
16 as we wait for him. We may even want to give up. But in
17 spite of the temptations we face: excess or distress, as noted
18 in this text, we know that Christ is coming again to rule
19 in power and might. He warns his ancient and present-day
20 disciples, “Pray that you may be able to... stand before the
21 Son of Man.”22
23 Sometimes we don’t connect the importance of the fruit
24 tree’s leaves with the promise of autumn bounty. But that’s
25 exactly what Jesus wants us to do, to see in the common leaf
26 the assurance of his coming and kingly rule.

27 The promise of leaves is the promise of Jesus’ second coming.

Rollin Grams

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In 2 Th. 1:11-12, we find the prayer of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy for believers living between Christ’s first and second advent: that God would work powerfully in their lives so that he might (1) count them worthy of his calling and (2) bring to completion their every good purpose and work of faith (vs. 11):Note, first, that God’s calling is all about *what* we are called to be: worthy. God chose us *to be holy and blameless before him in love* (Eph. 1:4).Second, faith is more than belief: it produces its own *work*. Faith works itself out in love (Gal. 5:6).Third, this is God’s work in us. Given the task of working out our salvation in fear and trembling, we discover God at work in us to will and to do his good purpose (Phil. 2:12-13). The marks of being God’s chosen people are *belief in the truth* and *sanctification by the Spirit* (2 Th. 2:13).When Jesus returns, he is not coming simply for an elect people with faith in him (cf. Mt. 25:14ff). He is coming for his bride, washed and cleansed by the Word, without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:26-27). The gospel is to be *obeyed* (2 Th. 1:8) so that the name of our Lord Jesus might be glorified in us (vs. 10, 12).

DAY PSALM 37:1-18

1 *William David Spencer*

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3 **T**he roads from Jerusalem were well-journeyed, so news
4 was everyone's constant traveling companion. One
5 Passover the news was cataclysmic, as two believers
6 updated a passing stranger about the recent execution of
7 the powerful healer, Jesus. Imagine their surprise when the
8 stranger responded by showing them that Jesus' persecution
9 was prophesied everywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.

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11 One place he might have taken them was to Psalm 37, where
12 David's victimization so paralleled the recent suppression
13 of Jesus. Pursued by the chief ruler, the beleaguered David
14 warned his followers not to dread or envy the power of
15 their adversaries, but to trust and delight in the power of
16 God's justice, knowing it will ultimately triumph (vs. 1-4).
17 Therefore, David counseled, be patient and don't let anger
18 turn you into a replica of your oppressor (vs. 5-8), because
19 God is working to destroy their power and give the righteous
20 everlasting victory (vs. 10-18).

21
22 The hope the travelers to Emmaus were seeking (Luke
23 24:21) was alive in the one walking with them. How often
24 in persecution, disaster, catastrophe, disappointment do we
25 worry, despair or even envy those who are powerful enough
26 to make us miserable? These are the moments we need to

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3 realize that Jesus is walking beside us and bringing us a
4 hope which passes all understanding.

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6 The lesson David teaches in Psalm 37 and Jesus explained
7 to the travelers is that many of life's journeys are filled with
8 difficulty and suffering. But the God who has called us is
9 more powerful than any opposition that we face, whether
10 temporary or terminal, and God's hope is eternal.

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1 *David W. Gill*

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4 **A** few leaders in human history have rivaled Judah's
 5 king Ahaz for his unrelieved wickedness. He
 6 abandoned the ways of his forefather David.
 7 He offered at least one of his sons in child sacrifice. He
 8 plundered the Lord's temple, stealing whatever seemed
 9 valuable, recklessly profaning its sacred contents. Ahaz was
 10 a hardcore idolatry addict, erecting altars and sponsoring
 11 worship to false gods from neighboring pagan nations.
 12 His folly and unfaithfulness left Judah vulnerable and cost
 13 hundreds of thousands of lives. Challenged by the prophet
 14 Isaiah to seek a sign from the Lord, Ahaz refused.

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And of course, it is Matthew who records the ultimate
 fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the birth of Jesus to the
 virgin Mary (Matthew 1:22-23). This is gospel indeed: our
 leaders may be dreadful and we the people aren't much, if
 any, better—and yet God promises to come and be with us.
 Praise to Immanuel.

15 And yet, just at that low point, God delivered a sign of
 16 redemption to come: a young woman, a virgin, would
 17 conceive and bear a son who would be named Immanuel,
 18 "God with us." In the darkest, worst hour, God brought
 19 hope and the promise of his presence.

21 In hindsight, it must have occurred to many that this
 22 prophecy was fulfilled (in part, at least) when Ahaz's own
 23 son, Hezekiah, succeeded him as king. Bad dad, great son:
 24 what a miracle! Hezekiah quickly cleaned out all the idols
 25 and restored the worship of the true God of Israel.

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DAY ISAAIAH 8:1-15

1 *Gordon L. Isaac*

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3 *A Time of Judgment*

4 **A**dvent is the season of reflection, a time to ponder
5 God's work in the world. It is a time to prepare for
6 his deeds of judgment and redemption.

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9 Isaiah is keen to warn Israel of impending doom. The king
10 of Assyria is coming like the rush of mighty waters, carrying
11 everything in its path. There is no turning back the floods
12 that have overflowed their channels. The only word that can
13 be spoken is:

13

14 *Strap on your armor and be shattered;*

15 *Strap on your armor and be shattered. (vs. 9)*

16

17 Destruction two times over is hardly a word that is easy to
18 hear. No doubt we would rather contemplate the birth of
19 the Christ Child. But there is a word before that last word
20 to which we must listen, for what we fear is as important as
21 what we embrace.

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23 This Bible passage is quite clear in saying that God alone
24 is worthy of our fear. The prophet serves up this word in a
25 powerful way for this Advent season:

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*But the Lord of Hosts,
him you shall regard as holy.
Let him be your fear,
let him be your dread. (vs. 13)*

Living in the cleansing fear of God is an act of faith. It is
enough for us in this moment to hear this strong word.
Letting the Lord be our fear and our dread will make room
for the song of the angels.

1 *S. Steve Kang & Gary Parrett*

2

3 **T**he prophets declared, “Thus saith the LORD.” But
 4 though the word was spoken through them, they
 5 were the first to humble themselves and tremble
 6 before it (Jeremiah 23:9). To Israel belong the oracles of
 7 God—but that made God’s people servants of the word,
 8 not its masters. Mary gave birth to Christ, but she did
 9 not become lord over the one she had birthed. Instead,
 10 her confession remained, “Behold, I am the servant of the
 11 Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)
 12 and “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). John’s ministry
 13 preceded that of Jesus, but he pointed away from himself,
 14 willfully decreasing even as Jesus’ influence increased. He
 15 unequivocally declared, “He must increase, but I must
 16 decrease” (John 3:30).

17

18 Tucked away in the Great Commandment (Mark 12:31) is
 19 a clue for Christians to let Christ increase in us. It reads,
 20 “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus, here, assumes our
 21 self-love. Yet, he is our Lord and we are his subjects. We are
 22 called to love ourselves properly as God has loved us. This
 23 way, we let Christ increase in and through us as we extend
 24 that love to our neighbors in this Advent season.

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Edward M. Keazirian

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Who is this Jesus of whom we sing? “Come, thou long-
 expected Jesus, born to set thy people free...Born thy
 people to deliver, born a child and yet a King...”

The youthful, impetuous Peter exclaimed that he was “the
 Messiah, the son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Years
 later, an aged, more mature Peter affirms in unmistakable terms
 that he is “our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1-2).

Using an elegant Greek grammatical construction in these
 verses, Peter makes it clear that Jesus is not only the Christ—
 that royal Messianic descendant of David destined to rescue
 and rule the people of God; nor only the Savior, who like
 Moses would deliver people from the ultimate enslavement
 of sin and death; but also—indeed consummately—God
 himself. What is more, this God of glory and absolute
 virtue (vs. 3) has invited us to know him and to participate
 in his glory and virtue.

As Peter goes on to say (vs. 5-7), our response begins with
 faith, but matures ultimately into love. In this Advent season,
 as so many around us are consumed with shopping, wrapping,
 decorating and baking, let us rather work hard to appropriate
 the goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness
 and kindness that move us from faith to love. That will be
 our best preparation for Christmas.

DAY ISAIAH 9:1-7

1 *Peter Kuzmič*

2

3 *The Coming of the Light*

4 “The true light ... was coming into the world” (John 1:9).

5 That is how evangelist John (1:9) reflects about the

6 Christmas event while summarizing the Incarnation

7 by “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). He must have read

8 Isaiah who, many hundreds of years in advance, sees the

9 coming of a “great light”(vs. 2) and of a “child born... son

10 given” (vs. 6).

11

12 Isaiah was a royal advisor and a prophet who knew how to

13 think politically. Today we would say that he was not only

14 deeply spiritual, but also contextually relevant. He spreads

15 out his prophetic message like painting a big picture on a

16 large canvas of history, present and future. He actually saw

17 more than he could fully grasp, for his own boundaries of

18 understanding were transcended by the inspiration of the

19 Holy Spirit.

20

21 Apart from the divine light, people live in “distress and

22 darkness” (8:22 and 9:2), but the great prophetic insight is

23 that God is willing and capable of changing our human

24 circumstances and transforming the situation by replacing

25 the “shadow of death” with the “dawning of light” (vs. 2).

26 The coming of light brings with it much joy and abundance

27 (vs. 3). Light, joy and abundance speak of freedom from

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oppression. The ultimate deliverance comes with the birth of a saving ruler, the Son of God. Royal titles ascribed to this “light and child/son” clearly point to his deity (now read verse 6 aloud!). He is the source of all wisdom and power, fatherly love and is the ultimate peacemaker. The final result of his deliverance and rule is harmony of peace and justice. Just what our world needs!

1 *Richard Lints*

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Most of us are too busy to slow down. Kind of odd, huh? Our lives move at such a pace that we can barely remember what's actually important any longer. If our lives are a story, the story seems to have too much filler and too little real plot. It probably wouldn't make a good novel, would it? By contrast, the story of Jesus moves with the feel of an epic drama. It is almost too grand to keep fully in view. Here in Mark 1, we learn that the epic drama of Jesus doesn't begin with his birth. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, tells us that the story of Jesus goes back even to Isaiah, and representatively in Isaiah to the whole of the Old Testament. And what John the Baptist tells us about that story here in the first chapter of Mark, as the whole of the Old Testament tells us, is that the Messiah will give us the breath of life itself. Jesus' mark on the ages will be the gift of life, which is nothing less than the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a story too good to be too busy to miss. May your life slow down long enough to savor the Savior's story.

Sean McDonough

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If all the many Christmas cards I have seen over the years, I cannot recall a single one that began, "Brood of Vipers..." But some of the people on John the Baptist's mailing list received just such a message as he prepared them for the Advent of Jesus' public ministry (Matt. 3:7). What could such a brutal (brood-al?) description have to do with the good news?

In short, everything. The Pharisees and Sadducees in question would never seek transformation until they first realized they needed transforming. Without John's stinging rebuke, they would go on thinking that the venomous teaching coming from their lips was the sweetest honey. His message is clear: Stop slithering, and straighten out.

The doctor's diagnosis of a deadly disease can be good news... provided it is followed by the assurance that a certain cure lies at hand. Even so, John's call to repentance is followed by the promise that one is coming who will baptize with the fiery Holy Spirit, who will burn away the image of the serpent on our souls and emblazon on us anew the likeness of the living God.

1 *Catherine Kroeger*

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3 **J**ohn the Baptist challenged his hearers to the most
 4 essential aspect of preparation for the coming of
 5 the Christ: that of repentance. The Christmas story
 6 begins with an announcement of the birth of this forerunner
 7 of the Messiah, the one who was to make ready the path
 8 before him.

3

During Advent, we ask again “who is Jesus”; and in his
 identity as Son of God and redeemer and Lord, we find
 ourselves. It is his coming that brings meaning to our lives
 and enables us to find our own true identity.

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10 When Jesus of Nazareth had come to him for baptism, he
 11 had identified him as the Christ; but since that time, Jesus
 12 had established no political system, raised no army, shown
 13 no interest in cultivating the rich and powerful. Within the
 14 dungeon, John began to wonder and sent his disciples to
 15 inquire whether the identification had indeed been correct.
 16 Implicit in his question is also John’s uncertainty about his
 17 own identity. If he had failed to identify the true Messiah,
 18 was he himself an authentic prophet?

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20 Jesus answered the inquirers by a concrete demonstration
 21 of precisely those works which the Scriptures had promised
 22 would accompany the coming of the Christ. The blind saw;
 23 the lame walked; the marginalized rejoiced in the good
 24 news of God’s love. After the disciples’ departure, Jesus
 25 took on the more delicate task of vindicating John’s own
 26 identity. He had come “in the spirit and power” of the
 27 promised Elijah, as the last and greatest of God’s prophets.

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DAY LUKE 3:1-9

1 David A. Currie

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I've been rethinking how we handle Christmas music. It's not so much carols in October; it's what we hear on Christmas Eve. I think we should add a prelude from the scores of films like *The Longest Day* or *Saving Private Ryan*.

Why? Because the Incarnation is an invasion. The eternal Son of God becomes human to reclaim God's creation from self-centered usurpers—like us!—and to restore God as its rightful ruler. Jesus' birthday is God's D-Day.

Before any invasion, special operations forces are sent in to prepare the way, to try to get the local population to welcome the invaders. A friend of mine, a Navy SEAL, gave me a general idea of what's involved. They live off the land, blend into the countryside, avoid population centers and seek out possible sympathizers ready for change.

Sort of sounds like John the Baptist: he hangs out in the wilderness, eats locusts and wild honey, wears camel camo and prepares people for the Incarnation invasion, the coming of Christ. Like a typical soldier, John gets right to the point: "Join the repentance rebellion! Switch your allegiance from self-serving to Christ-serving. Sprout fruits that reveal your

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roots" (vs. 8-9). These remain our Advent orders, as timely as we prepare for Christ's second coming as they were for his first coming, as necessary for our neighbors as for John's.

DAY EPHESIANS 6:10-20

1 *Ray Pendleton*

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3 *Be Prepared*

4 **T**he motto of the Boy Scouts in my youth was, “Be
5 Prepared.” As young boys, we were rarely prepared
6 for the sudden changes that took place on a camping
7 trip or a hike. However, with each mistake there came an
8 opportunity for learning how to be prepared for the same
9 event the next time.

10

11 The Apostle Paul writing to the church at Ephesus gives this
12 final note of encouragement to them and to us, “Be strong
13 in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

14

15 This is such a contemporary note for all of us who bear the
16 name Christian. God has equipped us with all that we need
17 to face the battles of an increasingly godless and secular
18 society. There is no need to despair about how difficult
19 things are since we have the recognition that our battle is
20 essentially a spiritual one and that the full armor of God is
21 more than adequate for the day-to-day battle that we face.

22

23 The Roman soldiers were well equipped with footwear
24 that enabled them to stay upright and move forward in any
25 terrain. So it is for us, that the Gospel upon which we stand
26 and which we live out day after day empowers us to make
27 peace in a chaotic world. This is not a passive activity but

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a demonstration of how the gospel is transformational. We
are protected as we follow our Lord in trusting obedience
one step at a time, since that is the dimension of faithfulness
that becomes our shield.

In this glorious season of Advent, we celebrate that we are
privileged ambassadors of the King of Kings. And we are
prepared.

DAY PSALM 61

Karen Mason

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3 **S**ome people don't expect much from God. The writer
4 of Psalm 61 expected a great deal from God: that
5 God would hear, listen, lead, protect and answer his
6 petitions. Even though this lament psalm was born out of
7 adversity, it exudes hope and expectation.
8

9 This lament begins with a protest ("Hear my cry, O God;
10 listen to my prayer." vs. 1). It continues with petitions: for
11 protection ("I long to dwell in your tent forever and take
12 refuge in the shelter of your wings." vs. 4) and for long
13 life for the king ("May he be enthroned in God's presence
14 forever." vs. 7). It ends with a promise of praise ("Then
15 will I ever sing praise to your name." vs. 8). This promise
16 is grounded in God's past protection ("For you have been my
17 refuge." vs. 3) and God's covenant faithfulness ("You have
18 given me the heritage of those who fear your name." vs. 5).
19

20 Advent is the season when we remember the first coming
21 of Christ and expectantly prepare for the second advent of
22 our victorious king. We anticipate his arrival because we
23 long for deliverance from our laments. We look for the time
24 when he will wipe every tear from our eyes, when God
25 himself will dwell with us again, when he will be enthroned
26 forever and ever. Our great expectations are grounded in his
27 first coming when he so tenderly loved us, hopeless sinners.
So we say, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Come ever so quickly.

REVELATION 20:11-21:8

Robert J. Mayer

The Holy City

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4 **I** grew up in a community of Christians who eagerly
5 anticipated the return of Jesus Christ. So when
6 Advent season arrives, my attention is drawn not
7 only toward the past but toward the future. John sees a
8 new Jerusalem where God will dwell with his people, where
9 every tear will be wiped away and where death will be no
10 more. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, will
11 make all things new.
12

13 Following Christ daily is a challenge. As Christians, we are
14 not immune from sickness, personal and financial setbacks
15 and the effects of living in a world infected by human
16 depravity. In the midst of those challenges, we can live with
17 hope because we know that Jesus Christ will return and we
18 will live with him in a new heaven and a new earth. The
19 risen Christ has conquered death and there will come a time
20 when Jesus Christ will appear. In that instant, sin and death
21 will be completely destroyed, and his followers will enter
22 into the new Jerusalem of his eternal kingdom.
23

24 We do not know when that will be, but we still live with
25 confident hope because the sovereign God of the universe is
26 Lord over time and eternity.
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1 Dennis P. Hollinger

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3 *The Annunciation*

4 **I**n this classic text of the Christmas season, we
 5 are given an intimate glimpse of a key moment in
 6 salvation history. This is in many respects what we
 7 should expect from a story about an angelic announcement
 8 of a birth, as such stories frequently occur in the Old
 9 Testament before divinely appointed leaders are born.
 10 In this story however, the miracle is amplified by Mary's
 11 simple question in verse 34, "How will this be... since I
 12 am a virgin?" The angel's answer provides the basis for
 13 one of the most profound and important mysteries of God's
 14 revelation in Jesus. God will become a human being. And
 15 Mary is to give him a name that will sum up his mission and
 16 personhood with perfect clarity: Jesus, "The Lord Saves."

17

18 The magnitude of this great revelation to Mary is contrasted
 19 with Mary's own station. She is but a young woman, still
 20 unmarried, from a small backwater part of a backwater
 21 province of the Roman Empire. And yet God has chosen the
 22 small things of the world to bring about a great salvation.
 23 Mary is herself quite cognizant of this contrast, and her
 24 response is a model to all of us, "I am the Lord's servant.
 25 May it be to me as you have said" (vs. 38). In this simple
 26 expression of faith, Mary models a proper response to God's
 27 gift in Jesus. May we respond likewise this Advent season.

F.A. James

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Magnificat

When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, her
 initial response was fear (vs. 29-30). That makes
 perfect sense. If a being from another dimension
 appeared to me, I would have jumped out of my skin.
 Mary's fear almost immediately turned to confusion. When
 the angel announced that she would miraculously bear a son,
 she countered, "How can this be?" Her fear and confusion
 give way to resignation to the divine apparition: "May it be
 to me according to your word."

It would seem that her visit with her relative Elizabeth
 calmed young Mary's nerves and reassured her that what
 was happening was indeed of the Lord. "Blessed are you
 among women and blessed is the child you will bear!" And
 the fear, confusion and submission turned to the rapturous
 joy of the Magnificat. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my
 spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

The annunciation sent Mary on an emotional roller coaster—
 from fear and confusion to joy. It is true that Mary has
 been venerated down through the centuries. Even Luther
 continued to venerate Mary as did many of the Protestant
 Reformers. But it is not veneration of Mary that emerges
 from this text. The primary message is that God showed

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favor to this young Hebrew girl and through her, God sent his Son who would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21), thus fulfilling his promise to Abraham, “just as he promised our ancestors.” To be sure, Mary was very much favored and blessed by God with a unique role in redemptive history. But to those of us living in this fallen world, she connects with us at a deeply emotional level. She reminds us that even while we are plagued with fear and confusion in this life, yet there is a joy that sustains us. The Magnificat points the way beyond fear and confusion to the joy of the magnificent faithfulness of God and his magnificent Son.

Roy Ciampa

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As one reads Zechariah’s response in Luke 1:67-80, it seems clear that he was most excited not about his own son but about the fact that his arrival was the harbinger of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah himself. The angel’s message meant that God’s promised redemption was as good as done! God “has come and has redeemed his people” (vs. 68). Zechariah is acutely aware of how long Israel has been waiting for this news. It was news that had been promised through the prophets “long ago” (vs. 70). The promise hearkened all the way back to the covenant God made with Abraham (vs. 72-73). God was indeed going to make good on his promise to bring about the complete redemption of his people. The wait for the second coming has been longer than the time between Abraham and the first coming of the Messiah. But just as the news of John’s arrival assured Zechariah that the Messiah would soon be there, we rejoice in the knowledge that as God kept his promises to his people in the days of Zechariah and Elizabeth, he will keep his promises to us as well. God will indeed bring about the ultimate consummation of our redemption with the second coming of our Lord.

