

Approaching Light

Reflections for Advent 2009



❖ LISA ALEXANDER

COVER ART ❖ JENN MILLEY

Philippians 1:3-11

THE first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new church year and it comes with many different emotions and thoughts. The texts in this devotional are ones to which the world-wide church turns for reminders that the experience of longing, waiting, hoping, preparing, nearness, approach, and promise are part of life with God in history.

Paul's opening prayer for the Philippians is a beautiful movement through emotions, location and time. He prays for them with "joy." We know that Paul's life will not allow him to speak of superficial joy which is devoid of tears and struggle; this is the joy, expressed in both laughter and tears, that signals a glimpse of the Kingdom of God coming in all its completeness.

Paul is also thankful for their "sharing" in the gospel (*koinonia*, usually translates as "fellowship"). This life together is held in common through the Gospel of Christ: the Word of God among us which continues to be the basis for our fellowship.

As we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus, God's direct entry into human life, we will spend time each day with many different words: words from the bible, words from each other, and words within our own hearts. May the Word among us build us up so that our love overflows more and more.

❖ RYAN SARTOR

Luke 21:25-36

WHEN asked how she found the strength and hope to work in the middle of so much suffering, Mother Theresa replied, “One day a long time ago, I went to nurse a woman with leprosy. Her body was covered with sores. So, I began the slow work of tending them, up and down her arms. And when I reached her hand, I saw a sore in the middle of her hand that looked like it went through. And I thought to myself. My Lord has holes in his hands. Then I prayed, ‘Lord, is this you?’”

Angels heralded his first coming. Shepherds, startled from their everyday job, first heard the news and their lives would never be the same. It was a dangerous world that met our saviour, just as it is today. Jesus gave us signs to watch for, events that will occur as surely as summer comes with the budding and leafing of trees. Don't be anxious as you see the turmoil around you, because you know why it's happening. As we witness the unfolding of events, we'll keep doing our everyday jobs just as the shepherds did. “Be ready,” he said, “and keep watch, I'm coming again!”

❖ LEE BEST

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

WHEN you read this passage from our vantage today, it quickly appears that what was promised to the house of Israel and Judah had not been so readily received. How is it that the gifts of such hopeful promises can end up being so easily dismissed?

It seems that an openness is required while we earnestly await the things we hope for.

And it seems that this is a hard to thing to learn.

There are a couple questions I see meeting us in this text:

For what promises are we awaiting today?

How are we becoming people able to receive the answers to these promises in unexpected ways?

Perhaps many gifts and promises have been given to us, but we have been unable to receive them. Perhaps it is difficult to receive these gifts because we are used to receiving things the way we want it, the way we expect it.

If we could learn to receive all parts of life as though they are gifts, and not as things we assume to be our rights, we might take a first step in recreating our character so we are more able to receive the promises that are too easily passed by.

Isaiah 7: 10-16

I HAVE loved the word “advent” since learning the Latin root, “adventus.” More than just the sound of it, I also love the economy, the efficiency of language: “adventus”—coming towards. It isn’t merely the anticipation of something coming—a saviour, a change, a light in the dark places—it’s that this motion is directed. He comes towards us. Just as, in this passage, a Sign was coming towards Ahaz, whether he wanted it, or not.

And clearly, he didn’t. In verse 12, he tries to evade Isaiah’s command, using delightfully proper language: “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” He keeps to the rules, but violates the spirit. He’s in a mess, both political and spiritual, but he’s afraid to ask directly for help. Indeed, Ahaz’s reluctance characterizes the entire chapter. Recalcitrance; it’s true of me too often. How many times I have gotten myself, or been thrown, into deep and terrifying waters? When, like Ahaz, I am petrified to open myself up to what God might do or ask of me. Somehow, the pain of change seems worse than the pain of staying the same, so I stay, drowning in worry, unable to ask for help.

Fortunately for Ahaz, and for me, help is coming anyway. Ahaz’s tiny kingdom is to be saved from present threats, his throne protected. The same help is always already coming towards me, in the form and person of Jesus, Immanuel, God-With-Us. All that remains for me to do is to receive this gift, to open my heart to the love that has been coming towards me for eternity.

❖ JENN MILLEY

Micah 7:18-20

TODAY, a question takes us the next step on our Advent journey: “Who is a God like you...?” What a roomy question! What is the first answer that springs to mind? Quite frankly, it’s a bit of an overwhelming question. And the answers Micah gives, do our hearts believe them? “A God that pardons sin and forgives transgressions.” “A God who does not stay angry but whose delight is in showing mercy.” We pause, trying to find a fresh way to read these words.

It is almost beyond imagining, that these qualities came to earth in the form of a tiny baby, fully human and fully divine. Micah wrote these words as both prayer and prophesy. We have experienced them, however, as a promise fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Our Advent invitation is to use Micah’s words as a foil for our own lives. Think now of your own experiences of the mercy of God. Reflect on your own pardon and forgiveness of transgressions. All this is a little baby? All of this in us? God, we yearn to know you, made human in Jesus the Christ.

❖ LISA ALEXANDER

Genesis 18:1-21

MAMRE

At the towering of the sun
Silent, seated, I behold you
Through baked and shimmering layered air
Standing there
By the trees

Expecting, hoping, fearing
I run, run, run to you
To you who knows
To you the end of all my hope
Please, oh please stay
Stay awhile, here, with me
Must you go?

Gentle, your question probes
my awkward, scheming, open heart:
Where is Sarah, your wife?
Sure, your promise feeds
my hope:
I will return.

True, your correction fortifies
my trust:
Is anything too hard?
Firm, your guidance lights
my way:
*Shall I hide from Abraham
what I am about to do?*
No
For I have chosen him.





❖ CARL VAN MAARSEVEEN

1 Thessalonians 3:6-11

What are you waiting for:

a visitor, an exam mark, a medical test result, a birth, a sale, a holiday?

How are you waiting:

worried, anxious, excited, impatient, peaceful, joyful?

We all spend much of our lives waiting, and might expect that practice makes perfect, but I, at least, tend to rush my way through the waiting, wishing it would go faster.

What a contrast to the attitude in this passage. Paul obviously longs to see the Thessalonians again, and knows that they long to see him, but rather than lamenting the time and distance that they must be apart, he thanks God for their faithfulness and love and prays for them. How would my waiting be different, transformed, if I embraced the wait as an opportunity to pray and reflect? What if I prayed:

for the visitor en route, the teacher marking my exam, the doctors involved in my treatment, the baby as it grows, the one who will buy this house, the time our family will spend together on their holiday.

Lord, as I wait for all that I anticipate in both joy and fear, may I seize the opportunity to come to you in prayer and share my waiting with you.

❖ CLARE VAN MAARSEVEEN

Psalm 122

“I was glad when they said to me ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’”

Sometimes.

Sometimes I am glad. Sometimes I’m tired and I’d rather sleep in. When I was six, I would kick and scream on Sunday morning when my parents said to me “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” (or words to that effect). Going to church meant that I had to get up early, get dressed up and go to something called “School” on the weekend. Sitting on a folding chair in the basement of the church, I had to take the minister’s word that I was in the house of the Lord. I looked around at the dingy paint and the exposed pipes in the ceiling, and thought that God should be able to find a better house.

Our church has been housed in different places: a university lecture hall, an office space, a traditional church, a tent in the park. Yet no matter where we meet, for more than twenty years I have felt as if I am coming home.

As we draw nearer to Christmas, may we remember that the house of the Lord is wherever we gather, and when we go to the house of the Lord, we are coming home.

And let us be glad!

❖ SUSAN FERGUSON

Luke 3: 1-6

WHEN I first read this passage I thought about place: What did John's desert look like? How would my imagination paint "a way prepared for the Lord"?

I imagined the desert place in which God spoke to John to be a dry, rocky, sand-coloured landscape where John spent most of his time alone. It is not surprising to me that God spoke to John in the desert place.

I have experienced significant times of communion with God when I am alone and away from distractions. In quiet alone-ness I've felt able to earnestly seek God's voice, and clearly hear God's words of direction.

Along with John, we are invited to hear God's call: "Prepare yourselves! I am coming!!" He invites us to watch and listen, and to see God's hand pointing to bumpy or crooked places in our lives.

And as we remember John's invitation to repentance, may we also be inspired to move into action, making straight and smooth these rough and crooked patches.

The landscapes of our lives are varied: deserts, lush and busy river valleys, high hills, and wide plains. Together as a community, may we continue to imagine our lives transformed into paths prepared for God.

❖ ZOE ASHER

Luke 3: 7-18

He has authority in his demeanour, conviction in his speech.

He's not safe!

Yet, there's something in his presence... and his message
is compelling.

I cannot dismiss it... and it disturbs me deeply... to my core.
He speaks with power to the tax collector, and even to the soldier.

He has no fear!

His eyes pierce mine as he shouts

“SHARE WHAT YOU HAVE... CLOTHES, FOOD,
SHELTER!”

But I'm a Christian... and a baptized one at that!

His response cuts me

“A DIME A DOZEN! DEEDS! NOT TITLE!”

Will I be chopped... discarded?

And who is this man who comes after him?

Will he require total submission?... complete allegiance?

What will his kingdom be like?

Will he subjugate by fear... with ghost and fire?

I would like to dismiss it all... but I cannot
for his message has burrowed deep under my skin.

I am expectant,... and I wait.

We now know: He elevates us past our titles and accomplishments.
He invites us to join Him this season in proclaiming and
demonstrating His love, and reclaiming all of creation. Let us
allow the love of God to touch us deeply, and make us bold in our
expressions of love to one another and to the world.

Isaiah 40: 1 - 11

THE exile had finally happened. There was no hope. Every shred of comfort was removed. Every contingency failed. The temple: destroyed. The land: taken. The people: exiled. And the Promise? The Promise given through Abraham that God would bless all nations through them? Was it perishing along with the temple, the land, and the people? Had God finally, utterly abandoned them? This message came to them: “Comfort, O comfort My people” says your God.’ There, in the utter darkness of exile, the Word of God streamed in and reclaimed them from their tattered remains. God brought a message of hope; a renewal of the ancient Promise. It was then they heard “the Lord God will come with might.” God had not abandoned them. “Do not fear” Isaiah told them, “here is your God!”

It had happened. There was no hope. Every possible comfort was removed. Every contingency failed. Humanity was mired in sin. Worship: lost. Goodness: gone. Their best works were as appealing as menstrual rags. And the Promise? The Promise given through Eve that God would crush the bondage of evil? Then God appeared. Not in might, but as a child: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The ancient Promise was not lost: it was fulfilled. Evil suffered a mortal blow. That night, the Good News was not announced by a prophet. But angels danced in the sky and cried out “Do not fear! There has been born for you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” Here is your God!

❖ BETHANY SOLLEREDER

Mark 1: 1-8

WHEN my in-laws visited us earlier this year from England, it was their first trip to Canada. For months we anticipated their arrival, excited about all the places we wanted to show them, people we wanted them to meet, and so many aspects of our lives that we wanted to share with them. We planned outings, organized meals, cleaned, stocked the freezer, booked time off work, and whenever we spoke to them on the phone, our excitement grew. All through the planning and the implementing of our plans during their three week stay, our usual routines were interrupted. Meal times and work schedules changed, our leisure time was necessarily shared with our parents, our usual quiet times were filled with conversation and laughter, and well... things were just “different” for a little while. But we had such a wonderful visit with them, and it was well worth rearranging our lives to make such lasting memories.

As I commit to making more time for You, Lord, my routines will be interrupted, my life will be impacted, and some things will need to be rearranged. Help me to adjust willingly and with excited anticipation, knowing that the sacrifices I need to make are insignificant when compared to the end result of a rich and lasting relationship with You.

❖ LINDA GRIME

Malachi 3: 1-4

RESPONSE FROM A PRIEST

All right.

Perhaps I have grown a bit lazy.

What can I say?

Waiting is tedious.

God is silent.

Time is ordinary.

Staleness sets in.

Cynicism takes over.

Worship becomes ritual.

It is hard to hold out hope for anything else.

So, yes, perhaps I have not given my best.

Perhaps I have become hard-hearted, half-hearted.

But does it really matter anymore?

Do You really expect anything more from me?

You put us here to be Your messengers.

You put us here to pronounce things clean.

But now You send us a messenger, a “malachi”!

Now You pronounce us – not clean – but unclean!

You say You want to launder us,

to trample us over with caustic lye.

You say You want to refine us,

to melt us down with blazing fire.

So this is how You’re going to come –

Close enough to trample me?

Close enough to melt me?

This is how You’re going to come –

Not to judge the outsiders, but to judge me?

Not to conquer my enemies, but to conquer me?

Not to purify the filthy crowds, but... me?

Is this shame or honour?

Is this what I’ve always dreaded

or what I’ve always hoped for?

Matthew 3: 1-12

JOHAN, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

“Change” my life? But I’m way too busy for that!

In the delightful urban chaos of the many treasured parts of my life, my family, my work, and my friends what room do I make to really grow in my faith? To move into the “desert surroundings” to which God calls me, just as he called John?

To be honest, certainly not enough, because the desert wilderness scares me. It makes demands on me in ways for which I am not prepared. I should be delighted to go with Him to this simple and austere place, where I can be with Him without distractions. But there, I am not sure I will even survive... I will have no grocery stores, no coffee shops, no dance lessons, no work deadlines, no shopping malls: just Him and me. Yet I know it is just where he wants me to be.

In the next few weeks of Advent, I will be in training: spending more time in the wilderness of my relationship with God. I challenge you, my friends, to join me on this spiritual journey toward Christmas. Being together on this adventure will make it richer, more authentic, not to mention less frightening, because I am an urban “gal,” and the wilderness of my relationship with God is scary in its awesomeness.

❖ LIZ DRANCE

Luke 1:26-38

LORD, here I am alone... betrothed... feeling so young.
 A stranger has just entered the house. He says I am highly favoured, and You are with me.

Why is he here? I wait. Is there something more?

“Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is going to bless you,” he says.

But I *am* fearful! Who is this? How does he know my name?

“You are going to have a baby...”

Now, I am extremely perplexed! Courage, Mary!

“... and will be called the Son of the Most High...”

“How will this be possible? I am a virgin!”

“... The Holy Spirit will come upon you...”

I feel something begin to change. The winds are turning... I can’t explain it. The words, incredible at first, are settling in, somehow making sense to me.

“I am the Lord’s servant,” I hear myself say, “May it be to me as you have said.”

*Lord, You know my name. You are present, even in my distress.
 Grant me your peace. Make me willing to hear your call... willing
 to move out of a safe place and step into the new with You.*

❖ ANN TKACHENKO

Luke 1:39-45

MARY hurries to visit her cousin Elizabeth with a hidden life enclosed.

Tentative, vulnerable, fearful, she offers her greeting. It pierces the silence of Zechariah's house.

There is expectancy; there is response.

A baby leaps in its mother's womb: a jolt of recognition; tiny spasmodic limbs thrash in the dark.

Something felt, glimmered, welcomed, known.

This baby is the silent but insistent first witness of God's presence.

Elizabeth cries out to Mary in affirmation,

"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear."

Mute prophecy is given voice.

Heaven's secret cannot be contained, erupting in the violent tremors of an unborn baby and the prophetic shouts of an old woman.

Elizabeth, subdued, then asks in naked humility and wonder,

"But why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Visitation of God; God with us; eternal love enfolded in flesh; within; infusing; transforming.

Already, Mary, cradling her Lord within her, is changed; made holy.

And us?

"Blessed is she who believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

ZEPHANIAH is one of the books of the Bible that occupies “the sticky pages.” That is the section of the Bible where the pages all stick together because they are seldom pulled apart (notice how the pew Bibles seldom open for minor prophets). My most vivid recollection of this book, is of joking around with fellow worship leaders about reading the first chapter in a worship service to make people ill at ease. “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth declares the Lord...” In this imagined scenario we would then transition to an uplifting song like “There is Joy in the Lord.”

If the juxtaposition seems odd, so does this: a small book from the sticky pages which begins in judgment and destruction ends with rejoicing. The people are restored and God is present with His people. Suddenly, there is healing and wholeness for God’s people. They are finally freed from oppression. As we await and prepare for the coming of Jesus this Advent, let us walk in solidarity with those who suffer and prayerfully look for the day when God will set things right and all will be as it should be.

❖ JAMES MATICHUK

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

BY themselves, these verses appear to be a hodge-podge of broad commands and wide assurances. The latent legalist in me wants to jump on these instructions because, if followed, then these promises will be mine. But such obedience escapes me, and I am unable to bend God to my will.

So what do I derive from these verses? In the immediate context, Paul is talking about our ultimate hope, the return of Jesus and the full realization of His Kingdom. The recipients of Paul's letter believed that Jesus would come back in their lifetimes, but as the years elapsed, their hope wavered. As a means of keeping hope alive, Paul describes what a hope-filled life looks like.

Our struggle in keeping these commands is not always our anemic wills. Rather it is that we have a lack-luster hope. We, in our prudence, hope only for that which seems possible. We stifle any dreaming beyond that to prevent disappointment. But hope is not characterized by the safety of emotional equilibrium. Rather Biblical hope is marked by a passionate and even desperate longing for God to appear.

As we light the hope candle this Advent season, let's be extravagant and hope for the healing and holiness seen in the Kingdom of God knowing that Christ has come and His return is sure.

❖ CAROLYN COUILLARD

Isaiah 12:2-6

MAKE SOME NOISE

ADVENT is a time of waiting. Often we think of waiting as a silent stillness, a time of quiet anticipation and expectation. This passage not only declares the waiting over, it throws silence out the window and declares that rejoicing in our salvation is a noisy business.

Indeed, how can we keep silent once we grasp the absolute, transforming reality of God's salvation? This love casts out our fears of being separated from God, of rejection, of death, of failure. In hopeful response, we are compelled to shout out, to sing, with an exuberance and creativity that has an emphatically outward, cacophonous momentum. First, we turn to God, thanking him and calling on him, entering into a dialogue. We praise God for what He has done and what He means to us. Then, we look beyond this personal relationship as we tell everyone we know about the love that makes us rejoice. We might start out singing this song alone, but other voices join us and we become a choir of praise, for the Holy One of Israel is among us.

And if we are silent, the rocks and stones themselves will start to sing. The trees shall clap their hands. Let's not be outdone. Time to start making a joyful noise!

❖ CEAL MCLEAN

James 5:7-11

PERSEVERANCE. The dictionary parses the word as: per-meaning “through, utterly, very” and severe meaning “difficult to endure.” Advent, and the years leading up to Advent, for Israel, are defined by the word perseverance, a time difficult but necessary to endure. Israel experienced many generations of prophetic famine: perseverance was necessary for the people to remain the people of God. We see Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promised Messiah, but for Mary and Joseph, having a child through the Holy Spirit caused them both to persevere against enormous cultural pressures.

Simeon was also a per-severer. He had been promised that he would not die until he saw Israel’s consolation, the Messiah. The biblical account does not reveal the days, weeks and months of waiting, or Simeon’s doubts about whether he would ever see what was promised. Simeon’s patient persevering showed his steadfast belief.

Where are we at this time of Advent? For what are we needing to “stand firm” before the Lord? Paradoxically, Advent is a time of excitement and joy, yet we may need to persevere through suffering, affliction or grief. Let’s not give up the struggle for if we “... see what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord... full of compassion and mercy.”

❖ GREG DALLIMORE

Psalm 126

IN Psalm 126:1-3, something like the Toronto Blessing visits the people of Israel! And yet the psalm's context is the return of the captives to Zion: the blessing is a subjective experience in the midst of the objective realities of returning to Zion.

Psalm 126:4-6 shows how the subjective and objective realities of God's presence can cut deeply into our lives. If we switch the reading of "seed" to a metaphor, the life-giving seed then becomes God's Word sown in our hearts.

Elsewhere in scripture (e.g. Hebrews 4:12), we know God's Word as a two-edged sword wielded by the Holy Spirit. It can cut in two directions: in one way, it cuts inwardly with God's message of forgiveness, deliverance and assurance into our receptivity, our "being." The second way is outwardly, bringing justice and righteousness into our activity, our "doing." This is very important. Herein lays our subjective and objective realities before God's in-breaking presence.

These realities are awe-inspiring. In the end, we too are like people who dream as we live our lives before a God at work amongst the captives, setting them free. Immanuel...

❖ BRIAN DUCILLE

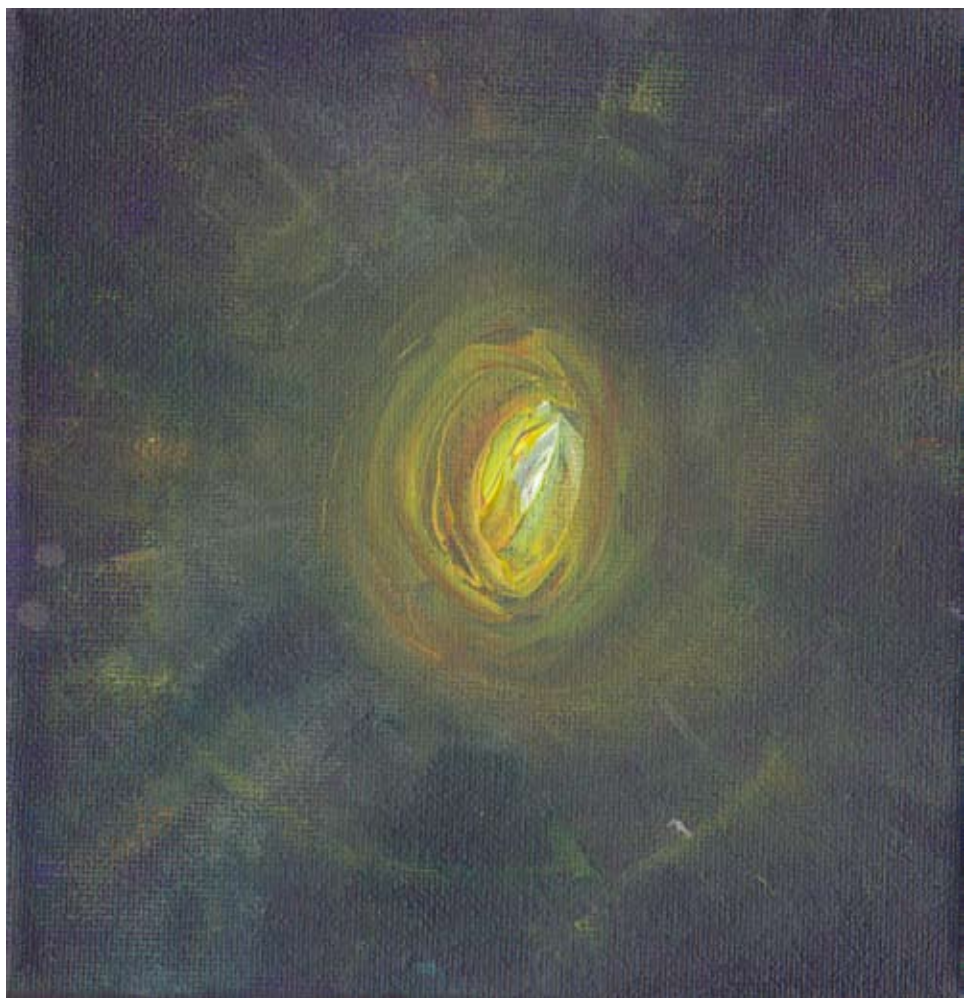
Isaiah 2: 1-5

IT was summer. Esmat, son of a village chief from Jeloucha in northern Afghanistan, was visiting the village of 100 Mile House in BC. That same day news arrived that the Taliban killed a volunteer from 100 Mile House while she was trying to help children in Afghanistan. Sadness spread, and a gloom fell over the place. Indescribable confusion filled each person's heart. Esmat was standing in front of the people in the community. He acknowledged the loss of the young volunteer's life. Despite the reality, Esmat encouraged the people to continue to care for innocent Afghans. "Discouraging people is what the Taliban want," he said.

Have you ever let evil shatter your spirit? When people are outraged, there are often two different reactions. Because of profound pain and anger, people will want to fight, or they will feel demoralized and give up. But there is a third way – the way of peace; of doing God's will. We are responsible for our reactions. Esmat's people in Jeloucha have chosen the way of peace. Which one do you choose?

Lord, please guide us in the way of love and peace – help us to walk as your light in the world. Amen.

❖ YUMIKO KING



❖ JENN MILLEY



❖ LISA ALEXANDER

Micah 5:2-5

HAVE you ever been humiliated or made to feel small? Judah was the smallest tribe in the nation of Israel and considered inconsequential. However the greatest ruler, David, came from this tribe. There are times where God can surprise us by taking our pain and meeting us there to make it a source of healing and restoration.

Israel's great hope was for another king like David to re-establish a golden age in the kingdom. What great hope, to wait for the one who had been spoken of from everlasting. Micah was telling his people that the king was going to come from Bethlehem. Hope in the little. Micah was saying that hope could be found in the small. Like the little mustard seed which grows into a massive shade tree to shelter the small birds of the air. Hope in Jesus. "This man shall be THE PEACE."

Micah is also reminding the Israelites in a time of exile that grief and pain do not have the last word. God has the last word. Pain and grief have the ability to humiliate and belittle us, but it does not have to finish us. Kits, GLD and UGM families were a gentle and loving reminder for us that in the darkest hours we could hope in a God who takes our small faith and surprises us with great hope.

❖ JULIO & LISA HERNANDEZ

Luke 1:67-79

I USUALLY love the Advent season, reading stories about the coming savior. Here, Zechariah speaks of salvation coming into the world through the tender mercy of God. Light will shine in the darkness and people will be led into the way of peace. I have heard these inspiring words many times.

But, some years, they seem just that: words, songs, stories. Wasn't this two thousand years ago? Yet, I still see a world filled with war, not peace, and often the lives of those around me seem filled with more darkness than light.

I think that Zechariah may have felt the same way. When he first heard that his son would be a prophet to prepare the way of the Lord, Zechariah doubted because he and his wife were old and childless. But, I wonder if he had a hard time believing that promises God made long ago to Abraham and David would be fulfilled through his life. Then, Zechariah saw the birth of his son and something in him changed.

May God birth something new in our lives this season that we may have a renewed hope and see the ways that Christ is working in and through us.

❖ SARAH MATICHUK

Luke 1:46-55

SOME chick from nowhere-ville will bear the hope of the world...

And she knows it.

And she rejoices in the silliness of it: she is a part of it!

But isn't this God's way? To remember the least entitled, drawing them up to be used by him to work mighty deeds, to achieve his purposes. It was like this before in the old days with Hannah, with David, with the prophets.

Luke has caught onto this pattern of God's interaction with people and highlights it with Mary's Magnificat at the start of his story. The story after all is about an obscure "Jewish sect," a group of un-likelies, fishermen, tax collectors and even foreigners who are drawn together around this Jesus. And here's the real kicker, they become, as Luke contends, the true Israel, the legitimate people of God, recipients of the promises first made to Abraham.

And it continues to be God's way. We, the misfits of Kits, are drawn up by God to follow in the steps of these first Christians. We are witnesses for Jesus, we are channels of peace and reconciliation, we are advocates for the weak. It's silly! Ordinary people are raised up into God's new Kingdom.

Praise Him!

❖ DAVID LAW

Hebrews 10: 1-7

Blood, it runs in the streets. Flies swarm and children laugh, jumping over the rivulets running from the slit throats of rams. As far as the eye can see, blood runs in the street on this high holy day to end Ramadan. A day of sacrifice.

Sacrifices become nothing more than an annual reminder of sin.

Blood, it runs in the streets, dripping from the points of needles discarded in the alley on this cheque day when there's not enough to pay the rent and get presents for the kids, so she spends what she has to make reality go away. A day of sacrifice.

It is impossible for all this blood to take away sin.

Blood, it runs in the streets, gilded in gold and tied with a ribbon. Gadgets and gizmos bought cheap on the bloody back of another, far away and long forgotten. Blood, it runs in the streets on this next to last shopping day of the season. A day of sacrifice.

Therefore, when Christ came into this world he said, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me. Here I am. I have come to do your will."

❖ JODI SPARGUR

Philippians 4:4-7

WHEN my shopping bag breaks, I sit down and cry like a two year-old. My nose is already snuffly with a fresh cold, so now the river is in flash-flood. With the family gathering tomorrow, what have I to celebrate?

Counting my blessings doesn't go further than one hand, and they aren't enough, they are nowhere near enough. Unlike the myriad things that keep me awake at night. I have to admit, my attempts to manage life are failing; at best, they are illusory. And I have lost my—what's a word like libido?—for prayer.

I will cheer up tomorrow: discovering presents under the tree, savouring spices from the table, feeling fleeting touches of love between us. But the fire will go out, the warmth will not last, and I will be here again, shivering, waiting in the cold. As though I am waiting for death. It is a deathly way to wait.

A child shies from the smack of a snowball in her face; the child looks up and laughs. Do I dare to believe in something more than the peace of anaesthesia? If, to live at all involves stepping out into the rain sometimes, I want to rejoice in something more than sunshine.

❖ JACKIE LAW

Luke 2: 1-21

HERE we are: Mary's due date.

Her body delivers her first son. This is, as far as we know, quite ordinary. He is wrapped in ordinary cloths. He is laid in an ordinary manger. As the scene changes in this passage, we meet more ordinariness: shepherds, sheep, pastures, and the thick of night.

The story, though, suddenly bursts with beams of the extraordinary in this dark pasture scene. An angel of God appears. The glory of the Lord shines. Heaven speaks. Emotions leap. A message is delivered. The Messiah has arrived. He awaits their visit. Then, more praise tumbles out from heaven: Glory! Peace! Favour!

And then we settle back into some more of the ordinary. The shepherds take a long walk, visit the baby Messiah, spread the story of their encounter, fade back into the place where they came from, and Mary holds the beauty of the ordinary made extraordinary deep in her heart.

We carry on from this Christmas day into the next twelve days of Christmas celebration in the church calendar. I wonder if there are ordinary experiences filled with heaven's exclamations to be gathered up and held in our hearts?

❖ **BOBBI SALKELD**



❖ JENN MILLEY



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