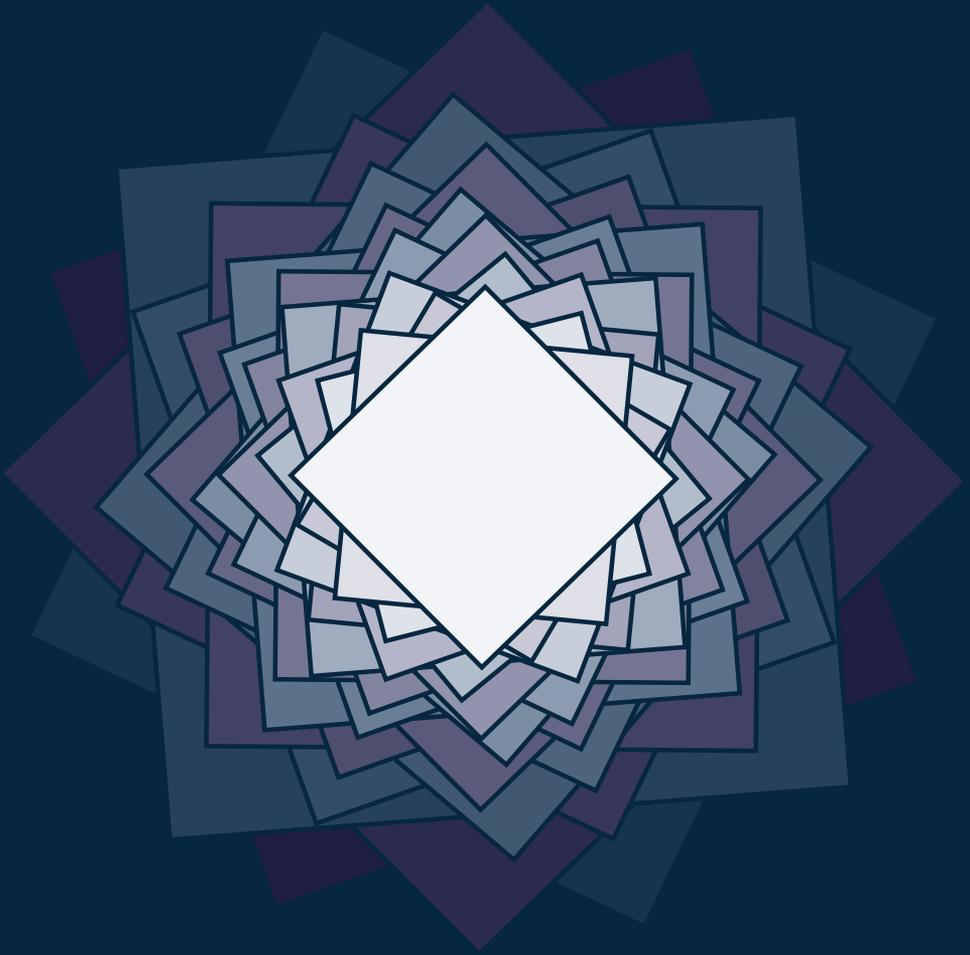


Advent Devotions



Written by Students of
Wake Forest University
School of Divinity



The Advent Season is that time in which we actively await the birth of Jesus Christ. Beginning in darkness, we allow ourselves time to reflect and renew as the light draws near. In the shadows, we often have opportunity to see the subtleties of God's grace that may be overwhelmed in the brightest Light.

This collection of Advent devotions is the work of students of Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Each week's theme reflects the gifts promised us by the birth of the Savior. We move through Hope, Peace, Joy and Love together. We hope that these reflections foster a deeper awareness of the gifts of our community and invite us into the liminal space of waiting together.

May your Advent Season be Holy and Blessed -

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Wake Forest University School of Divinity



Week One



Hope

Sunday, November 29th

Matthew 25:1-13

Emily Lemoine

What in the world does this story have to do with advent? Everything! Advent is defined as –the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event. Just as the ten virgins were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, we are awaiting the coming arrival of our Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us over and over again that He will be coming back (see Acts 1:11, John 14:3, 28, 1 Timothy 6:14, Revelation 22:20 among others).

Sometimes when I read this story, I get very annoyed with those 5 foolish virgins. If anyone knows me, they know I'm extremely prepared. Surely they knew they were going to wait on the bridegroom. Why were they not prepared? Did they really assume someone else would just share the oil they should have brought in the first place? Who gave them this sense of entitlement? Who did they think they were?

Today we are waiting for Christ to come and take us home—to where we were made to be: in the continuous presence of our Almighty God & Creator. But how do we prepare for His coming? Obviously we must be ready.

We must prepare ourselves so we never hear Him say – I don't know you. We must spend time with Him, daily...hourly...moment-by-moment if we can. We must talk with Him. We must soak Him in. We must praise Him. We must share His good news as often as possible. We should love those whom He loves. We must invest in other's lives and spiritual walks. We must live our lives intentionally, not getting swept up in the business and pettiness of this life. We must be ready.

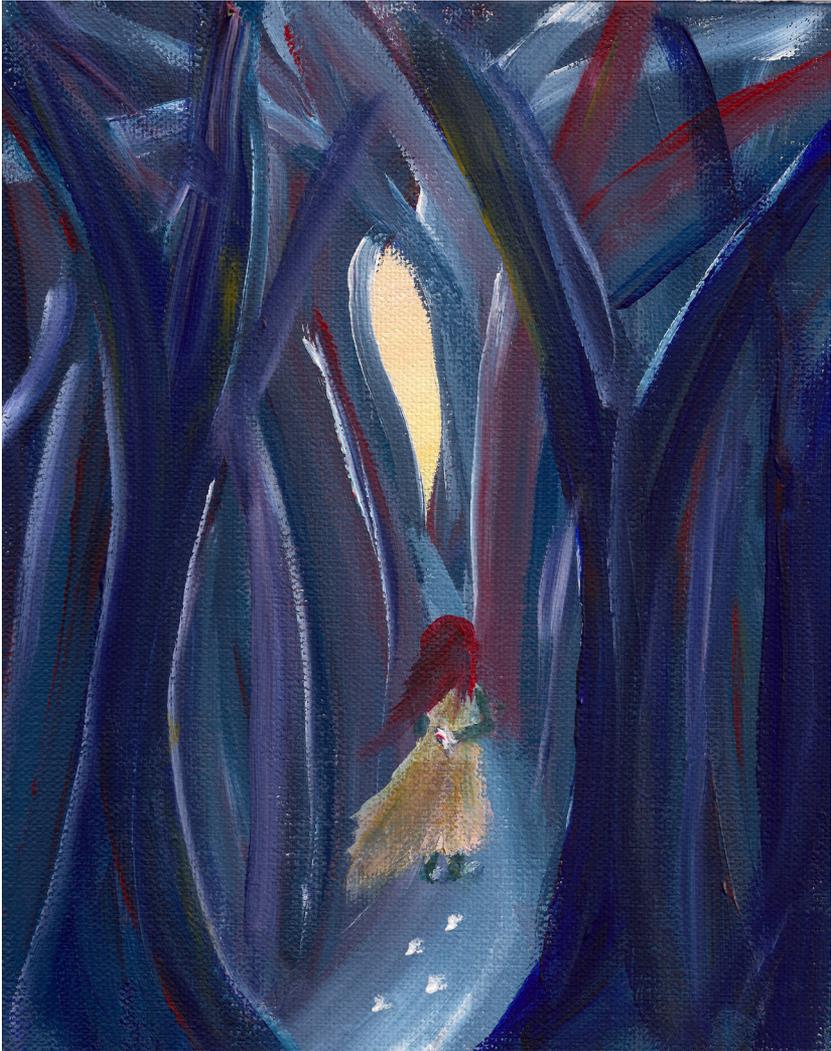
Come, Lord Jesus. And when You do, may You find us faithful.

Monday, November 30th

Christine Hargraves

Luke 20:1-8

Authority at Hand



Nay-sayers tower over
Winds of doubt brush my cheek
But the light I hold is more than they know.

Tuesday, December 1st

Luke 20:9-18

Nikki Scheidecker

Where and how do I find hope in the parable of the Vineyard? The first question I asked myself was: what does it mean to be a servant in God's vineyard? Being a servant in God's vineyard is to live in action the message of Christ through life's daily choices. Being a servant of God requires great leadership and to live a life in action through the message of Christ is a way of honoring God. The next question I found myself asking was: what is the fruit of the earth that God expects to receive and why did the religious leaders deny God this honor? God's desire for fruits in season was God's desire for true spiritual fruits from Israel. The leaders of Israel were denying Christ as the heir to God's kingdom. I'm still left wondering where the hope is to be found in the parable of the vineyard. God has been ignored, religious leaders have condemned his son, and the spiritual fruit God asks for is lost to God's servants. The hope lies in God's judgement of the people. Judgement can carry negative implications but if viewed in the proper way God's judgement allows for the proper discernment of one's spiritual fruit. It is through God's judgement a true servant leader, which is one who lives their life in action through Christ's message, will be forgiven, and salvation will become theirs.

Reading scripture and making sense of it is not my strong suit just yet. However, I do understand hope in the spiritual sense of which God is asking for. God desires humanity to rise up and transcend all egotistical ideals. God wants us to promote and be responsible for living our lives in and with loving kindness. This is the spiritual fruit God wants shared between human beings and engraved upon our hearts. To live in loving kindness while sitting in judgement of the other produces the hope and Great Spirit God is looking for in every one of us as a servant to God.

Wednesday, December 2nd

Nicole Newton

Luke 20:19-26

Taxes and Advent? What a strange combination. How do these two things go together to teach us anything about this season of waiting? Often, when we teach this parable we focus here on the coin; on “giving Caesar what is Caesar’s.” But I wonder if choosing to let our focus stay there is just one more way that the occupying force of the political arena co-opts the narrative we are truly meant to hear. During the hustle of the holiday season there are many narratives competing for our time and attention—narratives that are at their core merely new occupying forces trying to steal the show from what is really going on.

This Advent season I invite you to resist focusing there and instead find some quiet space. Sit. Listen. Breathe. Don’t let the occupying forces of consumerism, perfectionism, family drama, and festivities co-opt the story unfolding anew in your life right now. The Messiah is coming—the Incarnation is near! Wait on the Holy to bring illumination to the shadowy places that you have been carrying with you this year and then give to God what is God’s—your whole heart and all your unique giftings present and made manifest in this world for the glory of the King.

Thursday, December 3rd

Luke 20:27-40

Austin Thomas

The Way of Hope



Friday, December 4th

Andrea Simmonds

Luke 20:41-21:4

During the week I go to school full time and work part time at Lowe's Home Improvement. Recently in the past week we have begun to raise money for Gifts for Kids, which is sponsored by the Salvation Army. I spend a lot of time standing behind my register and reciting over and over again, "Will that be all? Also, would you like to donate to Gifts for Kids?" Most people say, "I'll give next time". However, it is one customer's response that actually made me think. When I asked her if she would like to donate, rather than say no she said she would give a dollar. "I know it isn't much, but really that's all I can give right now." I thanked her for her donation and let her know that every little bit helps.

Her words and that experience made me think about the widow in Luke 21. The scripture says that Jesus saw all of the rich people giving, and there was one poor widow who gave all that she had which was two copper coins, "...this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." (Luke 21:1-4).

The widow put in all she had. It was not millions of dollars or something fancy, but rather two small copper coins. What is important is that the woman was giving from her heart. It is people who give what they can that gives me hope. A lot of people do not want to become a part of a church or other organizations, because they feel they have nothing to give and that they are empty. What this passage shows is that God doesn't care about how much you give, but rather the love and devotion behind the giving. God doesn't tell us to get on our feet and then seek Him, but rather God comes to us and says, "Give me the broken pieces." Sometimes all we have to give is our broken pieces the important thing is that we are willing to give.

Saturday, December 5th

Luke 21:5-19

Monica Banks

Two things strike me most about this text. First, these are Jesus' words to his disciples preceding the passion narrative. They are a quiet, yet intensely firm warning with an apocalyptic tone. And though I now have the awareness of the Temple and its actual destruction, it seems that Jesus also saw a contemporary world and is speaking this warning to me, in this space. These "wars and insurrections" of Luke's time...It seems that Jesus knew of the atrocities that were to come. I wonder if Luke's Jesus presupposed the Holocaust, genocide in Rwanda, the deaths of Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, or rural and urban children ravaged by poverty. I suppose he must have, right? He even speaks of arrests, prosecutions, and prisons. Dr. Shaner spoke about when Jesus went home to Nazareth and how the people in the synagogue must have beamed as they said, "This is our Jesus!" Nearly 2000 years later, my heart is heavy while I write this. We are coming into one of the most hopeful seasons of the year. A season that includes Thanksgiving, Advent, and the birth of our Savior. Yet, I'm deeply troubled by the circumstances that surround daily life for many in our world. Isn't that exactly the circumstance that Jesus and his disciples must have understood? I too read this and feel this as a sermon and found myself saying, "This, this is MY Jesus. He sees us."

The second thing that I find myself reflecting on is the tension in the text. I feel such an immense connection to Jesus through this text. I mean, he's our Guy right? He saw his people, the ones right in front of him. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, fellowshiped with his friends. He promises in the closing verses that some of his friends and followers will be imprisoned, persecuted, hated, and even put to death. Yet, Jesus indicates that "not a hair of your head will perish." I think I would have raised my hand during this lecture. I can imagine myself calling out my teacher's contradiction at this point (don't be mad). But, it seems that none of the disciples did that. There were opportunities for certain, plenty voices of doubt are heard throughout the gospels. It seems that whatever Jesus was saying, the seemingly glaring contradiction of his words, was surpassed by the disciples faith in their teacher and a promise of salvation.

As we approach this holiday season, I feel that not only is Jesus' acknowledgment of suffering and injustice important, but it sits alongside of a promise that infuses salvation into hope and hope into salvation. I don't think that being a "Jesus Follower" means living on the right side of town or attending an approved church on Sunday mornings. I think the real risk of following "Our Jesus" is that it's counter cultural. It's exhausting and dangerous work speaking out for injustice. While we want to celebrate the birth of our savior this holiday season and buy gifts for our family and friends, we simply cannot forget that "Our Jesus" was occupied with the work of justice. To follow this Jesus, means that we cannot simply "go" to church, we must also "be" the church. I think this is the hope that Jesus offers in these final lines, the hope of "being" who we are created to be in community with all of creation. I believe that the work of Christians is to see others, exactly as they are and to stand with them in their joys as well as in their suffering. To acknowledge the joy of our savior's birth, is also to acknowledge tremendous suffering. Neither would be without the other's context.

Week 710

Peace

Sunday, December 6th

Luke 7:28-35

Sophia Russell

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the gift of life, the gift of your Son, Jesus, and the gifts of joy and peace. Help us to be more effective witnesses and living epistles of you. Amen

Now, there could be a few possible ways to view the text of Luke 7:28-35. But, I leave you with these two simple bits of wisdom.

During this season, no matter what you do on this day or in those to come. No matter what people may think of you. You have a purpose that is far greater than their natural eyes could ever comprehend or see. Matter of fact, the smallest diamond is made of more precious substance than the largest flint.[1] Therefore, you are a part of the kingdom of God. Be steadfast. Be love. Be wisdom. Be sound in mind. Be unmovable. Be radical. Be lush. But, mainly and most important of all, be at peace fully in your mind, heart, and spirit.

Secondly, you are invited on this day to, be as child. Be youthful in heart and genuinely thankful. Don't be uptight like the Pharisees. Live a lot! Play and dance with a fair heart!

Monday, December 7th

Rachel Revelle

Luke 21:20-28



The theologian is the diviner who examines the entrails of life in order to find there the signs of the Divine. The theologian is the detective of Mystery. The explorer of the kingdom in the midst of the world. - Clodovis Boff

Will we stand up? Raise our heads? Examine the entrails of life even amidst death and destruction? Explore the kingdom in the midst of the distressed, roaring, tragically beautiful world? Perhaps there will be our redemption...

Tuesday, December 8th

Luke 21:29-38

Beth Barksdale

When I was a little girl one of my favorite pastimes was walking in the woods with my grandmother, naming every tree in the forest. We would closely examine the bark, the leaves, the shape of the branches and foliage, each tree's height and the changing hues. I was always amazed that the tint of the budding leaves matched the pigment of the fallen foliage and with every changing season I would carefully recall its prior kaleidoscope of color.

As Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree, we are reminded God's kingdom is near. While a delicate spring tendril pushes a fading leaf forward, it is not until autumn before the leaf falls. Likewise, during the season of Advent we experience a sacred interlude for Christ to be revealed. As a time of expectation more than waiting, this season let us find hope in the midst of despair as we pray deeply, focus intensely, and sharpen our perspective. May we hear, see and believe the reemergence of Christ alive and make ready to encounter the holy.



Fig Tree
by Dee
Schenck
Rhodes

Wednesday, December 9th

Angel Lee

John 7:53-8:11

You don't know my story, yet you judge me. As a matter of fact, you never tried to get to know me. You saw what appeared to you to be a sin and wanted to throw stones at me. Instead of throwing stones, why didn't you take time to hear my story? Why didn't you take time to pray with me? Why didn't you take time to mourn with me over the pain and struggles of life? You decided to use me to trick your adversary. But what you planned for evil turned out for my good. Your adversary became my savior and redeemer. Your adversary saw that I am no worse than anyone else and that we all need to be redeemed. Lord, I thank you for loving me so much that you came to save and redeem me.

Thursday, December 10th

Luke 22:1-13

Marisa Fraley

Advent is a time of preparation. It is one of the busiest times of the year for churches and ministers. In this passage Jesus is asking for help in preparing the Passover meal. In a few short weeks many of us will be preparing a feast of our own. In the midst of our preparation we run the risk of becoming consumed in the details, so much so that we miss the point. If it isn't the details that have us missing the point, then we might simply be tired of Christmas before it even gets here. We live in a culture where stores now skip Thanksgiving completely and jump straight from Halloween to Christmas. However, I believe Thanksgiving, and the act of giving thanks is a vital thing for us to do in order to truly appreciate the holiday season. Melody Beattie says, "Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow." In my kitchen, I have a sign that says, "It's not happy people who are grateful, but grateful people who are happy." I propose that while the shopping malls and stores skip Thanksgiving we do not. We pause and think about the many blessings God has given to us, and the things we have to be thankful for today, even if it is simply breathing. For it is in giving thanks that we will find our inner peace, which will allow us to fully experience God's grace and love this Christmas season.

Friday, December 11th

Darnysha Nard

Luke 22:14-30

When reading this passage in a church setting, the focus is commonly on the elements presented. Jesus provides his friends with bread and wine that will fulfill their needs and help them sustain their physical health. Bread is a common staple in meals, most of us don't even consider a meal complete without a bread component. Whether it is biscuits at breakfast or rolls at the dinner table, bread fills us. It gives us a sense of fullness that cannot be granted by just drink alone. Yet drink is also important. Jesus presents wine to his friends. This drink of the vine provides a sense of security for people during this time. Not only is thirst quenched with each sip, the fermentation process to make this drink cleanses their systems of the things that we now have modern medicine for healing. Though peace flows like a river, the water in the river is not always safe to drink. So, drinking of this cup is safer than other possible drink options.

Jesus provides his friends with a fullness and a sense of security, even the midst of chaos. Just before their Savior is to be betrayed and crucified, he is filled with a sense of calmness. He remembers the needs of friends, of others, of the human body before his own needs. The cup and the bread do not solely represent salvation through a violent crucifixion, yet, it also represents the salvation provided by a Savior who remembers and gives fully. Let us be filled and give fully in remembrance of Jesus, even in the midst of chaos, just as he did for us.

Saturday, December 12th

Luke 22:31-38

Kerri Gibbs

Simon Peter as representative of Peace? I admit I struggled with this concept initially. Even taking off my ever-present, pro-Magdalene lenses, Peter remains volatile, argumentative and impetuous. In this particular verse, we learn that his loyalty, his commitment, is more fragile than Peter would like to believe. Yet Jesus speaks without malice or criticism. He simply says:

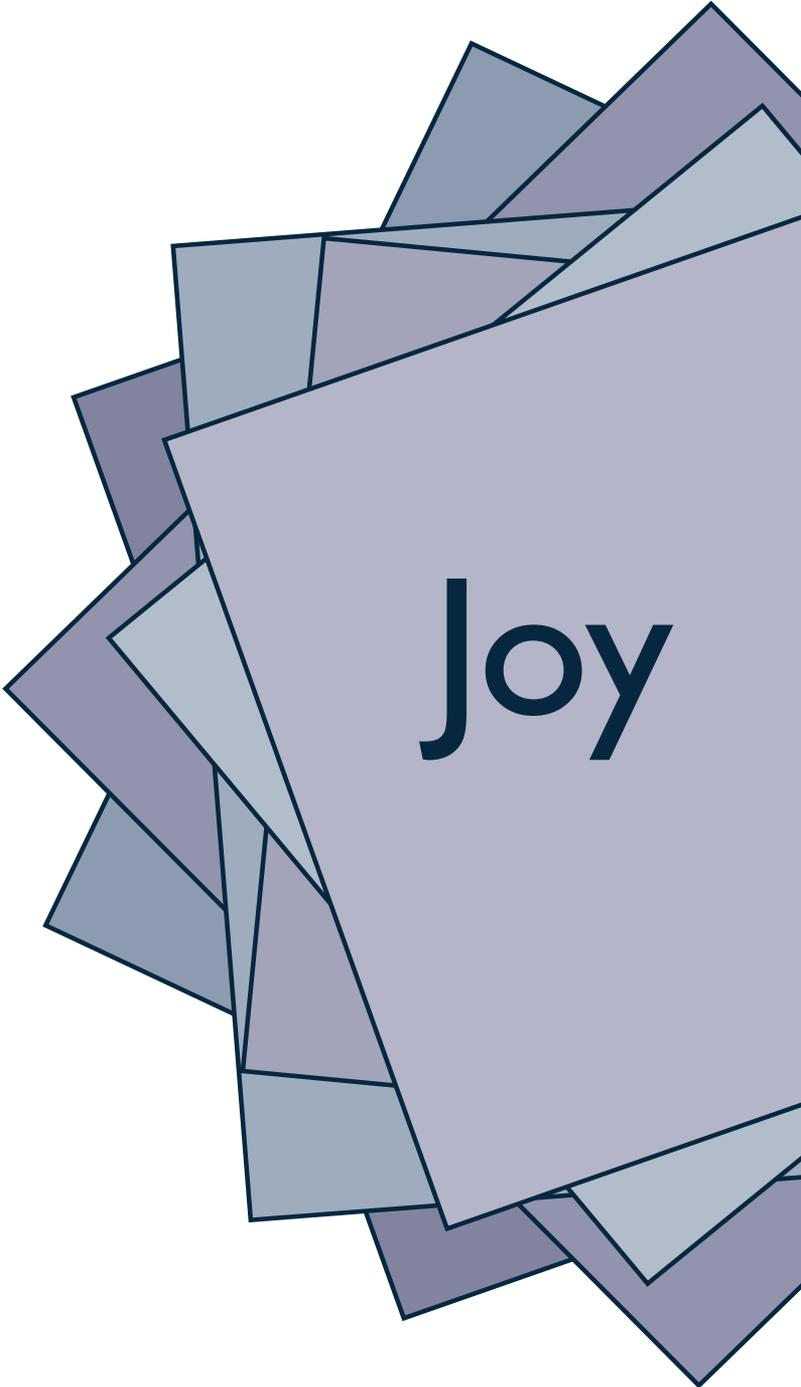
“Simon, I’ve prayed for you in particular that you not give in or give out. When you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start” (The Message, 2004, p. 1231).

Jesus prayed for Simon Peter...in particular. He didn’t pray a blanket prayer for the disciples. He didn’t offer a group affirmation for ‘those who would be tested.’ Jesus prayed with intentionality for Peter and his upcoming challenge. It is in the act of this heartfelt and specific prayer that I find a sense of peace.

I feel peace imagining Jesus praying for us, in particular, each individual, in the tests and challenges with which our daily life presents us. I hope that Peter eventually found a sense of peace after he dried his ‘bitter tears.’ I hope that he could see the love and acceptance that Jesus’s prayer offered even in light of the choices he made.

Today, I invite you to consider your life and your relationships, your choices and your challenges. What are your tests? Where do you need prayer? Wherever the need lay, may you feel peace in the knowledge that Jesus is praying for you.

Weeks Three



Joy

Sunday, December 13th

John 3:22-30

Angel Woodrum

There are many things to be joyful about during this season. The heat we have in our houses and apartments as the air gets colder and colder. The friends who help us during this season of finals at the Divinity School. The freedom to ask theological questions, and the sincerity of classmates and professors in their answers. In this passage from John's Gospel we see John being joyful for the success of someone whose John the Baptizer's followers consider a rival. "Jesus is baptizing more people than us!" They complain. I can easily translate this into our own worried: "X is getting better grades than I!" or "X's words are so much more powerful than my own." These thoughts can lead to insecurity, envy, and even anger toward others. But John says he is joyful at the success of his "rival." John, unlike his followers, welcomes Jesus' success. He welcomes the humility it invokes within his own baptizing minister. This rival has been invented by his followers, and John witnesses to them his own joy at another's success. This season I encourage you to sit aside constructed rivalries. Learn from John that what God has planned is far greater than any success you may achieve independently.

Monday, December 14th

Daniel Reese

Luke 22:39-53

Often, I wonder what it must have been like to be one of the first disciples. The long awaited Messiah in the flesh walking, talking, teaching and healing in their midst. No doubt, part of Jesus' ministry was to prepare the disciples for His departure. In essence, he was to teach them how to wait. Aware the days ahead would be trying in his absence.

I must admit, one of the hardest things for me to do is wait. After taking a test, I want to know the results immediately. After an interview, I simply want to know if you're going hire me. At times, waiting can be the absolute worst!

In Luke 22:39-53 we find Jesus and His disciples on the Mount of Olives. Anticipating the events that were to come, Jesus asks the disciples to wait in a very specific way, with Him in prayer. It was in this ongoing dialogue that Jesus waited to be given over to the Romans to be crucified and it was in the same manner the disciples were asked to remain.

This Advent season, as we wait for reconciliation, justice and peace to be realized, let us do so in diligent co-operation with the indwelling Spirit of Christ that also waits with us.

Take a few moments today and breathe in the unconditional love God has for you. On the exhale, give voice to your concerns, questions, and expectations. Wait in the way you are led. You may feel encouraged to journal, sing, or simply rest in the silence. Allow fresh grace to make ready your heart with love for all this season has in store.

Tuesday, December 15th

Luke 22:54-69

Abby Catoe

There are many times in our lives when we are given opportunities to be a witness for Christ. Depending on the circumstance, we may choose to deny our love for him or our faith in him. For some, this can be a case of life or death. I can't help but think of those students and teachers who have been killed because of their admittance to being a Christian. Unlike what we read about Peter's triple denial of Jesus, we may never know about others who elected to deny Christ rather than face possible death or torture. But they know. Peter knew, and his example is there for us to learn.

In other instances of standing up for what is right or what we believe, we too often find ourselves fearful to speak out if it goes against the thinking of the majority. We are afraid to be different. From Peter's example, we learn this is nothing new. We also learn that while we may suffer deep remorse for not taking the high road, we can be forgiven. God doesn't expect us to be perfect. When the opportunity comes along the next time, I hope I can put all my trust in God to help me do what is right; I want to profess my faith to the world from the mountaintops and always speak out against injustices wherever I see them.

Wednesday, December 16th

Daniel Potter

Mark 1:1-8

Even though Mark's Gospel misquotes the passage from Isaiah, we know that John the baptizer works in the wilderness of Judea offering ritual cleaning and opportunities for confession. He is working in the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. We come to this passage following the bustle of the end of the semester, exhausted from the wilderness that is a semester of theological education. It can be easy to forget that we labor to help bring about the new kingdom and new earth that Jesus would eventually proclaim. We work to make a path straight in the wilderness of American life so that the transformative love of God, found in the redemptive mission of Jesus, might more easily reach the outskirts of our various communities. We wait in the hope of advent for the birth of Jesus, the in breaking of divine Joy.

Take heart in the knowledge that the Good News ahead is a new community based on the radical liberation of Jesus the Christ. Find rejuvenation in the knowledge that we believe in a God who is able to fully redeem creation. Reflect on the joy brought about by your work this semester. Perhaps, it was a good laugh in the lower auditorium. Or, it might've been a moment when you felt the spirit fill you in Community Worship. Allow that joy, and the joy found in the coming of one better than you or I, to renew your spirit as we push onward to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world.

Thursday, December 17th

Matthew 3:1-12

Cynthia Drew

When first hearing this text, our response might be, What's so joyful about this scene where Matthew introduces us to this seeming wild man, John the Baptist? John was, after all, clothed in camel's hair, ate locusts and wild honey, and continued sharply chastising even the people who came to him to be baptized. You children of snakes! he called out to the Pharisees and Sadducees. "The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire." Yet in seeking the "joy" in this text we should not be deceived by the apparent tone of John's "tough-love" language which, like that of so many of Israel's ancient prophets, may rather lead us to consider what "joy" really is, and in what way John's actions here may betoken it.

For, from the beginning of this scene, Matthew has laid the groundwork for our more profound understanding of who John is: "the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: 'The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.'" And, if we remember the Psalmist's prior plea, "Return the joy of your salvation to me" and "Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways, and sinners will come back to you" -- we may see that that is exactly what John is doing, preaching the "good news" that "Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" So "Change your hearts and lives!" Be ready. For, as we now know, the one whose way John prepared has assured us, "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love," and "my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete." Now that is joy indeed.

Friday, December 18th

Amanda Kerr

Matthew 11:2-15

John the Baptist had long anticipated the coming of the Messiah. His prophetic words painted a picture of justice, peace, and righteousness to come. In the third chapter of Matthew's gospel account, John comes face to face with the one whose sandals he is unworthy to carry - the Kingdom of God has come near. But in Matthew 11, John sends his disciples for further confirmation that Jesus really is the Messiah. I imagine that John was a tad confused, for while the Kingdom of God had come, Israel's reality hadn't changed much and John's situation seemed to be worse. The judgment that John had preached wasn't happening, government corruption and Israelite oppression continued, and John himself had been imprisoned.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

A journey of faith doesn't exclude us from moments of doubt. How many times have I grown insecure or weary in my own prayers and declarations due to the gloomy realities of daily life?

But our Messiah doesn't punish John for his doubt, nor does he answer with a simple yes or no (typical Jesus). Instead Jesus instructs John's disciples to tell John what they had seen and heard themselves: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news has come to the poor.

Had God's Kingdom begun to break through? Absolutely. Was this the way John had envisioned it would happen? Definitely not.

But Jesus continues to affirm John instead of rebuking him, "No one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."

May our days of advent be filled with the same spirit that embodied John - a man stirring with anticipation, hopefully curious about Jesus, and faithful in the midst of waiting. Jesus understands our doubts and welcomes our questions. And thankfully God's Kingdom and God's answers are always greater than our expectations.

Saturday, December 19th

Luke 3:15-20

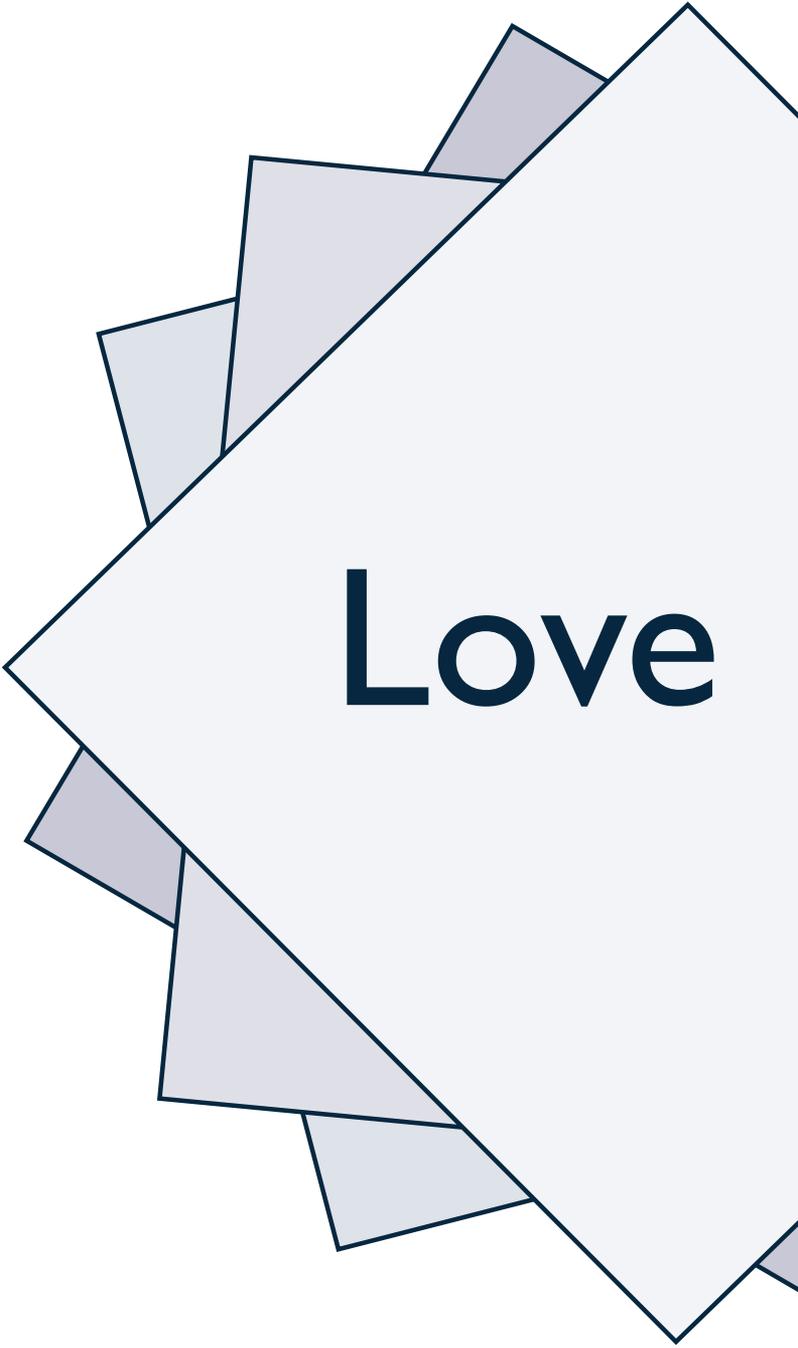
Helena Epstein

We are waiting for big things. The tikun olam which will save our world. The repair to the spiritual schism between ourselves and our God. Repair of broken relationship can be an arduous process. The joy which comes out of this deep cleansing, this radical setting right does not leave us the same. We will lose a part of ourselves, and it will hurt. The arrival of God in our midst, to point us towards the relationships we are meant to have is not gentle. This birthing of God's self into the world, which we are anxiously anticipating, will be like any other, and no other birth we have ever experienced. There will be sweat, and blood, and tears. There will be cries of joy tempered with the sorrow that accompanies any life which is lived fully in this world. Who will live more fully in this world than Jesus? Who can experience human life with more grace than God? Joy is not pleasure, it is not happiness. It is raw, and powerful, and divine. May we be prepared to join in the profound changing of this world. May we experience the fullness of God's grace for us, be surprised by the ways in which Jesus arrives in our midst, and be blessed evermore by the Holy Spirit which is ever present in our lives.

Amen

Week Four

Love



Sunday, December 20th

John 3:16-21

Patrick Cardwell

Points of Decision

If there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that I'm a deliberate person. I like to have to make a decision, consider all the possibilities, and then reconsider them. I think one of the great joys of divinity school is that you finally get to figure out what you really believe about God, this guy named Jesus, and what they have to do with you. You've gotten that all figured out by now for sure, right? Yeah, me neither. For me, this place has given me so much grace in allowing me to have the time and space to weigh my theological options, and have time to make a decision. Perhaps that's why John 3:16-21 is always so jarring every time I read it. There are important, life-altering decisions being made, the Fourth Evangelist tells us. The writer presents us with two options in multiple ways: Do you believe in Jesus, or not? Embrace eternal life by accepting Jesus' worldview, or perish as you reject it? Condemned, or saved? Light, or darkness? Evil, or truth? John 3:16 presents us with a choice. Wake Divinity's own Dean O'Day writes that "this verse makes clear that there is no middle ground in the Johannine vision."

But for all the choices, indecision, and uncertainty that confront me as I read perhaps the most well-known conversation in the Gospels, I am reminded that decision and choice is not the only theme here. In the same verse that compels us to make a decision to believe, we are left in awe of the love of God. In all its hesitation, disbelief, curiosity, and frustration, God loves the world. The "world" (kosmos) that God loves in John "refers most often to those human beings who are at odds with God." Even those who stand in opposition can know the love of God embodied in Jesus. So as you make your decisions in this time of your life, remember that while we all have decisions to make, we have space within that deep, deep love to make them. We have time in this season of Advent to wait, to listen, to consider and reconsider what we would do in response to the Gospel. And in that tension may God, whose love is for this world, draw near to you. Amen.

Monday, December 21st

Shakeisha Gray

John 5:30-47

How do we show love during the time of advent, especially if we're secular?

Advent is traditionally celebrated in the Christian church as the period beginning four Sunday's before Christmas. Some religious groups recognize it as a time for increased prayer and fasting. You're probably familiar with an advent calendar first used by Lutherans in Germany, to count down the days until Christmas. Most advent calendars either hang on the wall or are freestanding decorations, each day (numbered 1-24-counting down until Christmas or the arrival of baby Jesus's birth, advent also means arrival) has a flap or door on it and every day you open the flap or door to reveal a small gift, usually chocolate, or a sticker, or some other token.

In my household, as non-Christians, we started a new tradition. We participate in what we call, "reverse advent." With our younger children, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, instead of receiving, we challenge our children to give. This can be done in small ways...hot chocolate to the teacher assistants working at the car rider drop off line in the mornings, leaving a box of dog treats for our mail lady who leaves treats at every house she delivers to that has dogs, surprising elderly neighbors with loaves of zucchini bread, leaving the quarter in the cart at Aldi. Small, yet in some way, impactful things. In years past, to keep track of their giving, they wrote what they did on long strips of paper, and each time they gave, they added this paper as a link to part of a larger chain. Over the month they would watch their chain grow and thus have a physical representation of their giving.

This is not done to show one-upmanship, but the chain is to remind us how love, and generosity, grows in ways we might not think of as love.

Tuesday, December 22nd

Luke 1:5-25

Stephanie Williams

Love.

Love is present

in

through

amongst

these words.

Between two people in a desperate place.

Within the years spent waiting in hopeful anguish.

Underneath an old man's excited yet cautious questioning.

Around a young family as a baby jumps in an old woman's womb.

Love in the patience

Love in the hope

Love in the joy.

Wednesday, December 23rd

Anonymous

Luke 1:26-38

Every time I approach the magnificat, I experience a different emotion. I remember going to a denominational conference where I sang this song, just after my family left the church where I was told women could not “biblically” become pastors. There we sang “The Canticle of the Turning,” a musical setting of Mary’s song. As we sang, “he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” tears came to my eyes. Could it be that Christian scripture values those condemned by people in power?

Yet that same line convicts me today as I consider my own global position. I am a person of power. I’m surrounded by more than I need. Even my thoughts, my academic thoughts, are expensive, bought and (eventually) paid for with more money than many in the world could ever dream of accessing. What does it look like for me to be brought down? Am I willing to let that happen? This song is terrifying sometimes.

As you read that Magnificat, what phrases stick out to you? What emotions do you feel? How will you respond?

Thursday, December 24th

Luke 1:67-80

Travis Woodfield

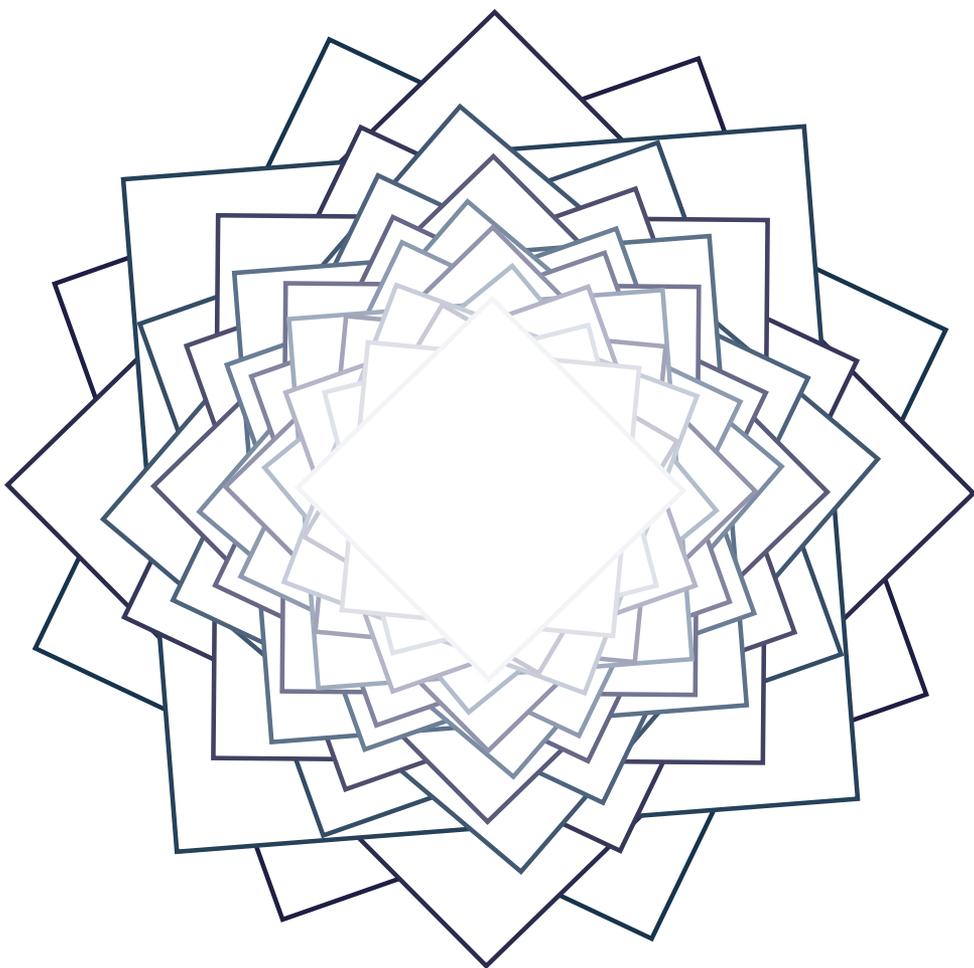
Let me set the stage for you. It's Christmas Eve night. In a stable there is an Ox, a donkey, and a manger full of hay. Candles are lit and people gather around to witness the incarnation, Emmanuel, God is with us. There the elements are blessed, broken, and passed. There, Jesus becomes incarnate in the people.

This story starts with familiarity but takes a dramatic turn- it is the story of tonight, the story of Christmas Eve, but not in the 1st century Holy Land, but rather 1224 in Greccio, Italy. In this small town, Francis of Assisi recreates the story of the incarnation in the first known Nativity scene. Francis is not content, in the story told by his hagiographer, Thomas of Celano, to recreate the scene with the manger left empty- such a sight would be to miss the point of the importance of such an event. Rather, Francis, recognizing the power and significance of Communion in his tradition, uses the breaking of the bread, passing of the cup, and the calling forth of God, to re-create even the incarnation. As Celano puts it, "...and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem."

Given the lectionary text for tonight, I can't help but wonder if part of this canticle refers to Francis, to us. When we do things like re-create the Nativity are we, "prophets of the Most High?" When we restore the bonds of God and the world is, "the dawn breaking on high" over us? When we minister, in our variety of ways, with everything we are, are we, "giving light to those that sit in the shadow of death?" And, ultimately, if we follow our vocation, that calling from God we are here for, will God, "guide our feet into the way of peace?"

Indeed. Indeed. When we live into these callings, these gifts from God, no matter how defined or nebulous, it is not Greccio that is made into Bethlehem. Rather, we say with Celano, "and out of the Wake Forest School of Divinity Family is made a new Bethlehem."

Friday, December 25th





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Designed by Christine Hargraves (MDiv '16)