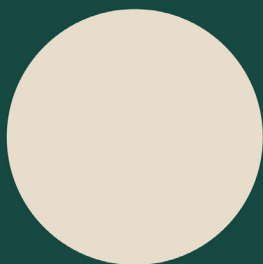


# VOICES OF BETHLEHEM

*Between Two Horizons*



ENCOUNTER CHURCH ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



# **VOICES OF BETHLEHEM**

*Between Two Horizons*



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## **HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL**

This devotional has been created to help you focus on the message of Advent and Christmas. There is a daily scripture reading, two weekly devotionals, space for you to make notes and record prayers, and “Sunday Table Reading.”

## **DEVOTIONAL THEME**

This devotional is an invitation to both pause and renewal. An opportunity to allow the season of Advent to mentor you in “the unforced rhythms” of Divine Grace (Matt 28:11 MSG). In the weeks ahead, our heartfelt wish for you is to breath deep breaths and to take long pauses so that resilient hope awakens in your heart, transforming your life and communities.

## **DAILY SCRIPTURE READING**

Each scripture reading will help to immerse you into the story of Christ's restorative work in coming as the promised Messiah.

## **DEVOTIONAL**

Two weekly devotionals, one for Sunday and one for Wednesday, have been prepared to encourage you and to sensitize you to the activity of the Spirit in this holiday season. Additionally, there is room for you to take notes, jot down thoughts, and record prayers.

## **TABLE TALK**

Each devotional will offer questions for you to discuss with friends and family around a shared meal. We encourage you to eat well and share deeply. Don't underestimate what God can do around a table.

## **SUNDAY TABLE READING**

Each Sunday in Advent you are invited to gather at your table with friends, spouse, and/or family to light a candle and read aloud the Sunday Reading (see instructions for Advent Wreath). We want to be able to share in the holy awe of Advent with you during these times and invite you to record a moment from the reading on your phone and tag Encounter Church in the post using the hashtag #encounteradvent2024

## **ADVENT WREATH**

The Advent wreath consists of four candles arranged equidistant in a circle. The wreath usually consists of evergreen branches arranged in a circle to symbolize eternity, and as a reminder that God has no beginning or end. Similarly, the evergreen branches also serve as a symbol of eternal life and a reminder that God is unchanging.

The Advent wreath is a tool to foster devotion and is usually incorporated during dinner time, or during nightly prayers. For families with young children, the Advent wreath is a wonderful way to help spark wonder in the hearts of babies, kids, and teen-agers alike as each week the light from the candles grows brighter. For those of us who are single or do not have young families we hope that participating in this practice awakens your hearts to a childlike wonder of the Creator among us in the flesh.







# **BETWEEN TWO HORIZONS**

*Introduction by Robert Gorini*

Voices of Bethlehem is an Advent devotional that listens to the many voices surrounding the birth of Jesus, the Messiah who entered the world through the vulnerability of a manger. Herod, Mary, the Magi, the shepherds, and the people of first-century Judea each respond to God's arrival in different ways: with hostility, courage, adoration, or indifference. Together, these voices illuminate the richness and complexity of humanity's response to God breaking into the world.

As we journey through Advent, this devotional is not content to look backward alone. Advent is a season that lives between two horizons: the first coming of Christ in Bethlehem and the promised second coming at the fulfillment of all things. Voices of Bethlehem holds these two Advents in tension, inviting readers to encounter the wonder of the incarnation while also facing the disruptive hope of Christ's return.

The nostalgia of Christmas, with its familiar warmth and light, stands alongside the forward-looking anticipation of a world made new, a hope that comforts even as it challenges us. Through these reflections, readers are invited to hear and listen for the voices of Bethlehem, to recognize their challenge, and to discover how they break into our lives today. They call us to consider not only how we receive Christ's coming at Christmas but also whether we are ready or even longing for the life-altering impact of his return.

Not all voices in Scripture proclaim the same message. Much like our world today, many voices of power in Scripture resist the coming reign of Christ. Some voices weep for losses that cannot be regained in this life, clinging to the hope that one day all things will be made right. Some see and even prophesy a coming justice that reverses the chains of oppression and suffering, as if they glimpse a horizon the rest of us cannot yet see. In God's Word, we do not find a single, unified tone of witness, strength, or confidence. Instead, we find voices of bold faith, resistance, mercy, indifference, hostility, longing, sorrow, anger, adoration, and expectation. In his Letter to Marcellinus, St. Athanasius explains that Scripture not only provides the language through which we address God in prayer but also functions as a mirror for the soul. He writes that the Psalms possess the "perfect image for the soul's course of life" and that, in reciting them, their

“words become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul.”

My prayer for you, as you journey through Advent with this devotional as your guide, is that in listening to the many voices of Scripture, you might discover your own voice and that your song would be tuned to the melody of hope

# HIS COMING FORETOLD

*Week 1 / Nov 30 - Dec 6*



## **WEEKLY SCRIPTURE READING**

### **SUNDAY, NOV 30TH | 1ST CANDLE**

Emphasis: See, The LORD Comes

Reading: Isaiah 9, John 1

### **MONDAY, DECEMBER 1**

Emphasis: His Peace

Reading: Isaiah 11

### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2**

Emphasis: His Suffering

Reading: Isaiah 53:1-6

### **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 3**

Emphasis: His Birthplace

Reading: Micah 5:2-5

### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 4**

Emphasis: His Kingship

Reading: Zechariah 9:9-13

### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5**

Emphasis: At the Right Time

Reading: Galatians 4:4-7

### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6**

Emphasis: By the Holy Spirit

Reading: Matthew 1:18-24."

# ADVENT

*Excerpt By Cristina Rosseti*



This Advent moon shines cold and clear,  
These Advent nights are long;  
Our lamps have burned year after year,  
And still their flame is strong.  
“Watchman, what of the night?” we cry,  
Heart-sick with hope deferred:  
“No speaking signs are in the sky,”  
Is still the watchman’s word.

The Porter watches at the gate,  
The servants watch within;  
The watch is long betimes and late,  
The prize is slow to win.  
“Watchman, what of the night?” but still  
His answer sounds the same:  
“No daybreak tops the utmost hill,  
Nor pale our lamps of flame.”

One to another hear them speak,  
The patient virgins wise:  
“Surely He is not far to seek,”--  
“All night we watch and rise.”  
“The days are evil looking back,

The coming days are dim;  
Yet count we not His promise slack,  
But watch and wait for Him."

We weep because the night is long,  
We laugh, for day shall rise,  
We sing a slow contented song  
And knock at Paradise.  
Weeping we hold Him fast Who wept  
For us,--we hold Him fast;  
And will not let Him go except  
He bless us first or last.

Weeping we hold Him fast to-night;  
We will not let Him go  
Till daybreak smite our wearied sight,  
And summer smite the snow:  
Then figs shall bud, and dove with dove  
Shall coo the livelong day;  
Then He shall say, "Arise, My love,  
My fair one, come away."



# VOICES OF EXPECTATION

*(Isaiah 9:2-7)*

*By Christian Griffith*

An abstract graphic of rolling hills in shades of orange and brown, set against a dark grey background. The hills are layered, with some in the foreground and others receding into the distance, creating a sense of depth. The colors range from a light tan to a deep, dark brown.

I'll never forget my first Winter in the Pacific Northwest. Everyone told me about the "big dark," the period of time in the dead of winter when the sun wouldn't come up until 8 am and would be down by 4 pm every day for several weeks. I was awestruck. I'd never experienced such darkness before. So, I watched every day as it got darker earlier and earlier and the sun came up later and later until finally, we reached early December and I watched as the sky grew dark before 5 pm. I was amazed, almost excited, to see this happen for the first time but then it happened the next day and the next day and the next day. What started as exciting became inconvenient and then absolutely fatiguing. I longed for Seattle Summer, the days when I would see sunlight from the early morning until well into the evening, but in that moment reality was cloudy and dark.

As we step into the season of Advent, we purposefully enter into a time of darkness not too different from the literal darkness we find ourselves in this time of year. In this season, we recognize that the reality of the world we live in can be cloudy, dark, and absolutely fatiguing, but we also recognize that we are not alone in this struggle against darkness.

When we enter into the story of God's people and put ourselves in the prophet Isaiah's shoes, we see a recognition of what seems to be never-ending darkness in the world. In Isaiah's declaration of what will be, there's a sort of acceptance of what is. After all, there is no need to declare a coming light if there is no darkness, no need to declare a coming joy in a world already filled with joy, no need to declare a coming justice without injustice, and no need to declare peace in a world lacking violence. In God's message through Isaiah, God recognizes the darkness and declares the hope of a coming light.

In talking about grief, author and theologian John Onwuchekwa says, "tragedy doesn't ruin anybody, hopelessness does." We are all bound to experience tragedy in our lives. What wrecks our souls and gives our hearts permanent damage is not tragedy, it's hopelessness. In the same way, darkness doesn't ruin us, hopelessness does.

We all live in a world filled with darkness. We see brokenness every day. Whether it be the sadness in the eyes of a homeless person asking for

money, the brokenness of the immigration system in our country, the violence we see on the news, or any of the military conflicts tearing apart countries around the world, there is an undeniable darkness around us. This darkness burdens our souls and breaks our hearts, but it doesn't break us. What breaks us, what holds us captive and ruins us, is not the darkness, but a lack of hope.

This is precisely why God enters into the story of his people with a Word through the prophet Isaiah. The declaration of all declarations is made. There is a coming light in the midst of our darkness, a source of hope in a coming Messiah. Injustice and violence will cease. Why? Because "a child has been born for us, a son given to us."

Isaiah goes on to describe the coming Messiah as one with authority and power. As Wonderful Counselor, he's filled with wisdom. He will be Mighty God, one who is strong and excellent. He is Everlasting Father with a nearness that has no end. He is Prince of Peace, who leads us to shalom, a state of being right with God, neighbor, creation, and self. The result of this coming Messiah is a world filled with endless peace, justice, and righteousness. What more could you ask for?

As we begin this season of advent, we join Isaiah in faith and expectation that what is dark will become light. In a world filled with violence, injustice, and brokenness, we recognize our need for the second coming of Jesus, our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. We look forward to a time when the world is filled with peace, justice, and righteousness. It's for this reason that we can live in a world filled with darkness with lives overflowing with hope.

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- Isaiah's words name the world's deep darkness before proclaiming the promise of light. Where do you see this kind of darkness in the world, or even within yourself, today?
- John Onwuchekwa wrote, "tragedy doesn't ruin anybody, hopelessness does." How does faith in Christ help you resist hopelessness in dark or uncertain seasons?
- Advent invites us to wait for Christ's return while living in the present reality of brokenness. What does it look like for you to live with both honesty about the darkness and confidence in God's coming light?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- Isaiah says God's light shines in darkness. When life feels heavy or confusing, what helps you remember that God is still with you?
- When you see hard things in the world, like violence, unfairness, or loneliness, how can you be a small light of hope to others this Advent season?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- When it's dark outside, we turn on a light. How does Jesus bring light to our hearts and the world?
- What's one small way we can help someone feel happy or hopeful this week?

# VOICES OF RESISTANCE

*(Luke 3:1-14)*

*By Christian Griffith*





One of the strengths of my family is giving good gifts. Christmas is almost a competition of who can give the best gift. We find that thoughtful giving is a reflection of our love for one another. 'Til this day, one of my favorite parts of Christmas morning is seeing my wife, Avanna, open the gifts I've gotten her and watching her appreciate the thought that I've put into her presents.

When Avanna and I found out that she was pregnant back in August, my expression of love through thoughtful gifts met the drive to be prepared that my military father instilled in me. Before we even got our first ultrasound, I had begun researching. I put together a registry that baby gear experts would applaud. Before she could ever notice a bump, I knew my top three favorite strollers, which car seats were the best, and had a collection of brain-enriching activities picked out for our unborn child's early months. This is how I expressed my love for my child before I could meet them. They'd experience the thoughtfulness of my giving before they could say a word, before I could even hear their heartbeat.

John the Baptist is known as the one who comes to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Just as I look to ensure that my baby has everything they need to thrive, John the Baptist comes to make paths straight, fill every valley, and lower every mountain to ensure that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (v. 6)

When we drop into Luke chapter 3, we find him traveling and baptizing people as a marker of their repentance. As we zoom in a little closer, we find him having an altercation that I hope I'll never have in a baptismal. Looking out upon the people who have come to be baptized, he declares that they are a "brood of vipers" and asks who warned them to run from the wrath of God. What he's saying is that these people have come with deceitful hearts. They knew that a coming Messiah would require that they be holy or set apart so they would be baptized as a religious practice, believing that what set them apart was their genealogy. This baptism was more of a symbolic gesture to appease God than a marker of transformation. What saved them required nothing more than a look at their family tree.

Knowing this, John the Baptist shakes his audience awake with his recognition of their deceitful motives. He declares that the coming Messiah

requires that they be set apart, but it was not about who their ancestors were. Holiness, he tells them, is the result of fruitful repentance.

Just as the love I have for my child bears the fruit of thoughtful giving, John the Baptist declares that a repentant heart bears the fruit of justice. In preparation for the coming Messiah, John the Baptist confronts both personal and systemic injustices. He tells them that they should give their excess to those who have nothing. He tells the tax collectors, who had profited off of systemically unjust collection practices, to stop doing so. He tells soldiers, who had found riches in threats and false accusations, to be satisfied with their wages. He later goes as far as to rebuke the injustices of those in power, which would lead to his eventual martyrdom.

As we wait in expectation with the hope of a coming light in the darkness, we are not called to a life of complacency. Just as the first coming of Jesus was not an excuse for John the Baptist and those he baptized to do nothing about the systemic and personal injustices of their day, the second coming of Christ is not an excuse for us to leave the hurts and pains of injustice unaddressed. The reality of the Christian life is that we are saved by our repentant hearts, but we cannot disconnect our hearts from our hands.

In advent, we find ourselves in the historical moment of those awaiting Christ's first coming and the reality of the present moment as we await the second. As we wait with the hope of all that comes with the Messiah's arrival, we are not simply comforted. Our hope doesn't numb us from the pains of the oppressed and encourage us to live lives of inaction. Our hope is an encouragement to the marginalized and all of us who have taken up the work of advocating for justice, that one day the Messiah would come and usher in a kingdom where injustice would cease. The hope of Jesus is a call to action, to have hearts marked by repentance and hands marked by the work of justice. In this moment, the voice of John the Baptist challenges us to examine where we resist God's kingdom and to prepare ourselves for the disruptive arrival of Christ, both in history and in the life yet to come.

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- John the Baptist called people to “prepare the way of the Lord.” What does preparation look like in your life today as you make room for Christ’s presence?
- John warned against empty religious gestures and called for repentance that bears fruit. In what ways might God be inviting you to connect your heart and your hands this Advent season?
- John’s message linked repentance with justice, generosity, and fairness. How can the hope of Christ shape the way you respond to the injustices you see around you?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- John prepared people’s hearts for Jesus to come. What are some ways you can make space for God in your daily life, at school, with friends, or at home?
- John said that real faith shows up in what we do. What’s one small action you can take this week to show kindness or fairness to someone else?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- Before Jesus came, John told people to get ready. What are some ways we can get our hearts ready for Jesus this Christmas?
- John told people to share what they have. What is something you could share this week to help someone feel loved?



# **HIS INCARNATION**

*Week 2: Dec 7-13*

## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7 | 1ST + 2ND CANDLE**

Emphasis: His promise is with us

Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16, Matt 1:18-23

### **MONDAY, DECEMBER 8**

Emphasis: His Divine Being

Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9**

Emphasis: His Superiority

Reading: Hebrews 1:1-14

### **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10**

Emphasis: He Humbled Himself

Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

### **THURSDAY DECEMBER 11**

Emphasis: His Offering for Sin

Reading: Romans 8:1-4

### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12**

Emphasis: His Gift to Us

Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13**

Emphasis: He is the Image of God

Reading: Colossians 1:15-29

## **MARY CONSIDERS HER SITUATION**

By Luci Shaw

What next, she wonders,  
with the angel disappearing, and her room  
suddenly gone dark  
The loneliness of her news  
possesses her. She ponders  
how to tell her mother.  
Still, the secret at her heart burns like  
a sun rising. How to hold it in—  
that which cannot be contained.  
She nestles into herself, half-convinced  
it was some kind of good dream,  
she its visionary.  
But then, part dazzled, part prescient—  
she hugs her body, a pod with a seed  
that will split her.



# VOICES OF BOLD FAITH

*(Matthew 1:18-25)*

*By Nancy Sugikawa*





A friend of mine is a doctor and one weekend each month she is “on call” for any emergencies brought to her clinic. This means that she could be sleeping, enjoying time with her family, or in the middle of dinner at a nice restaurant, and must immediately stop what she’s doing to take a call or drive to the clinic. Even as she goes about her daily routine that weekend, she is aware that a call might come in at any time, and she is ready to respond.

For those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ, do we live “on call” for God? Are we ready at any time to respond to his call to address a need or simply to do whatever he asks of us? Or do we think that if the Lord needs someone to serve him in a significant way, he will surely call somebody else. We often don’t think we have much to offer the Lord compared to those around us. Sometimes we feel like we have too much work or too many family responsibilities already to take on any new assignment from God.

The story of Jesus begins with a young woman named Mary, who was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Presumably they were well suited to each other, lived lives of integrity and were both deeply devoted to God. Mary suddenly finds herself called by the Lord to become miraculously pregnant with a son who would not only be the king of her people but be the holy Son of God himself. Despite the assumptions people would make, and the public disgrace and rejection they would likely endure, both Mary and Joseph receive the amazing task of raising this child with readiness and bold faith.

Neither Joseph nor Mary fully understood who this child would become. Yet we never hear Mary or Joseph demanding explanations from God or complaining about their hardships. We don’t see them trying to negotiate alternatives or run away from the task God had for them. Their wedding plans had been disrupted, their comfortable life together was threatened, and their future was now uncertain. Yet they courageously welcomed the miracle of God’s intimate presence with them and chose to faithfully carry out their mission together. In fact, it isn’t until Mary finds herself pregnant that they begin to recognize how God is answering the prayers of his people and bringing his long-awaited salvation...through them!

Why did God choose Mary and Joseph? It doesn’t seem like they were

especially gifted or had significant resources to raise the son of the Almighty God of the universe. Perhaps it was because they recognized the broken world they were living in and placed their hope in God's promises of a better world to come. Maybe it was because they continually prayed for God to save their people from the cruelty and injustice of Roman oppression. Maybe God knew that Mary and Joseph lived their lives "on call," ready for whatever God would call them to do.

This Advent season, will you welcome God's presence and call upon your life, even when it disrupts your plans and leads you into unfamiliar spaces? Will you offer the Lord your bold faith and obedience even when what God asks of you is inconvenient, costly or uncertain, embracing an "on call" life?

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- When have you sensed God calling you to do something that interrupted your plans or comfort? How did you respond?
- What keeps us from believing that God might call us instead of “someone else”?
- Mary and Joseph welcomed God’s call even when it came with uncertainty and risk. What would it look like for you to say yes to God this Advent, even if it changes your plans?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- Mary and Joseph said yes to God even though they didn’t know what would happen next. What helps you trust God when you don’t have all the answers?
- How might you stay “on call” for God at school, with friends, or in your community?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- When someone calls your name, how do you know they want you to listen? What do you think it means for God to call your name?
- Can you think of a way you can say “yes” to God this week, just like Mary and Joseph did?

# VOICES OF MERCY

*By Nancy Sugikawa*

Growing up, the days before Christmas were especially exciting. I would sit by our Christmas tree each night looking for gifts that had my name on them, especially the one from “Santa.” This special gift would often not appear until Christmas morning, but whenever I did spot it, I would pick it up, shake it and occasionally (when no one was looking) tear part of the wrapping paper away so I could get a glimpse of the prize inside. Once I knew what that gift was, I would count down the days before Christmas morning with an extra amount of joy, knowing the gift I would receive and anticipating the joy I would soon experience!

As adults, do we have this same sense of joyful anticipation as we look toward Christmas day? What gifts from the Lord are we looking forward to receiving, remembering or experiencing in a deeper way? The night of Jesus’ birth was celebrated with the light of a glorious star and a multitude of angels praising God. Out of God’s deep love for humankind, he had sent his one and only son into the beauty, pain and chaos of our world to bring about redemption, reconciliation and peace. It was as if these heavenly beings were celebrating because they knew the precious gift that had just been delivered, anticipating the healing and hope that Jesus would bring.

Only a young couple and a handful of shepherds witnessed the miracle and heavenly celebration of Jesus’ birth. They alone were able to glimpse the newborn Messiah, the Savior of the world. That precious glimpse of the very son of Almighty God was the gift of a lifetime, and it was something they would never forget.

After seeing the baby Jesus lying in a manger just as the angels told them, the shepherds returned to their fields “glorifying and praising God,” assured of God’s love and mercy toward them and their people. Yet, what Jesus would grow up to become, what he would say and the amazing miracles he would perform, would not be revealed for another thirty years. The power of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection that would break the chains of hopelessness and injustice, and bring about physical as well as emotional, relational and spiritual healing had not yet been fully understood. But the glimpse of this baby pointed to God’s kingdom of love that had just broken through a dark and hurting world.

Jesus had arrived in quietness and humility, but his words and actions would point to the day he would return again in majesty and power. For now, this sleeping baby was enough to assure Mary, Joseph and these shepherds that the God of their people, the Lord who had created the heavens and the earth, had not forgotten about them. They could now wait and proclaim with assurance and joy that the beautiful reality of God's salvation, justice and restoration was unfolding before their eyes.

What glimpses of God's presence, mercy or faithfulness have you seen in your own life? May each of us proclaim what we have seen and heard as we wait with anticipation for the fullness of God's kingdom to come.

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- What are some ways you've experienced glimpses of God's presence or mercy in your life recently?
- How might waiting for God's promises this Advent be different from the childhood excitement of waiting for gifts under the tree?
- The shepherds rejoiced after seeing the newborn Jesus, even though they didn't know all that was to come. What helps you rejoice in what you can't yet fully see?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- What's something you're looking forward to this Christmas, and how might that feeling help you understand what it means to wait for Jesus?
- How can you look for signs of God's love or goodness in your daily life—at school, at home, or with friends?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- What is something that makes you excited to wait for Christmas?
- Can you think of a time when you saw or felt something that reminded you of God's love?

# THE CHILD IS BORN

*Week 3: Dec 14 - 20*





## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14 | 1ST 2ND + 3RD CANDLE**

Emphasis: Rejoice with her

Reading: - Zeph 3:14-20, Luke 1: 9-45

### **MONDAY, DECEMBER 15**

Emphasis: Preceded by John

Reading: Luke 1:5-17

### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16**

Emphasis: The Lord is With You

Reading: Luke 1:21-38

### **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17**

Emphasis: With Great Rejoicing

Reading: Luke 1:39-45

### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18**

Emphasis: The Birth of Jesus

Reading: Luke 2:1-7

### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19**

Emphasis: The Angel's Good News

Reading: Luke 2:8-14

### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20**

Emphasis: The Shepherds Find Him

Reading: Luke 2:15-21

## **PRIMARY WONDER**

By Denise Levertov

Days pass when I forget the mystery.  
Problems insoluble and problems offering  
    their own ignored solutions  
        jostle for my attention,  
    they crowd its antechamber  
along with a host of diversions,  
    my courtiers, wearing  
    their colored clothes; cap and bells.  
And then once more the quiet mystery  
is present to me, the throng's clamor  
    recedes: the mystery  
    that there is anything, anything at all,  
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,  
    rather than void: and that, O Lord,  
    Creator, Hallowed One,  
    You still, hour by hour sustain it.



# VOICES OF ADORATION

*(Matthew 2:1-12,  
Luke 2:8-20, Psalm 19:14)*  
*By John Lee*

One of the most memorable moments of my life was when I visited Mount Rainier National Park for the very first time. When I arrived at the footsteps of Paradise, my body froze with conflicting emotions. I was filled with awe and reverence at the mountain's breathtaking beauty, yet gripped by a quiet fear that at any moment its vastness would swallow me whole. I felt the same emotions when I held my son for the first time. If you were curious, that's how his name came to be. I began to dream of new beginnings, even if they came at the cost of what had been. Both moments pulled me into the unknown, a place I didn't fully understand yet deeply wanted to be.

In the story of Jesus' birth, we encounter two very different groups, the magi and the shepherds, each witnessing the wonder of God's work. Their response offers us a model for how we, too, can respond to God's divine presence in our world today.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, magi from the east (modern-day Iran/Iraq) came to Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1). The magi, known to be astrologers—educated, privileged, and wealthy—traveled more than eight hundred miles to see the new king of the Jews after witnessing an astronomical phenomenon, a moving star in the east (Matthew 2:2). This celestial event, combined with their knowledge of ancient prophecies, was enough to move them toward Jesus.

The shepherds, common laborers tending to fields and livestock, were met by an angel who announced the birth of the Messiah (Luke 2:9). They responded immediately, hurrying to see Jesus (Luke 2:15). Later, the magi were overwhelmed with joy as they presented gifts and bowed down in worship (Matthew 2:10). The shepherds were amazed at the sight of the incarnate Christ and left proclaiming the good news to all who would listen (Luke 2:18).

Two vastly different groups encountered Jesus—immigrants and the lowly—yet their hearts responded in the same way. The revelation of God made manifest stirred them to worship, not in expectation of what He would do, but in adoration of who He is.

We often mistake worship for admiration rather than true communion with

Christ. Genuine worship is our response to who God is and what He has done. In this sacred exchange, we encounter His presence beyond all earthly things, and that encounter naturally overflows into visible praise and acts of love done in service to others for Christ's sake.

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- The magi and shepherds both responded to encountering Jesus with worship, though their lives and backgrounds were very different. What does this teach us about how God meets us where we are?
- How do you distinguish between admiring God from a distance and truly worshipping Him in your daily life?
- When was the last time you felt awe in God's presence? How might you make more space for that kind of worship?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- The shepherds couldn't help but tell everyone what they had seen. What is something about God that you would want others to know or experience?
- The magi and shepherds both traveled to meet Jesus. What helps you feel close to God during Advent?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- What would you bring as a gift to baby Jesus if you were one of the magi?
- How can you show your love for God this week?

# VOICES OF INDIFFERENCE

*(Micah 5:2; Luke 2:1-2;  
Ephesians 4:23; Proverbs 4:23)*  
*By John Lee*





Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and recipient of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, once said, “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.” We can agree that love represents a deep, positive connection to a person or situation. Hate, though negative, still requires a level of care and engagement. You remain connected. Indifference, however, signifies a total absence of emotion, interest, or concern. It is disconnection. No color, neither black nor white, just emptiness.

In contrast to the magi and the shepherds, who responded to Jesus’ birth with awe and adoration, we see another response in the Gospel story—one of indifference. The chief priests and teachers of the law knew the prophecy from Micah 5:2, which foretold that the King of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem. Yet they showed little interest. They were unwilling to make the short journey to Bethlehem to see for themselves, unlike the magi, who traveled hundreds of miles to witness the incarnation of Jesus. Similarly, the general population of Judea remained oblivious, continuing their daily routines. Their indifference reflected an unwillingness to change.

Perhaps the people of Judea were weighed down by Roman oppression, heavy taxation, and hardship (Luke 2:1–2). Perhaps they were disillusioned, expecting a powerful military Messiah rather than a vulnerable infant lying in a manger. Whatever the reason, their indifference led to gradual disconnection and detachment from the Creator of the universe.

During this Advent season, we risk becoming numb to the true story of Jesus, letting it fade into the background alongside Santa Claus, Rudolph, and Frosty the Snowman—turning the Son of God into just another fairytale. It is far more convenient to remain indifferent, drifting with the current of the world, than to confront who we are and why God created us. Convenience keeps us asleep. But what if we allowed this Advent season to wake us up—to shape our reflection, to remember with reverence Christ’s first coming, and to endure with hope as we await His coming in glory?

We live in a time marked by distraction and meaninglessness, often worsened by living reactively rather than reflectively. Yet choosing to resist indifference requires only that we begin. Start small, but start somewhere. Take deliberate time to pause, reflect, and allow yourself to be “renewed in

the spirit of your mind” (Ephesians 4:23).

Ask yourself: How does indifference hinder my spiritual growth or my witness to others? In what ways can prayer, reflection, or fasting help me cultivate sensitivity and compassion instead of indifference? What small acts of engagement or service can I take on to break the cycle of disconnection in my daily life?

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- The religious leaders in Bethlehem knew about the Messiah but did not act on that knowledge. Where might you be tempted to know about God without responding to Him?
- What practices (such as prayer, silence, or serving others) help awaken your heart when you feel spiritually indifferent?
- How can this Advent season be a time to reconnect with God and others in meaningful, intentional ways?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- When do you find it hardest to care about faith or to notice God's presence?
- What is one small way you could show kindness or care this week to remind yourself that love is stronger than indifference?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- What makes you feel close to God?
- Can you think of one person you could be extra kind to this week to show God's love



The background features a minimalist landscape. A large, solid yellow circle representing the sun is positioned in the upper right. Below it, two stylized hills are depicted: a brown hill on the left and a light purple hill on the right. The sky is a solid light beige color.

# **THE GOOD NEWS IS FOR ALL**

*Week 4: Dec 21-27*

## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21 | ALL CANDLES**

Emphasis: Hear her song

Reading: Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:46-55

### **MONDAY, DECEMBER 22**

Emphasis: Rejoice, Heaven is on Earth!

Reading: Luke 2

### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 23**

Emphasis: The Magi's Search

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

### **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24**

Emphasis: The Flight to Egypt

Reading: Matthew 2:13-18

### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25**

Emphasis: The Return to Nazareth

Reading: Matthew 2:19-23

### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26**

Emphasis: The Father's House

Reading: Luke 2:41-52

### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27**

Emphasis: The Scripture is Fulfilled

Reading: Luke 4:16-22

## **THE COVENTRY CAROL**

Anonymous

Lully lulla thou little tiny child  
Bye, bye, lully lulay  
O sisters too how may we do?  
For to preserve this day  
This poor youngling for whom we do sing  
Bye, bye, lully lulay

Herod the king in his raging  
Charged he hath this day  
His men of might in his own sight  
All young children to slay

That woe is me poor child for thee  
And ever morn and day  
For thy parting neither say nor sing  
Bye, bye, lully lulay



# VOICES OF HOSTILITY

*(Matthew 2:1-12)*

*By Sara Hwang*

The background of the cover is an abstract landscape. The top half is a solid dark teal color. The bottom half features stylized, rolling hills or mountains in shades of olive green and a light peach or salmon color. The shapes are smooth and flowing, creating a modern, minimalist aesthetic.



Sometimes even good things in life can feel like interruptions. A new job, a move, a relationship, or an unexpected opportunity can open doors, yet still leave us feeling vulnerable. I've experienced that tension in many seasons myself, trying to hold together many responsibilities while still hoping to keep everything in balance. Beneath all that effort, though, was a quiet desire to maintain control of what I had worked so hard to hold together.

But what happens when something interrupts it all? What if God drastically changes the plans I've so carefully made?

Advent has a way of asking these very questions. We are reminded that the coming of Christ stretches between two horizons: the humble birth in Bethlehem and the promised return in glory. The first confronts us with God's humility; the second, with God's sovereignty. His coming is as tender as it is transformative, both comforting and unsettling. For while it is undeniably beautiful, the way Christ shows up in our lives can disrupt the balance, security, and control that we have worked hard to maintain.

When it came to disruptive plans, Herod understood that all too well, and he was a man with a lot to lose. When he heard about the newborn King, he wasn't filled with wonder; he was filled with fear. Herod had built a kingdom, a name, a life of control, and the news of Jesus threatened to undo it all. The birth of Christ, which should have been good news, exposed the fragility of everything Herod trusted in. Sometimes the coming of Christ is not welcomed with open arms but met with clenched fists.

His story reminds us that, just maybe, there is a little Herod in all of us. It is the part that tightens its grip when God draws near, afraid of what might change if we truly let Him reign. Perhaps the coming of Christ still unsettles us as it confronts our plans and our comfort. Like Herod, we may want to keep Jesus close enough to admire but not close enough to change us.

Yet Advent calls us to release our grip and our desire to maintain control, and to welcome the One who is in full control. This God brings peace by first shaking what we've built. His reign may overturn our plans, but it establishes a kingdom that cannot be shaken. May we listen to Herod's warning today and find in it an invitation. May we have the courage to surrender, to welcome Jesus not just as Savior but as King, even when His presence disrupts what we've known.

The birth of Jesus isn't just a story of peace and wonder; it's also a divine interruption. And perhaps that is the invitation of Advent for you today: to make space for a Savior who doesn't always come according to our plans

but always comes to bring us something far better—Himself.

## TABLE TALK

### WITH ADULTS

- **Trusting God in Surprises:** Herod was afraid when his plans were disrupted. Can you share a time when God changed your plans in an unexpected way? How did it feel to let go and trust Him?
- **Control and Letting Go:** Sometimes we try to hold on tight to the things we can control. What is one area of your life where you are tempted to stay in control instead of letting God lead?
- **Welcoming Jesus' Presence:** The birth of Jesus can shake up our routines and plans. How might we invite Him into our daily life this week, even in small ways, around this table or at home?

### WITH YOUTH

- **Noticing God's Surprises:** Herod's plans were interrupted by Jesus' birth. Can you think of a time when God surprised you or changed something you didn't expect?
- **Letting Jesus Lead:** What's one way Jesus could be "in charge" in your life this week—at school, with friends, or at home? How might that change your day?

### WITH CHILDREN

- **When Plans Change:** Herod wanted everything to go his way. Can you tell about a time when your plans didn't go as expected? How did it feel?
- **Letting Jesus Be the Boss:** Herod didn't want Jesus to be King. How can we let Jesus be the boss of our hearts and our family today?





# VOICES OF LONGING

*(Jeremiah 31:15, Luke 2:25-38)*

*By Sara Hwang*

Many years ago, I sat across from a woman who had just lost her daughter. This moment is seared into my memory because I remember, as I sat there in silence with her, colorful Christmas lights twinkled through the church window behind her. In her eyes, though, there was no glimmer or sign of the hope of the season we were in. And I understood.

Sometimes joy feels dishonest.

Sometimes, like this mother who sat in front of me, and like the character of Rachel, we are undone by grief. We hold the empty spaces that the Christmas season and Advent don't easily fill. Other times, we cling to hope through long years of silence, trusting that God is still coming—just as Simeon and Anna did; but most often, we are somewhere in between.

In Matthew's Gospel, Rachel's voice cries out as a symbol of all who have suffered unjust loss—whose children, whether by violence, injustice, addiction, or distance, are no more. Her lament, originally from Jeremiah, is resurrected to describe the unrelenting pain of Herod's massacre of baby boys. Yet Rachel's voice belongs in the Advent story because Advent does not ignore suffering, but rather, it names it. It acknowledges that the world Jesus entered into, and the one we still live in, is filled with deep, aching sorrow. It reminds us that God's arrival doesn't always come with immediate answers; sometimes it comes with our tears.

At the other end of the story are Simeon and Anna—faithful, weathered, persistent. For years they waited in the Temple, clinging to promises others had likely forgotten. They did not see the fullness of redemption, but only a glimpse, which came in the form of a baby boy. And yet that glimpse was enough to make Simeon say, "Now I can die in peace." Their voices show us another side of waiting: not the pain of what has been lost, but the ache of what has not yet come.

In between these two stories, Rachel weeps for what has been torn away, while Simeon and Anna wait for what has not yet arrived; and here we are, suspended between grief and hope, between mourning and promise.

The good news is this: Advent gives us language for both. It says you are

allowed to weep, and you are invited to hope. You can lament the world as it is (and there is much to lament) while longing for the world as it will be.

This tension is not a problem to solve, but a place to dwell in. It is a sacred space where faith matures, and it is oftentimes in our tears that God draws near. In our waiting, may we hear the whisper of our God reminding us this Advent season that He is not finished. If this season finds you in tears, you are not alone. If it finds you waiting, the invitation for you today is this: know that you are seen. Rachel weeps. Simeon watches. Anna prays. And God, God comes slowly, surely, and faithfully.

## **TABLE TALK**

### **WITH ADULTS**

- Rachel's voice cries out over loss and injustice. What losses or griefs are you carrying this Advent season? How might naming them help you experience God's presence?
- Simeon and Anna waited faithfully for years without seeing the full promise. How do you wait for God in your own life? What gives you strength to hope even when answers or comfort don't come quickly?
- The devotional talks about being between grief and hope. How can you create space in your life to both lament and hope this Advent, allowing God to meet you in the tension?

### **WITH YOUTH**

- Rachel wept over loss, but God was still present. Can you think of a time when something hard happened but you sensed God with you?
- Simeon and Anna waited for God's promise and were patient. What are you waiting for right now? How could trusting God change the way you wait?

### **WITH CHILDREN**

- Rachel was very sad when she lost her children. Can you tell about a time you felt sad? How can we talk to God about our sadness?
- Simeon and Anna waited a long time to see Jesus. What is something you are hoping for right now? How can we pray and wait together as a family?





## **CHRISTMAS EVE**

ALL Candles + The Christ Candle in the Middle

### **MARY'S SONG**

By Luci Shaw, Accompanied by Angels – Poems of the

#### Incarnation

Blue homespun and the bend of my breast  
keep warm this small hot naked star  
fallen to my arms. (Rest...  
you who have had so far to come.)  
Now nearness satisfies  
the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies  
whose vigor hurled a universe. He sleeps  
whose eyelids have not closed before.

His breath (so slight it seems  
no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps  
to sprout a world. Charmed by doves' voices,  
the whisper of straw, he dreams,  
hearing no music from his other spheres.  
Breath, mouth, ears, eyes,  
he is curtailed who overflowed all skies,  
all years. Older than eternity, now he  
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed  
to my poor planet, caught  
that I might be free, blind in my womb  
to know my darkness ended,  
brought to this birth for me to be new-born,  
and for him to see me mended,  
I must see him torn.



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