



SERMONS
THAT WORK

SERMONS FOR
*Advent and
Christmas 2019*

An offering of
Sermons That Work

Advent 2019

Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading *Sermons for Advent and Christmas*, a collection of materials prepared by some of the best preachers from across The Episcopal Church.

Sermons That Work, a ministry of The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, has provided free and high-quality sermons, Bible studies, and bulletin inserts since 1995. Every week, it is our pleasure to source, review, and publish these pieces; we hope they are edifying as you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these and their corresponding scriptures.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is *The Friendly Beasts*, a 12th century hymn that imagines the animals of the manger explaining how they interacted with the Holy Family at Jesus' birth. In turn, the donkey, the cow, the sheep, and the dove tell of the simple gifts they shared: a ride to Bethlehem town, a manger and hay for a pillow, wool for a

blanket, and a song for comfort. In this telling, the whole of creation is – even briefly – oriented toward the One who set it in motion. There is no talk of the value of the friendly beasts' gifts; rather it is simply assumed that because they were used in service to the Christ child and the lowly Holy Family, they are invaluable.

As you journey through Advent, consider the gifts with which you have been blessed. How will you use these treasures of inestimable worth to glorify God and serve your neighbors? How will the friendly beasts inspire you to reorient your life around their and our Creator?

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Advent and a merry Christmas.

Your brother in Christ,
Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church

First Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 2:1-5; PSALM 122; ROMANS 13:11-14; MATTHEW 24:36-44

NO ONE KNOWS

by the Rev. Jazzy Bostock

There is a word that seminary students tend to love – maybe because it’s a big word and makes people feel intelligent: “eschatological”. You can use all kinds of variations of the word, from eschaton to eschatology. But what does the word mean? You have to be able to use it correctly in order to sound – and be – intelligent.

Today’s readings are eschatological in nature. That is, they deal with the end of the world, the end of humankind, the Judgment Day, the destiny of humanity. It’s a funny way to begin the new church year on the first Sunday of Advent – by talking about the end of the world.

So, what exactly does Jesus have to say about the eschaton, the end of the world? “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

What’s the point, you might ask, of Jesus bringing up the end of things just to tell us that we don’t know anything about it?

By telling us that we don’t know about the eschaton, Jesus tells us a lot. It can be easy to fall into the trap of making our faith about the end goal – heaven! As a people who are marked by death and resurrection, we can become enamored with thinking about what God’s *kin-dom* will be like – and, when that happens, we can lose sight of the gift we have been given in this world and in this life.

This separation from the things of the world is a common subject amongst Christians. In the book of Romans, Paul writes that we must lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. He goes on to list things we should avoid, which he considers to be part of that darkness. The thing is, in telling us what to stay away from, he really shortchanges the world – this beautiful creation God made for our delight. When we are too focused on those things we think of as being dark, when we focus on heaven as the only place of beauty and goodness, we run the risk of not only ignoring the beauty and goodness of the world but also our responsibility to it.

At the beginning of Creation, when God was busy forming things and Adam was naming all of the things with feathers, or fur, or leaves – God called this good. This world: good. Us, made in God’s image: good. Our lives of faith are not supposed to be focused on the world and creation to come to the detriment of this one – we have been given a mandate to love the place where we are.

Many of us, of course, are concerned about climate change. We are in a climate crisis, and our world is on fire. Given this predicament, it makes sense that we would also be eager to look for the eschaton – another world, coming to save us from this mess we’ve made! Trying to find solutions for problems like climate change can be too big to imagine – too much to bear. The problems are immense, and in trying to address them, we confront our own finitude. Into this particular moment, these words coming to us from Jesus seem particularly important to hear – “about that day and hour no one knows.” Living in the unknown – in what we cannot fathom or plan for – can make us crazy. We want certainty! We want to know how things are going to be!

Unfortunately, that’s not what Jesus is offering us. He is offering us an invitation into the world we are already in – an invitation to *this* planet, to *this* world, to *this* time and place.

How are we to ready ourselves for the day of his coming? Paradoxically, we can ready ourselves to leave this world by truly living in it, by soaking up every grace-filled moment. This Advent season is one that too often comes and goes without our noticing it. We gather family and friends but often focus on the shopping we haven't done or the menu that didn't turn out quite like the picture.

Jesus is coming at an unexpected hour – it might be in the moment you have on Christmas Eve. Maybe you will find Jesus in the flicker of candles at church. Jesus might come as your child bursts through the door, happy to be home after the first semester at college. We don't know when Jesus could surprise us – but we can be sure that it will be in this world, using what has been ordinary and transforming it into something wonderful. After all, this is the God who comes to us in the most ordinary bread and wine each week, transforming these simple elements into food for our journeys.

“About that day and hour no one knows,” says Jesus – today, may this be for us an invitation. Jesus is waiting, ready to surprise and delight. Amen.

The Rev. Jazzy Bostock is a recently ordained *kanaka maoli* woman, serving her curacy at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is thrilled to be back in the *'aina*, the land, which raised her, and the waves of the Pacific Ocean. She loves the warm sun, gardening, cooking, laughing, and seeing God at work. She strives to love God more deeply, more fully, with every breath she takes.

Second Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 11:1-10; PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19; ROMANS 15:4-13;
MATTHEW 3:1-12

REPENT, LIVE INTO GOD'S DREAM

by the Rev. Marcea Paul

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

– Romans 15: 13

In every age when God's people turn to sin and waywardness, human prophets appear to sound warnings of what is to come unless humanity changes its course. They may be humble, untutored individuals like Amos, the sheep farmer of the eighth century B.C., they may be learned public figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or wild creatures driven by some inner fire. We usually think of prophecy as foretelling the future – predictions of things to come. But the biblical meaning of prophecy is the declaration of religious truth, speaking as the voice of God.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves once again on the banks of the River Jordan with John the Baptist. All four Gospel writers agree that there is no good news – no Gospel of Jesus, without John the Baptist. Jesus himself describes John as the greatest of prophets. John took his mission, which was to declare the imminent arrival of the coming Messiah, very seriously.

John feared no one, not even Herod or Herod's wife, who in the end arranged to have John's head. He was, however, totally devoted to the

One for whom he came to prepare the way, saying to his followers, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” It would be hard to envision John on the cover of any fashion magazine. This wild figure dressed in camel’s hair would more likely be depicted as a cartoon image holding a sign that reads, “Get ready, the end is near!”

John proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Crowds from Jerusalem and the surrounding regions flock to hear John and to be baptized in the Jordan. Why do they flock to hear John? Perhaps they have become disheartened by the quality of their lives and welcome the call for change. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out that the Biblical understanding of the term “repent” is deeply shaped by the Jewish experience of exile. To repent, to return, is to follow the prepared way of the Lord that leads out of our separation and back into reconnection with the God who made us and loves us beyond our understanding.

John is out in the wilderness – far away from the places of power. He sees the world through the lens of wilderness experience and calls to mind the fact that God’s people endured the wilderness – with all its confusions, ill-will, and foolishness – as they fled from Pharaoh’s tyranny. For years, they struggled with God’s call on their lives, often abusing it with their own disobedience. This is a man who won’t stop reminding people of the reality of faithlessness despite all that comes from God’s gracious leading. He risks the traumas the wilderness may bring. The wilderness is a place where death is all too close – where food is scarce. No wonder his staples are locusts and wild honey. Perhaps venturing into the wilderness to be with John reminds the crowd of their ancestors’ struggles, allowing them to hear John’s call to repent more as invitation than judgment – as an invitation to come home.

To repent doesn’t mean to simply be sorry. In the New Testament, to repent means to begin seeing differently, to begin thinking differently, both of which lead to acting and living differently. To repent is to change, but not for the sake of change itself. Rather, when we change, we start to live differently, because as we enter a new mindset or as we develop a new way of seeing, we become aware that our actions are out of step with God’s dream for all creation.

And what is God’s dream for all creation? The answer to that question can be found throughout Scripture. One illustration can be found in our reading from Isaiah – God’s dream is for the world to be a place in which peace and equity – rather than fear and hatred – rule the day. God dreams for the world to be a place where we view each other with compassion and with love, where all of creation is full of the mercy and the peace of God. Dr. King dreamed of the Beloved Community. Catherine Meeks, Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, reminds us that God dreams of community where we love one another as neighbors with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that God calls us to live into this dream, not next year, not ten years from today, but right now.

It is a desire that John himself expresses with the phrase that always comes after the verb “repent.” He does not just shout, “Repent!” and then stop there; John links the call to repentance with the “why” of repentance: the kingdom of heaven has come near. For those of us who follow God in the Way of Love, it is Jesus who defines our new way of seeing, our new mindset, and our way back to God. Deciding to try to live and love like Jesus is what Christian repentance is all about.

Could it be that our rugged, ascetic nonconformist was not yelling with a tone of dread and doom, but with an equally intense voice filled with hope? Beloved, what if we choose to hear John’s call - *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near* – not as an ominous threat of impending condemnation, but as an invitation to live into God’s dream?

Even now, there are prophets rising up in our midst. Our youth dream of having a future in which they can enjoy God’s creation, but often feel that their dreams are threatened because of climate change and violence. They are demanding change to protect their lives and God’s creation so they and their children may enjoy the abundant life God desires for them - that they may live into God’s dream. The vulnerable simply can’t afford to be indifferent, “and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6b).

God invites us all to dream something beyond what we can presently see – the suffering of migrants, of refugees, the homeless, the hungry, and those who have lost loved ones through acts of violence. These are dreams by which to set a course. God does not ask us if we are there yet, but rather whether we are headed in the right direction.

We, as children of God, need to heed the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness – the voice that reminds us of God’s dream. We need to take the time to seek God’s vision for us – to ask, “What does God want us to be and to do?” We need to choose one – just one, for now – element of our lives where we see the need for repentance and take advantage of the opportunity to change direction.

Following Paul’s counsel, we who have glimpsed God’s dream must now share that hope. Like John, we must strive to renew the hopes of an exhausted world. With practice, we can be like Isaiah, who can see beyond the mess and dream of a world in which all are ready for the arrival of God.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” - “Repent, live into God’s Dream.” This is John the Baptist’s invitation for us to come home and to be the people God has created us to be. Amen.

The Rev. Marcea Paul is Curate for Pastoral Care at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Austin, Texas. She also serves on the Texas Pauli Murray Scholarship Committee. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018. Prior to attending seminary, Marcea had a career as an accountant and also served as Parish Administrator at St. Faith’s Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida.

Third Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 35:1-10; PSALM 146:4-9 OR CANTICLE 15 OR 3;
JAMES 5:7-10; MATTHEW 11:2-11

THE UNEXPECTED

by the Rev. Danae Ashley

“Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...” begins our collect for today. This sounds like one thing, but it means something else entirely, doesn’t it? It sounds like God is out at Hogwarts with Harry Potter, stirring up a potion of power that is going to be unleashed when God walks amongst us like some giant comic book superhero. But then there’s this business of waiting for a baby to be born—not quite the same idea.

The prophet Isaiah describes a world redeemed by God, and it’s pretty amazing: weak hands will be strengthened, feeble knees will be made firm, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the tongue of the speechless sing for joy, waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and a highway shall be there called the Holy Way—just for God’s people—and they will never go astray. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Doesn’t that sound marvelous? It sounds like God is stirring up power there. But then again, where does this baby we are waiting for fit into this? Shouldn’t we be looking for someone who already has power, someone who knows the ways of the world and can lead us through them? Can we trust in a God that asks us to wait along with a pregnant mother for a baby to be born into poverty?

That seems like a lot to ask.

In a day and age when we often rely only on ourselves to get things done, it's asking a lot of us to trust in a God who wants us to renounce control and expect the unexpected. It makes us nervous and makes us question if we really heard God right. In today's Gospel reading, even John the Baptist is unsure of himself, and sends one of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" This is not what John expected. The road was prepared for the Messiah to restore the world to God's vision, but the method was not what John – or anyone – was expecting.

Goals. Expectations. Hopes. Surely Mary had all those things for the child she was anxiously waiting for. Perhaps our parents had these expectations for us, and we have passed them on to the next generations. But what happens when new parents receive an unexpected diagnosis for their newborn child? What if we are never even able to have the child we long for? What happens when a beloved youth we have known for years becomes an addict? What happens when our adult children are unable to or simply refuse to care for us in our old age? When God does not answer our prayers for the way we want things to be, then what?

We put a lot of hope in people, and when the circumstances do not measure up to our expectations, we need help in grieving the loss of those hopes. It's tough. Navigating the loss of the goals we have for ourselves, our children, and especially our God, can rock the foundation of our beliefs about the world and our place in it. We climb the ladder that society presents us with to obtain the idol of "being top dog," "getting what's mine," and "being first." This ladder is built rung by rung by looking to a fictional goal – a goal that does not exist. But we believe in it and are willing to hurt others and ourselves to achieve it and stay on top.

The lesson of renouncing control over what God is doing is a tough one and we are called to learn it again and again. For those parents that give birth to children with unexpected difficult needs, the lesson is immediate. Emily Perl Kingsley writes about this in her personal story of having a differently-abled child in *A Trip to Holland*:

"I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability – to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this..."

"When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make your wonderful plans... the Coliseum, the Sistine Chapel, gondolas. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

"After several months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, 'Welcome to Holland!' 'Holland?' you say. 'What do you mean, Holland? I signed up for Italy. I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.'

"But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place full of pestilence, famine, and disease. It's just a different place.

"So, you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met. It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around. You begin to notice that Holland has windmills. Holland has tulips. And Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say, 'Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned.'

"And the pain of that experience will never, ever, ever, go away. The loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss. But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to go to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland."

The things we expect to happen that don't, the life we expected to lead and didn't, the church that was never supposed to change but has, the Messiah that was supposed to look like the King of Glory and didn't, the baby that Mary carried under her heart who dies a brutal death on the cross—we have mourned these losses for centuries. Our expectations—our goals—have taken detours in their outcomes, and we spend considerable amounts of energy trying to fictionalize the truth. We desperately believe that we really do have control over each element of our lives—that if we just close our eyes and imagine that we are in Italy, we won't be in Holland.

What a waste. What a waste of the Good News that God has brought to us in the places where we are. What a waste of the preparation we have done to open ourselves to God dwelling with us and in us. God is leading us down the Holy Highway, but the destination is unknown. It may be Holland. It may be Cuba. Regardless, God is with us. The Creator of the earth and stars is ushering in a new way of life, often in the midst of the pain of the old. No wonder Mary's soul proclaims with wonder! It is about God's expectations, not ours.

When a reporter once asked Gandhi what the secret to his happiness was, he replied, "Three words. Renounce and enjoy." Renounce the perceived control we think we have and embrace the grace that God has given us in its stead. Open our eyes to the wonders of the Holland-places in our lives. Only when we let go of our expectations, can we finally enjoy God's gifts to us.

May we all take up Advent's invitation to the leap of faith that awaits us and find God in the unexpected outcomes. Amen.

The Rev. Danae M. Ashley, MDiv, MA, LMFTA is an Episcopal priest and marriage and family therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, Minnesota, and is serving part-time as the Associate Rector at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Seattle and a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle. Danae uses art, music, drama, poetry, and movement in counseling, spiritual direction, and creation of ritual, especially for pregnancy and infant loss. She is an alumna of Young Clergy Women International and has written for their publications and is a proud member of Thank God for Sex--promoting healing for those who have shame around their bodies, sexuality, and faith. Danae is also one of the contributors of the book *Still a Mother: Journeys through Perinatal Bereavement*. Additionally, she developed and produced the verbatim play "Naming the Un-Named: Stories of Fertility Struggle" with playwright Amanda Aikman and has written for Working Preacher: Craft of Preaching. She was recently featured on Lacy Clark Ellman's A Sacred Journey Pilgrim Podcast 10: (In)Fertility Journeys. Her favorite pastimes include hiking with her husband and beloved dog, reading, traveling, volunteering as a Master Gardener, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; ROMANS 1:1-7;
MATTHEW 1:18-25

A DARING PLAN

by the Rev. Deon Johnson

It was a daring plan. For eons, God had tried to get the attention of people. Through prophets, poets, and priests, God had tried to get the attention of the people God loved. God had yelled and whispered, stayed silent and shouted, but people were deaf to God's call. God appeared in dreams and burning bushes, spoke through pillars of fire and fine manna from heaven, provided water in the wilderness and lands flowing with milk and honey, and still, the people wouldn't listen. It was a language barrier, God thought. "They can't hear me."

So, God spoke louder and bolder.

Fiery prophets and judges and kings spoke with God's voice. They tried their best to call the people back to the love buried deep inside, but the words fell on deaf ears. Humanity thought they were "self-made" and so they ignored the messengers and the message. They created idols of wealth and greed and worshiped on the mountains of commerce an idol called Fear. Fear preached a gospel of scarcity, me first, and self-centeredness. The people were divided one from another and surrounded themselves with others who looked and thought and talked alike and God's heart broke. "They were made for love," God said.

So, God hatched a daring plan. Instead of poets and prophets, instead of manna and messengers, instead of fires and floods, God would

become flesh and blood. The creator of the universe, the One who called the cosmos into being with a word, the great I Am would take human flesh. But how?

A baby. Babies by their very presence inspire hope for the future. But God as a baby had to be special. Not the baby of a powerful queen or a savvy politician, but a helpless baby, born in a backwater town. God was going to become a nobody. “I will be Immanuel – ‘God with us’ – to show them the face of love.” But what if things go wrong? What if something happened to God as a helpless little child? That was the chance that Love was going to have to take.

God was ready, but it took a while and a bit of searching before the angel finally found a girl named Mary that said yes. Perhaps others politely passed or simply shooed the messenger away, but Mary, Mary said yes. But the messenger had forgotten about Joseph. Maybe Mary could convince him. After all, who doesn’t like a baby?

Scandalous!

How could Mary be pregnant? We just got engaged. We haven’t even gone to see the rabbi or even asked for our parents’ blessing. Imagine what her mother will think or what she might do. Imagine what my mother will say. They tried to warn me that she was headstrong, but I never expected this. How could she? Didn’t she think I would find out? She’s ruined. My reputation is ruined, but I don’t want her to be stoned to death. No one should ever have to go through that. Maybe it would be best if I just quietly let her go. I’ll sleep on it.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

“‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’”

But why her? Why me? Why here? We are poor and simple and powerless. Why would God choose to be born here? It doesn’t make sense. I don’t want to be responsible for raising God. What happens if we mess this up? How do you ground the creator of the cosmos?

God is with us.

The time had come for the baby to be born. All those eons of loving and longing and hoping came together in this one seemingly insignificant moment. At last, God could speak our language. In Jesus, we are reminded that throughout the lives of our ancestors, throughout our lives and even in the lives of those yet to come, God is with us. God was with us when times were tough, when the weight of the world seemed heavy on our shoulders. God was with us when the whip of bondage weighed heavy on the backs of the people of God and freedom was a dream.

Emmanuel. God is with us.

God is with us through the struggle and the storm. God is with us in our stumbling and shortcomings, in triumphs and our thanksgiving, in the midst of the messiness of our lives and the days we seem to barely hold it together. God is with us.

God will be with us, as we travel into the unknown, as we venture on deeper water and uncharted paths. God will be with us in the silence and in the shouts, in our liberation and our longing. In Jesus, God was, God is, and God will be with us. Always.

The thing is, we, as the people of God and the followers of Jesus, forget that all our lives, our loves, and our longings are caught up in a God who became flesh and blood and bone and body to be with us. Ours is not a deity that is far off, removed from humanity; instead, ours is a God whose hands dug into the rich fertile ground and was able to say, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground...” Ours is a God who knew hunger and longing and hard work. “God is with us” is both pledge and promise that no matter where we find ourselves in this life, even in death and beyond death, that we are never, ever, ever alone!

Our world longs to see God with us. Behind the fear, the divisions, the divides we long to connect with the divine, to look for the holy in the midst of the confusion. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be grounded in the truth that God’s love is more than enough to cast out our fear. We know that God comes to us again and again seeking, searching, and sowing love. To know, to truly know, and to rest in that holy knowing, is to recognize that in Jesus Christ, God is in charge, and

no matter how much we try to cling to the past, no matter how much we long for what has been, God is always pointing to the future. When we get out of our own way, when we stop worrying about buildings and budgets, pews and pledges, the real work of walking with God in the world begins. The sacred and often scary work of clothing the poor, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the foreigner, honoring the immigrant, and blessing the other is why we follow Jesus. Maybe we should start loving (and living) like we believe it.

The birth of Jesus is not an event in time that took place millennia ago. The birth of Jesus the Messiah happens again and again and again each day in our world if we stop long enough to recognize God with us. God coming into our world will always be scandalous because it means that any of us could be in the presence of God made flesh. Listen. Can you hear it? Off in the distance. It's the sound of a newborn baby's cry. Amen.

A priest, a parent, and a (recovering) perfectionist, Deon K. Johnson is a native of Barbados who has questioned Michigan winters in his twelve years as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brighton, Mich. Deon's passion for inclusion, welcome, and worship geekiness has led him to be trained as a Liturgical Consultant, helping communities of faith re-envision their worship and worship spaces to better reflect the beauty, mystery, and all-around awesomeness of following Jesus. Deon graduated from Case Western Reserve University and the General Theological Seminary. When he isn't ruing temperatures below fifty degrees, Deon enjoys traveling, biking, hiking, photography and spending time with his family. Deon is married to Jhovanny Osorio-Vazquez and both are foster parents.

Christmas Day (I)

COLLECT

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 9:2-7; PSALM 96; TITUS 2:11-14; LUKE 2:1-14 (15-20)

BECOMING CHILDREN AGAIN

by the Rev. David W. Peters

Christmas is always better with children around. There is something in their excitement, their wonder, their anticipation for treats and presents that brings as much joy to the giver as to the recipient. As the old joke goes, "There are three stages of life: We believe in Santa Claus, we become Santa Claus, and we look like Santa Claus." Becoming Santa Claus—giving presents to excited children—is the greatest joy of all. It is the great secret of Christmas that we discover as we leave childhood—and yet, we can still remember our childlike wonder and excitement. We may even still miss having those intense feelings of anticipation and wonder.

Christmas can also be a time when we feel the absence of children or loved ones most severely and painfully. The first Christmas after a death or divorce can fill us with intense sadness and grief. Even in our laughter and joy, feelings of unease lie beneath, and we realize we are not children anymore.

The angel tells the shepherds on that first Christmas: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is

the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

The first word of Christmas to humans was “Do not be afraid.” The shepherds’ dark night sky was split open by blinding light, so the reason they were afraid is obvious to us, but these words, “Do not be afraid,” are words for us, too. C.S. Lewis wrote about the death of his wife, Joy, with these words: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.”

Is it because our expectations for a perfect Christmas are so high that we often feel grief and fear with such intensity at this time of year? If we find this to be true, then the angel’s words, “Do not be afraid,” are words for us.

The reason the angel gives for our fearlessness is that a Savior is born to us this day. The world Jesus was born into was full of problems and turmoil. The weight of the Roman occupation was felt by everyone, including these shepherds, and the lingering trauma of the Babylonian captivity made it difficult for most people to see much hope. And every Christmas since the first one has happened in the shadow of war, famine, occupation, and uncertainty. Every Christmas since the first one has happened in a world where children have gone hungry and been abused and neglected. There has never been a perfect Christmas. Jesus is always born into a world that is fearful and anxious.

The hope of Christmas does not lie in our creating “the perfect Christmas.” The hope of Christmas lies in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. The hope of Christmas is a person—and a tiny person, at that. This tiny person, born in Bethlehem, is the reason we no longer have to be afraid. No matter what grief, fear, or anxiety we may feel during this Christmas season, there is hope for us in this baby from Bethlehem.

The reason we find hope in this baby goes back to the ancient prophecies we read in Isaiah and other Old Testament passages of Holy Scripture. The prophets foretold that an anointed one, or “Messiah” would deliver God’s people from oppression and subjugation. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is the way in which these prophecies are fulfilled.

In our Isaiah reading, we are told this Messiah will be called, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” These are titles that speak to how Jesus helps us today. We are all in need of counsel as we face the difficult decisions and challenges of life. This baby born in Bethlehem can be your Wonderful Counselor.

We are often faced with our own powerlessness. We are powerless to change other people and we are often powerless to change our circumstances. This baby born in Bethlehem can be your Mighty God, able to do things you cannot do.

The changes and chances of life cause us anxiety. We face uncertainty in our personal lives and in our larger communities. This baby born in Bethlehem can show you the Everlasting Father.

When we look at the wars, oppression, and conflicts between nations, family members, and people groups, it is easy to give up hope for any peace. But this baby born in Bethlehem can be your Prince of Peace.

2,000 years later, we know this is true. We know this baby born in Bethlehem grows up to preach and teach and heal. We know this baby born in Bethlehem grows up and stretches out his arms on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone can come into the reach of his saving embrace. We can see him in his birth, in his life, and in his death, and we can see him in his resurrection. His whole life speaks to the redeeming power of God to provide the ultimate answer to our world’s *dis-ease* and pain.

But on that night so long ago, these shepherds only knew what they had been told by the angel. They knew so little, but their hope was strong. So, they went “with haste” to see this baby in the manger. This is the faith of Christmas: to hear good news and run to meet it.

Ethiopian Christians play a game called “Genna” on Christmas. It’s a version of field hockey, played with a hockey stick and a wooden ball, all hand-carved from eucalyptus wood. The origins of the game go back to the Christmas when the Ethiopian shepherds heard the news of Jesus’ birth. The story goes that when they heard the news, they were so overjoyed that they broke out into a field hockey game!

Luke's account of the shepherds' excitement and dash into Bethlehem and the Ethiopian account of a jubilant hockey game both point to childlike exuberance. This is the energy of Christmas—childlike excitement at the news of this birth.

Christmas is always better with children around. And perhaps this Christmas, we can become children again—perhaps we can become childlike in our wonder when we see that God has become one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, this baby in the manger. Amen.

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Christmas Day (II)

COLLECT

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born this day of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 62:6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:(1-7)8-20

A BEAUTIFUL MESS

by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Harmon

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem; come, and behold him, born the King of angels; O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen.

Each Christmas, we hear that well-known story from Luke 2. It's the one about a young couple, a man named Joseph and Mary, his expectant wife-to-be, doing their civic duty to be registered in Bethlehem, in the region of Judea. With the whole known world to partake in Caesar Augustus' registration, the couple too feels compelled, and so they pick up from Nazareth to trek roughly 100 miles back to Joseph's hometown.

Sometime along the way, Mary, great with child, starts to feel contractions, sending the couple to scramble for lodging, traveling from house to house, knocking on doors, looking for a place, any place. After being sent away time and time again, a manger suggests itself to the couple as a suitable crib. The child is born and quickly wrapped in bands of swaddling cloth. According to Luke's account, there was relatively little fanfare, at least at first – just an exhausted mother, a stupefied father, and the promised newborn.

Then, there are the angels—one at first, announcing the birth to some shepherds, and then a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.” The angels disappear and with haste, the shepherds make the trip to see this strange “thing” that has come to pass.

Each year, we are invited into that scene, and each year, the story sounds at least a little bit different. Forgotten details emerge and we again remember the Nativity in a new way. We might wonder about the precise wingspan of an angel or the dimensions of the manger. We might consider what exactly that makeshift labor-and-delivery room looked like or try to imagine the varied sounds of love that drifted into the expanse of that night.

One of the deep beauties of this narrative is that it can bear all these wonderings and then some. The Christmas story is one pregnant with joy and promise, life and pain. It encompasses all these aspects of human life, because, at its heart, it is a birth story, and birth stories are messy. Birth stories drip with and are driven by peculiar memories, curious details, and complex emotions.

There are cars that break down on the way to the hospital and children born in cars that break down on the way to the hospital. There is the penitential scratchiness of a hospital gown; the stringent smell of hand sanitizer; a flurry of telephone calls; and the constant beep of the infant heart monitor. There are hours of pain and crying and screaming and laughing. Bodies, both professional and personal, pop in and out of the room, interrupted and even silenced by those still, unfiltered moments of marveling at new life.

This is the beautiful mess of birth. This is what the Church invites us into year after year. We are invited to allow the sweat to sting our eyes as we journey shoulder-to-shoulder with the Holy Family, to feel the soft, packed hay underfoot. We are invited to smell the sheep out in the fields and to be afraid at that angelic announcement. This is when we let all those details wash over us, when we find ourselves caught up in the mysterious story of God’s salvation. And we’re called to lean into the deep hope, the joy and promise, that this new birth brings.

The messiness of the Nativity meets us in the messiness of our lives. There is work and school and family. There is grief and loss and

disbelief. There are feelings of excruciating shame and immense joy. For so many of us, the challenge of the season is that many of these feelings are bound up together: all the excitement and expectation bundled with a sadness, a sense that even when that glorious morning appears, that person will not be there, opening gifts, eating breakfast casserole, and drinking far too much coffee alongside us. And that is hard. That is hard because we want wholeness. We long for things to be set aright.

But notice that none of these feelings is lost on the Christmas story. For each season in which anxiety hovers, there is Joseph, trying to anticipate what his friends and family will think of this bizarre situation. For every instance of shame, there is Mary, the pregnant, unmarried teenager, shunned by the very people her son came to save. For each glimmer of hope, there are the shepherds, hurriedly traveling to Bethlehem to see their newborn king. Indeed, for every moment of unabated joy, there are the heavenly choirs piercing the darkness of that deep, purple night.

The good news of the Nativity is that the mess of our lives is not lost on the Nativity. There is an honesty, a profound humanity, that radiates from the lines of Luke 2—the eternal God of the universe, unbound by time and space, saw fit to break into our world in a particular time and place, with all the politics and social stigma and anxiety. God saw fit to come among us in the most unsuspecting way imaginable: in the form of a tiny, cooing, utterly dependent baby.

The strange beauty that breaks forth from such a counterintuitive advent might catch us a bit off-guard. We might be tempted to tamp down the difficulty that dots our days. For those of us who experience grief and loss this season—whose memories are strained and tenuous—the tendency might be to rearrange the furniture of our lives to match the grandeur of our heavenly guest. Or, for those of us cognizant of the habits that close us off from others, there might be the desire to try and ready our souls for the one coming into our midst.

But the Christmas story, at just about every turn, is about overturning such a notion. It’s not about how God withheld love until the world was pristine enough for God to enter into it. It’s about love incarnate, enfleshed, dirty and dusty and bloody, and all for the sake of what’s dirty and dusty and bloody.

God comes in the mess: a living, breathing word of peace to a people exiled from their homes and their hearts. The sound and shape of that word can take on a variety of tenors and tones over the course of our lives. At Christmas, though, we are reminded that this word often sounds a lot like the cry of a newborn, a timeless cry from a mouth that is only hours old. Can you hear it amid the noise of the world? Can you make it out from among the screams of your own regret and self-doubt? Can you hear it?

Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the new-born King.

Hasten to the manger and you will find something so purely human, so perfectly lovely, it must be of God. Amen.

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Christmas Day (III)

COLLECT

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-4, (5-12); JOHN 1:1-14

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

by the Rev. Anna Tew

*“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on...
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”*

Thus begins John Keats’ poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. In it, Keats celebrates the permanent anticipation of a life quite literally set in stone. Pipes play unheard, unable to be judged. Two lovers stay in an almost-kiss, the anticipation forever building but never accomplished. If anticipation is the best part of any experience, Keats holds, then this painted or chiseled world is paradise: stone, not flesh, immortal, forever in joyous anticipation.

To Keats, it sounds lovely. Never is the bliss over; it is always just about to begin. It is eternal Advent, set in stone, unfading.

On its face, it sounds nice, particularly on this holy night. After all, Christmas has a way of making us nostalgic for the past. We long for Christmases of years past: perhaps when we were younger, or when a certain person we love was still alive, or before a relationship failed.

Even children find themselves sad on December 26, because for most of popular culture, that's when the magic begins to fade, regardless of what the church says about Christmas lasting for twelve days. Yes, Christmas can make us long for eternal Advent, where we are immortal, forever in joyful anticipation.

For all kinds of reasons, Christmas makes us acutely aware of the passage of time, perhaps making us wish that time would stop permanently as it does on Keats' Grecian urn. This night, we may wish for holy moments past.

Yet tonight, we read the first chapter of the Gospel of John, which, for its part, tells the opposite story of the one about the Grecian urn.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

This is John's nativity scene. There are no shepherds, no wise men, no stars, no angels singing choruses. There is no dirty stable, no Mary and Joseph. There is only metaphor, reflecting creation as John begins, "In the beginning," and ending with the eternal God taking on flesh and coming to dwell among humanity.

In this nativity scene, there is only still silence as the Word of God, the eternal, takes on temporal flesh for a fleeting human lifetime. This is why we are here: because God put aside the unfading to join us in flesh. It is, for us, a reminder that Christ came to make our fragile, temporary flesh holy. It is, for us, a reminder that our fleeting time here on earth is holy, too.

Holy, like a church family gathered around a sanctuary on Christmas Eve. Holy, like loved ones gathered around a tree. Holy, like an individual who has, for once, found peace in this world. Holy, like a baby in a manger. These moments do not last forever.

Yet it is in the fleeting that we find the holy. It is in flesh that we experience Christ: in one another, in bread, in wine.

And in becoming flesh, Christ gives us new life, and that which was temporary becomes eternal: not as Keats imagined, in stone, but better: in "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." In Christ, fragile flesh is redeemed and awakened to eternal life.

For now, however, we have only to enjoy these moments while they last. No moment lasts forever, no matter how sweet. We cannot relive our most precious moments forever, and if we could, they would likely quickly lose their shine. The characters on the side of Keats' urn are as trapped in stone as they are forever in bliss.

We must hold onto these holy moments, wrapped in flesh: holding the hand of someone we love. Kissing a grandchild on the forehead. Laughing until our sides hurt. Eating until we can't eat anymore. Tearing open presents with our hands. Smelling pine in a Christmas tree or smelling a pie cooking in the kitchen. Crying tears of joy as the family is gathered around. These moments are holy, in part, because they are fleeting; we know instinctively that we must treasure them while they last.

After all, these are the moments that we will remember and long for in Christmases future. We cannot hold onto them, but we can remember to cherish them tonight. We can look with love on all who are gathered with us, reminding ourselves that this night is holy and that these people, made holy in Christ, are here to help us celebrate it.

In an age when we are increasingly attached and beholden to screens, tonight, we are called to put down our devices and obligations and live, for this one evening, as enfleshed, whole humans. Our lives are fragile, and these precious, fleeting moments are what make life worth living.

Keats writes: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter..."

Yet surely there are no sweeter melodies than Christmas carols, sung after an Advent of waiting. These melodies are fleeting but full; they are among the sweetest of the year, sung by those we love, in a holy space, surrounded by flesh made holy by the One who has come to dwell among us. They will not last, either, so we must cherish the holy while the music plays.

Beloved, we bring you tidings of great joy: love has broken through again, as it does every year. Christ is born in us again. Love is made flesh again. We are reminded again that we may see and cherish love in whatever ways it breaks through.

We bring you tidings of great joy because God has put on flesh and we are here to celebrate it for another year. So, light the candles, play the melodies, feast on Christ in bread and wine, and cherish these moments and these people.

Because you see, whenever we find love, whenever we enjoy love, whenever we remember love, the holy is born in us again. It's always there, as close as our next breath; love is here, in the spaces between us. Love is holy. And love is only felt in temporary, fragile flesh. God is made flesh, and flesh is made holy.

The last verse of the Gospel reading reminds us: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

And Keats adds in harmony: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." So ends the famous poem. Beloved, truth has come to dwell among us, and in Christ, beauty surrounds us. Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all we know on earth, and all we need to know. Let us praise the God who came to dwell among us in holy flesh, and let us cherish this holy night forever. Amen.

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