



SERMONS  
THAT WORK



SERMONS FOR  
*Advent and Christmas 2024*

---

An offering of  
Sermons That Work

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

---

## Advent 2024

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 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.

In what is probably very good news for the church and the world, I have found that there is little wisdom I could add to the Book of Common Prayer. Throughout my life, this book—gifted to me in third grade and signed with my best cursive—has been a constant companion, impressing upon me a worldview shaped by the saints, as well as helping me find my place in the world and guiding my connection with my redeemer. I hope every Episcopalian—and everyone, really—will take the time to study its wisdom.

I, for one, love diving into the prayer book (and Scripture, and our hymnal) around Advent. As a project manager, I live and breathe planning, and as a sometimes-Calvinist, I am deeply aware of the constant need of God’s people to examine and prepare themselves. And who doesn’t love the dramatic and foreboding hymns of sounding “the note of judgment,” beholding “dreadful majesty,” and watching the

entire political order “pass like a dream away”? It is jarring language and music, shaking us awake even as the nights get longer and colder.

But Christmas—the prayer book reminds us that this is joy. Yes, Jesus asks us to be prepared and to witness the foreboding things we learn about in Advent, but those things are all in service of the Incarnation: our savior coming among us. We can be joyful, confident, illuminated, regenerate, graceful, renewed, sharers of his divine life—and where we might lack those things, we only need ask God for them. We can, even in a world that sometimes can’t stand the word, exhibit joy. The cynic might ask, “How can you be so happy?,” and we might reply, “How can I not?” Even in our hardest days, we can hold the spark of joy, knowing that the light has come and the darkness has not overcome it.

Whether you find yourself this Advent and Christmas worshipping in a huge stone church where the organ shakes the foundations (“Word of the Father”), or in a rural church where a century of incense colors the ceiling, or at a house church with a friend playing guitar, or by yourself: Joy to you; joy to the saints around you; joy to the world.

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church 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

JEREMIAH 33:14-16; PSALM 25:1-9; I THESSALONIANS 3:9-13;  
LUKE 21:25-36

### WE ARE WAITING

by the Rev. Charles Wynder

We are living in a time of significant change. Whether it is the up and down of elections; the energy and tension embedded in politics in the public square, international conflicts and wars, climate change, or shifts in the economy, there is a feeling of uncertainty in the air. The whitewater rapids nature of our common life leaves many scared, questioning, and hopeless. It seems that things are out of control. Or, at least out of our control. Perhaps that is the point. We are not in control.

The first Sunday of Advent reminds us that we are not in control. It also provides direction and reassurance amid the chaos and confusion. This first Sunday of the church's calendar year invites us to suspend our linear notions of time. The season of Advent reminds us of Kairos time: deep time. A time that requires us to suspend the false control of Chronos time. It asks us to move away from dependence on false narratives. We are invited to make meaning of narratives that call on us to wait for God's realm.

The Gospel reinforces all of this when Jesus speaks with an apocalyptic voice. Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

It is tempting to try to parse out Jesus' words and make literal connections with our current time. Equally enticing is the desire to use Jesus' words to predict the future. This, however, is beyond the larger point of what God is communicating to us this Advent season. The famous theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner provides a framework for thinking about Luke's words as we start Advent. He writes, "Does he mean there will be real eclipses and strange comets that have never been seen before, maybe a reordering of the constellations themselves to scrawl some fateful starlit message across the night sky? Or is he speaking symbolically of some upheaval not of the world without but of the world within – an upheaval of the hearts and minds and spirits of the human race?" He continues, "I think we are waiting. That is what is at the heart of it. Even when we don't know that we are waiting, I think we are waiting. Even when we can't find words for what we are waiting for, I think we are waiting."

We are waiting during this season for the birth of baby Jesus. As Christians, we slow down from the busyness of an always-on culture and the distractions of ever-present cell phones to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth.

We are waiting for baby Jesus to be born. We are also waiting for the healing of the world. We are waiting for a transformation of the systems and institutions that seemingly have great control over the big picture of our lives. We are waiting for just and civil relationships between people and among communities and nations. We are waiting for a new ethic of love, peace, and justice to envelop us. In the waiting, we are called to prepare ourselves and to be on guard. Our calling in the waiting is to move beyond busyness into preparation of a solidity in our interiority.

Jesus tells us, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.” It might seem strange to joyfully wait in anticipation of Jesus’ birth against the backdrop of the apocalyptic words in Luke.

Susan Garrett reminds us that the apocalyptic view of events on Earth is often used in scripture to reflect things happening on a higher plane. More is happening than what first meets the eye. We are waiting for the birth of Jesus who is also the one on whom we have been waiting to bring peace and justice on earth. And yet, we cannot take our eyes off the warning of a stirring of chaos and disruption. So, we are invited to stay awake and be ready. Jesus tells us that we are to be on guard, “alert at all times, praying that [we] may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The tension that comes during this time of waiting can lend itself to confusion. It’s in times like this that it helps to look to a prophet. Prophets point beyond “what is” and can help us to be ready for “what is to come.” Prophets trouble the waters of our now and point to what can and ought to be. Our lectionary invites us to grapple with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who found hope during difficult times with challenges well beyond our own. Angela Bauer-Levesque writes about Jeremiah in *The People’s Companion to the Bible*. She observes that the Book of Jeremiah is “located in its initial layer of voices, in the seventh century BCE in the years leading up to the experiences of dislocation and exile in Babylon. The book warns of impending disaster, then tells of the actual war and destruction and of the various ways the people and their leaders responded to the crisis.” Furthermore, “Prophet and people search together and separately, to make sense of their experiences of war and violence, chaos and attempts at resistance, defeat and daily life.”

This is what Jeremiah is doing in our reading today: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

Scholars of the text caution us to refrain from reflexively seeing the New Testament as the fulfillment of the prophetic words of the Hebrew Bible. Rather, we should, as Walter Brueggemann posits, recognize that the “prophetic promises” of Jeremiah “continue to be generative and revelatory” for the “promised newness is always yet again to be discerned and received.” We listen to Jeremiah and recognize that we, too, are waiting for a righteous branch of David to spring up. Who is this one that is to come and bring forward justice and righteousness? We wait. We wait with the hopefulness of Jeremiah, “The Lord is our righteousness.” In waiting for the righteousness of the Lord to come, we are focused on the Realm of God to spring forth. Walter Wink writes, “The advent we are waiting for is not an apocalypse, but the beginning of human beings again and again as they recommit themselves to bring the Realm of God here.”

We prayed earlier for God to “give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” On this first Sunday of Advent, let us find the hope of Jeremiah and the continued generativity of the promised newness his words give to us in this time. May we prepare ourselves and stay on guard. As we wait for the birth of baby Jesus, may we understand our anticipation as part of our recommitment to living in the Realm of God that is coming with great glory. Amen.

**The Rev. Charles Wynder** is the dean of chapel and spiritual life at St. Paul’s School in Concord, N.H.

“The first Sunday of Advent reminds us that we are not in control. It also provides direction and reassurance amid the chaos and confusion.”

– The Rev. Charles Wynder

1) When was a time when you felt the need to control a situation but instead chose to wait? What was the outcome, and how did that experience shape your understanding of waiting?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2) As a group or individually, research a figure you view as a modern prophet working toward justice and peace. Share what you’ve learned with a small group.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## 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

BARUCH 5:1-9 OR MALACHI 3:1-4; CANTICLE 4 OR 16;  
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11; LUKE 3:1-6

### WHO NEEDS A PROPHET?

by the Rt. Rev. Deon Johnson

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

Who needs a prophet anyway? Prophets have an annoying habit of pointing out our flaws, airing family secrets, and being all around nuisances. They love to call us out when we stray from God and when we have lost sight of truth. At best, they are a nuisance; at worst, they are meddling. Who needs these messengers of discomfort and sacrifice? What are they good for? Wouldn't it be best for them to get on their soap boxes and protest and preach and prognosticate somewhere, anywhere else but here?

It is hard enough trying to be a good upright, churchgoing, tithe-giving, Sunday school-teaching person without one of these annoying prophets calling us to care for the poor, to look out for the downtrodden, to seek after justice and righteousness. Don't we do enough already?

It would be nice if they would go bother the people in power, the people who can actually do something for the poor and the needy. Why do these prophets insist on bothering good people? But here they are, calling us once again to repentance, and forgiveness, and hope. You would think that they were broken records, spinning the same thing over and over and over again.

Here comes another one called John, son of Zechariah—John the Baptist, some call him. He's no ordinary prophet; he doesn't just preach that we need to repent, but he has the nerve to insist that people get baptized in the muddy River Jordan no less. It would be nice if John sang a different tune for a change. He is always running around, “Repent this! Prepare that!” Haven't we heard this message before? And yet he persists. Like crazy old Isaiah preaching about paths being made straight, and valleys and mountains being filled and made flat. The thing about straightening crooked places and valleys being filled and mountains being brought low is that we like our paths crooked, our valleys deep, and our mountains high. We like things the way they are and the way they have always been.

Who needs a prophet anyway?

We need prophets. The people who sit in darkness, in deep despair, they need prophets. The people who look around and see destruction and desolation, they need prophets. The people who have no voice, no rights, no hope—they need prophets, because prophets proclaim a new and better way. Prophets are truth-tellers to a world longing and praying and looking for glimpses of hope.

Our world needs prophets. Prophets are harbingers of hope and hope is found in the one whose coming we await. The message foretold by John breaks into our world with deafening silence and shatters the dark of despair with the light of love.

Who needs prophets? We need prophets. We need those annoying, nagging nuisances that call us to be better followers of Jesus. As Rachel Held Evans reminds us, “Biblically speaking, a prophet isn’t a fortune-teller or soothsayer who predicts the future, but rather a truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.”

We need the voice of one crying out in the wilderness because things happen in the wilderness. In the wilderness, the needs are raw and real, and sweet words and hollow sentiment are not enough. We need prophets especially when we have grown so full of ourselves that we neglect to see the orphan, the refugee, the migrant, the widow, and the stranger. We need prophets to call us back to God, back to a place where hope is found not only in church, but in the world around us—in the interaction of strangers, the joys of difference, and in the radicalness of love.

Like Jesus and John, we are tasked with holding lightly to the things that do not matter, in order to be open to a hope-filled future to which God calls us. Now more than ever, our communities, our nation, and our world are in desperate need of the glimmer of hope found in Jesus Christ. Now more than ever, we need to not only hear the cries of the prophets, but to take on the mantle of the prophets.

We, as the church, the people of God, the followers of Jesus, are called to claim our prophetic birthright and be the voice of the voiceless, the hope of the hopeless, the love of the loveless.

Often in the church, we can feel small and powerless, wondering how we will survive, being concerned about ourselves rather than those in need. But God’s prophetic grace often falls not on the powerful or the mighty, but on extraordinarily ordinary people who turn the world right-side-up. We are called to remember that we are not a group of people who believe all the same things; we are a group of people caught up in God’s plan of redemption and salvation with Jesus in the center.

The question facing us as Christians, who seek to follow where Jesus leads and to heed the call of John, isn’t “Do we need prophets?” The question we must answer is “Are we willing to be prophets?” Are we willing to let God’s light shine through us so much so that we can show the world a new and better way? Are we willing to be prophetic enough to walk out in faith and break bread with people who may not look like us, or talk like us, or vote like us or speak like us? Because that is the Good News that we have to share; that is the prophetic vision that has the power to transform our world.

There are prophets in our midst. There is one sitting next to you right now. Look around. Listen. Keep awake. There is still darkness and despair and shattered dreams. There are still sins to be forgiven and enemies to turn into friends. It may not look like it, it may not sound like it, it may not feel like it, but in Jesus Christ, love has already won. The light of love and the glimmer of hope has broken through the gloom. The crooked places have been made straight, the valleys and mountains made smooth, the rough places made plain. Look and you will see the salvation of our God breaking through in a thousand pinpricks of light.

So, tune your ears to the voices crying from the wilderness, pay attention to the weirdos who speak of Good News and forgiveness and repentance and hope. Be the prophet who points to Jesus coming once more into our world. Amen.

This sermon was written by the **Rt. Rev. Deon Johnson** for Advent 2 (C) in 2018, when he served as rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Brighton, Mich.

“God’s prophetic grace often falls not on the powerful or the mighty, but on extraordinarily ordinary people who turn the world right-side-up.”

– The Rt. Rev. Deon Johnson

1) Bishop Johnson discusses how prophets can be “annoying” truth-tellers who often challenge us to live more fully into our faith. Reflect on a time when you felt challenged by someone to live more justly or compassionately. What was the outcome? How did this challenge impact your understanding of faith?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2) The sermon reminds us that “love has already won.” How does this hopeful vision influence your own life?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



# 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

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; CANTICLE 9; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 3:7-18

## GOD'S JOY IS JUSTICE

by the Rev. Cn. Whitney Rice

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word meaning “rejoice,” and the origin of this name for the third Sunday of Advent comes from the beginning of our reading from Philippians today: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Advent is actually a penitential season like Lent, something many people don't realize. Just like how in Lent we use the time to prepare for Easter and reflect on things like our mortality and sin, we do the same in Advent to prepare for Christmas. Thinking about how much we need Jesus helps us get ready to welcome and greet him. It makes the contrast between the penitential season and the major feast leading to a festal season all the greater, and our joy at Christmas and Easter all the brighter. That's why we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath on the third Sunday of Advent. Pink says joy and celebration!

So now that you have perhaps a bit of new liturgical knowledge to pull out at cocktail parties, let's take this concept of Gaudete Sunday to our scriptures. The theme is readily apparent not only in the text for which the Sunday is named, the Philippians “rejoice” text, but also in Zephaniah, which begins, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” In our canticle from Isaiah, we say, “Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation,” and “Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy.” So far, so good. We have got this rejoicing thing down. It is all about Gaudete around here.

Until we get to our Gospel, where John the Baptist commits a major party foul: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” John! Don't be such a downer! No wonder no one invites you to parties. Your living in the wilderness by yourself is starting to make more and more sense.

So, at first glance, it's hard to understand why this is our gospel for Gaudete Sunday. But let's look at it another way. Who else might want to celebrate Gaudete Sunday besides us? How about God? Maybe God would like the chance to be joyful once in a while. If we take that as a possibility, we have to ask ourselves: what makes God joyful?

And there is where our text from Luke starts to make sense. In this gospel, John the Baptist is functioning as a sort of ethical consultant. People are coming to him and asking him for advice on how they should live their lives. The crowds ask him what they should do, and he says that if they have two coats, they should give one away to someone who needs it. Tax collectors, notorious as a group for being unscrupulous and exploiting the people they collected from, ask him what to do, and he tells them to collect only what is owed and no more.

Even Roman soldiers go to John for advice. That is a remarkable thought, that members of the occupying army are seeking out this fringe Judean prophet on the very margins of society and religious acceptability, and asking him for direction in their lives. And John provides it, freely and very specifically. He tells them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

So, what can we learn from John's words? What principle is John demonstrating to these seekers that they must embody if they are to do God's will? Justice. John's words are all about justice. They are all tailored specifically to the situation of the people asking for guidance. John doesn't issue vague, general pronouncements like, “Try to be a decent person,” and “Don't be awful to other people.” He speaks right into the lives and contexts and specific circumstances of these people and tells them how to live ethically. John tells them how to do justice right where they are, now, in their own lives.

Often, we think justice is something huge and sweeping, accomplished only with massive movements of people and charismatic leaders and negotiations between heads of state. Justice does often require forces that big to move us past our prejudices and habits of oppression. But justice starts very small,

one act at a time, just as John the Baptist is preaching. How do you treat your waiter? How do you treat your boss? How do you treat the cashier at the grocery store? How you treat these people is how you treat Jesus.

People tend to get antsy when “God” and “justice” come into the same conversation. We think of justice as the opposite of mercy, and as full of wrath and condemnation of us and our sin. John the Baptist is certainly not helping our discomfort with his preaching this morning. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” That sounds kind of scary, doesn’t it?

But we’ve already learned that justice and joy are partners in God’s kingdom. God is not out to get us. God is not waiting for us to trip up on some silly sin and then cackling with glee and hanging us over an abyss. God’s will is our growing up into the full stature of Christ, becoming capable of partnering with God in bringing God’s justice to fruition on the earth. So how does God do that?

Well, consider John’s words about Jesus: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” We often think of the wheat and the chaff as two different groups of people. The wheat are the virtuous people we wish we could emulate, and the chaff are the poor clueless sinners that we’re all too certain we’re lumped in with. It’s not a very hopeful message.

But what if they’re not two different groups of people? What if we’re all the wheat and the chaff? We’re all wheat, brought in as part of God’s harvest, and Jesus in his love for us will cleanse and purify us with his holy fire and burn away those useless things that hold us down and hold us back from fulfilling God’s will. It may not be particularly comfortable, but it will be liberating. That puts rather a more hopeful spin on it, doesn’t it? We’re all a little chaffy, but there is good wheat underneath those obscuring, besetting sins, and Jesus’ love can burn away all the obstacles that prevent us from following him faithfully.

This is news worth celebrating on Gaudete Sunday. This is news worth rejoicing over. This is the knowledge and the truth that we have the ability to make God rejoice every time we act for justice—every time we repent of racism, every time we stand in solidarity with the oppressed, every time we refuse to doggedly hang on to our own ill-gotten power. And, as John the Baptist tells us, these grand ideas are brought to life one interaction at a time, one conversation at a time, one relationship at a time. We might wonder if

we have what it takes to live out God’s justice in the world. Well, Jesus comes to us and burns our chaff away so that our wheat might be gathered into the granary, to be used to make the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.

So, the next time you set aside your own preferences and your own self-interest and act with justice and kindness, remember that you are making God joyful. No matter how small the action you are offering of your heart, you are saying to God, “Gaudete! Rejoice!” And God hears you.

**The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice** (she/her/hers) is an Episcopal priest who serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has taught undergraduate courses at the University of Indianapolis and has contributed to Lectionary Homiletics, the Young Clergy Women’s Project journal *Fidelia’s Sisters*, and other publications. She has served as a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and is currently a member of The Episcopal Church’s Evangelism Council of Advice. A communicator of the gospel at heart, she writes and teaches on a wide variety of topics, including rethinking evangelism, stewardship, leadership, women’s theology of the body, mysticism, and spiritual development. When she’s not thinking about theology, particularly the intersection of evangelism and justice work (which is all the time, seriously), you’ll find her swing dancing. Find more of her work at her website [Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers](http://www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com) ([www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com](http://www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com)).

“God is not out to get us.  
God is not waiting for us  
to trip up on some silly  
sin and then cackling with  
glee and hanging us over  
an abyss”

– The Rev. Cn. Whitney Rice

1) Inspired by the idea that acts of justice bring God joy, write a short prayer or poem celebrating justice as an expression of divine joy. Consider how this joy motivates you to act and invite others to rejoice in small, justice-centered ways.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2) Justice is often seen as requiring large-scale movements, but this sermon emphasizes that small, everyday actions can embody justice. What are three small actions you could take this week to act justly?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## 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

MICAH 5:2-5A; CANTICLE 15 (OR 3) OR PSALM 80:1-7;  
HEBREWS 10:5-10; LUKE 1:39-45, (46-55)

### THE WINTER VISITATION

by the Rev. Charles Hoffacker

In the beautiful month of May, in the springtime of the year, the church keeps a feast known as the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The gospel reading on that occasion is the one we just heard, the story of pregnant Mary's visit to her elderly relative Elizabeth, who is herself pregnant with John the Baptist.

Now, at this time of year when the days are shortest and the nights are longest, we hear that visitation story again on the final Sunday of Advent, in preparation for Christmas, which comes in only a few days. We can call today the winter Feast of the Visitation.

What happens? Young Mary, a teenaged girl, has heard the angel's monumental message that she is to be the mother of the Messiah, the other parent to the Son of God. In an exercise of the bravest faith and submission, she agrees.

Mary agrees, though this pregnancy seems to promise the end of her engagement to Joseph. She agrees, although her people remember well how in the past they would put to death a woman about to marry who was found not to be a virgin.

Mary agrees to this remarkable and scandalous motherhood. It seems she has been brought, all in a rush, to a dark stone wall. But her faith finds a door, her faith finds a door.

One barrier after another collapses in Mary's life. Now she is on the road to Elizabeth's home, a house in the hill country. Pregnant women in Mary's time and place did not travel; they stayed at home. But Mary gets up and goes.

Why does she go? Is it to find refuge with an understanding relative against criticisms thrown against her because of the scandalous circumstances around her pregnancy? We do not know. But the meeting of these two pregnant women is thick with surprises.

It is common for babies to move in the womb in ways their mothers can feel. Sometimes these movements are called kicks. But John in his mother's womb did much more. He jumped for joy! When Mary called out upon her arrival, John jumped in the womb of old Elizabeth. How startled his mother must have been!

The Holy Spirit then filled Elizabeth, and she cried out to her visitor, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Theirs is a culture that honors the elderly, but here we have the older woman offering extravagant honor to the younger one, a teenager mysteriously pregnant. Yes, the world is turning upside down! The old era, which Elizabeth represents, has not much time left. The new era, ushered in by Mary, is about to dawn.

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth is the first to utter this acclamation, which becomes a favorite Christian devotion down through the centuries.

She then says more. She asks:

Why has it happened that my Lord's mother has come to visit me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby inside me jumped for joy! You're blessed, Mary, because of the child you carry. You're blessed, Mary, for believing that what the Lord told you would come true.

Here the older woman does not bless the younger, but recognizes that the younger woman is already superabundantly blessed. Yet we who know what will follow recognize that this blessing is not all springtime. It will have its winter season. A sword of anguish will pierce the heart of blessed Mary. She will cradle the baby at Bethlehem, yet years later she will cradle her dead son at Golgotha.

Suddenly the scene at Elizabeth's house becomes a sacred opera. It moves into music. Mary does not speak; she sings. And what a song she sings!

We call this song the Magnificat, from the first word in the Latin translation. We also call it the Song of Mary. It is a universe away from any self-indulgent, sentimental ditty. Instead, what we have is an explosive celebration of the God who saves: the one who looks with favor on a humble servant, who does great things, whose name is holy. The God whose mercy is known by those who reverence him, who shows his arm to be mighty, who scatters the proud and throws down the powerful and throws out the rich, who lifts up the lowly, and leads the hungry to a banquet. The one who keeps his promise to our forbearers in faith, whose name is holy, who does great things! This is the God who sets Mary to singing, and maybe, as Herbert O'Driscoll suggests, Mary, pregnant Mary, footsore after trekking up the hillside, not only sings for all she is worth, but starts to dance as well.

Often we Christians don't get it right about Mary. Protestants and Pentecostals and Anabaptists tend to ignore her, except perhaps at Christmas. Catholics and Orthodox appear sometimes to deify her, exaggerating the honor of she who is already higher than the cherubim. Episcopalians love the Mother of the Lord, but are rather diffident in talking about her. But sometimes we Christians do get it right about Mary. May this be such a moment.

For it seems that, in some mysterious way, reflection on Mary unlocks the door to Christian joy.

That joy rings out in ancient hymns – Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac – many of them modeled on Mary's own song.

It sounds forth in the work of Anglican poets and preachers, among them Henry Vaughn, who calls out:

*Bright Queen of Heaven! God's Virgin Spouse  
The glad world's blessed maid!  
Whose beauty tied life to thy house,  
And brought us saving aid.*

This joy radiates in the bright madonnas of Italy. It shines in stone in medieval cathedrals named for Our Lady.

Yes, reflection on Mary unlocks the door to Christian joy. Mary shares her song with us, asks us to sing the Magnificat. She invites us to delight with her in the God who turns the world upside down, who saves us through this girl's courage.

Mary always points us to her Son, the one redeemer. Her existence reminds us that we can be as she is: the faithful disciple, the one who brings Christ to birth, the soul espoused to God.

Without such joy, Christianity is ever in danger of becoming less than itself, falling into respectable dullness or mean-spirited fanaticism.

However, where this joy of Mary singing the Magnificat is set free, Christianity becomes confident, the harbinger of an eternal springtime, rich with hope for this world and the next.

We live in a time, my friends, when people ache for such a hope. May we help them find it in the liberating God who is the subject of Mary's song and the center of Mary's life

This sermon was written by the **Rev. Charles Hoffacker** for Advent 4(C) in 2009.

“Where this joy of Mary singing the Magnificat is set free, Christianity becomes confident, the harbinger of an eternal springtime, rich with hope for this world and the next.”

– The Rev. Charles Hoffacker

1) This sermon describes Mary as the “faithful disciple” who points us to Jesus. How does Mary’s example influence your understanding of discipleship and what it means to “bring Christ to birth” in your own life?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2) Spend time reflecting on or journaling about Mary’s words in the Magnificat. Identify specific phrases or themes that resonate with you, and consider how they apply to your own life or your view of God’s work in the world

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Christmas Day (I)

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

### UNCOUNTABLE

by the Rev. Phil Hooper

They came to be counted.

This is where it begins: Joseph and Mary, just two of many in the teeming, trembling, transcendent history of their people, traveling the well-worn roads of their ancestors and coming, at last, to Bethlehem, the city of King David.

They came to be registered in a census decreed by a ruler with a different name and a foreign throne—one who knew few of their number, and who had likely never stood where they stood or stopped to consider the centuries of blood and prayer and supplication that cried out from the many stones of their particular wilderness.

But nonetheless they obeyed, this man and this woman, and they came to be counted. Counted among the multitude of faces, both familiar and strange, in a place that barely felt like home. Counted as two, though a third was on the way. Counted as fixed commodities of an empire that did not suspect and could not comprehend the infinite possibility carried in their flesh—a child, yes, but also a long history of survival, and an ancient promise of dignity yet to be delivered in its fullness. A fullness that will not and cannot be commodified or controlled. A fullness that is a story, not a sum.

And although that story has shaped us and brought us here today, it is safe to say that we are still caught up in the process of counting. We are a people encircled by an empire of metrics and measures, whether for economies or households or faith communities or even our own bodies. This is understandable to a certain extent. We pursue the stability and the clarity that numbers offer. We want an objective proclamation of what is real, even if we can't decide what to do about it.

But it is also true, especially evident in recent times, that numbers alone cannot save or solve our most urgent and fundamental questions. We can count, and count, and count some more, and order census after census and survey after survey to track our shared challenges, but in the face of deep spiritual hunger and anger and grief and change, the power of these numbers is limited. They can be idolized or distorted or ignored. At their worst, they become weapons rather than tools, used to shape arguments rather than reveal truth. Like the empires that wield them, numbers can be useful in the project of uniformity, but they are insufficient for the pursuit of salvation.

No, as we travel the well-worn roads of our own ancestors, something else must be revealed to us, something else must arrive. Something—or someone—else must come, not just to be counted, but to amount to something more than the sum of our parts. Something that does not simply inform us, but that transforms us.

And today, it does. He does. The surprise addition to the census; the child whom no one was counting on.

If we wish to begin to understand the significance of Jesus' birth and how this Christmas gospel begins to counter our empires of counting, we should take note of how his arrival is heralded. Not by an agent of the orderly government, but by an angel of light, by one who emanates from the expanse of a heavenly host more numerous than the stars. "A multitude," Luke's narrative tells us, and the Greek word is *plethos*, which connotes a number so large it is difficult to quantify.

And then we are told that this divine plethora delivers its message, not to the statisticians or the bureaucrats of Caesar, but to the shepherds in the fields. They are figures who are themselves barely considered countable, roaming elusively among fields and pastures at the edge of respectability or safety. These nameless, numberless shepherds are given a message that would likely have been ignored by larger, more august bodies: that the long-sought answer, the long awaited promise kept, is to be found in the most unlikely of places—in a manger, in a child, in the smallest fraction of possibility, nearly obscured by the margin of our errors.

The angels no one can count and the shepherds nobody bothers to count—these are God’s chosen messengers. No census could ever account for it.

And yet this baby, this Jesus—he is perhaps the greatest surprise of all. For he is not just one of many, he is the One who made many. He is the One who, as the Psalmist says, determines the number of the stars and gives to all of them their names. He is the Uncountable One who has, for the sake of love, come to be counted, to submit himself to the census of our fears, to stare all our empires in the eye and forgive them, for they know not what they do. And on this day of his birth the ways in which he will do all of this are not yet revealed to us, but the story is set into motion, and the countdown to our transformation has begun anew in his newborn flesh.

This transformation is still at work in us, never more visible than in this season. Because the joy of Christmas is and always has been this: that despite all our attempts to categorize and commodify ourselves, God always manages to introduce an element of the immeasurable into our midst.

Just like the child whom we celebrate, Christmas itself refuses to yield itself entirely to our lists and our ledgers. Just when we become overburdened by the weight of expectations or regrets or the other ways we fear we don’t quite measure up, suddenly there is a song in the night, and a burning star, and the old story retold, and although we may feel like just one of many in the teeming, trembling, transcendent history of the world, we remember that there is a fullness meant for us, too, and it is still seeking us, even now. It has a name and a face that we can call upon even when nothing else makes sense.

It is Jesus, and he, too, has come to be counted. And even more importantly, he has come to be counted upon by you and by me and by all who seek a life that is more than the sum of its parts.

And like the shepherds who first received this good news, Christmas is also an invitation for us to stand up, to go forth, and to be counted upon as well. To be counted upon as those who keep telling the story, who keep seeking the signs of a new Kingdom being born, and who will keep working to make this new Kingdom something more than a fleeting dream in the night.

Because the paradox of the Uncountable One becoming one of the counted suggests the opposite for us: that even in the finitude of our individual lives, there is an element of numberless eternity that abides and yearns to be born through our prayers and our actions. We are called not only to behold a birth but to give birth ourselves, through the labor of our hearts, to the tangible realities of glory and peace and justice and hope for the entirety of the plethos, the multitudes, who live on the face of the earth and who are still searching the heavens for something more than that which can be quantified.

Christmas is the enduring moment when that search was—and continues to be—answered. And the answer, for all creation, is the same as it was for Mary and Joseph:

You, who have traveled so very far, who have arrived in a place that barely feels like home, and who fear that you will be counted among the lost and the forgotten and the used up of this world—on this day, eternity has been born unto you; infinite love has condensed itself down to be as one for you, to be one with you, and to show you the way into a life that cannot be commodified or conquered. All we must do is seek him, and hold him, and stand with him.

And when we do, the story will reach its fullness all over again in our lives, just as it did on that night in Bethlehem: the ancient promise fulfilled, and the innumerable host of heaven singing its song, and something measureless welling up within us to be revealed.

And what is it? It is Love, having come to be counted.

**The Rev. Phil Hooper** serves as rector of Saint Anne Episcopal Church, West Chester, in the Diocese of Southern Ohio. He is a contributor to several Episcopal publications and a board member of the Center for Deep Green Faith. His sermons and other writings can be found at [www.byanotherroad.com](http://www.byanotherroad.com).



“The angels no one can count and the shepherds nobody bothers to count – these are God’s chosen messengers. No census could ever account for it.”

– The Rev. Phil Hooper

1) The sermon highlights how society often values things that can be quantified, but God’s love is immeasurable. Reflect on an area in your life where you feel pressured by society’s metrics (e.g., success, productivity, appearance). How might embracing God’s “immeasurable” love shift your perspective?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2) Spend time journaling about areas in your life where you feel called to be “counted upon”—where you can make a difference in the lives of others. Reflect on small, specific actions you can take to live out this calling and commit to practicing one of these actions during the season of Christmas.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2024:  
An offering of the Episcopal Church's Sermons That Work

To find your nearest Episcopal Church, please visit the Episcopal Asset Map at [episcopalassetmap.org](http://episcopalassetmap.org).

Visit Sermons That Work at [sermonsthatwork.com](http://sermonsthatwork.com) to find sermons, Bible studies, bulletin inserts, and other free resources for your congregation.

For more information, please contact:

Christopher Sikkema  
Project Manager  
The Episcopal Church Office of Communication  
[csikkema@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:csikkema@episcopalchurch.org)

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church,  
815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

©2024 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.