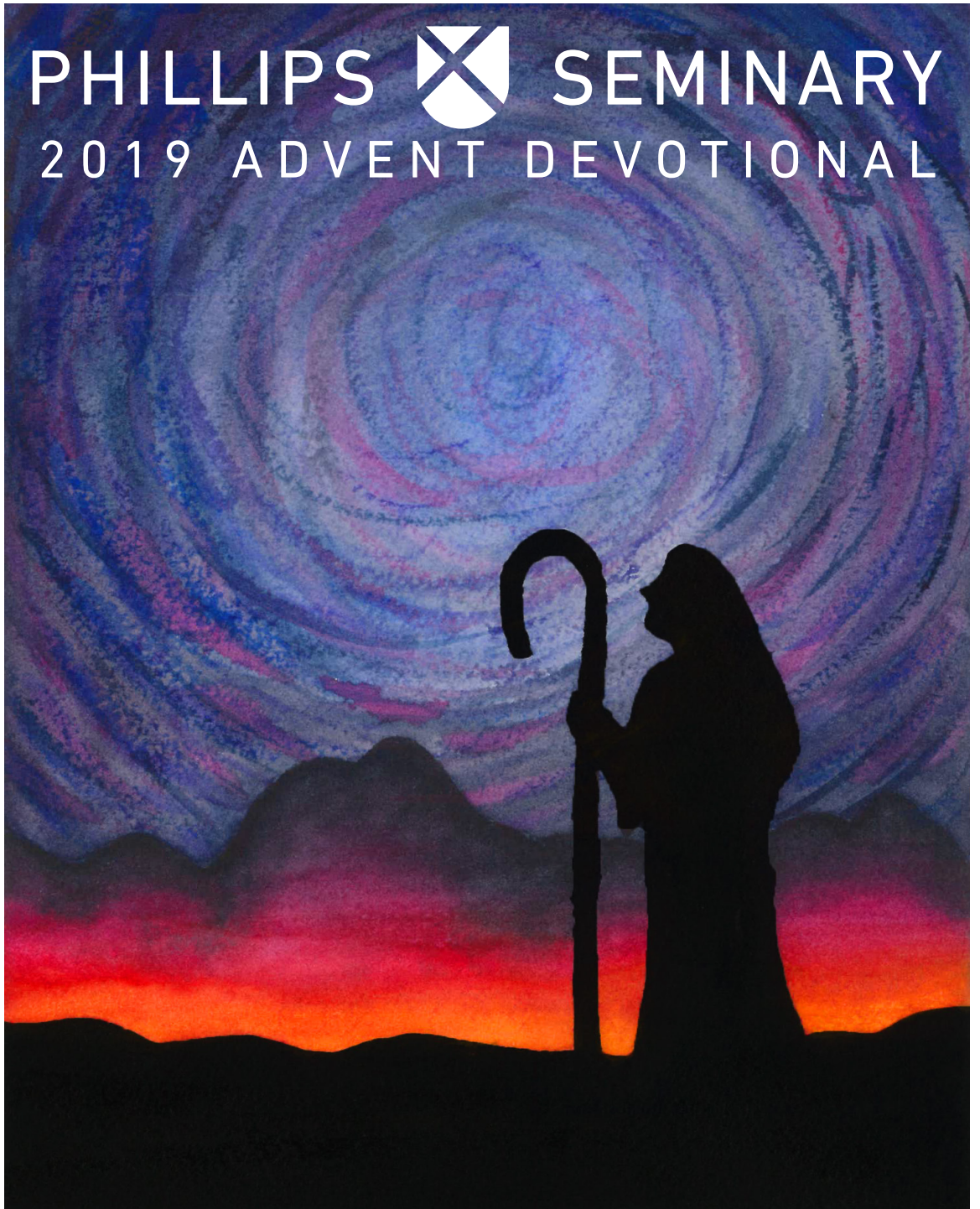


PHILLIPS  SEMINARY  
2019 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL





# PHILLIPS SEMINARY

Phillips Theological Seminary is once again providing this Advent Devotional for you. Over the last four years, I have been tasked with organizing this booklet for Advent. I continue to be blessed by the response to this booklet and the way it's used personally and throughout the churches. Many of you have told me you use the booklet:

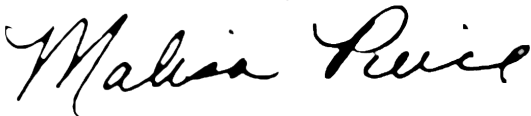
- to assist with sermon preparation.
- in church small groups and Sunday school classes.
- as a daily congregation-wide devotion.
- for personal and family devotion time.

Phillips is grateful for your support and thanks you for believing in the mission of the seminary. We strive to bring theological formation to the church and to students preparing for ministry.

The devotional is an important part of our goal to support and educate the whole church. We value your contribution to our lives as a community and consider you a part of our community.

As we prepare for Christmas, may we come to understand how we are all connected through our remembering the sacred texts and themes that surround the advent of Jesus into the world. We pray that you will use this time of reflection to understand where faith is leading you. We hope that through this booklet you get to know us a little bit better and are inspired to deepen your faith.

Peace and Blessings,



**Malisa Pierce**

Director of Advancement

 *where faith leads*

## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 1, 2019**

### **Advent Again**

*Romans 13:11-14*

*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers... Romans 13:11*

Advent again. So much has changed since the Advent season of last year; and so much has stayed the same. We continue to learn that time cannot be controlled by clocks or calendars. Nor can it be contained in the seconds, minutes, hours and days that flow by and through us with no stoppage. Time will not be tamed.

Paul says to the Romans, “you know what time it is.” I look at my alarm clock to confirm my sense that it is 6:25 in the morning. “Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep,” he warns. My mother’s voice echoes from my childhood, “Nancy, get up now or you’ll miss the bus!” And I burrow deeper into my pillows, sure I can make it even if I snooze for five more minutes. Paul speaks again, “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

“That’s what you said last year,” I respond to him. “And every year before that for time immemorial.”

The annual repetition doesn’t make it any less true. Salvation is in fact nearer to us when we are awake and looking for it than when we pull the covers over our heads. I want to see that salvation—that time-transcending, moment-crashing joy of knowing that I belong to Holy Goodness and to my people and that they belong to me. And that the “they” of the previous sentence includes all the people I encounter through time, and all those that I do not. I will miss that salvation if I don’t get up and go look for it. Advent again. Time to look.

**Dr. Nancy Claire Pittman**

President and

Stephen J. England Associate Professor of the Practice of Ministry

## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 2, 2019**

### **Mountain and Branch of Hope**

*Genesis 8:1-19*

*...again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Genesis 8:10b-11*

Sometimes you may feel as if your life has been flooded with torrential rain. You are left out in the rain surrounded by the flood waters. No metaphorical ark to save you from the onslaught. You feel like you are drowning in grief, in stress, in busyness, in self-hatred.

Then you see a glimmer of hope as you feel the stability of Mt. Ararat—a day when somehow you feel stable—the water is receding.

Then you receive an olive leaf of hope: a kind word from a friend, an encouraging meme on social media, a compliment from a stranger, a sermon that speaks to your soul.

You know you will be OK. You may still be surrounded by the water (the anger, the grief, the stress) but you know in your bones that the waters are receding. You can't see dry land, but you know it's there.

Hope that change is coming. A shift has happened. You will live in hope again.

As we await the birth of Jesus, I pray that you will live in hope and that a change is coming for you.

**Malisa Pierce**

Director of Advancement

## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 3, 2019**

### **Hope in a Rainbow**

*Genesis 9:1-17*

*And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." Genesis 9:12-15 (NIV)*

Having grown up in the desert of El Paso, summer rainstorms brought special joys to otherwise hot, dry days. There's something amazing about the smell of rain in the desert. A unique scent fills the air with aromatics from the leaves of the creosote bush. Then there are the stunning rainbows that appear in the stark blue skies that seem to immediately follow the storms. I was fortunate to experience these simple sensory pleasures after every rain.

In the story of Noah, God is tormented by the condition of earth and the violence, corruption and evil of humans. God is willing to use the rain to create mighty floods to destroy all life—land, plants, animals and humans. It seems like a drastic approach, but with Noah's help, the stage is set for a hopeful new beginning. God even offers the rainbow following the flood as a sign of his promise to care for us and to never again destroy the earth in this manner.

Sadly, we don't have to look too far to see a repeating landscape of destruction, violence, selfishness, and evil all around us. The earth is being assaulted through our actions and inactions, and humankind is ignoring the cries of the sick, hungry, oppressed, voiceless, and hurting. Our world is once again flooded—flooded with need. So how do we know that the rainbow will come? We find hope in God's promises.

Divine One, stir up in the hearts and minds of humanity the desire to love one another, care for one another, protect our earth, and seek out ways to meet the endless needs of this hurting world. May the sweet smell of rain bring with it healing on earth and may rainbows continue to offer hope for the storms our world is weathering today.

**Sharon Russ**

Assistant to Advancement

## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 4, 2019**

### **Just-Ripe Hope**

*Matthew 24:23-35*

*For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Matthew 24:27*

You know how you can buy an avocado and it feels perfect in your hands... and yet experience has told you that there's about a 30-second window where the ripening is perfect... and otherwise it's either too hard and not quite at peak, or 31-seconds later where it's gone soft and bruised-looking on the inside.

Or when you're popping microwave popcorn and you're standing there and it takes forever to get going and you're thinking, that's weird, it's not going to pop... but then it goes!... and you still stand vigil and you listen so that, even on microwaves with built-in magical 'popcorn' settings, you don't let it go too long. Because if it goes more than 2-3 seconds between pops it's like scorched earth in there and your colleagues vow to keep you well away from the breakroom microwave ever again.

So, Advent is like avocados and popcorn is my point. Sort of.

This passage from Matthew suggests that the coming of the Messiah is going to be that "trust me, you'll know the difference" sort of moment. In the gospel reading, (already-grown) Jesus is in the midst of his responses to challenges and questions with a series of teachings that reads, if you just sit and go right through, like a real downer: lamentations, persecutions, desolation, destruction, denunciation. WHY is this an Advent text?!

Maybe by looking to the almost-end of the gospel, we can more closely consider the beginning, and in this first week of Advent, remember where HOPE rests. Hope is an active thing and involves a little seeking: selecting out from among the false omens and mistaken reading of signs, and waiting, standing vigil, even, for that very moment where it's so clear: Where the star appears in the heavens, and the power of the universe shakes. That kind of hope? It can ripen in a split second, and when we see it, we'll know that the Promised One is near.

### **Rev. Courtney Richards**

Supervised Year in Ministry Adjunct Faculty, and

Connections Pastor, Harvard Avenue Christian Church, Tulsa OK

## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 5, 2019**

### **Hope in the Imagining**

*Psalm 72:1-7; 18-19*

*Give the king your justice, O God... May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. Psalm 72:1a, 4*

As I read this psalm, I think of how often I fall short of expectations I set for myself. Like the psalmist, I possess what some may call lofty ideals. I feel the challenge to avoid complacency within an unjust system while being reminded of a faith tradition bigger than myself and a force mightier than any institution.

This psalm is more than a prayer for one time and place. It challenges and inspires communities of faith to continue the vision described in their actions and imagining. As it names possibilities and responsibilities that accompany power, the psalm reflects an understanding of the Divine that cares for the needy and oppressed. It describes a type of power that values and empowers those in one's care.

Our ability to imagine enables us to be co-creators with the Divine—the Spirit of Life not bound to what those in power say must be, but the Spirit of Life that inspires unconditional compassion, improbable peace, and radical love.

Perhaps hope can be found in the expression of these ideals, not in whether their communities of origin experienced them or whether they reflect our current reality. Hope stirs in the very existence of these words and endures, despite the lineage of tyrants and injustices.

We come from an ancient line of brave souls who refused to accept an oppressive and damaging status quo. While one may take in a deep breath with the magnitude of the work that remains, the ability to breathe itself means we are not done yet and capable of more.

Hope persists in the prayers of those who came before and dwells within the gift of being co-creators with the Source that does wondrous things. May we keep such hope alive, Dear Ones. May we continue to imagine and create.

**Alexis Engelbrecht**

Master of Divinity Student, Student Senate Member, Persistent Imaginer



## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 6, 2019**

### **Hope from the Past; Hope for the Future**

*Isaiah 30:19-26; Acts 13:16-25*

Both of these Bible passages speak to people that are unsettled by their present situations, and both passages ask their hearers to look to God and God's action in another time. The Isaiah passage tries to make sense of the present by focusing on what God will do. The Acts passage is trying to make sense of the present by focusing on what God has done. Both actions invite us to live in the present with hope.

I'll be honest. I sometimes wish that hope was not a necessity. Hope is only needed in dark unsettling times. So, I think about how great it would be to not live in unsettled times. Sometimes I even wish that I didn't see the darkness around us. However, the absence of dark times is simply not a reality.

How great, then, is it that we have the gift of hope—the hope that times will not always be this dark. The Isaiah passage reminds us that God wants to comfort us, be with us in our time of need, and make our life better. In Acts, Paul recites the history of Israel and in this history, Paul shows how God has acted again and again and again on behalf of God's people.

We are God's people. So, as we struggle with our present, we should look toward our past. We have been here before. Even if we personally haven't survived this before, there are those that have. And most importantly, God has delivered God's people from this before. Because of God's work in the past, we can have hope today for a brighter tomorrow.

**Dr. Annie Lockhart-Gilroy**

Assistant Professor of Christian Education and Practical Theology

## **ADVENT WEEK ONE**

**December 7, 2019**

### **Who Are You?**

*John 1:19-28*

*Then they said to him [John], "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John 1:22*

Producers of the TV show *CSI* used as their theme song "Who Are You" (sung by The Who) to reveal each week the identity of those who had committed crimes and thus bring justice to the victims. The concern over identity is certainly a motif in the fourth Gospel, as well as in our current society. Who we are, who we are not, and who we sometimes pretend to be address issues of authenticity and truthfulness.

Unlike the synoptic gospels, John's baptizing activity does not produce his identity. Though he does baptize, the Fourth Evangelist is concerned with John's role as a witness, pointing people away from himself and his work to the coming of Jesus. When questioned about his identity, John proclaims, "I am not the Christ; I am the voice who prepares the way." John knows who he is and who he is not. He is not the light but testifies and points people to the light. Isn't that our role as well?

Our world contains much darkness, even at this celebratory time of year. Darkness overcomes many who experience brokenness, loss, hurt, and hopelessness. Many who live in darkness are searching for an authentic expression of Christ revealed in this time and place. For those whose faith provides a sense of hope, it is our calling to point to God's life-giving light breaking into the world. William P. Brown writes in *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World*, "the Word [was] made flesh for a world made of flesh... God's embodiment in Jesus Christ establishes once and for all a divine link with the body, and all bodies, of the world." In this time of anticipation as we wait to celebrate the event of Incarnation, we already know the identity of Jesus. Let's give witness and testify to that.

**Dr. Lisa D. Barnett**

Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity

## **ADVENT WEEK TWO**

**December 8, 2019**

### **Anticipation**

*Isaiah 11:1-10*

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse... Isaiah 11:1*

As I write this reflection, it is the first of August and, thus, the time of anticipation—of advent—for the fall semester and the coming of new students to campus for orientation. It is a focused and exciting time for faculty and staff preparing to welcome and engage students in the good work of teaching and learning, of centering and reaching out, of seeking hopeful grounds for justice in which the metaphors of lions and lambs resting together, of bears and cows grazing alongside one another (Is 11:6-7) take human flesh across diversities of race, gender identities, and faith commitments. And it is a focused time for students as well, new students especially, looking forward to the friends they hope to make but perhaps also wondering if they are prepared for the studies they'll encounter.

In the life of faith neither Advent nor Christmas are set by the calendar. We celebrate these seasons in the life of the church as a way of practicing openness, hospitality, and gift-giving so that we might come to live these practices in every season of our lives. And so, the coming of these students to us is a radical gift of God. Anticipation—advent—always includes aspects of agitation, anxiety, and uncertainty, as well as of joy and hope that break open our embedded theologies and conventional assumptions. The opening verse from our text in Isaiah underscores the vulnerability of Advent as well as its utterly unexpected character: "A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse."

Deep learning always involves the risk of holding ourselves open to both others and to insights we've not known—and that might endanger us. The peace of advent is not the stillness of the same, or the stillness of the dead stump. The peace of advent comes in the affirmation of new life, in the difficult gift of being reborn, opening ourselves to unforeseen and unimaginable encounters that will remake us and teach us again what it means to be incarnate and to touch the sacredness that we call God.

### **Dr. Joe Bessler**

Acting Academic Dean and

Robert Travis Peake Professor of Theology

## **ADVENT WEEK TWO**

**December 9, 2019**

### **Give me Peace**

*1 Thessalonians 4:9-12*

*...you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another... may behave properly toward outsiders... 1 Thessalonians 4:9b, 12a*

The dictionary definition of peace is “a state of quiet; especially: freedom from public disturbance or war. 2: freedom from upsetting thoughts or feelings.” In this social media-driven age, I pray for God’s peace to cover humanity from social media distractions and beefs. Now is the time to infuse the spirit of peace for all who show signs of addiction and exhaustion from social media. No longer should social media continue to disrupt the fundamental fabric and experience of family, friends, and community. I firmly stand on the notion, Give me Peace!

How and why does social media drive so much of what people commit to? When and where do people go to find a peaceful place? With the use of social media, many of our lives are on constant broadcast. A vacation or outing to the store, mall, or our favorite restaurant can turn into a trending topic for the world to view. One would hope this trending story would display us in a positive light; however, many times the trending stories are those of shame, hurt, embarrassment, and defeat. I firmly stand on the notion, Give me Peace!

Unfortunately, many people seek the approval of social media from the number of likes, shares, and comments. Social media presents an inadequate reflection of feeling a sense of love and belongingness. Social media is creating a world of superficial love and peace. A feeling of self-worth should come from meaningful relationships over the number of Facebook friends and Twitter followers. The scripture suggest that this group of people learned to love God and each other through meaningful relationships. Also, the sacred text expresses a foundational platform built on incorporating a life with peace and love. I firmly stand on the notion, Give me Peace!

Give me Peace! During this Advent season, please remember the importance of living with peace. When the trials of this world are laying heavy on your life, seek God’s peace. Seek God’s peace when your family is sick and hurting. Seek God’s peace when the world needs more of you, but you’re tired and weary. As it is stated in Philippians, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Give me Peace!

**Rev. Ulysses D. Allen**

Recruiter

## ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 10, 2019

### Being a Hope

*Romans 15:14-21 (Common English Bible)*

*My brothers and sisters, I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and are able to teach each other. Romans 15:14*

The Netflix documentary *Homecoming* showcases the work and solidarities behind Beyoncé's headlining performance at the 2018 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. Halfway through the film, the voice of Black philosopher, activist, political theorist, and Christian thinker Cornel West floats over the soundtrack.

Much as Beyoncé's film does, West lifts up the words and presence of ancestors in the fight for Black liberation, including Curtis Mayfield's encouragement to "Keep on pushin'," and Nina Simone's prophetic protest song "Mississippi G\*dd\*m." He describes these stances as *being* a hope: "courageously bearing witness regardless of what the circumstances is because you're choosing to be the kind of person of integrity to the best of your ability before the worms get your body." Hope is not a feeling, but a practice of life aligned to God's promise that love and justice are breaking out in the world.

Paul grounds his ministry in this kind of practice of hope. Taking no credit for any results that might come from his own evangelism efforts, Paul doesn't have hope, he is a hope. He reminds the community of Jesus followers at Rome that they have the power to be hope to one another and others in the whole world too.

Choosing to be a hope isn't an emotional orientation toward an unknowable future or an otherworldly reward. It also doesn't mean your actions or words will bring you concrete results, or comfort and rest in this time and place. Choosing to be a hope is a faithful response to God's promises, and to God's faith in us as God's creatures of integrity and love.

This doesn't mean we do this perfectly. It's not an accident that West has described hope as a practice.

May being a hope be your practice in this season of blessed anticipation.

**Dr. B. Yuki Schwartz**

Adjunct Faculty

## ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 11, 2019

### Treasures

*Matthew 12:33-37*

*The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. Matthew 12:35*

Matthew does not have an “original blessing” view of human nature. Elsewhere, his Jesus says, “*If you who are evil know how to give your children good things...*” (Matthew 7:11). In the present text, his dark assessment of the human heart is focused on Jesus’ brothers, the Pharisees. Some Pharisees had accused Jesus of being in cahoots with the devil in casting out the devil. Jesus faults their logic (“a house divided against itself will not stand”) but then repeatedly castigates them for their *words*. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...” What a concept: speech is an expression of our hearts.

Remember, Jesus also connects heart and treasure (Matthew 6:21). And, in chapter 12, he says something fascinating about treasures: an evil person curates an evil treasure.

I don’t know how many times I’ve read this passage without the phrase “evil treasure” slapping me like a branch on a forest path in the dark that you don’t see until it stings you.

We all know about evil treasures. A treasure is what one values, stores, protects. A treasure is curated by attention; and we become what we attend to. When we (we as individuals, we as a group, we as a church, we as a society) save up fear, resentment, disappointment, jealousy, self-righteous anger (as in self-justifying, without openness to other’s points of view), or the need to dominate, denigrate, demonize, or dismiss another person or group in order to protect one’s own privilege and place in the pecking order, then we are building an evil treasure. Nothing good can come out of such a treasure: no good deeds, no good words, no restorative justice, no compassion, no peace.

Advent would be a good time to examine what kind of treasures we are curating in our hearts.

**Dr. Gary Peluso-Verdend**

President Emeritus and

Visiting Research Professor of Religion in Public Life

## **ADVENT WEEK TWO**

**December 12, 2019**

### **Shalom—Peace with Justice**

*Psalm 146*

*Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! Psalm 146:1*

In this prayer, we are reminded of the Divine's actions that seek a world of "shalom." The Holy "executes justice for the oppressed; gives food to the hungry... sets the prisoners free; opens the eyes of the blind... lifts up those who are bowed down; loves the righteous... watches over the strangers; and upholds the orphan and the widow." This description teaches us that the best way to praise the Holy is by working with the Divine to create a world in which "shalom" becomes a reality.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is consistently portrayed as requiring justice (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:18; etc.). Showing concern for the oppressed, the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is a common theme among the commandments found in the Torah. Israel is taught to take care of the most vulnerable because that is what God did for them in the Exodus and because that is how they will image God to the world (Gen 1:26-27) and be a "blessing" to others (Gen 12:2-3).

The word "shalom" in Hebrew means much more than just peace; it has a greater sense of wholeness. Shalom seeks the well-being of all. Shalom embraces justice, reconciliation and nonviolence. Shalom is the experience of being in right relationship with God, which would mean that you see yourself, your neighbors, and all of creation as God does—inherently good and worthy of respect.

This psalm and other biblical texts teach us that, when there is brokenness anywhere within the human family, no one can know wholeness. As those made in the Holy's image, we are called to be agents of this divine shalom in the world, creating peace with justice for all.

### **Dr. Lisa W. Davison**

Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible and  
Formation Director for DOC Students

## ADVENT WEEK TWO

December 13, 2019

### Disclosure

2 Peter 3:11-18

*Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 2 Peter 3:11-13*

“Black hole sun / Won't you come / And wash away the rain / Black hole sun / Won't you come / Won't you come?” As anyone who wore flannel and Doc Martens in the 1990s can tell you, these song lyrics come from Soundgarden's 1994 hit, “Black Hole Sun.” The lyrics have no deep meaning. Lead singer Chris Cornell reported at the time that he heard something on the news about a black hole and started playing with the words in his head. But I'm more concerned with the music video. It begins in an idyllic suburbia, populated by residents with freakishly exaggerated grins. Over the course of the video, each grotesque rictus widens into... fear? Delight? Ecstasy? All of the above? ...as the sun turns into a black hole and swallows them up.

High art it is not, nor is it a Christmas carol. But it does capture something of apocalyptic longing that many of us feel in these days of protracted climate crisis, emboldened totalitarianism, and state-sanctioned torture. Looking around, how could one not think that it might be better for this whole rotten business to be set ablaze, dissolved, and replaced? We've made a mess of it, God. Burn it all down. Wash it away. Won't you come? Won't you come?

In such a world it might seem madness to talk of peace. Here, the author of 2 Peter seems to think that peace is to be found in righteous behavior, avoiding false teaching, and eschewing corruption. By doing these things, the text seems to suggest, we can rest easy knowing that we've got a spot in the Righteous Home for Godly Persons—coming soon!

If you've achieved that, great! However, the rest of us might do well to attend to another theme that appears throughout 2 Peter's epistle: disclosure. Because it turns out the melting and the fire isn't even the half of it. In God's time, what has been covered up will be unveiled. What has been silenced will be announced over the public address system. What has been lied about will be declared in its unmistakable, undistorted truth.

Think about how violence depends upon cover-ups; torture, upon misinformation; injustice, upon lies. This is where our peace comes from. Our peace comes from trusting that the lies will not last; one day, God will unveil what has been covered up. May that day come quickly.

**Dr. Sarah Morice Brubaker**

Associate Professor of Theology



## **ADVENT WEEK TWO**

**December 14, 2019**

### **Waging Peace**

*1 Samuel 2:1-8*

*There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you, there is no Rock like our God. 1 Samuel 2:2*

Today I learned that *Waging Peace* is the title of Eisenhower's memoir from his years in the White House. Perhaps, you already knew that. It's a phrase I generally associate with social justice advocates who recognize that achieving peaceful equilibrium first requires stirring things up. In both cases, the idea of waging peace captures the push and pull inherent in the coexistence of competing forces, values, needs, and desires.

Whenever I read Hannah's song or Mary's Magnificat, both of the same biblical genre, I remind myself that this is what it looks like to wage peace. "The world as it is" gets turned upside down in order to make space for "the world that could be," the world that God created us to be, the world that Jesus foreshadowed in his life and promises through his teachings.

This is the world we await in the Advent season. We await as disrupters, as wagers of peace in the name of Jesus Christ. Advent is not a comfortable or comforting season, as much as we might prefer it to be. Sometimes we are the people actively overturning systems of power that are designed to defend "the world as it is;" sometimes we are the people whose lives are being overturned because we are beneficiaries of and complicit in those same systems of power.

No, Advent is not a comfortable or comforting season. It is, however, a necessary season for wagers of peace who are committed to a vision of "the world that could be" and to the God who makes it possible.

In the words of Hannah, "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." Amen.

### **Rev. Susanna Weslie Southard**

Interim Director of the Supervised Year in Ministry Program,  
Chaplain, and Instructor for Ministry Studies

## **ADVENT WEEK THREE**

**December 15, 2019**

### **What a Hymn**

*Matthew 11:2-11; Luke 1:46b-55*

*"My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you my Savior."*

*Luke 1:46b-47 (The Inclusive Bible)*

I'm one of those church people who loves the hymns of Christmas but also wants to save them for the candlelight service on Christmas Eve and later (don't get me started about the order of appearance of the figurines in the creche or Christmas trees in the sanctuary).

The hymns of Advent, including the ancient hymn that today's scripture ascribes to Mary, are some of my favorites. A glance through my denomination's hymnal lists plenty of music to keep a congregation's pent-up desire for Christmas hymns at bay until Dec. 24. Phrases from these hymns are full of promise, hope, and desire, unlike the Christmas hymns which can send the message, "Jesus is born. It's over. Nothing to see here. Return to your homes."

With a focus on a baby in manger, joy coming to the world, and a lovely silent night, it's no wonder Christmas music of both the sacred and secular kinds is so popular and hard to avoid from the end of Halloween until Dec. 25. But Christmas music does little to inspire action and instill hope, unlike Advent hymns.

I love these Advent hymn phrases: "born thy people to deliver," "we long for your new world," "the lowly are his choice," "he comes to break oppression, to set the captive free," "all the world, bound and struggling, seeks true liberty," and, "O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thy justice here." Advent joy is derived from the expectation of justice breaking through in new and unanticipated ways.

Mary's exuberant hymn, to me, is an unexpected and joyful response to her future as an unplanned mother. Her Advent faith foresees a holy future where we are all invited to realize God's surprising breaking through in the least likely ways with the most unexpected people.

**Kurt Gwartney**

Senior Director of Communications

## **ADVENT WEEK THREE**

**December 16, 2019**

### **Shadows**

*Acts 5:12-16*

*...so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. Acts 5:15*

If you Google the word "shadow" you will find related quotes from such profound thinkers as Tolstoy, Rumi, and Shakespeare. In modernity, "shadows" have often been associated with that which is evil, ominous, sad, or threatening; whereas light has been affiliated with that which is pure, good, nurturing, and empowering. These metaphors and the language used to describe them have been used in very harmful and destructive ways because they have been transferred and applied to racial and ethnic peoples. If light (white) is pure, good, etc. then by comparison, shadows which are cast in the absence of light are akin to evil, darkness, and despair. The use of terms like black magic, blackballed, and the dark side, are insensitive and painful and perpetuate racism and oppression.

A dear friend recently reminded me about the restorative and nurturing qualities of blackness. She indignantly asked, "What about the darkness of the womb where life is conceived and takes shape? What about the rest and renewal that happens at night in the absence of light that repairs our wounds and restores our minds? How convenient it is to ignore the positive dimensions of blackness!"

Our world is buckling under the oppressive effects of racism and we are longing for a way forward. This biblical passage recasts the term "shadow" and thus offers some advent hope to a broken world. In verses 15 and 16 the "shadow" is the source of power. It is the shadow that has the capacity to heal. The author of Luke/Acts utilizes a similar idea translated as "overshadow" in Luke 1:35 in reference to the Spirit's visit to the unwed Mary and in Luke 9:34 in relationship to the Holy's presence during the transfiguration story. Clearly, for the author of the text, the shadow is the mysterious manifestation of the divine.

During this Advent season, may the lengthening of the night hours remind us that it is in the absence of light that life has its origins and it is during the hours of darkness and sleep that renewal transpires. And most of all, may the God of advent hope cast a shadow upon us and our world bringing about the healing we all so desperately need.

**MaryAnn Morris**

Dean of Students

## **ADVENT WEEK THREE**

**December 17, 2019**

### **Joy from Chacraseca**

*Ezekiel 47:1-12*

*On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. Ezekiel 47:12*

I am writing in the sweltering heat of Chacraseca, Nicaragua in early July, where dust covers every leaf and withered blade of grass. This is supposed to be a rainy season. Farmers are worried. The entire community is concerned about their potable water system with its aging pumps. This week electric bills doubled, and the government announced that two more price increases will come soon.

About 8,000 people depend on Chacraseca's communal system of electric pumps for their drinking water, so their water bills will increase as well. With no government provision for this rural water system, the whole community worked to construct it through support and collaboration with partners from the U.S. like JustHope, headquartered in Tulsa. JustHope is led by a dream that Chacraseca, which means "dry husk," will become *Chacraverde*, a verdant, sustainable community.

If there is such a thing as a universal, surely drinking water would be a good example. Ezekiel's expansive vision portrays diverse trees of life flanking a river of life, flowing from the heart of a sacred space. Simple images like trees, fruit, fish, and pure water may not capture our imaginations during this complicated, busy holiday season of shopping malls and cocktail parties.

May Advent move us deeper and deeper into the living waters' joy that the world can't give and the world can't take away. From this community of joyful people who will celebrate in Nicaragua, I wish you renewed thirst and hunger for enough healing, fresh fruit, and good water.

### **Dr. Kathleen D. McCallie**

Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and  
Assistant Professor of Ministerial Leadership and Ethics

## **ADVENT WEEK THREE**

**December 18, 2019**

### **Candle of Joy**

*Matthew 8:14-17*

*When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand... Matthew 8:14-15a*

The Gospel of Matthew does not linger at this scene of Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Nor are we given many details. We do not know what her name was or how long she had been bed-ridden. We do not know what they might have said or how well they knew each other. That does not mean however that we should read over this story quickly or spend little time with it in prayer.

What comes into my mind and memory when I pray this passage are those times when an afflicted loved one is lying in the sick bed and one of the servants of Jesus, a pastor, pays a visit. In the course of the conversation, the pastor places a hand on the arm of the loved one and quietly asks, "May I pray with you?"

In the stillness that follows, people arrange themselves around the bed, and the pastor gently takes their hand. The prayer places the afflicted one—and the community of care surrounding the afflicted—into the center of God's Light and Love. The prayer closes "in Jesus name."

It is a moment no less sacred than this encounter between Jesus and Simon Peter's mother-in-law. This is the only healing story in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus takes the initiative. No one has to bring a human need to his attention, he moves immediately to serve, to heal, and restore. How do we respond to this One who moves in the direction of our suffering without our even having to ask? We light the candle of "Joy!"

### **Dr. Richard F. Ward**

Fred B. Craddock Professor of Homiletics and Worship

## ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 19, 2019

### Embracing Freedom

*Galatians 3:23-29*

*But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Galatians 3:25-27*

What Paul faced in his life before Christ was a never-good-enough mentality, with stringent dogma and impossible rules, with confining hierarchies and divisions. What he dealt with was constant struggle and defeat—a life without grace, without unconditional *belonging* in the family of God.

And then he encountered the risen Christ, who had said, “It is finished.” The struggle is finished. Through Christ, Paul came to know a faith that is freeing rather than burdensome. Paul’s newfound freedom in Christ makes room for joy, room for everyone to flourish.

During this season of Advent, are your burdens heavy? Are you suffering under unrealistic expectations and joyless tasks? Each night as you unplug the tree lights and go to bed, do you wonder if you’ve been good enough or if you’ve done enough, if God could really love you or accept you?

These words of scripture might be just what you need to hear. If your spiritual life is heavy, then maybe it’s time to change clothes. Get out of that stifling suit in which you can barely move. Take off the weight that clings so closely, whatever that may be. “Clothing ourselves with Christ” means embracing *freedom*—a grace-filled freedom that leads us to follow the Spirit without constraint. We are no longer imprisoned, labeled, or divided. We are released into the joy of knowing that we are children of God, beloved and free.

### Rev. Georgia Senor

Associate Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Bentonville, Arkansas and  
Alumni Board Secretary (2004)

## ADVENT WEEK THREE

December 20, 2019

### Anywhere!

*2 Samuel 7:1-22*

*But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 2 Samuel 7:4-6*

Who remembers Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*? I certainly do. I have always loved the surprise attending the absurd suggestion that anyone would eat green eggs, and the word 'ham' just sounds silly. And what about the revelation of new, different food, so good it can be eaten anywhere with anyone: in boxes, trains, and boats with foxes, goats, or a mouse. What about the creature's delighted gratitude: Thank you, thank you, Sam-I-Am?

King David is at a peaceful moment in his life. He now has a house. No one is trying to destroy him or his people, and he is feeling terribly grateful. In his moment of appreciation, he hits on the idea that the heretofore nomadic God of Israel should have a house to dwell in. His prophetic adviser, Nathan, at first thinks this is a great idea. But that night Nathan receives word from God that God disagrees. God gets right down to several points, one of which is, "Have I ever asked any of the Israeli leaders to build me a house? I have my own plans." Here we see the flowering of the concept of God's "uncontainable presence." God was on to something.

There is real cause for joy here. It helps to know that this passage was written while Israel was in captivity in Babylon. It is important for the exiled people to know that God is a mobile God and is with them still. This piece of monotheism is ingenious. As much as we want to create permanent holy spaces, to concretize our faith, to materialize it to make it more convincing, we need to accept the omnipresence of the Divine.

As the creature in *Green Eggs and Ham* might respond, "Say, I can worship anywhere!" Good news, indeed.

**Sandy Shapoval**

Dean of the Library and Research Services

## **ADVENT WEEK THREE**

**December 21, 2019**

### **Give Joy**

*John 3:31-36 (New International Version)*

*For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. John 3:34*

As the scripture reminds us, "for God gives the Spirit without limit,"

May Joy abound in you through the Holy Spirit, manifest through Divine Love,

And without limit

May Joy abide in the world through your declarations.

During this third week of Advent, we focus on Joy in anticipation of the coming of the Holy Joy that is the everlasting life of the believer. Dr. Wayne Dyer suggests if we seek Joy, we will not find it, as we will be focused on the seeking itself.

When we give Joy to others is when we truly receive the Joy that is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is in service to others where we experience the Joy in the Holy as the Joy within us.

The Holy delights in our exuberant Joy

The kind of Joy that wells forth from our very soul

Joy that expulses from, yea, the very fiber of one's being

In lavish praise and thanksgiving

The Joy... On the lips... In the heart... And in the spirit

That shines like radiant daylight

Extolling the virtues of the Holy

Untethered... Unrestricted... Unbridled... Unfettered

And unabashedly rife with ebullient obviousness

Sheer zeal and exhortations that resonate universally

Think not about what Joy you can discover

But think instead about what Joy might you be blessed to bring to another

Unfettered... Untethered... Unabashedly exuberant and obvious.

May it be so.

### **Debi Reinhardt**

Master of Divinity Student and Student Senate Member



## ADVENT WEEK FOUR

December 22, 2019

### Guests

*Romans 1:1-7*

*...Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith... Romans 1:4b-5*

I remember being invited to other kids' birthday parties. We kids did not actually send the invitations, the moms did. The invitations were very flowery. A mom choice.

I remember my ninth birthday party. I had received a toy metal submarine. This submarine had a propeller at the end which would spin if you turned a little crank. For some reason, I chose to crank the propeller and place the submarine in my hair. My hair was immediately tangled in the propeller. Resisting any help to remove the submarine, I walked around my birthday party with a submarine attached to my head. Eventually, I allowed my mom to cut the submarine out of my hair. Only a mom could love such a child.

As I read the different translations and paraphrases of this passage, I am most interested in those involving an invitation. *The Message*: "You are who you are through this gift and call of Jesus Christ!"

And the *Cotton Patch* version: "Through him I got the favor of an appointment to approach, on his behalf, other races, including you all, about faithful obedience on all matters. So you too, are Jesus Christ's guests."

*Invite*, from the Latin *invitare*, means "to summon or to challenge." *Invitation* is defined as, "An action that causes or encourages something to happen or makes something more likely to happen."

Yes, we are *called out*, but we are also *called into* belonging. We are those people who are included, who are invited, who belong, despite our confused and crazy actions. We are guests. We have been summoned and challenged to accept this invitation to belong. A belonging that will open doors to something happening. You are invited.

Only God, through Christ Jesus, could love such children.

**Dr. Terry Ewing**

Vice President of Advancement

## **ADVENT WEEK FOUR**

**December 23, 2019**

### **Mary's Son(g) of Protest and Hope**

*Luke 1:46-55*

*(God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Luke 1:52-53*

How is God at work in the world, if at all? Mary's song of protest and hope aligns her freshly-minted pregnancy with deeply ingrained understandings of divine activity from the biblical traditions. She protests a world structured by imperial power and marked by hierarchy, patriarchy, wealth-disparity, and privilege. She names this world as contrary to divine purposes and in need of transformation. She yearns for God to scatter the proud, bring down the powerful, lift up the lowly, feed the hungry.

This protest is her hope that, as the Psalmist says, "God will arise" with merciful power to act faithfully again in ways consistent with claims about past divine activity. She recalls the divine promise to Abraham to bless all the peoples of the earth, not just the privileged and powerful. Her language evokes Moses' song that celebrates deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It echoes Hannah's vision of a similar world marked by transformative justice, revamped societal structures, and practices that ensure resources for all. The weak are strengthened; the poor become rich; the hungry are fed; the needy are supplied.

All of that seems very hopeful, yet two factors rain on the parade. Millennia after Hannah and Mary articulate such protesting and hopeful visions, their words resonate so much with our own protests and hopes. Their (ancient) worlds are very reminiscent of ours. What has/is God (been) doing in the world and where?

And what sort of hope does Mary's son(g) offer? What happens to the scattered proud, the brought-down powerful, the dismissed rich? Is this vision of the transformation of societal structures and practices punitive or benign, death-bringing or life-giving, vindictive or merciful, revengeful or redemptive? Does it simply imitate and reinscribe imperial structures but with a divine emperor, or does it truly offer a new world with good life for all?

**Dr. Warren Carter**

LaDonna Kramer Meinders Professor of New Testament

## **ADVENT WEEK FOUR**

**December 24, 2019**

### **A Loving Heir: Advent as Revolution**

*Hebrews 1:1-4*

*In these last days, G\*d spoke to us by a son, who was appointed heir of all things and through whom [G\*d] created the ages... Hebrews 1:2*

In 1831, French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville traveled America and saw promise in its inheritance laws. Deviating from pro-aristocratic customs where eldest sons inherited everything, Tocqueville believed this distribution of power and property likened every father's death to a mini-revolution. Tocqueville believed an ethos of equality permeated America's nascent democratic experiment, promising, over time, to deliver America from the malaise of chattel slavery, Native American removal, restrictive patriarchy, and enshrined racism. Despite injustice, he envisioned an alternative future.

Today's passage addresses a similar hope from another time of social and political volatility. Imagine Jewish followers of Christ, long-dispersed by war, exile and empire, listening to Hebrews amidst a corrupt and increasingly xenophobic Rome that compelled "patriotism" and silence by violence and social exclusion. For this auditor, Hebrews' portrait of a loving first-born heir subverts imperial cultures of domination.

Instead of exploiting privilege, this heir relished relationship, embraced diminished status, and self-sacrificed in order to distribute power and privilege. Less a supersessionist rant, for this auditor Hebrews is an affirmation and memorial to G\*d's fidelity and love: solace for a tenuous time. Hebrews 1:1-4 exhorts the people of G\*d to envision Christ's radical love as an advent of divine revolution.

In these last days [of Advent], may we hearken to Christ's powerful, life-sustaining utterances, which personify love and transform practices. As we, too, witness injustice in our "democratic" institutions, may we let G\*d's distributed love [power] combat the encroaching paralysis and corruption of hopelessness and frustration. May Christ's impending advent and revolution fortify our connectedness with those ancestors with whom G\*d spoke and that great cloud of witnesses who foreshadows our hope. May it fortify our connectedness with that heir, our sibling, who speaks with life-giving, transformative love.

**Dr. Arthur F. Carter, Jr., Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor of New Testament



# PHILLIPS SEMINARY

> *where faith leads*

*The 2019 Advent devotional cover was created by Elizabeth K Gwartney. The image of the shepherd is one of her favorite Advent symbols. Elizabeth is a sophomore honor student at Oklahoma City University majoring in biomedical sciences with a minor in child advocacy studies and training.*

*"I hoped to capture the mystery of what happened to the shepherds in the field," she said. "My art challenges a different part of my brain than most of my course work and helps center my spirit."*

*Scriptural citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.*