

IN DAYS TO COME



- Words for Advent -

 **saint benedict's table**

a worshipping community, rooted in an ancient future

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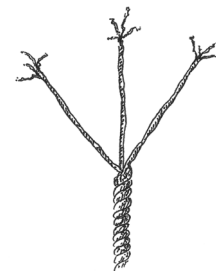
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Introduction

It is often assumed that Advent is little more than a prologue to Christmas. But preparation for the Church's celebrations of Christ's nativity is really only the season's secondary purpose. Advent is a season that calls Christians to a posture of readiness for Christ's return, for the world's final Advent, when all of time and history will be drawn to its culmination. The words and phrases that appear in the opening weeks of the season—"be awake," "be alert," "watch," "prepare"—are anything but reminders to get our shopping done and the Christmas baking underway. They call us into a place of fundamental openness to what God is ever and always about to do in us and in our world.

In the Western Christian tradition there has been some version of Advent in place for almost as long as there has been a mid-winter celebration of the birth of Christ. In some times and contexts it has been observed with an almost Lenten sense of penitence, though what the season was most often meant to do was to set the celebrations of the nativity in a larger context, saying, in effect, "For all of its glory, Christmas is but the first chapter in a much longer story, and one that remains as-of-yet unfinished." In taking hold of Advent in this spirit, we not only facilitate a posture of openness to God's ongoing and re-creative work and purpose for the world,

but we also begin to free Christmas from some of the heavy baggage with which it has been laden in our current cultural context.

Following the three-year cycle of Sunday readings set out in the Revised Common Lectionary, Advent always begins with a reading from one of Jesus' apocalyptic teachings, set late in his ministry. Over the next three Sundays, the congregation moves through readings dealing with John the Baptist and his role in heralding the arrival of an adult Jesus, on toward the story of the Annunciation. In this way, the community more or less backs its way toward Christmas in a way that is meant to slow down the pace at which that great feast is approached. While all around us the culture is declaring that these December days are the "holiday season" to be filled with parties, shopping, and indulgence, in the pulse of the liturgical calendar we are challenged to keep a different rhythm. The feast will come soon enough—and we'll keep it for a full twelve days, thank you very much—but in the meantime we have other stories to attend to.

This little book is a collaborative work, and, as the contributors began to imagine how we might best do this work, we found ourselves drawn toward the interweaving of three sets of four "threads," all of which have been associated with the Advent season. The first are themes often connected with the four candles of the Advent wreath: peace, hope, love, and joy. Contrary to what many assume, the Advent wreath is a relatively recent innovation, having developed in Germany in the nineteenth century and spread from there as other German seasonal practices (including the Christmas tree) gained popularity across Europe and then into North America. These four are good and positive words, yet, like the wreath itself, they tend to direct us more toward Christmas than to the challenge of readiness for the final Advent.

An older practice was to call people to a consideration of what are called "the four last things:" death, judgment, hell, and heaven. Clearly that's much heavier terrain, but we felt it important to not simply gloss over the insights of this older tradition. Instead, we want to bring these words into a kind of dialogue with the more contemporary ones. And then, because the writings of the prophet Isaiah have such strong resonance in both Advent and Christmas, we decided to draw four of the oracles of Isaiah—2:1-5, 11:1-10, 35:1-10, and 7:10-16—into the conversation.

In addition to these three "threads," we're delighted to share a series of seven sonnets by someone we consider a friend to saint benedict's table: the priest and poet Malcolm Guite. These sonnets are based on the "Great O Antiphons," which are themselves based on a series of Old Testament images for messiah. In the monastic tradition, an antiphon or verse is sung at the beginning and end of the *Magnificat* at evening prayer, and during the final seven days leading up to Christmas Eve it is these seven "O Antiphons" that are used. The great Advent carol "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is actually a metrical setting of these verses, so the imagery should be familiar to most readers. Rather than presenting them as a series of seven over the final days of Advent, we've chosen to spread out Malcolm's poems over the whole of the season.

Each of the contributors to this book brought a unique set of gifts to the table. Steve Bell works professionally as singer and songwriter, and is also a thoughtful blogger. Similarly, Jaylene Johnson's primary vocation is that of a singer, songwriter, and musician, but she also has a background in education and serves as the ministry coordinator for saint benedict's table. Rachel Twigg Boyce pastors an intentional community called House Blend Ministries, for which she blogs insightfully. My primary theological work is that of a preacher, though I also love the craft of writing. The editors of this book are Adam Kroeker and Kyla Neufeld, both poets and writers with a keen editorial eye and a passion for words. To this circle of saint benedict's table folks, we are delighted to add Malcolm Guite as a long-distance contributor.

We hope that in using this small book you will find yourself engaging the season of Advent anew.

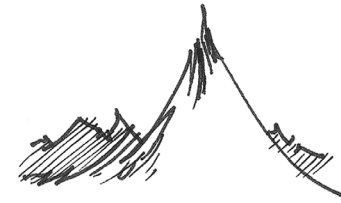
Jamie Howison
saint benedict's table

A WORD FROM MALCOLM GUTE

Advent is traditionally a holy season of preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas, just as Lent is a season of preparation for the true meaning of Good Friday and Easter. Advent is a season in which we connect again with our “inconsolable longing” as C.S. Lewis called it, our yearning for the One who is to come and is also—mysteriously—the One who has come already: as child, as fellow-sufferer, as Saviour. His coming, already achieved, we hold at bay from ourselves so that we have to learn afresh each year, even each day, how to let him come to us again.

In the first centuries the Church had a beautiful custom of praying seven great prayers calling afresh on Christ to come, calling Him by the mysterious titles he has in Isaiah, calling to him: O Wisdom! O Root! O Key! O Light! O King of Nations! O Adonai! O Emmanuel! Come to us!

I have responded to these seven “Great O Antiphons,” as they are called, with seven sonnets, re-voicing them for our own age now, but preserving the heart of each, which is a prayer for Christ’s Advent: for his coming, now in us, and at the end of time, in and for all. These Sonnets form the opening sequence of my larger cycle of sonnets for the church year.



- Judgement -

IN DAYS TO COME THE MOUNTAIN OF THE
LORD’S HOUSE SHALL BE ESTABLISHED AS THE
HIGHEST OF THE MOUNTAINS, AND SHALL BE
RAISED ABOVE THE HILLS; ALL THE NATIONS
SHALL STREAM TO IT.

ISAIAH 2:2

- Peace -

November 27

PEACE: OUR RESTLESS HEARTS

Rachel Twigg Boyce

Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.

St. Augustine

Advent is one of the core practices I use in an attempt to maintain a restful attitude in December. I see a lot of anxiety in the practice of skipping Advent and starting to celebrate Christmas in November. Advent helps me to step out of the consumerist rush and cloud of anxious energy that fills not only our malls, but many of our homes and churches at this time of year.

People in these places are often looking for love in all the wrong places—in the perfect gift that will win them love, in the perfect holiday party that will bring their family back together, or in the outfit that will magically hide the last 10 pounds they haven't managed to lose yet.

Advent tells us to wait, to hold off; the time has not yet come. It is the opposite of rush and anxiety because we wait, safe in the knowledge that the story will turn out the way we want it to. Jesus will come.

In the above quotation, Augustine reminds us that we have been created by God and for God. There is something in all of us that longs to be in communion with our Creator. We may not consciously recognize it and we may try to fill that void using our own means, but nothing aside from God can ever provide true satisfaction. May we all begin to see that these things are poor substitutes for the love and acceptance we find when we rest in God. And may that inspire us to help others to see it, too.

“Lord Jesus, help us to become more and more aware this Advent of how much you love us and how much you gave to show us that love. When life does not go exactly the way we would want it to, help us to remember that your love can be found in all circumstances. Help us to accept the surprises that always come with our Advent preparations and Christmas celebrations. Amen” (from, *The Lord is Near: Advent Meditations from the works of Henri J. M. Nouwen*).

November 28

O SAPIENTIA

Malcolm Guite

*O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other mightily,
and sweetly ordering all things:
Come and teach us the way of prudence.*

I cannot think unless I have been thought
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken;
I cannot teach except as I am taught
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me:
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

November 29

WHO IS MY TEACHER?

Jaylene Johnson

While much of this Advent book is an invitation to contemplation, I have written four practical reflections that have been inspired by the oracles of Isaiah featured during this season (Isaiah 2:1-5; 11:1-10; 35:1-10; 7:10-16). They are not meant to add weight one might not wish to carry during an already busy time of year. Rather, they are meant as an offer of “release,” not unlike the release of a writer who pieces together a puzzle of words after much musing. Whichever way you choose to use this tool during Advent, actions born out of our reflections can be a marvellous way to learn and grow.

Isaiah 2:1-5

It is alarming to hear followers of Jesus discount or brush aside the Word of God. There is an eagerness to study philosophy, theology, psychology, but...the Bible? How antiquated! How boring! Equally troubling is the readiness to theorize about the power of the Holy Spirit, without an eagerness to welcome this Power's work in us. Perhaps this is because we have yet to truly experience the transforming power of the Bible, and the peace and life-changing power that the Spirit brings when we are mindful in spending time with God.

Isaiah's invitation is clear: Come to God to be taught. While God uses many things to inform and shape us, let us not marginalize the teaching already given through the words and life of Jesus, and the rich history and inspiration of the Bible. And, above all, let us open our hearts to be led by the Holy Spirit in all things.

Who is my teacher? Many agree that we are influenced by whatever, or whoever, takes our time. What does my calendar or day-book reveal about where I spend my time? Does the Bible and designated time for personal prayer feature in my routine? Why or why not?

As the Holy Spirit leads, set time aside to seek God's instruction. Commit it to the schedule, and keep the appointment. Perhaps a good study Bible, study group or one-on-one mentor would also be a way to grow in this area. Another idea might be to keep a prayer journal; ask God to reveal Truth as scripture is read and prayers are said, and keep a journal of whatever comes back.

Prayer: Lord, I want to walk in Your light. Teach me, O God. Where there is pride and arrogance in my own ideas, humble me. Give me a teachable heart. Lead me in Your ways, which are the ways of peace and justice. Teach me to hear Your voice as I pray, and fill me with your Holy Spirit, that your Word will come alive in me with revelation and understanding. Amen.

November 30

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME IMAGES IN THE ORACLES OF ISAIAH

Steve Bell

Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-10, 35:1-10, 7:10-16

I recently stumbled upon an essay reflecting on the four Advent Oracles of Isaiah, and I was immediately intrigued by the use of the word oracle. The word sounds strangely pagan, and evokes subterranean and mysterious images.

But quick research found that the word was not as mysterious as I thought. An oracle, it turns out, is a prophetic utterance. Nevertheless, the word still carries tones of dread and danger, presumably arising from an unearthed knowledge from the forbidden depths. Oracles are—at least as Hollywood portrays them—too hot to handle and are therefore sequestered and reserved for a chosen few.

But I found the Oracles of Isaiah to be familiar and safe enough. One of them speaks of a coming age when nations, in search of wisdom, will stream to the Mountain of the Lord. Another is confident of a day when warriors will beat their weapons into gardening tools. Yet another predicts the radical safety and relational ease symbolized by a wolf lying peacefully with a lamb. And finally, we are told of a virgin giving birth to a child who will lead us.

Advent is the time to consider the deeper currents underneath these Oracles and consider how they might intrude on our current assumptions of what the Incarnation of Christ may mean.

Nations Will Stream to the Mountain of the Lord

Take a closer look at the first oracle. There's a trip-switch hidden in the relationship between the words stream and mountain. The oracle claims that nations, in search of wisdom, will stream to the mountain. I presume the oracle initially assumed the mountain to be a metaphor for the city of Jerusalem with all her grand, nationalistic

aspirations. Later, Christians would come to understand Jerusalem to be a metaphor for the height of Christian truth and God's sovereign rule.

I've been to Jerusalem, and it is, topographically, a high point in the land. The point here is that things don't generally stream to the high points: they stream away.

This oracle speaks of a radical reversal of nature, not only nature out there, but our own inner logic as well. By way of example, simply consider humanity's reasonable fears and need for security. Then, consider the counter-intuitive gospel account of the long-awaited Messianic king who entered history as a vulnerable child under morally dubious circumstances, who was found fleeing for his life as a political refugee shortly after his birth, who after 33 years was only able to muster a handful of followers that abandoned him when things got rough, and who eventually suffered a brutal and humiliating death at the order of an illegitimate tyrant.

This is a hard sell.

December 1

THE LAST FOUR THINGS: JUDGEMENT

Jamie Howison

We're sometimes inclined to make a distinction between the God encountered in the Old Testament and the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we're faithful to the proclamation of the New Testament, no such distinction can be made. There is only one God. Besides, there is a good deal of grace in the Hebrew Scriptures, and a fair bit of judgement in the Christian testament. Jesus had some strong words on the subject: words that should make us squirm in our pews.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left" (Matt. 25:31-33). That's the set-up for one of Jesus' most startling parables, often called "The Matthaean Judgement." If Jesus had only stopped midway through the parable, this one would be the preacher's dream. That would give us a picture of the king looking with compassion and approval at the sheep at his right hand, saying to them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). "Now go," the preacher could say, "and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, and you'll meet Jesus."

But Jesus didn't stop his parable at that point. He continued on to the goats, who had failed to attend to the hungry, the stranger, the imprisoned, and who will now "go away into eternal punishment." And as the goats head off down that particularly undesirable road, surely they'll be thinking, "Oh man, if we'd only known." Which is the point of the whole parable. As in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, judgement rides on these very basic human matters of compassion-in-action.

So, short of being disingenuous and reading only the first half of the parable, the preacher is not going to get off easily here. And as a preacher I really have to acknowledge the “goatiness” of my own day-to-day life. Reading this particular parable, I’m not sure I’d fare all that well on the day when “the Son of Man comes in his glory.”

Yet as a colleague of mine recently observed, “Christians dare to say that there is only one lamb, and the goats got him. Yet in dying exhalations that one Lamb forgave all the goats.” That could, of course, be misconstrued as a dodge to get us all off the hook from acting compassionately (“Look, Lazarus, here comes that damned rich man”). But from a Gospel point of view, I just don’t think that explanation washes. It matters to Jesus how we live these lives of ours, yet at the same time the making of sheep is his business. The only posture we can take in the face of this parable is one of a humility that enables us to tell the truth about our own halting selves.

Each year on Good Friday, we offer a prayer that situates us in this manner. As it turns out, this prayer can also lead us through the season of Advent:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgement and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dying; to your Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Amen, indeed.

December 2

They Will Beat Their Weapons into Plowshares

Steve Bell

Isaiah 2:1-5

Consider the second oracle, the unlikely prediction of weapons turned into pruning shears. The world’s largest economy is based on the assumption of war and the opportunities for wealth-creation it offers. It is pretty hard to imagine that the radical shift in world-view necessary for the abandonment of arms will get much traction—even among Christians who, supposedly, have been gifted with a vision of the last chapter of history so that we can bear witness to it in the present.

We, especially in North America, are heavily invested in a theology that equates faithfulness with the right to security and safety, even though it is difficult to imagine such theology can be gleaned from the witness of Christ as portrayed in the gospels.

It is common to assume that the oracle will come to pass once threats are gone. Until then, to unhook from systems for wealth and security based on weaponry would require an uncommon capacity for vulnerability. But, considering the oracle, coupled with the witness of Christ who bade us to follow after him, could such vulnerability be the very catalyst for the oracle’s consummation?

December 3

O ADONAI

Malcolm Guite

*O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush
and gave him the law on Sinai:
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.*

Unsayable, you chose to speak one tongue;
Unseeable, you gave yourself away;
The Adonai, the Tetragramaton*,
Grew by a wayside in the light of day.
O you who dared to be a tribal God,
To own a language, people and a place,
Who chose to be exploited and betrayed,
If so you might be met with face to face:
Come to us here, who would not find you there,
Who chose to know the skin and not the pith,
Who heard no more than thunder in the air,
Who marked the mere events and not the myth;
Touch the bare branches of our unbelief
And blaze again like fire in every leaf.



- Death -

A SHOOT SHALL COME OUT FROM THE STOCK OF
JESSE, AND A BRANCH SHALL GROW OUT OF ITS
ROOTS.

ISAIAH 11:1

- Hope -

* a Greek word meaning "four letters," referring to the four Hebrew letters in the name for God: YHWH

December 4

THE JESSE TREE

Jamie Howison

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

Isaiah 11:1

Anyone who has spent time around saint benedict's table will know that Gord Johnson's song, "The Jesse Tree," is something of a worship standard for us. It is one of those great, almost disarmingly simple songs of his, which easily moves the whole community into a kind of singing that all but raises the roof off of our old church building. "Sing lustily and with good courage," John Wesley instructed his followers, and it is fair to say that we do that with "The Jesse Tree." Yet Wesley also felt it was necessary to challenge his followers to "attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually." And so, here are a few words that might help us to get at "the sense" of where Gord is taking us on this song.

While we occasionally sing "The Jesse Tree" at other times of the year, this song really has its place in the season of Advent. Picking up on the prophet Isaiah's image of a shoot springing up from the root of the household of Jesse, the song folds into a repeated chorus built on the four contemporary themes for Advent.

Out of the root of the Jesse tree
I'm going to set my people free
Into their desert, and into their night
I'm going to send my sweet pure light

And there'll be peace, joy, hope and love
Peace, joy, hope and love...
(Gord Johnson)

When Isaiah first offered his image of a new shoot coming forth from the stump of Jesse, his audience had little reason to be hopeful. The united Israel of David's time had long been split in two; the Northern

Kingdom was annexed to the Assyrian empire, while the Southern Kingdom managed to maintain a very unstable existence as a vassal state. With the glory days of David an increasingly faint memory, it was hard to see much of a future. Besides, when these prophets—Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah—opened their mouths, it tended to be to pronounce judgement. They railed on about social injustice, poverty, and inequity, and claimed these were proof that the nation was no longer faithful to God.

If the prophets are right, how do we begin to undo all of these social problems when those in power are the least likely to want change? They'll never release whatever comforts they still have in hand.

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse," sings the prophet, "A branch shall grow out of his roots." Out of what looks like the dead stump of a felled tree, new growth will come. In all likelihood, Isaiah first imagined a new heir to the royal line of David: a king who could lead a campaign in which Israel could be re-imagined and reclaimed as God's people; a figure filled with wisdom and knowledge, and one who with righteousness and equity would offer new judgments on behalf of the meek and the poor (Isa. 11:4). In many ways, the figure Isaiah envisioned is as unlikely a candidate for kingship as was David himself when the prophet Samuel first went to the home of Jesse and found himself anointing a shepherd boy as King Saul's successor. God has a funny way of choosing unlikely people and of doling out unlikely job descriptions.

In time, Isaiah's words were seen as pointing not to a narrowly political leader, but to the Messiah, whose political force we would do well not to lose sight of (Luke 1:46-55). From an apparently dead tree stump will come something radically and remarkably new for Israel—for the whole of the world, in fact, if we read these verses from Isaiah in light of chapters 40 through 66 of the same book.

The image of the Jesse tree points to Jesus, and it points to the hopeful and expectant space in which we must live our lives. Peace, joy, hope, and love may well be good words for Christmastide, but unless you've been living with your eyes closed you know we've got a ways to go before these are current realities for the whole of humanity. Yes, that birth in Bethlehem changed everything, but so much still seems unchanged.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. Some days I think it can't come soon enough. But I'll keep on singing.

December 5

HOPE: DON'T RUSH THE WAITING

Rachel Twigg Boyce

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You must also be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near.

James 5:7-8

I am not a patient person. I like to think big picture thoughts and once I see what needs to be done on a project, I like to get started as quickly as possible. I don't like having to wait.

And yet Advent is a season that is all about preparation and waiting. Don't put up the Christmas tree just yet! Don't put all the figures into the Nativity set or unwrap your gifts. Don't rush the waiting!

God is constantly trying to teach me the importance of enjoying the particular season I find myself in. God wants to teach me to be patient, but I am not a very willing student.

For me, gardening is a spiritual practice that helps me to learn the importance of enjoying the present moment while waiting patiently for what is to come. As James says, it is necessary to be patient if you want things to grow. You can't plant seeds and eat their fruit in the same day. In the same way, we need to wait patiently for God's return.

Over a year ago I began to plan for the 3rd floor expansion of our community house: an expansion that will almost double our occupancy and allow our little community to continue to strengthen and grow. It took several months of planning and then almost six months of painfully slow back-and-forth with the government to get the permit that would allow us to start this work. And then there was the issue of money—as a novice fundraiser, the task of raising an additional \$65,000 over-and-above our existing operating budget

seemed like an impossible task!

There have been many times in the past year where I have failed to wait patiently. In fact, there have been many times when I was pretty sure that the only way this work was ever going to happen was if God intervened with a miracle.

But then I watched as the trucks rolled up and the work began. And this taste of Christmas—this taste of Christ’s breaking into the world—that I experienced is all the sweeter because I had to wait so long for it to happen.

In this season when so many people are rushing this way and that, may we slow down and learn to be patient. Christmas is coming! But it’s not here yet .

December 6

O RADIX

Malcolm Guite

*O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make
their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.*

All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,
Rose from a root invisible to all.
We knew the virtues once of every weed,
But, severed from the roots of ritual,
We surf the surface of a wide-screen world
And find no virtue in the virtual.
We shrivel on the edges of a wood
Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root,
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshipped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

December 7

THE LAST FOUR THINGS: DEATH

Jamie Howison

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

1 Corinthians 15:55

Terminally ill people often stave off death until after Christmas Day, and I've wondered if that has mostly to do with a desire to spare the family from having to associate Christmas with grief and loss. We have such high expectations around how Christmas *should* be, and that just doesn't include funeral homes and pastoral calls from the clergy. If you can manage, it is just better to wait until January to die.

Yet in the older tradition of seeing Advent as a time to contemplate the "four last things," death was squarely on the plate during the weeks leading up to December 25. Not just any death, either: our own.

The same culture that has created such high expectations around Christmas has also cultivated an aversion to contemplating death. Most of us probably assume that it is depressing to think too much about dying, just as most of us take for granted that it is right for people to fight like hell against death.

In the Christian tradition, death is not downplayed, romanticized, or trivialized. In 1 Cor. 15:26 Paul goes so far as to call death the "last enemy." Death marks a massive separation: between people who love and care for one another; between the known and the unknown; between body and spirit. Whatever else death might be, it means that the union of body and spirit is severed, and that the physical body that is so recognizably *me* stops functioning and begins to decay. It is appallingly jarring to confront that truth. And so we fight, resist, and even deny death.

In his instructions, St. Benedict tells his monks to "keep death before

you daily," which could seem a morbid bit of counsel. It might be tempting to imagine that he was pressing his monks to remain in a constant state of penitence, such that unexpected death would not catch them in a state of sin. I think, though, that this interpretation of his words is too thin; Benedict's view of life—and death—was on the whole quite generous. It is better to read his counsel as being something more like, "Don't kid yourselves; we are mortal and fragile: live accordingly."

While part of what it means to "live accordingly" is to be mindful of our vulnerability and mortality, I think it also has to do with learning to savour each day as a gift and an opportunity to live. To keep the reality of death before us daily might actually be what allows us to embrace life. And embracing life in this way might actually allow us to embrace life's end with a deep and confident thankfulness.

Facing his own death from typhoid at the age of forty-five, the poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins' final words could only have been spoken by one who had learned to "live accordingly." "I am so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life."

Good, strong, and unsettlingly peaceful words for this season of expectation and preparation.

December 8

IRRATIONAL ACTION

Jaylene Johnson

Isaiah 11:1-10

This oracle of Isaiah foretells the coming of the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. There is an emphasis on the irrational: what cannot be seen with our eyes, but only understood by the Spirit. This is followed by the irrational, upside-down images of a new Kingdom where natural enemies dwell at peace with one another.

Every Christ-follower ought to strive for peace and justice. Praise God we are given a Helper in this. But do we lean on this Helper—the Spirit of God—or do we simply rely on our own flawed ideas of what is right? True righteousness is God’s and God’s alone to bring forth in us and around us, and it may often seem irrational by worldly standards.

We all have “lions and lambs” in our lives—conflicts that can only be reconciled with God’s peace and guidance. It may mean giving in areas where we feel we lack (an act of faith in our Provider God). It may mean reaching out to someone with whom we do not seem to naturally connect, simply because the Spirit prompts us. It may mean putting ourselves in situations that others question, because we are convicted it is God’s leading for our lives. It certainly means extending forgiveness where there is cause to hold a grudge, and extending grace—the unmerited favour of God—in situations where it is not deserved. Being children of God, where is He calling us to “irrational action.” What is He saying? Does anything hinder us from acting?

Prayer: Lord, help me to seek Your face and to hear Your voice. Give me wisdom in matters of peace and justice, and the courage to take irrational action as You direct me. Quicken my understanding, inspire me to action and fill me with the Holy Spirit, who brings knowledge and revelation. What would you have me do, Lord? Reveal your call

on my life today, and show me anything that is in the way of loving You through my obedience to Your Word. Amen.

**As a suggested exercise, write down your answers and any ideas that come to you. Make a date to “act” and commit it to your calendar. Ask God to lead you in the power of the Holy Spirit as you take a “leap of faith” and do what is asked of you. Tell someone about it; they can pray for you and help you to be accountable.*

December 9

THE EXCHANGE

Steve Bell

Last fall I picked up and started reading a book of daily reflections called *Divine Intimacy - Meditations on the Interior Life For Every Day of the Liturgical Year*. The book was a gift from a friend and the reflections began with the Advent season. I don't usually find these sorts of books to be all that helpful, but recently I've felt increasingly alienated (emotionally and spiritually) from the Advent and Christmas seasons. And so, I began to read with the hope of finding something that would help repair the gulf in a meaningful way. I was quite surprised by the first week of readings. They didn't focus on the coming Christ at all: no swaddling, no cooing, no announcing, singing, reveling; no prescription for ritual candle lighting or wreath making. The author, Fr. Gabrielle of St. Mary Magdalene, is steeped in an older, almost forgotten tradition that understands Advent almost like it does Lent: as a sombre season of preparation that begins with a fearless inventory and renunciation of *inordinate attachments* for the sake of a greater love. I was surprised by the language of abnegation and renunciation, warnings against disordered affections, vain agitations, prattling fancies, useless preoccupations, and the like. There was nothing warming or comforting about these readings. But the church understands that our proper ardor for Christ is easily diffused and sullied by the many lesser loves we allow to take hold of us. Not all of them are bad, just lesser.

It is generally understood that most great gains require the renunciation of lesser ones. This is particularly evident in sports, where elite athletes will forswear certain pleasures and privileges—like giving up certain foods and drinks—in order to achieve an athletic goal. We also know this from marriage. My youngest son recently got married. Among other things, marriage recognizes that there is a level of love and intimacy that is only possible by renouncing all others. My wife and I proudly witnessed our son “forsake all others” so that he could gain his beloved. Sadly, this meant a certain forsaking of us, his parents. He no longer lives in

our home and animates our lives with his affection, escapades, and humor. Something has been lost so that a greater good may be found.

It is similar with the acquisition of Christ. It begins with renunciation of all other attachments. It recognizes that lesser attachments fragment us, that we need to forswear and recollect before Christ's coming, the gift of himself, will have much meaning. If Christmas is really an exchange—which I believe it is—we must come to understand that we can't give away what we don't possess.

Years ago, I wrote in a song:

Fashion for me a desert of peace
A land that is empty of endless disease
With no-one to suffer, hate or appease
With nothing to covet, desire or compete
But You alone.

C.S. Lewis once famously quipped, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Perhaps the recovery of a meaningful Christmas may require stepping away from the crowd of distractions to do a fearless inventory of disordered affections, followed by a sincere renunciation of those affections for the sake of a much higher love: that of Christ. Coupled with earnest prayer that God will indeed recollect our fragmented souls so that we may, having full possession, give it away, Christmas may yet offer an exchange of love beyond what we have imagined.

December 10

O CLAVIS

Malcolm Guite

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

Even in the darkness where I sit
And huddle in the midst of misery
I can remember freedom, but forget
That every lock must answer to a key,
That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,
Particular, exact and intimate,
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.
I cry out for the key I threw away
That turned and over turned with certain touch
And with the lovely lifting of a latch
Opened my darkness to the light of day.
O come again, come quickly, set me free,
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key.



- Hell -

THE WILDERNESS AND THE DRY LAND SHALL
BE GLAD, THE DESERT SHALL REJOICE AND
BLOSSOM LIKE THE CROCUS; IT SHALL BLOSSOM
ABUNDANTLY AND REJOICE WITH JOY AND
SINGING.

ISAIAH 35:1-2A

- Love -

December 11

AMAZING LOVE

Jaylene Johnson

Mary's song, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), marks a watershed moment when our world was changed. We now live in the age of grace—the Messiah was conceived and born, he dwelt among us and showed us the Father, was crucified for our sins, and was resurrected for our eternal life. We, who know God today, have never known a world without Jesus—but Mary did. Somehow, despite hundreds of years without a prophetic word for the children of Israel, the teenage girl understood what was happening. She would not have been educated nor wealthy. She was entirely nondescript, but God chose to set her apart. She believed the word she received from the angel Gabriel, and she sang the incredible words that we still ponder during Advent—words that imply a deep understanding of what was at work. Surely the Spirit of God was with her!

Mary's piece in the Advent story affirms so much of scripture: the weak will be made strong; we should not lean on our own understanding; with God all things are possible; God uses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God does not need us to be great, the "best," the strongest, the most popular, or the smartest. In fact, His glory is revealed when the unlikeliest of us listen to Him and believe what He says, trusting Him through any circumstances, obstacles, negative experiences, or personal shortcomings. *His* power, working in us, can do infinitely more than *we* could ask or imagine.

That power is at the heart of the *Magnificat*, and it inspired me to write my song, "Amazing Love," which is found below:

Amazing Love

Let the rich leave the table
Make room for the poor
No crumbs for the wicked

While the hungry are filled
Let the mockers be silent
While the weak become strong
The reason for hoping
Has finally come

My soul sings God is great
And my spirit lets down her weight
My heart cries holy is God
Who has poured out mercy on us
Amazing love

Listen O people
Children of God
He's shown himself faithful
Remembering us
Just like he promised
At the dawning of faith
The end of the darkness
The beginning of grace

My soul sings God is great
And my spirit lets down her weight
My heart cries holy is God
Who has poured out mercy on us
Amazing love

God is great and His name will be praised among the nations
God is great and His name will be praised among the nations

December 12

O ORIENS

Malcolm Guite

E vidi lume in forme de riviera Paradiso XXX; 61

*O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of
death.*

First light and then first lines along the east
To touch and brush a sheen of light on water
As though behind the sky itself they traced
The shift and shimmer of another river
Flowing unbidden from its hidden source;
The Day-Spring, the eternal Prima Vera.
Blake saw it too. Dante and Beatrice
Are bathing in it now, away upstream...
So every trace of light begins a grace
In me, a beckoning. The smallest gleam
Is somehow a beginning and a calling;
“Sleeper awake, the darkness was a dream
For you will see the Dayspring at your waking,
Beyond your long last line the dawn is breaking.”

Audio for Jaylene's song, "Amazing Love," can be found on our website
at <http://stbenedictstable.ca/music/amazing-love/>.

December 13

LOVE: THE SIMPLE JOY OF A SMALL VICTORY

Rachel Twigg Boyce

The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 35:10

I love these sorts of prophetic promises in Scripture. I love the beauty of the language and the beauty of the promise, “Sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” How wonderful!

And while I believe that these promises can be trusted and will be fulfilled in God’s perfect timing, I find that in my day-to-day life I often have to be satisfied with simpler joys and smaller victories.

Today I woke up to one of the first truly cold days of winter, got dressed, and made my way to our local soup kitchen to volunteer. I have been doing this for about four years, but the first truly cold day of winter is always a bit of a shock—I rolled from a warm bed in a warm house, put on good quality winter-wear and then drove to my destination. Some of my friends slept outside last night, or in inadequately heated shelters, rooming houses, or apartments and then travelled to the same place in clothes that were better-suited for the warmth of early September.

It’s enough to take my breath away. It’s enough to make me embrace sorrow and sighing, not joy and gladness.

But today, I also experienced the simple joy of a small victory.

I drove to the soup kitchen today not only because it was cold outside but because my trunk was crammed full of warm winter wear. Hats, mittens, and scarves that were lovingly knit by friends of House Blend. I knit, too, and I know how much time and care went into each piece.

These simple gifts were greeted with great joy and thanks and I left deeply humbled by the privilege of sharing these things with people I love.

During Advent we anticipate an amazing gift presented in a humble form: Jesus Christ came into the world without the fanfare befitting a king, but as a baby born in a place reserved for animals. May that thought warm our hearts and inspire us to share that warmth with others.

December 14

THE LAST FOUR THINGS: HELL

Jamie Howison

An Advent reflection on hell? Being pressed to think about death and judgement are one thing, but what kind of a Scrooge arrives at the office Christmas party looking to pour hot coals into the punch bowl? It would have been so much easier to just skip on by to the topic of heaven, decorating the margins with a few appropriately seasonal angels. Instead, it seems we're going to get some fire and brimstone in the season of good cheer.

In his reflections on the "four last things," Robert Farrar Capon suggests that, "If you remove the possibility of hell from Christian theology—even out of pure kindheartedness—you do more harm than good. That is, you end up saying that after all the expense and heartache God went through to respect the freedom and integrity of his creatures (heartache for us as well as him), he ultimately reneges on it by forcing everyone's hand, thus turning the whole business into nothing but a cruel charade." Capon's use of the word "cruel" might seem a bit over the top, until you consider that he is challenging the idea that a lifetime of choices—the life-giving choices of Mother Teresa or Jean Vanier on the one hand, or the death-dealing choices that paved the way to Auschwitz on the other—is finally without meaning.

Many find it tempting to dismiss the concept of hell as being hopelessly mired in an ancient religious world-view, irrelevant and unacceptable in our time. Struggling with this question as a student, the theologian Lewis Smedes once asked Karl Barth if he was a universalist. The great theologian drew close to the young man, poked a finger in his chest, and said "*Ich bin kein universalist*" (I am not a universalist). Aware that his student wanted a neat cut-and-paste answer, Barth continued, "You believe the Bible? Fine, then believe this too: 'Christ died not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world.' If you are worried about universalism, you had better begin worrying about the Bible."

To spend time "worrying about the Bible" is to read and study it in its fullness, to enter it as "a strange new world," as Barth put it in one of his early essays. Strictly speaking, the idea of hell doesn't really rear its head in the Hebrew scriptures, though that doesn't change the fact that Jesus took the concept quite seriously. When Jesus spoke of it, he drew on an array of stark and fiery images: of outer darkness, a state "where the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched," and where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." To say that this is all symbolic language is true, but that isn't the same as saying it is meaningless. To what was Jesus pointing when he used such words?

Many people do quite like the concept of hell, though always a hell for someone else: the enemy, the tyrant, the abuser. If there isn't an eternity of punishment, then let there be utter annihilation for such people (or at the very least, a hellishly arduous purgation). What attracts us to wanting this sort of a fate for "them" is a deeply held conviction that final justice needs to be done, informed by a theology that carefully ranks sins and declares that some people have placed themselves beyond God's reconciling mercy. What Hitler did to the Jews, or what the pedophile did to those children, must be ultimately vindicated, right?

"Christ never gives up on anybody," Robert Capon once remarked. "Christ is not the enemy of the damned. He is the finder of the damned." Still, in spite of Christ's death being "for the sins of the whole world," the Biblical story seems to suggest that some will continue to choose *not* to be found. Like the older brother sulking in the garden in the parable of the Prodigal, or the Pharisee who refuses to be seated at the same table with those he considers sinners, some of us will apparently choose separation over sharing in the wedding feast of the Lamb. It must be hell to be so stubbornly lonely.

December 15

THE WOLF WILL LIE DOWN WITH THE LAMB

Steve Bell

Recently I met Amhad, an Arab man, and Dorit, a Jewish woman, who both live in an intentionally mixed community in Israel. The community sees itself as a living witness, running counter to the dominant narrative of conflict that beleaguers that storied land. When I met them I made reference to Isaiah's wolf and lamb oracle and the unlikelihood of their deep friendship. Amhad's eyes twinkled as he said, "I'll leave it to you to decide which one of us is the wolf and which one is the lamb."

One can hardly consider this oracle without making the judgment that one of those two is more innocent than the other. Much of modern history could be summed up as an overall culture of individuals and groups clamoring for lamb status. Certainly, few clamor for wolf status.

Consider myself as an example. I am a reasonably nice, Christian, heterosexual man committed to the betterment of my fellows through the exercise of the gifts God has bestowed on me for the sake of the gospel. If there is a continuum, surely I lean toward the lamb side. And yet, if I consider my investments, my buying habits, my eating habits, my lifestyle and leisure, my excesses and my prejudices, it doesn't take a great sleuth to uncover where I am woefully complicit in systems of oppression and injustice. If truth be known, I don't need a sleuth. I already know it. I willfully participate and benefit from systemic injustice every day. I can justify it to others, I suppose, but I don't think my defenses will stand long before the steely gaze of the "Lamb who is on the throne." Part of me longs for Christ. Another part dreads the encounter.

December 16

O REX GENTIUM

Malcolm Guite

O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one:

Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.

O King of our desire whom we despise,
King of the nations never on the throne,
Unfound foundation, cast-off cornerstone,
Rejected joiner, making many one:
You have no form or beauty for our eyes,
A King who comes to give away his crown,
A King within our rags of flesh and bone.
We pierce the flesh that pierces our disguise,
For we ourselves are found in you alone.
Come to us now and find in us your throne,
O King within the child within the clay,
O hidden King who shapes us in the play
Of all creation. Shape us for the day
Your coming Kingdom comes into its own.

December 17

JOY WILL COME

Jaylene Johnson

Isaiah 35:1-10

There is no ambiguity in Isaiah's words; God will come, will restore, will make a way. Where there is parched land—water. Where there is danger—safety. Where there is sorrow—joy. The splendour of God will be seen. It is a promise.

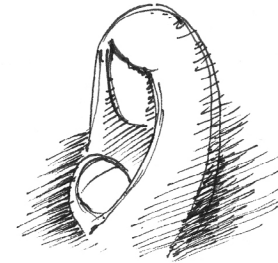
Isaiah also issues a challenge. He calls the weak to be strong and tells the fearful not to fear. Is this not counter-intuitive? We tend to establish ourselves and our well-being based on our emotions. If we're weak, we are not strong—that's just the way it is. How can we "be strong?" We just are or aren't...right?

Often, we wait for circumstances to change before we change our feelings. While God understands our feelings (and, in fact, calls us to have compassion for one another), Isaiah's words imply that hope in God and in His promises—unwavering belief that God will do what He says—is an encouragement to draw upon, regardless of our situation or emotional state. In this, our state of being is ruled by our faith, not our feelings.

Is there any area in our lives where faith needs to take the lead over feelings? Seek comfort and strength in the Word and know that God is faithful and good.

Or perhaps you know someone for whom this reflection is relevant. Advent and the ensuing "holiday season" can be one of the loneliest and most depressing times of the year for many people. For many more, it is a season riddled with stress and anxiety. As God directs, may we encourage the "weak" and "feeble-kneed" in our lives, and remind them that whatever the situation, joy will come, and God is with us.

Prayer: Lord, as I read and understand what You are telling me in scripture, may my heart always be encouraged. You have promised that Your redeemed will come with "singing unto Zion;" you have promised "everlasting joy." I trust You, Lord, regardless of my feelings. You are God, and You always keep your Word. Thank you for Your faithfulness. I commit to being strong and not afraid. You are the same yesterday, today and forever. As a way of salvation was made through Jesus, so will a way be made for me by the power of the Holy Spirit. Encourage me, Lord, and show me others whom You, through my words and actions, would encourage as well.



- Heaven -

THEREFORE, THE LORD HIMSELF WILL GIVE YOU
A SIGN. LOOK, THE YOUNG WOMAN IS WITH
CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND SHALL NAME
HIM EMMANUEL.

ISAIAH 7:14

- Joy -

December 18

IT'S COMPLICATED

Steve Bell

Last fall I noticed a growing disturbance in my own soul and quickly recognized it as my recurring dread of the coming Christmas season. My childhood memories of Christmas are not all sugar plums and cozy fires. When I was eight years old, my mother suddenly collapsed under a debilitating depression, accompanied by severe anxiety. She was whisked away to a hospital 80 miles away and I didn't see her again until she came home briefly for Christmas that same year. When she did return for the holiday, she sat huddled and frail in a corner, returning only weak and weary smiles whenever we tried to engage her. It was a confusing time. I adored (and still adore) my mom, but at that time I was too young to understand the complexity of her illness. I wasn't too young, however, to recognize the deep sadness in my father's eyes or to feel it in my own spirit. The contrast of my mother's frail, miserable form against the tinsel and glitter of our Christmas tree was not lost on me. Nor was the impotence of the limp platitudes and Bible verses piously lobbed at my mom by well-meaning Christians in her vulnerable state.

Around the same time, my father left his job as a local pastor and went to work as the protestant chaplain at Drumheller prison in Alberta. In an unexpected way, it was a good thing for us. Whereas my mom's illness was difficult for church-folk to accept—good Christians, especially pastors wives, don't get depressed—the inmates had no problem with her. "Come hang with the rest of us losers," was the unstated, but clear and sincere invitation. The prison became a safe place for my mom to be unwell. For us kids, though, it meant that every Christmas, shortly after opening our presents, we had to leave our treasures on the living room floor and accompany Mom and Dad to the federal prison to lead a Christmas service for the wretched souls who weren't able to get a day-pass for the holiday, and for whom no one was going to visit. While I initially dreaded going, I always ended up deeply moved by the experience. It seemed to really matter to the inmates. Our family was quite musical and I distinctly

remember my sisters and I singing for the inmates who sat stooped in their chairs, their heads buried in their hands, and their shoulders quivering while tears splashed on the floor. The mystery of deep regret, grief, and loss first presented itself to me on that Christmas day.

Much later, in the early 1990s, I travelled to India where I spent 10 days in the north singing at a retreat for indigenous Catholic priests. Being the son of a Baptist minister, I was a bit out of my element, but it remains one of the more formational experiences of my life. It happened to be mid-December and, before returning home, I had to stay over in Calcutta for several days before I could catch a flight home. I had never before experienced anything like the desolate poverty and human suffering I witnessed there. Out on the streets—stepping over the sleeping bodies of whole families huddled together to keep warm on the sidewalk, being accosted by the multitude of desolate beggars, experiencing the disparity between those sentenced to a life of grinding poverty and the gated, luxury hotel compound in which I was staying—I had a break-down of my own and spent the final 24 hours on my bathroom floor in the fetal position, clutching at my stomach and feeling like I had ingested acid.

Having forgotten it was Christmas, I eventually boarded the plane home to find it decorated with silvery garlands and shiny “best wishes.” It took everything I had to resist running through the plane and tearing the tinsel down.

I have many, many wonderful life memories attached to the Christmas season. But for me, it’s complicated. Our culture’s relentless trivialization of the tradition seems almost unbearably bizarre. It is no accident that the ancient church, in her wisdom, placed the Feast of the Martyrdom of St. Stephen on the 26th of December (a small liturgical fact somewhat obliterated from our consciousness by the incredible sales on Boxing Day) and the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the massacre of the children by Herod’s decree, two days later. Again, it’s complicated. It is no surprise to me that each year I find myself keening for a better dawn, deeply dissatisfied with things as they are, and cynical of mere religious platitudes like, “Jesus is the Reason for the Season!” We have “had the experience, but missed the meaning.”

Recently, while in conversation with friends, the word “keening”

was used. I was only remotely familiar with the word but it seared through me like a hot knife and haunted me for the rest of the day. Later that night the following verse bubbled up, and I knew it was time to face this season head on.

On and on the night goes on
Brooding dark before the dawn
We are waiting
Wearied lips rehearse our creeds
Bellies swollen with you seed
We are waiting
Hardened shards of broken bread
Small consolations in your stead
Soured wine a tonic for the pain
Dutifully we take our fill
Still, we long to see Your face again
Keening for the dawn as such
Stirs the memory of your touch
We are waiting
We are waiting

Looking back on the story of Christmas, it seems as though the waiting *should* be over. Hasn’t Christ already come? Haven’t we smugly proclaimed, “Jesus is the answer!” And yet our present experience still longs for redemption, healing, purpose, and completion. Our liturgy confirms this: “Christ has come, Christ will come again.” And in the last sentences of our scriptures we read, “Even so, Lord Jesus come.”

December 19

THE GIFTS OF GOD

Jaylene Johnson

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test" (Isa. 7:10-12).

God extended a gift to Ahaz: a sign of any magnitude. But Ahaz wrongly refused. Not only was this culturally offensive (refusing a gift from a contemporary would be considered extremely rude during Ahaz's lifetime), it was a move that tried God's patience.

We do it sometimes as well—refuse gifts. Perhaps it's because we don't want to be beholden to someone. Maybe, at times, we feel unworthy to receive. Whatever the reason, Ahaz presumed to reject God's offer, and was met with displeasure. God decided to give a sign anyway, but not one Ahaz would ever see with his own eyes. A virgin would give birth to the Messiah: Emmanuel, God with us. This, of course, is brought to pass in Mary, mother of Jesus.

When God offers a gift, the desire is for us to receive it. Is there anything God has been trying to give us, either directly through the Holy Spirit, or perhaps through another person's graciousness and generosity? If we are hesitant to receive, some reflecting upon what our inhibitions are could be a good step forward.

Prayer: Lord, thank you that every good and perfect gift comes from You. Thank you that you delight in giving good gifts to Your children. Help me to recognize and receive what You so graciously extend to me: forgiveness of sins, wisdom, peace, the Holy Spirit, and provision for all of my needs. You offer us all things pertaining to life and godliness. Remove anything that keeps my hands and my heart closed; replace pride, sin and shame with joy in Your goodness towards me. Amen.

**As a suggested exercise, ask God to reveal truth in this area. Write down whatever comes to mind, however silly it seems. Ask Him what He would like you to receive, and thank Him for it. If pertinent, ask God to show you why struggle to receive. You could also ask if there is any gift He would like to give someone else through you. Write it down, and commit to doing it.*

December 20

THE LAST FOUR THINGS: HEAVEN

Jamie Howison

I once heard a radio preacher argue that of all English translations of the Bible, only the King James Version can rightly be called God's word. I can't recall anything of the content of his argument, but I do remember the example he gave to illustrate what he considered the error of the New International Version. The text in question was John 14:2, which (in the King James Version) begins, "In my Father's house are many mansions." The preacher remarked, "In heaven we will all get mansions. But if you look up the same passage in the NIV, it says, 'My Father's house has many rooms.' The Lord promised me a mansion, so why should I settle for a room?"

While the preacher seemed to believe he had made an airtight case, the logic was lost on me. Besides, the picture of each of us rambling around for eternity in our own private mansion seems a singularly unappealing picture of heaven.

As for the versions that have grandpa happily golfing on the heavenly links, surely even the most ardent golfer would find the prospect of endless rounds hitting nothing but holes-in-one a little depressing. Rather than being a picture of heaven, this sounds closer to Bernard Shaw's definition of hell as "a place where you have nothing to do but amuse yourself."

If by eternity we only mean "endless," I'm not sure how I feel about the idea of eternal life. Whether we lived in a room or a mansion, spent eternity participating in the singing of praise (Rev. 4) and feasting at the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19), or walking the streets of an unimaginably wondrous city (Rev. 21), I struggle to see the appeal of it all being without end, without a sense of *telos*. *Telos* is Greek for "end," but also "purpose," "goal," and "culmination." As humans we live within time; our lives are marked by beginnings, milestones, and endings. How do we begin to contemplate a state beyond time?

The other issue with much popular thinking around the notion of heaven is that it is primarily imagined as being *not* here, and *not* encumbered by anything so limiting as bodies. There's grandpa on that cloud-banked golf course again, but also the picture of mom looking down over her children as a kind of spectral guardian. Stop and think about that one for a minute or two, and you'll realize it is a horror: both for the surviving children and for mom.

And according to the Bible, this vision simply doesn't wash. Yes, the Epistle to the Hebrews does speak of "a better country, that is, a heavenly one," and of the city God has prepared for those who long for "a homeland" (Heb. 11:14-16). Yet echoing Isaiah, the final image offered in the Christian scriptures is not some ethereal land of purely spiritual beings, but "a new heaven and a new earth," with "the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:1-2). My imagination is too limited and too time-bound to make much deep sense of the glimpses of the eternal offered to the likes of Isaiah and John the Divine, but clearly it has less to do with our escaping this world and more to do with all things being made new. And I am profoundly moved by the appealing words about a state in which "every tear will be wiped away," and "mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev. 21.4). Even then, though, we need to remember that those we now consider to be our enemies might be sitting there with us, having their tears wiped away right alongside of ours.

All of these glimpses—all of the imagery, visions, and longings—are just that: glimpses. This side of the new heaven and the new earth, we need to learn to hold them in our hands without clutching too tightly. As Sally Ito writes in the closing lines of her Advent poem, "On Joy and Heaven,"

"We are given joy because we are given death. And Heaven will be its name until we arrive and know the true end of time."
(*Alert to Glory*)

December 21

THE VIRGIN WILL BEAR A SON; A CHILD WILL LEAD THEM

Steve Bell

A woman will bear a son and name him Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” Coupled with “a child will lead them,” this oracle is perhaps the loveliest and most harmless of all. And yet, if we consider the record of adult, male-dominated history, it is hard to believe that the best and wisest of things will be ushered into history through a woman and child. It simply does not stand up to our experience as we have understood it.

Its coming true, along with the other oracles, would require a radical refashioning of every institution and social structure we have known. It would also require a willingness to relinquish illegitimate wealth, power and prestige. Such relinquishing, and the vulnerability needed to do so, could only be sustained by an ardent love and longing for the community of God. And yet, these oracles taken together suggest that this is a reality that we can work towards, starting today.

December 22

JOY: IN SACRED SILENCE

Rachel Twigg Boyce

The expectation of Advent is anchored in the event of God’s incarnation. The more I come in touch with what happened in the past, the more I come in touch with what is to come. The Gospel not only reminds me of what took place but also of what will take place.

Henri Nouwen

Every Tuesday evening as part of our weekly potluck and prayer night, people are invited to share their name and a high and low point from their week. They are invited to both look back at the past week and also anticipate the week to come. Although we do this throughout the year, it is a deeply Advent-inspired practice.

It is also deeply rooted in Christ’s incarnation. We hold the value that during this time of sharing everyone gets to speak and everyone is listened to. This creates a sacred space, and in that space, we see Christ.

Sometimes we hear the same story week after week: “I am frustrated with my job,” “I am looking for a job,” “This illness/addiction/anxious feeling just won’t let go.” People are listened to intently but also silently with only nods and soft sighs indicating, “We hear you and are with you in this moment.” Sharing these stories is a sacred act, but so is listening to them, and people—even newcomers—seem to sense this without having to be told.

Never one to mince his words, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that Christians often forget that “listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either.

“This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life,” he continues,

“and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words...anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brothers, but only for himself and his own follies” (from *Life Together*).

Listening is hard work and none of us gets it right all the time. But I love being a part of a community that is learning to listen to each other, to our neighbours, and to God.

I have also come to see the power that comes when we share our stories with other people. Sometimes we hear with great delight that, “I found a job!” “The monkey is off my back!” or “This week was a bit better than last!” In these moments, the joy bubbles to the surface and breaks through as people express their delight at the good news. Those shouts of joy are richer and deeper because we have also been a part of bearing witness to the hard parts of the story. They also remind me when things feel bleak that God has been good in the past and will be good in the future.

This Advent may we all continue to learn what it means to be quick to listen and slow to speak. May we take time to reflect on all the good that God has done and look with anticipation to the good that God will continue to do.

December 23

O EMMANUEL

Malcolm Guite

*O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:
Come and save us, O Lord our God.*

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us,
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness,
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

December 24

COLLECT FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

*The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican
Church of Canada*

Eternal God,
this holy night is radiant
with the brilliance of your one true light.
As we have known
the revelation of that light on earth,
bring us to see the splendour of your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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Biographies

Steve Bell is a singer/songwriter whose 30 year vocation as an artist has taken him around the globe and produced numerous albums. Currently living in Winnipeg with his wife, Nanci, Steve has three grown children and two grandsons. Steve's reflections included in this book are based on songs from his latest CD, "Keening for the Dawn," which can be found at www.stevebell.com.

Audio for Steve's Advent songs can be found at <http://stbenedictstable.ca/music/advent-music-from-steve-bell/>.

Jamie Howison is a priest of the Anglican Church of Canada, and with his wife Catherine Pate was one of the founding leaders of saint benedict's table. His book *God's Mind in that Music: Theological Explorations through the Music of John Coltrane* has just been published by Cascade Books. He also authored *Come to the Table* (sbt press, 2008), a reflection on the practice of communion at saint benedict's table.

Malcolm Guite is a priest, chaplain, and teacher at the University of Cambridge. He is also a poet and singer/songwriter, and the author of *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, and *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Church Year*.

Jaylene Johnson is a singer, songwriter, and the Ministry Coordinator for saint benedict's table. She lives, works, and dreams in Winnipeg, Manitoba. You may have heard her music on prime time TV shows like *Pretty Little Liars* or *Degrassi*. To hear more and read of her adventures, visit www.jaylenejohnson.com or look for her on iTunes.

Rachel Twigg Boyce is a spiritual director and the pastor of House Blend Ministries, an intentional community in West Broadway. When she's not working she can often be found drinking coffee, walking her dog, or doing both at the same time.

Adam Kroeker has an M.A. in English from the the University of Manitoba, with a background in creative writing and philosophy. He is currently living in Winnipeg and working as a poet, editor, and collectible book seller. Adam was a winner of a 2012 Firebird Poetry

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Kyla Neufeld is a poet and the previous editor of *Juice*, the University of Winnipeg's creative writing journal. She has a B.A. in Creative Writing and lives in Winnipeg with her husband, Bryan.

