

2006

Advent 2006

Gardner-Webb University

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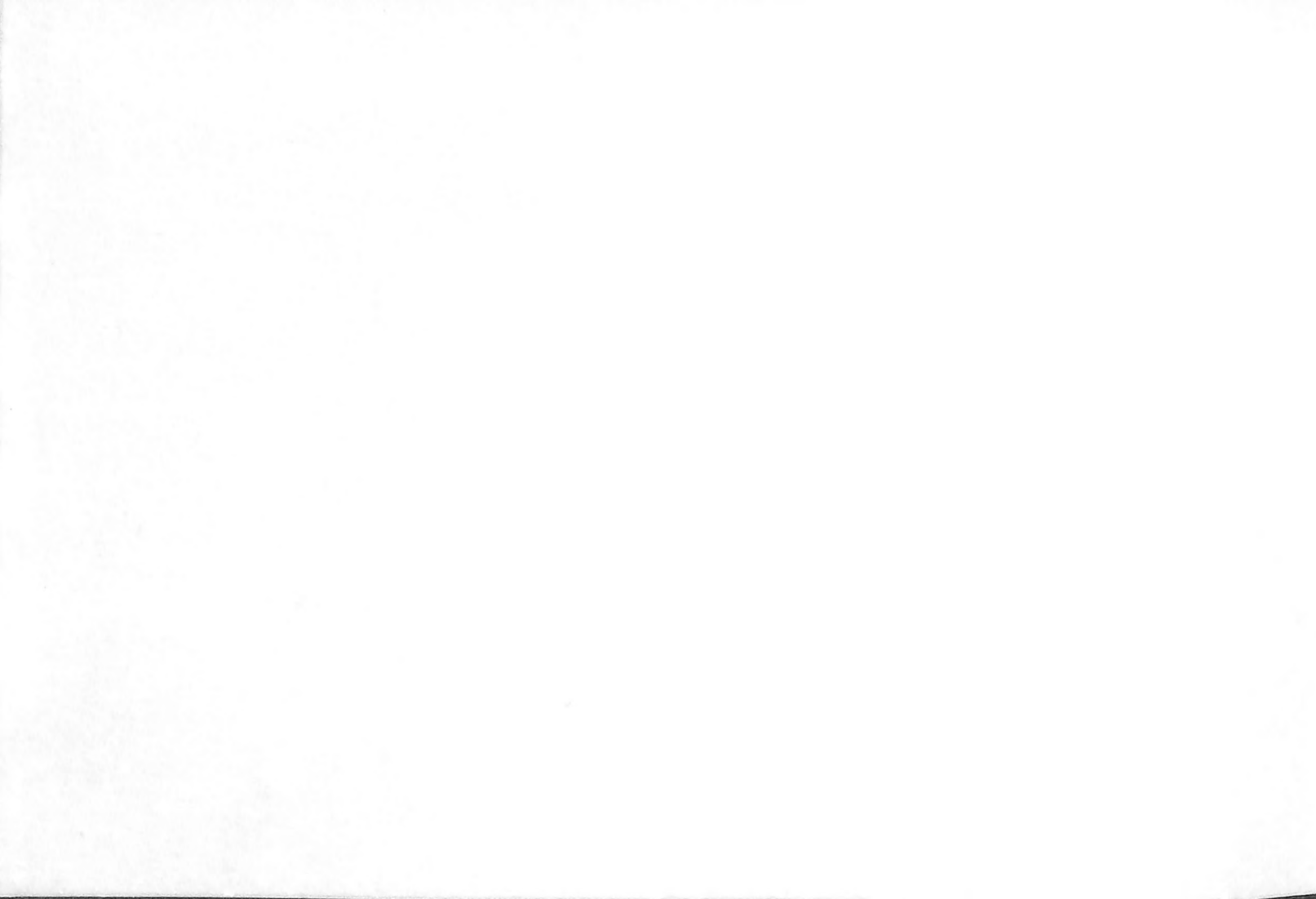
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Adven
GARDNER-W



Advent 2006
GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

"The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment."

Those words from Frederick Buechner aptly capture the great spirit of expectation that stirs our imagination and quickens our spirit during the Advent season. Preparing ourselves to celebrate Christ's coming is the first act of receiving Christ into our midst—we are joining ourselves with Israel's psalmists and prophets, and with the church's apostles and teachers, as we anticipate God's redemption of the world. Will God deliver those who suffer, who are downtrodden, who stumble under the weight of sin and oppression? Advent assures us God will. Will all of creation finally be reconciled to God? Advent promises exactly that, even insisting that those of us who serve God must play a part in that reconciliation by becoming "ministers of reconciliation" ourselves (2 Cor. 5:18).

So Advent compels us to look backward to Christ's coming and forward to Christ's triumphal return. And how are we to live, during this middle time? In a word, faithfully. The Scripture readings for each day of Advent ask more from us than just our remembrance or our anticipation. They call us to accountability before God. They call us to be heralds of God's good news. They call us to

confess our sins and to devote ourselves to the will of God. And they call us to pray.

Here at Gardner-Webb, we join with you in your earnest prayers this Advent season. We hope your celebration of Christ's coming is a rich one and that your life is both a source and a recipient of God's hope, peace, joy, and love, the four traditional themes of Advent. In the pages that follow, you will find for each day of Advent a series of Scripture readings and a short reflection written by a member of the GWU community. Together, the Scripture passages and the devotionals testify to the transforming promise of That Moment—when "you can feel the beating of your own heart and you can hear the world itself holding its breath," to use Buechner's language—when all of creation awaits God's visitation. It is a moment that must be pondered and treasured. It inspires. It confronts us with our greatest hopes—and fears—about God and the purpose of our lives. It is extraordinary indeed. And Advent is that moment.

Finally, some words of thanksgiving. I'm grateful to Frank Bonner and Chuck Bugg for their support of this project. I also want to thank the writers who contributed such thoughtful reflections. May the Scripture readings and the reflections collected here be a blessing to you, even as you live your life as a blessing to others through the Advent season.

. . . *that* *moment*

**Advent at
Gardner Webb
2006**

Daniel Goodman

Bob D. Shepherd

Chair of New Testament

Interpretation.

School of Divinity

hope

Sunday December 3

Psalm 146
Isaiah 1:1-9
2 Peter 3:1-10
Matthew 25:1-13

Daniel Goodman

Bob D. Shepherd
Chair of New Testament
Interpretation,
School of Divinity

During the year between seminary and graduate school, I took a job as a courier for a pathologist at a hospital. The work was menial, as was the pay. My job was to pick up tissues and samples for the pathologist to examine back at the lab.

If you've ever felt like you were "on the shelf," then you know exactly how I felt. I was not using my seminary education, I was biding my time until Ph.D. studies, and I felt far outside of whatever work God was doing in the world. I was on the shelf, waiting out this foolish period of my life, waiting for something more fulfilling down the road.

After a few months, my church asked if I'd come on staff for the balance of the year to develop some educational and outreach programs. I was thrilled! And then one Friday afternoon, when the other ministers had gone home, our church secretary took a phone call from the hospital. There was a man who was nearing the end of a lengthy battle with his disease, and he was asking to see a Baptist minister. Though wretchedly unqualified to speak to such a mystery as a man's impending death, I was the only one around.

I drove over, knowing I had nothing compelling to say that would ease this man's suffering or relieve him from even a portion of his burden. When I entered his room and reached out to shake his hand, he grabbed mine and didn't let go. I sat down beside his bed, holding his hand, and except for a short, uncertain prayer, we said almost nothing to each other. My gift to him was my presence. His gift to me was much greater.

I learned a lesson about waiting that day. I had regarded those months spent working in the hospital as time wasted, but that day I realized that God had used those months to prepare me for this single encounter with a man in grave need. In other words, what I thought was a season of waiting—waiting for something more rewarding, waiting for something more suited to my abilities and interests—wasn't a season of waiting at all. It was a season of preparation. Just like the season of Advent.

Sturdy is one of my favorite words. I use it to describe people all the time. Lately, when using this descriptive word, I have noticed others have misinterpreted my connotation. A few folks thought I meant someone had a husky physique. Actually, describing physical attributes was not my intention. A sturdy person, to me is one with a good personality and great character. Sturdy from my mouth is not an insult. It is a high compliment.

In this modern era of pre-fab, instant and disposable, I yearn for sturdiness in the important things of life. Well made houses, dependable cars, home-cooked meals are things that ease my anxiety, because they are reliable. The same can be said about sturdy people.

Sturdy people are the ones you encounter who are real, loyal, stand-up, honest, and true. Most of all they are not going to let you down when you need them the most. In the scripture for today's consideration the Psalmist describes sturdy people. They are "happy because they do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers... they are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season" (Psalm 1:1, 3).

Sturdy people give me hope. In the midst of the streams of chaos called life, my family, friends, and even acquaintances have been strong fruitful trees that have equipped and encouraged me to persevere. Their actions shout that there is something greater, something better than this world.

Sturdy people also remind me that ultimate joy and ultimate hope come from the One who is the epitome of sturdiness. The Sturdy One who traded the bliss of heaven for a rugged manger bed. The Sturdy One who chose to dwell among us. The Sturdy One who endured the cross. The Sturdy One who reigns and will return. Jesus, the Sturdy One, gives me hope.

hope

**Monday
December 4**

Psalm 1
Isaiah 1:10-20
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Luke 20:1-8

Lou Ann Gilliam
Director of Alumni Relations

hope

**Tuesday
December 5**

Psalm 5
Isaiah 1:21-31
1 Thessalonians 2:1-12
Luke 20:9-18

Susan Carlisle Bell
Associate Professor of Art

Lots of times it is hard to know what to hope for. We are struggling like the writer of Psalm 5:1, 2: "Consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my God and my King." The Psalm describes the surrounding wickedness, not unlike the world we know today. Isaiah 1 tells of a loss of justice and righteousness. Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers who rejected the servants and killed the son is also an indictment of our rejection of God. Though imprisoned for sharing the gospel, Paul speaks to the Thessalonians about the importance of pleasing God, not men. He urges them "like a father to live lives worthy of God."

These are not exactly warm and fuzzy Advent scriptures. What do they have in common? Each holds forth a hope that God will show up and things will be different. But what interests the Lord more is that we will be different.

Oswald Chambers observed that God is much more interested in our character than in answering our prayers. Instead we hope the pain (emotional or physical) will go away and yet pain is surely God's instrument. Pain wakes us up and turns us to God.

So what do we hope for? Isaiah promises that those who wait/hope/trust in the Lord will be renewed. In other words, it is not what we hope for, but Who we hope in that matters. When we put our trust and hope in the Lord, He will be our refuge while we wait. Psalm 5:11: "All who take refuge in You will be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them that those who love your name may rejoice in You."

No matter what, this Advent we can rejoice in Him and love His Name: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. What a hope! No matter what!

As a child, I was never one of those kids who made extensive Christmas wish lists. I loved surprises!

Looking back on it, there may not have been any particular virtue in my character revealed by this. Perhaps it could have just been symptomatic of a cynical pragmatism being calculated in my psyche.

“Proposition: A Christmas list just isn’t necessary—and worse yet, it may even be counterproductive. Proof:

1. I want Christmas gifts.
2. I have always gotten Christmas gifts, either from a list or ‘surprises.’
3. I have never found the surprise gifts any less satisfying than those conceived in my own mind.
4. In fact, I generally have found them superior.
5. Therefore, the greatest good for me is to expect surprises.”

Well I hope my motives weren’t quite so sinister. (And “to expect surprises” might be an oxymoron which defeats the argument anyway.) Nevertheless Christmas’ coming held out the hope of great things. So waiting for it was hard. But the hope in the waiting was built on solid evidence of revelation—the promise of some good things coming and of experience—it had always been good before.

The difficulty in waiting has always been so. Of the three Christmas encounters in Scripture—the Shepherds, the Magi and the Dedication at the Temple—Simeon and Anna’s story is by far the least popular to tell, but somehow seems to fit the common Christian experience more closely than the other two. Their stories are biographies of hope, a hope assured by the testimonies of Scripture and of the Spirit. But those assurances were given with the requirement of waiting—faithful waiting for a long time! But at least for Simeon and Anna, I get to read their biographies from after the end of the long wait. I find myself in another waiting period of the story—that long wait for the Second Advent, when all things will be made permanently right and all promises of God are finally fulfilled.

So while waiting, my calculation will be:

1. God promised to send a Redeemer who would take His stand upon the earth. He did. And it was better than expected.
2. Jesus went away but promised to send a Helper that would remain. He did. And it was better than expected.

Therefore, I will try to be faithfully waiting in hope for that day when God will make His dwelling with people. And meanwhile I will remember that “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me”—nor in His timetable.

hope

**Wednesday
December 6**

Psalm 119:1-24

Isaiah 2:1-11

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

Luke 20:19-26

Bob Bass
Chair, Department of
Mathematical Sciences

hope

Thursday December 7

Psalm 18:1-20

Isaiah 2:12-22

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Luke 20:27-40

Deborah D. Gaddis
Development Director for the
Lilly Program and Assistant
to the Dean, School of
Divinity

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I had the privilege to make several trips to the Gulf Coast to serve as a chaplain and to do what I could to help the victims of the catastrophe. I was appalled by the devastation I witnessed, but also was blessed by the miracle stories of the survivors. One story of resurrection and renewal in particular comes to mind during this season of Advent.

God sent a team of six from a church in North Carolina down to Biloxi, MS, to join the rebuilding efforts. The team received a work-order to rebuild a roof, loaded the truck with appropriate supplies, and set out on a mission. When they arrived at the dilapidated house, they first went over to the FEMA trailer in hopes of meeting the homeowners. There was no response to their knock. They then climbed on top of the house and began patching the holes in the roof. They worked all day until the sun went down. The next morning, the team returned to the house to continue rebuilding the roof. As they were climbing on the roof, a man and a woman walked up holding hands. The group leader walked over and introduced himself. The man asked the group leader who had sent them to work on his house. The group leader explained that they were volunteers working with a Christian-based mission organization. The man and the woman had never heard of

the organization. Puzzled, the group leader showed the couple the work-order.

Immediately, the two started weeping. Once composed, the man told the group leader that he and his team were at the wrong house. The work-order was intended for the neighbor's house. The group leader began apologizing for his mistake, expressing his regret for trespassing on their property. The couple stopped him. The woman then explained that she and her husband had lost practically everything in the hurricane. They felt completely helpless and hopeless. The couple spent what little bit of money they had received from FEMA to purchase two pistols. She told the relief workers that she and her husband were sitting in the dilapidated house the day before, with pistols to their heads, ready to give up when they heard the sound of the hammers hitting the nails on their roof. Looking at each other, the man and the woman dropped the pistols, and fell to their knees, sobbing and praising God for the sound of hope.

The sound of the hammer hitting the nails offered hope to a devastated couple. The same sound offers hope to us all. The hammer pounds. The nail pierces sinless flesh and splinters the wood of the cross. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, hope resounds.

In the Dickens' classic, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is paid a visit by three spirits who show him a view of his life from a unique perspective. Scrooge is allowed to see his life from the outside, to look at himself as others see him. It's kind of a scary thought as we wonder what our lives would look like from the outside. In Scrooge's case, his focus had become an inward and self-centric affair. The failures and disappointments of his past had made him a withdrawn, greedy, selfish little man. His entire existence was reduced to the utilitarian challenge of seeking material wealth with a bent, determined will. He could deny his coal fire, grit his teeth and curse the cold day after day in order to post that extra shilling in his tally book.

Sadly, Ebenezer's experience is not far from our own. In all of our lives there are seasons where hope is elusive. We temporarily lose our connection with our Creator as we face the struggles of our lives. At times like these, our focus becomes an inward gaze. We go into survival mode where our goal is to exist, but not really live. We pride ourselves in our ability to get through, but find no joy in the journey. At those times, our relationships with others become obligations, annoyances and distractions rather than connections for

comfort, love and community. Our duties are our source of solace as we dwell inward in isolation.

The good news is that Advent is here! In Scrooge's situation, one night made all the difference. Scrooge was given the opportunity to change and see hope through a transformation. In that one night, what had changed? London's streets still teemed with the poor. Tiny Tim still suffered from his affliction. What changed, of course, was Scrooge's own heart. An intangible transformation had occurred when his temporal and earthly existence was met by the greater powers of an unseen spiritual realm. His greed for himself became generosity to others. He cast off his drab isolation for joyful fellowship. He was no longer looking inward to despair but outward to hope.

As a Christian, Dickens understood the power of God to transform our heart and our perspective. Hope is a quality that is intertwined through our faith and trust in God who is unseen. As we focus our heart on that supreme relationship, we can discover a renewal of hope in the loving arms of our Savior. Rejoice!! Christ has come!!

hope

**Friday
December 8**

Psalm 16
Isaiah 3:8-15
1 Thessalonians 4:1-12
Luke 20:41-21:4

Christopher Keene
Assistant Professor
and Technical Director
of Theater

hope

**Saturday
December 9**

Psalm 20
Isaiah 4:2-6
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Luke 21:5-19

Paula Qualls
Associate Professor
of Religion

A few years ago, three stray cats found their way to our house. Much to the delight of my children, these newfound friends immediately became our adopted pets as we fed them and loved them. One day, the cats wandered off and were nowhere to be found. We called for them, but to no avail. I was certain that they were gone for good when my then five-year-old daughter said, "Let's pray that God will send them back to us." Her three-year-old brother smiled in delightful approval. I knew I was in trouble. I cringed at the thought of explaining to my budding theologians that sometimes God says "No." I chose the higher road and prayed, reminding my children that God is Lord of the cats too. Then, I silently begged God to pull through on this one. The hours passed. No cats. Evening and nightfall came. Still, no cats. The next day, the cats returned!

What a lesson on faith and hope. I am often reminded of this day and the hope that I saw on the faces of my children. Their concern for the lost cats was quickly translated into a prayer of hopeful expectation. They expected the cats to return. There was no doubt, no wavering. They prayed, and as far as they were concerned, God was sending those cats back to us.

How often do we respond to our difficult circumstances with prayers of hopeful expectation? Do we believe that God is Lord of all things—even the cats? Truly, He is Lord of every concern that we carry today. Luke reminds us that even in the darkest days, we can place our hope not in our circumstances, but in the living Lord Jesus who is present to abide with us as we await his return. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord's suffering and rejection and crucifixion." As we look forward to the second advent of our Lord, we are able to endure suffering and persecution as we find our identity in Christ. What greater hope can we ask for? The Psalmist echoes this in our reading today, "Now I know that the LORD saves His anointed; He will answer him from His holy heaven with the saving strength of His right hand. Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the LORD our God" (vv. 6-7).

Christmas is at our throats again, and finding a moment of peace in the midst of it sometimes seems impossible. I found my Advent peace in the middle of Interstate-85 in downtown Atlanta in a rush of traffic, horns, and lights. And it all began with the Pink Pig.

When I was a boy in 1970's Atlanta, downtown was the place where people went Christmas shopping, and the downtown Rich's was that one great iconic department store in town. The Pink Pig was a monorail that was set up on Rich's roof for the season, and it flew you above a collection of lit Christmas displays—to adults it was tacky, but to a six-year-old, it was spectacular. You got to ride right under the 75-foot Great Tree which, when lit at 7:28 p.m. on Thanksgiving night to a choral fanfare, signaled the beginning of Christmas in Atlanta. Priscilla the Pig was Pepto-Bismol colored and fronted by a giant fiberglass pig head. It was pretty awful looking, but if you were six, there was nothing in the world you wanted more than to go downtown and ride the Pink Pig.

When my brother and I reached a critical mass of obnoxiousness during the holiday season, Mom and Dad would pack us into our pine-needle green 1969 Caprice Classic

and drive us downtown. We'd park in a big parking deck (which in itself made the trip pretty exotic), find our way into the store, and make our way to the roof. Then we walked into the sweet cold night air—and dark—so dark at the winter solstice that by 8:00 it had been pitch-black for hours. And you saw the Great Tree with the thousands of lights and the ornaments that were three, four feet across and the cold pulled your cheeks tight. And then the Pig pulled up, and you got in—the car wasn't especially big, but it had big windows to look out at all of the lights. And there were so many lights.

In three minutes it was all over and you got out of the Pig and went out through the store and got into the car and the traffic lights looked like Christmas. And when I was nestled in the cold vinyl black back seat of that big green Chevy in the dark and the wave of heat from the vents washed over me and I was drifting in and out of sleep dreaming of the Pink Pig, I just remember thinking, "there are so many lights. . ." And wrapped in love and light, I slept in Heavenly peace.

peace

**Sunday
December 10**

Psalm 148
Isaiah 5:1-7
2 Peter 3:11-18
Luke 7:28-35

David R. Parker
Associate Professor
of English

peace

Monday December 11

Psalm 25

Isaiah 5:8-17

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Luke 21:20-28

Don Berry

Associate Professor of
Missions and World
Religions; Director of the
Global Missions Center.
School of Divinity

The remains of the city of Ephesus provide one of the most impressive sights I have ever seen. More than a mile of streets, restored buildings and marvelous architecture fill the eye as you stroll down streets where Paul may have walked. The theater stands majestically engraved in the Turkish hillside. Thinking about Paul being brought to this theater and booed by the crowds provides me with a great sense of history and connects me with biblical characters in a powerful way.

Yet, I also feel sadness when I think about such a powerful, thriving city being nothing more than the remains I see all around me. How could a city as large as Ephesus, with a population similar to that of Charlotte, end up as a collection of ruins?

Isaiah provides not an answer, but a thought for me to ponder. Isaiah speaks of houses being made desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitants, and vineyards that produce almost nothing.

My first thoughts go back to Ephesus and the lifeless city that unfolds before every person who walks the streets of this once great city. I realize that no amount of power can guarantee peace. The powerful city of Ephesus and the

powerful symbol of the famous Temple of Artemis could not guarantee their success and certainly could not guarantee peace.

The peace that comes through Jesus Christ is a peace that displays the power of God's love for humanity; but, in the end, the peace that Jesus gives to all who follow him comes through sacrifice. In the end, those with power will eventually lose it to someone else with more power. Peace never seems to follow power, but the peace that passes all understanding comes in the form of a humble Galilean who sacrificed his life to bring peace between God and humanity. I have learned that peace comes through sacrifice, not power.

In 1983 our youngest daughter came down with a rare pain in her arm and was immediately hospitalized. For the next thirteen days she lay in the hospital with a tube attached to the vein in her arm and a board underneath holding it straight. Our pediatrician had remembered reading once in a medical book about a rare infection that children who have had chickenpox may develop in their shoulder or knee joints. He had guessed right. Our daughter had developed a very rare septic joint infection.

As she lay in that hospital bed the first day with needles being stuck in her tender shoulder we had to wait outside hearing her screaming and crying as the doctors searched for answers to this rare disease. Our lives were in chaos. We had no answers, not even an assurance from the doctors and nurses that she would be alright. We cried and prayed, wondering what was going to happen to our three year old daughter. Our friends from the church and college came offering encouragement and prayers. We were terrified.

Only a week before we had celebrated Christmas with such joy and hope with the usual gifts and singing of carols. Now we wondered whether there would be another Christmas to celebrate. We could only wait as the doctors searched for answers and

medicines to cure her illness. On the third day, that wonderful doctor delivered great news.

"I think we are on the right track. She is on the right medicine. It is going to be a long recovery, but she is going to be okay."

What peace came over me. What rejoicing there was for Christine and me and our other daughter. We could not stop thanking the doctors and God for the miracle that had happened. Our helpless child had hope.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:15-22, the Apostle Paul writes to the church reminding them, "Be at peace among yourselves... always rejoice...never stop praying... in everything give thanks." Even though this was written to church members, my wife and I had experienced it in a personal way.

Advent reminds us that once upon a time a child was born in humble circumstances. When we recall his life, we hear angels sing. We experience miracles which the world often denies. There is a peace in our lives which denies all understanding. We feel like praising God and telling one another about it. Why? Because once upon a time at Christmas, God announced glorious news of great joy which was to all people. For unto you is born a Savior.

peace

**Tuesday
December 12**

Psalms 26

Isaiah 5:18-25

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Luke 21:29-38

Jim Whitlow
Professor of Psychology and
Director of Counseling

peace

**Wednesday
December 13**

Psalm 38

Isaiah 6:1-13

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

John 7:53-8:11

Chris Breedlove
Communications Specialist,
University and Media
Relations

Freedom. Stillness. Serenity. These are reflections of the word “peace” and as we gather into another season of celebrating the birth of Christ, we need to be reminded of the power and encouragement that comes from peace. Not just peace in general but, more importantly, the peace from God.

In the Psalms we find numerous confessions and petitions from David which, I believe, we all share in common. Here in Psalm 38, David is crying out to God because he has no peace. I love what he says in verse 2, “your arrows have pierced me;” and then in verse 4, “my guilt has overwhelmed me.” It’s a realization that has finally come and David knows it. It’s more than just a statement of despair. It’s a plea to be rescued, a plea for peace.

This Christmas season marks a year and a half since I have become a full-time staff member at Gardner-Webb and it’s been like a whole new chapter in life. I graduated and with a smile on my face and with eagerness to begin a new job, I shook my employer’s hand and, before I could make sense of it all, I was beginning to feel alone. Every day brought new tasks and opportunities to meet new people and there were exciting times, but I was not allowing myself to enjoy life or, more

importantly, the peace that comes from our Heavenly Father.

To perfectly illustrate peace, think of a river. A river is at peace; it’s always flowing, filled with beauty and purpose. So, one night not too long ago, I went to our local river and basked in the presence of such peace. But what was most amazing is what I realized. I realized, finally, that like David, I had no peace. I broke down and prayed and communed with Jesus, and since that day I have felt more alive than ever before.

I am writing all of this to offer encouragement, that no matter the loneliness in life or the despair that comes or even the sorrow we often face, God grants us an amazing, unlimited, powerful supply of peace. So this holiday season, I encourage you to reflect on why Jesus Christ came into this world: to offer us life and peace.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:2, we are instructed to thank (praise) God for our brothers and sisters for their encouraging faith. I believe that peace can come from those who encourage us. And that is what I leave you with. Encouragement. Peace be with you.

From Cain (Genesis 4) to the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25), biblical texts recount the violence perpetrated by individuals and nations upon another. Not even the Advent story can escape the painful reminder that suffering belongs to the human condition. A Roman king willfully chooses to slaughter innocent children to protect himself from one child of peace. Violence is part of the biblical story, and it's certainly part of our world.

Psalm 37 expresses outrage at the violence and injustice of the world, but with a peace that comes from faith. Not blinded to the evil of this world, the psalmist refuses to succumb to its terror and pain: "Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret – it leads only to evil. For the wicked will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD will inherit the earth" (37:7-8).

We face the temptation to meet violence with violence, to retaliate in God's name against those who inflicted violence in the name of God. This psalmist implicitly warns against such action.

In the face of violence, Christians are called to be the voice of God, the voice of peace, in this world. We are not called to be God's tools of judgment. A Quaker songwriter, Carrie Newcomer, struggles to understand war waged in God's name (from, "I Heard an Owl"):

*The questions fall like trees of dust,
and rise like prayers above,
But the only word is courage,
and the only answer, Love.
So don't tell me hate is ever right
or God's will.*

*These are the wheels we
put in motion ourselves.
The whole world weeps, and is weeping still.
Though shaken, I still believe the best of what
we all can be,
And the only peace this world can know,
can only come from Love.*

Peace will not happen unless we learn to break the cycles of violence that threaten our world. We cannot make peace unless we learn to trust that justice belongs to God. In the words of the Psalmist, echoed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "The meek shall inherit the earth" (Ps. 37:11; Matt. 5:5), and, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

peace

**Thursday
December 14**

Psalm 37:1-18

Isaiah 7:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Luke 22:1-13

Jim Nogalski
Associate Professor of
Old Testament
Interpretation,
School of Divinity

peace

**Friday
December 15**

Psalm 31

Isaiah 7:10-25

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Luke 22:14-30

Bob Carey

Chair, Department of
Communication Studies

My wife, Sharon, and I were eagerly awaiting the birth of our second child and quickly headed for the hospital as she began to suffer mild contractions. We spent what seemed like long hours waiting for the time to deliver. When the doctor told us that he needed to perform a caesarian, I ran to change into my scrubs and the nurses wheeled Sharon into the delivery room.

I walked into the delivery room and began videoing our cheerful delivery. As the doctor began to make the incision, Sharon asked if it should hurt so much. The doctor said it probably was just the scar tissue from her first c-section pulling. She replied that, no, she was feeling the cutting. The anesthesiologist reached over and cranked the knob on the gas. With a kindly pat he told me, "Don't worry dad, it'll be just fine." In my mind I thought, no one ever talks that way unless it's bad news.

What had been a peaceful expectation of our second child, suddenly turned into a nightmare for me. Fears flooded my brain. I heard Satan telling me, "I'm going to take your wife and your child." I continued videoing the whole event, terrified to move. The doctor removed Hannah, and handed her off to the nurse who immediately ambu-bagged her. When she began crying, the nurse held her

up for me to see and then rushed her out of the room. My view from behind the camera seemed surrealistic. Sharon was now in a deep sleep from the anesthesia and I stumbled out the door to see Hannah in the nursery.

My peace totally left when the doctor told me Hannah had serious problems and would be placed in the neo-natal unit for care. I stumbled out to the joyful crowd who had been wagering on the sex and weight of our new child. My news brought the laughter to a halt. My family and friends came to my side offering prayer.

Later that evening as I climbed into my car to head for home, I quietly asked God for peace. I turned on the radio as I left the hospital parking lot. My ride home was somehow filled with just one song, Deneice Williams' hit, "Healing." God had showed me hope and grace on my ride home. That night I slept peacefully and awoke to a new morning, knowing that God would provide the peace in our hearts to deal with any hurdle that Hannah would face in life.

For over 16 years he has provided us peace on a daily basis. During this joyful season, it is my prayer that you too will know the peace only He can provide.

This past summer, my son read all six episodes of the Scholastic edition of Star Wars. Episode I, "The Phantom Menace," centers on a young boy, Anakin Skywalker, who appears to have all the qualities needed to become one of the elite Jedi knights, protectors of the universe. Anakin is examined in front of the Jedi council, but the examination is more revealing than he expected as he is questioned about his fears.

Yoda, one of the Jedi Masters, asks Anakin, "How feel you?" "Cold, sir," Anakin replied without thinking. He had been cold ever since he left home. "Afraid are you?" Master Yoda said. "No, sir," Anakin said, startled. That wasn't the kind of cold he'd been thinking of at all. Beside Master Yoda, Mace Windu stirred. "Afraid to give up your life?" Oh, that's what they meant. Anakin hesitated. "I don't think so." "Be mindful of your feelings," Mace Windu said. "Your thoughts dwell on your mother," the alien Ki-Adi-Mundi added.

"I miss her," Anakin admitted. "Afraid to lose her, I think," Master Yoda said almost gleefully. "What's that got to do with anything?" Aren't Jedi allowed to have mothers? "Everything," Master Yoda's scratchy voice was emphatic. "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger; anger leads to hate; hate...leads to suffering."

"I am not afraid?" Anakin said angrily. Did they want him to fail? Master Yoda thrust his head forward, studying Anakin. "A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. I sense much fear in you."

Anakin took a deep breath. As he had done before, he crushed his fear down inside him until it almost did not exist. Almost. Hoping that would be good enough, he raised his chin and said quietly, "I am not afraid" (Wrede, Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace, p.129).

Often we crush our fear down inside us until it almost does not exist and we attempt to make it on our own. That's when the downward spiral begins - when confidence in God becomes self-confidence. "When I felt secure, I said, 'I will never be shaken'" (Psalm 30:6). But the Psalmist reminds us that this false sense of security only leads to suffering. Even still, we are not outside of God's watchful care. If only we would cry out to God as the Psalmist did, "Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me; O LORD, be my help" (Psalm 30:10).

Advent reminds us that peace and security do not come from outward circumstances or from confidence in ourselves. Peace comes from confidence in the One who is the Prince of Peace, the One who turns mourning into dancing and removes our sackcloth to clothe us with joy so our hearts can sing again.

peace

**Saturday
December 16**

Psalm 30
Isaiah 8:1-15
2 Thessalonians 3:6-18
Luke 22:31-38

Tracy C. Jessup
Assistant Dean of Students
and Minister to the
University

joy

Sunday December 17

Psalms 63:1-8
Isaiah 13:1-13
Hebrews 12:18-29
John 3:22-30

T. Perry Hildreth
Associate Professor
of Philosophy

*"...this means that things on earth will be shaken so that only eternal things will be left."
Heb. 12:27*

Sometimes things fall apart, sometimes things decay, sometimes there is loss. Sometimes the heavens and the earth shake, and we are reminded again of who we are and who God is.

In May of this year, I stood beside my mother's hospital bed and said these words: "Depart, O Christian Soul, out of this world; In the Name of God the Father Almighty who created you; In the Name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you; in the Name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you. May your rest be this day in peace, and your dwelling place in the Paradise of God." When we are so cursed and so blessed as to visit with Death intimately, he speaks truths that bring us to our senses. He speaks to us of the brevity, vanity, and transience of human life. He speaks to us of restoration and wholeness in a world to come. He whispers to us rumors of the Eternal.

In the moments surrounding my conversation with Death, in a moment of deep pain and grief, in a moment that felt something like

judgment, Christ came to visit me. Perhaps he was there all along, but the things that Death told me helped me see more clearly. Yes, Christ came to visit in the disguise of the pastoral counselor and the pastor and the nurses and loving friends and family. At other times—times when the ground was not collapsing beneath my feet—I probably would not have known that he was there.

We prepare for Christ's coming aware that we do not know when or how we might meet him. We expect that Christ will "come again in glory to judge both the living and dead." We rehearse this final judgment at many moments in our lives. When our world is shaken, we may catch some small glimpse of the Eternal. In such times of clarity, we should not be surprised to find ourselves visited by the Christ.

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

As an only child, I did not grow up around kids. When Kristen, my wife, said she was pregnant, I was excited and anxious. In fact, most of you would call it scared to death! I had no experience with newborns and, in fact, Kristen had to show me how to put a diaper on a stuffed animal to help me prepare to take care of Madison.

The day Madison was born, I got to witness a miracle. I witnessed my child come into the world. At that moment, I knew beyond faith there was a God. I saw this precious little child, my precious little child come into the world and take her first breath. I experienced the intense joy of holding Madison, and I experienced the love a parent has for their child.

Then there was the realization, "Wow—my wife and I were responsible for the development of a little person." I was responsible. How could I do it? There is no sacrifice my wife and I would not make to ensure Madison is cared for and loved.

It hit me that if I loved this little girl so much, how much more did God love us? God loved

us so much he gave his only begotten son to hang on a cross for our sins. So we could have eternal life and fellowship with him.

As a new parent, it is hard for me to comprehend that type of love. I can't imagine the sacrifice of your child, your flesh and blood. But I know that our Heavenly Father loves us that much. That fact leads me to the peace to know that if I put my faith in the Lord, it all will be all right. He will provide for all our needs.

He loves us! We can rejoice!

joy

**Monday
December 18**

Psalm 41
Isaiah 11:1-9
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 3:16-21

Tony Setzer
Head Men's Soccer
Coach and Instructor in
Physical Education

joy

Tuesday December 19

Psalm 45

Isaiah 11:10-16

Revelation 20:1-10

John 5:30-47

Paul Etter

Director of Choral

Activities and Coordinator

of Sacred Music

Shhh . . . don't tell my wife that I'm letting you know this secret—today is her birthday. It's not exactly something that she publicizes, probably because, like many of us, she doesn't want to keep getting older. I suppose that it is better than the alternative, and birthdays can be fun, for both those who are doing the "celebrating" and those who provide the gifts and cake. Some (untold by me) years ago her birth brought great joy to her parents, the first child in their family. And she continues to bring joy to them and now me, as we've now been married for 18 years. I'm proud to be known as her husband.

I also remember my son's day of birth on a cold January day, and how much I beamed with pride. We had other plans (though somewhat tentative as the due date was near), but those were quickly changed as family and friends were phoned about the exciting news. He was now my priority. I love spending time with him, and find great enjoyment in being his father.

As we prepare ourselves for the celebration of our Savior, let me encourage you to say a special thank you today to our Lord for the joy that our families bring, and for bringing them into our lives. Sure, we get upset from

time to time with those around us that we love so much—that's just part of life. But, if you're like me, I consider my family to be a great source of delight. I cannot imagine my life without them.

Particularly during this advent season, may your life be a delight to the Lord. Find your joy in Him, love Him, and spend time with Him. The reflection of the birthday of our Lord is a great time to rekindle that flame of spiritual passion and find our delight in Him. Thank Him for allowing you to be part of His family.

Advent is about promise. The theme of promise emerges early in the biblical message and is a central focus throughout all of scripture. Promise is crucial for everyone in every time. Promise is essential in the face of so much that is burdensome and bleak. There are times in every person's life when promise is the only way to make it through the day.

The psalmist in Psalm 119 reminds us of the value of promise. The promise of God gives life. Further reading in the psalm makes it clear that the promise of God offers respite from the overwhelming threats that otherwise might swallow up life itself. Whether it is arrogant and deceitful people or threats of another kind, the Torah way of life, life founded on God's law, enables those who follow it to endure, even to flourish.

The prophet in Isaiah 28 presents the element of promise which we would often prefer to ignore. Promise is about righteousness and justice. The human hunger for power and the arrogant exercise of it contradict the purpose and intention of God. In a given moment, such disregard may appear unchallenged. The biblical word of promise reminds us that those who consider God's promises no more than empty words will ultimately discover to their dismay that God will act. Security concerns

in ancient Judah led to misplaced priorities. In the post 9/11 world, we have all become familiar with obsessive attention to security. Judah's concerns seem very familiar to us. The prophet's words to Judah remain applicable. Ignoring God's demand for righteousness and justice, even in the service of security, becomes no more than a covenant with death.

Of course, Advent focuses primarily on promise which appears in the dusty streets of Judah in the world of the first century. Two babies introduce that configuration of God's promise. The advent text for today from Luke's gospel speaks of the first of those babies, the child to be born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. John the Baptist would proclaim a call for repentance and prepare the way for the ultimate promise fulfilled in his cousin.

In all of these scriptures, however, the element of promise is "not yet." To the frustration of some of his followers, Jesus did not "bring in the kingdom" in the manner they had hoped. He, too, looked for that which was "not yet." Full realization of God's promise remains future, whatever the context. Somehow, though, the words of the psalmist ring true, perhaps because they always look forward. "Your promise gives me life." May the promise of God guide our advent experience.

joy

**Wednesday
December 20**

Psalm 119:49-72

Isaiah 28:9-22

Revelation 20:11-21:8

Luke 1:5-25

Gerald L. Keown
Professor of Old Testament
Interpretation,
School of Divinity

joy

Thursday December 21

Psalm 50
Isaiah 29:9-24
Revelation 21:9-21
Luke 1:26-38

Steve Varley
Vice President for
Development

A physician friend of mine was explaining the pharmacology of caffeine to me the other day. Some of the chemistry and nervous system biology explanations were forgotten as quickly as I heard it, but his elegant conclusion stuck with me: "Caffeine is just the gas pedal, it's not the fuel. At some point you have to fill up on something real."

For the reflective Christian, there is a great divide between happiness and joy. Not that there is anything wrong with being happy or experiencing pleasure. It's just that being happy is like having our spiritual gas pedal pushed. My favorite activity these days is finding new ways to push that "happy gas pedal" with my infant daughter. Finding some new way to play with her and make her laugh is a lot of fun for both of us. I think many adults have some degree of control over when we are happy: we go for a jog, we spend time with friends, we engage in our hobbies. We get to tap the gas pedal a bit here and there and manage our lives in a way that help moderate our emotions.

Joy, it turns out, is quite different. The Christian apologist C.S. Lewis writes in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* that joy is an intense, stabbing feeling that might be better

equated with unhappiness or grief than with pleasure. The big difference between joy and those negative emotions is that we desperately want to feel joy again once we have had it. No one would ever exchange simple pleasure for real joy. The problem is, as Lewis writes, that "Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is."

I think Advent allows for us the possibility of joy. God does not want us to respond with ritual and rote behavior where we should be thoughtful and in thanksgiving (Psalm 50: 8-13).

When we prepare our hearts this way it is most clear that our moments of joy are only pointers to something "other and outer:" they are moments where we brush up against the Lord, where we catch a glimpse of Him through our relationships and through His creation, when both our pleasures and our hurts fade to insignificance, and our spiritual gas tanks are filled with something real. Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

"I waited patiently for the Lord" (Ps. 40:1).

Maybe patience had marked my waiting in the past. But, to be honest, patience was not a fruit I displayed often, especially not on this day. I sat at my desk at the church, performing the duties expected of me. Very likely on the surface the torment was not obvious, but in my heart it was real. I was faithful. I was dedicated to my task. I loved God and people. The list of what I was could be long, but on this day I was obsessed by what was missing. Joy.

I started writing. It was a letter to God about the torment of my heart. It was replete with reminders of my faithfulness but flavored with disappointment in God. I felt as if He had failed me. Why could I not feel the joy I preached about and read about and longed for? Why had God not given me this most basic of blessings? I poured my heart onto the pages of this letter, describing my hurt and disappointment. It went on and on.

After several minutes of writing, honestly laying my heart before the Lord, I paused to observe that my heart had changed. There was a peace that overwhelmed me, bringing a deep satisfying joy into my heart. God

had heard the pleas of my heart, even as I attempted to write them on the pages before me. I closed the letter with the words of gratitude, "Thank you Lord for hearing my cry and for giving me joy."

I had not waited patiently for the Lord. In my impatience I cried out and He heard my cry. I was desperate, but He was there. The Psalmist, while more patient than I, reflects the new song in my heart. "... [H]e inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (Ps. 40:1b-3a).

joy

**Friday
December 22**

Psalm 40
Isaiah 31:1-9
Revelation 21:22-22:5
Luke 1:39-48a

Ron Williams
Professor of New Testament

joy

Saturday December 23

Psalm 55

Isaiah 33:17-22

Revelation 22:6-11, 18-20

Luke 1:57-66

Sara Hartman
Secretary,
Department of Religion
and Philosophy

Leaving friends and familiar comforts to start anew is an intimidating undertaking. When my family moved to Boiling Springs last summer, I was torn between the sadness of leaving what had been home for several years, and the joy of beginning a new chapter in our lives. My lingering apprehension vanished once we settled in and realized what an amazing place we had chosen to live in. Our neighbors welcomed us with open arms and every new person we saw greeted us with a smile. I was filled with joy and uplifted with the knowledge that we had made the right decision in moving to North Carolina.

At the end of the summer, a new family with three girls moved in across the street from us. Determined to make them feel just as welcome as we felt moving in, I took my girls over to meet them. In the next hour, I learned that although they made the move from Wisconsin, their belongings did not. I could only imagine the feeling of despair. They were hopeful that the movers would bring their things tomorrow or the next day or the day after that (they did not). As the days of waiting turned into weeks, others in the neighborhood heard of their predicament as well. Soon our new neighbors had a temporary kitchen table and chairs, mattresses

for their girls, some basic cooking utensils, and a few toys for their girls to play with. Some of us also shared meals and homegrown vegetables to help ease their burden.

At a time when their lives were turned upside down, and they were unsure of the outcome, they never lost hope. Offering them what little we had to help them through this difficult journey gave me immense joy. I was reminded of the happiness that can come from helping others. It was inspiring to see a family bonded together through the difficult ordeal they faced. I hope that when they look back on their move to Boiling Springs, they look past the difficult beginning and remember how welcomed they were. I hope the knowledge that others were so willing to help them gives them comfort and joy.

This Christmas season it is important to remember that joy and happiness can come from unexpected places. Our wonderful new neighbors never lost faith or questioned the path that they had taken. "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you" (Psalm 55: 22).

Many of us turn to the book of Psalms to find strength for the living of our days and nights. The Psalter is a prayer book as well as a hymn book. As a prayer book, the psalms embrace the range of human emotion and present a God who cares about God's creation. As a hymn book, the psalms call us to sing together the joys that we feel as well as the sorrows we experience.

By Christmas Eve, most of us have prayed and have sung. We've listened to the children's choirs, to the sanctuary choir, and to the people standing next to us as we've prayerfully sung about the God who has given us the gift of life in Jesus Christ.

Maybe some of us wish we could go back and relive the expectancy that filled us through Advent. Most of us like to feel hopeful. But there comes a time when we ask, "Does what we have felt, prayed and sung translate into lives that glorify God?"

Psalm 24 is a poignant reminder that to follow God is to live a certain way. From a Christian perspective, we ask, "So what? What difference does it make that Christ has come to live in us and to make us his 'new creatures?'"

The psalm is a song that the Hebrews sang as they ascended the hill to enter their sacred temple. As they sang, the people cried, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and who do not swear deceitfully."

To be in the presence of God is for you and me to become more humane, more caring, more compassionate, and more of what God wants us to be. Our faith expresses itself in ethics and morals that reflect the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

So, on Christmas Eve we continue to pray and to sing. In the midst of it, we also ask, "How do we live our lives so that others see the Christ who has been born in us?"

love

**Sunday
December 24**

Psalm 24
Isaiah 35:1-10
Revelation 22:12-17, 21
Luke 1:67-80

Charles Bugg
Dean and Professor
of Church Ministry
and Leadership.
School of Divinity

love

Monday December 25

Psalm 98

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

A. Frank Bonner

President of the University

A pervading theme in the scripture passages for today is communication—though communication seems too paltry a word to convey the meaning behind that theme. Originally God spoke “in many and various ways by the prophets” (Hebrews 1:1). Beautiful are the feet of the messenger “who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation” (Isaiah 52:7). And the response to the Lord is singing of praise and joy—“a joyful noise before the King, the Lord” (Psalm 98:6).

But God’s message was fully communicated when “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:2) and was made complete when “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). So it is, I think, that the Advent message—God’s message of love, grace, and salvation—is not complete when it is merely received. It is fulfilled in each of us only when it is embodied in service through love and thus communicated through us to others.

A Christmas memory that will always haunt me is one from an early age—elementary school as I recall. My Sunday School teacher gave each of us one dollar (worth more then than today!) with instructions to use

the money during the Christmas season to benefit directly someone much less fortunate. On the first Sunday after Christmas we were each to report to the class how we had used the money. I still remember the expression of disappointment on the teacher’s face when I had to admit that I had failed to make sufficient effort and in the end had simply given the money to the Salvation Army. (How much easier it is today to write a check than to actively convey the message of God’s love.) To this day that dollar is a reminder of lost opportunities to convey fully—through action and through love—the message of God’s redeeming love and grace.

As we celebrate Christmas and look forward to the New Year, opportunities to communicate God’s love will be all around. May God’s message find fulfillment in each of us.

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