

2011

Advent 2011

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Recommended Citation

Last, F. M. (2011). Devotion title. Advent 2011. Gardner-Webb University. Retrieved from Gardner-Webb Digital Commons.

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Adven





I loved Christmas as a child. The atom bomb and I are about the same age, so I cannot remember a time when I was not aware that we could blow ourselves up 53 times over. (One of my friends once asked, "Wouldn't once be enough?")

Each year, though, the Christmas season brought a different and wonderful way of living. Everyone seemed so HAPPY. We genuinely did experience peace and joy, love and hope. I looked forward to the season with great anticipation and always felt a sense of grief as it ended, knowing the brightness it brought would go with it. I always wondered, and I suspect many of you do as well, why we were incapable of living Christmas 365 days of the year.

Now, with more than six decades under my belt, I no longer grieve that we can't live Christmas 52 weeks a year; rather I marvel that we pull it off for roughly four weeks. Billy Graham was once asked about the theological concept of total depravity. Graham responded that "total depravity" doesn't mean that every one of us is as bad as we can possibly be every minute of every day, but rather it means that we spoil everything we touch, even our efforts to do good.

If we are honest, we know the problem lies with us, not God. The poem, *One for all Newborns*, by Thylas Moss, relates the struggles the author had with her human mother, but there is this sobering stanza: "I treated God

badly also; he is another parent watching his kids through a window, eager to be proud of his creation, looking for signs for spring."

God came to us in the baby Jesus, and we treated him badly. There is nothing we can do to change that history, but the power to live Christmas 365 days a year is an option still very much open to us. God will come to us, again and again. One of those times will be this Advent season. God is watching us, eager to be proud of us.

It takes a good many people to make this little book possible. Thanks especially to my co-editors, Dr. Danny West and Dr. T. Perry Hildreth, for their help in enlisting writers, editing submissions, and working almost year-round on the guide. Thanks to colleagues in University Advancement and University Creative Services for all the good work they do in helping with funding, design, and distribution of the guide. And thanks especially to you, the reader, for the support you give to Gardner-Webb from year to year. We wish you a meaningful Advent and a very happy Christmas season.



ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2011

Dr. Sheri Adams
Professor of Theology and
Christian History
School of Divinity



SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 27

Dr. Paula Fontana Qualls
Professor of Religion
Department of Religious
Studies and Philosophy

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21: 25-36

Moments of victory. Aren't they sweet? This past summer, I celebrated one as I ran to the top of the "Rocky Steps" in Philadelphia, PA. Some of you may remember the 72 stone stairs leading to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They were pictured in several of the Rocky films with the boxer, Rocky Balboa, sprinting across them as part of his intensive training. My jaunt to the top was a moment of empowerment, success and victory. In the final seconds of my ascent, time stood still. I found myself identifying with the Italian Stallion: all of his struggles; all of his victories. I was Rocky. And I could do anything.

Rocky moments are invigorating, and somehow the anticipation of them spills over into many areas of life. You see, I have this fantasy that everything in my life can be a Rocky moment—a situation where I have complete control and victory. Wouldn't that be great? Total control over every situation? Well... perhaps in the movies, but when the popcorn is gone, and the credits begin to roll, I am left with the stinging reality that I am able to control very little. My children still argue and get sick, my husband is still from Mars and I am from Venus, my students are not always perfect, and the larger world is in utter turmoil. Tsunamis, earthquakes, murder, deception, suffering, injustice, slavery, oppression, and predictions of the end of the world fill the news. How do we cope in the midst of such chaos and uncertainty?

I continue to discover that strength and hope are not found in the Rocky moments, but in surrender and weakness. In my most challenging moments, both professionally and personally, I am learning to pray, "Lord, I cannot do this alone, please work through me, for your grace is sufficient, and your power is made manifest in my weakness." I am always surprised by the provision of the Lord. Hope is birthed in these moments of brokenness and desperation. Strength flows out of the surrender of my control as I release my concern and fear to the Lord. I have more patience with my children. I am able to speak and teach after an exhausting night caring for a sick child. Greater insight is found as I deal with people. A new motivation to speak out against slavery and injustice overcomes me. Prayers are deeper and more effective. I am changed.

I can identify with the words of Jeremiah which bring hope in the midst of a desperate and dark situation. "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'that I will perform the good thing which I have promised....'" As I stand daily at the bottom of a new set of "Rocky Steps," I have hope...in the Lord.

I have always been intrigued by war stories and, in particular, by the testimonies of those who have endured unthinkable violence at the hands of other human beings. Unable or unwilling to represent such baffling and horrific experiences through normal literary modes, these writers often bend and shatter the rules of storytelling, leaving us readers to make sense of the shards and, if possible, to put the pieces back together.

Recently, I had the privilege of teaching an inquiry course called “War and Representation” to 46 college freshmen, most of whom barely remember a time before the War on Terror and several of whom had watched friends die in Iraq and Afghanistan. The text that most captivated my students was Kurt Vonnegut’s sci-fi novel *Slaughter-House Five*, one of the last century’s most compassionate and enduring antiwar stories.

In a pivotal scene, the novel’s protagonist Billy Pilgrim, who “has come unstuck in time,” watches a movie about American fighter planes during WWII—but he watches it in reverse. I won’t spoil the passage by giving away too many details, but imagine turning off the sound and watching a war play out in reverse. Decimation becomes reconciliation, enemies become goodwill ambassadors, and the very weapons of violence themselves become instruments of healing and peace. It’s one of the most beautiful passages I have ever read—and yet, it remains ironically and utterly hopeless. To Vonnegut’s mind, redemption is as unlikely as reversing time. History cannot be unwritten. So it goes.

But we know better. The prophet Isaiah promises that when “the mountain of the Lord’s temple” is “established as chief among the mountains... He will settle disputes for many peoples.” Like the Americans and Germans in Vonnegut’s dream vision, people from among the nations, who once were enemies estranged from one another, will finally “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

In Romans 15, Paul also emphasizes that Christ’s purpose in coming to us was to bring a spirit of unity, to reconcile our fractured relationships with the Father and with each other. Realizing that Christ came not just for the few but for us all, Paul insists we should “accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted us, in order to bring praise to God.”

History cannot be unwritten, but praise be to God that He intervened in history, rescuing us from darkness by the love of His Son. I am so thankful that Jesus came, that He initiated our sanctification not through violence but through sacrifice, and that we can rest in confident anticipation of the day when, finally, we will abide in peace.

Until then, and even now, “may the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.



MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 28

Matt Walters
Copy Writer and Editor

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 15:7-13



TUESDAY,
NOVEMBER 29

Dr. Gayle Bolt Price
Associate Provost for Schools

Isaiah 11:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

I have always loved Christmas.

I love the sounds—Christmas songs everywhere, Salvation Army ringers outside stores, steeple bells pealing carols. I love the smells—evergreen boughs, baking sugar cookies, simmering cider spiced with cinnamon. I love the sights—brightly wrapped packages with shiny bows, red berries and poinsettias against green leaves, candles, twinkling lights. I love the Christmas mood that many people don't like—a warm cape—expectancy, renewed hope in a world that even in the midst of pain, sadness, and undeniable evil sometimes bursts forth with goodness and love.

I love Advent worship. I shiver as I belt out "O come all ye faithful," "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," "Gloria, in excelsis deo," or try softly to croon "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." I marvel at images from scripture—Isaiah proclaiming to a grieving people about the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" who someday will usher in an age when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them"! Gospel writers telling in spare but vivid detail of shepherds gazing up in awe at a host of singing angels, of three wise men in royal robes dusty from a long journey on camelback, bowing with gifts before—of all things—a baby, in—of all places—a manger in a stable! How preposterous! What a thing to pin your hope on! Yet my heart knows that such strange Truth could not have been made up.

But this year Christmas will be different.

On June 27, 2011, I had surgery to remove a large ovarian cyst that turned out malignant, followed by

eighteen weeks of intensive chemotherapy that my doctor tells me I have every reason to hope has killed errant cancer cells which might grow into new tumors. While I believe I am cancer-free, I know that only God knows how many tomorrows any of us have. So I ponder how my life has changed and what having cancer has taught me besides a more profound awareness of life's fragility.

Even while I lay in the hospital filled with fear and pain—in both spirit and body—I began to experience an extraordinary outpouring of love and grace. Through the difficult days of recovery and strength-sapping chemotherapy intended to make me well, hosts of wonderful people (many of whom were Gardner-Webb people and some of whom I didn't even know) were "praying earnestly night and day that [they] may see me face to face and supply what is lacking in [my] faith." And as they prayed (often without my awareness), I was—in that hot, dark summer—somehow given the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christmas. God through His grace made me "abound in love" so that I would be ready as I have never been before for—whenever it happens—"the coming of our Lord Jesus and all His saints."

So this Advent I am thankful for glorious new pictures playing in my head along with the much-loved ones of Christmases past—of wonderful, loving, praying people sent to minister to me like angels. This year Christmas will be different. It will be better than ever before.

Thank you, God, for Your amazing love and grace shown to us through our Lord Jesus! Allelujah! Amen.

Each of my 13 completed marathons entailed unique personal challenges and triumphs. The commonality between each of these races has always been the incredible sense of hope at the start of training, when everything seems possible, and during the last 1.2 miles, when I am relatively certain I will finish the race. I decided to share that feeling of hope with my Gardner-Webb family, along with the myriad of additional benefits associated with an active lifestyle.

This past year, I had the pleasure and honor of leading two groups of Gardner-Webb University faculty, staff, and friends through a half marathon training experience that culminated in over 25 first time runners completing a 13.1 mile course while raising money for the Dr. Dee Hunt Scholarship [<http://gardner-webb.edu/dee-hunt-scholarship>].

The idea for the half marathon challenge came to me while on a training run for my latest marathon experience, and I will admit to feeling a bit overwhelmed by the response. Ideas that seem great at mile 15 of a 20 mile training run often fizzle out when the clarity of perpetual motion is replaced by the sanity that accompanies hydration and rested legs. I expected three runners to accept my challenge: my supportive wife, my running buddy, and myself; however, we packed the room with nervous, yet hopeful would-be half marathoners.

Over the course of 15 weeks we dedicated ourselves to our training program, and I watched a hodgepodge of hesitant stumblers turn in to a group of (somewhat) confident runners. Along the way, I was witness to much more than a physical transformation within each of the runners. Each runner experienced a momentary taste of the satisfaction associated with a singular focus on a goal and the joyful satisfaction of accomplishing that goal.

However, you do not get up from your couch and attempt to run 13.1 miles. Training for a half marathon is a process with no quick fixes or shortcuts. Running requires making some difficult choices, recommitting yourself each day to some distant goal, taking inventory on what really matters in your life and cutting out that which inhibits progress, not giving up when you stumble, and enjoying where you are and what you are doing at that moment because, as difficult as running 13.1 miles might seem, it could always be much worse; you could be not running!

Running serves as a great metaphor for our Christian walk, and the hope and satisfaction we experience as runners at the start and finish of each race is only a small slice of the hope and satisfaction realized by the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. As you run your race, whatever it may be, remember that your Lord will strengthen and steady your weak knees, and as you enter that last mile, be strong, do not fear, your God will come to save you.



WEDNESDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

Dr. Jeff Hartman
Assistant Professor
Department of Physical
Education, Wellness, and
Sport Studies

Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 1

In March of 2011, Gardner-Webb students, faculty, and staff broke ground for the Gardner-Webb Community Garden. Our original purpose in creating the garden was to provide a place for students to learn how to grow food and to donate the food to meet needs in the community. Now I grew up eating food from my mother and grandmother's garden, but somehow I never actually learned how to grow food.

Needless to say, this year's garden journey has been a learning experience. For example, the Community Garden student leader, Brittany Mote, and I learned pretty quickly that when one worm starts to eat your precious broccoli plants, sooner or later, 30 worms will be feasting on the food you toiled over—or that some mornings you can arrive at the garden to find out that some really nice deer decided to have a midnight snack called okra, leaving you heartbroken and without any okra for the community. Once you learn those lessons, they usually stick. And I expected to learn those types of lessons.

Surprisingly, this year's garden experience taught me a lot more than just practical gardening lessons. The garden has taught me about the beauty of the unifying qualities of the earth. Sometimes we become so disconnected with nature that we forget how God created it with a genius design. There is beauty in seeing 15 students working with their spades and hoes, having conversations of their lives' passions and the things they have in common. They are building relationships and helping to feed our community with every hole dug and word spoken. God created it that way.

I am also now aware of the unique beauty of the changing of the seasons. This past summer was just plain hot. We knew it, our electric bills knew it, and the

precious garden knew it. It was wonderful to get the harvest of summer beans, squash, tomatoes, and melons, but through the heat, there was a yearning for cooler days along with a yearning for the fall crops of greens, potatoes, and root vegetables. And then, at the end of this growing season, the desire to rest and allow the ground to rest has been uniquely fitting. God created it that way.

The most beautiful truths that I have seen through the garden are the truths of the nature of God. We are able to work together to feed our community through this project, living out God's call to justice and righteousness for the poor. We are also able to see how God's creation so often reminds us of the love of God. God created every piece with God's design in mind, and we have the opportunity to be a part of that. We have an opportunity to give our time and efforts to those who have less, while experiencing the beauty of creation we so often take for granted.

So my encouragement to you through this winter season is to reflect on nature. Recognize that the dead leaves on the ground are actually bringing life to the plants around them. Notice that though the winter is cold and harsh, there is something significant about cold and harsh times in our lives and that spring is on its way, with all the new life and beauty surrounding it. I also encourage you to do something with your time. There might not be a garden to volunteer in, but there are plenty of homeless shelters, nursing homes, and after school programs that you can be directly involved with. There is so much beauty in simplicity. Take time to appreciate it.

Stephanie Richey

Community Engagement

Coordinator

Office of Student Engagement

Psalms 146:5-10

James 5:7-10

I know cousins. I grew up a year younger than my cousin Charles. He was the country boy and I was from the “city,” a town of 500 people some 200 miles away. But every summer from age eight or nine I got to go south and spend several weeks with Charles. We chased water moccasins in the Southern Illinois swamps, we tried things we probably should have left alone, and we talked. For hours we talked—while we lolled through the summer fields even late into every starry night. We grew closer than I have ever been to anyone in my life. We learned about ourselves, and about life together. We laughed and bared our young souls, our fantasies, fears, and dreams to each other.

Yes, I know Jesus and John, the one called the baptizer. Cousins they were. Born six months apart to mothers who were as close as mothers can be. We meet John and Jesus when they are young adults. But you cannot read their stories without knowing how very close they were. I am certain that every summer Jesus, the city boy, looked forward to heading out to spend time, weeks probably, with his cousin John. They did the things boys do, and they talked. They wandered and talked incessantly in those desert hills that John knew so well. Even into the night as they camped—in the same desert hills that Jesus would later return to alone as he wrestled with his own future. That story is told in Matthew 4.

It was in those intimate, youthful, late-night dusk and campfire talks that John, gentle, savvy youngster that he was, gradually became aware, even as Jesus himself probably did, of just who this younger cousin was and why he had been born. It was something that at age 12 Jesus would hesitantly begin to articulate in public. Remarkably, John grasped early, long before anyone else did, that his cousin was the Promised One who was to come into the world. He knew—he really knew—that the cousin to whom he was so closely bonded was the hope for which God’s people had longed, the one who would take away the sin of the world. Finally the pain and agony so articulately described by ancient prophets like Amos were about to be overcome.

By early adult years cousins drift apart, not leaving behind their deep and abiding connections, but going their own ways. John determined, probably with Jesus’ humble consent, to devote his life to boldly announcing to the world the arrival of Jesus, still his cousin, but the source of the world’s hope for salvation. As John was imprisoned and then killed for his incisive and courageous preaching for repentance, Jesus, grieving and thinking back on their long, youthful days together, would tell those around him that among all those born of women none was ever greater than his cousin John. The Messiah had finally come, but one can easily see him slipping away to weep in private.



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 2

Dr. Joseph M. Webb
Professor of Communication
Studies

Amos 2:6-16
Matthew 11:2-11



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 3

Dr. Don Berry
Professor of Religious Studies
Department of Religious
Studies and Philosophy

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Matthew 1:18-25

The birth of Jesus, according to Matthew, began with a tragedy. Why would we see a tragedy in this text? Imagine for a minute that you are a young male 2,000 years ago. Your family has arranged a marriage with a young lady and soon she is to be your wife. You have dedicated your whole life to be righteous in the eyes of God by following God's laws. Everything seems to be great...until you learn that your fiancée has become pregnant. You are devastated by the news. The law is clear, and your actions are expected. You can bring charges of adultery and have her tried for a capital crime, or you can quietly divorce her. If you divorce her then her life may be spared, unless someone else brings the charge of adultery. No matter what you choose, your dreams of having a wife and family seem to have disappeared.

So much emphasis is placed on Mary in Luke's account of Jesus' birth, but Matthew views it through the eyes of Joseph. Two things stand out to me about Joseph in this story. First, he was a righteous man. God chose someone who feared God and who would be willing to listen to the voice of God. Second, he was a man of faith. Imagine that you were in his place and imagine the ridicule that you would receive when people knew that your fiancée was pregnant when you married. His faith in God was stronger than his fear of others' opinions.

Joseph found himself in a position where the world seemed to be crashing all around him, but his faith in God provided hope for his troubled heart. We speak of hope glibly when things are going well, but the real measure of hope comes when life circumstances create a crisis in our lives. We feel like the Psalmist who cries out "Bring us back, O God! Show us your mercy, and we will be saved!" Although we sing "Joy to the World" to celebrate Christmas, we must also recognize that Christmas is an emotional season for many because of the loss of a loved one, a severe illness in the family, not being able to be with family, family conflicts, etc. Jesus is called Emmanuel (God with us) which reminds us that no matter how many difficulties we face, the very presence of Christ is with us, and Christ's presence provides hope for every day of the year. As we prepare ourselves to celebrate the advent of Christ, we recognize that in Christ the world can have "Great Expectations" as we celebrate the birth of our Lord.

It is traditional at Advent for the church to remember the words and ministry of John the Baptist, that voice crying in the wilderness whose distinctive message prepared the way for the coming ministry of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke (3:3) tells us that John “went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

In the eyes of many, repentance is not a concept that has worn the test of time very well. It is an alien word that conjures up images of weeping and wailing. Or perhaps closer to home, we think of emotion-packed altar calls to turn from our sinful ways.

There may well be some images associated with repentance that are neither necessary nor helpful, but the act of repentance itself lies at the very foundation of the Christian life. Recently, as I was driving down the highway, my traveling companion pointed to the FedEx® truck ahead and asked if I had ever noticed the hidden arrow in the logo. I studied the logo and asked him not once but several times to explain what in the world he was talking about. He explained that in the “Ex” of the logo, between the “E” and the “x,” there is a white arrow pointing to the right. (If you go to the internet and search for the “FedEx arrow” you can see it, too.) While I was the last person in the car to finally see the arrow, the light did eventually switch on, so to speak, and the arrow became nothing short of obvious.

My friend's patient explanation led finally to a whole new way of seeing the logo. It hadn't changed, but my way of looking at it had altered dramatically. On a more important level, repentance is a similar event that we experience not just at the beginning, but also again and again in the course of the Christian life. In repentance we come to see, not just a logo, but the whole world in a markedly different light. We see ourselves as we stand before God and in our relationship to others. We see ourselves from a whole new perspective, God's perspective. We see our brokenness and those ways in which we push God out of our lives. To repent is to turn toward God and open ourselves to that remarkable peace which passes all understanding.

May your Advent Season be one of turning toward God and God's peace in preparation for that great adventure of the Christian life!



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Dr. Ben Leslie
Provost and Executive
Vice President
Professor of Religion

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Kheresa Harmon
Director of Admissions
School of Divinity

Nahum 1:15
James 3:18

On June 8, 1972, canisters of napalm pelted southern Vietnam. The ferocious flames fed voraciously on a tiny village. Kim Phuc was nine years old, and the napalm's burn temperature of 1,200 degrees Celsius incinerated her clothes and charred her flesh. As the hungry inferno devoured her village, a photojournalist pulled out his camera. The image captured on film was that of Kim running, burned and naked, through the fiery village.

Kim should have died. The doctors who treated her thought she had. Three days later Kim's parents found her in the hospital morgue—alive. Seventeen surgeries mended some of the visible wounds, but hatred and bitterness seethed inside her. When Kim was nineteen years old, she became a Christian. Her relationship with Christ changed her life, and Kim learned that she must forgive...and seek reconciliation.

One day Kim filled a tall, clear glass with black coffee. The black coffee symbolized her anger, hatred, bitterness, pain, and loss. She poured a little out every day. One day there was no coffee left to pour. Kim filled the glass with pure, clean water. With pen in hand, she wrote down the names of people and places that had caused her suffering. As dawn melted each night's darkness, Kim would arise, see the glass of water and the list of names, and she would pray. "The more I prayed," she shared, "the softer my heart became."

In 1996 Kim spoke at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. and expressed a longing to meet the pilot who dropped four canisters of napalm on her village. Kim yearned to tell him that she had forgiven him. The pilot was not present, but a man who helped with the coordination of the airstrike was. After the fiery attack on Kim's village, darkness had descended upon the man. He found himself broken by alcoholism and failed relationships. When Kim finished speaking, he pushed through the throngs of veterans to find Kim. They embraced. It was the in-breaking of the reign of the Messiah, who will bring peace, justice, and righteousness on earth, through his followers, called to be peacemakers, like Kim.

Compelled by the biblical mandate to live a life of forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation, Kim now shares her story globally, and she founded The Kim Foundation International in 1997. The foundation seeks to heal the wounds of children who are victims of war and to restore hope and happiness in their lives by providing medical care and counseling services.

What is the one thing we all search for in life? If I were to take a survey on this campus, I would get several different answers, but I believe we all long for peace—peace within ourselves and peace with the world.

Advent is a time we long to experience peace on earth. As believers, we may even long for that same type of peace that the shepherds experienced when the angels announced the birth of Christ with those memorable words, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:14)

Each year is different when celebrating Christmas with my family. Usually, my sister is the one who is unable to come home for the holidays, so I know she feels lonely. I know it's hard on my parents when one of their children is not able to be home for Christmas. One of my fondest memories that brought joy and peace to our family was when I surprised my parents with a gift. It was a gift that could never compare to the memories that we still hold on to until this day. On this particular Christmas, I returned to Kentucky to be with my parents and older brother. This was going to be a special Christmas because my brother and I were able to fly my sister in to surprise our parents. For the first time in five years we would be able to be in the same room with each other. On Christmas morning, we called my sister, Stephanie, who was still in Denver, and, as usual, opened our presents together over the phone.

Later in the day, I secretly left to go pick up my sister. When I arrived at the airport I was overcome by joy, and the feeling of peace overwhelmed me because I knew that this Christmas we would be celebrating as a complete family. I still recall my mother opening her eyes so big and shouting, “Oh, Oh, Oh, my goodness, Oh my goodness” when she saw Stephanie standing before her. We had not been together for over five years! I remember that my dad had tears in his eyes, knowing that his daughter had finally made it home for Christmas.

During the Christmas Season, we hold on to the hope that brings joy and peace because we have a gift given to us by our Lord. There is no greater gift than that of Jesus Christ. Of course, we are not immune to suffering, and there are times when this season can bring about pain or hurt because we have lost loved ones or possibly they live too far away for us to see. We may feel as though our peace is lost when we experience loneliness in this world. When we have the opportunity to unite with family during the holidays, we take great delight in sharing the love we have for each other and knowing where our hope comes from. It is from Jesus Christ!



TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 6

Stacy Mahler
Associate Minister to the
University for Pastoral Care

Ezekiel 37:26-28
Galatians 5:22-23



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Dr. Terry Casiño
Professor of Missiology &
Intercultural Studies
School of Divinity

Isaiah 55:12-13
Romans 8:1-6

Some people view peace as ideal but not realistic; others see peace as realistic, yet elusive. Peace could be a “disturbing” reality, although one could embrace it with an empowering quality. While the prophet Isaiah envisions peace in terms of opening up creative possibilities, the Apostle Paul describes peace as a relationship with the risen Christ. The biblical vision of peace unpacks the coexistence between the paradigms of redemption and potential: the first depicting forgiveness; the second portraying empowerment. These twin elements of peace inform each other in both spiritual and practical realms.

This deliberate combination found a practical application during a trip last summer that brought me, my wife, Cecilia, and Brian Robertson to India. Our acquaintance with one of our hosts, Hukato Naga, in Northeast India afforded us a spiritual and experiential testimony of these powerful twin elements of peace, namely, forgiveness and empowerment. Hukato is not the average successful businessman that one can rub shoulders with at any executive meeting. As one raised in a Baptist family, Hukato lived a life that basically went opposite his family's Christian background. His lifestyle as a youth was comparable to that of the Prodigal Son in the Gospels; he was more interested in initiating conflicts rather than resolving them as a son of a prominent family in his tribe. Feared by his peers, Hukato eventually turned his back on the religious ethos that guided him as a young boy. By the time he entered the university, Hukato's wanton habits and vices finally caught up with him; he was struck with illness that confined him to a hospital bed for months. His sickness was so severe that even the death of his beloved father was kept from him while doctors tried to save his own

life. When he finally surrendered his heart and life to Christ, he experienced the peace that he sought after for years.

Hukato, however, found out that even as a maturing Christian, forgiving people who have wronged him was easier said than done. He struggled with this for some time, until a personal study of the Scriptures led him to discover that dispensing forgiveness is the sole standard in measuring peace in the Christian life. “Peace in Christ,” Hukato stresses, “empowers a believer to forgive.” Dipeeka, Hukato's supportive wife, nods in affirmation. The Naga family now strives to live for the LORD, serve God's people, and support various ministries and missionary endeavors.

Hukato's vision for his beloved state of Nagaland, Northeast India includes spiritual renewal of church leadership and congregations, Naga people's re-rooting in their heritage and indigenous cultures, and the revival of economy in his land. Hukato confides that whenever he does business transactions, the LORD becomes first and foremost. Christ has set him free; hence, the experience of peace that enables him to forgive in both a spiritual and practical sense!

Our meaningful fellowship with Hukato and Dipeeka went past midnight at their posh compound. By the time our prayers ended, it was already 2 a.m. I went to bed that dawn with the couple's glaring testimony: Peace in Christ enables a believer to forgive others and live a spiritually empowered life. I left India last summer with a recaptured vision of the essence of Advent.

When asked to write for the Advent devotional guide my first thought was, why me? This thought was only reinforced when I reviewed the past contributions from people I revered. People whom I knew were more devout, more talented, and even more literate than I am. Even at my age and experience, I have not achieved these qualities. Although well accepted by some of my peers, and well tolerated by many, I recognize my feeble attempts to fit within the bell shape curve often falls short. Then, on second thought, I realized the Advent Season, a time of love, joy, hope and peace, is for all of us—those that fit the mold and those that do not. Therefore I agreed to write.

An occurrence this past summer refashioned what I believe is important. A freak accident resulted in an emergency room visit for my four-year-old grandson, Tyler. For the first time in my life I was in danger of losing someone I dearly loved. As a nurse, I especially felt helpless as the emergency room doctors and nurses worked frantically to save his life. I found the only thing I could do was pray.

Although I have been through periods of my life when I doubted my faith in Him, as I grew older my faith grew stronger. I could look back and see how God had provided for me and led me in the direction I needed to go. I had been the recipient of His grace before and knew I needed it now. I knew the power of prayer and in

the middle of the chaotic events occurring around me, as Tyler was scanned, intubated, and prepared to be airlifted to Charlotte, I made one phone call—to my GWU family—requesting prayer.

I know that the doctors and nurses were instrumental in Tyler's recovery. The assessments, the surgical intervention, and the care he received were made possible by God. But the one thing that made the difference in Tyler living or dying was not a result of human intervention. When the surgeons opened Tyler's skull the bleeding had already stopped—the power of prayer and His Grace.

When I was asked to write for the Advent devotional guide and reference Jeremiah 33:6-9—despite my feelings of unworthiness, I knew I had to share my story of health and cure. As He said, "I will cure them and reveal unto them the abundance of peace and truth." Through my story, I want to give to Him the "name of joy, a praise and honour before all the nations of the earth." From Him I have received Peace.

I pray that in this Advent Season we may all recognize what is important, feel the power of His Grace, and receive Peace.



THURSDAY
DECEMBER 8

Dr. Rebecca Beck-Little
Dean, School of Nursing

Jeremiah 33:6-9
Hebrews 12:14



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Jim Corn
Men's Tennis Coach

Isaiah 26:12-13
Philippians 4:7

The words of Philippians 4:7 became very real to me for the first time on July 1, 1986. Since that day God has let me experience it on an "as needed basis." On that day our minister, Dr. Gene Watterson, and our pediatrician, Dr. Paul Sarazen, walked back to my wife Penny and me in the ER waiting room shaking their heads and informing us that our Annie was gone—gone to be with Jesus.

She was almost nine years old, mentally handicapped, and she suffered from seizures. This last seizure was more than her little body could handle. As we said our goodbyes, I smelled her "little girl" hair and rubbed those "little girl" fingers for the last time. It was in that moment that I realized I would never again feel her head flat on my shoulder, arms around my neck, and her legs wrapped around my waist. I felt a pain, the depth of which I did not know existed and the pit of my stomach ached like never before.

Then it happened. In the midst of the worst pain imaginable, the "peace that surpasses all understanding" engulfed me. All I could think of was Annie on Jesus' lap giving him one of her big old wet kisses on the cheek, and that there were no more pills to take or needles to receive. She was free from her earthly infirmities. Now don't think that I was suddenly over her death and that the void was filled. Periodically, I still have an "Annie" day, hour, or moment, but over

the years God has allowed us "the peace" to live with it. Fortunately, Penny and I have two great sons, both of whom suffer from epilepsy which is controlled by medication. The "peace" has allowed us to not live in fear everyday though there have been some close calls with both sons through the years.

As we anticipate the birth of the "Prince of Peace" during this Advent season, I wish for you the "peace that surpasses all understanding." Thanks be to God for making it available to us all.

Western Christians observe the Advent season as both a time of expectant waiting for the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas as well as the anticipation of Christ's imminent return. I am struck by the contrast in images of the babe in the manger with the images of God's power and strength so vividly illustrated in Psalm 29. We begin to realize that Christ's birth was something far greater than the simple and familiar story of a poor family and their firstborn child. No, this was something incredible, something cosmic; something universal has just entered human space and time. Nothing will ever be the same.

The Advent season symbolizes the Christian spiritual journey as we affirm that Christ has come, that he is present in the world today, and that he will come again in power and glory. Advent is marked by a spirit of hope, expectation, and longing. It is this hope, however faint at times, that allows us to persevere in difficult times. In this season, we can all look forward with renewed anticipation to the reign of the Anointed One, a Messiah, who will bring peace, justice, and righteousness to the entire world.



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 10

Monte K. Walker
Vice-President,
University Advancement

Psalm 29
John 14:23-27



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 11

Charlie Barnett
Graduate Student,
School of Divinity
& School of Psychology
and Counseling

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

I remember when our children were younger, my favorite part of the day was bedtime. Smelling fresh and clean from their bath, they snuggled under the covers as the lights went out, and then my wife would sing an old family lullaby to send them into sleep. It was that cherished, sacred time of day when the world slowed down just long enough for us to reflect on all of the wonderful things that we had experienced with our children that day and to look forward with joyful expectation of what tomorrow might bring.

Life is more complicated these days. The demands of being a husband, father of two teenagers, full-time graduate student, and part-time employee pull me in multiple directions, all at the same time! As I read the passage in Zephaniah, I was painfully aware of how long it had been since I had rejoiced with all of my heart (Zephaniah 3:14) over much of anything. How unfortunate and how quickly the busy-ness of life creeps into every corner of our hearts and minds. As enemies go, I am increasingly convinced that busy-ness is to the 21st century Christian as the Romans were to the Nation of Israel! And as I read through the selection in Luke, I was reminded that people throughout history have often faced similar dilemmas. Solemnly, I began to wonder how many blessings, how many relationships, and how many Kingdom opportunities I have missed in all of the noise.

Through all of the chaos, clutter, and “chaff” (Luke 3:17), how often do we forget to slow down long enough to listen to the song that God wants to sing to His

children? To really listen to the songs which call us to repent, to renew, and to rejoice? In racing to meet the needs of everyone and everything else around us, we ourselves can miss The Gift. We can also miss the gifts that God continuously gives us each day. One of my favorite lines from the movie, Mr. Holland’s Opus suggests that “Life is what happens while we’re busy making other plans.” I contend that God is what happens while we’re busy making other plans! Will we ever heed the message of the prophets to listen and prepare?

Advent is just that...the opportunity to prepare. To anticipate. To listen. To be still. A time to do any business with God that we have been neglecting in order to more fully receive all that he has been preparing for us and preparing us for. The selection in Zephaniah also reminds us that our Lord “will take great delight in” and “rejoice over [us] with singing.” Will we be in tune enough with God to hear the song? Will we even be listening? Perhaps more importantly, what song would God have to sing to us right now in order to get our full attention?

My prayer and challenge for each of us during this Advent season is that we may learn to slow down long enough to more fully reflect upon the mystery of God’s Gift, to fully cherish and embrace each other as the community of God’s people, and to fully anticipate each holy note that compels us to receive and proclaim the Good News of Christ our Lord!

I was able to experience the "Joy of the Lord" first hand a few years ago. I was driving in to work one May 2005 morning feeling sorry for myself. My husband and I had separated and I was feeling very alone. I cried all the way to work and kept saying to God, "Where are you? Why don't you hear me? Don't you see how much I am hurting?"

When I arrived at work, I walked into my office and immediately heard someone say "the joy of the Lord is your strength." I looked around but didn't see anyone. Once I had logged into my computer I wondered if there was a verse that was from and found out there was—Nehemiah 8:10. And to my delight the beginning of the verse says, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." I can't begin to tell you how much better I felt after hearing and seeing God's words. As I began to pray more and more, other scriptures were given to me such as Philippians 4:4-7, "Rejoice in the Lord.... Don't be anxious about anything...."

That Thanksgiving, I was one of a group from our church to travel to Gulfport, Mississippi on a mission trip to help clean up after hurricane Katrina. In the months leading up to that trip and all through our stay, I was reminded over and over, "It's not about you, it's about Me (God) and helping others." It humbled me greatly that this God of the universe was concerned about whether or not I had joy and that I knew it was from Him. And He was asking me to show that joy and love to others in need.

In today's passages, there are wonderful reminders that God has given us the Holy Spirit to comfort us: He sent ME to help the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, to comfort all who mourn and grieve, to bestow a crown of beauty, to anoint with the oil of joy—instead of mourning, and to give a garment of praise—instead of a spirit of despair. In this season of Advent, may we all remember to give "joy" whenever and wherever possible. In everything we do, may we give God the praise and glory. Forever.



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 12

Becky Wright
Administrative Assistant to
the Provost and Executive
Vice-President

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Philippians 4:4-7



TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 13

Julia C. Turner
Graduate Student,
School of Psychology and
Counseling

Exodus 15:20-21
Luke 5:34

As a hospice social worker, I have spent countless hours with terminally ill patients and their families. Although some days are emotionally difficult, the rewards far outnumber the challenges. To me, one of the most interesting aspects of my work is hearing the life stories of my patients. From a therapeutic perspective, reminiscence often affirms that one's life holds purpose and meaning.

Many of my patients were children or young adults during the 1930-1940s era, experiencing the hardships of the Great Depression and World War II. As I listen to their stories, I learn that the grandmother I visit today was a war bride of the 1940s, who left her family in Italy to immigrate to the United States with her American groom. Another elderly lady, speaking with a German accent, tells me that she and her family fled from Europe in 1939, barely escaping the horrors of Nazism. On another day, I sit in the living room of a decades-old mill house, visiting a retired textile worker. He tells me that he began working in the cotton mill at age fourteen to help his family survive the Depression.

Now, you're probably wondering, "What do these memories have to do with Christmas?" I mentioned a young bride, leaving her parents behind, to begin a life with her new husband. Does this sound something like Mary, as she and Joseph departed for Bethlehem? And then there's a young girl, escaping the dictatorship

of Germany, who came to this country for safety. Sound similar to the flight of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus into Egypt, seeking protection from Herod's tyranny?

Finally, there is the elderly man who spent his entire life working in the cotton mill. He was unable to finish high school, but was brilliant with arithmetic. Although his talents could have taken him to college and led to a more comfortable life, he remained at home to care for those he loved. I am certain that Jesus worked hard, alongside Joseph, in a carpenter shop. And his earnings contributed to the family's income. At the end of His life on earth, Jesus also experienced how it felt to sacrifice for those He loves.

Jesus' birth at Bethlehem placed Him into a world filled with political tyrants and uncertainty about physical safety. He was born into a world which needed a Savior. He is the One who can understand the hardships we face, because He lived them too. He was here in a stable. He was here at Calvary. And He is here now, in the hearts of all who know Him. We are not alone. He is the reason we can rejoice at Christmas and every day. Emmanuel, God with us!

In 1994 I was offered a job as editor of *Missions Today*, the men's mission education magazine of the Brotherhood Commission. It meant a move to Memphis, Tennessee away from our comfort zone of close friends and family. But God was calling and we moved.

Sharon and I purchased a home, I went to Rwanda to cover the relief work following the genocide that occurred earlier that year, Sharon began teaching in an inner-city high school, and we were expecting our third child. Our lives seemed to be completely blessed.

My life was turned upside down six months later when the Southern Baptist Convention announced it was merging The Brotherhood Commission and two other agencies into the North American Mission Board. I knew I would be out of a job in less than two years.

Both Sharon and I knew God had called us to Memphis, yet our lives soon were in turmoil. Her obstetrician told her she needed to be on bed rest, my car was broken into and I lost much of my photo equipment, and my job was ending soon. But we held onto the belief that God was in control. There were days that were difficult, but He always pulled us through.

When I saw the posting in the Chronicle of Higher Education for a position at Gardner-Webb, I knew God was working. As I got out of the car to fly to my interview, Sharon commented, "We're moving to North Carolina aren't we?" Yes, it seemed that God had things on the move again and less than three months later we were settling into life at the Webb. God knows the plans He has for us.



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 14

Dr. Bob Carey
Associate Professor and
Chair, Department of
Communication Studies

Jeremiah 29:11-14
1 Thessalonians 5:16



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 15

Dr. T. Perry Hildreth
Associate Professor of
Philosophy

Psalm 46
1 Peter 1:3-9

"We will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains
tremble with its tumult." (Psalm 46:2-3 NRSV)

2011 has known more than its share of tragedies and calamities: the shooting at a political meeting in Tucson, the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the outbreak of powerful and record-breaking tornadoes in spring, the shooting at the youth camp in Norway, the historic drought in the Southwest and the devastating flooding in the Midwest and New England. Add to these the US debt crisis and the troubled world economy—all within a period of less than 365 days. It is all a bit much to handle. The world is a scary place, indeed.

Fear is a natural response. The earth is unstable. Our neighbors are unstable. The economy is unstable. We should be afraid.

Fear is a powerful motivating force. Leaders in all areas of human activity have been known to appeal to fear in order to control others. As we enter a new election cycle, politicians of the various political parties will try to make us afraid of each other even more than we, perhaps, already are. They will promise us safety if we will vote for them and their party. And we know that even religious leaders can use fear as a way of manipulating us, sometimes with grave consequences.

The Biblical texts for today offer a different response to the tragedies and calamities of our age: faith and hope. The Psalmist reminds us that no matter what may happen, God is, ultimately, in control. The writer of 1 Peter directs us to that which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading in the midst of the various trials that we may suffer. Both writers point us away from fear and towards faith in a loving and powerful God.

Advent invites us to look across the broad sweep of human history and remember that God has met human fears in the past with divine action, particularly as he came to dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Advent invites us to hope that God is doing this again in our age in the hearts of all those in whom his love reigns. Hearts filled with faith, hope and love have little room for fear.

Peace. What does it look like or even feel like? As I walk through the halls of the hospital I see it in a variety of forms. A patient just received the news that the biopsy is negative. An emergency C-section gives birth to a healthy baby. Cells have engrafted in the bone marrow transplant patient and things are improving. That is one side of peace, but what about those times when things do not turn out as we had hoped or even prayed? Where is the peace then? God is present in these moments and His peace is available. The peace then comes through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Inasmuch as God brought peace to the Jews and Gentiles through His son, we also can find ways to see past our differences. Walls of division and discord between diverse populations, the oppressed and marginalized can be torn down. Even in the most seemingly impossible times, God's presence can bring peace.

Having the occasion to minister with a large culturally and religiously diverse population has allowed me an opportunity to see the peace of God transcend those differences on many occasions. In the midst of crisis and uncertainty, people begin to look for God as their source of help and peace. Often, regardless of differences, they become united in the quest for seeking something beyond themselves—a higher power. God's presence becomes the unifying force during these

times, allowing for relationships to be formed. I quickly realized that in order to minister with those in my care, I would have to be able to see past the differences and view them as God's beloved. It is necessary for me to meet people at their point of need.

One afternoon, I was paged to a unit to meet with a family. This family was from a different religious background. Although our religious views and heritage may have been different, this family was seeking peace and comfort. God was able to remove the barriers in the situation which allowed me to minister with this family in this most difficult of times. Peace is not always found where we may expect it, but it is possible to trust that God can bring the same peace to our lives that he has given to people throughout time.



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 16

Donna Seay
School of Divinity Alumna

Isaiah 51:9-11
Ephesians 2:14-17



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Rusty Stroupe
Head Baseball Coach and
Instructor of Sociology

Psalms 149:1-9
Ephesians 5:18-19

There's nothing wrong with having fun at a gathering with friends. And the thrills a ride at a theme park can provide are often exhilarating. The excitement of an athletic contest that ends with a victory can produce an emotional high and memories that will last a lifetime.

But none of these temporary emotions produce long-term joy. They are merely imposters, temporarily masking our deepest desires to discover a true joy that is not swayed by external circumstances.

A few weeks after graduating college, I was offered the opportunity to coach the middle school baseball team where I had been hired for my first teaching job. Fresh from a successful career as a college baseball player, I was certain I knew everything about coaching baseball, especially as it pertained to eighth graders.

It was obvious the first day of practice that I was going to have to make cuts due to the large number of young men who tried out for the team. It was equally obvious that one particular young man would be among those who would have to be left off the final roster.

Fred had no athletic ability and struggled academically. His fellow students paid him little attention and when they did it was only to make fun of him. It seemed to me that Fred had little going for him in life.

On the day the cut list was posted, Fred paid me a visit in my classroom during lunch. I fully expected him to complain about not making the team, but little did I know he had other ideas.

He explained to me how he understood why he didn't make the team. He wished me well in my first year of coaching and promised he would support the team during the season. He then shared with me something he said he had learned at church.

"Coach, I want you to know I am a Christian," he began. "God loves me and He loves you. If we want to have true joy in our lives, we should remember that the word JOY stands for Jesus, Others, Yourself. If we keep our priorities in that order, we can have joy throughout our lives. I just wanted to tell you that today. Thanks for allowing me to try out for the team."

Though it has become widely known today, it was the first time I had heard that particular acronym for JOY. And I've never forgotten it. Psalm 149:4 says "For the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory." A hot-shot coach was humbled by a child that day, one whom I'm sure the Lord took delight in. The young man who I thought had nothing going for him had all he needed and was unashamedly willing to share his Joy with the whole world.

Music is my passion. More specifically, sacred music is my passion. From the time I was about eight years old, I've been singing about my Jesus. Therefore, it should be no surprise that Advent is my favorite season of the year in the life of the church. From the angelic singing of the children's choirs and youth choir to the powerful sounds emanating from the adult choir and orchestra, the words foretelling Jesus' birth ring through the rehearsal rooms and in the sanctuary.

One summer many years ago, my family was attending Music Week at Ridgecrest. It was always during this special week that I had the privilege to join in the most glorious congregational singing with over 2,000 church musicians. Every evening had a different theme with different concerts or premier presentations. This particular week, Tuesday's theme was Advent. In the middle of the presentation, a young girl, about fourteen years old, moved to the middle of the large stage in Spilman Auditorium and began to sing Ken Medema's "I'll Go Tell Elizabeth." Ken Medema is well known for setting meaningful stories to music. This song is based on the Bible story of Mary, mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth. From Luke 1:28-31(NIV): "The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.'" Medema's song tells the story of a

frightened young Mary trying to decide how to handle this news. Through the beautiful melody she reveals her fears and confusion. Then the harmonies and rhythms transform as she tells of her excitement at the thought of running to visit Elizabeth. She sings, "I'll go tell Elizabeth. She'll understand. She'll hold my hand." A peace envelops the young girl as she sings of the comfort that Mary feels when she thinks of sharing her news with Elizabeth, who is also miraculously expecting a son. The congregation was obviously moved as she sang this beautiful story of the coming of Jesus. I cannot read these verses in Luke without hearing that melody in my head. It brings peace during this busy season.

May you find comfort and peace through the music of this Advent season.



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 18

Mary Roby
Dean of Libraries

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:26-38



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Jennifer Martin
Graduate Student, School of
Psychology and Counseling

Psalm 126
Philippians 1:3-11

The other day, I saw two women, probably in their 60s, come into the bakery where I was studying. The women were mesmerized by the array of cookies, scones, and crème puffs on display. Their heads bobbed up and down in front of the counter as they looked at each item while they placed their order. I had to stop and watch these women. They did not come in to order one treat to sit and enjoy. They ordered about 10 items each! There was a purpose and a joy to their trip to the bakery.

In some small way, these women are like the Israelites were when they were brought back from captivity. Psalm 126 says, "They were like men who dreamed." They were filled with songs of joy and their mouths were filled with laughter. To experience this kind of joy, you have to have known the alternative to freedom. Rarely do we stop and consider what God has freed us from. He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, from slavery to sin, from separation from Him, from a meaningless life. And what have we been saved to? We have been saved to freedom to live for God, to the joyful anticipation of seeing God face to face, to the comfort and peace of knowing God is for us and not against us, to the joy of eternal life that starts now.

When I take the time to meditate on what the Lord has done for me, what He has brought me through, and most of all, who He is, I am filled with joy that He would consider me. I am so unworthy of His attention and His promises. I often fail to obey Him and I run after other things to make me happy. Yet, He delights in me. Most of us would agree that we love to be loved. There is joy in knowing we are important, lovely, beautiful, "worth it" to someone. How much greater is the joy of knowing the God of the universe feels that way about us?

As the Israelites saw God's faithfulness and goodness to bring them back from captivity, they were filled with joy,

others saw what God did for them, and they boldly and unashamedly asked for more blessings from Him. When we grasp God's love for us, we see that God delights to lavish us with good things. As a father gives good gifts to his children, so God delights to give us good things. I confess I do not often approach God like this. I do not expect God to give me things I ask for. But if these requests are according to His will, then He has promised to answer them in His timing.

I have experienced true joy many times in the small things. In seeing God answer a prayer that was not a need but a desire. In a sunset. In talking to a good friend at just the right time. In being still and knowing that He is God. In being reminded that He has the whole world in His hands and I can stop worrying so much. I like to call these kisses from God. He is so very intimate with us. As we meditate on God's promises and on His very nature, I pray that He will fill our mouths with laughter and our tongues with songs of joy at His great love for us.

During the fourth week of Advent, find joy in the fact that we are God's children and we are His ambassadors to a world that is desperate to experience the unhindered joy that comes from God's presence and promises. This type of joy cannot be faked or manufactured. Like everything in the Christian life, this type of joy can only be experienced with Christ. He is the source. Real joy flows like streams of living water. It gushes from within us as we experience the Presence of God. Amazingly, like those delicacies in the bakery, God's presence and His joy are laid before us for the asking. This Advent come to God and ask Him to fill your heart with purpose and joy.

Many of the daily scripture lessons for Advent introduce feelings of dissonance into our preparations for the celebration of Christmas. Our culture gets ready for Christmas with party-going, shopping, “dreaming of a White Christmas,” creating magical surprises for children, and making moments of wonder for the child in all of us.

There’s nothing wrong with those things in themselves, but they are in some tension with the call of our Advent readings to prepare for Christmas by seriously considering our sinfulness and the world’s brokenness, praying for forgiveness and renewal, identifying with the longing of Israel for a Messiah, and connecting with the church’s millennia-long yearnings for the return of Christ. There’s unavoidable dissonance between the culture’s festive dance toward Christmas Day and the church’s reflective journey. Ironically, in the long run, it is the church’s way—slow and thoughtful—that ushers us into real and lasting joy.

While the culture sings bright and frothy holiday songs, today’s reading from Isaiah 13:6-13 sounds notes of dissonance from superficial and sentimental happiness. It speaks soberly of the “Day of the Lord”—a day of “destruction,” of “pangs and agony,” of the darkening of the heavenly lights, and of God’s “fierce anger.”

The “Day of the Lord,” according to the Hebrew Scriptures, had two primary fields of meaning. In one, the “Day of the Lord” was the day of victory over all the forces which resist the will and way of God. In the other, it was the day of God’s joyful enthronement as the just and merciful ruler over God’s people. Clearly, the text from Isaiah is of the first kind: God wages war against all that thwarts God’s will. The value of such a difficult

text is that it reminds us of a painful problem with which God wrestled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It’s the deep struggle in the heart of the Divine between anger and mercy, between judgment and grace, and between vengeance against God’s enemies and unconditional love for them.

In Jesus’ death, God absorbed, underwent and “died” to God’s own anger, judgment and vengeance. The death of Jesus means that only those who consciously, willfully and always resist trusting in the Son endure God’s “wrath” (John 3:36). The resurrection of Jesus means that God is determined to pour-out love, mercy, and grace on all the world.

In other words, Easter assures us that the “Day of the Lord” will not be a day of God’s war against the world but a day of God’s peaceful reign of truth and grace over and within the world. Easter’s triumph of grace is why we celebrate Christmas. Easter joy is the source and font of Christmas gladness.

John the Baptist found great cause for joy in Jesus. He knew that Jesus would turn judgment day into a festival day. Because of Jesus, the “Day of the Lord” would be like a wedding banquet—a feast of plenty and gladness. John called Jesus “the bridegroom,” the one whose presence and promise filled him with joy. He said of Jesus: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (see John 3:22-50).

How about a phrase like that for a Christmas card? “Let joy—let Jesus increase. Let my fears—let me—decrease.” It might not sell well at the local card shop, but it is an authentic Advent prayer.



TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 20

Guy Sayles
Pastor, First Baptist Church
of Asheville

Isaiah 13:6-13
John 3:22-30



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 21

Dr. Shannon Warden
Assistant Professor
School of Psychology and
Counseling

Psalms 25:1-10
Luke 1:39-45

When was the last time you said or heard someone else say, “I enjoy waiting”? To enjoy waiting seems contrary to our human nature, yet so much of life is time spent waiting—waiting in lines, waiting for direction, waiting on opportunities, waiting for better times. All along, we wonder, “How much longer must I wait?”

As I write this devotional, my husband and I are waiting. We are only weeks away from the birth of our second child, so our wait is now short. However, through various pregnancy-related trials, we have learned that starting and growing a family can take much longer than people sometimes expect. We once thought we could have any number of children we wanted at any time we wanted. God patiently and lovingly showed us that we thought wrong!

Elizabeth and Mary awaited the birth of children. Of course, their pregnancies were foretold, which likely increased their trust in God that all would go well. Nonetheless, trust was still required as both women carried out God’s will in their lives. They had to trust that, despite their unique circumstances, God was faithful and would keep His promises.

The confidence and expectation demonstrated by Elizabeth and Mary is the same confidence and expectation we as believers can have as we wait for God to reveal His plans in our lives. No matter what

the focus of our wait, we can trust that God is faithfully bringing about His plan for our lives. God’s faithfulness should give us peace of mind while we wait, especially if our prayer is the same as that of Psalm 25. “Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.... My hope is in you all day long.” It seems that if we mean this, then we’re agreeing to wait on God; we’re agreeing that His plan is perfect and that waiting on Him is worthwhile. At times, some, if not many of us feel unable to hold out hope that God will come through in our times of need. Certainly, He may not deliver the answer or outcome that we want or deliver when we want it. However, our hope is not in answers and outcomes but in God, who is merciful and loving and in whom we will not be shamed.

Here on December 21, we can and should celebrate Jesus’ birth with the same expectation and joy demonstrated by Elizabeth and the unborn child inside of her. Jesus’ birth reminds us of fulfilled prophecy—a prophecy on which people waited for hundreds of years. Their wait was rewarded much like our wait for Jesus’ return will be rewarded. We wait with expectation and know that while we wait, God is showing us His ways, teaching us His paths, and guiding us in His truth. We might not always enjoy the waiting, but we can take joy in knowing that our trust in God makes the waiting worthwhile.

As a child, I looked forward to welcoming the New Year. I loved watching how downtown became an enchanted place with sparkling lights and a huge tree nestling a live Santa in a sleigh. I delighted in inhaling the aromas of delicacies piled on the carts of street vendors that seemed oblivious to the bitter cold. I knew that they would not be available during the rest of the year. I was thrilled when school let out a few days before the adults were off. I savored the freedom of those few days because on the day of New Year's Eve my parents had me running last minute errands while they were busy with final preparations for the evening's festivities. At the end of the day we were all exhausted but ready to celebrate. So at midnight many of our neighbors toasted the New Year out on the street and lit sparklers. The city put on a fireworks show. Ships at the sea port sounded their fog horns. The TV broadcasted festive programs all night long. On the following day life settled to its usual rhythm for another year.

I never questioned if there was more to the season. The word "Nativity" was not part of the popular vocabulary back then. The "reason for the season" was to welcome the New Year with as much eating and noise as possible. No one mentioned Christ's Nativity because to openly proclaim Him meant to risk being ridiculed and rejected as backward, ignorant or fanatic; being declared mentally unfit or denied educational and professional opportunities. I grew up behind the Iron Curtain. My generation and that of my parents were systematically indoctrinated that one was the author

and finisher of one's destiny. There was no place for Christ in my childhood world which the authorities filled with utopian promises of a future abundant with progress, happiness, and material wealth. With the future so bright, there was no need to remember an obscure event from 2,000 years ago, described in a Book that few possessed and fewer dared to proclaim, even if the event marked the beginning of human salvation in a story far greater than anything or anyone.

Now, a few decades later, I see how easy it can be to be distracted by the promise of "bread and circuses" and miss something very important. Christ was born over 2,000 years ago. The King of Kings arrived in an unwelcoming world, unlike any earthly king we know. Angels heralded His arrival, as He chose to come into the world in the most vulnerable human form—that of a baby whose young life was soon to be threatened by an earthly king. Has today's world been any more welcoming than that of 2,000 years ago? Yet, He continues knocking gently on our hearts, for He desires to be born and to live and grow there, if we let Him.

The Iron Curtain is gone. Now I am one of many who are free to proclaim Christ without fearing persecution. Now the end of each year and the beginning of the next come as a quiet and awesome reminder of God's love towards us. Christ is Born! Glorify Him!



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 22

Dr. Stefka G. N. Eddins
Associate Professor of
Chemistry

Isaiah 59:15b-21
Luke 2:1-20



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 23

Dr. Bob Bass
Professor of Mathematics

Isaiah 28:9-22
Luke 1:57-66

Today's Old Testament reading opens with the prophet bemoaning the need to teach his listeners with "Do and do, do and do; rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there." As related in most footnotes to the text, the Hebrew being translated is basically like listening to a tongue twister. *Sav lasav sav lasav; kav lakav kav lakav.* I sometimes think this is the way many find my discipline. As math teachers, we feel as if we have to teach the same way: "do this and then do this; use this rule and then this rule." All the while, many students simultaneously perceive it as having themselves subjected to strings of mind-numbing, garbled syllables.

The New Testament passage relates the details of the end of Zechariah's punishment of losing his ability to talk after failing to believe the message of the Lord's Angel.

Well, how do these two passages relate to me? The syllabi for all courses I teach contain a very brief introduction of myself to the students. They have a summary of my time at Gardner-Webb and then a short introduction of my family. They conclude with the following lines to my students:

"I take my faith in Jesus Christ as of paramount importance in every aspect of life and hope that my dealings with you will be pleasing in His sight."

I see three possibilities for myself for having made that declaration. First, it is possible that I could actually please Him by expressing my faith in love—because that

is the only thing that counts (Gal. 5:6). Or, I could proceed to act in disregard for that statement. In that case, He could let me continue along putting that statement in as meaningless words, thereby storing up judgment for myself by the flagrant violation of the Third Commandment. Or lastly, He could close my mouth—remove my opportunity to make that proclamation.

Well, this is an Advent devotional. But so far I have made it sound more like a confessional for Lenten mourning. I guess I should bring it back around to the joyous season—the first visible shoot off the root of all our hope.

After the end of Zechariah's punishment, his voice is restored, even to the point of singing.

"Praise to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed His people,... to enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."

May this Christmas find us all expressing our faith in love!

And by the way, if you don't find me doing that very thing, please remind me of what I have just said. Then you should rightly tell me to shut up!

"Seeing the Glory of God!"

If yours is like our family, you probably have a special Christmas Eve routine, maybe one that you've followed for years! Candlelight services are special times for us. Once the worship service of prayers, scripture reading, and music has concluded, our sanctuary will fall silent as the lights are darkened in the building. Then, one-by-one, beginning with the Christ Candle, worshipers will pass the light of Christ until the whole place glows. It is a high moment in worship when the darkness gives way to the spreading light, and then comes the singing of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus.

In today's reading from Revelation 21 and 22, light winning out over darkness is one of the major themes. If you've read the Book of Revelation lately, you're glad that the book ultimately ends with light triumphant. There are so many dark scenes described in this extraordinary piece of scripture (scenes that depict our world) that we wonder if evil may not actually prevail. We witness in page after page how evil just keeps on rearing its ugly head. Having observed all the devastation and wickedness in the world, it truly is a high moment when we read: "And night shall be no more" (22:5a). This is the moment for which we have been waiting.

Just a few verses earlier, with the announcement of the arrival of the new heaven and new earth, we learn that "the sea [with all of its chaotic darkness] was no more" (21:1c). Celebratory notes begin to play and we join in with great rejoicing that light has finally overcome night.

And in the morning (Christmas Morning) when we awaken, the "Light of the World" will have been born! Good news will erupt again shattering the darkness, putting night on its final notice! Jesus' birth signals that darkness's days are numbered and soon will altogether disappear.

In fact, Jesus put it this way once: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:9). That is, when we let God remove the darkness from our lives (and eventually from this world), then and only then shall we see God's face! The Beatific Vision, as the ancients called it, will be the moment for which we all have been created—to see God face-to-face—when darkness is no more. Yes, Revelation declares that God did something on Christmas Morning, on the Cross, and on Easter Day that we could not do for ourselves. God made a way for us to "see his face" and live.

Today, then, marks another new beginning for letting the light of God break forth into our lives in anticipatory celebration. Best of all, we don't have to wait until all of the world's darkness is dispelled before we live as though the night has already passed away. That's the good news of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

So, when we see the Christmas candles lit, and if we look closely, we just might be able to catch a glimpse of the ONE whom we will one day see face to face.



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 24

Dr. Robert Canoy
Dean, School of Divinity

Isaiah 29:13-24
Revelation 21:22-22:5



SUNDAY
DECEMBER 25

Dr. A. Frank Bonner
University President

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-5

Why is it that of all the holidays, of all the seasons, Christmas is visually the richest? When we think of Christmas, invariably images of the season come to mind—images that have accumulated in our memories from childhood and throughout our lives. When I was growing up, we always celebrated Christmas at my grandmother's, and her Christmas tree was always a cedar. With all appropriate respect to the other varieties of trees, to this day only a cedar seems to me to be a real Christmas tree.

Think of all the visual images of Christmas—the trees, the ornaments, candles, wreaths, ribbons, brightly wrapped gifts, baked goods, stockings, fireplaces, snow, sleighs, colorful department store displays, fire in the fireplace (chestnuts perhaps?), all the red and the green, and on and on. No other season is as visually striking as Christmas.

Through all the visual images of Christmas, the common denominators are beauty and light. Sure, other seasons have special visual images, but none so universally marked by beauty and light. Recall the beauty of the traditional candle light service as the light grows brighter and brighter in the beautifully decorated sanctuary.

It is no coincidence that light and beauty characterize the Christmas season. Christmas is about God's wonderful message for us—the message of love, of light, and of life itself. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1: 3-5).

Commenting on these verses, Matthew Henry in his *Concise Commentary* suggests, "As our words explain our minds to others, so was the Son of God sent in order to reveal his Father's mind to the world." Through his Son, God has revealed to the world His mind, the immeasurable beauty of His love and grace—the "power to become children of God" (v. 12).

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (p. 45), Philip Yancey describes C.S. Lewis walking into a discussion of "Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, 'Oh, that's easy. It's grace.'" "Other faiths offer some way to earn approval," says Yancey. "Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."

What could be more beautiful?

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Gardner-Webb University At-a-Glance

◆ Gardner-Webb is a private, Baptist-related university located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.

◆ We serve over 4,300 students from over 37 states and 21 countries.

◆ Gardner-Webb University has been ranked as one of the "Best Universities" in the South that offer a "full range of undergraduate and master's programs" in "America's Best Colleges" from *U.S. News & World Report*.

◆ Gardner-Webb was awarded the North American Mission Board's (NAMB) Courts Redford Award for 2010, which recognizes the nation's top 10 universities for mobilizing student missionaries through NAMB.

◆ Gardner-Webb was one of only 511 universities and colleges nation-wide to be named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (for the fourth consecutive year).

◆ A total of 5 professional schools, 2 academic schools, and 11 academic departments offer nearly 60 undergraduate and graduate major fields of study.

◆ Our 140+ full-time faculty (13:1 student-to-faculty ratio) are teacher-scholars who help foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning.

◆ Gardner-Webb University is an NCAA Division I institution and competes in the Big South Conference and the Coastal Collegiate Swimming Association.

◆ Gardner-Webb features active chapters of at least 10 national honor societies in such academic disciplines as Biology, Spanish, English, French, Psychology, Religious Studies and Theology, and Nursing.

Gardner-Webb University

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One that embraces faith and intellectual freedom, balances conviction with compassion,
and inspires in students a love of learning, service, and leadership.*

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