

2012

Advent 2012

Gardner-Webb University

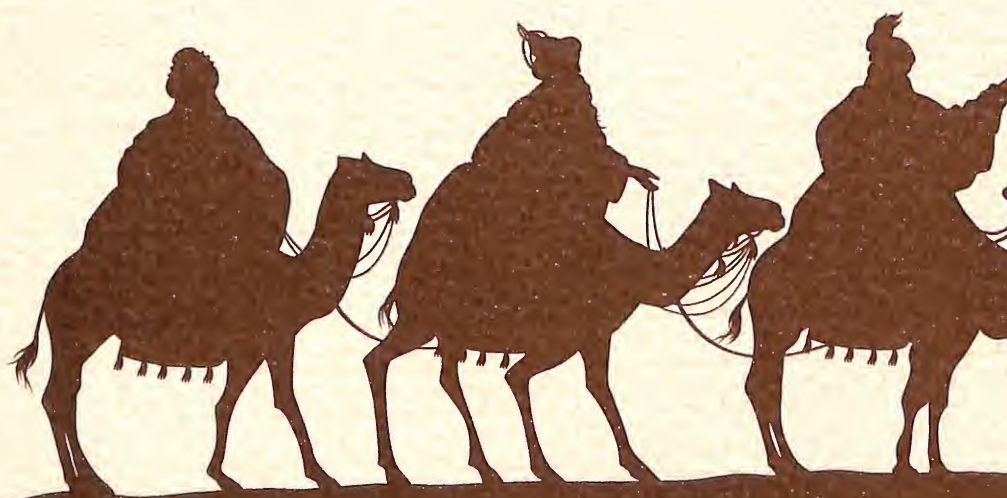
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Advent 2012



Amazing things can happen in dark places. When I was young, I was dreadfully afraid of the dark. When the lights would go off, my anxieties would rise. I couldn't help it; the darkness brought out the worst in me. But... it also brought out the best in me. In those terrifying moments, something profound happened almost every time. My heart would race, my ears would perk up, and my eyes would dart frantically to every corner of the room—my whole being was on high alert. While I cannot say that I enjoyed such experiences, in the moment, I encountered an adrenaline rush. The darkness forced me into heightened awareness.

In many ways, the same holds true with the journey of Advent. For all of the misnomers of the season, Advent pilgrims dare not forget that this is a season of sacred longing for that which only God can provide. I call it the "Holy ache." Myopic followers of Christ bypass prophetic images and Holy longings in a feeble attempt to race to the cradle of the Lord. But to do so renders great injustice to the season. And, frankly, it is a slap in the face of the faithful throng that lived expectantly and obediently under God long before the Christ event. In our longing, we pay tribute to the longing of those who went before us.

Yes, amazing things can happen in dark places. The joy of Advent is that, by design, we begin the weary trek toward our faith's culmination which occurs in the darkness of Bethlehem. To get there, however, we must pass through the dark and scary places of life and faith. Advent holds all of that in balance for us.

Contained in the following pages are the Advent reflections of the family known as Gardner-Webb University. We are a diverse lot but we hold many things in common. One of those points of commonality is our respect for Holy seasons such as Advent. There are many persons who make this process not only possible but meaningful. Profound gratitude is expressed to my partner in this venture, Dr. Sheri Adams. Together we have attempted to "cast the net" far and wide within the Gardner-Webb community to enlist writers. To that end, I believe our attempt is a success. Likewise, the University administration has offered full blessing and support to this endeavor. Clearly, a work of this magnitude could not be realized without their support.

As referenced in several reflections, the year has not been an easy one for the University. There have been significant losses suffered within the family. Several writers mentioned the hopeful meditation offered last Advent season by Dr. Gayle Bolt Price. Sadly, Dr. Price is no longer with us but her influence lives on and it is in the spirit of that legacy that this year's Advent guide is lovingly dedicated to her memory.



ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2012

Danny West
Executive Director,
Doctor of Ministry
Program
Professor of Preaching
and Pastoral Studies,
School of Divinity



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 2

James P. Morgan
Associate Professor,
School of Psychology
and Counseling

**Jeremiah 33:14-16 and
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

Have you ever had the experience of losing someone or something of importance to you: your spouse, a child or parent, your job, or your health? Such losses are often traumatic and mark a time of great change, sometimes even upheaval, in our lives. Life as we know it is forever altered, and the future holds great uncertainty. This was the case for the people of Jeremiah's day whose lives were dramatically changed when they lost their homeland and their freedom.

Major losses can also be accompanied by another kind of loss—loss of hope. Perhaps Jeremiah sensed that his people had lost hope as a result of their desperate situation: The dynasty of David had come to an end, and they would soon be forced into Babylonian exile. It may have seemed to them that God's promises had come to an end as well. In this context, Jeremiah, while in prison, proclaims God's words: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (33:14). Out of devastation comes a new beginning and a profound promise: "I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land" (33:15).

What I find comforting about this passage is that God stood steadfastly by His people in their time of great discouragement. He never turned His back on them. Through Jeremiah, God provides a powerful message of promise and hope. This same message can serve as a source of comfort and hope for us today as we face difficult times in our own lives and help others who

are struggling. However, sometimes when tragedy strikes, we may blame God or feel abandoned by Him. We may lose all hope and sink into a state of despair.

Such was the case for Harold Kushner (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*) who lost his son at a young age. Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, could not understand why his son had to die. After all, Kushner had dedicated his life to God and to serving God's people. Kushner did not feel that God was standing by him—quite the opposite. The loss of his son precipitated a spiritual crisis in Kushner that led him to revisit the book of Job and eventually to dramatically change his view of how God worked in his life. Instead of seeing God as responsible for his son's death, Kushner came to see God as hurting along with him and as a source of comfort. Like the people of Jeremiah's day, God stood steadfastly by Kushner; he just couldn't see it until he changed his way of thinking about God. As a result, Kushner was able to regain hope—hope of God's promise to stand by him, to weep with him, to comfort him, and to sustain him in all of life's circumstances.

As we approach this Advent season with the hopeful expectation of the fulfillment of God's promise in the birth of Baby Jesus, my prayer is that each of us can become more mindful of how God works in our lives and of how we can become beacons of hope for others.

If you are willing and obedient,
You will eat from the best of the land;
But if you resist and rebel,
You will be devoured by the sword.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 1:19-20)

Several years ago, Janie, my wife, and I decided that we would honor our children's wishes and get a puppy. One day as I arrived home, I was met in the yard by Janie, Eli, Sydney, and a new member of the family that had already assumed the name Rascal. Knowing that our luck with dogs had not been very good in the past, we both insisted that we would have to determine some way to keep Rascal safe from wandering off, getting lost, and being safe from the road. We all agreed that living indoors was not an option for Rascal.

After much research and thought, we decided on an underground fence. This fence is designed to create a boundary so that Rascal can run and play freely in a safe and protected area as large as we determined. According to the literature we read, the system was designed to send a warning tone and then, if necessary, an electric shock to a collar that is worn by Rascal when he approaches the boundary line. The key to the success of this system would be the proper training in order to help Rascal develop the obedience to stay away from the boundary line.

Janie and I knew when the system arrived that the training would require that Rascal be shocked so he would understand the consequences of attempting to

leave the protected area. Eli and Sydney didn't seem at all in favor of this training and wanted to know if there wasn't a better way. We explained that in order to protect this new member of the family that they already loved, this process was necessary. Rascal had to be obedient and the consequences of the training were far less destructive than the consequences of leaving the protected area, which we knew from past experiences. We further explained that Rascal being obedient to our leading would afford him the best possible life.

As I study the Word of God through the prophet Isaiah, I am reminded of God's love for us by a lesson from our little furry friend named Rascal. God has invited us into His family and has promised us an inheritance in His Kingdom. In order to receive that inheritance, we must be obedient to His command to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Never be mistaken that even the most obedient of God's children will still encounter troubles in this life and too often experience the pain of God's discipline, but to those who have accepted Jesus Christ into their lives the Hope of an inheritance awaits.

For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 3

Mike Hardin
Vice President for
Administration and
Finance

Isaiah 1:10-20 and
Luke 20:1-8



TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Mary High
Associate Professor of
American Sign Language,
Director of the ASL
Program

Isaiah 1:21-31 and
Luke 20:9-18

As I read these passages for today's devotion, my first thought was, "What odd passages to select for Advent." For me, Advent is about celebrating the Gift that God has given us. It's about the joy we experience as we remember again the depth of God's love for us. In Christ, God was with us. To me, this is the very essence of what Christianity teaches. But then, as I thought of the Isaiah passage, I realized that you can't think about the Gift without also thinking about the Demand. This was a phrase used by one of my favorite Baptist Theologians, Frank Stagg. He wrote in his New Testament Theology about salvation as both Gift and Demand. It is the Gift we can never earn, but it is a Gift that demands everything we are. If we truly receive the Gift, we are transformed. The Isaiah passage reminds us that many people claim to have received the Gift, but their lives do not reflect this. The economic crisis and our politicians seeming ineffectiveness over the past few years have been a powerful reminder of humanity's sinfulness. The desire for money and success has caused many of our companies and politicians to abandon any commitment to justice they may have had, and of course the hardest hit are always the poorest among us. But this passage also reminds us that God's justice will prevail and those who selfishly pursue their own interests will be called to account.

The passage in Luke reminds me that the Gift cannot be fully appreciated unless we also understand what that Gift cost. The message of the gospel is not just about God with us, as powerful as that is; it is also about what God was willing to do for us; the price God was willing to pay to have a relationship with us. In the Old Testament we see the God of power and justice and even of love, but the God of sacrifice is most clearly seen in the New

Testament. Every religion has sacrifice within it, but it primarily involves the sacrifice the believer must make. To my knowledge, only Christianity holds the Sacrifice of God as its primary tenet. I shocked one of my Seminary Professors once when I said I believed that when Christ died on the cross, God also died. I can still remember the silence in the room as I said that. I believe that whatever the experience of death is, in Christ, God also walked through that experience. God took that experience into God's Self and transformed that experience, not just for Christ, but for all of us. But that could only happen if God truly experienced what death is.

In my study of languages, I have found an ontological metaphor that seems to cross languages and cultures. It is based on the word "swallow." In English, we say, "He took that hook line and sinker." In ASL, a variation of the sign that is used for "swallow" can also mean "gullible." Similar metaphors exist in other languages. In the Bible, we see the same metaphor used in 1 Cor. 15:54 and Isa. 25:8. God has swallowed death. When we eat something, it goes into us and is transformed within us to become part of us. We are literally made from the things we swallow. In the same way, God took death into God's self and made it a part of God's own being. The one experience that truly differentiated us from God, God took and made his own. In doing this, the separation that forever divided us from God was undone. Can there be a more powerful message for this Advent Season? I think not.

Thank you Lord for the Gift that cost you everything and demands everything from us.

In December of 2008, my wife was 6 months pregnant with our first child. Thanks to modern technology, I knew by that time that we were going to have a son. My first-born would be a boy. I became wrapped in my own world of naming my son. I can vividly remember the internal pressure that I felt to name him a name that would be strong and powerful. I wanted a shorter name to ensure he would have no trouble spelling it early on in school and, most importantly, a name that no other child could easily make fun of.

Now, being the father of two boys, I have gone through that same inner-turmoil twice. I remembered that pressure as I read these verses from Matthew 1 with new eyes. I often read over the part that it is Joseph who is given the commission by the angel to name his unborn child Jesus, and Joseph did as he was commanded. These scriptures do not offer any verbal conflicts between Joseph and the angel as they debated what to name the child Mary had been blessed with. There are no writings of how Joseph told the angel that the name John, Jacob, or even Joseph Junior would make for much better selections. There is not even a hint of argument that there is no way God could be calling him to stay with this now pregnant, un-wed teenage girl. God called Joseph to take Mary and to name the baby Jesus, and Joseph obeyed.

In the midst of the new talk of "Happy Holidays" and the busyness of the season, let us remember the name in which this season of celebration began. I pray that as we go throughout this Advent season, a time of preparation for the celebration to come, that we will remember to give this season the name of Jesus, the same name that Joseph gave the babe on that first Christmas. I pray we take time to ponder on the quiet witness and steady faithfulness of Joseph as we prepare to welcome the baby Jesus. May we all answer God's call on our lives to move as He leads and step as He guides, just as Joseph did. Let us all take a moment this season to drink in what Paul so beautifully writes in Philippians:

Philippians 2:9-11

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Let us bow before the name of Jesus this Christmas and be restored.



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Aaron Hinton
Director of Church
Relations
and Christian Service
Organization

Psalms 80:1-7 and
Matthew 1:18-25



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 6

Billy D. Houze
Pastor, First Baptist Church
Lawndale
School of Divinity Graduate

Isaiah 2:1-5 and
James 3:18

In a world that finds itself rattled from the constant instabilities of unrest and tension—locally, nationally, domestically and globally—there is the question as to where do we find relief. The many perils of life that tend to penetrate the walls of humanity's perceived securities have often been highlighted by man's inability to embrace truth that offers inward peace. We live in a ruthless society filled with massive inhuman gadgets, technologies, and designs that tend to desensitize us to the importance of having an inward peace. Like Israel of old, it appears that "every man does what is right in his/her own eyes," resulting in a life changing anarchical climate of selfish pride and degradation. It becomes apparent that most of humankind wants peace but the forces of spiritual arrogance often seizes control of our ability to make profitable decisions. Peace is a premium that comes with a considerable cost. Isaiah understood that there is no peace to be found except humankind is willing to ascend his/her faith to the mountain of God in candid and sacrificial worship.

In this second chapter, Isaiah is aware of the abiding and continuous conflicts that divide humankind from God and each other. Separation retards our growth thus blinding us to the understanding nature of God's love extended to those engaged in a genuine worship experience. In verse 2, he reminds the reader that the "house of God" is to be established above the highest of the mountain and all nations must come to it. In this, there seems to be innate to humanity an upward reach for a higher power that brings about transformation in the hearts of mankind. Nowhere is that experience conveyed more clearly than in the Advent season. It is in this period that one will forgo

animosity from yearlong foes and embrace goodwill. It is in this season that we convey a great spirituality that ascends the height of selflessness and sees others above or at least equal to oneself. The upward reach toward God has the ability to give power to escape the violence and attacks of the enemy's venom that has been spun for your demise. As John Cullen Bryant, a great poet, once informed, an upward reach to God will launch us above the "snake line" in this season. The snake line suggests that there is a place where we can escape the attacks of vipers and venomous injection that sickens and poisons humanity. Isaiah writes of many nations going to the house of God to be taught in the ways of God as He is the great arbitrator that brings brokenness together in relationship; advocates forgiveness between foes; and reconciliation among the separated as they are convinced to turn their weapons of destructions into tools of goodwill meant to embrace life rather than destroy it.

Lastly, James suggested that those who have an upward reach have the ability to productively show forth fruit from their labors and that they in return will receive the peace of God. Those who sow peace will in return receive peace. In this Advent season, the greatest gift we can offer is that of peace as an external offering to all of mankind. Ironically, as we offer such peace, it has the ability to convey a message of its own, reaching an individual inwardly, changing the status of his/her being eternally. Let us share peace in this season and watch God use it for our good and His glory.

"Look! On the mountains, the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!" (Nahum 1:15a NRSV). The messenger brings good news! The enemy is not a threat, and fear turns to praise.

Those familiar with the Harry Potter series remember that a boggart is a creature that takes the form of one's greatest fear. With concentration and the right words, one can transform that threatening creature into a whimsy. Harry's friend Neville Longbottom transforms his boggart from the form of Professor Snape, the slithering master of potions and the dark arts, into that same teacher dressed like one's beloved Great-Aunt Myrtle!

Because of the fantasy world of Harry Potter, one might conclude that a boggart is a mere figment of one's imagination. One might even condemn the idea because of its association with the conjuring world of Potter wizardry. Nonetheless, threats are real and we all experience them.

The threat posed by the Assyrians in the book of Nahum was anything but imaginary. The Assyrians were a particularly brutal enemy toward those in their path. In fact, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to them, and Judah both feared and experienced the worst from the hand of King Sennacherib and other Assyrian soldiers well into the 7th century BC.

In spite of this reality, there is no doubt that the book of Nahum challenges the faithful reader because of its expressions of exuberant vengeance in describing

divinely ordained destruction of the Assyrians and their capital city, Nineveh. We should realize, however, that while the target of Nahum's oracle is Nineveh, the audience of the proclaimed oracle and/or book is Judah. The affective message of Nahum, then, is not so much "Look out you mean and nasty Assyrians, God will take care of you!" but "Watch for it you fearful and threatened Judeans, God will take care of you!" For them, Nahum is good news. These words of hope and assurance transform Judah's boggart, and they remind us that the good news of God's care is available to us amidst all the dangers of life.

According to Luke 2:10, the angel proclaimed, "I bring you good tidings of great joy for all people!" to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth. The good news is that of life instead of death, of hope instead of fear. "Be not afraid," the messenger of Luke proclaims, for what one feared most, death, no longer threatens. The powers of death are deflated and deposed.

This is the salvific hope and assurance—the gospel—proclaimed to Jew and Gentile, according to Paul in the book of Romans. Christ has come, and in him is life! What good news that was then, and what good news that is for the world this Advent season!

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit!" (Romans 15:13).



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Cal Robertson
Assistant Professor of
Biblical Studies,
School of Divinity

Nahum 1:15 and
Romans 15:7-13



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 8**

**Denise Smith
Assistant Professor
of Business,
Godbold School of Business**

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

It seemed Christmas was so much simpler and easy to enjoy when I was younger. I didn't know of the struggles my parents had just to make ends meet, and getting me a gift for Christmas was usually at a great sacrifice to them. All the photos of Christmas back then show everyone so happy, and my parents were all smiles at my joy over their gift. Fruit has also been part of my Christmas tradition for as long as I can remember. My stocking always had an apple, orange, some nuts, and hard candy in it. Through the years, that tradition has continued. Even though my grandson does not like apples (tough peels) or oranges (pulp!) he still gets them in his stocking every year.

One year, my sister even gave me a basket of exotic fruit. It was as much fun to research what the fruit was and what kind of tree it came from as it was to eat it. One thing I realized as I looked at the different kinds of fruit and the plants that produced them is that each plant had one purpose—to produce that one fruit. It didn't have to work hard to make it happen. It didn't begrudge anyone for taking the fruit when it was ripe. It simply put out what was in it, effortlessly.

It pains me to hear Christians that dread Christmas or wish that it would just be over. What they seem to dread is the extra work or effort that current Christmas rituals seem to demand. Decorating the

house during Thanksgiving, buying gifts for everyone and his brother, baking, going to parties, extra choir rehearsals and play practices for the pageant, all makes for overwhelming feelings of dread, fatigue, irritability and even guilt. So what comes out of us so effortlessly? Is it exotic, pleasing fruit, or rotten, smelly, garbage?

We long for the simplicity of Christmas past - the love, joy, and peace that are my memories of Christmas as a child. As children of God, we can still tap into that peace as we celebrate the birth of our Savior. He has given us a gift—the Holy Spirit—who is our comforter, mediator, constant companion. Because of this indwelling Spirit of God, we are like that exotic fruit tree—bearing the fruit that fills us. By staying connected, through prayer and reading Gods word, what we produce as the effortless overflow of what is within, is the sweet fruit of the Spirit of God—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) Imagine Christmas preparations with these attitudes and actions defining us. Imagine the impact we would have on our family, friends, and coworkers when this fruit is what they experience in being around us. Let there be peace on earth.

Beginning the second week of Advent and lighting the candle which represents LOVE is meaningful to me because of my "Life Prayer" from Mark 12:29-31 in which I have asked God that "all of my seed and their spouses would grow to love God with all of their heart, mind, soul and strength and their neighbor as themselves."

In striving to love God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength, I am reminded of my shortcomings, but yet reminded of the promise in Philippians 1:6 that "he who has begun a good work in me, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Much of the excitement of Christmas is expectation and preparation, especially on the part of women. The decorating, cooking, shopping, gift giving, Christmas music and pageants are all ways of looking forward with anticipation to Christmas. The expectation, however, does not equal preparation. As I think back to worship services in the 1970's, I remember people who went into the sanctuary and spent the 10 minutes before the service, quietly preparing their hearts and minds for worship. There is no comparison of life in 1970 and life in 2012. Smart phones, texting, Twitter and other social media have robbed us of our quiet time. There is very little preparation to set our minds on God, or preparation to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts.

Malachi 3:3 reminds us that God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way. All of God's creation was preparing the way for Jesus to come to earth.

My husband, Bob and I visited Calvary Baptist Church in New York City where David Epstein is pastor. He is otherwise known as the brother of Kathy Lee Gifford (TV personality). That morning as we sat waiting for the service to begin, I witnessed a very moving sight. The pastor came out, and instead of going to the podium, he went to the altar and knelt in prayer. How fitting that our leaders and teachers would also recognize their need of preparation before sharing God's message in worship.

There is a new addition on the east side of the Tucker Student Center. A bronze statue of a beautiful, timeless woman draped in robes, stands with her eyes closed and her arms lifted toward the east. She symbolizes the Body of Christ anticipating and waiting for His return.

A bronze statue cannot prepare for His coming, or offer love, but it can be a constant reminder of our love and adoration and expectation.

Love is a decision. Make a conscious effort to love God and your neighbor.

May our prayers of preparation during the Season of Advent rise up as a sweet-smelling savor of love and not just noise.



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Carolyn Tucker
Co-Owner, Shoe Show, Inc.
Friend and Benefactor of
Gardner-Webb University

Malachi 3:1-4 and
Philippians 1:3-11



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 10

Hebert Palomino
Associate Professor of
Pastoral Care and
Counseling,
School of Divinity

Jeremiah 33: 6-9 and
Hebrews 12:14

A few months ago I was visiting one of the many precious Caribbean islands. After a strenuous day, I sat with some friends outside a popular and typical restaurant to eat some chicken. Suddenly, from the other side of the street, a young man began his attempt to cross. His walking was very difficult, stumbling as if with each step he was going to fall. He came into the restaurant and started babbling almost incoherently. I wanted to walk off and ignore him, rationalizing to myself the fact that I could not understand him. I looked at him for a second and paid close attention to his hands and lips and understood that he wanted something to eat. I asked the waitress for a chicken sandwich, thinking that my compassion was more than enough. As the sandwich was delivered, Antonio looked at me and with signs asked me to put the food into his mouth. His chronic Muscular Dystrophy, which severely affected his body's balance, impeded him from feeding himself. As a bird to its young, I started feeding Antonio piece by piece.

When he finished his food, he asked me for something to drink. I was kind of hesitant to do that. As I tried to do it slowly, he grasped my hand and guided me to drop the water faster. I noticed his ability to do this and not choke. Throughout the experience, I was not aware of time, space, or circumstances. My only focus was to care for Antonio to the best of my ability. When the meal was over, he looked at me and with a big smile of

satisfaction and gratitude, with a lot of difficulty, he started to say something. I paid attention as much as I could. Antonio opened his mouth and mumbling with so much effort said: 'Fromm thee bootomm of my heartth... thaank youu...' As I looked at him, my eyes watered up, my lips clamped down on each other and my breath slowed down as never before. Antonio stood up with difficulty and started walking back to the street. I was astonished seeing his figure moving as slowly as a snail and stumbling with each step.

What does this story have to do with Advent or Christmas? I am sure that as you read it, you may have reached your own conclusions. For me, it moves me to reflect that Advent or Christmas should not only be an annual event of celebration or a time to remember our Lord... but a daily event, a daily celebration of our living Emmanuel: God with us!! It is a time to give of ourselves to others regardless of who they are or what they do. It's a daily time to offer ourselves to our God. The people of Israel and Judah were invited to celebrate with Joy and Praise. We are also invited to make of this our daily living experience, exclaiming to the Lord, together with Antonio: From the bottom of my heart, thank you!!!

Owen Whitmore was a janitor in a small school in a little town in Virginia. He had not amassed great wealth or power in his lifetime. Other than the people in that small town no one knew him. His job and status did not define him. The way he did his job and the way he lived his life did.

I knew Mr. Whitmore when I was a little girl attending that school in the early 1970s. Our building was old and kind of shabby. But in many ways, that school was representative of a community of love. It wasn't about the building. It was about the people. People like Mr. Whitmore.

Mr. Whitmore showed every child who ever attended that school the love of Jesus. His smile was genuine. His voice was soft. He listened when we children spoke to him. He never acted as if we were the least bit of an inconvenience in any way to him. His job was to care for the school, and for him, that included us children.

One day after school, I was at my grandmother's house doing my homework and realized I'd left a book I needed in my desk. I asked Grandma if she would take me back over to the school to get it. It was late in the afternoon and we weren't sure anyone would still be there. No one was.

Mr. Whitmore lived on the same street as the school, so I asked my grandmother if we could just go by his house and ask him to let us in. Grandma said okay.

We found Mr. Whitmore at home. Grandma explained the problem and asked if he would please let us in to get the book. He did. No hesitation. No words like, "It's after hours and I'm not working right now." He said, "Sure. Let's go." We walked up the street with him, he opened the door, I got my book, we thanked him, and I got my lesson done that day.

One summer, I was staying with my grandparents and I heard that Mr. Whitmore was very sick. I asked my grandfather if I could take Mr. Whitmore some of the beautiful gladiolas Grandpa had been growing. Grandpa helped me cut them and I took them to Mr. Whitmore after church. I thanked him again for what he'd done. But, you know, he seemed to think that my taking flowers to him was a bigger deal than what he had done for me. That was Mr. Whitmore.

I have recalled many times the kindness of that sweet man and the efforts of a cherished grandmother to care for a child in a simple, but meaningful way. In these days as we look toward the birth of Jesus, we can use the words in 1 Peter 3:8-12 that remind us of how we are to live with each other—in unity, humbly, gently, tenderly, repaying kindness with kindness and never with evil.



TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 11

Lynette Sills
School of Divinity Student

Isaiah 26:12-13 and
1 Peter 3:8-12



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 12

Heather Hartsell
Athletic Training
Educational Program
Director

Psalm 30 and
John 14: 23-27

I am a lay person who is not full of eloquent speech or flashy overtones. I am, however, full of faith, hope, and joy. Each moment, day, or year we may face challenges that seem too hard to overcome. It is easy for us to become bogged down in our day-to-day lives and in some cases be overtaken by feelings of hopelessness. Often we are only able to see and feel what is in a particular moment. Both in our times of need and times of security, we may linger from the path of hope and wander so far away that we lose sight of the one who can help us. It is also in our human nature to think that we can handle everything by ourselves and that we do not need God to help. Walking the road of faith is not always easy because walking this road often goes against the status quo. But we are reminded in Psalm 30 that God will be by our sides in every challenge, struggle, and step of our lives. We only need to call upon him and not be ashamed of our fragile human nature. For those who call upon him, God does not forsake, instead he turns our “wailing into dancing” and will remove our “sackcloth and cloth us in joy”. The tears we cry or the heartache we bear only last but a moment when we allow God to be God in our lives. I find comfort in our reading, knowing that no matter the challenges in my life all I need to do is to gaze and call upon him, and he will, without hesitation, be the hands that cradle me and arms that surround me.

In this season of celebration we must not forget Jesus' promise to us. In our second reading, John 14: 23-27, Jesus speaks to us and tells us that through our act of loving him and believing in his teachings one day we will make our home with him and the Father. Trusting and believing in Jesus will blanket our soul with a peace that we cannot get from the world in which we live. It is a comforting thought to know that God is preparing a place for me and that one day I will get to sit with him and be bathed in his love forever. In our reading, Jesus says that he must leave us, but He encourages us to not be troubled because He leaves us His peace. This is the true celebration, God has given to us his only Son, and He will return again and take us home.

In that thought, I must apologize for falling short and thank him for loving me.

Several years ago, a friend of mine had a "Christmas experience" I always think about this time of year. She was in a restaurant waiting for her take-out order when an older gentleman, with only a thin coat and tattered shoes, obviously down on his luck, came in. He placed a couple of dollar bills on the counter and asked, "What could I get to eat for this?" The clerk shook his head and said, "Nothing." The gentleman nodded humbly and began putting his meager finances back in his pocket. My friend stood up and walked over to the counter and said, "Please take this nice gentleman's order and add it to my bill. It will be my Christmas gift to him." The gentleman nodded and said, "How kind of you. I am most grateful." He and my friend talked for a few moments about the season and the weather. His order was ready first and he thanked my friend again and walked out the door. My friend then walked over to the window near the exit and watched, waiting to see if the poor fellow had a vehicle or was on foot, worrying about his walking in the cold weather. She searched the exit and the parking lot and saw no one. She walked out of the building and searched again, but still no one was in sight. Did she simply miss him or was this a case of entertaining angels unaware? We all must decide for ourselves.

Part of our reading for today comes from Psalm 41, "Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble." Perhaps there is no other time of the year during which we are reminded more of the poor and downtrodden than the Christmas season. We give to charity; we provide gifts for those who would otherwise be without. However, as Christians we are called to remember the poor, not only during this season of celebration, but at all times and in all places. St. Benedict of Nursia talks at length about receiving others as Christ. As Christians at a Christian university, we are blessed with a unique opportunity to minister to the poor, but not only those who are poor materially. We must also remember those who are poor in spirit, those who are without family or friends, those who have no one even to pray for them. Quite often, those in need aren't across town or even the strangers we see in restaurants or other public places. The poor may be our students, our colleagues, even our friends, who we think we know so well. In all that we do, may we receive all as Christ, never knowing that indeed we may be receiving Christ Himself.



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 13

Sheila Ingle
Associate Professor
of Education,
School of Education

Psalm 41 and
Luke 22:39-53



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 14

Ben Coates
Instructor of Spanish

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

Isaiah 61:1 – “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners”.

Jesus Himself read this passage of Scripture when He was teaching and preaching in His hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He even told the crowd assembled there that day, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). This text describes exactly what Jesus promises to us, the poor, the brokenhearted, the prisoners of our sin. He came to tell us the good news of how to break those chains and be released from the darkness. He came to give us true freedom and to allow us to experience a full and abundant life in Him. Further on in Isaiah 61, we are reminded that we are to “delight greatly in the Lord”, to “rejoice in my God” because “He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels (10). So here, these same people who only nine verses earlier were called the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the lowliest prisoners, are suddenly clothed in the finest of wedding garments and are worthy to sit at the head table, right alongside Jesus Himself. What a beautiful picture of how God transforms us after we trust His Son for our salvation! Our rejoicing in Him does not

seem to be sufficient enough to show our eternal appreciation for what He has done for us. Just saving us should be enough, but the love of Christ runs deeper still. In Philippians 4, Paul reminds us to “rejoice in the Lord always”, but for different reasons. In this case, in times of crisis, we should “not be anxious about anything, but in everything, in prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (4-7). Jesus does not save us to then abandon us. He provided our need for eternal salvation but then desires to provide our daily needs and take our burdens for us so that we can rejoice in Him and live a life characterized by peace, trusting and knowing that He can and will provide all of our needs. Father God, thank You for the gift of Your Son, for sacrificing Him so that our ultimate need would be met. Thank You for caring about us enough to desire to meet our daily needs as well. Please help us to take You at Your word, believe Your promises, and trust You with our lives. In the Name of the One who came to set us prisoners free, Jesus Christ, I pray, Amen.

When I was a small child in the early 1970s, my father was the minister of a Methodist church in Asheboro, North Carolina. One Sunday during Advent, my mother struggled to keep her two restless toddlers in check at the back of the sanctuary. As a nimble three-year old, I easily slipped away from her and my sister by crawling underneath the pews. My father, just then making a point in his sermon about the danger of getting lost in the commercialization of Christmas, implored the congregation in a stern and passionate voice, "Has anyone seen Christmas?" Apparently, I thought he was asking people to look for me, so I jumped to my feet, several rows away from my mother, and shouted, "Here I am!"

Almost forty years later, the real Christmas can yet be hard to find. Our vision is often clouded by the modern, mad hustle of shopping and the constant retail forecasts of sales surging or spiraling. Despite the economic camouflage, however, Christians still acknowledge and celebrate the true purpose of the Advent season. In a way, we work hard to proclaim to the secular world, "Here we are."

In last year's Advent Devotional Book, our good friend Gayle Price wrote eloquently about her love of Christmas and Advent worship. At the time she composed her devotional, Gayle was optimistic about beating her disease and believed she was cancer-free. She thanked God for His amazing love and grace, remarking that only He knows how many tomorrows any of us have left. During the "hot, dark summer" of her surgery and chemotherapy, Gayle somehow felt the "hope, peace, joy, and love of Christmas."

Of course, we know that Gayle's cancer did return. For me, her death is now another reminder of the importance of the Advent season. I will not be able to sit through Advent or Christmas worship without remembering her grace amid her struggle. I will not be able to exchange gifts without remembering that Gayle's life was a gift to us. Her impact cannot be measured. Just the other day, my wife said, "I still can't believe she's not on this Earth."

Gayle is certainly in heaven now, though her work on this Earth lives in us. Just as we stress the importance of the Advent season by saying "Here we are," we can also hear Gayle whisper to us every single day, "Here I am."



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 15**

**Chris Davis
Associate Professor
of English**

**Exodus 15:20-21 and
Luke 5:33-39**



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 16**

**Lisa Wimberly Allen,
Director of the Center for
Christian Ethics and
Leadership,
Assistant Professor of
Christian Ethics, School of
Divinity**

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

My father served in the U.S. Air Force as a fighter pilot for most of my childhood. Because the military bases were often at great distance from extended family, my parents, brother and I lived separated from them. I grew up knowing what it feels like to be apart and to come together.

Christmas was one of those times when we found ways to get together. Sometimes we travelled to Georgia to be with extended family. Sometimes family members would come to us in California, Germany, or England. It was always a time of anticipation and excitement. I remember running down many airport concourses and jumping into the arms of grandparents. It was a time of homecoming and joyful celebration.

Now that I have children, I have the opportunity to experience reunions from an even richer perspective. I get to watch my children run into the arms of their delighted grandparents. I see and hear the joy they all experience. Our dachshund, Nellie, even howls, caught up in the joyful reunion.

These memories returned to me as I read today's passage from Zephaniah. It speaks about a time when the people of Israel will be brought home. They have been separated from home and from God. There will be a time, however, when they will return. In verse 20 they are told by the prophet that God will bring them home and gather them up. I am reminded of grandparents gathering up their grandchildren in loving embraces and joyful laughter.

I am especially drawn to verse 17 because it paints an image of God that can shape who we are if we live into it. Sometimes we carry a heavy weight because we experience God as a God of judgment who thrashes about, and that image is given by the prophet in the earlier chapters of Zephaniah. In today's verses, however, the prophet expands and enriches our view. God is one who delights in us. We are a good creation, a joy to know. God rejoices over you with gladness. God is seen as one who actually sings loudly over this reunion – much like my howling Nellie. Caught up in the joy of the moment, God's celebration is generous and abundant like a reunion where we eat more than normal, laugh more than normal, and stay up later than normal wrapping presents.

I hope that, during this Christmas, you will be caught up in the moments around you, and when you experience the exuberant joy of those moments of coming together, that you will pay attention to those feelings and realize, "Wow! God feels that way about me!" You are loved by God who gathers you up in life's embrace and delights loudly in you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Mr. McKnight, a member of my home church, was a soldier in World War II, stationed in France. He was disappointed because he was supposed to have been home for the holidays, but was still in France on Christmas Eve. While the people he loved the most, his family, were here in the United States, he "sat watch" in the ditch in the middle of a field as it snowed. He recalled the beauty and the peace of that night. He said it was cold but the splendor of the night made the greatest impression on him, not the chill. Mr. McKnight remembered the brightness of the stars and how the moon reflected on the snow so brilliantly. He said "It looked like daylight." It was a scene he would never forget. That night, a young man full of life, strength and aspiration witnessed beauty in nature that was so profound. He recalls knowing that night was particularly significant although it appeared uneventful. It was a quiet night. Just a few years later, McKnight lost his sight and remained blind for the rest of his life. As a handsome, well groomed blind man in his late sixties, he stood before our congregation during a Christmas program and gave his testimony. He said, of all the things he remembers from when he had his sight, that night in France is most memorable and vivid. He admitted sulking about missing his family, thinking it a tragedy to be so far from everyone he loved, but he did not realize the Lord was creating a beautiful picture to take with him all the days of his life. Isn't it interesting that God knows something about our situations that we don't know, can't relate to, or can't understand? Thus, when

we sang "Silent Night, Holy Night," this blind man was able to see the true meaning of such. Psalm 46 reminds us to "be still, and know that the Lord is God." The Heavenly Father knew what the future held for Mr. McKnight and ordered his situation so that he had to "be still" in the midst of war, loneliness and destruction. The Lord will do the same for us. Let us be reminded this Advent Season, although things might not be what we hoped for, to take notice, God is with us. Sometimes we worry about the little things that seem so big. Yet, God is doing a greater work through the situation of which we are unaware. We so easily discount God's purpose and expected end by fretting over life's circumstances that we will find insignificant when all is said and done. What seems to be a disappointment today may be the glorious intervention of God to bring you a treasured gift for life.



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Willie Fleming
Associate Professor,
School of Psychology and
Counseling
Program Coordinator
Mental Health Counseling,
Statesville Campus

Psalm 46 and
I Peter 1:3-9



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 18**

**Carolyn Billings
Professor of Music,
School of Performing and
Visual Arts**

**Isaiah 51:9-11 and
Ephesians 5:14-17**

As I read the verses for today's devotional, I was struck by the admonitions to wake up. Of course the first thing that popped into my mind was the tune of "Wachet auf"—wake up, translated as "Sleepers Awake"—from Bach's cantata for the 27th Sunday after Trinity (Dec. 9 this year). That melody stayed with me as I read and re-read the scriptures.

In Isaiah 51:9, the Israelites beseech God to wake up and use his power to save them as he had in earlier times. The call to wake up returns later in the same chapter at verse 17 and again in 52:1, but in those passages God is telling his people to wake up. He assures them that it is he who brings them comfort and strength and that he will deliver them from their enemies.

No doubt the Israelites were desperate for their exile in Babylonia to end. Around this time last year, I was feeling desperate for my friends to stop dying. I, along with many others here, had recently lost so many wonderful friends—Jack Partain, Ben Davis, Pat Partin, and Barry Hambright—and Gayle Price was courageously fighting cancer. My prayers were a plea for God to wake up and use his power to heal Gayle. When I realized that healing Gayle's illness wasn't part of God's plan, I had to wake up and accept his comfort and strength.

Last year, Gayle wrote the devotional for November 29. I'm so grateful to June Hobbs for reminding me of that. Writing about her time in chemotherapy, she said, "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.'"

Gayle's words will always be a reminder to me to wake up, and stay awake, to the light of Christ. During this glorious season of Advent, my prayer for all of us is to be awake to God's presence and to make good use of our opportunities to serve him.

Psalms 149:1(b) "Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints;" NIV Ephesians: 5:19(b) "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." NIV

Praise the Lord! Today's scripture passages remind and encourage us of our responsibility to Praise the Lord. As believers, we are called to Praise the Lord in numerous ways, such as: praising and honoring the Lord, rejoicing with our voices through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, and through the use of musical instruments, as well as our affirmation of God in our prayer life.

When we think of hymns we know by heart, and as we sing them, they are a source of joy, renewal, and help as we go through some tough situation where the solution is not so clear. Can you name the hymns that aid and inspire you depending on what your need may be?

Perhaps you have already worshiped and praised God during your cantata this season, or was it just another service to attend? In my experience, I am blessed and drawn closer to the Lord as the message comes alive in a different form of worship. I trust that as you left, you were refreshed and renewed to continue celebrating the joyous Christmas season.

God's people have reason to rejoice and sing for joy. We are to make a melody in our hearts, not only with our voices, but with an inward affection that will delight and be acceptable to God.

In today's world of ups and downs, we have an anchor in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins. Thus through our belief in Him we have eternal life. We sometimes take that for granted as we go about our busy schedules. As we participate in the Advent season, let's renew ourselves in Christ and re-prioritize our lives with a focus on what Christ wants us to do for Him, and the advancement of His kingdom!

Think about ways you can Praise the Lord this season. It may be doing something for a shut-in, helping with a children's Christmas party, or bringing your extended family together for a meal. Whatever it may be, do it to the glory of God and let it be a time for you to Praise the Lord.

As we bow before you in prayer, Lord we praise your Holy name in all we do. Help us to be a witness for you during this Christmas Season. Amen.



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Neal Alexander
Chairperson,
Gardner-Webb University
Board of Trustees

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



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 20

Kristen Setzer
Associate Vice President
for Undergraduate
Admissions

Jeremiah 29:11-14 and
1 Thessalonians 5:16

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations' places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." – Jeremiah 29:11-14

"For I know the plans I have for you," rings true. When I was a little girl, like all little girls, I would play with dolls, and I would pretend that this would be me one day, a mother. My friends and I would name our dolls, and I recall that I always had a doll named Madison, and I grew to love that name.

The journey to parenthood was not easy. After a few years of trying to start a family to no avail, frustration and apprehension were routine emotions. Tony, my husband, and I kept praying, but we were beginning to ask if we were meant to be parents. We both wanted children. We prayed, but what if the answer was no? What if we weren't intended to be parents?

Why were we exiled from the joy of children? Why us? We decided we would be faithful to God and seek His plan with all of our heart, and as we came to peace with our situation, a door opened and we

learned of REACH, a group of fertility specialists. They worked us through the procedures, which were full of tests, needles and daily drives to Charlotte. The doctors spoke of not being disappointed if it did not work. Why me, why us? All we could do was pray for His will. More tests, the probes to the body and spirit. I knew that this was our last resort, and that God had a plan, though unclear, and I had to remain faithful to His path.

In late February 2003, I was at REACH for the final pregnancy test. They performed the procedure and sent me home. The drive was an agonizing hour of what if's and doubts. The phone rang and I saw the number. It was the doctor. Tepidly I held the phone, closed my eyes and said, "Hello." On the other end was Dr. Crain, and in a celebratory tone he informed me the test results were positive. I was going to be a mother. Tears descended down my cheeks as I thanked God for the blessing. He had brought me back from my captivity of fear and doubt. My childhood doll became a reality—Madison was born November 20, 2003.

In our brokenness as humans, we mark time as "life (birth) to death," yet through salvation it is "death to life"...eternal life with Christ. Seven years ago, I attended a Christmas concert at a church filled with the love of Christ shining through each individual. As I enjoyed the celebration of the birth of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, my mind wandered to the hundreds of faces, of all ages, depicted on the backdrop of the stage. Who are they? Why was this backdrop used? As the concert concluded, the senior pastor explained that "the faces you see are loved ones that have gone to be with Jesus." My first thought questioned, "Why, during a celebration of life would we be reminded of the loss of loved ones?" Then a flood of peace filled my heart as the Lord provided me a parallel view of our "Life in Christ."

While the world marches on with a smile at the sight of a newborn baby and mourns at the loss of life on earth, God takes the time to teach us to view both with joy. He demonstrated the joy of new life with the birth of His son in the simplest of dwellings, a child born in a stable. Yet, this birth is the most glorious birth in human history. God is becoming flesh! The one who is from the beginning, who always existed, who created all things, who was and is God, now at Bethlehem becomes flesh! Although Jesus was truly a man, at His glorious birth He did not cease to be God. And yet, "God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8 NLT) Did you hear that? God sent the babe in a manger to die for sinners like you and me.

God does great things! His power not only releases us from sin's captive hold but brings us back to Him. He wipes our slate clean! Whenever you feel uncertain about God's love for you, remember He loved you even before you turned to Him. God's ability to restore life is beyond our understanding. Broken bones heal, relationships are mended, and grief is not permanent. "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!" (Psalm 126:5 NLT) Do we not know that God's great harvest of joy is coming?

So, it is with this insight of "life to death" and "death to life" that I celebrate the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. May He fill your heart with His presence, as the world pauses; as we together celebrate His birth and anticipate His return!



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 21

Pamela Baxter
Assistant Vice President of
Advancement Services

Psalm 126 and
Luke 6:1-6



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 22

Jeff Rogers
Dean,
Gayle Bolt Price School
of Graduate Studies

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

"This is the way the world ends," wrote the British poet T. S. Eliot, "not with a bang but a whimper." Eliot's haunting turn of phrase in the closing lines of "The Hollow Men" is a quiet variation on a typically noisy theme in religious and non-religious circles alike. It is variously portrayed as the coming of a "son of man" (Daniel 7; Mark 13), a cataclysmic battle at Mt. Megiddo ("Armageddon" in Revelation 16:16), a nuclear holocaust, a global environmental collapse, a doomsday asteroid, and more. Scientists, poets, and religious visionaries agree that the world as we know it will not last forever.

The picture of "the day of the Lord" in Isaiah 13 is one of the noisy variations on this theme, and it is an unwelcome intruder into our cheerfully decorated Advent season. Its depiction of dismay, agony, anguish, desolation, and destruction (Isaiah 13:8-9) strikes a dissonant chord in our Advent caroling. Isaiah 13 reminds us that Advent is an observance with a bifocal expectation: the coming of Jesus at his birth and the coming of Christ in power at the close of the age.

In our personal and professional experience, the end of the world as we know it can take many forms other than the final consummation: a loved one's death, a marriage ending, a great recession, losing a job, an emptied nest, a threatening diagnosis, and others. In John 3:22-30, John the Baptizer models the response of faith when a season of reversal arrives to disrupt our naïve expectation of inevitable increase.

When John's disciples tell him that the crowds who had once flocked to him are now turning to Jesus, John acknowledges the consequence of this development by saying, "I must decrease" (John 3:30). But instead of despairing at his impending decline, John appropriates the festive and celebratory image of a wedding: "The friend of the bridegroom," he says, "rejoices at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled" (John 3:29).

The gospel tradition tells us that Jesus himself used wedding imagery in his teaching. On one such occasion, in referring to himself Jesus asked (the disciples of John!), "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" (Matthew 9:15). This rhetorical question comes from the same One who announced, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Our Advent faith is grounded in a personal experience of Emmanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23), whose arrival we both celebrate and await in this season, knowing full well that when life as we know it ends—in death, divorce, recession, job-loss, an empty house, a decline in health, or the close of the age—we are friends of the Bridegroom. Whether it ends in a bang or a whimper is immaterial to us because in the end as at the beginning we rejoice at the voice of the One in whom our joy is fulfilled now and forever.

December 23rd has always been one of my favorite days of the year for different reasons. In my household, this day has always been spent preparing for the next two days to come. My family spends the day baking Christmas treats, wrapping the last of the presents and watching our favorite Christmas movies. December 23rd has always been a very special and peaceful day for my family. Unfortunately, I have come to learn that many people spend this day out in the department stores still trying to find that one perfect gift. I would imagine that waiting until the very last day to purchase Christmas gifts is very hectic and stressful. This is one of the times of year when the peace within us is greatly challenged.

For me, I have always been able to find peace within myself. Even through all the hectic times in my life from graduating college to moving to Gardner-Webb University to start a new chapter of my life, it still comes easy for me. One of my favorite things to do is to go hiking in the mountains of western North Carolina. Almost every weekend I head to the mountains to spend my days discovering new places to hike and explore. Even though hiking can be a strenuous activity that requires a lot of time and energy, I find it to be very peaceful. God's beautiful creations are felt all around through the sound of a trickling creek to the breeze in the trees. Halfway through my hike, I find enjoyment in locating a nice place to stop to relax. Usually I spend this time sitting on a rock somewhere near a waterfall or in the creek bed where I can appreciate and reflect on everything around me. After having busy weeks at

school and work, escaping to the mountains every weekend to hike and spend time outdoors is the perfect way to keep my life peaceful.

Micah 5: 2-5a states that once Mary gives birth to Jesus, he will be the new ruler and will come to rule in the strength of the Lord and with that he will bring peace to all of the earth. It is easy to lose this peace within us and become overwhelmed and stressed out during chaotic times of the year. So during these last few days of Advent, I encourage you to find peace within yourselves and keep that peace within you through the rest of the year and into the upcoming year. Continue to remember the real reason why we celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ, and that through Him we will always be able to find that peace within ourselves.



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 23**

**Emily Hurst
Graduate School of
Business Student**

**Micah 5:2-5a and
Luke 1:39-45**



**MONDAY,
DECEMBER 24**

**Robert W. Canoy
Dean, School of Divinity;
Professor of Christian
Theology**

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

The Christmas journey of expectant mother Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem with her betrothed Joseph for the taxation is etched into most of our memories. Each time I read this story something happens to me again. Just hearing the news that there is no room in the inn, that baby Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes, and that He is laid in a manger, brings a wash of emotion over me. Once the shepherds arrive, and according to tradition some livestock gather around the manger with them, most of our Christmas visions are complete. Almost that is! The angels must not be forgotten as they join in praising God at the wonder of what has just happened!

Frankly, there are so many things going on in Luke 2:1-20 that it's really difficult to decide where to focus our attention. So, like any good book, it's not until we have read the entire story (in this case the whole of the Gospel of Luke) that we truly appreciate many of the earlier details. Take for instance the manger. First century mangers in Jesus' day were not like the wooden ones that appear in most of our manger sets. Rather, first century mangers were hewn from stone, the most prevalent building material of the region. In fact, a trip to the Holy Land today always impresses travelers with how many of these ancient mangers can still be seen. These stone structures were feeding troughs at which domestic livestock in the villages and homes would eat. What sometimes escapes our notice, however, is the dramatic interconnection of this hewn stone structure with another one found later in Luke 23. The rock-hewn manger associated with Jesus' earthly beginning (Lk. 2:12) has a striking parallel in the rock-hewn tomb in which Jesus is laid after His

crucifixion (Lk. 23:53). Add to this important detail that while at His birth Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes, at His death He is similarly wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a stone tomb!

These connections are hardly coincidental! In fact, Luke removes any notion of coincidence by including a quotation from the angel of the Lord: "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Lk. 2:12). Yes, the humble beginning of our Lord's life with swaddling clothes and a rock-hewn manger point to His humiliating death and placement in a linen cloth and a rock-hewn tomb. While one stone structure provides sustenance for animals who in turn give their lives that people might live, the other stone structure reminds us that Jesus gave His life that we might truly live.

If we take the sign of Jesus' birth and death with the seriousness that it demands, we too will learn to be like Him—self-giving, not selfish. To verify this conclusion, hardly a few verses pass before we hear the angels begin to sing and the shepherds glorifying and praising God. The shepherds see with earthly eyes what the angels see with heavenly ones. They all see God giving the greatest gift the world has ever received—Himself!

In his daily column in which he answers questions from readers, Billy Graham once responded to a question about the nature of heaven. The reader had worried that life in heaven might be dull. Rev. Graham replied that heaven certainly will not be dull and cited his thought that, when he arrives, God may give him a tour of the cosmos. I suspect that Rev. Graham and I share a fascination with the majesty and utter enormity of God's creation. I too would enjoy a tour of the cosmos, but I would first like to ask God a simple question: Why? Why did you create a cosmos that the human mind cannot begin to comprehend in its enormous scope, majesty and beauty?

Consider some numbers—numbers that must take a super computer to calculate. The speed of light is 186,000 miles per second—not per hour, per second! According to the PBS NOVA web site, the “visible” universe, the universe that can be detected with our technology, is 28 billion light years in diameter—the visible universe. At 186,000 miles per second, it would take light 28 billion years to cross it. Astronomers speculate that there is much, much more beyond the part of the universe we can detect. Who can imagine what is beyond the “sight” of the most powerful telescopes and our most advanced technology!

Even with no real concept of the full enormity of the universe, the Psalmist was so struck by it as to be awed that its creator could be mindful of humanity:

When I look at your heavens, the
work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you
have established;
what are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
(Psalm 8:3-5, NRSV)

Yet, as the Psalmist continues, God made them “a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

Far more than crowning us with glory and honor, God loved us enough to give his only Son that we might have eternal life. The Psalmist's question is turned in upon itself in the first several verses of The Gospel According to John, as Jesus is presented both as Creator and as the very source of life: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” John's connection of Jesus as the embodiment of creative power and the source of life is fully intentional.

As for my question for God as to why He created such an awesome universe: I suspect that his first answer, with a touch of divine humor, will be “Because I can.” But the other answer is suggested in those verses in John: The creative power that is beyond our comprehension is but a reflection of love that also is beyond our comprehension. Today we celebrate the birth of the embodiment of that love.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 25**

**Frank Bonner
President
Gardner-Webb University**

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

PRAYER REQUESTS

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be a standard notebook page or a sheet of stationery. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

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PRAYER REQUESTS

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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 nearly 5,000 students from over 37 states and 21 countries.
- ◆ The U.S. News and World Report also ranked Gardner-Webb as one of the “Best Universities” in the South that offer “a full range of undergraduate and master’s programs” in the 2012 edition of “America’s Best Colleges.”
- ◆ Gardner-Webb was one of only 528 universities and colleges nationwide to be named to the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (for the fifth consecutive year).
- ◆ Gardner-Webb was recently awarded the North American Mission Board’s (NAMB) Courts Redford Award, which recognizes the nation’s top 10 universities for mobilizing student missionaries through NAMB.
- ◆ 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

Faith ◆ Service ◆ Leadership

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Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University’s purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).

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