

2014

# Advent 2014

Gardner-Webb University

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Advent 2014





In her new book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the tendency of our culture to inculcate a fear of darkness into the lives of our children. Yet, she notes, darkness can be one of our most experienced and seasoned teachers. Not only are families uncomfortable with dark images, writes Brown, so are many Christians. Calling this phenomenon "full solar spirituality," Brown carefully reminds us of the power of dark places and shadowy moments to teach us the ways of God.

No season of the Christian life approaches such a holy topic as well as does the liturgical season of Advent. The contrasting images of darkness and light weave seamlessly throughout the biblical texts of both the Old and New Testaments. Far too many Christians shelter themselves from dark texts during Advent. Yet, the full experience of our common humanity is that dark places inform our bright places. The most well rounded believers I know and respect have stared down the shadows in their lives and as a result, the power of light is all the more gratifying and rewarding.

The Advent journey is filled with such places. The biblical texts force us to confront difficult questions and the messy ingredients that surround our existence. While Advent leads us to the light, don't dare forget the dark places that got us there.

The reflections contained within the pages of this guide bear witness to that reality. Coming from various sources and persons affiliated with Gardner-Webb University, the voices ponder the realities of the season. Deep appreciation is offered to my colleague, Dr. Sheri Adams, for assisting me in securing writers and in all of the little things that accompany such an undertaking. In addition, my administrative assistant, Lisa Hollifield, continues to anchor this endeavor with her careful work. I am also grateful to School of Divinity student Elizabeth Maye for her assistance with the production. Likewise, the University staff and administration continue to offer their blessing and support to this Gardner-Webb tradition. Were it not for the collective investment of so many within our family, this book would not be a reality.

These are important days of pondering and reflection. These are holy days. My prayer is that we treat them as such.



## ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2014

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



**SUNDAY,  
NOVEMBER 30**

**Tracy Jessup  
Vice President for  
Christian Life and Service  
and Senior Minister to  
the University**

**Isaiah 1: 1-9  
Matthew 25: 1-13**

Are you ready for Christmas? If you haven't been asked that question, chances are that you will encounter it numerous times in the next few weeks. There are multiple meanings behind such a question. One person may be curious as to whether or not you have finished shopping for everyone on your list. Another may want to know if you've completed the process of trimming the tree or decorating the house. But few, if any, will ask the question with a desire to give attention to the spiritual aspect of preparing for Christmas.

The people of Isaiah's day faced challenges not unlike those we face. The world was dangerous and unstable. People were struggling to survive and make sense of their lives. In Isaiah 1, God summons heaven and earth to listen, underscoring just how important this exchange is between God and his people. How will the remnant respond to God's word as they prepare for the coming of the Messiah?

In Matthew 25, Jesus uses the Jewish custom of a wedding feast to teach the importance of being prepared for his return. It was a great honor to be a bridesmaid and accompany the groom to meet his bride for the wedding feast. Typically, there was no set time in which the bridegroom would arrive, so the moment of the procession could be quite unpredictable. Since the procession most often took place at night, the bridesmaids needed sufficient oil to keep their lamps lit for the processional. Five of the bridesmaids understood the importance of preparation. Not only did they take their lamps with

them, but flasks of oil as well, ensuring that their lamps would stay lit for the coming of the bridegroom.

In a sermon entitled "Heaven," Lee Eclov tells the story of Robby Robins who was an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. After his 300th mission, he was surprised to be given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. They flew across the ocean to Massachusetts and then had a long drive to western Pennsylvania. They drove all night, and when his buddies dropped him off at his driveway just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage - "Welcome Home Dad!"

How did they know? No one had called, and the crew themselves hadn't expected to leave so quickly. Robins relates, "When I walked into the house, the kids, about half dressed for school, screamed, 'Daddy!' Susan came running down the hall—she looked terrific hair fixed, make-up on, and a crisp yellow dress. 'How did you know?' I asked.

'I didn't,' she answered through tears of joy. 'Once we knew the war was over, we knew you'd be home one of these days. We knew you'd try to surprise us, so we were ready every day.'

The first advent reminds us that the Child who came in a manger will come again. Nobody knows when. Preparation is the key. Are you ready for Christmas?

Growing up in a typical Baptist home, I thought I needed to do everything by the book. In order to live and be that "ideal" Christian person, I thought it was expected of me to memorize the scriptures, to be in a pew every Sunday morning, and to be at all youth events. These rituals, though important in their own ways, became the idol I worshiped. I thought more of what people thought of me rather than who I was doing it for. It was a very empty and pitiful way to express my love of Christ. It was through my years in undergrad that I finally began to understand that true identity and relationship with Christ is not exactly obeying the rules and regulations. I came to learn that it is about being in community, about serving the poor, about seeking justice. All these things that we read and say we believe in, we never act out fully.

In a period of time when the law was idolized, and right religious practice and thought were precedent, Christ came to teach us the way to truly commune with God. Christ breaks it down into two simple-seeming statements: love God, love others. It is during this time of Advent that this idea of Christ coming to be with us becomes all the more real. As we anticipate the coming of Christ, may we remember that we are a people called to interact with God and each other daily. May we remember that we are called to break out of the ways in which society tells us to live, and that our identity in Christ is our greatest honor. May we realize that we are the hands and feet of Christ to all we meet through this season of Advent, and every day of our lives.



MONDAY,  
DECEMBER 1

**Sarah Briggs**  
**Student**  
**Gardner-Webb University**  
**School of Divinity**

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





TUESDAY,  
DECEMBER 2

Jay Zimmer  
Instructor of Biology  
Gardner-Webb University

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

“WWRD:What would Rome do?”

One of my favorite authors, Ravi Zacharias, once said, “Contrast brings clarity.” I think that it not only brings clarity, but it brings appreciation. A friend of mine, Greg, shared an interesting article with me about healthcare. It contrasted the ancient healthcare system of the Romans with the new kids on the block. No, not the boy band, but Christians. Now you have to give the Romans credit for some of the things they accomplished: amazing roads, gymnasiums, and the military muscle to keep the peace. What is often not reported is their healthcare system. Basically, Rome had no public healthcare system. Worse yet, the average Roman considered compassion a weakness. Those that didn’t have enough money to hire a personal doctor were out of luck when sickness struck. Often the only option for sick people that were not rich was to hang out at a pagan temple and hope for a miracle. Large families that couldn’t afford to feed all of their children would often abandon their least useful kids on the steps of a temple. Virtually all deformed babies were likewise abandoned. Things were equally bad for slaves. When they became sick or old, they were left to waste away on Tiber Island. When plagues struck, the dead were often left where they died; unburied and festering with disease. The stoic philosophy that guided so many Romans taught that to help the weak was giving in to emotion and not reason. Compassion was actually considered a vice, not a virtue.

And then came the Christians. And what a contrast they were! Motivated by the teaching of scriptures—each person being made in the image of God, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Parable of the Lost Sheep—these Christians did things unthinkable to the Roman mind. One amazing story centered around the bishop of Carthage, Cyprian. Around 250 AD, a plague was tearing through North Africa. For five years, he helped organize the Christians in caring for the sick and dying as well as burying the dead. As time went on, the Christian view on helping the sick took hold and we began to see the emergence of a building that most Americans take for granted—the hospital.

The early Christians in Rome were a light in the darkness. They saw their world through God’s eyes. They saw the signature of God in each person. Mother Teresa was also deeply affected by the Scriptures. When asked why she spent so much time with the sick in Calcutta, she responded, “I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus.”

The Roman Christians as well as Mother Teresa were radically changed by the words of Scripture and the powerful example of Jesus. May we all be challenged and changed in a similar way.

August 2009 was a month I will never forget. Pam and I had taken Patrick, our youngest son, to Charlotte for his birthday when I received a call that my parents had been in a car accident. We rushed home, packed a few things, and left for Asheville where my mother was in a coma and on life support. We waited in the hospital and prayed. Every hour the nurses would let us go into her room to visit and hold her hand. It soon became evident that she was not going to make it, and so, after three days, we took her off life support.

That day changed our family forever. My mother had always treasured Christmas because the two things she loved most – the love of Christ and her family – were present. After her death, we thought our Christmases would never be the same.

My mother had always given to the church, but we did not know how much until my dad, who had never been saved and did not attend church, met with her pastor. Dad told the preacher that we, as a family, wanted to continue giving what my mother had been tithing. He said she had always given \$1500 per month, which was all she had.

Luke 20:25 – He said to them, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Looking surprised, my dad promised we would continue to give that amount and asked how he could get it to the church. The preacher responded, “Come to church, Harry; that is the only way we will accept it.”

The longer they talked, the more they realized all they had in common. Before the conversation was over, the pastor and my father were planning a fishing trip.

Soon after that meeting, my dad asked the preacher to come to his house for dinner. As they rode out on the mountain on a four-wheeler, they talked about the church and how my dad’s life had changed with the death of my mother. My father was alone at 84 and did not know where his life was going. When they stopped, overlooking the valley below, the preacher said, “You are as close to God here as you can get.” My dad responded, “I want to be closer.” The preacher asked, “Harry, are you saved?” and my dad replied, “No, but I want to be.” They got off the four-wheeler and knelt down, praying for Christ to come into my dad’s heart as his personal savior.

Isaiah 2:2 – In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

Two weeks later, Dad was baptized, and he has been at church every Sunday since. Our Christmases now are just as wonderful as all the others because we know that our parents will one day walk together again, praising God.



WEDNESDAY,  
DECEMBER 3

**Woody Fish**  
**Associate Vice President**  
**for Alumni Relations**  
**and Development**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 2: 1-11**  
**Luke 20: 19-26**





THURSDAY,  
DECEMBER 4

**Kemeshia Randle**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**of English**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 2: 12-22**  
**Luke 20: 27-40**

Exactly one week after Thanksgiving and all of the cranberry sauce has been consumed, the turkey bones have been cleaned completely, and the remnant of the meat is in a Ziploc bag waiting to be sandwiched. Unlike the meal itself, the memories of the feast and time spent with loved ones are ever-present, as one longs for Christmas day to celebrate the birth of Christ and yet another reason to be thankful.

For the past few years, my family has made a tradition of having a destination Thanksgiving celebration. Four generations gathered in a home in Orlando, FL. While in Orlando, we toured the magical city, enjoyed two amusement parks, shopped at several malls, and watched a new release at the theater. Yet, the highpoint of the trip involved nothing remotely linked to the city itself. We most appreciated staying in the house, reuniting as a family, and eating a wonderful meal.

Last year's Thanksgiving holiday was indeed a time to be thankful. All eight of my grandmother's children were present, along with a majority of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Although we were grateful to see everyone there and much obliged that my grandmother shared with us her famous sweet potato pie, we were more thankful that she was still around and sound enough to even recollect the recipe; we took family photos to commemorate the event.

About two years ago, my grandmother was diagnosed with dementia. The disease has been eating away at her memory as fast as we were able to devour the pie. That Thanksgiving was bittersweet because Grandmother, although still here with us physically, was not healthy enough to make the trip.

For quite a while, I was unaccepting of the fact that my grandmother soon would not recognize her beloved granddaughter, or the children that she birthed. However, Luke 20: 35-36 reminds me that one day, my grandmother, a diligent and devout Christian, will leave us altogether, return to her Heavenly Father, join a new family, and become one with the angels. For Jesus said, "But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection."

I acknowledge that Grandmother's time with us was never meant to be eternal. Our Heavenly Father was gracious enough to share her, sound mind and body, as long as He did. And, like many others who are finishing up the turkey and waiting anxiously for Christmas day, I, too, look forward to this glorious time, not in the want of a gift, for I realize that the gift has already been given in the form of the many children God selfishly shares with us, specifically The One who gave His life to guarantee that we all might one day see our Father's face and become equal unto the angels.

It is hard to imagine that thousands of years ago, the state of our world could be anywhere near as dangerous as it is today. Our news is dominated by political unrest, misguided ideologies taking root, ISIS, Al Qaeda, Syria, Nigeria, Sudan, Ukraine, women and children sold into slavery, thousands murdered daily to remove their culture and heritage from the path of an oppressor.

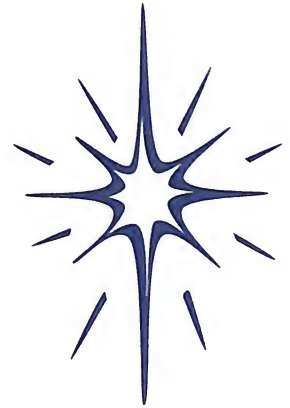
While Americans wonder if our own leaders are doing the right thing for us, and we get caught up arguing among ourselves about things often having to do with our wants rather than our needs, entire communities elsewhere in our world flee into neighboring countries to escape death brought by dangerous leaders claiming to represent a true believer's adherence to God's will. Those with power, resources and might seem to change the geographic, economic, cultural and historical direction of our world faster than we can read about it.

Thousands of years ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke of anarchy in Jerusalem, brazen sinfulness in Judah, and warned that continued rejection of God's leadership would lead from unrest to violence, risking God's wrath upon His people who had strayed far from the Word. Isaiah characterized leaders as "children" whose oppression fell inordinately on the poor and needy. Indeed, wars sprang up, Jerusalem fell to various armies over many generations, and God's people met with famine and even death as their leaders directed them away from God's will.

Centuries later, the Gospel of Luke reflects on a time when Sadducees, priests, and scribes were testing Jesus' knowledge of the laws of the time. After answering them, Jesus turned to his disciples and commented on how these leaders with the most education, who wore fine clothes, had the best seats in the synagogue, and were overly-concerned with their public appearance, had built their persona on far less than the widow who placed two copper coins in the offering bowl. Although the priests had given a fair measure of their wealth in that same offering, the widow gave all she had and did so with spiritual significance, rather than earthly significance.

What lessons can we take from Isaiah and from Luke that might help us lead lives of spiritual significance, rather than focus on things that have a "shelf life" of a day, a year or some other amount of time characterized by a fast-paced generation?

Like ancient times, today's leaders whose foundation is built upon control of land, natural resources, money, fear, and denial of human rights will inevitably face the judgment of God whose Word has far outlasted any civilization, regime, misguided ruler or interpretation of laws for self-gain. While we are held practically accountable to our leaders for the mechanics of living each day, we are spiritually accountable to God for the acts we engage in, the care we show for those who lack even the most basic tools for supporting themselves and their families, and for keeping His commandments that guide a life of virtue and value.



**FRIDAY,  
DECEMBER 5**

**David Hawsey  
Vice President of  
Enrollment Management  
Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 3: 8-15  
Luke 20: 41- 21: 4**



SATURDAY,  
DECEMBER 6

**Meredith Garrett**  
**Director of the Learning**  
**Enrichment and**  
**Assistance Program**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 4: 2-6**  
**Luke 21: 5-19**

March 29, 2010 – I had just given birth to my first daughter, Lila. In that moment, I experienced the greatest love I have ever felt for a human being. However, shortly after this realization I was terrified. Lila's tiny body glowed the color purple. I knew something was terribly wrong. I recall watching every move the nurse and the doctor made as they examined Lila. I kept asking them if Lila was ok, and they tried to reassure me that she was fine, but I could see in their eyes- they too worried about Lila. Before I knew it, Lila was being airlifted to Levine's Children's Hospital in Charlotte.

That day, I remember feeling completely lost, empty, and extremely angry toward God. I wanted to know how he could possibly allow this to happen to me. I felt I had done my perceived "duties" as a Christian, so why was this happening to me?

As I read this morning's devotion, I found myself questioning and "tossing around" several thoughts and observations regarding the scripture. I could not help but notice, and relate to, the many dynamics of human behavior such as: worrying about the unknown, and often times questioning God's plan for our life, and how, as humans, we try to fill in the blank of what should or shouldn't happen to us during life challenges.

I can recall trying to bargain with God during this time of uncertainty. Nearly seven days later, Lila was released, and she has remained strong and healthy. Do I think God gave into my bargain because I have been a good Christian? No, I do not. God is a loving God, and I'm thankful I worship a God who does not accept bribes or bargains, rather He is a God in whom I find peace no matter how chaotic life can be.

When Lila was born, she could not physically do anything for me. She was dependent on my love and protection, and yet I still felt the happiest I ever had (even though she was not doing or giving anything to me). I was so glad to serve and provide for her. Since this time, I have realized my living on this planet, being a mother, being a wife, a friend, an employee, and being a Christian, is not about what God or His people can "do" for me, but it is about how, only through him, I can love and serve every single person on this beautiful planet. So, if I find myself focusing on what God and those around me can "do for me," and not on what I can do for others, I will be continually disappointed; however, if I focus my energy on serving God and His people, I find God's love, and I am content because this is where the ultimate peace is found.



Silence, four hundred years of silence, until Zechariah, the tongue-silenced priest, wrote the name John. Immediately, his tongue was loosed and praises to God were spoken. The people throughout the hill country of Judea wondered about this baby, John. "Who he would be?" for the Lord's hand was surely with him.

A silent night, a holy night is how the Christmas hymn depicts a night several months later. A young traveling couple was searching each Inn for a room as the birth of their baby, our Savior was near. The stable became the delivery room for this most special baby.

How did God communicate with humankind after centuries of silence? God's exchange with us came through the birth of these two special babies.

These baby cousins grew and their respective ministries were as controversial as their dramatic entrance into our time. The lives of John and Jesus did not fit into the confines of the expectations of the people.

Isaiah 5:1-7 is a descriptive song of the good fruit that God's chosen nation was to produce. The good fruit was not produced instead, the vineyard yielded only bad fruit. The boundaries God had planned for this special vineyard became instead a place where the hedge was destroyed, the wall was trampled down, it was unpruned with thorns and briars, and no rain fell on this land. Instead of justice, there was bloodshed and distress rather than righteousness.

Silence, birth, and those two special babies became the way to redeem the bad fruit of his chosen nation as well as becoming good news for all people.

John the baptizer, the messenger, the one preparing the way for Jesus came fasting and was told he had a demon. Jesus, the Son of Man, came feasting with tax collectors and sinners and was told he was a glutton. In, *And It Was Good*, Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "He made it clear that people who are different are not therefore inferior. He knocked all our race and class distinctions to smithereens."

Both men represent the sacraments that we partake. John was the baptizer of his cousin Jesus. He witnessed the Holy Spirit descend as a dove and he heard the voice from heaven speaking His love and pleasure with the obedience of Jesus. Jesus brought us to the table and shared himself with us. In turn, He asked us to remember Him. Thomas Aquinas wrote:

"The eucharistic food, instead of being transformed into the one who takes it, transforms him unto itself. It follows that the proper effect of the Sacrament is to transform us so much into Christ, that we can truly say: 'I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me.'"

In this season of anticipation, spend time in silence preparing for the celebration of the special baby, our Savior, with the expectation of His return. Then gather with others and "re-member"—whether we are fasting or feasting, whomever we share the table with—"wisdom is proved right by her children." (Luke 7:35)



SUNDAY,  
DECEMBER 7

**Susan Bowling**  
**Interim Director of**  
**Event Services**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 5: 1-7**  
**Luke 7:28-35**



MONDAY,  
DECEMBER 8

**Garin Hill**  
**Doctor of Ministry Student**  
**Gardner-Webb University**  
**School of Divinity**  
**Pastor, Sandy Plains**  
**Baptist Church, Shelby, NC**

**Isaiah 5: 8-23**  
**Luke 21: 20-28**

Waiting. Just reading the word makes us want to purse our lips and take a deep breath to calm ourselves down, doesn't it? How about you – for what are you waiting? The test results, perhaps. Or the boss to take notice of your extra effort. Or the guy to call. Or the girl to smile in return. Or the resume to finally be considered. Whatever the case, it's fair to say waiting is an experience we understand all too well because we live with it each day in so many different facets of life.

Advent is such a special time of the Christian year, and though "Advent" itself means "arrival," it's arrival for which we spend four weeks waiting! We remember God coming to the world long ago in the incarnational Christ, and we anticipate God's arrival again in our spirits and our lives this year. It all has a warm glow about it, doesn't it? Christmas is on the way, and it's an encouraging thought and a heartwarming feeling to consider God's arrival again, even if it means waiting!

When I read the pages of Scripture, though, I confess the anticipation isn't only centered on the warm glow of this season. Be it tests or bosses or resumes or whatever, we fully understand waiting comes in many forms, and folks like you and me are waiting for so much more than just a yearly advent of Christ. In today's lectionary text, Jesus addresses this deeper yearning. In Luke 21, our Lord says;

*26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*

I'll tell you what I'm waiting for this Advent season. Yes, I am eagerly anticipating Christ's new arrival in our lives again, but not just that—I'm waiting for the last arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not just in our hearts, but riding the wings of the wind on a cloud, full of power and glory. I'm waiting for the last time test results or bosses or resumes ever concern us. I'm waiting on the last tear of sorrow, the last stillborn child, the last cancer diagnosis, and the last victim of trafficking. I'm waiting for the last of pain and the last of death. We wait to see – at last – the Son of Man come in glory and mighty power, and we hope to see it soon. We wait to see – at last – the redemption of the Lord draw near.

*So Lord, haste the day when the faith will be sight, when the clouds are rolled back as a scroll. Bring justice and righteousness in this advent season, and soon, bring it also in your final advent. We ask this prayer oh Lord, in faith, even as we wait. Amen.*



I always read the ending first. I read the last few paragraphs, the last few pages or even the last chapter of any new book. My son, now an eighth grader, admits he too, reads the ending first. "I just read that way," he replies when questioned. We both like to know how it all ends before we start at the beginning.

Advent is little bit like that I suppose. The season of Advent confronts us with both the beginning and the ending at once. Advent anticipates both the already come and the not yet coming of Jesus Christ. Perhaps Advent is more than a series of Sundays, a liturgical season or a countdown to Christmas. Perhaps Advent is a reminder to see and to hear anew what we know to be true—He, who was and is—is also He who comes.

Today's readings are from the middle. It is challenging to jump right into the middle of chapters from Isaiah and Luke. We are thrust face-to-face into passages that are unfamiliar and perhaps unsettling. We read and we wonder. We may have questions.

These Scripture lessons, like our lives, are right in the middle. We are often thrust into unfamiliar places. We wonder. We have questions. We live in the midst of futility and failings, conflicts and crises, wildness and wilderness.

And in the midst of our waiting, our wandering, our wondering, Jesus tells us a story. Jesus tells us a fig tree parable. The original hearers knew fig trees. They ate this accessible fruit- this common food, this basic necessity. Fig trees were a part of the scenery, a staple in daily life, and an ordinary experience.

In the midst of a difficult teaching, Jesus shared a parable. He tells us to look at the ordinary trees. Look at the tree by the kitchen window, the tree on the drive to work, or a favorite tree on campus. Look at the ordinary in the midst of a hard-to-grasp knowing. Watch with anticipation in the midst of hard-to-live living. Wait expectantly in the midst of a long longed-for outcome.

We see those deciduous trees. Right now, in December, they are stripped bare. They seem lifeless. Yet we know from all the winters in our lives that leaves will come back to these trees. They are not gone. Jesus' parable about a common ordinary tree and its leafing reminds us of what is to come. Jesus teaches us about Advent living, life in the middle, between beginnings and endings. Come Lord Jesus, Come.



TUESDAY,  
DECEMBER 9

**Marja Houston**  
**Proofreader**  
**Gardner-Webb University**  
**School of Divinity**

**Isaiah 5:13-25**  
**Luke 21:29-38**



WEDNESDAY,  
DECEMBER 10

Travis Burch  
Catering Manager  
Gardner-Webb University

Isaiah 6:1-13  
John 7:53- 8:11

Clarity, knowledge, and freedom of will, these are the key elements of each of these scriptures. In the passage from John, the Pharisees have brought before Christ an adulteress in an attempt to test Jesus and tempt him into failure, into a trap. Jesus instead turns the onlookers on their heads, saying "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." Instead of stoning the accused, the crowd dispersed until she is alone with Christ. In providing them the choice to carry out their own punishment, the crowds gained clarity, for they knew that in the eyes of God, and in the presence of their Lord, none of them were beyond punishment, even punishment to death. This knowledge reminded them that none of them were better than this woman and that they had no power to judge others, when they struggle daily with failings in their own right.

In Isaiah, we see a vision of the Lord's discontent, as presented to Isaiah. The voice of the Lord came to Isaiah, describing the people of Israel as those who hear, but fail to understand, who see, but don't perceive. He says their hearts are dull, their ears are heavy and their eyes are blind. These are the people of God! If anyone has been presented with the knowledge and wisdom of God, it would be the people of Israel. However, God gives humans free will, and so the Israelites are choosing not to see, to hear, to understand. They are choosing to ignore God's healing and salvation. The voice of the Lord then gives

clarity to Isaiah, telling him that the people will die and their lands will become desolate. Even that which appears safe will be destroyed once more, until, like a tree, the only thing that remains is a trunk, and in that trunk, the Holy seed. That seed is all that will remain.

Both of these passages ring with familiarity as we walk through our world today. Our world is rife with those who would cast judgment on others who are labeled "less than" or "tainted." We are not fit to judge, for in the eyes of the Lord we deserve equal scrutiny for our own shortcomings. However, as Jesus said to the woman, he tells each of us that he chooses not to condemn us; he only calls us to live a life for God, a life free from sin. These passages are intended to bring us clarity. We are to see clearly that we are given the keys to Heaven in the message of Jesus Christ. We've been given the knowledge of how we may receive eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven through the gift of God's own son, but it is up to us to choose to follow him. God gives us the free will to live free of dull hearts, heavy ears, and blind eyes.

In Christ we are given *clarity, knowledge, freedom and life everlasting.*

One of the most memorable moments of my life occurred nearly three and a half years ago. My mind's eye will never forget my beautiful bride walking down the aisle of the church. I remember what a blessing it was to have all of our closest friends, family, and mentors present at our wedding. The sanctuary was magnificently decorated, the bridesmaids and groomsmen were dressed to a tee, and the ceremony was planned to perfection; but none of these things would have gone as well as they did without hard work and preparation.

Preparation was made not only for the wedding ceremony, but more importantly for the long-term marriage that my wife and I wanted to experience. Understanding and agreeing with one another's values and approach to life, including our faith in Jesus Christ, was especially important because that is the foundation of our relationship.

The Bible provides several scriptures referring to being prepared, especially when focusing on the life of Christ. One specific example was when Jesus directed his disciples to prepare for the Passover meal, also known as the Last Supper (found in Luke 22:7-13). This event was more than just finding a place to share the Seder and organizing the celebration of Passover; this was a means of Jesus preparing his disciples for His death, which was soon to come. Jesus already knew that He would experience betrayal by one of His own disciples, and it was not long before He would offer His life as a sacrifice for the sins of humankind.

All along, Jesus knew that His purpose on this earth was to be offered as atonement for our sin; however, that did not stop Him from continuously learning, developing, and following the path that God, the Father, had ordained for Him. During this time of development and learning, Jesus always took time to intimately talk with His Father through prayer. During these times of solitude, God the Father continuously prepared His Son for what was to come and He gave Jesus the daily strength to proceed to the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Jesus was prepared for the cross and He prepared His disciples for the responsibilities that would follow the event at Golgotha.

Advent is a time of preparing, with great expectation for the blessings that come with celebrating Christ's birth into this world. Even more, Advent is a reminder of the eternal gift He brings to us as we trust Him with all that we are and all that we have. The questions we must ask ourselves as we reflect upon Advent are these: "Am I prepared to receive the gift of salvation that Christ offers and does my life reflect the receiving of that gift of eternal life?"

Alexander Graham Bell once stated, "Before anything else, preparation is the key to success." Are you prepared for the successful journey that God has in store for you?



THURSDAY,  
DECEMBER 11

**Tyler Davis**  
**Assistant Director**  
**for Housing and**  
**Residence Education**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 7:1-9**  
**Luke 22: 1-13**





FRIDAY,  
DECEMBER 12

**Bobbie Cox**  
**Associate Provost**  
**for Adult and**  
**Distance Education**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 7:10-25**  
**Luke 22:14-30**

Christmas traditions in my family have evolved over time as they have for other Christian families. I can still smell the Christmas coconut cake and roasted turkey my grandmother was baking while she stood in the kitchen wearing her apron and singing Amazing Grace. She was a devoted Christian who read the Bible daily, prayed out loud before she went to bed and taught her children and grandchildren that Christmas was more than good food and commercialism.

Just as my grandmother prepared her Christmas meal with much attention to detail, Jesus prepared for the last supper just as methodologically. When he sent Peter and John to go and prepare for the Passover meal, he was specific in his directions and gave much attention to specific details. *And he said unto them, "Behold, when ye are entered into the city, there shall a man meet you, bearing a pitcher of water; follow him into the house where he entereth in. And ye shall say unto the goodman of the house, 'The Master saith unto thee, Where is the guestchamber, where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he shall show you a large upper room furnished: there make ready."* (Luke 22:10-12.) Jesus then met in the upper room with the disciples whom he had mentored and guided through the celebration of Passover. He spoke of them as if they were children as we do our own children. I can only imagine that the disciples were confused or surprised by being referenced as children when their work with Jesus had been so hard and they had sacrificed so much of their lives with dedication to his message. I believe that Jesus would convey the same message today in

our celebration of Christmas in conveying that we are all children, God's children. For children, everything about Christmas is new and exciting, even though the tradition is repetitious. Children possess innocence and humility that may not be present in the lives of adults. They trust that the Advent will be exciting and is something greater than them. Jesus wants us to be childlike in the joyousness of the season and wants us to understand humility and innocence, just like a child. During the Christmas season, it is easy to get caught up in the traditions and forget that it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can experience true happiness, joy, and satisfaction in life.

As we approach the Advent season, my wish is to experience the season in the heart of a child, the Lord's child, Jesus Christ, and to share the Christmas message with others who have become burdened with tasks and materialism. During this Advent season, my family pauses and waits for God, knowing that we are waiting for peace, joy, love and commitment, as we quietly anticipate and prepare for him. As in Luke 3:6, *"Let us not fail to miss the thunder in the desert,"* because we are so busy shopping, buying presents and decorating a tree.

I can never remember a time, in my lifetime, when the peace, hope and joy of Christmas was more needed in the world.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poems and notes often reference miracles and optical phenomena once labeled as miracles. For example, in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, the mariner's fear that he is cursed is confirmed when he sees "death fires" or ignis fatuus (decaying or phosphorescent sea life) and flashes of St. Elmo's fire (atmospheric electricity around the ship's mast). Yet, when he witnesses the arrival of a "glory" or haloed figure (his shadow cast on the ocean and surrounded by reflected moonlight), the mariner interprets the "kind saint" as a sign of his redemption.

Coleridge's interest in miracles and optical illusions was not unusual at a time when scientific explanations demystified the specters haunting the Mariner as well as other well-known sightings. Also not uncommon were the consequences; many began to suspect the validity of miracles in general, and, as a result, some eventually questioned their faith. But Coleridge argued faith was not based on miracles, rather miracles were based on faith. And, ironically, Coleridge uses one of the most famous optical illusions, the Brocken spectre, to demonstrate his claim. Named after the peak in the Hartz Mountains where sightings frequently occur, the Brocken specter appears when the viewer's shadow is magnified, surrounded by a halo of light reflected from the sun behind the viewer, and projected on a screen of fine mist. The source of the Mariner's "kind saint", the Brocken spectre also appears in the last stanza of "Constancy to an Ideal Object:"

And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when  
The woodman winding westward up the glen  
At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's  
maze The viewless snow-mist weaves a  
glist'ning haze, Sees full before him, gliding  
without tread, An image with a glory round  
its head; The enamoured rustic worships its  
fair hues, Nor knows he makes the shadow, he  
pursues!

Had the Mariner been without faith, he would not have interpreted the optical illusion as either a "kind saint" or a sign of his redemption. Without faith the woodman would not have been inspired to worship the image appearing before him. The opening question refers to the "Ideal Object" discussed in the earlier stanzas, and some scholars argue that question negates the woodman's experience. However, Coleridge repeatedly defended and affirmed the presence of faith and its impact on human perception. So, rather than refuting the woodman's interpretation of the sign, the question and the response insist on its value; the physical cause of the vision was less important than the faith that served as foundation for the interpretation. Coleridge, of course, knew the scientific explanation of the Brocken spectre, but when a similar vision appeared before him, he, like the woodman, was inspired, not by the science but by his faith.



**SATURDAY,  
DECEMBER 13**

**Janet Land  
Professor of English  
Director, Center for  
Excellence in Teaching  
and Learning  
Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 8: 1-15  
Luke 22: 31-38**





SUNDAY,  
DECEMBER 14

**Eddie Stepp**  
**Professor and Chair**  
**Department of Religious**  
**Studies and Philosophy**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

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

No one attends a wedding to celebrate the best man. I have been in several weddings, one of my own, and officiated a handful of others. I have hazy memories at best of the groom's wing-man. I remember radiant and resplendent brides, anxiously beaming and teary-eyed grooms, but no best men. While these sidekicks have a role to play in the proceedings, in the whole scheme of the wedding event, they are insignificant. We don't go to weddings to see them. The focus of our joy is elsewhere.

In the passage from John 3, John the Baptizer draws upon a similar image as he talked with his disciples about this One who had come, the Messiah. Jesus was the groom and John was the best man. Although some people had been confused about John's role, he reaffirmed here that his role was preparatory – he was getting people ready for the groom. He held the microphone briefly, announcing the groom's arrival, but now he was standing to the side, not distressed that he had been replaced, but joyful that the attention of the crowd was now in its rightful place.

When I was a child, my family always lived at least eight hours away from both sets of grandparents. When it was time to visit, my dad's preference was to drive through the night, avoiding traffic and bickering children. After dinner, my sister and I were chucked in the back of the van when it was time to head down the highway. Even though the anticipation was palpable, and despite vows to stay awake the entire

night, inevitably slumber won. Along the way I would wake up, hopeful that we were close, only to be disappointed. Gradually I would be lulled back to sleep by the rhythms of the highway and the baritone vocal stylings of Gary Puckett, the only musical cassette tape my father owned. Eventually, after a seemingly endless night, with the sun just beginning to appear on the horizon, we arrived at our longed-for destination. And that was enough to provoke a joyful celebration! Arrival and joy were always companions.

For Israel, it had been a long journey as they waited for the arrival of the Messiah. Hundreds of years had passed, full of excitement and disappointment. It is no surprise then that John met the arrival of Jesus with joy. The long-awaited One was now standing front and center. Did John fully understand who Jesus was and what it meant to call him Messiah? Doubtlessly not. Yet he saw enough to know that a new day was dawning and that God was moving. Generations of waiting, hoping, longing, and anticipation were over. Immanuel had come to rescue captive Israel. And that was enough to provoke a joyful celebration! Arrival and joy, together.

May it be so for us this year, that Jesus' arrival and our joy will be reunited again.

Growing up I looked forward to decorating our home for Christmas. Our house, where my parents still live, was designed with Christmas decorations in mind. I am certain of it! Every year, following Thanksgiving, I would join in the work of bringing all the decorations down out of the attic. Boxes of ornaments would fill the dining table, just waiting to inspire a story about how one of them joined the collection. Garlands and wreaths and red bows would abound. Strands of colorful lights would be tested. The beautiful manger and its band of people, angels, and animals would be carefully arranged on the top of the piano. Stockings would be hung on the rock fireplace which would inevitably inspire my Dad to build a roaring fire. And, before we knew it, our home would be transformed into a Christmas Wonderland. Suddenly, the darkness and the chill of December would be chased away by the symbols of the Christmas season, and anticipation and hope would begin to sink in.

As I read Isaiah 8 and Luke 22 in tandem and hold them against the backdrop of Advent, I recognize elements from my own Christmas memories. There's darkness, and symbols, and hope. Reflecting on the passages today, my mind continues to return to these phrases: "signs and symbols" (Isaiah 8:18), the reigning of darkness (Isaiah 8:22, Luke 22:53), and the day that is coming when there will be "no more gloom" (Isaiah 9:1). Right out of the gate, these passages may

not make the reader immediately think of the typical scriptures we read at Christmas. Upon further inspection, though, one can sense the anticipation and confidence of Isaiah in God's plan to redeem His people. While there would be dark times, God's people would not be abandoned, and God's Great Light would enter the world. That is exactly what we celebrate during Advent.

With Advent positioned at the darkest time of our calendar year, and at this dark point in time, these passages speak well to what is happening in our world. With the stories that are reported daily on various news outlets, our focus could easily be derailed and turned inward. However, as Christ followers living in this world where darkness abounds, we can choose to follow Isaiah's example and say, "Here am I... we are signs and symbols... from the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 8:18) We can choose today to represent the Hope that a day is coming when there will be no more gloom! As we wait for that day, may we choose to live as symbols of Christ with us and use our smiles, our words, our resources, and our actions to chase away the darkness in someone else's part of the world.



**MONDAY,  
DECEMBER 15**

**Leah Robinson Clevenger  
Director of  
Alumni Relations  
Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 8:16-9:1  
Luke 22:39-53**



**TUESDAY,  
DECEMBER 16**

**Linda Smith  
Director of Payroll  
Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 9: 1-7  
Luke 22: 54-69**

While we all were enduring the heat and humidity of the late days of summer, I was reminded that this season would soon pass and Christmas would be upon us. Our choir director shared with our church organist and me (church pianist) that she had already spent quite some time perusing Christmas cantatas for our choir. She had narrowed the selection down to two that had possibilities, and as is usual, she asked us to listen to the cantatas and share our thoughts. As I took the book and CD home to listen, I found myself making a mental to-do list of all the accompanying activities that come with the Christmas season. Instead of anticipating this wonderful time of the year when we celebrate the birth of our Savior, I felt the familiar feeling of being overwhelmed; where would I find the added time for all these busy preparations?

Like a lot of people, my life has become so consumed with the daily activities of work, family, church, and just "life." How could I possibly squeeze in something else? I'm sure you recognize the holiday list: the decorating, the endless shopping for that "one last gift," the cooking and baking, attending parties and get-togethers with family and friends, the traveling to visit out-of-town family, and the list continues...

The following Sunday afternoon I took advantage of the quiet in my house, gathering my book and CD for listening. As I sat on my sofa I decided to listen to each of the songs with an open heart. While all of the music was meaningful and beautiful, it seemed that something within me was especially drawn to one song entitled "My Heart Longs for Christmas." The theme throughout this song is how all the "things" of Christmas will never fulfill that longing deep inside us; only when our focus turns to the true reason for Christmas will we find peace, joy, and contentment. As I sat in the quiet, I contemplated the words of this song and it became clear to me that my focus had strayed. Instead of looking forward to the celebration of our Lord's birth, I had allowed myself to be overwhelmed by all that I felt was important and needed to be accomplished. My prayer was that God would help me to change my thoughts and ways this coming Christmas season, to eagerly anticipate the celebration of the birth of the Light of the World.

Perhaps you have the same struggles in your life, to keep the Savior at the center of everything. As we all share in this time of Advent, won't you join me as we turn our hearts and minds toward the one whom Isaiah called, "Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Amen.



I remember vividly as a boy the great time in our country when men were making the first voyages into space. It was a rare occasion in those days to have a TV in the classroom, but exceptions were made to watch rocket launches. I recall the thrill as someone far away counted T-minus one minute and the clock was displayed as the countdown ensued along with images of the rocket sitting majestically on the launching pad. There was an almost unbearable anticipation in the minds and hearts of those of us who could only imagine the thrill and excitement of space travel.

Isaiah warned of the men of his day who were leading the people astray. They were being led away from God. He describes a wrath that included both the common man and the leaders in contrasting stone and cedar, and the head and tail. All will face God's outstretched hand of judgment.

Yet while the story of John the Baptist has both a sense of thrill, much like I had as a child in anticipating the launch of rockets, it is accompanied by the knowledge that God is both merciful and our judge just like Isaiah had written. John knew God still had his hand of judgment outstretched. He preached "A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He was the messenger about whom Isaiah had foretold. He called those who heard him to repentance just as he was prophesied to do and his story still calls us to repentance today.

Unlike Isaiah, John had an immediate message of hope that was pounding in his heart. It was T-minus, one minute. The time was here. It was the message that, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." John knew that the ministry of Jesus was about to blastoff. It was near the end of the long countdown.

I can only imagine in that day, the talk in the community about John, his preaching and his calls to repentance. It was the sharing of this exciting and convicting news that caused people to come to the Jordan River to see and be baptized. John was excited about the coming of Jesus to his public life and ministry and he wanted everyone to know and respond.

As we quickly approach Christmas and the celebration of His birth, are we following the example John has set? During this time when Jesus the Christ is so much a part of our thoughts and our hearts pound with anticipation about the celebration of his birth, are we drawn to repentance and confession that we need His forgiveness and grace?

*Father, with the coming of the Christ child, we know you fulfilled your purposes in the words and deeds of Isaiah and John. We pray that this season, you will fulfill in us the message of repentance, hope and your grace through Jesus the Christ. Amen.*



WEDNESDAY,  
DECEMBER 17

**Bruce Boyles**  
**Associate Professor of**  
**Education**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 9: 8-17**  
**Mark 1: 1-8**



**THURSDAY,  
DECEMBER 18**

**Jamye Duncan  
Graduate  
Gardner-Webb University  
School of Divinity**

**Isaiah 9:18-10:4  
Matthew 3:1-12**

My children are almost grown, but there is still something very special about Christmas morning in our house.

Christmas feels magical. The sights, sounds, and smells of Christmas don't compare to any other time of year. Christmas has the ability to unify families and communities. We reconnect with loved ones, stretch our arms in generosity to others, and allow ourselves to be united in the magic of the season. Even those who do not know Jesus celebrate Christmas. There is an intrinsic understanding that this time of year is special, holy, unique.

The picture that Isaiah and John the Baptist paint for us in these texts is magical as well. Both men experienced harsh evil and deliberate disobedience in the world. They knew of God's impending and ultimate judgment upon his people. Both knew our universal need for salvation, which could only come through the deliverance of God. The birth of Jesus was the culmination of many years of expectation for deliverance. His arrival was world-changing. Isaiah prophesied it and John witnessed it.

However, for us, the magic of Christmas is misdirected. We neglect the example of Isaiah and John. They eagerly expected the Messiah because the world needed him. They declared his impending arrival, and warned of the consequences of rejecting the deliverance Jesus offered. We place a nativity

scene in our homes and sing Christmas songs at church, but sense no urgency in sharing our need for Jesus, or the gift his arrival affords us. Isaiah and John were commissioned with the task that is our task to complete as well.

Talladega Nights, a popular comedic film produced in 2006, quotes its lead actor praying to the baby Jesus. When he is scolded by his wife for praying solely to the baby, his reply is simple. He says, "I like the Christmas Jesus the best." At times, we are all guilty of liking the "Christmas Jesus" the best. The beautiful baby, as a perfect gift to us, eagerly awaits our love and devotion. Although this image of Jesus is beautiful and accurate, it is wholly incomplete. The "Christmas Jesus" was brutally tortured and murdered to save those who hated him. He has saved us, even though we neglect him and disobey him. The disobedience of God's people that infuriated Isaiah was forever eradicated. The evil politics that disgusted John were revolutionized through a baby who would save us all from the sin that engulfs us.

As we revel in the beauty of the season, we should always remember the true magic of Christmas: God made a way for us when there was no other way.



Just turn on the news. The earth seems to be shattering all around us by the minute. There are times when we feel hopeless, desolate, powerless, or all of the above. However, these feelings are not unique to the people of the here and now. People from all times and places have felt abandonment in the waves of terror this world harbors.

So often, in times of strife, humankind dismisses that voice from God, drawing them to careful discernment, inviting them to choose love, and calling them to dwell in the presence of his glory that is alive at every corner, even in the scary places no one wants to see.

This retreat from God is clearly seen throughout the world. Either people do not subscribe to a God of grace and redemption, or they know but cannot grasp this truth with much strength. There are others who commit acts of violence against humanity and the created world in the name of God. Even when we think we know that there is a hopeful future in the restoration of creation, there are those that do not believe or do not show their belief. This unbelief was even present when Jesus was alive and well, in the flesh, living as a fulfillment of the prophecy that people had heard about for centuries.

For this and all the haste and waste we see, either firsthand or through a screen, we pray. We pray with questions through tears and for mercy and grace to overcome. For God to help us understand and hold us together when everything around us seems adrift in a sea of something that is surely polluted.

Regardless of our skepticism, cynicism, and utter hopelessness, we can place our hope and faith in something much bigger than world leaders, materialism, doomsday prepping, status symbols, and weaponry collections. Although we live in a world with so much wrongdoing and thinking, we serve a God that is much more powerful than all wrongs. We can use the resources and gifts that he has given for love or for war, for peace or for turmoil, for reconciliation or ruin. No matter what we choose, God will prevail and all things will be made new. God's presence is not on hold for a far away time but is evident right now.

His presence is made known in the way that nature flourishes and regenerates, even after it has been ravaged. It is known in the way an individual diagnosed with a terminal disease can still have joy and peace, even in the midst of so much fear and pain. It is known in the way that a child living on a heap of trash can still smile and laugh, even when their bodies have little for which to be happy.

Even in the threadbare places of life where it seems that God is absent, renewal bursts forth, joy and peace offer strength, and smiles and laughter still resound.



FRIDAY,  
DECEMBER 19

**Mallory Monroe**  
Student  
**Gardner-Webb University**  
**School of Divinity**

**Isaiah 10:5-19**  
**Matthew 11:2-15**



**SATURDAY,  
DECEMBER 20**

**Brooke Thompson  
Assistant Professor of  
Psychology  
Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 10:20-27  
Luke 3:15-20**

As proud parents of a toddler, my husband and I have spent most of the last year developing a strong bond with our son. It is our goal that he develops a solid sense of trust. I want him to trust me and believe that I am looking out for his best interest. I want him to trust that he really shouldn't grab that knife even though every impulse in his body is telling him to do so. I know eventually he will trust me - he is only a toddler and is still learning so much about this world. But what about us, why do we constantly struggle to trust in the Lord? The people of Israel put their trust in the Assyrians to whom they were in bondage. Similarly, when we place our trust in the things and people of this world we are also held in bondage. We come to rely upon these sources and lose sight of the Truth we should trust in. Although my son will trust me, I will unfortunately let him down at times. That is the nature of humankind - we are fallible. Accordingly, our trust should not be placed in humans but rather in the Lord. We should even be careful of placing too much trust in pastors, prophets and other church leaders even though they may be strong in faith and righteous purveyors of the word. Just as John the Baptist explained, he as a man can only baptize with water but the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit. We should be cognizant of this distinction, understanding that our ultimate trust should be in the Word with Christ.

Our lack of trust is also made evident in our fear. It is against God's will for us to fear. For if God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? But, trust in the unknown can be difficult, especially in times of great affliction as was the case for the people of Israel in the writings of Isaiah. Fear will often lead people to try to control outcomes instead of trusting in God's design. The essence of faith, however, is trusting in something that you can't see, control, or even understand. And this is what God calls us to do.

We should have comfort, however, in knowing that He will always keep His promises. He promised that He would maintain a remnant in Israel and that the people of Israel would no longer be in bondage to the Assyrians, and He followed through with his promise. Just as God made promises to Israel, He has also made promises to us. He promises that He will be with you and never forsake you (Deut 31:6). He promises that He works for the good in all things for those who love him (Romans 8:28). He promises that He will strengthen you and help you (Isaiah 41:10). And, finally, He promises that whoever believes in Jesus will never die (John 11:25-26). God keeps his promises - trust that!

In October of 2012 my wife Ellen was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Thus began a physical and spiritual marathon which included seemingly endless medical treatments, continuous medications and nonstop prayer. She endured many sufferings. In less than a year, her cancer consumed her and she died. After Ellen died, my daughters and I elected to wear colored cancer bracelets as one way to honor her memory. You have probably seen or worn one. My periwinkle blue cancer wristband reads "no one fights alone." That saying reminds me of Ellen because she bravely suffered the crushing, debilitating, and painful servings of cancer with a grace that amazed me. Her complaints were rare but her will to fight for her health was extraordinary. She relied on God's grace to heal her first and foremost spiritually, then physically. Plus, she united her suffering via prayer to Christ's suffering to help others. Not that Christ needs our help; he does not. But he invites us to share in his divinity. That would include suffering. Whatever Christ did he sanctified. He suffered, therefore suffering becomes sanctifying.

When I look at this wrist band and its message, I am also reminded of that famous passage from St. John's gospel that reads: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18

This passage and the passage from Isaiah reveal the love of God and what real love means—sacrifice. The sacrificial nature of God's love is played out in the life of God the Son. Sacrifice is the most beautiful and most difficult expression of love. Ultimately, if suffering has no meaning then love has no meaning.

God does not leave us alone to battle our weaknesses and brokenness. He sends a savior to win eternity for us by suffering for us. He fights to save us in a way that is permanent, exclusive, and fruitful. As Saint Augustine once wrote, *God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.*

However, Jesus comes to us in ways that we least expect. Like C.S. Lewis would say, Jesus comes "in disguise." He champions our cause in ways that are surprising and perhaps, at first glance, unrecognizable. For example, next week we celebrate our Lord's birth. It is surprising to think that the God of the universe would come to us as an infant. It is shocking to think that our champion is a little baby born in poverty. But this infant will change everything; he turns everything upside down. This divine baby changes suffering into healing and death into life eternal.



**SUNDAY,  
DECEMBER 21**

**David Carscaddon  
Professor of Psychology;  
Dean, School of  
Psychology and  
Counseling  
Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 42: 1-12  
John 3: 16-21**





MONDAY,  
DECEMBER 22

Shaun Dover  
Senior Web  
Designer/Developer,  
Gardner-Webb University

Isaiah 11: 1-9  
John 5: 36-47

*"You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees." John 5:39 (The Message)*

When I think of Christmas, my thoughts always focus on memories of my grandmother. My wife says that she was the closest thing to a "mountain woman" that she has ever met. Easily over a foot shorter than I am now, she was quietly strong, taking care of the farm that she lived on until she was in her mid-80s, never asking for, nor accepting any help with, daily tasks. Yet to her grandchildren, she exuded the sort of love that still lifts my spirit when I reflect on her memory.

Since I was an only child, I always had plenty of gifts to open, but I always looked forward to getting the gift that my grandmother gave; a Laura Lynn creamer container (back then you could buy a gigantic brown plastic container of the stuff) filled with small bills and change that she squirreled away all year long. I generally spent the better part of Christmas afternoon counting and sorting all of the change into paper rollers so that my parents and I could take it all to the bank once Christmas had passed, soon to be spent on some toy that I would quickly break or forget about, or, at best, save to be spent at some later date on something that would shortly be stored and forgotten.

So, let's think about the disparity between my actions and my grandmother's. For me, the joy was found in the moment of receiving the gift. I was just a child, but for me there was nothing more required of me than to wait the allotted 365 days, and show up. For my grandmother, the process was something that she *lived*. If you have ever attempted to save for anything by collecting the change from daily purchases, you know that filling up this massive jar takes an awful lot of dedication and patience. Especially for a woman who was living alone on a meager income made up of Social Security money, augmented only through what little help was accepted from my mother and uncle.

Aren't all of our lives full of moments like this? Do we all not sometimes miss the forest for the trees? Rather than filling the jar with love and good intention, do we not wait for the good to come to us?

Thinking back on that jar, I know that grandma approached Christmas as we all should, living in the spirit of Christmas all year, not just simply showing up. Advent is a time of anticipation and reflection; I hope this year to approach Christmas as my grandmother did and not simply show up.

The Boy Scout motto is "Be Prepared." The Advent season is a season of preparation. Whether we find ourselves in the hustle and bustle of consumerism or spiritualism, it is a season of getting ready for something. I found in Psalm 66 how God prepared the way for the children of Israel to cross a river on foot. In doing so, we recognize this is nothing short of a miracle. Who can divide a sea, and make it ready for the traffic of a whole nation? He that can do this must be God, who is worthy of our love, adoration, praise, trust, and obedience.

Isaiah 11:10-16 revealed through his foretelling of the coming of the Messiah, that God had been busy from eternity making preparations for the birth of our Savior. Jesus would come from the root of Jesse. Most roots are underground and are hidden from our eyes. So was Jesus, until he put on flesh and appeared in the fullness of grace to save us from sin. In Jesus, the root, branches grow and extend upward and outward from the root. In Jesus, we have our being, our nourishment, fruitfulness, and holiness. John 5:15 reminds us of the importance of being rooted in Jesus with the following words: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

In Revelation 20:11-21:8, God is preparing us for a new heaven and a new earth. That preparation is to have us live in a new reality where there will be no more death, no more crying, and no more pain.

The Gospel of Luke 1:5-25, prepares a forerunner to come before Jesus. One who would baptize with water, preach of the one who would baptize with the spirit, and declare the kingdom of God was at hand (the kingdom being Jesus).

This Advent season, the only question that could possibly remain is, are we preparing for the right thing? Are we preparing our souls for heavenly living or earthly living? Are we preparing our minds spiritually to endure this race to the end? I am reminded that the Advent season for some is the loneliest season of all. It is during this season that suicide is at its highest.

In this season of preparation, I am reminded of Paul Harvey's poem "What Are Fathers Made Of?" At the very end of the poem is the following verse: "I don't know where fathers go when they die. But I've an idea that after a good rest . . . wherever it is . . . he won't be happy unless there's work to do. He won't just sit on a cloud and wait for the girl he's loved and the children she bore. He'll be busy there, too . . . repairing the stairs . . . oiling the gates . . . improving the streets . . . smoothing the way." This Advent season, let us prepare our minds, bodies, and souls for the second coming of Jesus.



**TUESDAY,  
DECEMBER 23**

**Rev. Barbara Starr Barner  
Associate Minister  
Doctor of Ministry  
Candidate  
Gardner-Webb University  
School of Divinity**

**Isaiah 11:10-16  
Luke 1:5-25**





WEDNESDAY,  
DECEMBER 24

**Robert W. Canoy**  
Dean  
School of Divinity and  
Professor of Christian  
Theology  
Gardner-Webb University

**Isaiah 28:9-22**  
**Luke 1:26-38**

The two biblical stories of Isaiah 23:9-22 and Luke 1:26-38 could not be more different, and yet at the same time they could not be more alike! We are greeted with a scriptural paradox (with something contradictory but yet true) of WOE and WOW this Christmas Eve.

My personal preference has always been to be wowed at Christmas by the unexpected arrival of a family member, some amazing gift that I had not anticipated, or a simple surprise that brings with it unspeakable joy. In fact, most of the people that I know work really hard at Christmas to push aside the woes of life and try to forget about their troubles. Church groups and charitable organizations pitch in and go the extra mile to be helpful and generous with needy people everywhere. People do random acts of kindness at Christmas. Even Charles Dickens' famous Ebenezer Scrooge has a change of heart at Christmas. But try though we might to avoid the woes of life, Christmas always comes with both wow and woe.

Isaiah 28, like many of the chapters of Isaiah, begins with a characteristic woe, and most of the twenty-nine verses of that chapter reverberates that sobering theme. Luke 1 on the one hand begins with a woe, but then on the other hand quickly turns into a wow! The angel Gabriel speaks to Mary, who is not married, and shares with her the disturbing news that she is going to have a baby. She begins to ponder, wonder, and to be troubled at this woeful news. But the more she listens to Gabriel, she soon comes to hear and confirm his words: "For nothing is impossible with God" (Lk. 1:37). In an instant the woe has turned to wow—a virgin can conceive by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

And the prophet Isaiah's message of woe is also interrupted briefly with the beautiful words that a "tested stone, a precious cornerstone...justice...righteousness" (Is. 28:16-17) will be laid in Zion in the midst of the utter nonsense that is being spoken by Israel's false prophets and charlatan priests. In a fascinating turn of phrase in Hebrew (saw lasaw saw saw lasaw, qaw laqaw qaw laqaw), those who do not know Hebrew can sound these words (from vv. 10 and 13) and recognize that they are reading gibberish. 'These verses sound like what we sometimes say in English: "Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah!"' The nonsense spoken by the drunken priests and prophets, that all is well in Ephraim, is just another lie for which the price of judgment against injustice will soon be paid in the land.

So on Christmas Eve we do well to remember that God sent His righteous and just Son into the world to do right by all people, to tell us the truth, and not to add more blah-blah-blah-blah-blah to a world that knows that all is not well in the land.

"Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known." – Carl Sagan

"A new kind of machine could unlock the power to solve our most difficult problems."

*Time*, February 17, 2014 (page 27)

Having devoted my career to higher education, I would be among the last to denigrate the pursuit of knowledge and human progress. But a misguided understanding of knowledge and power can be dangerous, and the assumptions that may lie behind these quotes (above) give me some pause. Could we be overreaching and overconfident in our own ability to know and understand? Indeed, this is not a new idea. In literature we have long had the story of Faust—or Doctor Faustus—who sold his soul to the devil for what he thought would be ultimate knowledge and perhaps power as well.

In today's passage from Isaiah, hypocrisy and insincerity in the worship of God are linked with an arrogance that even challenges the Creator and his knowledge:

*Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it,  
"You did not make me"?*

*Can the pot say to the potter,  
"You know nothing"? (v. 16)*

God's response is that "the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish" (v. 14).

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the coming into the world of the true source of enlightenment—the true light of the world—as well as the source of the greatest power, the power to become children of God. As he told his disciples, Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14: 6). He told them, further, that the Father would send the Holy Spirit, who "will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you" (v. 26). It was because she was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1: 41) that Elizabeth recognized Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (v. 43).

Though Carl Sagan and *Time* magazine had other applications in mind for their words, those for whom Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior are aware of the power to solve our most difficult problems, and those who do not yet know him do indeed have something incredible waiting to be known.



THURSDAY,  
DECEMBER 25

**Frank Bonner**  
**President**  
**Gardner-Webb University**

**Isaiah 29:13-24**  
**Luke 1:39-66**

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

## 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.

## 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, possibly from a spiral-bound notebook as there's a slight shadow on the left edge. The background behind the paper is dark.

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



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# Gardner-Webb University At-a-Glance

- Gardner-Webb is a private university with a Baptist heritage, 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 2014 edition of "America's Best Colleges."
- Gardner-Webb was one of just 500 universities and colleges nationwide to be named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (for the sixth 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 five professional schools, two academic schools, and 11 academic departments offer over 60 undergraduate and graduate major fields of study.
- Our 160+ 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 a 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.



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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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