Calling All Peace-Builders

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” —Isaiah 2:4

Read Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 5:9

In my estimation Christians these days tend to speak more about the emotional and relational aspects of our faith than did previous generations. I can scarcely recall a time, for example, when my grandparents or people in their age bracket read books about love languages or naming your deepest feelings. For them following Jesus involved, first and foremost, a profound commitment to discipleship and tangible Christian service. As one elderly man stated it to me several years ago, “We read the Bible and do it.”

I must quickly add, however, that I am all for this recent swell of interest in the inner life—just not at the expense of faithful and courageous action. In reality the Gospel of Jesus involves both the hope of inner peace as well as a call to radical peacemaking. We should not, and need not, choose one over the other.

As president of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, I am delighted once again to give you this Advent devotional. My colleagues and I have prepared it as a way of praising God for his unfailing goodness and thanking you for your encouragement and support. As you read the texts and reflect on our associated comments, we pray that you will be both renewed in spirit and stirred to action. If you are, please pray for us as well!

We thank you, O Lord, for the promise of peace that passes all understanding. Give us the courage—the will!—to promote lasting peace in our war-torn and violent world.

Terry L. Brensinger, Ph.D., President of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary;
Vice President of Fresno Pacific University
“It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”
—Lamentations 3:26

Read Lamentations 3:19-26

Being called to walk alongside parents who are at risk of losing their children has humbled me. Whether I witness the loss of a child that is four or 40, whether the loss be from cancer, mental illness or war, never have I seen such torment and such an appetite for courage as in the eyes of these mothers and fathers. I have been most struck by one thing in companion-ing these parents—they have each reached a point on their journey when their darkness was so black, so consuming, that even the memory of light had escaped them. In that moment grief was a luxury they could not afford as they were handed the news and told to “strap it to their backs” and run the race lying before them. They experienced the helplessness as “thought-chains” as heavy and confining as the chains described in Lamentations 3:7.

To this day many of these parents link themselves together in catastrophic what-ifs and if-onlys. Their nights are robbed of sleep and their souls are deprived of peace (see Lamentations 3:17). Filled with bitterness and hardship (3:15), their cries and panting drown out the gentle whisper of God’s voice. But I assure you that God is there. I know this because when we lay our most precious children at the foot of the Savior, the Lord our God embraces both of his children, the parent and the babe, as they wait for answers from biopsies, psychiatrists and army chaplains. They can be empowered to “wait quietly for deliverance from the Lord” (v.26).

Father, I pray that hope fill the hearts of those who are awaiting deliverance. May your promises bring a gentle peace that soothes these troubled souls.

Autumn Lindberg, M.A., LMFT, Visalia Marriage and Family Therapy Program; Director and instructor in MFT, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Peace Imagination

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” —Psalm 122:6

Read Psalm 122

This Song of Ascents, Psalm 122, was part of the Jewish pilgrim tradition. While hiking up to Jerusalem for a great festival, the faithful sang this song and others now preserved in Psalms 120-135. The power of this song lies in its imaginative vision of what Jerusalem, the residence of God, will look like when Israel returns from exile—not just physically but with full freedom and prosperity. The vision includes both the destination and the travel plans—how to get there.

This poem invites the singer to the imagination of peace that is built on justice. Biblical justice, we learn in Deuteronomy 10:12-22, behaves like God does by defending orphans and widows and loving the foreigners or aliens among you. When people and nations do God’s justice, peace prevails!

One way that Christian friends are bringing peace by loving foreigners is to adopt children of color. Then, they give themselves to creating church communities where their children are welcome. One way the seminary builds peace is by sponsoring the summer Institute for Global Anabaptist Peacebuilders. Young adults (early college) gather in Fresno for 10 days to study models for overcoming food insecurity, injustice for recent immigrants, fouling of the air and water, and injustice in the criminal justice system. That is the vision of Psalm 122—building peace by searching for justice. Please sponsor a 20-year-old next June when seminary professors and others nurture a new generation of peace-builders.

May the peace of Jesus fill Jerusalem, the cities in which we live and the cities of the world as we side with justice for the poor and the needy.

Lynn Jost, Ph.D., Professor of Preaching & Old Testament; Director of Center for Anabaptist Studies, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Contrasted by the Light of Love

“The night is far gone, the day is near. Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” —Romans 13:12

Read Romans 13:11-14

Paul’s metaphor of separating night from day or darkness from light echoes Genesis 1. Just as God tamed the chaos of creation (Genesis 1:1-2) by establishing day and night (Genesis 1:3-5), this God pulls humanity from the chaos of evil into a liberated life of love. Paul knew the contrast of awakening from the slumber of a life without Jesus. The light of Christ blinded him and the scales of darkness fell from his eyes (Acts 9). Similarly, the church is a contrast—a community of light in the midst of darkness.

The sleep/darkness/night versus wakefulness/light/day images invites readers into lives of transformation. Christians live countercultural patterns of life; the contrast should be obvious—just like day and night. Romans 12 invites us to bless enemies, refuse retaliation and to trust God with executing justice against evildoers. Romans 13 delegates this sort of sword-bearing to rulers and authorities—with limits!—to limit evil in a world addicted to cycles of retribution.

God’s people are the contrast to a fractured world that embodies vengeance as a means of keeping order and idolatry as a means of identity formation. The “armor of light” of enemy-love separates us from the “works of darkness” of vengeance. The day of living honorably separates us from the night of idol worship. The wakefulness of neighbor love separates us from the slumber of selfish desires. The church’s contrast to culture prefigures a liberated world (Romans 8), one where light wins the day as the law of love is actualized in daily practice (Romans 13:10).

Almighty God, help us, in a dark and fractured world, to embody the light of love as we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” as signposts of a liberated world.

Kurt Willems, M.Div. Alumnus; Pastor of Pangea, a BIC church plant in Seattle, WA
Christ our Hope

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” —Jeremiah 29:11

Read Jeremiah 29:10-14

Years ago my sister and I attempted an obstacle course which began by swinging on a rope swing across a ditch. My sister stood behind me terrified, whispering to herself, “I’m going to hit the tree!” Camp counselors reassured her that they tried to hit the tree but could not. After my turn I looked back to see my sister hobbling toward me. Yes, she hit the tree. Her misdirected focus was the tree instead of the intended good path. We must determine to keep our focus on God’s plan and not allow obstacles—political, economic or environmental—to obscure that view.

Our hope, like my sister’s tree, determines our future. What is our hope? With what have we aligned our life? Toward which path have we set our direction? As Christians we hope in Jesus. In the middle of my most difficult situations I have recognized a deep, unexplainable peace because I am confident God knows what he is doing and is working for my good to realign my life toward the future hope. I strive to get beyond the “trees” of this world to keep Jesus at my forefront, actively inviting people to the path of God’s story and sowing Jesus’s peace into situations that would otherwise be hopeless.

Jeremiah reminds us that God is good and sovereign—even when we feel abandoned and especially when we don’t understand our circumstances. God is at work orchestrating our lives to create an original symphonic score driven by his heartbeat of peace, justice and love.

Give us determination to focus on our hope, Jesus Christ, who invites us to come out from behind our troubles and instead be ambassadors of his peace and presence.

Connie Nicholson, M.Div. Student, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary; Associate Pastor, Loma Vista Community Church, Clovis
Righteous Power

“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.”
—Psalm 72:2

Read Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Josie came into our half-finished financial literacy course with a huge smile, waving a slip of paper over her head. We all said, “What’s that, Josie?” She responded, “I paid it off, I finally paid it off! I’m never going back to those slaveholders again!” There are more payday lenders in our city than Starbucks and McDonald’s combined. Like magnets they cling to the corridors of poverty, exploiting the vulnerabilities of poor communities. Josie, in a moment of urgent need and with no margin in her life, had resorted to a payday lender that ended up charging her 459 percent interest. But the financial literacy course had given her the skills and biblical perspective she needed, and she was free.

The king of this passage is requesting that he keep to God’s values of justice and righteousness and that he use power in a godly way, in a manner that reflects the glorious God he serves. This is the very purpose of power. Many consider it a messianic passage referring to how Jesus would reign. In a season when we juxtapose the power of a servant Lord with the quest for power in a national political election, we exercise faith to reject cynicism and instead pursue admittedly imperfect efforts aimed at justice worthy of the servant king.

The class helped Josie, but so did the ordinance we helped pass curtailing the payday lender industry. And the blessings of righteous power, servant power, falls like rain on our parched city.

Servant Lord, you are making all things new through your people as they follow you.
Make us to be like a gentle rain on a city thirsty for peace.

Randy White, D.Min., Executive Director,
Fresno Pacific University Center for Community Transformation;
Associate Professor of Community Transformation, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
A New Song Rises

“O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.” —Psalm 98:1

Read Psalm 98

Music often signals something new: a new scene, a first dance, another birthday. When a country is born, it writes a new anthem. When wars end, citizens sing and dance in the streets. When a new king takes the throne, he does so to song and pomp. It is natural, then, that the psalmist calls for a new song to celebrate the victory of Yahweh (98:1). It is a song of good news.

Now imagine the overcrowded town of Bethlehem. People yelling, children crying, dogs barking, pans clanking. Amidst this noise, a new song rises. It opens with a baby’s cry. Then angels’ songs echo through the hills. The footsteps of shepherds set the beat. Waters clap over the heads of the baptized. Can you hear it? Five thousand pieces of bread crunch together. Coins ring as they hit the floor. Fishing nets creak as they stretch too far. The tempo builds. Whips snap like a snare drum on an innocent man’s back. Hammer and nail join the percussion. Thunder rolls like heavenly bass strings. A man cries out.

Silence.

Then, a deep, desperate gasp for air—the first breath of resurrection life. Though the song had been silenced, the beat could not be kept down. We hear it today when prisoners’ chains fall off, when hungry children laugh and run again, when water bursts forth from a new well, when enemies cry in each other’s arms, when bread is broken and wine is poured. This is the new song. It is the song of victory—the song of peace. Won’t you join in?

Christ our king, teach us this song once again. Play it louder that we might hear it clearly. Help us be unafraid of joining in and dancing to the rhythm.

Dallas Nord, M.A. Theology Student, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
The Roots and Shoots of Peacemakers

“A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him.” —Isaiah 11:1-2

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

Jesse Newsome was a Mississippi farmer, one of a handful of African-American leaders who supported John and Vera Mae Perkins in their civil rights work. My wife Terry and I spent our twenties with the Perkins in Mississippi immediately after most intense days of the civil rights movement, doing what they called Christian community development.

I’d go to Jesse Newsome’s home to study the Bible. He was in his eighties. One evening he told me how he got his farm. “I sharecropped for a white man. I’d save a dollar, then I’d buy an acre full of stumps, clear-cut by timber companies. I’d pull the stumps with a shovel, axe, chain, a mule and a lantern—I’d have to work into the night.” He cleared 150 acres. I asked, “Where did you get the inner stuff to do that?” Pausing, he said, “Time I was born, my Daddy died. When I was 14, Mama died. I went out under a tree and cried. I prayed, ‘Jesus, would you be my Mama?’ From that time on, I knew I was never alone.”

Jesse’s strength became a root for John and Vera Mae Perkins, who were the shoots for peaceful voter registration that led to John’s near fatal beating in 1970. The Perkins became the root for hundreds of Christian community development workers shooting out in under-resourced rural and urban communities around the world. Terry and I are two of those shoots.

This passage promises that God’s peace is so vital that it will spring up in the toughest times and places. May it be so in Fresno, in our Valley, in America and globally in this season and for years to come.

Jesus, you were the shoot of King David’s father, Jesse. Jesse Newsome was your shoot and a root for John and Vera Mae Perkins. May we become shoots for peace and roots for a new generation of peacemakers after us.

H. Spees, D.Min., Senior Vice President of Network Growth and Development, Leadership Foundations, Tacoma, WA
Turn From, Turn To

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” —Matthew 3:2

Read Matthew 3:1-12

“Repent!” What does the word bring to mind? I imagine a preacher urging non-Christians to convert. In fact, for much of my life the phrase “to repent” was interchangeable with “to convert,” or “to accept Jesus as your savior.” They all referred to the same thing. This understanding is true enough, but also problematic. It leads to generalizing the meaning as “becoming a Christian” and links “repentance” so strongly to initial conversion that it unlinks it from the ongoing walk of discipleship.

A jail Bible study led me to correct both problems. The study guide directed me to go over the meanings of the words “repent” and “convert.” We talked about repentance as turning away from something to head in a new direction. Although the study that week was evangelistic, most of the men were already Christians. In our discussion we applied the term to all in the circle. Where were we heading the wrong direction? What was God calling us to turn from and to turn toward? I now frequently use the term in its specificity and invite both non-Christians and Christians to repent.

The initial acknowledgement of mistaken ways and the first turning to Jesus is of utmost importance. Let us, however, continue to be open to repentance. As we seek to become more centered on Jesus, what might we be called to turn away from in our lives?

Jesus, in this time of Advent what might I turn away from that will better enable me to experience you and follow you in discipleship?

Mark D. Baker, Ph. D., Professor of Mission and Theology, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Our Faithful God

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.”
—Psalm 146:5

Read Psalm 146:5-10

Has there ever been a more bitter or divisive U.S. presidential campaign than the election of 2016? Friends of both political parties have filled my Facebook news feed with denunciations, conspiracy theories, ad hominem attacks and declarations that a vote for the opponent is tantamount to hastening the apocalypse. Punctuating the outrage and despair is the occasional post, “No matter who is president, Jesus is still King.”

As I write these words, there has not yet been a single debate between the parties’ nominees. As you read these words, we have already elected the new president. It is safe now to say with confidence that the world still turns and the sun still rises; Jesus is still king, and we are still his disciples. “Do not put your trust in princes,” the psalmist reminds us in verse 3, “In mortals, in whom there is no help.”

God is a faithful God. His mighty works endure, his character never changes, his reign will never end. He keeps faith forever. May we as disciples be constant, too, knowing the real source of our help and our hope, and the one who truly merits our allegiance. May we go forward as citizens of Zion, so that the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoner, the blind, the stranger, the orphan, the widow and the world will experience the reign of God through the faithfulness of God’s people.

We trust in you, our faithful God, and sing your praises all life-long.

Mary Shamshoian, LMFT, Program Director, On-Site Counseling Program, Fresno
Pacific Biblical Seminary
Out of Her Poverty, She Received God’s Gift

“For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” —Luke 1:48

Read Luke 1:46-55

Read this text with me in Oaxaca, the second poorest state in Mexico, where I write while observing the economically impoverished try to eke out an existence by selling bookmarks, vegetables, wooden spoons. With what good things has the Lord filled the poor? (1:53). What light can the poor offer us who are not economically destitute? How might we become aware of other kinds of poverty?

When the angel greets Mary by announcing that she is favored and that God is with her, Mary is perplexed (1:28-29). God comes to people like Mary, to those caught in poverty, homelessness, slavery, brokenness and sin. Mary recognizes her standing as that of a lowly, humble servant (1:48). Even though the Scriptures tell us virtually nothing about her, we realize that under her name we find no degrees, achievements or heroic deeds. Even as Mary recognizes her status among the poor, she becomes a spokeswoman on their behalf. Mary praises the one who has paid special attention to the down-trodden.

Richard Rohr writes, “Mary is the archetype of such self-displacement and surrender. If Jesus is the symbol of the gift itself and how God gives the gift, then Mary is the symbol of how the gift is received and treasured.” With trust founded on the stories of Miriam, Deborah, Hannah and Ruth, Mary is a picture of freedom, demonstrating that one can say “Yes” to God even in challenging circumstances. God wants to birth new life in us as God did in Mary. Her song can be our song! We may not be economically poor, but we all have need liberation. When we feel bereft, powerless, Mary’s song comforts us.

Liberating God, connect us to our inner lowliness. May we hear Mary’s radical song of hope as we draw nearer to Christ’s coming.

Debra Brensinger, M.A., Spiritual Director and Adjunct Professor, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Passionate Patience

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” —James 5:7-10

Read James 5:7-10

The heat of India outside our room matched the intensity of emotion we were experiencing inside the room. We listened as Indian Christian leaders expressed anger and pain over the way they and other minorities were being treated in their country. They were not quietly enduring their persecution or praising God for it. These were leaders who had had enough and were calling the Indian church to make their voices heard.

James tells his church to be patient in the midst of suffering, but what does he mean? Look at his two examples. Farmers whose crops depend on rain don’t sit still until the rains come. They prepare the fields and get seed ready. The Old Testament prophets were anything but idle. They challenged their kings, rulers and people to return to the Lord and establish justice.

They were active, but they were also patient. The crop would only reach its full potential with the rain. The kingdom would only experience complete godliness and justice under the direct reign of God. Like the Indian church leaders, they didn’t wait in silent submission, but worked with passionate patience.

Jesus demonstrated this perfectly and empowered his disciples to do the same. He and they passionately worked for peoples’ transformation in the present, even as they pointed towards full restoration in the future. As we worship and follow Jesus this Advent, let’s ask him to renew our passionate patience for a particular person or situation.

Lord Jesus, as we think of a specific situation or person, renew our patience and trust in you and your timing even as we receive passion and ideas for how we can help bring hope and transformation.

Darren Duerksen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies, Fresno Pacific University
Waiting for God to Arrive

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” —Matthew 11:3

Read Matthew 11:2-11

G

od promised to send the Messiah to deliver Israel and the world. When Jesus arrived, he did not deliver Israel from their perceived enemies (the Romans). He delivered them and the whole world from our real enemies—sin and death and behind both, God’s supernatural enemy, Satan. Yet the paradox of all this is that when God sent the Messiah, it was the sending God who arrived, in the flesh. God came in person to deliver his people, to save the world.

Through John’s messengers Jesus assured John the blind are receiving sight, the lame are walking, lepers are being cleansed, deaf people can hear again, even the dead are being raised. The Old Testament never claimed the Messiah would do these things. It promised God would do them, when God would come to make all things new.

In a tiny corner of the world, in one village at a time, Jesus healed people and even raised a few from death. But it was a sign of much more to come, when God would arrive again in person, to wipe away all tears, heal all diseases and conquer death once and for all.

Was Jesus the one who was to come, or do we wait for another? He was the one, the One, the One God! And we await, not another, but the same God to come once more and make all things new.

God who arrived in Jesus, increase our anticipation of your next arrival. Until then, may we continue your work so that all may discover you came once and are coming again.

Tim Geddert, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament,
Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Immanuel

“I will not put the Lord to the test.” —Isaiah 7:12

Read Isaiah 7:10-16

This is a strange passage. Ahaz appears to tell God that he trusts him. Ahaz claims that he does not need a sign. But God sends one anyway, the sign of Immanuel, God with Us!

I am Jewish. Jesus introduced himself to me when I was in high school. My Jewish friends found it difficult to understand. One friend said something like this, “You are Jewish. You know that God cannot become a human. Jesus could not have been God.”

Like Ahaz, I was surprised by God. Ancient Ahaz had been surprised by the word from a prophet. As a modern Jewish person, I had been surprised by God in Jesus. God became human. God became one of us. God was with us. I didn’t fully understand it, but knowing Jesus as God with Us changed everything.

Immanuel means that we are not alone. We have hope. We have the love and power of God with us. Like Ahaz, I was facing challenges. Everyone’s life is full of danger and hardship. But God offers all of us—Ahaz in ancient Jerusalem, me in high school and all of us reading this devotional this season—God offers all of us Immanuel—Jesus with us. Jesus guides us, empowers us, heals us. Jesus brings peace in the midst of those challenges. Out of that peace he calls us to bring peace to others. That is the promise of Advent: Immanuel, God with Us.

Lord God, keep us open to your surprises this Advent.

David Bruce Rose, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Marriage and Family Therapy,
Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Songs of Joy

“Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” —Isaiah 35:10

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

As a therapist I am familiar with sorrow and sighing. My job is to walk into the most painful of places with people as they put names to the sorrows of their experience. In time we come to places where there are no words, only sighs. The deep, heavy, guttural sighs that escape from the cavern of pain that seems to expand until it can’t possibly be contained within the body.

Then as we talk through the sorrow—look at it and name it—ever so slowly we begin to see evidence of something different: new life like a blossom sprouting in the wilderness; vivid colors where there were none; places of warmth that bring relief and hope. In time the sighs are often replaced by smiles. Where there was only pain, gladness is poured in until one day joy bubbles forth. Like a spring in the desert that brings water to thirsty ground, the sorrow subsides and gladness spills forth.

In this period of Advent we find ourselves waiting, anticipating something new. The beginning of the journey may feel perilous. Overwhelming. Impossible. Still we proceed holding on to a faith that believes that joy is on its way. Sorrow and sighing will retreat. Gladness will take residence. Joy will be upon our heads!

To the God of peace and restoration who walks with us through sorrows and knows what it is to sigh, thank you for the promise of gladness and joy. Give us eyes to see the blossoming of life and ears to hear the songs of joy.

Angela J. Turner, M.A., LMFT, Assistant Director and Clinical Supervisor of the On-Site Counseling Program, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Christmas Presence: Through Singing and Sirens

“Let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Seek the LORD and his strength, seek his presence continually.” —1 Chronicles 16:10-11

Read 1 Chronicles 16:7-16

One Sunday night six Christmas seasons ago our small church plant was hosting its first Christmas program—a humble nativity play starring children from our surrounding neighborhood. With smiling family members and congregants looking on, and with no small number of cues from my wife the director, these students enacted the birth of the world’s savior and sang, most for the first time, Christmas songs starring “Christ, Jesus” rather than one “Claus, Santa.” An evening of celebration and joy to be sure (quite in the spirit of Israel’s celebration of God’s presence in today’s reading)!

We concluded our program with a raucous rendition of “Feliz Navidad,” snapped pictures of costumed performers and shook hands with parents as they headed for the doors. Yet in so doing I noticed what appeared to be a concerned group still gathered on the doorsteps of our church sanctuary and motioning me outside. I was greeted with the harsh lights of a dozen police cruisers piercing the night sky. Cops were scouring the neighborhood with flashlights. I learned that there had been a fight and a stabbing in the alleyway across from our church. At least one man was being rushed to the hospital in critical condition. We were all jarred by the unsettling realization that in the very moments that we had been together in warmth, light and joy, singing of the beauty of the Incarnation, a man in the veritable shadows of the church property had been subjected to violence alone in the cold of darkness. In joyfully remembering the astonishing love of God that came near to us in the babe of Bethlehem, this Christmas season we must also attend to the alleys of our present world where we will extend anew the good news and presence of peace.

Lord, as we contemplate your peace and praise you for drawing intimately near to us in our neediness this season, may you give us eyes to see. May we with courage and creativity proclaim your wondrous story of eternal hope to those alleys where loneliness and violence still seem to be winning the day.

 Brad Isaak, Youth Pastor at Kingsburg MB and Selma MB Churches; M.A. Christian Ministries Student, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Old and New

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—God with us.” —Matthew 1:23

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Is there really anything new under the sun? One might not think so reading the text. Words like engaged, virgin, divorce, shame, married and sexual intercourse pop off the page like headlines off a grocery store tabloid. Matthew succeeds in letting his audience know that God has chosen two young people of exemplary character as the pivotal figures in God’s salvation “show.” Through the character of Joseph and the willingness of Mary, “God with Us” is ushered into the theater of space and time without a flaw. Without question the star of God’s miraculous grace is Jesus, who came “to save his people from their sins.” Jesus is Immanuel, fully God and fully a man, come to be the world’s savior.

God’s production took place in the context of human drama, decision and intrigue. Angels provide special assistance to point Mary and Joseph in the right direction. God’s actors: Mary, Joseph, angels and Jesus followed God’s direction perfectly. Though perhaps burdened with more information than any human should have to handle, Joseph and Mary followed the script and faithfully stayed “in character.”

Most of us wish we got that “heavenly assist” in the midst of challenging circumstances and too much information. We’re happy that God’s Central Casting included two young people who followed through on the heavenly help. Mary and Joseph point the way for people young and old, showing us that doing the right thing is always God’s thing.

Thank you, God, for choosing and guiding the parents of Jesus, the one through whom we experience you incarnate and receive salvation from our sins.

Charles Buller, M.Div., Director of Seminary Advancement, Fresno Pacific University
The Questions of Worry

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” —Matthew 6:31

A cloud of worry often hovers over Advent disguised in the pressure of endless preparations for a perfect Christmas. During Advent my fiancé and I attempted to prepare for a Christmas Eve wedding. We selected the date on the previous Thanksgiving Day. Now life was a blur for two Christian college students living hundreds of miles from their respective homes while making arrangements for a wedding. We experienced multiple reasons to worry. We needed to ask forgiveness of our parents and the students who now had to change plans for Christmas break. We should have worried even more, but love does strange things to our heads and hearts.

Something more profound than poor planning due to a romantic but self-absorbed wedding plan is at work in the response of Mary to God’s plans for her. The angel’s reassuring words to Mary could have created a baseline for worry about what others would say, how this could happen, why she had been chosen and how would they have enough to eat, drink or wear. But this young woman chosen by God was in love with her God. She could trust the challenging pieces of her life in obedience to God. Worry was not necessary. Love for her God was enough to trust unanswered questions and give peace to her soul. The God of Advent was enough.

Our God, we are tempted to worry about the romantic details of Christmas. Help us instead to seek first the righteousness of our present and coming Sovereign One.

Eldon Fry, D.Min., Founder, Open Hands
Our God Reigns

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”
—Isaiah 52:7

Read Isaiah 52:7-10

The people of Jerusalem cluster by the city gate in anticipation. The army has gone to war; those at home wonder about the outcome. Having no access to Facebook or email, they wait for a messenger.

In the distance a runner is spied. He brings news. Everyone strains to see. Does he drag his feet, forcing himself to move along? If so, the news is not good. The army has been crushed; the sons and husbands of the city will not be coming back.

But joy! The messenger is skipping, leaping, feet hardly brushing the ground. He brings good news, salvation news, peace, victory! “God reigns!”

The chant surges into every corner of the city: “Our God reigns!”

The recent election in the U.S.A. has brought many announcements of bad news. Reports of terrorist attacks, shootings of African Americans by the police and the murder of police officers by those who seek revenge have shown that we live in a divided country, and we have lamented that our choices in this election have seemed so limited.

Isaiah 52 diagnoses the condition of America in 2016. The problems are deeper than political leaders have understood. What is needed is a radical surgery of the human heart. What is needed more than a new president is a Redeemer.

To that Isaiah announces good news. The wait is over. The Redeemer has come, and hope has returned. Our God reigns.

Our God, in a time of bad news, we relax in the good news of the messenger Jesus, who announces peace. We face today with confidence, knowing that Our God reigns.

Jim Holm, D.Min., Former President of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary; Pastor of the Faith Congregation at Butler Mennonite Brethren Church
Walking in the Light

“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” —Isaiah 2:5

Read: Isaiah 2:1-5

The scene is dependably humorous in TV and films. In the dark of night someone inside the house hears someone trying to break in. They either rouse someone else, or they personally take charge of grabbing some kind of “weapon” from a frying pan to a vase and position themselves in the dark to bonk the intruder. Then one way or another the light comes on, and disaster is averted as the intruder turns out to be a known and safe person. Enmity thrives in darkness; simply turning on the light of truth exposes reality and advances appropriate relationships with God and with fellow humans who each bear the image of God. We are made by God to thrive in the light of the Lord.

At the very beginning in Genesis God said “Let there be light,” and in the grand finale that we see in the Revelation the Lamb is the light of the new Jerusalem. God is light and those who seek him move toward the light.

In a typical fashion for Hebrew poetry, this text presents the vision of peacemaking with alternating pairs: the truth about God (who God is or what God says or does) is followed by a call to action by the people of God in response. The Lord establishes his holy place and the people say: “Come on, let’s go there.” God teaches the ways of the Lord so that we may walk through a dark world in these well-lighted paths. God settles disputes between nations, and the people stop destroying each other and instead they say: “Come on. Let’s leave this darkness and walk together in the light of the Lord.”

The coming of Jesus was a season of lights with a special stars and bright angels singing in the night. He was and is still the light of the world and in that light of his love we are reconciled to God and to each other.

Loving Father, let us leave the darkness and walk in the light of the Lord as we welcome the coming of Jesus, the true light in whose brightness we are reconciled to God and each other.

Richard Kriegbaum, Ph.D., President, Fresno Pacific University
A Praiseworthy King

“Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.” —Psalm 96:2-3

Read Psalm 96

“God of wonders beyond our galaxy; you are holy, holy; the universe declares your majesty; you are holy, holy!” Cloistered together in a tiny, impoverished classroom, our mission team sung this Third Day lyric at the top of our lungs. As we approached the chorus again, we invited our Egyptian and Sudanese friends to join us in praise. This union filled the room with palpable joy and excitement. Together we bore witness to God’s reign in our lives. Our combined voices declared his majesty.

In today’s reading, the psalmist invites all peoples and nations to praise God, for he is the only worthy and just king, and therefore the only recipient of our honor and devotion. The psalmist exhorts all the earth to rejoice in God’s present reign, but also anticipates a time when God’s kingship will be fully established and his justice known throughout the world.

During Advent we rejoice and give praise to Jesus, the only worthy and just king. Jesus’s reign inaugurated in the manger brings life, salvation, and justice to all. The pagan magi, the lowly shepherds, a young Jewish mother (Mary) and a Spirit-filled Jerusalemite (Simeon), all recognized the redemption God offered in Jesus’ birth, and all respond with praise, joy and exultation to this salvific work. Their praise, like that of the peoples and nations in Psalm 96, affirms God’s kingly rule over all of creation, a rule which is now established in the form of a babe.

Lord Jesus, you are the only one worthy of our praise. As we anticipate your kingly arrival this Advent season, may our joyful worship be a light and invitation to all nations.

Jessica Conzen, M.A., Adjunct Professor, Biblical and Religious Studies and Early Childhood Development, Fresno Pacific University
Apostolic Leaders

“We have received grace and apostleship to bring about obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name.” —Romans 1:5

Read Romans 1:1-7

By the time you read this devotional, the people of the U.S.A. will have elected a new president. In what has been among the most tumultuous and divisive campaigns in American history, many have referred to the choice as being “the lesser of two evils.” For the next four years all of our lives will be impacted in some way by this leader.

Most of us can recognize good (and bad) leadership when we see it. God entrusted the Gospel message to the apostles, who would carry the message of Christ’s good news to the world. Today’s passage is rich with theological depth. Jesus entrusted this Gospel by the power of his spirit to the apostles.

Each of these apostolic leaders were recipients of grace (as are we). They were flawed and broken humans who were, by God’s extraordinary grace, entrusted with significant responsibilities. Despite weaknesses and inadequacies, they were recipients of apostolic authority and purpose. Christian leaders have a mission and a mandate—to bring about obedience of faith among God’s people. That is a no small assignment, especially given the rapid cultural shift toward secularism.

Christian leaders need your prayers and your support. Your pastors, education leaders, mission leaders and organizational leaders of all kinds are in desperate need of God’s help as they carry out their particular assignment in God’s Kingdom. But like the apostles of the first century, all leaders are flawed and walk with a limp.

Lord, you entrusted that which is most precious—the Gospel—to leaders in desperate need of your Spirit’s empowering. Encourage, uphold and strengthen our leaders today. Call them to obedience as they call your people to faithful obedience.

Gary Wall, D.Min., Pacific District MB Conference Minister
Until . . .

“You who remind the Lord, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem.” —Isaiah 62:6, 7

Read Isaiah 62:6-12

Is there anything more haunting than before-and-after photos of a once-vibrant city ruined by war? Hiroshima, Sarajevo, Baghdad. Now the devastation of Aleppo fills our news feed and our wearied minds. How could any soul remain unmoved by the plight of war’s victims living in rubble and terror or the throngs of refugees fleeing with only what they can carry?

These are people who, like us, had plans, dreams and aspirations that did not include danger and displacement. They built businesses to provide for their futures. They established homes in which they hoped to raise their families. They passed down sentimental possessions, trusting their heirs would treasure them and keep them safe. Now, all is left behind for enemies to steal or destroy.

“They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit,” Isaiah 65 promises. “They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.” This is a blessed hope for all who have experienced our mortality firsthand.

Give God no rest until his kingdom comes. Pray his will be done, on earth as in heaven, until the “not yet” is now. Give yourselves no rest, the Scriptures urge. Be active partners in this mission. Wage peace, with all our might, until our enemies of sin, sickness and death are no more, and the New Jerusalem comes to all.

Lord, help us to claim your promise and proclaim your salvation in a devastated land.

Mary Shamshoian, LMFT, Program Director, On-Site Counseling Program, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
The Easy Burden

“I will give you rest.” —Matthew 11:28

Read Matthew 11:25-28

frequently begin the day already tired when considering the long list of tasks ahead. Real weariness, however, comes not from tasks, but from conflict or lack of improvement.

Matthew 11:25-28 is part of Jesus’ concluding comments in a chapter filled with conflict. John, in prison, sent followers to ask whether Jesus was really the one to come. John apparently was having trouble believing. Jesus told them to relay to John the good news of his deeds that resonated with what Isaiah had to say about the one to come. Jesus commends John to the crowds as a great prophet, the greatest ever born of women, the messenger chosen to prepare the way, but who was sitting in prison due to a conflict with Herod the tetrarch about injustice. Jesus berates the crowds for neither believing John with his austere way of life nor Jesus with his attendance at parties. He lashes out at the local towns for not believing when so many mighty deeds had been done in them, the same ones he referenced for John.

The promise of rest in 11:28 comes from putting on the light and easy yoke of Jesus. The invitation echoes Jeremiah 6:16 in its call to remember the way of God. It contrasts with the heavy yoke the towns were willing to keep by continuing life as normal. Jesus’ way breaks with normal and brings healing to many. This will result in serious conflict with Pharisees in the next chapter. It is, however, the only way we find rest.

May Jesus’ way of peace and wholeness ever be our guide and our place of rest.

Greg A. Camp, Ph.D., Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Fresno Pacific University
Right Here, Right Now

“I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob’s descendants, ‘Seek me in vain.’” —Isaiah 45:19

Read Isaiah 45:17-24

Last summer a craze swept the world. In a few days 30 million people downloaded Pokémon Go and took to the streets to find Pikachu and Charmander. Sidewalks and waterfronts that were previously sparse now had groups of teens, families and even sole adults holding their smartphones, walking for miles, looking for these imaginative characters ready to be caught or battled.

Niantic Labs, the creator of Pokémon Go, changed our world. They augmented our reality. Our quiet streets became places of discovery and adventure.

In the birth of Jesus, the mystery of the incarnation, God augmented our reality. God moved right into the neighborhood. God made it easy for those living in first-century Israel to discover and know him. When Jesus returned to God the Father, God gave us the Spirit so that all people could discover and know God personally right where they live.

Jesus reveals that God wants to be found. God wants us to experience his great salvation and personal transformation. As Paul said in Acts 17:24, “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.” Jesus invites me to ask, “Will I open my heart to experience God right here and right now?”

Jesus, you changed my world by bringing God’s rescuing love right to me. Today I open my heart again to experience your presence and love in my life.

Tim Day, M.Div., Executive Director, City Movement Canada, Oakville, ON
His Birth and Our Rebirth

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.”
—Titus 3:4-5

Read Titus 3:4-7

When I came to North America, I was born again. I’m now a big baby.” While these words from my Afghani refugee friend made me laugh, his statement was also steeped with insight. As he explained to me how he had to relearn how to speak, how to act and how to navigate this strange new Canadian world around him, I was reminded of the truth of our rebirth into the kingdom of God. Our old ways of living no longer serve us when we experience “the water [or cleansing] of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” and come under the kingship of Jesus. We become like children, living in a new kingdom and learning the language, ways and customs of that new nation. We learn how to season all our conversations with grace, how to grow in our love for one other and even our enemies and how to offer kindness and hospitality to the people we used to avoid. In short, we learn how to be more like our king.

Through it all we have the ongoing comfort of the Holy Spirit, who has birthed us and cleansed us and continues to nurture us. We have the clear example of our king, Jesus, who is the actual, observable, visible appearing in history of “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior.” We have the confidence that God has adopted us as heirs of the coming reign of God.

Dear Jesus, as we celebrate with gratitude your birth into our world, help us also celebrate with gratitude our own rebirth into your world. We are excited about everything that lies ahead for us—everything we have yet to learn and experience together.

Bruxy Cavey, Author, Teaching Pastor at The Meeting House in Toronto, Canada; Adjunct Professor at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Unconventional

“When they saw this, they made known what had been told to them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.” —Luke 2:17-18

Read Luke 2:1-20

It is not a far stretch of the imagination to call the birth of the Messiah unconventional. The unique sign the angels give to the shepherds to prove that they have found the Messiah is, after all, “a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (2:12). This would be shocking and unexpected for any birth, let alone the long-awaited Messiah. Merely days away from the due date of my husband’s and my firstborn child, I cannot help but wonder what might have been going through Joseph’s and Mary’s minds. Luke does not let us know whether this couple was as cool as cucumbers, confident in God’s timing, or freaking out at the thought of giving birth to the king in such an unusual manner.

Instead the spotlight is cast upon shepherds within traveling distance to whom angels proclaimed the good news of the Savior’s birth, “a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (2:12). This news was, as Luke describes it, amazing to all who heard it. The father who sends his son to reunite his children to himself does not do so with pomp and circumstance. Born in the shadow of one King Herod’s palace fortresses meant to inspire awe and strength in his own military victories, the true king flips convention on its head. Jesus comes into the mess of the world, conquering in the name of reconciliation.

Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Prince of Peace, you never cease to amaze. Your ways are not our ways; we are forever grateful for it.

Christine Simon, Executive Assistant to the Seminary President,
Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
First the Heart, Then Other Gifts for Jesus

“They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures.”
—Matthew 2:11

Read: Matthew 2:1-11

Our family tradition is to open gifts on Christmas Eve. Before we do, we spend time worshipping Jesus. That takes many forms—singing favorite Christmas songs, reading or acting out the Christmas story, praying together. It is a special time; though of course young children are eager to be finished so they can get to their presents. Many people open gifts Christmas morning, and I suspect a time of worship would be hard to wedge between excited children waking up and the children racing for their fireplace stockings or the piles of gifts under the tree. Whether worshiping Jesus precedes or follows gift-giving, it belongs at the heart of Christmas.

Note the sequence in the story of the Magi: “They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures.” First the Magi gave Jesus their hearts; then they shared their gifts. Even if we reverse the order, the two belong together—at Christmas time and all through the year.

It should also be so in our families. We give gifts at Christmas, but let’s also give our hearts. Unless gifts are given from the heart, they are little more than commercial transactions.

Tonight is Christmas Eve. Tonight or tomorrow morning most of us will be exchanging gifts. Let’s first share our hearts with Jesus and with each other. Then our gift-giving will be extra special, to us and to the One who was God’s gift from God’s heart to us.

We worship you, father of our Lord Jesus, for turning your heart towards us and giving us your most precious gift, our Lord Jesus. As the Magi did, may we also give you our hearts and our gifts.

Tim Geddert, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
The Answer is Born

“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son.” —John 1:14

Read John 1:1-14

My wife and I have been blessed with four children. Even though we celebrated at the birth of each one, we often say to each other, “They were so cute, but I am glad they are not babies anymore!” The joy around the arrival of an anticipated infant is not finally about a baby, but about the mature person that they will become.

Today we are not primarily celebrating the birth of a child. We are celebrating that God became one of us. That God and God’s ways are most fully revealed in the man Jesus.

Tomorrow each of us will go back to all of the complexities of a confusing world. Is it better to be conservative or progressive? Should I take a stand or show mercy? How much money should I save and how much should I give away? What can I do with that child who is headed down the wrong path? The questions go on and on.

Today we are given the answer to our questions—the man Jesus. He is God with skin on. What should we do tomorrow? Consider Jesus. Follow Jesus. Live like Jesus. Trust Jesus.

There are so many big issues in life that we will never fully comprehend, but today is the day that we are reminded that whatever the question, the answer is always Jesus.

Lord, help me to give up trying to solve everything. Instead, renew my commitment to Jesus. You are not calling me to understand. You are calling me to follow him.

Brian A. Ross, D.Min., Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministries, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Sing to the Lord a New Song

“O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.” —Psalm 98:1

Read Psalm 98

Growing up tone deaf in a musical family presented a problem for me because my musical limitations didn’t give me a pass. I didn’t have a choice whether or not to sing. When my mom’s family got together, my grandpa would gather everyone around the piano to give us a pitch, then lead us in a cappella singing. I tried to hide but was found every time. I lamented the laborious practices, complete with stares from grandma, secretly wishing I didn’t have to open my mouth.

Years later my grandpa lay on a hospital bed with his eyes closed. He was surrounded by family who had come to be with him before he took his final breath. He lay unmoving as we sang hymns to him and comforted one another. He lay unmoving until we sang his favorite hymn, “Beautiful Savior.” With eyes closed he moved his finger to conduct the family choir one last time.

One day we will all sing, whether tone deaf or with perfect pitch, of our Lord who has brought salvation to all peoples. We will praise our Lord who rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, who never forgets his promises, who has brought salvation to the world in his son Jesus Christ and who will one day “judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity” (Psalm 98:9). Our Lord is worthy of our praise, and so to him we sing a new song. Joy to the world! The Savior reigns!

Lord, you are worthy of our praise because you have made your salvation known to all peoples. Keep us faithful, O Lord, that our lives may sing of your goodness.

Jonna Bohigian, M.Div., Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary Alumna; North American Lutheran Church Pastoral Candidate
The Spittin’ Image

“He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” —Hebrews 1:3

Growing our family by adoption has been a blessing! But one of the things we mourned when we realized we wouldn’t have biological children was the expectation that our child would share our features; she wouldn’t have my red hair or Cindy’s ears. However, what has surprised us is the number of ways our daughter is very much like us—how she quotes a movie line at just the right moment like her baba, or how like her mama she is moved to compassion for someone in pain. Becoming our child, she has learned from us certain expressions of herself that are beautiful reflections of us.

In our passage today Jesus is called the “exact imprint” of God, the perfect image of the Father. The author of Hebrews takes great care to demonstrate Jesus as the epitome of God’s own self, but this is more than essence. It is also in actions. Recently a student who had just witnessed the birth of his first child stated, “Knowing how much I love my son, I can’t imagine how God would send Jesus to die for us.” I responded, “It makes a difference that Jesus loves us with the same love the Father has for us.” Jesus, the exact image of the Father, makes God known to us by the love Jesus himself has for us. Jesus, the supreme expression of God’s being, calls us to follow him and become God’s child. Through the Spirit’s presence, God transforms us to look like Jesus in our actions and attitudes through a renewal of our mind (Romans 12:2).

So my question is, “Who do you look like?”

Jesus, thank you for showing us the Father by coming to us in love and grace. Teach us to be like you in our love for your world.

Quentin P. Kinnison, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Chair of Biblical & Religious Studies Division, Fresno Pacific University
Dual Citizenship

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come!” —2 Corinthians 5:17

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

W hale watching off the coast of British Columbia this summer as we passed through both Canadian and U.S. waters, the guide said something playful but peculiar, “The whales are dual citizens.” I know these majestic creatures belong only to the ocean and God, but it got me to think about belonging to two places.

Paul’s triumphant cry, “in Jesus we are fully new and the old is gone,” is exciting news, but often this does not fit with our experience at Christmas or otherwise. In this season the new things are perhaps the toys and the New Year, but resolutions fade as quickly as interest in shiny toys. Before long we are back into the same year, same self and same relationships. Much as we wish for it, we typically don’t believe “everything old has passed away.” And yet this verse remains. Perhaps the dual-citizenship metaphor can help us. We were once citizens of one country, but now we are members of a new one as well; we seek constantly to live as its representatives (v.20). Paul’s Damascus road experience (Acts 9) was so jarring that, though he was still imperfect (see Romans 7), it changed how he saw everything. Even if we don’t have a life-transforming moment like his, we may remind ourselves of the time we began to see how reconciliation to God changed everything for us, too. Yes, we know the ways of the old country: fear, distance, grudges and hurts, whether with God or others, but we are also citizens of a new country. Here we are reminded to bear the passport of our new citizenship where the law of the land is reconciliation.

God, renew our minds this season to bring vividly into remembrance how your reconciling work on the cross invites us into new ways of relating to you, others and ourselves.

Adam A. Ghali, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Marriage and Family Therapy, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Undeserved Loving-Kindness

“I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord according to the abundance of his loving kindness.” —Isaiah 63:7

Read Isaiah 63:7-9

When I was a grad student preparing for a comprehensive exam, I chanced upon a handbook in the library written by my professor. I pulled it off the shelves and read portions of it before setting it aside to return to my review notes. As it happened, a major question on the exam was specifically on what I had read in that handbook, a topic not covered in my review notes.

In our text the author wants his readers to be mindful of God’s incredible faithfulness and goodness: God chose us as he chose the house of Israel; God assumes us to be faithful followers as he assumed Israel to be faithful even though they, like us, weren’t; God is our savior as he was Israel’s savior; God treats our sorrows as if they are his own as he did with Israel’s distresses. Finally, in his great love and compassion, God redeems and even carries us as he lifted and carried Israel.

When I picked up that handbook in the library, I had no clue it was God carrying me through my comprehensive exam. But that is the kind of God he is. Our passage reminds us to be mindful of such underserved loving-kindness.

I bless you, God, for all your underserved loving-kindness. May I recall your caring acts by sharing them with others that they may be drawn to you and the compassion you have for all.

Brian Schultz, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Chair of Biblical & Religious Studies Program, Fresno Pacific University
Faithful Witness

“*I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.*” —Psalm 40:10

Read Psalm 40:1-17

It was during the summer of 2011 that God called me to be a faithful witness to a complete stranger about how I have learned to be a follower of Jesus while also experiencing same-sex attraction. By the leading of the Holy Spirit, I was able to profess boldly how Jesus had taken away the shame and fear of my attraction and how God has given me a new identity in Christ. I waited several years for God to rescue me from the pit of confusion and fear I was in; during this time, I had to wait patiently upon God. Finally, God heard the cry of my heart and rescued me from my fear and shame. God’s saving action put a new song in me as I learned about my identity in Christ and how Jesus still loved me despite my same-sex attraction. Although there are still times when I feel ashamed, fearful and confused, I cry out to God to help me. Unlike before I know full well that God will rescue me in his time; because of this, even during the trials, I seek after God and share with others the hope of salvation I have in him and how Jesus has helped me to understand my sexuality. As I depend on God to help me pursue a life like Jesus, I have surrendered my sexuality and attractions to him and have committed to a celibate lifestyle.

We all have a story of how God has saved us from shame and fear and has delivered us from evil. We all have a story of how God has rescued us from oppression. Let us be a people of God, like the Psalmist, who share about how God has saved our lives. Let us be a people of God who are faithful witnesses of the One who has helped us overcome to those we need such salvation.

*Lord, we commit to being faithful witnesses of how you have saved us from evil and how you have removed our guilt and shame to all people we encounter.*

*Joshua Lee, M.Div. Student, Seminary Chapel Coordinator, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary*
Our Suffering Savior

“Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” —Hebrews 2:18

Read Hebrews 2:10-18

As a distance runner I have learned that training alone and training with teammates are two very different experiences. If running solo, the miles seem longer, your legs feel weaker, the sun is hotter and exhaustion comes sooner. Do the same workout with a training partner and your legs feel stronger than ever, the miles fly by, breathing comes easy and you finish feeling refreshed rather than drained.

Hebrews 2:10-18 describes a Messiah who suffers. Jesus did not render salvation through force or power but through the ultimate state of powerlessness—death. It was only by suffering death that Jesus could shatter the power that death held over the lives of the weak and fearful (Hebrews 2:14-15). If we believe that Jesus is God incarnate, then we can confidently look at our suffering Messiah and see the face of our suffering God. While this image of God has encouraged many, others have wondered what good a suffering God really is. How does a vulnerable God truly help us?

In the same way that having a training partner helps one withstand the pain and exhaustion of a long distance run, a suffering God enables us to persevere under the pressures of the world. Being peacemakers in a violent world is not an easy job—nor is it always a respected one—but knowing that our Savior suffered under the same powers gives us strength to continue the work of the peacable kingdom. Knowing that our Savior overcame those powers by walking the path of vulnerability and sacrifice encourages us to continue confronting fear, violence and death with sacrificial love.

God who suffers, thank you for sharing the pain of your people. Grant us your Spirit that we might to do the same. Mold us into a people of peace.

Dallas Nord, M.A. Theology Student, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
A Place of Refuge

“‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you’ … This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’” —Matthew 2:13-15

Read Matthew 2:13-23

In Egypt the image of the holy family’s flight is everywhere: displayed in churches and homes and businesses, painted on walls, embroidered on cloth, carved in wood, even sculpted into rock reliefs. The importance of this part of the Gospel narrative to Coptic (Egyptian) Christians was one of the things that surprised me most when I visited Egypt in 2008. I had, I think, largely thought of Matthew 2:13-15 as a point where the Christ event was sort of “on hold.” After all, Matthew’s Gospel doesn’t really provide much story detail about the time in Egypt.

What my Coptic friends saw in those same verses, though, was the overlap between their own history and God’s larger redemptive history. At the angel’s instruction and the prophet’s word, their land became a place of refuge for the Prince of Peace, in contrast to the horrors of infanticide occurring at Herod’s hand in and around Bethlehem. In today’s text the call to peacemaking was a call to provide safety and protection (or anonymity?) to the one who would most fully show what God’s peace looks like in life and death and resurrection. Far from being “on hold,” this part of the Gospel story was treasured by my Coptic friends as a reminder that now, as then, the Prince of Peace is present and journeying in their land. Now as then, the call is to witness to this Prince’s reign.

Help us, Jesus, Prince of Peace, to see the overlap between our stories and the story of your redemptive, reconciling way, that we may hear and answer the call to be peacemakers.

Laura Schmidt Roberts, Ph.D., Professor of Biblical & Religious Studies, Fresno Pacific University
Dawn, Darkness and Melting Mountains

“Clouds and thick darkness are all around the Lord. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord. Light dawns for the righteous.” —Psalm 97:3, 5, 11

Read Psalm 97

The psalmist boldly, radically proclaims that we are about to witness a new order in which God alone is in charge, the Lord is King! Though theories about how royal psalms fit into Temple worship are difficult to confirm, one endures: on New Year’s Day royal psalms like Psalm 97 celebrate the coronation of the Lord as king with a great procession. Strike up the band! Have a parade! Shoot off fireworks and light altar fires. This year is different because God rules.

The claim is bold! There is much evidence to the contrary. Nations dispute. Natural disasters destroy. Domestic abuse threatens. Daily death notices appear in the newspaper. Why celebrate the rule of God over a new year?

Psalm 97 engages the natural world, the environment, surging tides, thunderstorms, volcanic eruptions and morning dawn to create fanfare. Overwhelming as the natural display is, God’s rule is founded on righteousness and justice. Every time the Lord rescues the needy from the wicked the dawn brightens. Each time the faithful embrace a new dawn the reign of God is extended. Whenever right prevails, God’s people rejoice.

God’s rule of right transcends national boundaries. The Prince of Peace makes his home in Egypt, as we read yesterday. The poetic and prophetic imagination even transcends religious boundaries, as we will see in tomorrow’s text. Every time we see violence thwarted, generosity extended, fairness in relations between races and sexes, and effort made to protect the environment we have evidence that the God’s justice rules.

Rejoice, you righteous! Thank the Lord’s holy name!

We rejoice in you, King Jesus! Open our eyes to see your just rule in the New Year.

Lynn Jost, Ph.D., Professor of Preaching & Old Testament; Director of Center for Anabaptist Studies, Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary
Poets and Prophets

“For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” —Acts 17:28

Read Acts 17:24-31

This is Paul quoting a pagan poet as he seeks to announce to the Athenians the good news that God has given the world a new and eternal emperor in Christ Jesus. Though Paul was distressed with the temples and idols that filled the city of Athens, he doesn’t chide the Athenians for their idolatry; instead he quotes one of their great poets. In the sixth century BC the Greek poet Epimenides defended the immortality of Zeus in his poem, “Hymn to Zeus.”

A grave has been fashioned for thee, O holy and high One,
The lying Cretans, who are all the time liars, evil beasts, idle bellies;
But thou diest not, for to eternity thou livest and standest,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.

In Athens Paul calls Epimenides a poet. In his letter to Titus he calls Epimenides a prophet (Titus 1:12). Paul understands that the poetic and prophetic are related. As a pagan poet Epimenides could only go so far in his understanding of God, but what he gets right, Paul is happy to quote: “In him we live and move and have our being.”

As we announce to the world the good news that Jesus is king, we should not hesitate to acknowledge the common ground we share with the poet-prophets of the age, whether it’s Epimenides, John Lennon or Kendrick Lamar. Remember, Jesus didn’t come to condemn the world, but to save the world.

Jesus, help us to recognize the poet-prophets of our secular age who hunger and thirst for justice, that we might harmonize with them in announcing the joyful Gospel of peace.

Brian Zahnd, Lead Pastor, Word of Life Church, St. Joseph, MO
Freed from Fear to Shelter the Vulnerable

“Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear for God will hide me in a shelter in the day of trouble.” —Psalm 27:3-5

Read Psalm 27

As babies both Moses and Jesus were hidden away from danger during times of war and oppression by courageous caregivers. This classic, archetypal script is also found in my family story and perhaps in yours. My grandmother grew up in the Mennonite village of Osterwick, Ukraine. As a result of widespread injustice under the Tsar, the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917, and civil war raged through the country. In Ukraine a peasant army arose to fight for independence, but their methods were often brutal, including home invasions. In December 1919 my great-grandmother Anna Schulz’s house was commandeered for two weeks. The males of the house had to flee for their lives into the nearby forest, while my 15-year-old grandmother, along with her sister and girl cousins, were hidden up in the attic. Anna proceeded to feed, clothe and nurse the rough soldiers. In the face of terror, she committed her life to her divine protector and practiced nonviolence.

Too many of us avoid conflict and insulate ourselves from violence and poverty. The psalmist made his confession of faith in a time of social troubles, and I imagine my grandmother reciting this psalm while serving her captors. This inspires me to live out an Anabaptist faith that challenges injustice while resisting the epidemic of fear that is infecting our current political climate. May our churches find more courage to protect children vulnerable to domestic abuse, poverty, street violence and war.

Shelter us, God, in these times of trouble, that we may also provide shelter to others.

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