

# THE ROAD TO HALLELUJAH

## Daily Meditations For Advent & Christmas

From the Authors of *The Immediate Word*

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George Reed

Chris Keating

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# THE ROAD TO HALLELUJAH:

Daily Meditations For Advent & Christmas

From The Authors Of *The Immediate Word*

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# THE ROAD TO HALLELUJAH

FIRST EDITION

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## FOREWORD

Advent is the biggest and best gift we receive from the Christian calendar.

In a world excited about accomplishment, and in a season filled with frenzy, Advent invites us to pause. The season summons us into a most unusual activity — actually waiting. As we wait, we hear the wise old prophets again, and listen to Mary's fresh voice, marveling about God's plans. Christmas pageants and choir extravaganzas take a step back, shopping and baking wait their turn, and we settle into God's presence for a time of holy waiting.

In Advent, God invites us to settle in, and to join our ancestors in faith in waiting for the fullness of God's presence in the world. God surely looks at the season's busyness with amusement, knowing that we make ourselves so busy that we miss the gifts of this season. Each time Advent returns, God issues us a holy invitation to push away the things that clamor to be done (today! right now!) God calls us into the deep pause we find in the divine presence, so we can hear the sacred words of promise again.

As you read the season's scriptures again, we hope these reflections will give you a taste of deep hope, all through the season of Advent, into the joy of Christmas and a little beyond. Our prayer is that you find rich grace again this Advent season, in the stillness of prayer and reflection. We are honored to be your companions in this journey of anticipation this year.

Mary Austin, for the TIW Team —  
Dean Feldmeyer, Editor  
Chris Keating  
George Reed  
Bethany Peerbolte  
Tom Willadsen





# INTRODUCTION

## O, Little Town Of Bethlehem

There's a Christmas card that comes to mind every time I read or hear those famous lyrics by Episcopal priest Phillips Brooks.

The card shows Joseph standing next to Mary who is sitting on the donkey. They are in silhouette, atop a hill, looking down on this peaceful, quiet little town. The whole thing is tinted in dark blue with some yellow light coming from the windows of some of the houses. White stars are twinkling in the sky. If you look carefully, you can make out the inn and the stable next to it.

And then, my mind says, "Nah. That wasn't the way it was."

First of all, they probably didn't travel alone. It was just too dangerous to do that. They probably traveled in a caravan with other people headed for Bethlehem or other nearby towns.

They probably didn't look as neat and freshly scrubbed as the two on the front of the card do. Bethlehem is about 100 miles from Nazareth. That's about 176,000 steps if you're walking it. Call it a journey of 5-8 days. They probably were hot, dirty, tired, and ready for a bath and a meal.

They certainly didn't arrive at night. No one traveled after dark in those days. They made a camp fire, a big camp fire and they put their stuff in a circle around it with the women and children inside the circle and the men on the outside. The men no doubt took turns standing guard over their fellow travelers.

With all due respect to Father Brooks, the little town of Bethlehem was probably not all that peaceful, either. It was more likely a loud, crowded, raucous mess.

Have you ever been to the Kentucky Derby or the Indianapolis 500?

I grew up in Indianapolis and every year, on the night before Memorial Day, we would drive over to Speedway, the suburb where the track is, and watch the madness. People who wanted to get into the infield for the race camped out in line the night before and they were neither quiet nor peaceful.

It was full on party mode, an Indiana version of Mardi Gras. Drinking, dancing, loud music, and activities continued, from which my mother insisted that we children must avert our eyes and which, most certainly, we did not.

The residents of Speedway, especially those in the blocks immediately adjacent to the track were in full entrepreneurial mode. This would have been 1965 or so and they were charging \$50 per night for people to park in their yards. Hamburgers and hotdogs fresh off dad's grill were going for \$5 each and bottles of soda and adult beverages were available for a king's ransom.

My brother, Scot, and I made a pact that, as soon as we were old enough, we were going to join this wonderful madness but we moved to Cincinnati in 1967, never to return for the race. Too bad. It would have been cool.

Anyway, that's where my imagination takes me when I think of Bethlehem during that census that Augustus ordered, "the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." I think of a little town of about 800 people whose population exploded to probably something like 5,000 for the census. And those are real people not blue tinted, neatly painted, cute people. They were real people in a real town.

The Inn? Forget about it. Those room prices were jacked up 200% and were still reserved six months in advance. And the stable? We like to think of it as a straw-strewn shed but I imagine that innkeeper had swept it out and set up rows and rows of cots for his "guests" to rent (Special discount for family members).

The streets of that little town were probably alive with revelers. That's what happens when family members who haven't seen each other in a long time get together. There was, no doubt, plenty of drinking, and storytelling and singing and dancing in the streets.

Yeah, I imagine it was quite a blow-out in Bethlehem that year.

And it was into that loud, messy mix that Jesus, our Savior, was born. A real Savior for real people in a real world.

The writing team from "The Immediate Word" (TIW) has kept that image before us as we walked along the road to Bethlehem. And, using that image, we have created what we hope are real meditations for real people who are on a real journey to the Christ child. As we do in our weekly offerings in the "Sermon Suite"

we have pressed the lectionary reading for each day through the current events that we find in the newspapers, media broadcasts, and our everyday lives.

We hope this little collection helps you come to Jesus with real faith and return to the world better equipped not just to face Christmas but to face all of life — real life — as well.

Merry Christmas.

The TIW Writing Team —  
Dean Feldmeyer, Editor  
Mary Austin  
Chris Keating  
George Reed  
Bethany Peerbolte  
Tom Willadsen



# The First Sunday of Advent

Surprised By Joy

By Dean Feldmeyer

Matthew 24:36-42

*“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. “Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”*

## IN THE WORD

We begin the Advent season, the season of self-examination, of repentance, of waiting, of watching, and of expecting with a warning from Matthew: Jesus is coming and if we are not vigilant, we will miss him.

He is coming in unexpected ways and times and places. He is coming when we least expect it.

His coming is not just limited to Christmas morning. He is given to us everywhere and always but often in ways and at times we don't expect.

So, watch!

## IN THE WORLD

It was in the very heart of the Christmas season and I was wrapping up my day in the grocery store... again. Never a day passed, it seemed, that I didn't have to stop at the grocery for something. I felt like I was on a first name basis with the guy behind the meat counter.

This time I was supposed to pick up something for supper. Something quick and easy with not a lot of clean-up... and, oh, something cheap, too — and healthy.

I was tired.

The store was hot and crowded.

I wanted all these people to go away and let me get my rotisserie chicken and cottage cheese and go home. Then, for all I cared, they could have full run of the place until Christmas.

I looked around and it seemed that everyone in the place looked and felt exactly the way I did: Hot, tired, impatient, petulant, and on the verge of a meltdown.

And then, without warning, something happened that lifted me out of my recalcitrant revelry. Nothing big or explosive, nothing earth shattering or world changing or mind blowing. On the contrary, it was a thing so simple, so small, so innocently lovely that, had I not been in precisely the right place at the right time, I might have missed it.

It was, simply, laughter — the pure, sweet, innocent, laughter of a child. And, like the pied piper's song, it so captivated me that I had to follow the sound of it to see its source.

He was maybe five or six years old.

His heavy winter coat was hanging off his shoulders, threatening to fall to the floor. His mittens clipped to each sleeve and dangling like caught fish.

His face was flushed red and his hair matted with perspiration.

And he was laughing — laughing without a care in the world.

The store was running a sale on dvd's and they had set up a monitor showing the Disney favorite, *Madagascar*. The sound was turned down so we could hardly hear it but this little boy, this audience of one had obviously seen the movie before and he was laughing at every gag, hearing the dialogue in his mind's ear as he watched.

He was laughing, and his laughter was like a bell, sweet and pure, innocent, and full of love and life, calling to me, summoning me to come and see.

It was contagious. It infected everyone who walked by. We adults, so sour and so tired of the season could not help but smile and nod to each other as we passed through the shower of mirth which he poured over us so freely, as a gift.

For he had surprised us with joy and made us forget our doubt and our cynicism, our discomforts and dissatisfactions and remember if only for an hour, that this, this kind of joy, this kind of laughter is what awaits us with the coming of the Christ child.

### THINK ABOUT

When have you been surprised by contagious joy? Did you recognize it as a Christ moment?

When have you missed a Christ moment and only recognized it in retrospect?

How might we create a Christ moment for others by surprising them with our joy?

### PRAYER

Awaken us, Lord, to the bright and lovely promise of your son, and open our hearts to the surprising joy that he promises to bring us, not just on Christmas, but every day. Amen.





# The Second Day Of Advent

Brand, Spanking New

By Dean Feldmeyer

Romans 6:1-4

*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

## IN THE WORD

Jesus makes all things new. Even us!

In a few weeks we will celebrate his birth by joining him in his life and, yes, in his death and in his resurrection. As we progress along this journey with our Savior we will not necessarily be changed but we will be transformed. We will see and experience life differently than we have before.

The life we live will be new life and we who live it will be brand, spanking new people.

## IN THE WORLD

Old Methodist Joke —

Question: How many Methodists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Answer: Change? Change? You can't change that lightbulb! My grandmother gave that lightbulb to the church!

When I was sixteen years old, preparing for my junior year in high school, my father came home and announced that we were moving from Indianapolis, where I had spent my entire sixteen years, to Cincinnati where I knew no one and about which I knew nothing.

I was not excited by the promise of this move.

I was active in youth fellowship at my church and in the district youth fellowship as well. I was a starter on the football team and a solid second stringer on the basketball team. I sang in the concert choir and played baritone in the band.

I was a popular class clown at school, I was loved in my church, and, perhaps most importantly of all, I had a girlfriend.

One day, when I was feeling particularly sorry for myself, my mother asked me how I was doing, handling the news of the move and all. I was honest with her. I hated it.

Mom had a tough childhood.

Her dad was an alcoholic who suffered from a wanderlust that bordered on mental illness. In twelve years, she had gone to eight schools in seven different towns and this during the Great Depression. She shared something she had learned from all those moves.

“When you move,” she said, “You start with a clean slate. You can completely reinvent yourself. You can be anyone you want to be. Don’t be too quick to make friends. Take your time. Get to know people and let them get to know the real you.”

For one of the few times in my life, I took my parent’s advice.

I had been a class clown in Indianapolis, always quick with a joke, a prank, or a goofy comeback. I prayed and asked for God’s help as I decided that in Cincinnati I would be more serious. Not morose, but a little more contemplative and thoughtful.

And it worked. With God’s help, I embraced the change being thrust upon me and used it as an opportunity to change who I was.

In two years, before I graduated, I was elected president of the senior class, vice president of the student council, and section leader in the band. I was president of the youth fellowship at church and delegate to the conference youth council. I was voted most likely to succeed in the senior class and given an award for outstanding citizenship from the local Lion’s Club.

With God's help, I changed myself into a new person.

This, said Paul to the Romans, is the kind of thing we can expect if we are willing to turn our lives over to Jesus Christ — positive change, transformation, growth, development into a brand, spanking new person.

### THINK ABOUT

What changes have you feared only to discover that they were actually beneficial?

If a change is being offered to you, how might you pray for God's help in navigating it so you can grow and learn through it.

### PRAYER

Holy one, help me to ride the changes that come to me so that, in them, I might be made new for your sake and the sake of your kingdom. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.



# The Third Day Of Advent

## The Bow In The Sky

By Dean Feldmeyer

Genesis 9:12-17

*God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

### IN THE WORD

In today's passage from Genesis we are reminded that God makes promises and keeps them. God is faithful and so are we called to be faithful in the way we make and keep our promises.

### IN THE WORLD

My mother's father had many faults and difficulties. He was an alcoholic and, today, he would almost surely be diagnosed as bipolar. But he also had his share of strengths, one of which was a solid value system based on his Christian upbringing.

This story about him may be apocryphal but it has been told in my family for years as a parable about the value of promise keeping:

During World War II it was nearly impossible to buy a new car as all of the resources required to build them were being used in the war effort. Steel for the body, rubber for the tires, glass for the windows were all in short supply. And even if you could buy a car, gas and oil were severely rationed so most people's driving was limited to only essential trips.

After the war, however, things changed and almost instantly.

Within a few weeks, automobile dealerships were being flooded with customers and my grandfather, Howard Clark, was among them.

It had been a long time since he bought a new car and the \$1,100 — \$1,400 average price tag on a new car in 1946 was a lot of money, so he was determined to make a wise decision that would require him to look at what was being offered by both Ford and General Motors — the only two dealerships in the small, Indiana town where my family lived.

He set out on his journey on a Saturday morning and went first to the Ford dealership where he looked at all the cars that were or would shortly be available. He saw one he liked but, he told the salesman, he really thought he should look at what General Motors had to offer as well.

The salesman said he certainly understood, but Howard knew that this man was being paid on a commission basis so he told him, "If I decide on the Ford, I'll come back here and buy it from you."

He went to the GM dealership and saw some cars there that he liked as well but, he said, that the salesman was kind of a "wheeler-dealer" type of guy that put him off. Finally, he told the wheeler-dealer that he had decided on the Ford but the flashy salesman was not to be undone. He asked Howard what model he was going to buy and when my grandfather told him, the salesman winked, smiled, and nudged Howard's shoulder. "I know a guy in [the county seat] that owns a Ford dealership. I can get you that car \$100 dollars cheaper than the guy here in our town."

My grandfather said that he was sorely tempted. \$100 was nearly 10% of the entire price of the car but, he said, “I gave that salesman at the Ford dealership my word, and I figured my word was worth a heck of a lot more than \$100.”

### THINK ABOUT

Have you ever experienced having an important promise to you broken? How did it feel? How do you show people that the promises you make are important?

What are some of God’s promises to us in which you find comfort?

### PRAYER

We give you thanks, Lord, for the promises you have given to us, the promises you have kept. We especially thank you for the promise of love and forgiveness which you have made to us in your son, Jesus Christ whose birth we will soon celebrate. Amen.





# The Fourth Day Of Advent

Redeemed By Love

By Dean Feldmeyer

Isaiah 54:4-8

*Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace;*

*for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.*

*For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.*

*This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth,*

*so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.*

## IN THE WORD

Isaiah spoke of God's desire to bring the children of Israel back to their homeland from their captivity in Babylon and he used the metaphor of a husband who casted off his unfaithful wife but then, because of his great love and grace, forgave her and returned to her to accept her, once again, as his beloved.

The double theme for this day is God's grace and forgiveness as they come to us in Jesus Christ.

## IN THE WORLD

What was rejected and lost is saved and redeemed.

Nearly fifty years ago, when my wife and I were first married, we were poor. Really poor. She was working as a registered nurse and I was struggling to finish grad school and we were constantly strapped for cash.

In those days most stores would pay two cents for an empty, glass soda pop bottle and we would spend many weekends scouring the ditches and roadsides for empties that we could take home, clean, and redeem at our local super market.

For help, we would recruit my two younger brothers to join us in our searches by promising them that any money we made we would use to do something fun and we would take them with us. Over a couple of years our pop-bottle-missions made enough money for us to take Ben and Brian to the state fair, to Cincinnati's Coney Island, fishing at a local state park, and more late nights at the drive-in movies that I can count from memory.

The thing that made all this possible was that two cents was such a small amount.

To most people two cents was just not enough to make them care about saving their pop bottle and redeeming it. Two-cent pop bottles were, to them, worthless, especially if they were lying in a ditch, covered with mud and ... whatever.

But we didn't see the mud and whatever. We didn't see empty, worthless pop bottles. Every time we found one my brothers would send up a shout of glee because what they saw in that nasty old bottle was the state fair, and the fishing lake, and the drive-in movie.

Those bottles had value.

We restored them and redeemed them.

And so it is that when God looks upon us, God does not see the muck and grim that has spoiled our appearance, the separation and estrangement, the unfaithfulness, the meanness and pettiness that has hurt the feelings of those we love.

No, what God sees is the potential within us, the potential for love and redemption, the potential for kindness and grace and peace and newel.

God sent Jesus Christ to reach down and pull us out of the muddy ditch into which we have thrown our lives and clean us up and redeem us so that we can do good in the world, good that is far better than the state fair, and the fishing trips, and the drive-in movies.

Even though those were pretty good, too.

### THINK ABOUT

Have you ever felt that you were redeemed or were being redeemed by God?

From what have you been redeemed?

Have you ever participated in the redemption of another? What did that feel like? Would you do it again?

### PRAYER

We give you thanks and praise, O God, that you have given us your son, Jesus Christ, who pulls us out of our sin, separation, and despair, washes the grime from our lives, and redeems us for greater, more authentic living. And it is in his name that we pray this prayer. Amen.



# The Fifth Day Of Advent

## A Prayer For Leaders

By Dean Feldmeyer

Psalm 72:1-7

*Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.*

### IN THE WORD

Psalm 72 is both a prayer for the king and an injunction to the king. Compare the NIV and the NRSV (above), both of which are appropriate translations and we see that both prayer and injunction are apparent. The NIV says that if God will bless the king the king will do thus-and-so. The NRSV prays for the king so that he will do thus-and-so.

What is this thus-and-so the king is to do? Why, justice and righteousness, certainly. See how often those two words are repeated in the seven verses above. And, for the psalmist, justice and righteousness have mostly to do with how we treat the poor. (Vs. 4).

Finally, the psalmist concludes that if the king is committed to the cause of justice and righteousness, especially for the poor, then the result will be “shalom” (peace) for the whole nation.

That this prayer was still used after the monarchy ended in Israel shows that it applied not just to kings but to leaders of all sorts. It contains both prayers and admonitions for politicians, bosses, teachers, preachers, and all those who would aspire to lead others.

## IN THE WORLD

I’m old enough to remember when the President Lyndon Johnson declared a “War on Poverty” in his first state of the union address.

In 2004, on the fortieth anniversary of that declaration, National Public Radio made this observation about President Johnson’s massive program:

“Making poverty a national concern set in motion a series of bills and acts, creating programs such as Head Start, food stamps, work study, Medicare and Medicaid, which still exist today. The programs initiated under Johnson brought about real results, reducing rates of poverty and improved living standards for America’s poor.

“But the poverty rate has remained steady since the 1970s and today, Americans have allowed poverty to fall off the national agenda.”<sup>1</sup>

Even with all those successes, President Johnson’s War on Poverty was only a measured blessing.

But a measured blessing was better than no blessing at all. The fact that we made the attempt to address the fact that nearly one in every five Americans lived in poverty at that time is remarkable. It is not unlike what Winston Churchill reportedly said about dogs dancing on their hind legs: “It is not that they do it well that please us, but that they do it at all.”

We don’t hear many politicians talking about the plight of the poor, these days.

The poor are not a very profitable voting block. They tend to not show up at the polls. They certainly don’t contribute heavily to campaigns and they don’t create political action committees or pac-funds.

1 <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1589660>

If the poor are mentioned at all it is often to berate them and to blame them for their plight as though it is their own fault. At the very best they are sometimes thrown a bone in the form of a higher minimum wage, sometimes one that is even large enough to support a family.

But mostly, political points these days are scored by pandering to the middle class. They vote and, sometimes, they throw a few bucks into a campaign coffer.

Then there are the rich. The wealthy are the king makers. And, thanks to “Citizens United,” they can find a seemingly endless number of legal ways to contribute millions of dollars to political campaigns creating debts of gratitude between them and the politicians they support.

In such a political climate the words of Psalm 72 ring loudly in our hearts and minds.

The psalmist prays for the king and, later, other leaders who are symbolized in the word “king,” so that they will have the strength and the vision to lead with justice and righteousness for the poor.

Perhaps what we’re talking about, here, is more than throwing a handful of change into the red kettle at Christmas time. Perhaps what we’re talking about is attacking poverty at the systemic level, at its root wherever people are kept poor because they make better, more dependent, more docile employees. Perhaps, what the psalmist is praying for is a system government that lifts up those who are the most desperate and hopeless and leaders who are bright enough and strong enough to lead such a system.

## THINK ABOUT

There’s nothing wrong with throwing some bucks into the red kettle, but what would it look like to also support a ministry that works at defeating the need for red kettles?

Who profits from keeping the poor, poor? How can we fight such a system?

How can we teach our children that there is more to justice and righteousness than being generous at Christmastime?



**PRAYER (Psalm 72: 1-4 paraphrase)**

Give our leaders your justice, O God, and your righteousness to all who would lead us.

May they lead your people with righteousness, and treat those who are poor with justice.

May our mountains of wealth yield prosperity for all the people, and may the hills of profit conduct their business with righteousness.

May every leader, in government, in business, in education, in church, defend the cause of the poor,

And give deliverance to those whose need is genuine, and crush the aspirations of those who use the needy for their own gain. Amen.

# The Sixth Day Of Advent

## Walk This Way

By Dean Feldmeyer

Isaiah 30:19-22

*Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, "Away with you!"*

### IN THE WORD

Isaiah offered a word of encouragement to the children of Israel. Yes, he said, you have experienced the full consequences of your infidelity and your apostasy and your idolatry, but that period of consequence will eventually end.

It will be replaced by a time when YHWH puts on the teacher's cap and gown and walks with you through your days and nights. God will be with you to inform and instruct you and when that happens you will finally realize how silly and worthless are the trinkets and toys of this world. You will toss them away like trash, like filthy rags, and you will be content to walk with the Lord.

About 1,000 years later, Christians would see in this passage the reflection of Jesus Christ.

In the season of Advent we prepare for the arrival of Emmanuel, God-with-us, in the person of Jesus Christ. Isaiah reminds us that one of the ways that God is with us is as a teacher.

## IN THE WORLD

Five minutes for a GTA (Graduate Teaching Assistant).

Ten minutes for a Master's Degree.

Fifteen minutes for a Ph.D.

When I was a college student, that was the unwritten rule about how long you wait for a professor who is running late. If they didn't show up for class in the allotted time you were allowed to leave.

I don't know who made up that rule. Certainly not the professors or instructors. I never saw it written down anywhere but everyone seemed to be absolutely sure that it was a hard and fast rule and it applied to every situation, because if you want to learn, really learn, you need a teacher. You need a flesh and blood human being to show you and explain to you and answer your questions. You can get some things from a book and some things from a video or a web page but if you're really serious about the process of learning you'll go out and find a teacher.

My mom taught me to cook, not by giving me a cookbook but by showing me. I would sit on a stool in the kitchen and tell her how my day went while she cooked supper and she would explain to me what she was doing and why.

Later, she would suggest that I try it while she watched and made corrections and suggestions.

We started with frying an egg and, over the years, we moved up from there.

She knew, instinctively, the pedagogical method: I do it while you watch. We do it together. You do it while I watch. You do it alone.

As we make our way through Advent we would do well to think of God, especially as God comes to us in Jesus Christ, not just as the holy one of Israel but as our pedagogue and teacher.

## THINK ABOUT

Who were the teachers that taught you the important things, small and large? Say their names out loud and give thanks for them.

Who are you teaching? Who have you taken under your wing? Who are you bringing into the house of the Lord?

Who will look back and name your name when asked, “Who taught you?”

## PRAYER

I give you thanks, good Lord, for all the teachers in my life who sacrificed of themselves so that I could learn and grow and live. And especially I thank you for the great teacher, Jesus Christ, who taught me about grace, even grace from a cross. So it is in his name that I pray. Amen.



# The Seventh Day Of Advent

O Come, Emmanuel

By Chris Keating

Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has  
served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has  
received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins...*

## IN THE WORD

A little boy leans forward to light the Advent candles and somehow lights the candles without engulfing the entire wreath in flames. His mother breathes a sigh of relief, and the liturgist begins the call to worship. The boy handles the long candle lighter as if it were a Jedi lightsaber and he was a Star Wars apprentice. As the choir begins singing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” the pint-sized Padawan makes his retreat. Advent has come, the Lord is at hand, and now is the time to prepare.

A curious feeling of comfort mixed with anticipation is expressed in their voices. *Veni, veni, Emmanuel.*

It is the second week of Advent, and all is bright with imagination, dreams of peace, and words of comfort. Second Isaiah's words of comfort, so familiar to many, ring in our ears. The prophet delivered promises of soothing relief to those whose hearts have been crushed, and whose lives are as withered as drying desert grass.

Scholars point to the shift in tone and vocabulary in Isaiah 40-55 as indicators that these chapters are the work of another writer often referred to as “Second Isaiah” or “Deutero-Isaiah.” The expected exile had happened. Lives have been disrupted and the conquest of Israel's hopes, dreams, and places of worship have been completed.

The exile was never directly addressed, but rather assumed. The event hung in the air like a tragedy so severe no words can adequately describe it. Like nine-year old 9-11 survivor Oscar Schell in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Israel was tormented by the horrible, awful experiences of abandonment and severed hope.

Until, however, a voice began to cry out. "Get ready! Make room for the coming of the Lord!" Get rid of all the obstacles and clear a pathway for the one who will lead the return to Zion. Climb up to a high place and see it for yourself: Yahweh is returning with a paradoxical mixture of both strength and gentleness.

The image is challenging. The people have sinned, and God's judgment has been executed. At the same time, it appeared that Yahweh had heard the cries of those long oppressed. It was enough.

The scripture confirms this challenging mix of images. The flower withers and fades, but the word of the Lord stands forever. God comes with might and strength, but will feed the flock like a gentle shepherd, guiding the stray lambs back to their mother's bosom.

Prepare. Hope. Pray. It's a lot for a young Padawan acolyte or even his mother to absorb. But like Israel in exile, they cling to the hope. *Veni, veni, Emmanuel*.

## IN THE WORLD

Second Isaiah's words are a reminder that, even for God, timing is everything. The prophet called the people to turn from their laments into an active stance of preparing. Clear out the obstacles, get rid of the debris, haul off all that will get in the way. God is coming.

These words are meant for our comfort, and are a reminder of the sort of preparations we ought to be undertaking during Advent. Serious Christmas planners advise beginning holiday planning early — as in August or September. Last year we met a professional designer at a Christmas party who admitted that he had begun decorating his yard on a humid August morning.

By December, the pros say, our check lists should be completed, with only bits and pieces remaining. Refreshing greenery and adjusting table linens are the tasks at hand, not hauling boxes of ornaments down from the attic. If you're just starting to prepare, why you might be a little too late.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist is busy preparing in different ways. In the wilderness, John is offering the baptism of repentance, a message that this is perhaps the most important way to prepare for God's coming. "Prepare yourselves," he preaches. "Not by acting busy, but by turning around, and living with hope."

Prepare. Hope. Pray. *Veni, veni, Emmanuel.*

### THINK ABOUT

In a month filled with preparations, how are you preparing yourself spiritually for Christmas?

What sort of Advent preparations might help you center yourself in grace, peace, and joy instead of the non-stop frantic pace so often experienced during the holidays?

### PRAYER

Loving God, you hear our cries and promise us comfort. As we await the coming of your son, help us to clear away the obstacles which keep us from fully participating in the promise of your reign. Amen.