

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

LUKE 1:68–79

Message in the Lantern

*“By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in
the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

Luke 1:78–79

The miles-deep passage from Long Island to Crooked Island in the Bahamas can be a threatening stretch of ocean. Unrelenting currents and strong tradewinds can throw a small vessel around, and a lack of lighthouses or other sanctioned navigational aids in the remote area make nighttime crossings even more intimidating.

But every evening, Sonia, whom we met in the remote settlement of Albert Town (pop. 22), would climb a rickety wooden ladder and faithfully light a kerosene lantern to guide yachtsmen away from dangerous rocks and shoals. She was undeterred by illness or other obligations.

Just as Sonia’s faithful beacon, though tiny, has kept many a vessel from foundering in perilous seas, Jesus, rising Advent sun, will shine light on our darkness and direct our course to safe harbor. We can trust the tender mercy of our God to guide us in the path of peace.



Lord of light, help us be a faithful beacon lighter for someone whose path needs illuminating with your love. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

LUKE 1:68–79

Message in the Waiting

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and
redeemed them.*

Luke 1:68 (NIV)

We are experiencing two seasons at once—a liturgical season of preparation and an indeterminate epidemiological season as we deal with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first, we wait for eagerly; the second, we wait in. So what does Advent teach us about adversity? Zechariah’s song from Luke paints a picture to give us perspective on the pandemic and a focus for Advent.

LOOK UP: “Praise be to the Lord” (v. 68), giving God glory in the midst of the mess.

LOOK BACK: “Remember his holy covenant” (v. 72), recalling that God is faithful to us.

LOOK OUT: God will “enable us to serve him without fear” (v. 74), to use the time to find new ways to serve him.

LOOK AHEAD: He will “guide our feet into the path of peace” (v. 79), as we ask not to get out of the distress but to determine what he wants us to get out of it.



*Rising Sun, shine on us as we lift our eyes to your
deliverance from darkness. Help us to be watchful in
the waiting and prepared for your presence. Amen.*

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

LUKE 3:1-6

Message in the GPS

*The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.*

Luke 3:5b (NIV)

When her plans took a circuitous trip, ending the way God intended rather than the way she planned, my friend Floydie always used to say with a smile, “God draws straight with crooked lines.”

Look back at the route planning of your own life. Is it an intentional straight line to God’s heart? Probably not. Mine certainly hasn’t been! I’m still on the winding journey. Where have we met dead ends? Come to forks? Found ourselves at a roadblock? What’s been your biggest detour? Can you look back and see God’s hand guiding and rerouting you when you weren’t at the wheel?

Only God can make the crooked lines of our life’s trajectory into a straight line to Bethlehem. Only the Holy Spirit can fill in the valleys, level the mountains, and straighten the curves as we join the Advent procession to meet his majesty.



Heavenly route planner, reset our spiritual GPS to your best route—not the shortest or the quickest but the one you have plotted to take us to our ultimate destination where “all people will see God’s salvation” (v. 6, NIV). Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

LUKE 3:1–6

Message in Our Story

*As it is written in the book of the words of
Isaiah the prophet:*

*“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”*

Luke 3:4 (NIV)

We all have a story, and every story matters to God. We can see how the script for John, known as the Baptist or Baptizer, started seven centuries before he was born, when Isaiah prophesied a voice crying out to ready a parade route in the desert for the Messiah.

John doesn't appear on the world stage until just before the Advent of Jesus' birth. Scripture outlines his story: he was born to aging parents, the cousin of Jesus; he urged repentance and mercy; he jump-started Jesus' ministry with baptism; he was beheaded for speaking truth to power.

Like John, the plot for our individual stories goes back infinitely to the time before time, when God wove our chapters into his big picture. He knows the plans he has for us (Jer. 29:11) and has already written our narrative. It's not about my story but how it intersects with God's story.



Lord of our stories, show us our part in your larger story. Help us to be the noble character you choose for us to play, for your glory. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

COMFORT AND JOY

ZEPHANIAH 3:14–20

Rainbow of Comfort

*He will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.*

Zephaniah 3:17b

Our family was preparing for a long overnight sail from the Dry Tortugas back to mainland Florida, the end of our Christmas vacation. Leaving Loggerhead Cay before sunset, we set sail in a stiffening breeze and building seas, salty spray flying. My anxiety grew with each swell. As I climbed from the galley with steaming bowls of stew for the crew, I looked forward. The fiery sun was melting into the watery horizon. Each time the sharp bow plunged through a cresting wave, the spray refracted the angled sunlight, sending up a beautiful rainbow. Astounded, I sent up a prayer of thanks for comfort and renewed courage for the night's sail.

God's messengers for us are not always people, like John the Baptist was. God sends us signs in unique ways, such as by dispersing the spectrum of light. Since that long-ago cruise, I have learned to look for God's messengers in turbulent waters and thank him for his presence and peace in the moment.



Creator of the rainbow, thank you for your couriers of encouragement in the midst of troubled seas. Open our hearts to receive them with comfort and trust. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

COMFORT AND JOY
ZEPHANIAH 3:14–20

A Comforting Hand to Guide Us

Do not fear

.....

The LORD, your God, is in your midst.

Zephaniah 3:16b–17a

Our friend Tammy exchanged Maryland snow for a balmy January week sailing with us in the Bahamas, so we decided to show her the joys of snorkeling.

Our local friend Richard, a master diver, agreed to be Tammy's guide to the world below the surface. He was practiced at introducing novices to God's underwater creation. Gently, he helped her into the clear, warm sea.

She quickly built confidence and found the rhythm of diving amid sea fans, fish, and coral. Soon she was twirling around by herself with confidence.

Later we noted the parallel with putting our hand in the hand of Jesus. As our guide, he takes us to places of beauty and steers us away from harm. Our fears dissolve in his presence as he opens a new world through spiritual lenses.



Lord of all creation, thank you for being with us in uncertain times. Our fears melt in your strong grip as you calm us with your love and rejoice over us with song. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2021

COMFORT AND JOY

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Joy in the Moment

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again:
Rejoice!*

Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

The photograph captures a brief moment: beaming Debbie and two handsome uniformed chaps, an airstrip in the background, jet smoke still lingering. Dennis had snapped the perfect scene of an unplanned stop at the spectacular Thunderbirds practice for the Daytona Air Show.

Two crewmen came unexpectedly to the fence after takeoff to share stories of the iconic air-force-flying team. When Dennis tells the story of the delightful young lads and their chat, his enthusiasm is contagious. In the retelling, he celebrates the pleasure of the moment. It was not a dramatic climb of Machu Picchu or a descent into the Grand Canyon but a serendipitous moment of delight.

The lesson for me is in the commemorating and sharing of joy, in stopping with gratitude for precious gifts. That's the joy of the Lord. It is how we bless him, praise him, and thank him for his presence with us (and presents for us) in our minor snapshots and our grand murals.



God of all our moments, thank you for reminding us of the many ways you continually smile on us and rejoice over us with gladness (Zeph. 3:17). Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

COMFORT AND JOY

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Do Not Fret!

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Philippians 4:6

Nine-year-old Anna joined me on the front porch for a morning café au lait. Hers was more cream and sugar than coffee. Including her in my devotion, I read aloud Psalm 37:1–8, which is similar to today’s verse in its admonition against fretting and worrying. My cherished granddaughter seemed engaged but made no comment. I thought she had missed the psalmist’s intent or was perhaps daydreaming. Then she surprised me by saying, “Do not fret, do not fret, do not fret. So, Gram,” she said as she put her hands on her hips, “did you get the point?”

I love how our creative God underscores important lessons to us in imaginative ways. Anna indelibly imprinted a picture that I would guard in my heart always as a reminder not to worry.

Paul’s message helps calm me further with the challenge to replace anxiety with prayer, grumbling with gratitude, and panic with peace.



Creative maker of images, help us to reframe our worry with worship, our problems with praise. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

COMFORT AND JOY

PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7

Aligning with God through Prayer

Let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6b–7

What is prayer? That's a silly question. Of course, you know what prayer is . . . or do you? What is your one-word definition? For me, that one word is *alignment*.

After decades of being called to pray as an intercessor for others, I have dipped my cup into the endless well of prayer and am still thirsty to know more. The meaning of prayer is as fluid and alive as God's Word. First, I have learned what prayer is *not*. It is not just a wish or a hope or a longing, or ordering from God like one would from a waiter, or even simple meditation or contemplation.

My memory prompt for true Christian prayer is WWJT. I pray to be aligned with God's *will* and *word*, in *Jesus'* name, and in God's *timing*: WWJT. Each part is crucial to authentic prayer. The peace of God that Paul speaks of will indeed guard our hearts and minds when our prayers are in alignment with God's heart.



Jesus, our first intercessor, we pray in your name, not only asking but also listening for God's will and word, knowing that God will answer in God's perfect timing. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

COMFORT AND JOY

LUKE 3:7-18

Weeds and Seeds

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Luke 3:8 (NIV)

I am already looking at seed catalogs and thinking about my spring vegetable garden. I am also planning to invest in weed preventer and a hoe for chickweed and crabgrass.

John the Baptist knew about seeds and weeds too. As designated advance Advent team for the Messiah, he took on the job of preparing the way with fervor. Before the turnaround (Greek, *metanoia*) could occur, John had a specific list of weeds to uproot: making excuses, entitlement, favoritism, stinginess, cheating, extortion, false accusations, discontent—not major commandment breakers like murder and adultery, but certainly in the categories of stealing and false testimony.

Only after eradicating the weeds could they hope to harvest good fruit: responsibility, impartiality, generosity, honesty, fairness, justice, contentment.

What uprooting do you need to do to prepare the soil of your heart for God's plentiful harvest? What weeds are keeping you from planting and gathering abundantly?



Lord of the harvest, show us the undesirable plants in the garden of our hearts, offenses that choke out the bounty you want us to yield. Prepare us to be fruitful and faithful for the Advent of your Son. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

COMFORT AND JOY

ISAIAH 12:2–6

Resonating Joy

*Sing praise to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.*


Shout aloud and sing for joy.

Isaiah 12:5–6

A new concept for you today: optical resonance. In physics, optical resonance involves using mirrors to magnify the intensity of a light beam. In plain English, it means making something brighter than it really is. On this wintry day, I need spiritual mirrors to brighten my soul. Isaiah 12:5–6 shows us how not to absorb our dreary surroundings but to reflect God's light. We are to shout for joy and sing praise. Our feelings can change from sad to glad as we call out in worship, a kind of vocal resonance.

Surely Mary and Joseph practiced this concept. Rather than being overcome with their humble circumstances, they resonated with God's glory: the holy babe lying in the hay, a heavenly resonance.

It is not light we generate ourselves but rather reflected light that comes from God's infusion of joy. Together as God's flock, we can multiply a small candle of gratitude and praise to become a lighthouse: kingdom resonance.

——

*Creator of light, may our voices resound to proclaim
the birth of Jesus and magnify your light to illuminate
a darkened world. Amen.*

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

MICAH 5:2–5A

Better-than-GPS Course Correction

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel.*

Micah 5:2

Some Advent calendars use a verse of Scripture to inspire you each day. We can prepare our hearts for Christ's birth by deepening our life's dialogue with Scripture.

In the story of the magi, the star in the sky tells them to go to Judea to find the newborn King of the Jews. So they arrive in Jerusalem and start asking around. It is King Herod's scriptural scholars who point to Micah: *from Bethlehem will come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel.* Only then do they know their holy journey's true destination. A scriptural course correction enabled the magi to kneel, give their gifts, and gaze on the face of the Christ child.

On our trek, it may take a fresh encounter with Scripture to find the course correction that propels us into new geographies of faith. So do not get lost! Read the road signs of the Word. You just might end up kneeling and gazing on the face of your Savior.



*Direction-giving God, help me pause to listen and
follow you all the way. Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

LUKE 1:39–45

Greetings Unanticipated

*“For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.”*

Luke 1:44

Christmas-card greetings are still a treasured (though endangered) tradition of Advent, perhaps the only time we hear from long-cherished friends with a printed letter describing their year’s joys and sorrows. A church friend may send me a stunning card depicting the nativity or one with an astonishing poem, and when I open it, I experience—in that moment—Christmas coming for me, the good news of great joy to all people. Years later, handwritten messages from loved ones who have died too young are priceless.

My own practice of sending greetings is to find a moving, memorable story and add a few sentences from the heart. But then I try to think of a few additional friends, neighbors, or store clerks whom I appreciate and want to lift up and encourage—who expect nothing from me—and surprise them with fond wishes and a feather from my white dove, Gracie. I pray this small surprise of caring may cause them to leap for joy, glimpsing the Child of Hope coming now into our world.



*God, help me give and receive your surprise greetings
of comfort and joy. Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

LUKE 1:47–55

*“**Todo La Tierra (All Earth Is Waiting)**”*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

Luke 1:52–53

Indigenous children in La Laguna and Mataderos, Honduras, are not often noticed by the eyes of the world. But they, too, yearn to learn and find work they love, to build future dreams. At Advent, they sing together “*Todo La Tierra (All Earth Is Waiting)*.”

For three decades, our area churches have sent mission teams to work with tribal leaders to provide medical clinics, schools, roofs, safe stoves, clean water, and sanitation. Since my trip, I have felt forever linked with these faith-filled new neighbors in my world, and they have gifted me with much, including the nickname *Ocho Loco*, as I taught them Crazy Eights and chased them with wet *verde* paintbrushes as we were painting the clinic.

If we are looking for where the Christ Child chooses to be born to incarnate a new world, gaze into the faces of Mirtila, Jose, Perla, Jorge, Emilia, and Ramon. Let them teach you to sing.



*God, in empty moments fill me with your love for
your never-forgotten ones. Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

COLOSSIANS 3:12–17

Bridge Reconstruction

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. . . . Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:13–14

Many of us have families in which a loved one is estranged, where conflict keeps us apart. We long for the Christmas-movie miracle of family reunited and reconciled, the empty place at the table filled.

But maybe we are the ones who need to change, the ones the Prince of Peace assigns to do bridge reconstruction. Have we put up road signs of unwelcome or no-way-to-win obstacles? We are called to take the first step, to make overtures of no-strings-attached caring: to send the message, to make the call.

Yet sometimes all we can do is pray that God may send our loved one other friends or family for this time in their lives, to give the affirmation and love they can't or won't receive from us. At the same time, we can open our arms of caring and adopt lost loved ones from other families who need a home in this holy time. So set an extra chair at your heart's table. Better yet, make it two.



Baby Savior, save our relationships. Baby Savior, save our families. Baby Savior, save me. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

ISAIAH 40:1–11

Blue Christmas

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Isaiah 40:11

For some, it is a blue Christmas. Many churches hold Longest Night services to offer support. When we're ill, struggling, or grieving, how can we celebrate favorite traditions? Isaiah whispers this message: Fear not. Into your exile, comfort is coming. At your room's threshold, the Shepherd enters, gathers you into holy hands, carries you, and shows you the way.

Friends, my prayer for you is my poem "When Our Loved One Is Seriously Ill":

*We pray for a cure; God sends us healing.
We pray for continued life; God gives us new life.
We pray death will not come; God overcomes death.
We pray in anguish; God weeps with us.
We pray in fear; God teaches us to laugh.
We pray for ourselves; God gives us each other.
We pray for miracles; God fills us with love.
We pray for the future; God showers today with blessedness.
God, help me trust the voices heralding your hope.
Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

ISAIAH 61:1–4

Saved by a Devotional

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me
.....
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

Isaiah 61:1a, 3a

In the midst of a family crisis, I was so distraught that my hands trembled. Sitting in my car in a parking lot, I wondered how God could possibly reach me, could rescue us.

Then I noticed something on the center console of my car: a devotional booklet already folded open to the words: “I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you” (Isa. 41:13, NIV). I burst into tears and read on. The writer described how, when our young children want to cross the street, we teach them to hold a grown-up’s hand. Instantly I knew this message was meant for me, sent from above.

Finally, I stopped shaking. I felt God assuring me: our family wasn’t forsaken but cherished. I knew then that somehow we would come through this.



O Peace that passes understanding, keep my hand in yours, every step of the way. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

LIVING WITH TIPTOE ANTICIPATION

ISAIAH 61:8-11

My Uprooting vs. God's Upshooting

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,

.....
*so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

Isaiah 61:11

In April 2008, I planted a thin river birch seedling in front of our house. With great anticipation I waited. Spring came and went. No leaves, not even any buds. Summer ended. Still no leaves, no buds. It looked like a dead stick, so I tried to uproot it. But shockingly, I couldn't! A month later, I tried harder and still could not budge it. Its hidden root system surpassed my understanding.

Then on September 30 came the miracle: baby leaves bursting forth. By the end of October, sweet leaves bedecked this tenacious tree. The following spring, a flock of new leaves grew on many new branches. Today, I look over my computer screen and out the window and see the river birch stretching above the streetlight, arching over the sidewalk, like hands offering benediction.

God will cause healing, human rights, and hope to burst forth in our world where only troubles seem to dwell. Don't imitate me; never try to uproot what God upshoots.

—♦—

*God, help me trust the slow, silent birth of hope you
bring into our world. Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

THE GIFT WITHIN

ISAIAH 9:2-7

See That Light There?

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a
great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

Isaiah 9:2

Imprisoned for years for a crime he didn't commit, middleweight-boxing champion Rubin "Hurricane" Carter gave up hope after losing his appeal. At that point, he was befriended by a teenager and his adoptive parents in Toronto. But when another legal motion was denied, Rubin fell into a hopeless place.

One evening, Rubin got a phone call at the prison from his Toronto supporters. They told him to look out the window toward the apartment complex. "Do you see that light, the one's that blinking?" They explained they'd left their jobs: "We moved down here. We're in this thing full-time till you walk out of there. . . . We're taking you home." Even before the courts finally freed Rubin, he declared, "Hate put me in prison. Love's gonna bust me out!"*

The people enduring times of hopelessness and bondage will one day see the light of God bringing freedom. May we open our eyes to see it.



Through my closed eyes, O God, shine your light. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

* Norman Jewison, *The Hurricane*, Beacon Pictures (1999).

THE GIFT WITHIN

LUKE 2:1–7

Do You Believe in Miracles?

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:7

Our definition of miracles tends to be rather broad. In 2014, my beloved Green Bay Packers played my church's beloved Buffalo Bills. Deciding to preach on miracles, I teased my parishioners: if you need practice believing in miracles, today's game is the perfect time. Somehow, a "miracle" happened: the Bills won, and I got lots of gloating phone calls.

Many of us are praying for miracles of a more significant kind. In my previous church, two-year-old Christina desperately needed a heart and lung transplant. We kept praying, though the list was long. One day, the family went to the Cleveland Clinic, and while there, a heart and lung became available. The doctors chose Christina, and she has since grown up. The Sunday after that miraculous event, I confessed to my church that I had, knowing the odds, prayed without trusting, prayed with desperation, not with hope's expectancy. And while my faith was too small, God's faithfulness remained breathtaking. Whether through the work of well-trained doctors or a brave young mother laboring in a stable, God works miracles every day.



God, take my breath away when your wonders are too wonderful to believe. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2021

THE GIFT WITHIN

LUKE 2:8–14

Do You Want to Hold the Baby?

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Luke 2:11

Imagine you are there at Jesus’ birth and Joseph says, “Would you like to hold the baby?” Imagine gazing into the glory of that face, feeling the wonder of God’s hope coming into our world through this Bethlehem baby. Now imagine handing him back to Mary as she says, “Now go live your life as if you’re always holding the Christ Child.”

What would that mean? How would this change you? Would you seek in every moment to trust God’s higher thoughts and ways of overcoming evil with good? With every glance at the baby’s face, would you be inspired to build a more peace-filled world? Boosting the baby up on your shoulder and nestling his head near yours, would you be impassioned to advocate for all at-risk children, emboldened to go be with forgotten ones and care for strangers?

This Christmas, may you begin to be blessed by those on the margins, the parents and children from faraway places, seeking a place to call home, and may you live your life in a way that allows others to see God made visible in you.



God, may we cradle the promised One in such a way that one day the world will sing one song. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

THE GIFT WITHIN

JOHN 1:1-14

No Está Olvidado (You Are Not Forgotten)

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not overcome it.*

John 1:5

Amnesty International invites supporters to sign greeting cards to prisoners of conscience: *No está olvidado*. “You are not forgotten.” One prisoner reported that after years of agony, his cell door opened one day and someone threw in a card signed by some unknown friend in a far land: *No está olvidado*. At that moment, his hope was rekindled, knowing people were praying and working on his behalf, and they wouldn’t cease. It was enough to help him carry on.

When John McCain was suffering in a North Vietnamese prison camp, the guard one day inexplicably loosened John’s handcuffs for a few hours. Then, when no one was watching, the guard drew a cross with his foot in the dirt, his eyes meeting John’s eyes. It was Christmas Day. Sixty seconds later, he erased it, but John realized God’s beacon of hope could reach him and touch him even there.

Friends, Christmas is *not* a bunch of colored lights at the end of a tunnel. Christmas is the light *inside* the tunnel, and the darkness has never put it out.



*Christ Child, shine on me your light so that I may
become light for others. Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

THE GIFT WITHIN

PSALM 98:4-9

Angel-Language Joy

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

.....

*let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the LORD.*

Psalm 98:7-9

Elizabeth was a new Salvation Army bell ringer at a local store, an older woman with lively eyes and an exuberant joyful face, though her speech was impeded and came out garbled. But she was so unabashed, everyone understood her merry message. Touched, I walked back to give some coins to thank her for being a herald angel to me.

Arriving home, I happened across the story of a country singer at a summer fair asked by a deaf woman to perform “O Holy Night” while she put her hands on his throat. He sang acapella and wept, and everyone wept, in awe of the sacred moment unfolding.

After reading this, I rummaged for a gift and rushed back to the store. Elizabeth was still there! I put a Hawaiian necklace over her head, in thanks for offering us a sacred moment, a gift of the Holy Child born among the lowly and outcast. Elizabeth beamed, and in her language of the angels, she thanked me. As for me, there were no words.



God, in giving and connecting, reveal to us the radiant beams of your holy face. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

THE GIFT WITHIN

LUKE 2:15–20

The Gift *within* the Gift Within

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:20

Whenever we give a child a Christmas gift, we are giving something more. What is the gift within? Our deep love and the joy of sharing a moment of delight. But what is the gift within the gift within? It is the palpable presence in that moment of the love that came down at Christmas, God with us, Emmanuel.

Last fall, I got to know gas station market manager Nadeem, who knew all the struggling families in our neighborhood, especially those walking in to buy food. I marveled at his friendliness and funniness. Sometimes he would even give free bread and eggs to the poorest. So I started giving him gift cards to give away, because I knew he would know who needed them most.

What was the gift within the gift card? A surprise of hope that some unknown person cared, that maybe the future held possibilities. What was the gift *within* the gift within? The Christ child connecting one soul to another across borders and walls, saving us all.



Emmanuel, take us deep enough into your gifts to weep for joy. Amen.

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

THE GIFT WITHIN

ISAIAH 52:7-10

Welcoming Christmas to Live with Us

*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

One November, our church decided to welcome a refugee family from war-torn Bosnia whose youngest daughter had never known a night without guns and bombs. Preparing for their January arrival, we suddenly got the call: they're arriving in eleven days! Miraculously, we got a donated apartment, furnished it, and greeted them at the airport with signs, balloons, and stuffed animals for the little girls. After an hour of orientation, one of the daughters ran forward to catch up to her sister and mother, Francika. As she laughed, Sasha turned to me and said, "Look! She no more scared!"

One year later, Sasha had a good job and provided the Christmas tree and presents for his family. He invited me over: "There's something I want you to know: my wife's maiden name. Her name is *Borzhic*. It means, 'Christmas.' When your church welcomed us, you were literally welcoming Christmas to come and live with you."



*Holy Child, once a refugee yourself, may I always
open my heart for you to abide. Amen.*

Hope Douglas Harle-Mould, Buffalo, New York

A TURNING TIME

LUKE 2:41–52

God's House

And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

Luke 2:47

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus goes from age one to twelve to thirty in the blink of an eye. We meet Jesus today in his twelfth year. Think of your experience of church during your twelfth year.

I remember my twelfth year. It was dominated with school, competitive swimming, my newfound love of music and singing, and enjoying life with friends. I remember being involved in church at age twelve, but I don't think you would have found me in the temple with the leaders, either listening or asking questions.

When our young people are lost, struggling, angry, or questioning, I wonder where they most often turn? How refreshing it might be for parents or guardians to find them turning to the church as a place to ask questions instead of the multitude of some not-so-positive, potentially unhealthy places that in a split second they can scroll to on their phones. The question is, if they showed up at the door, is the church ready and prepared to answer their questions?



Loving God, make our churches, which are your home, a place of welcome and safety for all. Amen.

Mark Eldred, Louisville, Kentucky

MONDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2021

A TURNING TIME

EPHESIANS 1:3–14

Words That Stick

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:5a

There are some words in all languages that tend toward being very personal and intimate; this is even more true when we see them in Scripture, our foundation of faith and church. As an adopted person, even at forty-eight years old, my heart still does a little pitter when I read the word *adoption* in the context of Scripture. *Adoption* was a word that drew me closer to church as an extension of my family, with God as my guiding Spirit.

Here, Paul is speaking to the early Christians, those “first to set [their] hope on Christ” (v. 12a). Yet when we read words that are personal, here and now, the context of the Word is immediately broadened to include all of us. During hard times in my life, I took comfort knowing that I had been adopted a second time through Jesus Christ. What personal words have you come across in Scripture, and how have they helped guide you in your life of faith and belief?



Lord, we are blessed and reblessed in your Word, here and now. Amen.

Mark Eldred, Louisville, Kentucky

A TURNING TIME

JEREMIAH 31:7-14

Rise Up Singing!

*For thus says the LORD:
Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob.*

Jeremiah 31:7a

As a singer who so often has found the Spirit of God in the lifting of collective voices through singing, I never thought there would be a time in my life when this gift would be taken away. More than a year into this pandemic and the restrictions it has necessitated, I think about what corporate singing will be like when we can, once again, lift our collective voices in songs of gladness. I am guessing that many of you have also missed singing in church. It's unclear when we might be able to sing together again.

Today, I think of the times in Jeremiah when God asked God's people to focus their hope during an immensely challenging time for all the people of Israel. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. I can only imagine our weeping when we are once again able to lift our voices in song. May that intimate connection with God be restored as we all seek our own restoration at the close of another challenging year.



Lord, we sing to you loud cries of gladness, if only in our hearts. Amen.

Mark Eldred, Louisville, Kentucky

A TURNING TIME

JOHN 1:1-18

Light of Mine

In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:4

I am a morning person pondering this Scripture just after experiencing the springtime shift to daylight savings time, when we lost an hour of morning sunlight. I start most of my days reading Scripture, seeking the light of the Word. As I write this on the first Monday of Holy Week, I sit and ponder both Jesus' birth and death simultaneously, as they relate to the beginning of John's Gospel.

How important was Jesus' life, his presence, his godliness in the human flesh as one of us, breathing, eating, feeling, mourning, laughing, weeping, walking, empathizing, healing, living, and dying in body. His very life is our light, even before sunup, even on our worst and most challenging days. When I think about the hour of sleep gone and the later sunrise, I am reminded of the light in the darkness for all of us, the Son, Jesus the Christ. As we anticipate the year 2021 turning to 2022, might we continually seek the light of the Word in our very lives.



*God, be our life's light, both in day and at night.
Amen.*

Mark Eldred, Louisville, Kentucky

A TURNING TIME

JOHN 1:1–18

Go Tell It!

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 1:8

Some might not be as familiar with a tradition of testifying. Yet we all have a faith and a story. We have all shared in this pandemic collectively, but its effect on each of us was also individual. Your story is important to God. Your experience in the world, through faith, is relevant and important.

Maintaining our faith through times of struggle is an example of God's continual light making its way into the world, still working its way into and through our hearts. I have some sense that our testimonies will be needed in 2022, as we are called to share God's steadfast and abundant love with those whose lives during the pandemic severely challenged their very life and faith. Might we remember this first chapter of John and its message to us that we are a people called to continue to testify to that very light; that our lives and individual faith stories are a continuation of the gift of God's love, grace, mercy, and peace on earth, here and now.



Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Amen.

Mark Eldred, Louisville, Kentucky

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2021

A TURNING TIME

JOHN 1:1–18

Imago Dei

And the word became flesh and lived among us.

John 1:14a

There is something very important to me about Jesus embodying Word in and through the same flesh that we each share. We are a people who believe Jesus is fully human and fully divine. It is this marriage of God and our very bodies that has always been so sacred to me; we are created in the *imago Dei*, the image of God residing in us.

The pandemic has caused many people to think closely about their own bodies, about their health, about their well-being, and about the ways in which we live among one another and how we will proceed to care for one another. As we look toward 2022, we ponder entering into a new chapter of life and faith. We continue to rejoice in the gift of baby Jesus. Where will the church locate itself in the greater conversation of how we continue to care for one another in body, mind, and spirit? May 2022 be a time of turning toward Jesus' love.



Lord, when we turn away, turn us back around with your grace and truth. Amen.

Mark Eldred, Louisville, Kentucky