



A D V E N T

# Living Hope



CT

# Advent: Living Hope

## INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to have hope amid trying times? Hope is more than a feeling; it isn't simply being perpetually optimistic or having a "hopeful" attitude. Scripture offers us an understanding of hope that is much more robust. Christian hope has heft, endurance, and purpose—and God is its source.

God, "in his great mercy . . . has given us new birth into a living hope" (1 Pet. 1:3). And it is our "God of hope" who enables us to "overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13). This reality isn't true only in good times; in fact, it is in dark and difficult times when hope truly shows its mettle.

As Jay Y. Kim writes in "Hope Is an Expectant Leap,"

This is what Christian hope looks like. It doesn't ignore fear, anxiety, and doubt; it confronts them. It holds steady, clinging to peace in the midst of chaos. Through life's many treacherous storms . . . Christian hope is buoyed by something greater that *has happened* and something greater that *is going to happen again*.

CT's 2020 Advent project explores the theme of hope as it weaves throughout the biblical story. In these daily devotional readings, we reflect on the hope of God's people in the Old Testament as they relied fully upon God in difficulty and hardship. We look at prophecies and promises of hope that pointed toward the First Advent: the coming of the Messiah. We contemplate the miracle of hope breaking through in the Incarnation, when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" as a human baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (John 1:14; Luke 2:12). And we reflect on our hope in Christ's future coming—the Second Advent we await—that gives us endurance, confidence, and joy in our daily lives, no matter what difficulties we might face.

This is our "living hope" or, as the New Living Translation puts it, our "great expectation." Our hope is animated by our confident expectation that the child who was born *will* one day come again in glory to put all wrong things right, and his kingdom will have no end.

**KELLI B. TRUJILLO**

Editor

**PRAISE BE TO THE  
GOD AND FATHER  
OF OUR LORD JESUS  
CHRIST! IN HIS GREAT  
MERCY HE HAS GIVEN  
US NEW BIRTH INTO  
A LIVING HOPE  
. . . AND INTO AN  
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IN HEAVEN FOR YOU  
. . . UNTIL THE  
COMING OF THE  
SALVATION THAT  
IS READY TO BE  
REVEALED IN  
THE LAST TIME.**

1 Peter 1:3-5

# How to Use This Resource

- Begin by reading “Hope Is an Expectant Leap” by Jay Y. Kim.
- Each day, read the assigned Scripture and short article, then prayerfully reflect on the prompt at the end. If you’d like, take notes in the space provided.
- For deeper engagement, use the weekly Bible study sessions on your own or with a small group.
- To use this resource with your family, check out our ideas for families. They highlight suggestions for hands-on projects and fun experiences that will help kids and teens explore key ideas from each week.
- The Bible reading guide highlights the main assigned Scripture passages for each day’s reading. This guide can be printed out and used as an easy reference; it can also serve as a resource for sermon planning.
- You can use the images provided in this download to promote this series within your church, to visually accompany sermons, or to serve other uses that fit your church’s needs.

## **ADVENT: LIVING HOPE**

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# Hope Is an Expectant Leap

ADVENT REMINDS US THAT CHRISTIAN HOPE IS SHAPED BY WHAT HAS HAPPENED AND WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN AGAIN.

BY JAY Y. KIM

My mother, Young Kim, was born in Korea in 1948 as the nation was on the precipice of civil war. By the time she was five, the country had divided into two, North and South. Her family, once prosperous, had lost everything. Both of her parents died while she was just a teenager. She lost her two older brothers just a few years later. My mother eventually found herself in a troubled marriage. She separated from my father, and in her early 30s she immigrated to the United States as a single parent with a bag of clothes, a few dollars in hand, and me, a toddler at the time. Her life has been a story of struggle, grief, and loss. And yet, despite the challenges, she has always been the most hopeful person I know.

If you had the chance to ask her, she would tell you without the slightest doubt or hesitation that Jesus is the singular source of her hope. She would tell you that since the day she encountered the risen Christ almost 40 years ago, circumstances have taken a constant back seat to something far more immutable and unchanging. But that something isn't a pristine or sophisticated utopian fairy tale built upon happy thoughts or fantasies of a problem-free life. Her hope is a gritty and often grueling grip on something far more substantive. It's a resolute, unwavering hold on something that *has happened* and *will happen*.

In 1 Peter 1:13 we read, "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming." In the original Greek, the word translated as "alert" (*anazōnnyimi*) is a term describing physical preparation. It derives from a common practice in the ancient Near East: people gathering up their long outer garment and tucking it in to prepare for physical action, be they farmers heading out to the fields, soldiers going off to battle, or runners girding up their clothing to race without hindrance.

I wonder if Peter was thinking back to one of his early encounters with the risen Christ as he wrote these words in his first epistle. At the end of John's gospel, we read the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Peter and the others are fishing, but as soon as they recognize Jesus calling to them from the shore, Peter "wrapped his outer garment around him . . . and jumped into

the water” (21:7). *He wrapped his outer garment.* It’s the same word and imagery he uses in 1 Peter 1:13. When Peter saw Jesus revealed on the shores of Galilee, he immediately wrapped up his garment and took action. Several decades later, Peter invites the early followers of Jesus to take the same action toward the hope they—and we—have in “the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.”

## EXPECTATION AND ACTION

Some linguists suggest that the word *hope* shares etymological roots with the word *hop*, conveying that to hope for something is to leap in expectation, to hop toward possibility. True or not, the idea poses an interesting point. In our day and age, the idea of hope has been co-opted by passivity, neutered from its intended action-oriented nature. We hope the lines aren’t too long. We hope for a good diagnosis. We hope everything will work out.

Today, hope is most often thought of as a grown-up version of wishing. This is why, when our hopes seem a bit too outlandish, we may call them “wishful thinking.” But Christian hope is not wishful thinking. Christian hope is an expectant leap forward. We take action. We live in motion. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders the beginning of 1 Peter 1:13 this way: “So roll up your sleeves.” Christian hope is about rolling up our sleeves and getting to work. It’s a blue-collar sort of hope, making us ready and willing to get our hands dirty, to labor and toil our way toward expectation and promise.

This radically counterintuitive nature of Christian hope is shaped by a resilience and fortitude that’s woefully missing from pop-culture renderings of hope. Christian hope does not shy away from but rather rushes toward the suffering and pain in our world. Tim Keller writes, “While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.” Christian hope is not deceived by the world’s promises of comfort and ease in this life, all the while waiting anxiously for the other shoe to drop. Instead, Christian hope settles into the struggle of human experience with strength and resolve. Yes, there is pain and suffering in this life, but Christian hope enables its recipients to stand tall with every ounce of *imago Dei* dignity possible.

I think of my friends Landon and Sarah Baker. Our community rejoiced when they shared the news that they were expecting. But when the baby was born, there

were complications. In the middle of a global pandemic, I walked into the hospital’s NICU with a mask over my face to dedicate a beautiful little girl whose life on earth would span less than three days. With tears streaming, the young parents prayed over their daughter and held her as she breathed her last and entered eternity. They read the Psalms over her and sang of their love for Jesus. Even in their pain, their hope never wavered.

I think of my friend Darren Johnson, who went well over a year without a job. With a family to support and bills to pay, the situation was dire. He wasn’t unemployed for lack of trying. Things simply weren’t working out and

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AND WILL HAPPEN.**

he didn’t know why. But in his confusion, he continued to pray, worship, lead his family with courage, and serve his community. He was convinced that God was still working and moving even in the smallest details of his perplexing circumstances, though he didn’t know how. In his uncertainty, he modeled monumental faith. His hope never wavered.

I think of my friend Christina Tang. A gifted songwriter in her early 20s, she’d been working on a collection of songs when she received the news that there was cancer in her stomach—and it was aggressive. There was sadness and confusion all around. But then there was resolve. Even with her body weakening, Christina continued to write and record. She found strength to lead worship from time to time at church. When her hands could no longer strum the

guitar, she recruited musician friends to play along. A couple of weeks after her death, we gave everyone in the church a copy of her new album: six original songs painstakingly written and recorded in her final months. Her hope never wavered.

This is what Christian hope looks like. It doesn't ignore fear, anxiety, and doubt; it confronts them. It holds steady, clinging to peace in the midst of chaos. Through life's many treacherous storms—be they pandemics, political divisions, social unrest, or personal struggle—Christian hope is buoyed by something greater that *has happened* and something greater that is going to *happen again*.

### **HE WILL COME BACK, SO ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES**

Advent is our great reminder of this. This time of year, many front yards are transformed into Nativity scenes. But this season we're about to enter is less a journey into history and much more a journey toward the future. Advent, which comes from the Latin

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THE MIDST OF CHAOS.**

*adventus*, meaning *arrival*, is our long and steady gaze forward, backlit by history. The light of the Christmas story breaks into the darkness of our past guilt, present pain, and future anxieties, pointing us to brighter days ahead.

In Acts 1:11, as the first followers of Jesus witness his ascension into heaven, they are reminded that “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven,

will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” *He will come back*. This is the promise we celebrate and remember during Advent, and it is the bedrock of Christian hope. Remember Peter's words: “Set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.” We roll up our sleeves and get on about the work of Christian hope because Christ is coming again. We can face anything and everything with resilience, fortitude, and patience because Advent reminds us of how the story ends. This is why Paul writes, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. . . . For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Rom. 8:18, 24–25).

My mother turned 70 a couple of years ago. Visiting Hawaii had long been on her bucket list, so we went. We stayed near Waikiki Beach, and from our hotel window we could see Diamond Head, one of the most popular and strenuous hikes on the island. I asked my mother if she wanted to try it. Without hesitation she said yes. The Diamond Head trail is 1.6 miles roundtrip, almost straight up, climbing nearly 600 feet from the trailhead to the summit. I immediately regretted asking; I wasn't sure she could do it at her age.

The next morning, we made the short drive to the trailhead. I asked her again if she really wanted to do this, reassuring her that we could turn back and go enjoy some poke bowls on the beach instead. She smiled and began marching onward. About halfway up, seeing her exhaustion and exhausted myself, I asked her again if she wanted to turn back. She looked at me, smiled, and rolled up her sleeves. We continued on and eventually enjoyed the spectacular view from the summit. Of course we did. This is how hope works for my mother. And this is how Christian hope works. We roll up our sleeves and take one grueling step after another until we arrive.

Once we returned to the hotel for a rest, we used FaceTime to call my kids—her grandchildren—back at home. My mother beamed as she told her newborn grandson all about conquering Diamond Head. He'd been born just three months earlier, and she'd given him his Korean name: *So-Mahng*, which means *hope*. Of course.

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Week 1

# He Will Come Again in Glory

We live in the “in between”—after Christ’s first coming and before his return. This week, we reflect on the nature of Christian hope as we await the Second Advent.



**LOOK, I AM COMING SOON! . . . I AM THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA,  
THE FIRST AND THE LAST, THE BEGINNING AND THE END.**

Revelation 22:12-13

11/29

# IN BETWEEN

BY KELLI B. TRUJILLO

Revelation 1:4–9; 19:11–16;  
21:1–5, 22–27; 22:1–5

Almost immediately, the opening chapter of Revelation lifts our eyes up to gaze at a glory that utterly transcends our earthly circumstances. “I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:8). Our Savior “who loves us and has freed us from our sins” *will return*; “‘Look, he is coming with the clouds’ and ‘every eye will see him’” (vv. 5, 7). John goes on to describe a wondrous vision of Christ himself—an encounter so awesome that John “fell at his feet as though dead” (v. 17).

But right in the middle of these two glorious passages is a line we might easily miss: John’s brief description of his life and the lives of his letter’s recipients. John writes that he’s a “companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus” (v. 9). John wrote Revelation while in exile; it was circulated among a suffering church facing pressure and persecution that would only worsen in the coming decades. Revelation’s initial recipients were living in two overlapping realities: their assurance in the sovereign reign and glorious return of Christ; and their earthly, everyday experience of waiting and suffering.

Some two thousand years later, we still live amid these overlapping realities. Here, between Christ’s first coming and his glorious return, our lives may also feel like a mix of kingdom and confidence alongside waiting and suffering.

It’s no wonder that John’s honest words about suffering and the need for patient endurance are woven in and among his visions of glory, for it is this vision of what is to come that enables and emboldens such endurance. Consider the realities portrayed in Revelation’s grand finale: Christ victorious, riding on a white horse and defeating evil; “a new heaven and a new earth” without sorrow or death, where “God’s dwelling place is now among the people” (21:1, 3); and a Holy City where people from all nations are gathered in the light of God’s glory. With this ultimate, eternal reality in view, any temporal circumstance—no matter how dire—fades in importance.

The idea of patient endurance is repeated several times in Revelation 1–3, often paired with language of overcoming and conquering. Endurance isn’t merely patient but is also tenacious, courageous, strong. And this is what God gives us as we live in the in between. In Christ, as the classic hymn puts it, we find “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”

“LOOK, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS,” AND “EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM.” . . . SO SHALL IT BE! AMEN.

Revelation 1:7

**CONTEMPLATE REVELATION 1:4–9; 19:11–16; 21:1–5, 22–27; 22:1–5.** How does meditating on this future impact your perspective on current circumstances? Pray, inviting God to strengthen your endurance and enliven your hope for the future.

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# 11/30 PROPHECY HOPE

BY DANTÉ STEWART

Zechariah 9:9-17  
Romans 5:3-5; 8:18-30

“Hope begins in the dark . . .” I could never quite shake these words from Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*. This language of hope has recently become a theme in my life—not in the abstract sense, but as a living activity, a struggle, a commitment, a discipline.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann rooted the language of hope in the resurrection of Jesus and the praxis of protest. Sometimes hope seems to be the only language powerful enough to counter despair. Or maybe it’s, in Lamott’s words, a sort of “revolutionary patience.”

Whatever hope is, there is something deep within each of us that cries out in expectation. Sometimes it sounds like a whisper, but it is there. Yet, while hope springs from the depths of the soul, it often comes out of the shadows. Hope begins in chaos.

Some days it feels like we have never escaped from under that cloud that covered the face of the earth during the crucifixion of Jesus. The brokenness and weight of our world feels so much like darkness that Elie Wiesel, retelling the horrors of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, could only call it Night. We have to tell the truth of pain and even the pain of hope.

I sat down with my grandmother some time ago and asked her to tell me about her life. At first she didn’t want to. One can only imagine what deep scars her soul has borne over 80 years. Her stories were hard. It’s difficult to describe what it meant for her to live in the South as a black woman. One word seemed to capture the audacity of survival in the midst of a cruel world: love. “The Lord hasn’t failed me yet,” she said.

Radical, life-changing, community-changing, world-changing love is, after all, the way of Jesus. He came preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing all manner of sickness and affliction. To prophesy hope is a dangerous love.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” This is what it means to stand in the world as prophets of love, power, and justice or, to use the biblical language of Zechariah, to be “prisoners of hope” (9:12). As someone once said, “I don’t know what tomorrow holds, but I know who holds tomorrow.” While tomorrow is on the way, I’m going to prophesy hope today.

*This is adapted from a longer article titled “Why We Still Prophesy Hope,” published on October 21, 2019, on ChristianityToday.com.*

**I CONSIDER THAT OUR  
PRESENT SUFFERINGS  
ARE NOT WORTH  
COMPARING WITH THE  
GLORY THAT WILL BE  
REVEALED IN US.**

Romans 8:18

**READ ZECCHARIAH 9:9-17 AND ROMANS 5:3-5; 8:18-30.** Reflect on what hope looks like “in the dark.” How does suffering produce hope and love? How can Christ’s first coming and future return enable you to prophesy hope today?

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# 12/01 COME, LORD JESUS

BY CHARLIE DATES

John 1:1-5, 14  
Revelation 22:12-13, 20

**LOOK, I AM COMING  
SOON! . . . I AM THE  
ALPHA AND THE  
OMEGA, THE FIRST  
AND THE LAST,  
THE BEGINNING  
AND THE END.**

Revelation 22:12-13

In his gospel, John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:1, 14). We have a God who came. He came to make the intangible touchable and the invisible visible. He came to make himself knowable. But our hope is not just that he came; it is also that *he is coming*.

*He’s on his way back.* This promise is what can make sense of the pain and frustration we experience on planet earth today. When he comes back, the righteous will be vindicated. When he comes back, he will bring with him your vindication for the ridicule you faced for believing in a God you could not see. When he comes back, all the human beings who tried to make themselves potentates and rulers will be put to the floor, and we will see that there has always only been one ruler of rulers and one King of Kings. All of a sudden, our faith will become sight. The one we’ve talked to and about, we will see.

In Revelation 22, Jesus says, “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (vv. 12-13). John records, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon’” (v. 20). And it’s as if John has nothing else to say before he closes his letter but this: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (v. 20).

When we look to the future, things may not go the way we want them to go in our nation. The economy may not shape up the way we think it should. More children may be hurt by guns on the street, by sex trafficking, or by drugs. Marriages may struggle, we may face sickness, we may worry about our grandchildren. In all of this, there’s this hope: *Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*

Whatever we face, we know he’s coming back. One of these days, the sky is going to crack, the angel is going to blow his horn, and all the world will see it together. All of creation will respond as our Lord steps down from the balcony of heaven to say, *Now is the time I’ve come to redeem my church.* Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Charlie Dates preached on December 22, 2019. Used by permission.*

**MEDITATE ON JOHN 1:1-5, 14 AND REVELATION 22:12-13, 20**, considering Advent’s dual focus: Jesus came and he is coming again. What does it mean for you to say, “Even so, come Lord Jesus”?

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# 12/02 ADVENT AND APOCALYPSE

BY FLEMING RUTLEDGE

Mark 13:24–37  
Luke 21:25–28

THEY WILL SEE THE  
SON OF MAN COMING  
IN A CLOUD WITH  
POWER AND GREAT  
GLORY . . . STAND UP  
AND LIFT UP YOUR  
HEADS, BECAUSE  
YOUR REDEMPTION  
IS DRAWING NEAR.

Luke 21:27–28

During Advent, we hear passages of Scripture that are infused with the language of darkness, tribulation, and apocalypse. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each have one fully apocalyptic chapter. In Mark 13, Jesus says, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (v. 8, RSV throughout). The passage only gets darker as it goes. “In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (vv. 24–25). Why is Jesus talking like this about death and destruction instead of talking about sheep, shepherds, and heavenly hosts?

In Scripture, apocalyptic writing comes out of catastrophe. The Israelites were a favored people; God had promised them a future of safety and prosperity. But then they were conquered and forced into exile in the Babylonian empire. Humanly speaking, there was no hope for them. When the Israelites found themselves in crisis, it was “a theological emergency.” It was out of this emergency that a new apocalyptic way of thinking took shape. It started with the second half of Isaiah (chapters 40–55)—written during the Babylonian captivity, when everything seemed so hopeless—and it blossomed from there. By the time of Jesus, apocalyptic language was everywhere.

Apocalyptic theology is, above all, the theology of hope—and hope is the polar opposite of optimism. Optimism fails when it is swallowed up in darkness. By contrast, hope is found in something beyond human history. It is found in an incarnate God.

In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus speaks apocalyptically of “signs in the sun and moon and stars” and the “distress of nations,” he ends by saying that humanity “will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (21:25–27). He is speaking of his second coming. He’s telling us that our great hope comes not through any human development but through himself. He possesses sovereign power that is independent of human history. In spite of the apparent darkness, God in Christ is shaping our history in accordance with his divine purposes.

Advent tells us to look directly into the darkness and name it for what it is. But this is not the end of the story. Jesus said, “Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

*This is adapted from a longer article titled “Why Apocalypse Is Essential to Advent,” published December 18, 2018, on ChristianityToday.com.*

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**READ MARK 13:24–37 AND LUKE 21:25–28.** Which parts of Jesus’ teaching do you gravitate toward? Which are harder to grapple with? How do these depictions of God’s sovereign power over history deepen your hope?

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12/03  
A MORE  
IMPORTANT  
QUESTION

BY VINCENT BACOTE

2 Peter 3:8-15

**BUT IN KEEPING WITH  
HIS PROMISE WE ARE  
LOOKING FORWARD  
TO A NEW HEAVEN AND  
A NEW EARTH, WHERE  
RIGHTEOUSNESS DWELLS.**

2 Peter 3:13

*What is taking so long? Why hasn't Jesus returned yet like he promised?* The recipients of Peter's second letter may have been asking questions like these—questions that continue to echo in our time. Peter addressed them with a strange assurance: first, that God's timing reflects his patience and saving love and, second, that the Day of the Lord will be fearsome and will involve destruction by fire.

Apocalyptic language like Peter's (similar to Jesus' in Mark 13 and Luke 21) certainly gives us pause. What is meant by "destroyed by fire" and "destruction of the heavens by fire"? Is this something we ought to fear?

Earlier verses in 2 Peter provide some perspective for understanding the language of destruction used in chapter 3. In 2:5, we are given a parallel with the time of Noah, where God destroyed the earth by water. That past judgment did not mean God utterly washed away all of creation; similarly, the final judgment by fire likely does not mean God will incinerate the earth to make way for the arrival of the new heavens and earth. As Peter described it in Acts, Christ is in heaven "until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (3:21). The new world will come through God's great restoration and redesign of the world we have now.

Woven within this discussion, Peter poses an important question that deserves even greater focus than our wonderings about God's timing or what Christ's return will be like. In light of the coming Day of the Lord, Peter asks, "What kind of people ought you to be?" (2 Pet. 3:11). Peter urges a response of holy living and a hopeful anticipation, "looking forward" to the new heaven and new earth (vv. 11-14). We see these themes emphasized in Peter's first epistle, as he urges believers to live with a joyful confidence and alert, hopeful focus on Christ's coming (1 Pet. 1:3-5, 13).

We are people of hope, like those already told the ending of a novel full of twists, turns, and unexpected events. We know the end of the story; our knowledge of the amazing ending waiting for us can impact how we approach the present. We may not understand when or how it will happen, but we can trust that the end includes both judgment and vindication for God's people. How is the news of final judgment a reason for encouragement rather than fear? God is going to make even the best parts of this world better than we can imagine. Judgment, vindication, and transformation are coming. The true promised land awaits.

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**PONDER 2 PETER 3:8-15.** (Optionally, also read 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13). What questions does this passage raise for you? What emotions does it stir up? How does your hope in the coming "Day of the Lord" impact your daily discipleship?

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12/04  
**WAITING FOR  
 THE PARTY  
 TO BEGIN**

BY VINCENT BACOTE

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

**NOW, BROTHERS AND  
 SISTERS, ABOUT TIMES  
 AND DATES WE DO NOT  
 NEED TO WRITE TO  
 YOU, FOR YOU KNOW  
 VERY WELL THAT THE  
 DAY OF THE LORD WILL  
 COME LIKE A THIEF IN  
 THE NIGHT.**

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2

One of my favorite things to do as a professor is to show movies we might label as “eschatological cinema.” Many of these films focus on the Rapture, an interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where “caught up” is understood to refer to an invisible return of Christ when he comes to take his church with him to heaven before the Tribulation begins. The aim of these films is to create awareness that Jesus may return at any moment.

The range of opinions regarding the Rapture and other end times issues is wide, and when we come to 1 Thessalonians 4–5, we could easily find ourselves focusing only on that part of the passage. But there are many other important points about Christ’s return here that also deserve our attention, including what seems to be Paul’s greater emphasis: how to encourage Christians who are alive now regarding the status of believers who have already died. Will they be “left behind” and miss out when Jesus returns?

Paul encourages the Thessalonians (and us) that we do not need to worry about God forgetting those who have died. Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee that death is no barrier to participation in the new world that arrives with Christ’s second coming. Whether we are alive or dead, our relationship with Christ is all that is necessary to be on the guest list when the Day of the Lord comes.

When Christ arrives, it will be a grand entrance, complete with fanfare. It will include “the trumpet call of God” (4:16)—language the Thessalonians would have understood to mean the return of the most victorious leader of all. Unlike any other call of the trumpet, this one raises the dead in Christ, who will join the living to welcome Christ.

We see similar themes in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in which he also addresses concerns about death, “the last enemy” that Christ will destroy (15:26). Paul assures the Corinthians that “the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (15:52). Death’s “sting” (v. 55) will be rendered powerless through the ultimate victory of Christ.

As we wait for that day, we are called to make ourselves ready, “putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thess. 5:8). This “thief in the night” arrival will come as a surprise because no one but God knows when this will happen—but it will be the greatest surprise party ever for we who eagerly anticipate his coming.

**REFLECT ON 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:11.** (Optionally, also read 1 Corinthians 15:51-58.) How would you describe Paul’s emphasis and tone here? How does hope factor in? Why is it significant that the Second Advent will come “like a thief in the night”?

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12/05  
**HOPE  
FOR THE  
DYSFUNCTIONAL**

BY VINCENT BACOTE

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

When we read about Christ's return in 1 Corinthians, it's important to remember the context of Paul's letter. The church in Corinth was a deeply dysfunctional community. In Paul's epistle, we learn of factions in the church who were committed to different leaders, scandalous sexual practices, controversies about meat sacrificed to idols, and much more. Though this Christian community was full of dysfunction, in 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, Paul identifies them as sanctified people ("saints" in King James Version language). He goes on to remind them that God has been generous to them in providing spiritual gifts and describes them as people who "eagerly wait" for Christ's return. Paul emphasizes God's grace (v. 4) and commitment to them: "He will . . . keep you firm to the end" (v. 8) In spite of the ways their weak faith manifests in sinful behaviors and attitudes, God's faithfulness to them (and us) includes God's commitment to help his people grow and transform into Christlikeness.

While chapter 1 emphasizes that God, through his grace, will keep the Corinthian Christians "firm to the end," in the same letter, Paul describes Christ's return and urges the Corinthians, "My dear brothers and sisters, *stand firm*. Let nothing move you" (15:58, emphasis added). He calls them to a resoluteness that's inextricably part of waiting for Christ's return. Despite their faults and failures, Paul calls them to both transformation and determination.

We see a similar picture of resoluteness in another of Paul's letters: "While we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ," God's grace "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11-14).

We cannot read 1 Corinthians or Paul's other letters without noticing how strongly Paul calls out sin and dysfunction, but as 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 reveals, Paul is addressing these great concerns *with a backdrop of great hope*. We are called to do our part while God, in his grace, does his work in our lives.

This is an example and an encouragement for us. Chances are, most of us have had our own moments of spiritual dysfunction, but our failures ought not be our main focus. Instead, we look to Jesus, who not only has made reconciliation with God possible but who also is committed to us so that we will be presented to God as blameless when his kingdom arrives. Thank God, his faithfulness is greater than our dysfunction.

**HE WILL ALSO KEEP  
YOU FIRM TO THE END,  
SO THAT YOU WILL BE  
BLAMELESS ON THE  
DAY OF OUR LORD  
JESUS CHRIST.**

1 Corinthians 1:8

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**CONSIDER 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9** in light of the dysfunctions in this church. (Optionally, also revisit 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 and read Titus 2:11-14.) What does Paul emphasize about God? About spiritual formation? About Christ's return? How does this give you hope?

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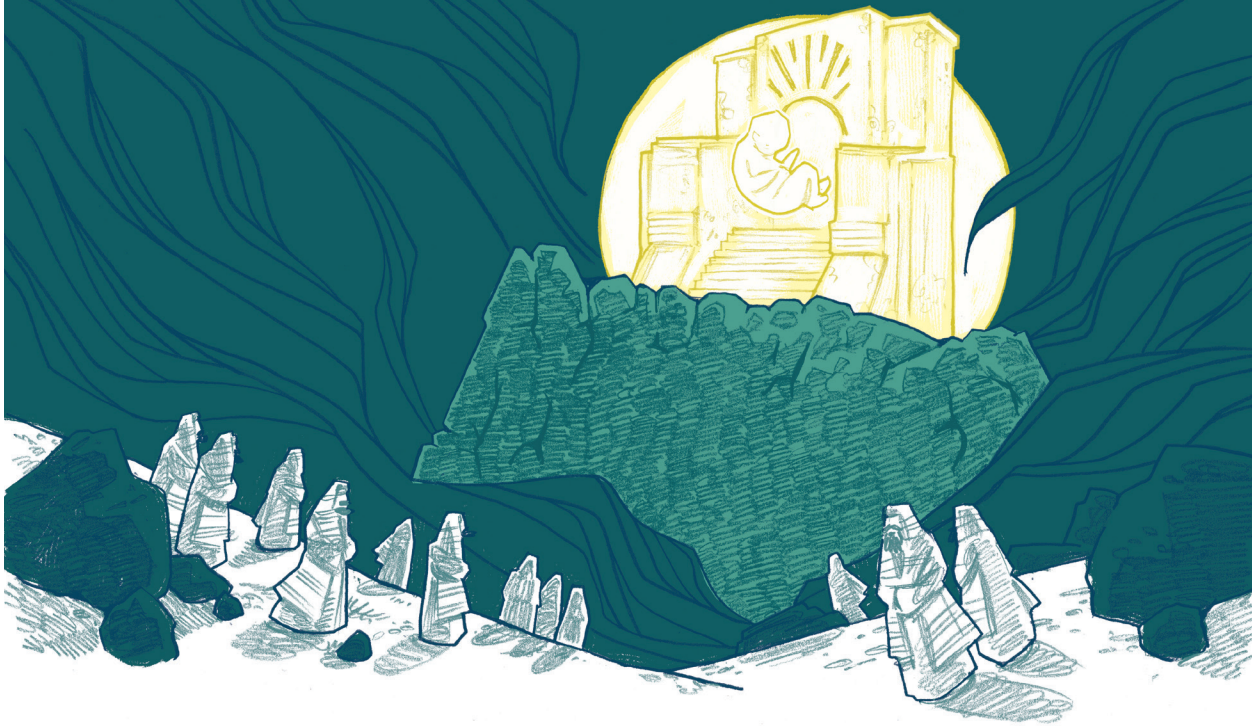
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Week 2

# God's Presence and His Promises

This week, we consider the hope of God's people in the Old Testament as they relied fully upon him in difficulty and hardship. And we ponder the prophecies and promises of hope that pointed toward the First Advent: the coming of the Messiah.



FOR TO US A CHILD IS BORN, TO US A SON IS GIVEN. . . .  
HE WILL REIGN ON DAVID'S THRONE AND OVER HIS KINGDOM.

Isaiah 9:6-7

# 12/06 WHAT GOD SEES

BY CARMEN JOY IMES

Exodus 1:1-3:10

I HAVE INDEED SEEN  
THE MISERY OF MY  
PEOPLE IN EGYPT.  
I HAVE HEARD THEM  
CRYING OUT BECAUSE  
OF THEIR SLAVE  
DRIVERS, AND I AM  
CONCERNED ABOUT  
THEIR SUFFERING.  
SO I HAVE COME  
DOWN TO RESCUE  
THEM FROM THE HAND  
OF THE EGYPTIANS.

Exodus 3:7-8

Israel's exodus from Egypt has fueled the imaginations of countless generations. At its heart, it is a story of hope. The Israelites couldn't see that at first. They were a despised minority enslaved by an ambitious and greedy pharaoh who continually sought to extract more profit at less cost. In spite of his dependence on their labor, Pharaoh saw the Israelites—especially the men—as a potential threat. Not only did he work them to the bone, but he sought to kill their sons.

The writer of Exodus begins by focusing on the women in the story: midwives, a mother, her daughter, a servant, and the daughter of Pharaoh. Each one acts within her sphere of influence to resist Pharaoh's cruel policies. Working together, they save the infant Moses. They act with hope, refusing to let the regime force them into submission. The writer describes their bold actions with the same words he will later use to describe God's saving of the Israelite nation.

Consider these examples: Moses' mother *saw he was good*, reminding us that God values every human made in his image. She placed him in an *ark* in the *reeds*. The ark (or "basket") reminds us of God's rescue of Noah's family from watery death. Moses' rescue anticipates Israel's future escape through the Sea of *Reeds* (or "Red" Sea). Pharaoh's daughter saw the ark, saw the baby crying, and took pity on him. Suddenly there is hope for this condemned child. Then we learn that God saw his people's suffering, heard their cries, and was concerned. God's concern moved him to action when he commissioned Moses to lead the people out of Egypt.

Christian hope is rooted in God's *seeing*. Nothing escapes his notice. The heart of Advent is knowing that God sees a world gone wrong and that he will do something to make it right. He may at times seem distant in our suffering, but he consistently acts to uphold the covenant he made with Abraham (Gen. 17). This same covenant is why God sent Jesus into the world.

The exodus story invites us to participate in God's audacious work of redemption. The women of the story heard no clarion call from the heavens prompting them to act. They simply lived as though God could see and acted accordingly. They knew the right thing to do, and they did it.

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**READ EXODUS 1:1-3:10.** (Optionally, also read 3:11-4:17 and 13:17-14:31.) How do the women in chapters 1 and 2 embody hope? How can the Exodus enrich our understanding of Advent?

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12/09  
ON BUILDING  
A HIGHWAY

BY JOHN GOLDINGAY

Isaiah 40:1-11

Over the past two or three decades, the Israeli National Roads Authority has built an impressive network of highways through the country. One current project is an urban artery with tunnels and bridges that will take people straight into the center of Jerusalem from the point where the Tel Aviv highway reaches the edge of the city. The trouble is that the construction involves disturbing some Roman graves from 1,900 years ago, which has sparked protests. But people want to get to Jerusalem, fast, and they feel the need for a highway that overcomes the obstacles—a bit like the one God commissions in Isaiah 40. “In the wilderness clear Yahweh’s way, make straight in the steppe a causeway for our God” (v. 3, FT).

In the summer of 587 B.C., God essentially walked out on Jerusalem. He’d had it with his people’s unfaithfulness. His glory left, as Ezekiel 10 puts it. And when God walked out, Nebuchadnezzar was free to walk in. Nebuchadnezzar set about devastating the city so thoroughly that he rendered it more or less uninhabitable and had to locate his provincial headquarters elsewhere, in Mizpah.

Nothing happened for half a century. Then, in Isaiah 40, God told one of his aides to commission supernatural contractors to lay out a superhighway with flyovers and underpasses for him to return to the city, bringing his scattered people with him. And God did return. Some of those in exile came too, and they did their best to make the city habitable again. The Book of Ezra relates how they rebuilt the temple and God returned to live there and meet with them there once again.

On the whole, things were better between God and his people for the next 500 years, though for most of that time they remained under the authority of a series of imperial powers. They still longed for their independence.

In A.D. 30, along came John the Baptizer, picking up Isaiah 40 and proclaiming that people needed to turn to God and be washed clean. And again, God was saying, *Build me a highway, I’m coming back, and I’m going to sort out your destiny* (see Matt. 3:3). This time the highway was a moral and religious one, and John was commissioned to build it.

In effect, each Advent God is again saying to us, as he says in Isaiah 40, *Build me a highway*. You want to see Jesus? He’s coming.

IN THE WILDERNESS  
PREPARE THE WAY  
FOR THE LORD; MAKE  
STRAIGHT IN THE  
DESERT A HIGHWAY  
FOR OUR GOD.

Isaiah 40:3

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**REFLECT ON ISAIAH 40:1-11**, first considering its original context: God’s people in exile, living far from Jerusalem. Then re-read it in light of John the Baptist’s role and Christ’s coming (Matt. 3). What stands out to you when you look at this passage through different lenses?

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# 12/11 LIGHT AND LIFE

BY THABITI ANYABWILE

Isaiah 9:2  
John 1:4-5, 9

THE PEOPLE WALKING  
IN DARKNESS HAVE  
SEEN A GREAT LIGHT;  
ON THOSE LIVING IN  
THE LAND OF DEEP  
DARKNESS A LIGHT  
HAS DAWNED.

Isaiah 9:2

Some of us have grown up in cities, so we don't *really* know what darkness is. In cities, there's always a light on somewhere, and you can see by that light. But others of us grew up in the country, well beyond city lights—where darkness is darkness indeed. Where it can get so dark that you cannot even see your hand in front of your face.

This is the image in Isaiah 9:2—that the darkness of sin is so deep and complete, it incapacitates and immobilizes. You can't walk in it with any certainty. You don't know where you're going. You're lost. The darkness here symbolizes the blindness and death that come from sin.

But God solves this problem of sin and death with Christmas. The very people who walked in darkness "have seen a great light." They didn't turn the light on; rather, *on them* light has shone. God breaks into the darkness of sin with new hope, new vision, and with a new life of righteousness.

We shouldn't be surprised that almost every Gospel comes back to this prophecy from Isaiah in describing how Jesus came into the world. For example, when John tells us about Jesus' birth—the Incarnation—he reaches for this symbol of light. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world" (John 1:4-5, 9).

Jesus is that true light. This season is about God sending this light into the world to give salvation to all who would believe in him. Christmas is not about the lights on the tree or the lights decorating the house. At their very best, these are merely weak symbols for a much more powerful light that gives *life* to the world.

Isaiah saw it 700 years before Jesus' birth. Two thousand years ago, the apostles laid eyes on that very light in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. And today, he's given us that light in the message of the gospel. Everyone who is in darkness must repent of sin and believe in this light in order to come into the kingdom of God. This is how the Lord changes us. This is the message of light bringing life.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Thabiti Anyabwile preached on December 17, 2017. Used by permission.*

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**MEDITATE ON ISAIAH 9:2 AND JOHN 1:4-5, 9.** Prayerfully reflect on *darkness*, *light*, and *life* in these passages. How does Isaiah's prophecy help you understand the true hope Christ brings?

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# 12/12 A SON IS GIVEN

BY THABITI ANYABWILE

Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7

FOR TO US A CHILD IS BORN, TO US A SON IS GIVEN, AND THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE ON HIS SHOULDERS. AND HE WILL BE CALLED WONDERFUL COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD, EVERLASTING FATHER, PRINCE OF PEACE.

Isaiah 9:6

Isaiah 9:6-7 is a glorious, prophetic biography of Jesus. The son Isaiah describes is the “Wonderful Counselor.” The word *wonderful* is the same word often used in the Old Testament to describe miracles—the “wonders” God did in the world. And *counselor* brings to mind the wisdom of God. This is Jesus, our wonderful, miraculous counselor who speaks to us and guides us that we might walk in the paths of righteousness.

This son is the “Mighty God.” This is the unique child Isaiah 7:14 said would be born of a virgin and named “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” Mighty and strong, there is no weakness in God at all. Even as a babe in a manger, Jesus was upholding the universe by word of his power.

This son is the “Everlasting Father.” This doesn’t mean he’s the same as God the Father; the Father and Son are different persons of the Trinity. Rather, this could be translated to say he is the father of the ages, outside of time; and in his attitude toward his people, he is always fatherly. Psalm 103:13 puts it this way: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” Over and over in the Gospels, we’re told that Jesus saw people and had compassion. He is a savior with the tenderness of a dad toward his children.

And this son is the “Prince of Peace.” Matthew Henry writes of Jesus, “As the Prince of Peace, he reconciles us to God. He is the Giver of peace in the heart and conscience; and when his kingdom is fully established, men shall learn war no more.”

Jesus is a wonder. His counsel never fails. He is the almighty God. He has a father’s heart. He brings a royal peace to all who believe in him. He’s so much more than just another baby. He is God come into the world. And don’t miss the most important phrase: He is *given to us*.

He is ours, if we will accept him. In all of his wisdom, all of his power, and all of his fatherly love, this same Jesus comes into the hearts of those who trust in him. This is the Son the world was waiting for. And he has come into the world to give himself to us.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Thabiti Anyabwile preached on December 17, 2017. Used by permission.*

**CONTEMPLATE ISAIAH 7:14 AND 9:6-7.** What phrases or ideas stand out to you most? What hope you think they offered Isaiah’s original audience? How do they offer you hope today?

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Week 3

# Immanuel: God with Us

This week, we contemplate the miracle of hope breaking through in the First Advent, as God miraculously worked in the lives of ordinary people like Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and Elizabeth to enter into the world as Immanuel—God with us.

**YOU WILL CONCEIVE AND  
GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND  
YOU ARE TO CALL HIM JESUS.  
HE WILL BE GREAT AND WILL  
BE CALLED THE SON OF THE  
MOST HIGH. . . . HIS KINGDOM  
WILL NEVER END.**

Luke 1:31–33



# 12/13 GREATNESS AND GRACE

BY RACHEL KANG

Matthew 1:1-17

During Advent, as we seek to encounter and worship Christ, we often look for him in the shining star that led the Magi to the miracle in the manger. We look for Christ in the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We look for him in the heavenly host of angels singing to shepherds watching o'er flocks by night.

We don't often think to look for Jesus in his genealogy. There we see the mention of great men like Abraham, the father of our faith, or King David, the warrior and worshiper. Yet the Messiah's genealogy highlights not only greatness but also grace. His lineage names not only leaders but also those least expected—unlikelies like Tamar, a tainted woman; Ruth, a Moabite; and Rahab, a woman of the night.

A genealogy isn't just a list of names to skim and skip through. Genealogies are paragraphs of paradoxes that point to a God of the impossible. A God who had it in his mind for our Messiah to come from a bloodline of kingdoms and crowns as well as from criminals and castaways.

The genealogy of "Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" not only invites us to ponder that God chose some of the unlikeliest of people, places, and plots to accomplish his plans for his people; it also provides us a record of promises and prophecies from the heart of a faithful God who fulfilled the very future he foretold. More than a mere summary filled with names, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus reveals the fulfilled prophecy of a Messiah who'd "come up from the stump of Jesse" (Isa. 11:1) and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that through him "all nations on earth will be blessed" and that his descendants would be "numerous as the stars in the sky" (Gen. 22:17-18).

So lean into this list of names. Let it lead you into holy living as we persevere in the time and space between Christ's birth and Christ's return. Let it remind you that we can trust in God's Word and in his promise to make good of our unlikely lives and, ultimately, to make good of this unlikely world. So linger long in the lineage of Christ, praising God for all that he has done, all the while waiting—with eager and expectant hope—for all that is to come.

## THIS IS THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS THE MESSIAH THE SON OF DAVID, THE SON OF ABRAHAM.

Matthew 1:1

**PONDER MATTHEW 1:1-17.** Also consider reflecting on the stories of Tamar (Gen. 38), Ruth (Ruth 1:1-5; 4:13-22), Rahab (Josh. 2), David (2 Sam. 23:1-4), and Abraham (Gen. 22; Rom. 4:1-3). How does Jesus' genealogy point toward his purpose? How does it deepen your trust in God?

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# 12/14 HOLD ON

BY RICH VILLODAS

Luke 1:5-25

**BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO HIM: “DO NOT BE AFRAID, ZECHARIAH; YOUR PRAYER HAS BEEN HEARD. YOUR WIFE ELIZABETH WILL BEAR YOU A SON, AND YOU ARE TO CALL HIM JOHN.”**

Luke 1:13

In an instant society in which we can order something online and get it an hour later, we often have a hard time waiting. Yet, as Simone Weil said, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.”

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had been waiting for a long time. “They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old” (Luke 1:7). Zechariah means *he whom the Lord remembers*. There’s a painful irony here, for though his name means *the Lord remembers*, in all the long years of waiting, it likely felt as if the Lord had forgotten him.

But in Luke 1:5-25, everything changes. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and says, *You will have a son*. This news is so incredible, so shocking, that Zechariah’s response is *This is impossible*. It’s hard for Zechariah to believe it’s going to happen. And because he doesn’t believe, Zechariah gets a case of angelic laryngitis for the next nine months until his son is born.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story reminds us that a faithful response to waiting is prayer. Gabriel told Zechariah, “Your prayer has been heard” (v.13). This statement gives us insight into how Zechariah and Elizabeth handled their long years of disappointment: They persevered in prayer. They prayed even when things did not unfold as they expected them to. They held on to God, even in the midst of social disgrace, disappointment, and hopelessness.

But, of course, their waiting was not perfect. Consider verse 20: “*You did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time*” (emphasis added). Even though Zechariah lacked faith, God still performs the miracle. Advent reminds us that even though our faith is not always strong, God is faithful to come. We may doubt, get depressed, become discouraged, or want to give up, yet God is still gracious to come.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is both beautiful and frustrating. It’s beautiful because their long waiting ends with answered prayer. But it’s also frustrating because we know that not all of our prayers are answered in this same way. This is the complexity of Advent—human suffering and divine grace—and we hold it all together. Whether it is in this life or the life to come, we know God will make all things new. So with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we hold on.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Rich Villodas preached on December 8, 2019. Used by permission.*

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**REFLECT ON LUKE 1:5-25.** In what ways might you relate to or empathize with Zechariah? What does this account reveal to you about God? About suffering? About waiting?

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# 12/15 PART OF THE STORY

BY KEN SHIGEMATSU

Luke 1:26-38

Mary is incredibly famous today, but there was a time when she was completely unknown. She was just a teenage peasant girl from Nazareth, a town which some scholars say may have had fewer than 100 people. Like her peers, Mary was probably illiterate. Given her station in life, she would have been expected to marry humbly—a poor, working-class boy. Their family would likely often go hungry because there wasn't enough to make ends meet.

When the God of the universe decided to choose his mother, he didn't approach a young woman of wealth and status. Instead, God approached an illiterate peasant girl from a very small town. Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17) shows us that we don't have to be of a particular race or be an "insider" to be part of God's story. And when we look at Mary, we see that we don't have to be rich, from a big city, highly educated, or important in society. We can be dirt ordinary and yet be part of this everlasting story.

What is the one qualification that God seems to require? When the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her, *You're about to become the mother of God*, Mary opened up her heart and said, *Yes, may it be to me as you have said*. To become part of this story and to experience God birthing his life in us, all we need is a yes. We need to consent to the work of the Holy Spirit inside us.

Recently, I've been praying something called the Welcoming Prayer. I pray it like this: *Holy Spirit, I agree to your work in me and I let go of my desire for security, for affection and esteem, for power and control*. This was the essence of Mary's yes to God. She let go of security, affection and esteem, and power and control. As a result, her reputation would be stained for the rest of her life. She'd one day see her adult son mocked, spat upon, beaten, and nailed to a Roman cross. It would feel like a dagger piercing her heart (Luke 2:35). Yet she said yes.

May we, like Mary, pray, "Holy Spirit, I say yes to your work in me." May God's life be birthed in us. May we too play our part in the grand and everlasting story of God.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Ken Shigematsu preached on December 25, 2019. Used by permission.*

**"I AM THE LORD'S  
SERVANT," MARY  
ANSWERED. "MAY  
YOUR WORD ME  
BE FULFILLED."**

Luke 1:38

**CONTEMPLATE LUKE 1:26-38.** What might it look like for you to say yes like Mary? To consent to the work of the Spirit within you? Pray, welcoming God's work in your life.

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12/16  
**HOPE WHEN  
THE FUTURE  
CRUMBLES**

BY CATHERINE MCNIEL

Matthew 1:18-24

**AN ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED TO HIM IN A DREAM AND SAID, “JOSEPH SON OF DAVID, DO NOT BE AFRAID TO TAKE MARY HOME AS YOUR WIFE, BECAUSE WHAT IS CONCEIVED IN HER IS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT.”**

Matthew 1:20

What did Joseph hope for in life? We don’t know much about this carpenter who lived so long ago. Matthew tells us he was righteous and faithful. We see firsthand that he was compassionate, wanting to protect Mary even as his future crumbled. Joseph knew how to sacrifice for the sake of duty, becoming a husband to Mary and father to Jesus under disquieting circumstances. He later fled to Egypt, leaving behind family, home, and work to protect the toddler boy who was not his own (Matt. 2:13-15).

We see a glimpse of Joseph in his choices, but I wish we knew more. What did the angel’s strange tidings mean for him, and how did he make sense of it all? Had Joseph longed for marriage and a family? Did he yearn for Mary, or was the betrothal brokered by her parents? When he first learned of her pregnancy, was he heartbroken? Or angry? Or frustrated by the delays and red tape of divorcing her?

We’ll never know for sure what Joseph hoped for from life, but it certainly wasn’t this: a pregnant fiancée, an unborn child not his own, a lifetime of gossip and slander still ahead. Who would believe the angel’s story? Would you? Did *he*?

Maybe he didn’t, entirely. Most of us would not, could not, no matter how much we wanted to. Babies were conceived the same way then as now. Perhaps Joseph wrestled with lingering doubts, praying something like another biblical father would: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Whatever Joseph wanted from life, marriage, and fatherhood, we know he was given a steeper climb than he hoped. And yet, he stepped forward. Joseph actively set his face toward a long-term hope that God would prove faithful and true, that a far-off redemption would be powerful enough to overturn all this suffering and darkness, all this bitter disappointment.

They named Mary’s boy Jesus, a common name, believing that he also bore another name—Immanuel—and believing that this scandalous birth story would be redeemed by divine scandal, “God with us.” Joseph wagered his life, family, future, and identity on the chance that God was faithful—that this common boy, this source of so much initial disappointment and upheaval in Joseph’s life, was indeed the hope of the world.

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**READ MATTHEW 1:18-24**, prayerfully engaging your imagination to step into Joseph’s story. What might he have thought or felt? What does he show us about faithfulness and hope?

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12/17  
**A SONG OF  
MERCY AND  
JUSTICE**

BY RICH VILLODAS

Luke 1:39–56

**AND MARY SAID:  
“MY SOUL GLORIFIES  
THE LORD . . . HIS  
MERCY EXTENDS TO  
THOSE WHO FEAR HIM,  
FROM GENERATION  
TO GENERATION.”**

Luke 1:46, 50

In Luke 1:39–56, Mary leaves her hometown to be with her relative Elizabeth. When she gets there, she learns that Elizabeth is pregnant as well. And when Elizabeth sees Mary, the baby inside her womb jumps for joy. Elizabeth says, *God’s favor is on you, Mary*. She affirms and confirms God’s words to Mary.

And out of the joy of this encounter, Mary starts to sing. She bursts forth with exuberance and rejoicing. She sings about the goodness of God, then focuses on God’s mercy. She says, “His mercy extends to those who fear him” (v. 50). She sings, “He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful” (v. 54).

We tend to think of mercy in a limited way, such as providing relief for someone who is in pain. But in Scripture mercy goes much deeper and further than that. Yes, it speaks of compassion, but it also speaks of God’s loyalty to and fierce love for his people.

Mary’s song is also a song of justice. She sings, “He has scattered those who are proud. . . . He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (vv. 51–53). When Mary sings, she’s essentially saying, *God’s justice is coming*.

Justice, biblically speaking, is about God taking everything that’s wrong with the world and making it right. In God’s kingdom, things are turned upside down. The least are now the greatest. The last are now the first. Justice is God taking what’s broken and bringing it to wholeness. In Advent, a season of longing and expectation, we wait for God to make things right. And this is a key theme in Mary’s song: *Lord, make it right*.

Mary’s song reminds us that there is no sin so deep that God’s mercy doesn’t go deeper. The good news of Advent is that God has come and God is coming in the person of Jesus—and he offers mercy that goes deeper than our sin. Mary’s song also reminds us that there’s nothing so wrong with the world that God’s justice won’t one day make right. This is why we sing: because of God’s mercy, because of God’s justice. This is why we wait for Jesus to come again: because when he comes, he’s making all things new.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Rich Villodas preached on December 5, 2019.  
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**PONDER LUKE 1:39–56.** How does Mary’s song emphasizing God’s mercy and justice speak into your own life today? How does it offer hope to our hurting world?

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# 12/18 THE LIGHT AND THE KING

BY JAY Y. KIM

Isaiah 9:2-7; 40:1-5  
Luke 1:57-80; 3:1-6

**AND YOU, MY CHILD,  
WILL BE CALLED A  
PROPHET OF THE MOST  
HIGH; FOR YOU WILL  
GO ON BEFORE THE  
LORD TO PREPARE  
THE WAY FOR HIM.**

Luke 1:76

Zechariah and Elizabeth named their baby John, which means *God is gracious and has shown us favor*. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesied over his son: “You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:76-79).

When we fast-forward to John the Baptist’s adult life, we see he does exactly that. Luke records,

He went into all the country . . . preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’” (3:3-6)

These ideas from Isaiah about reshaping valleys, hills, and roads to prepare the way were, in the ancient world, associated with the arrival of royalty. And, indeed, John’s ministry focused on this one thing: declaring that a king was on the way.

Zechariah’s prophecy over his newborn includes a paraphrase of another passage from Isaiah: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (9:2). The people who heard Zechariah prophesy these words would have known exactly what this Isaiah passage was about: the promise of a coming king. It’s part of the same familiar passage that declares, “For to us a child is born . . . He will reign on David’s throne” (vv. 6-7).

This offers such immense hope for us. As much as we may like to believe that we can create the peace and joy we desire through our own efforts, the story of John the Baptist and the words of Zechariah and Isaiah emphatically declare that the peace and joy every human longs for will not be realized until the king arrives. John the Baptist literally gave his life to proclaim this truth—to help people see that a light was about to break through the darkness.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Jay Y. Kim preached on December 9, 2018.  
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### **CONSIDER LUKE 1:57-80 ALONGSIDE ISAIAH 9:2-7; 40:1-5; AND LUKE 3:1-6.**

Which parts of Zechariah’s prophecy stand out to you? How do these passages convey the hope of Advent?

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12/19

# A GOD WE CAN TOUCH

BY CATHERINE MCNIEL

Luke 2:1-7

IN THOSE DAYS CAESAR AUGUSTUS ISSUED A DECREE THAT A CENSUS SHOULD BE TAKEN OF THE ENTIRE ROMAN WORLD. (THIS WAS THE FIRST CENSUS THAT TOOK PLACE WHILE QUIRINIUS WAS GOVERNOR OF SYRIA.)

Luke 2:1-2

It was said that the gods of the ancient world lived outside time and space, on a different plane from our mortal existence, unreachable. On earth, in the hopes of glimpsing divinity, the ancients established hallowed places—a sacred tree or mountain, a holy temple or city—which they believed existed in both spheres, like a window to heaven. The people traveled to these holy places on holy days, believing the divine and mundane might nearly overlap for one reverent moment.

Luke takes pains to communicate that *this* story, *this* God, *this* mingling of divinity and humanity are altogether different. The Creator is arriving *here*, to our muddy, dusty, physical, emotional, beautiful, terrible world. Like a midwife carefully noting the time and place of birth, Luke clarifies that God’s birth interrupts a particular event—the Roman census—in a particular place—the town of Bethlehem—in a particular family—the house of David. Jesus is born into history, to a specific woman, exactly here and exactly now. We might gloss over these local details, but to Gentile readers Luke’s statement would be jarring.

On this night, God does not come like the gods of old, on a cloud or a storm, his untouchable power barely glimpsed through a holy mirror. No, God falls into the arms of his mother, arriving on this earth the way we all do. For months she carried him, for hours she labored with pain and blood and struggle, pushing until God was born on earth among us, an infant, vulnerable, wrinkled, and wet. Exhausted from the ordeal and sleeping now but soon to awaken, howling and hungry.

This is Luke’s unbelievable news: The true God came near to us physically, tangibly, in a way that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. God arrived in a village we could walk to, during a year we can remember. Divinity took on flesh in a mother’s womb, interrupting a marriage, a night, and a village like any other birth. We no longer meet God in sacred places and spiritual spheres but here on the ground, in the dirt, in our families and flesh and blood.

It is a shocking idea, even for us so many centuries later. There is no longer a separation between sacred and mundane. Our messy, daily lives are exactly where God is found, where God is at work. This is a God we can touch.

**REFLECT ON LUKE 2:1-7**, considering the details Luke uses to situate this event in space and time. Why is this significant? What does it emphasize to you about God? About Advent?

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Week 4

# A Savior is Born

Christ was born into a world of pain and darkness. This week, we consider the hope of the Incarnation as we reflect on the stories of those who interacted with the newborn Savior. And we consider the hope Advent offers in our own experiences of pain and darkness as we trust in the one who was, who is, and who is to come.



MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION, WHICH YOU HAVE PREPARED  
IN THE SIGHT OF ALL NATIONS: A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE  
GENTILES AND THE GLORY OF YOUR PEOPLE ISRAEL.

Luke 2:30-32







12/22  
**A DISRUPTIVE  
JOY**

BY QUINA ARAGON

Matthew 2:1-12

God’s great story of redemption is filled with irony. Even as Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the promised Messiah by virtue of his Scripture-fulfilling birthplace, he also introduces his Jewish audience to a mysterious group of foreigners: Magi from the East. Right away, we see the Christ child causing the nations to “rally to him” (Isa. 11:10; 60:1–6).

This migrant caravan of Gentiles enters the Holy City—the center of Jewish religious life and the residence of Herod, the so-called “king of the Jews”—intending to find and worship the *true* “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). The irony here almost provokes laughter, until we notice the chief priests and scribes’ seeming indifference to Christ’s birth. And until we see Herod’s faux worship result in the slaughter of infants.

More than entertaining, the irony is convicting. The Magi’s ambition contrasts starkly with Herod’s. Though both were informed by the Scriptures and both inquired of Christ’s whereabouts, Herod resorted to closed-door schemes to try to eliminate this threat while the Magi simply followed the star to their exceeding joy.

We also see a critical contrast between the Magi’s response of worship and the apparent inaction of the chief priests and scribes. Clearly, proximity to the truth is not enough. Was it embarrassing for these Messiah specialists not to recognize his advent before these pagans did? Why didn’t their theological expertise rouse a readiness in them like we see in the watchful Magi? Was their spiritual responsiveness dulled by a hunger for power and thirst for privilege as they allied themselves with a tyrannical king?

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,” Scripture tells us (Matt. 5:6). This is the reality we see embodied by the Gentile Magi. Their joy overflowed into worship when they saw that shining sign of hope rest over the home of hope himself (see Num. 24:17). They traveled from afar to gladly bend the knee to the “king of the Jews” who, it turns out, is also the “King of the nations” (Rev. 15:3).

The love of God is a scandal—too full to contain, too shocking to predict. It makes Christ-worshippers out of pagans, faith heroes out of foreigners. Are we willing to learn from these unlikely leaders and their generous, humble worship? If we are, perhaps we too will embody a beautiful irony—a disruptive joy, a bright hope, piercing through the darkness of our times.

**WHEN THEY SAW  
THE STAR, THEY  
WERE OVERJOYED.**

Matthew 2:10

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**REFLECT ON MATTHEW 2:1-12.** (Optionally, also read Isaiah 11:10 and 60:1-10.)  
What stands out to you in the Magi’s response to Christ’s birth? How does the Magi’s joyful worship emphasize Christ’s purpose?

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12/23  
**CHRISTMAS  
WARFARE**

BY ANTHONY CARTER

Matthew 2:1-18  
1 John 3:8

Up until this point in the birth narrative of Jesus, it has been all singing and rejoicing. It has been angelic choirs, hurrying shepherds, and wise men seeking to worship him. But here, in Matthew 2:16-18, we have the brutal and blunt reminder of why Jesus came into the world in the first place. “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi” (v. 16).

In this passage, we are faced with a disturbing and stark reality: There are evil and wickedness in this world. There is the terror of sin that rules and reigns in the hearts of men and women. Left to our own devices and under the influence of the Evil One, humans can be given over to murderous lies and to deceit. We see it clearly in Herod’s actions; it couldn’t get any more evil. Right here, in the Nativity story, while we’re still listening to the angels singing, Satan and his minions *kill* countless numbers of babies.

The frustration of Herod gives way to fury, and he unleashes this unholy rage. We can only imagine the horror that gripped Bethlehem as Herod sent his death squads through, killing baby boys. This is the brutal, monstrous act of a sadistic ruler under the influence of Satan. This atrocity in the Christmas story is a stark and sober reminder to us, in the midst of our singing, that the reason Jesus came is to do battle. There’s a war, and Jesus came to conquer our sin.

Christmas is not about ribbons and tags. It’s not about packages or boxes or bags. It is about spiritual warfare. First John 3:8 tells us that it is about the Son of God being born to conquer our sin and to destroy the works of the Devil.

May we celebrate the peace and beauty of Christmas. May we celebrate as we sing, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come.” But let us also remember this dark event in the Christmas story, because the slaughter of Bethlehem’s babies reminds us of *why* Jesus was born. Christ came into the world to conquer our sin and to destroy the works of the Evil One.

*This article is adapted from a sermon Anthony Carter preached on December 24, 2017. Used by permission.*

**THE REASON THE  
SON OF GOD APPEARED  
WAS TO DESTROY  
THE DEVIL’S WORK.**

1 John 3:8

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**CONSIDER MATTHEW 2:1-18 AND 1 JOHN 3:8.** In your view, how does the disturbing end to the story of Herod and the Magi emphasize Christ’s purpose or point toward the gospel? How can it deepen our understanding of hope?

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# 12/24 ADVENT ANEW

BY MARLENA GRAVES

John 1:1-18

**THE WORD BECAME  
FLESH AND MADE HIS  
DWELLING AMONG US.  
WE HAVE SEEN HIS  
GLORY, THE GLORY OF  
THE ONE AND ONLY  
SON, WHO CAME FROM  
THE FATHER, FULL OF  
GRACE AND TRUTH.**

John 1:14

The Word—the source of creation, the true light—entered humanity as a helpless babe born in humble circumstances. From a human perspective, Jesus’ birth is quite shocking. Why didn’t he, the God-man, first appear as a strapping young man flexing his divine muscles with spectacular feats for all to see? Angels could have trumpeted his coming throughout the whole world! But they didn’t; an angel choir lit the night sky for only a few isolated shepherds.

Contrast Jesus’ advent with first-century Roman generals arriving in town with fanfare and flourish after a military victory. They wanted to see and be seen, aiming to impress as they displayed power and demanded homage. Jesus came quietly and unobtrusively, demanding nothing.

Jesus’ mode of arrival, his life among Jewish peasants, and his eventual execution as a criminal certainly seem like a counterintuitive plan for persuading the world that he’s the Messiah. Yet John asserts: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

The glory John testifies to doesn’t comport with our human conceptions of glory and power. While the disciples witnessed many miraculous examples of Christ’s power, in John’s gospel the greatest demonstration of Jesus’ glory is *the Cross*. Jesus himself makes this plain: “‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die” (12:23, 32-33).

The shocking humility of the manger points us toward the humiliation of the cross. This is our strange and otherworldly hope: The Word who was born as a helpless infant is the Savior who came to die a criminal’s death—for us. When we receive him, John says, we enter into his light and life.

Sometimes I find myself among Jesus’ followers who still wrestle with questions (see Matt. 28:17; Mark 9:24; John 20:24-29). When I do, I turn back to John 1:14. The disciples had seen and been with Jesus. They’d eaten with him, traveled with him, fished with him, laughed with him, grieved with him—with *God, face to face*. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus so profoundly transformed them that they were willing to abandon everything to suffer and even die for Jesus. That reality quells my doubts.

I also think about the miracle we celebrate this Christmas Eve: Jesus, the babe in the manger who was “in very nature God” yet “made himself nothing” for us (Phil. 2:6-7). I think of the Christ child who grew up to die and rise again for my sins, offer me true hope, and make all things new. In those moments, Jesus, Faithful and True, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, appears to me afresh (Rev. 19:11; John 14:6). Advent anew.

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**CONTEMPLATE JOHN 1:1-18.** (Optionally, also read John 12:23-36 and Philippians 2:6-11.) Ponder the mystery and glory of the Incarnation. What spiritual responses—like worship, trust, hope—are stirred up in you?

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# 12/25 THE LAST CHRISTMAS

BY ANTHONY CARTER

Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 2:4-7  
1 Peter 1:3-5, 13

OF THE GREATNESS  
OF HIS GOVERNMENT  
AND PEACE THERE  
WILL BE NO END.  
HE WILL REIGN ON  
DAVID'S THRONE AND  
OVER HIS KINGDOM,  
ESTABLISHING  
AND UPHOLDING IT  
WITH JUSTICE AND  
RIGHTEOUSNESS  
FROM THAT TIME  
ON AND FOREVER.

Isaiah 9:7

Herod and the Devil tried to keep Christmas from coming—because the coming of he who is King of Kings is a frightful thought. But Christmas came anyway. Satan couldn't stop God's plans, which have been established forever. He couldn't stop Christ from being born. He couldn't stop Jesus from dying on the cross. He couldn't stop Christ from rising from the dead. He couldn't stop Christ from building his church. He couldn't stop Christ from saving you. And Satan can't stop Christ from getting you home. You place your trust in the King who not only came but will one day come again.

This Christmas Day, as we celebrate Christ's birth, we focus on why he came. And we also remember that there is another Christmas coming. The Lord our God is not finished yet.

Despite what the naysayers say, Jesus is coming again. Despite what the doubters doubt, Jesus is coming again. Despite what the skeptics say, Christ *will* come again. As Scripture tells us, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7, ESV).

Beloved, let us remember: Every Christmas is one Christmas closer to that last Christmas when the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout and with the voices of the angels and the trumpets of God (1 Thess. 4:16). If you think it was loud and glorious when the angels announced his birth to the shepherds, just wait until his Second Advent comes!

For those who do not believe, the coming of Christ will be frightful. But for those who trust in Christ, the Lord's coming is delightful. We say, "Come, Lord!" *Maranatha!* (1 Cor. 16:22). Even though we don't know when or how he will come, we pray, *Come Lord Jesus, come. We, your people, are waiting for you. We want to be found faithful. We want to persevere. Come, Lord Jesus.*

This Christmas Day, we celebrate the miracle of the Incarnation. We join the shepherds who hurried to see the babe in the manger, glorifying and praising God. We worship with the wise men who knelt before the Christ child. We rejoice in the Good News of grace for which Jesus came, died, and rose again. We live in hope. And we remember that this Christmas is just one more Christmas closer to that glorious last Christmas we await. With everything we've got, we sing, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

*This article is adapted from a sermon Anthony Carter preached on December 24, 2017. Used by permission.*

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**REVISIT ISAIAH 9:6-7; LUKE 2:4-7; AND 1 PETER 1:3-5, 13.** Ponder Isaiah's prophesy in light of Christ's first coming and the Second Advent we await. How does your hope in Christ's return and eternal reign deepen your understanding of his birth? How can it enrich your celebration of Christmas?

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# Contributors



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