

Follow...

**Daily Reflections
for this Season of Advent**

*A collaboration of multimedia
devotionals written & compiled
by Grace Mills River*

Come Follow...

An Introduction by Patrick Lafferty

At the end of Christina Rossetti's plaintive Christmas hymn "[In the Bleak Midwinter](#)" we sing:

*What can I give him?
Poor as I am
If I were a shepherd
I would give a lamb
If I were a wise man
I would do my part
But what I can I give him
Give him my heart
Give him my heart*

Even if it tends to eclipse all else, gift-giving marks this season. But the impulse owes its origins and its spirit to the Gift we believe we were given in Jesus, the Christ.

His gift we do not merit, nor can we repay Him for it. But those who see Him as the gift He is will naturally feel the desire to extend themselves in gratitude and generosity, both to Him and to whomever He puts in their path.

So what can you give him—frail, fragile, and spent as you might be? What might we offer that befits Him?

May we suggest one gift you might give Him this Advent is *the gift of your attention*. Precious is that finite resource we all possess, one we too prodigally give away without thought of its consequences. Given how indiscriminate we tend to be with that attention (how many voices and sources have you consulted in just the last 24 hours?), perhaps we need something to redirect it—to focus it?

We have just the thing.

Over a dozen of your friends, peers, staff, and pastors have given their prayer and time to offering you a series of creative reflections for your attentive consideration. For each Advent weekday you'll find in these pages creative offerings in word, song, or imagery—all out to explain further what it means to follow Him who "[became as we are that we might become as he is.](#)"

We invite you to pause, to consider, and to pray. As you do, you offer the gift of your attention – which is the necessary first step to giving him your heart.

Come follow.

Please Note:

This is an interactive publication.
Links to video and audio are active when
viewed from a digital device.

There's a Simplicity to Following Jesus

Written by Patrick Lafferty



*Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device. "Forgetting Sarah Marshall" <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NTQIXBb8rfQmoN-ZMmbdX-JGUuIRJsGD/view?usp=sharing>

I won't speak for the film, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, but I can speak for a moment in it that illustrates well a common human experience.

Humans tend to make simple things complicated, or challenging things seem impossible.

Can the same be said for what it means to follow Jesus? As we've been making the gospel according to Mark our spiritual food of late, we've been asking what is the essence—the simplicity—of Jesus's most misunderstood command.

Do you ever feel like you're always doing it wrongly? That you'll never quite grasp what it means to follow him? And the people (ahem) tasked with helping you in that pursuit resemble something like the surfing instructor saying repeatedly, "that's not it"?

Each reflection in this Advent devotional guide will offer a different look at following. But they will all radiate from a central idea—one that Jesus introduces from the first moment he began speaking publicly:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:15)

As we said at the beginning of the sermon series, the simplicity of following Jesus rests on two simple moves which function in tandem: repentance and belief. A turning from, accompanied by a turning toward. A grief over what has held me in its grip, and an embrace of what is meant to free me for self-forgetful love.

That "simple" task could apply everywhere. Where does one even begin, though? Start where your emotions are the strongest: when the anger, the distress, the sullenness, or, yes, the numbness bring you to a tipping point. Often those acutely felt moments point to something: an unmet, frustrated desire that reveals a belief—one you consciously or unconsciously hold. A belief about how life, yourself, or someone else should be—but which isn't shaping up that way. Sometimes the frustrations are properly felt; at other times they indicate a need for something to change, not in your

circumstances, but in yourself. Repentance and belief in the gospel looks like first taking note of those emotions and letting them reveal those beliefs—like tracking footprints in reverse to see from where they originated. And then letting the gospel ask whether those beliefs are sound.

Can there be more to repentance and belief than that? Sure. But not less.

You're about to begin arguably the most frenetic few weeks of the calendar year. Emotions are bound to surface. Each day might invite something of an inventory at its close. What emotions did you feel intensely? What beliefs did they reveal? If the gospel is true, how does it confront or console you in those beliefs?

This is the simplicity of following.

Pray like the Psalmist:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

Follow the Cross: *What does it look like to follow?*

Written by Craig Lotz



[Cast Away - Follow the Wings](#)

Do we come to a crossroads in our lives? Multiple paths. Unsure. A beautiful Stranger rolls in, offering advice. Direction. Do we take our own path or follow them to seemingly new life and never-ending love?

Or maybe the whole thing seems scary? Unstable. Too risky.



[Extremely Loud - If You Cross](#)

We're offered silent words of direction from a seasoned Sage. A new story....if we're willing to cross. But where will it lead? Will it hold us? And what must we give up on this new journey?



[Romancing the Stone - Baggage](#)

Mark 8:34 - And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

What are we being asked to deny? Throw off? Essentials, that we think we need, but ultimately weigh us down? Can we trust this new Guide to lead us to safety as we venture deeper into the jungle in hopes of finding our way home? And what part do we play on this new journey? Do we do nothing? Everything? Faith? Works? Wrestle? Joy? What does it mean to take up our cross?



[GWMR - Take Up Your Cross](#)

Jesus comes into our lives offering a different road. Potentially beautiful but often scary. Calls us to lay down our burdens. Cast aside everything we cling to for life and find direction in Him. It will be challenging. Constant wrestling, numerous questions and even exhausting, as we strive to follow Him.

**Click the images above to watch the clips if viewing on a digital device.*

Reflections: Ask the Spirit to drive deep the truths of what Jesus has accomplished. His willingness to enter our world. Become one of us. Go far and wide telling of a new and better kingdom. Ultimately, walk a scary road alone and give up His life to conquer our jungle of sin and build a bridge to the Father. Pray for encouragement as He calls us down this new road. The faith to step towards a better story. To trust He will hold us and lead us as we cast aside our baggage and take up necessary death each day... That leads to resurrected lives.

Prepare in Silence

A Reflection from Luke 1:5-20

Written by Rebecca Cochrane

Luke 1:5-20

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

We've heard the saying, "Silence is golden." Indeed, the Proverbs give warning, "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise." (Proverbs 17:28) But Christ followers are instructed to "go and tell." The God who is Word Incarnate and whose message is gospel (literally, "good news") graciously cleanses the unclean lips of his chosen (Isaiah 6:4-7) and makes us ambassadors and a kingdom of priests.

And so I puzzled over the angel Gabriel's response to the priest Zechariah in muting him at such a crucial time in God's redemptive history, until I saw what Zechariah himself, when his lips were once again opened, would refer to as "the tender mercy of our God." (Luke 1:78) Zechariah, upon being stricken mute, was twice bearing the mercy and goodness of the God he deemed to serve.

Zechariah had ministered for many years as a priest on the Temple rotation. He was in the eighth division, according to how King David had allocated priestly service among the descendants of Eleazar and Ithamar, surviving sons of high priest Aaron. When Luke's gospel opens, Zechariah is on the job, and among those priests in the eighth division, Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the temple on behalf of the people, carrying their prayers in symbolic incense into the presence of God. Zechariah is chosen to speak the people's words to the God they worship and wait upon. And he goes, Zechariah who walks blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord, into the holy place while

a multitude waits outside, praying—offering words heavenward with their hopes set on their spokesman to represent them.

Outwardly, Zechariah was meeting the expectations for a follower of God. But over the course of his long life of service and waiting, the cobwebs have settled on Zechariah's faith. Doubt over time has eclipsed anticipation and wonder.

We know God allows us, his creatures, to wonder at his mysterious ways. Doing so even brings him honor and glory when we do it out of anticipatory faith or even trusting bewilderment. But there is a kind of doubt that would derail faith altogether and banish God's promises and power to the realm of impossibility. And that is what Zechariah meets the angel with: doubt that would deny the fulfillment of God's purposes.

Perhaps the faith like a child is emboldened as it is because it is not yet exhausted by a lifetime of fading endurance. Ah, Zechariah. I know. I can empathize. You have grown old without seeing new revelation from God or the answer to your own prayers for a child and a lineage of your own. You are so very human.

Both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had their genealogical place in the line of Aaron. Aaron was set apart as a priest and as the mouthpiece for his brother Moses, who was not confident to speak before the powerful Pharaoh. Aaron and his descendants were crafted by God to speak of God and to God on behalf of others. They were not like the rocks that would be raised up to cry "Glory!" and "Hosanna!" in the place of silenced worshipers. They were the mouthpieces ordained by God for that purpose, nurtured and nourished in a lineage designated for priestliness while waiting for the Great High Priest of the promise.



The Angel Appearing to Zacharias, 1799–1800, William Blake

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Had Zechariah's service become only so much ritual to him as he entered the temple year after year to offer the prayers of the people while his own prayer—his longing for offspring—went unanswered?

Was not the presence of an angel to the right of the altar on the very day Zechariah was chosen to enter enough to jar him out of his fatigued disappointment to consider that a new thing was being done in his very life? Were not the words spoken to him—so like those spoken to Abraham and Sarah in their old age—enough to rekindle hope in God's supernatural abilities? Was not the angel's assertion that the promise from the prophet Malachi would be, finally, fulfilled in Zechariah and Elizabeth's son enough to wipe the dust off the genuine purpose of his calling and ignite in him a new fervor in recognition of the culmination of all Israel's history—at this moment?

But no. Sadly, none of that produced in Zechariah glorious praise and a desire to magnify the Lord's goodness in the remaining days of his life. Unlike his wife's youthful

cousin, who, upon hearing the angel's additional bewildering announcement, asks with childlike acceptance but curious wonder, "How will this be?" Zechariah's response is all doubt, even denial, and accusation toward the messenger whom he now flings beneath the shadow of his own suspicion: "How shall I know this?" he demands. In other words, "Why should I believe you?"

This response is starkly contrasted to that of the virgin's question. She accepts that the angel's message will be, even as she wonders "How?" But the learned priest does not acknowledge the inevitability of the angel's revelation. He speaks for the people before a God in whom he does not trust—at least at this point in his life. A God whom he has wearied of waiting for, and in his weariness, he has ceased to believe. Zechariah walks in ritual blamelessness while his faith is dying within, out of the sight of onlookers. He is a double-minded man.

But God, in his mercy, will not allow Zechariah to continue pronouncing doubt and denial and speaking

against the Sovereign's will, further condemning himself. Through the angel Gabriel, who "stands in the presence of God" in the heavenly realm and not merely in the earthly temple, Zechariah's mouth is shut—not unlike the mouths of the would-be-devouring lions in Daniel's den trial. God will not allow Zechariah to be used by the enemy in public—the enemy who prowls around like a lion seeking living testimonies he might devour. No. Let Zechariah be silent. "Be still and know, Zechariah, that I am God." He will surely do as he has said.

And he does. We do not get to know the manner of transformation that goes on within Zechariah as Elizabeth's belly grows and the one who would prepare the way of the Lord is knit together within her. But we know that the God who was working in the 400 years of silence after Malachi declared that one was coming who would turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers in preparation for his own coming is also at work—in the darkness and silence of Elizabeth's womb. In the darkness and silence of Mary's womb. In the darkness

and imposed silence of Zechariah's disillusionment. In the darkness of the silent night while shepherds watched their flocks. God's own silence does not imply absence, apathy, or inactivity. It is a deception taken root that suggests such to an impatient one like myself, like Zechariah.

When Zechariah's mouth is once again opened, he is clearly changed. Now he knows nothing but redemption, salvation, mercy, and oaths fulfilled. He can be the priest he was created to be as he waits on that High Priest he foreshadows.



*Click the image above to listen to the clip.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Hip1F8kY8>

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence *liturgy of St. James, 5th century,* *adapted by Gerard Moultrie, 1864*

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away!

Prayer:

Oh, Father: When I am in doubt, shut my mouth like Zechariah's, lest I speak against you. And open my lips only when they will magnify your wonders, your goodness, your tender mercies, your salvation, as we wait on you to come again. And as we prepare this Advent season, as we relive those days of anticipation even on this side of their fulfilment, quiet our hearts, our minds, our tongues, to be still and know that you truly are God. Let all mortal flesh keep silence until we can burst forth in glorious praise with all the heavenly host, singing "Glory to God in the highest!" and accept your peace.

The Personal Call to Follow Jesus

A Reflection from John 21

Written by Ann Kerhoulas

*Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"
- John 21:22*

At some point, most of us have looked at someone else and thought, *why does their life seem so much easier than mine?* Whether they have more money or their kids are super-achievers or they love their job, we tend to glance side-to-side and wonder, why did God give them that and not give it to me? But underneath this seemingly innocuous question is the basic belief that God is *supposed* to give us all some measure of fairness; we all have our own blessings and struggles, but God should ultimately distribute suffering, success, happiness, and trials evenly.

My mom used to say, "Life isn't fair," but perhaps it is *God* who isn't fair. God isn't in the business of democracy, doling out equal portions of joy and suffering to his creation. He is always *just*—never letting evil overcome good, but when it comes to his children, He does not apportion us the same lots in life. And unless we address this tough reality, our expectations for God and how our life should look will continue to be marked by disappointment.

In the final chapter of John, Jesus calls Peter to found his Church and warns him that he will suffer the same fate as his savior: death by crucifixion. I think most of us would respond to Jesus in the same way that Peter did—he asks, *but what about John? Is he going to be crucified too?! Why do I have to be crucified!?* Peter's immediate reaction to his master calling him to a life of ministry, sacrifice, and ultimately dying for the glory of God is to look at the guy next to him and ask about what God has planned for *him*.

Because we all have this tendency inside of us, we must hear what Jesus has to say about it. Jesus tells Peter, *If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me* (Jn 21:22). Jesus doesn't entertain this kind of comparative thinking, but challenges Peter by telling him that it doesn't matter what his plans are for John, whether he live until Christ's second coming or not doesn't change the call he has placed on Peter's life—*"You follow me."*

Just like Peter, God calls us to certain works and specific suffering. He allows exactly what we need for both our flourishing and refinement, whispering, "Follow me" as he permits enough friction to keep striving after him and enough comfort to delight in his perfect provision. We must learn from Peter and John how to stop questioning his will for our lives and embrace the lot he has given us for our good and his glory.

Following Jesus in our Work; A Call to Cultivate What We Have Been Given

Through Peter and John, we see how God assigns unique work within a larger calling. All humans have two callings; a primary calling and a secondary calling. Primary calling is the same for everyone; to glorify God and enjoy him forever (Westminster Catechism). But our secondary callings are unique and localized to our lives; it is the place that *we live out* our primary calling.

But God does not appoint us all to the same work, he gives us a lot, a patch of ground, and says *this is where I want you to work*. Cultivate your love for me and bring me glory through what you do here. In Psalm 16, David declares, "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." Your lot might be as a stay-at-home mom, a fitness instructor, or lawyer, but whatever it is, God calls us to work out our primary calling to glorify and enjoy him in the context of that everyday work, creatively pursuing him in what he has given us.

Both Peter and John were disciples, but the callings Jesus placed on their lives were different. Peter would preach sermons, establish churches, and travel through the Ancient Near East as a missionary to the Jews. John too would work in the local church, but from the cross, Jesus asked John to take care of his widowed mother since he would not be there to do it. John's calling took him into exile and to continue in ministry while Peter and Paul were crucified.

Peter and John's secondary callings were to work out how to love and glorify God in *these* places, grappling with how to glorify God when they were isolated in exile, sharing the gospel with people who didn't want to hear it, when they were caring for an elderly widow. These men fought the same doubts as us wondering, *why did God call me here, to this lot?*

I find myself asking, *why did God give me twins? Why did he call me to marry a pastor and be in ministry? Why did God call me to this life and not theirs?* When I find myself thinking these things, I must remember Jesus' words, *what is their calling to you? You follow me!* We need to stop asking why this lot and start asking how do I follow Jesus here, cultivating the lot he has given me for his glory?

Following Jesus in Suffering; The Call to Submit

Every Christian is called to suffer as a fundamental part of following Jesus. If we love him, we start doing the kinds of things he did—like putting other's needs ahead of our own, giving up our rights for them, bearing their burdens, and submitting willingly to the will of the Father that sometimes leads us into places we would rather not go.

But suffering is never a waste. Not only does suffering provide an opportunity to know our weakness

and draw from the infinite well of God's strength (2 Cor 12:10), suffering is the currency of our sanctification, refining us so we might grow in humility, patience, perseverance, and joy in spite of our circumstances. When God calls us to suffer, he is accomplishing his purpose of transforming us into the likeness of Christ.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34). For Peter, following Jesus would literally lead him to the cross. Though we will likely never face crucifixion, our response to suffering is the same as Peter's as we cry, *unfair!* We believe suffering is a hindrance in our lives to be avoided. And like Peter, when we compare the suffering in our lives to others, we walk ourselves into a place of anger and entitlement before the Lord; we don't *deserve* to suffer. This kind of thinking, however, is unbiblical and unrealistic. Suffering is a friend, not a foe, and we must learn to submit to the suffering God has for us in the same way that Jesus did. This too is part of following him.

Jesus suffered the cross out of love for his Father and joy in knowing that his submission would glorify his Father. But more than that, he submitted to the suffering he was called to so that we too might follow him, submitting to his will for us. This is what Jesus calls Peter into—submitting to his will out of love. Peter had just told Jesus three times that he loved him. The only reason Peter would continue to follow Jesus after hearing of his fate is because he loved Jesus and believed that Jesus was worth dying for, that Jesus truly was Lord. And this is the exact same reason why we follow him today through our own suffering; because he is our suffering, good, faithful King, and we love him. And as we do God strengthens, confirms, and establishes us in our suffering

(1 Pt 5:10), we experience the power of the resurrection (Phil 3:10), we are glorified with Christ (Rom 8:17), and we learn contentment in our weakness and dependence on Christ (2 Cor 12:10). When we submit to the suffering that God calls us to, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus who also submitted to the suffering that the father called him to out of love for the Father.

How we follow

Willingly. "Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you" (Ps 32:9). When comparison, jealousy, or suffering arrive, we must choose to stay near Jesus. Unlike an untamed animal who requires restraints, submitting to Jesus means we choose to stay near him in all circumstances.

With our eyes fixed on Him. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb 12:2). The best way to keep us from looking at others and growing angry with the Lord is to keep our eyes fixed on Him. He is our mark, our measure, our King, and the one whom we serve. Fix your eyes on him.

Ruth: A Picture of a Steadfast Follower

A Reflection from Ruth 1:16-17

Written by Brian Bloi

In the story of Ruth, Naomi's two widowed daughter-in-laws (Orpah and Ruth) were given the go-ahead to return to each one's **"mother's house."** They were I think, being let go to start their lives anew amongst their own families, their peoples, and their land.

Both had seemingly done well in Naomi's eyes; **"May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead (her sons) and with me."** (Ruth 1:8)

After making her final point about how much better off the widowed daughters would be in leaving her and going back home to their families Orpah kisses her mother-in-law goodbye and leaves back to her people, **"..Ruth (though) clung to her (Naomi)."**

I guess the picture at this point is if we were to see the two (Orpah and Ruth) as church people (Christians/ Jesus Followers), then we might see two well meaning persons who cared about their mother-in-law's well being, or in this exercise, Jesus and His Bride (the church).

"No, we (Orpah and Ruth) will return with you to your people." (Ruth 1:10)

I'm sure at this point they were showing much emotion and expressed love towards Naomi.

But in this book, we are told Ruth's story, not Orpah's. So we are drawn into her character by her devotion and love for her mother-in-law.

Ruth 1:16-17

16 But Ruth Said, "Do not Urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

This picture is only drawn from the first chapter of Ruth.

Read Ruth when you have the chance.

Again, the picture of Ruth clinging to Naomi and going off to a foreign land and people, and the care Ruth felt and displayed in her sweat. *It was real.*

A picture maybe of a Christian's ideal love and following of Jesus.

Besides the fact that we are daily, all going to fall short of this ideal. Which is why we need Jesus in the first place.

Devotion. Selfless Love. Caring for the one who cared for us first. Putting one's own desires and safety in the rear view window and joyfully, and probably also fearfully, plodding forward.

Dropping our nets (or our whatevers) to follow Him. To be in love with Him that much, to know the truth of all truths... to follow Jesus.

And to also love His bride, the Church, along the way.

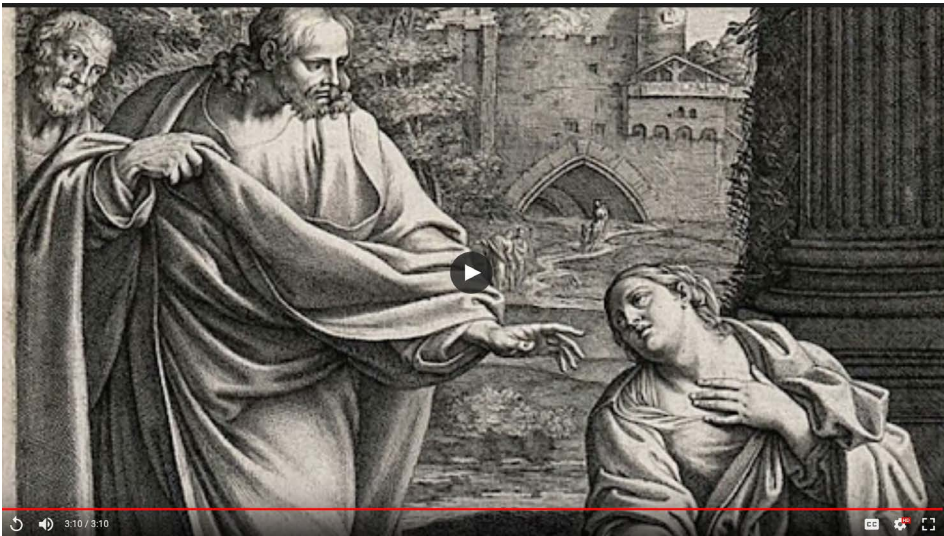
"..Your people shall be my people..." Even as difficult as we, the Church, can be to love.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, help me to hear your voice today, to see and know you Lord, despite what I desire things to be. Help me hear your voice down the narrowed paths, and to walk towards it, always remembering every child of God, every son and daughter along the way. Please forgive my many sins, and thank you Lord for all you have done for us. In your name dear Jesus. Amen.

Kyrie Eleison Sonnet 1

Written by Katie Winkler



*Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.

Source: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s12rQjwRukh6wLGy6-upWAYt_Mvs55HZ/view

Sonnet 1

And As I kneel before the table here
I grasp for crumbs. Am I a dog, outside
The circle? They won't let me come too near.
So from afar I call for You, I cry
Kyrie Eleison. Lord, have mercy.
My daughter is so sick, a darkness clouds
Her mind. And I seek the light, unworthy
I am, deserving nothing from You now.
Yet, Lord, although I may be what they say,
I know I will receive a scrap from you,
So, Master, I beseech your help today.
And I will follow you, the one who's true.
Woman, this moment, I grant your desire
Rise Up. Go home. Your faith has healed your child

Mark 7:26

*The woman was a Greek,
a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and
she kept asking Him to cast the
demon out of her daughter.*

*27 But Jesus said to her, "Let the
children be filled first, for it is not
good to take the children's bread
and throw it to the little dogs."*

*28 And she answered and said to
Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little
dogs under the table eat from the
children's crumbs."*

- New King James Version.

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Music:

Kyrie Eleison by Giovanni Animuccia

Performed by The Tudor Consort

Via Free Music Archive

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To Accompany Kyrie Eleison Video

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Praying in the Dark

A Reflection from Mark 4:12-16

Written by Andrew Kerhoulas

Light and dark are important themes in Advent. This time of year we're reminded that God's emanating presence has forever pierced the darkness in Jesus Christ. One of my favorite Scriptures often heard during this season is from Isaiah 9:2, which is quoted in Matthew 4:

12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. 13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

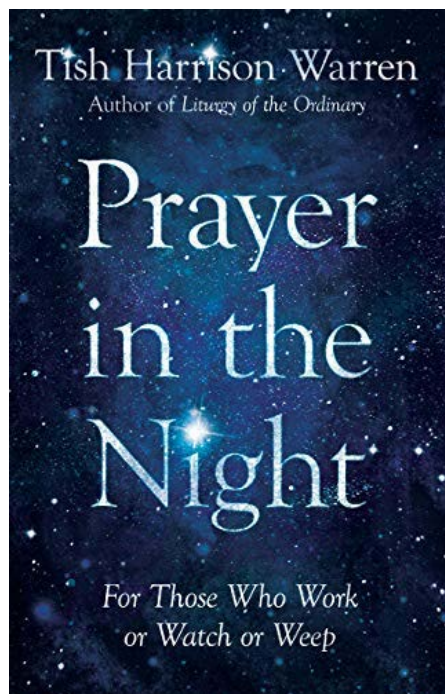
15 "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 16 the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."

Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would bear light in the darkest places. Jesus is the light that has dawned on those who are living in the "shadow of death" and "dwelling in deep darkness." Let's consider what this scripture means for our discipleship, especially when it seems like the dawn will never break in our present darkness, and when our faith merely flickers.

As followers of Jesus, the light of faith can flicker for all kinds of reasons: a life snuffed out too soon; relationships that have gone dark; a chronic illness casting long shadows over our hearts; a besetting sin that seems to hide the

light of His countenance. What can we do when we're struggling to follow him through tenebrous seasons?

In her new book, [*Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work, or Watch, or Weep*](#), Tish Harrison Warren opens with the heartbreaking backstory as to how she became a priest who couldn't



pray. She was under the long shadow of death and found herself struggling to approach God, bring her pain to him, and hear his words of love for her. Have you ever felt that way, too exhausted to find the words to pray? So, what was it that breathed oxygen into the dying embers of her faith?

She writes, "*When we're drowning and we need a lifeline, our lifeline in grief cannot be mere optimism that maybe our circumstances will improve because we know that may not be true. We need practices that don't*

*simply palliate our fears or pain, but that teach us to walk with God in the crucible of our own fragility. During that difficult year, I didn't know how to hold on to both God and the awful reality of human vulnerability. What I found was that it was the prayers and practices of the church that allowed me to hold to—or rather be held by—God when little else seemed sturdy, to hold to the Christian story even when I found no satisfying answers. There is one prayer in particular, toward the end of the Compline [in the [*Book of Common Prayer*](#)], that came to contain my longing, pain and hope. It's a prayer I've grown to love, that has come to feel somehow like part of my body, a prayer we've prayed so often now as a family that my eight-year-old can rattle it off verbatim..."* Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

For this follower of Jesus fumbling around in the soul's dark night, it was *praying the prayers of others* that carried her through. It was the prayers of other followers who had suffered and yet remained faithful before her that kept her faith alight.

Advent is a season of waiting; we're waiting in a dark world for the source of Light to return. In 1 Thessalonians 5:5 it says "You are all children of the light and children of the day." Paul writes this in the context of awaiting the Day of the Lord, the return of

Christ, which will come as a thief in the night (5:2). Towards the end of his charge to stay awake to this reality Paul writes, “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (5:11). Just a few verses later, we read “pray without ceasing” (5:17). If you are prone to forget that the dawn has broken as I am, we need encouragement from others. Warren reminds us that praying the prayers of others regularly can serve to build us up and keep the light of faith burning in the shadow lands.

Don’t hear me wrong, praying our own prayers is right and good. But the Bible never precludes praying the prayers of others and neither should we. The Lord Jesus himself taught us how to pray, and we would do well to pray his words and not merely our own. Not only that, as Warren said there are times when we don’t have the strength to pray on our own. To pray a written prayer is one way that we can speak with God outside of our normal patterns of thinking and praying. And when we enter into the prayers of another, be it from the Scriptures or elsewhere, we place ourselves into an environment that’s greater than our individual faith. As Warren said above, “it was the prayers and practices of the church that allowed me to hold to—or rather be held by—God when little else seemed sturdy, to hold to the Christian story even when I found no satisfying answers.”

I’d like to invite you to a discipleship habit to practice with me during advent. Remember, our habits do not change God’s love for us. However, His love does change our habits. With that said, for the remainder of Advent let’s pick a prayer, perhaps a biblical prayer or the Compline she prayed, and pray it out loud. It could be said alone or with someone else, but let’s pray even if we can’t find our own words lately. Let’s pray as an act of tethering ourselves to followers that have gone before us. Let’s pray as a way to enter into a story beyond ourselves. Let’s pray as an act of defiance against the gloom of sin and death. Let’s pray because Christ will come again to do away with death and darkness forever.

To close, I invite you to prayerfully read Isaiah 9:2 again. Then take a few moments to speak with God about where you need Jesus’ in-breaking presence. Then close with the following prayer.

Closing Prayer:

Father of mercies, you sent the Light of the world to who plumb the depths of darkness so we can become children of light. The shadow of death was no match for him, but it can often hide him from us. We are tired and our faith flickers. Come by your Spirit to blow upon the embers of our faith, and warm us in the fires of Your unending love. Set us ablaze as an incandescent city on a hill for all to see. And may Your Spirit comfort us, prod us onward, to follow Jesus through the night, trusting that the day without end has indeed dawned. In Jesus’ name and no other we pray. Amen.

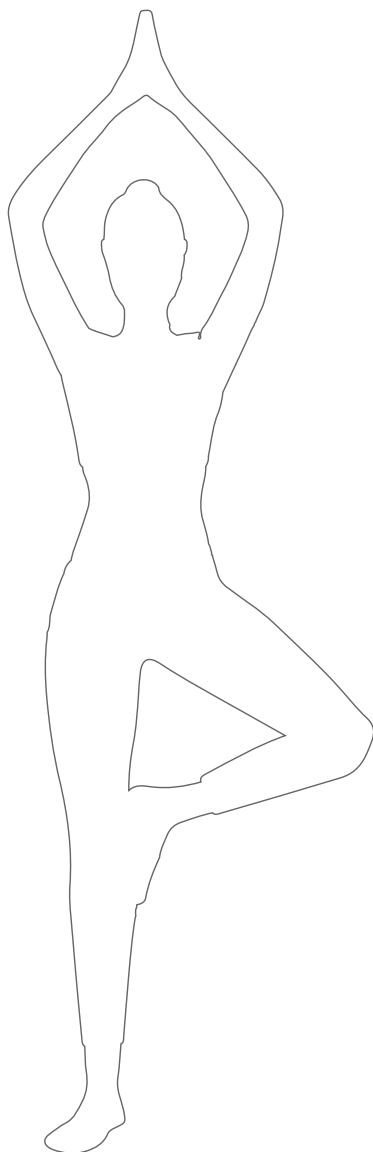
For further reflection,
listen to
[“Our Song in the Night”](#)
by Bifrost Arts

Follow Him? Why Should I? - Part I

Written by Paddy Lynch

Colossians 1: 15-20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.



When my daughter, Anna, began to talk, the words seemed to come rushing out of her mouth, not one at a time, but in nearly complete sentences. Or rather, questions, endless questions. If I didn't have an answer for her, my go-to response was usually, "I don't know, let's find out." (Except when she asked, "What color is worm's blood?" We let that one go.) As a toddler, she was asking purely out of curiosity, but later on, as you might imagine, the why's became more challenging, a questioning of authority, a "you're not the boss of me" kind of why. An understandable posture for a young woman making her way in the world, exploring her faith, and asking big questions of herself

"Why?" is a big question; it's a matter of identity, really, the search for who or what is ultimately going to be 'the boss of me.' As I reflect upon the sermons from Mark and what it means to follow Jesus, I have asked that of myself: why do I follow Him? Why do I make Him the filter through which I try to sift all of my life choices, everything from how I spend my time and money, the language I use, how I treat people who think like me and those who

don't, the media content I consume, the books I read, what I choose to engage in or refrain from, ad infinitum? An epiphany in my weekly yoga class prodded me into putting pen to paper to explain my 'why.'

I have practiced yoga for nearly twenty years. It involves the gentle stretching of nearly every part of the body, which is something I, as a woman of a certain age, need to do. (It helps me do a forward bend from the waist and put my hands on the floor, with only a slightly bent knee—not bad for an old lady!) The class I attend is a small one, with lots of individual attention from my teacher, who likes to begin each session with a song, written in Sanskrit, intended to prepare us for class. The English translation is as follows:

*I offer myself to the Light,
the Auspicious Lord
Who is the True Teacher
within and without
Who assumes the forms of Reality,
Consciousness and Bliss
Who is never absent and is full of peace
Independent in existence, is the vital
essence of illumination*

There is much in these lyrics that is admirable, but I think the “*who*” to whom these verses refer is unknown, a vaguely divine something that has been invested with qualities mankind considers worthy and good. But if I’m going to offer myself to something/ someone, to follow them, I want details, specifics- I want to know the one to whom I offer myself and to be known by that one. I want relationship. In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes:

“When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God loves man: not that He has some ‘disinterested,’ (because) really indifferent, concern for our welfare, but that, in awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God,: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the ‘lord of terrible aspect,’ is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philosophy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work, and despotic as a man’s love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father’s love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.”

And so, inspired by Lewis and the description of Christ in Colossians 1, I composed an invocation for yoga that identifies the One to whom I offer myself:

*I offer myself to You, Lord God,
Creator, Redeemer, and Friend,
Whose word is just and merciful
and true;
You dwelt among mankind in the
person of Your Son, Jesus,
Who suffered all that we do,
And by His death and resurrection
forgives us
The malice and pettiness that lie
within,
To reconcile us to You,
Almighty and transcendent God.*

I will share this with my teacher, not to disparage the Sanskrit song we sing, but to offer her a different perspective on Who the ‘auspicious lord’ might be, and to initiate a conversation. I found something Frederick Buechner once said to be encouraging:

“I wouldn’t have the brass to stand here before you now if the only words I had to speak were the ones I had cooked up for the occasion. I am here, Heaven help me, because I believe that from time to time we are given something of Christ’s word to speak if we can only get it out through the clutter and cleverness of our own speaking.”

Why the Spirit is prompting me to do this now, I have no idea, but I am grateful for the nudge to think deeply about why I believe Jesus is the Christ and worthy to be followed. And the beautiful irony of God’s timing is, this week’s theme in yoga is truth.

Follow Him? Why Should I?, Part II

Written by Paddy Lynch



The Cross and the Hanging Tree, fiber art by Paddy Lynch

Ezekiel 36: 26-28

26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. 28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

For this year's juried art show, I submitted 2 fiber art pieces that were created during the chaos that was 2020. "*You Have the Right to Remain*" was inspired by the Miranda rights, suggesting that all individuals have the right to remain alive while in police custody. The second piece, "*I'll Have What She's Having*," speaks to my belief that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of skin color, background, or birthplace. But the piece that connects these two works and completes them, which was not submitted, is called *The Cross and the Hanging Tree*, seen above.

The tree itself was based on the famous Angel Oak, located on John's Island, South Carolina. Considered a low country treasure and one of the oldest trees east of the Mississippi, it nevertheless served as the venue for

hanging 'errant' slaves, represented by the dark brown figures. Behind them are white hooded shapes, suggesting the overseers, klansmen, and others who perpetrated those hangings. Victims and their murderers hanging together, none of whom are completely innocent nor entirely evil, created in the image of God, all in need of the forgiveness and love and reconciliation of Christ Jesus, who hangs with them. He is the only way such disparate groups could ever be reconciled, because, as Ezekiel reminds us, He is in the business of changing hearts. He is the One who reconciles us to Himself, to each other, and to ourselves. He is our only hope. Reconciliation with a capital R.

The increased racial tensions and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement last year have resulted in many positive and deliberate attempts

to address and improve the treatment of people of color in this country. But ultimately, as Paul reminds us in Romans 7, true and lasting change comes only from the spiritual renewal afforded us in Christ. "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." (Romans 7:18b) Such change requires supernatural intervention. And while racial reconciliation is critically important, I suspect we all have personal reconciliations that require an equally new heart.

In another life, I was a single mother, with 2 young children to care for, a house payment, a car payment, \$50 in the bank, and no job. By the grace of God and a loving community, I got back on my feet again, but as you might imagine, there was no love lost on the man who had abandoned our family. A decade later, when daughter Anna was ready to graduate from high school, I suggested, begrudgingly, that we send an announcement to her father, whom we had seldom seen in the years following his departure. The announcement was sent, but there was no response, so we planned a celebratory dinner with family and friends for after the ceremony. As we exited the gym, my younger daughter, Kari, nudged me and said, "Mom, see that man over there? He looks familiar." (Insert pregnant pause here.) "That's your father," I said. Needless to say, this happy occasion quickly morphed into a tense and awkward gathering which drew attention away from Anna to the unexpected presence of her father, and he should have died many times over from the looks I shot him throughout the evening.

Years later, as we worked on the guest list for her wedding, Anna suggested that we invite her father. You can imagine my response: like a woman scorned (which I was), I was furious that she would even consider including him, given the way he had ruined her graduation. But she persisted and asked me to prayfully consider it, which I reluctantly agreed to do. God had changed her heart, and by His grace and mercy, He changed mine, too, so the invitation was sent. That Anna and I both experienced such an "about face" toward the man who had caused us so much pain was miraculous enough; however, God's work wasn't quite finished.

After he left, my mother took every opportunity to vilify my ex-husband to anyone who would listen, expounding on the tremendous grief he had caused our family. And so I was shocked to see him approach her at the wedding reception, anticipating an outpouring of fury, and fearing slightly for his safety. The initial conversation between them was punctuated with my mother's angry expressions and gestures, but he listened to her with surprising patience. I don't know what was said, but I suspect it was a kind of apology for his actions; whatever it was appeared to appease her. It took considerable courage and determination for him to approach her, and for her to be willing to face him. But as Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." And as with kings, so too with mothers and ex-husbands.

So, why should I follow Jesus? Why would I not? What more could I require in this life or the next? In *Letters and Papers From Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses my 'why' beautifully in this prayer:

*In me there is darkness,
But with You there is light;
I am lonely, but You do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with You
there is help;
I am restless, but with You
there is peace.
In me there is bitterness,
but with You there is patience;
I do not understand Your ways,
But You know the way for me.*

*Lord Jesus Christ,
You were poor
And in distress, a captive
and forsaken as I am.
You know all man's troubles;
You abide with me
When all men fail me;
You remember and seek me;
It is Your will that I should know You
And turn to You.
Lord, I hear Your call and follow;
Help me.*

Amen and amen.

Following Sometimes Means Surrounding

A Reflection from Romans 8:28

Written by Patrick Lafferty

Remember in the film *Dead Poet's Society* when Professor Keating encourages his whole class to rip from their poetry textbooks the introduction? In Keating's mind the author was in clear violation of how to think of poetry?

At risk of posing a sacrilegious question, what verse from the pages of Scripture do you most wish had been ripped out? What is most intimidating or dispiriting or galling?

For anyone who has suffered, or who has sought to comfort one who is suffering, what Paul says near the end of Romans chapter 8 is as liable to provoke as console.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

The acclaimed author John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*) found that kind of consolation hard to swallow. Twenty years ago he was on the verge of entering seminary, taking a job as a chaplain in a children's hospital to acquire some real world experience.

Days into the work, Green stumbled to the trauma wing where paramedics had brought a three year old boy, tragically burned in a backyard accident. The awful experience did more than unsettle him; it caused him to question his vocational trajectory and moreover the set of assumptions about the goodness of God and His ability to work all things together for good. Green returned the next day to find the child gone, but soon after

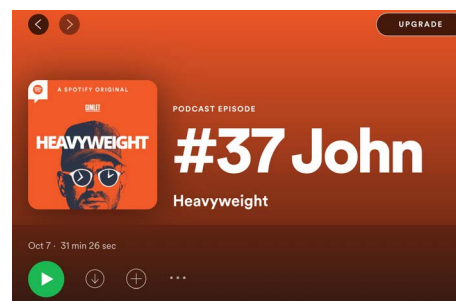
turned over his chaplain's pager for good. He could not reconcile what had happened that day with what he'd be asked to do as a prospective minister of the gospel.

Despite that collision of faith and life, Green found himself still occasionally praying for that boy and his family, not knowing whether the child had lived or died.

Nearly twenty years later, Green discovered what happened.

His name is Nick. He's now 24 and studying business administration. He's also a follower of Jesus.

You can hear John tell his own story, and then hear the interview between him and Nick on [a recent episode of Heavyweight](#) (Listener discretion is advised given graphical descriptions and language).



**Click the image above to listen.*

By Nick's own telling, his parents had no faith at the time of Nick's accident. But a community of faith surrounded them, attended to them, showed them what faith working through love looked like. And both they and Nick himself were persuaded that God was not far from even those who knew painful tragedy.

In fact it's that troubling passage in Romans 8 which Nick cites as a consolation, even if its substance erases neither the pain nor the questions remaining since that fateful day.

And for John, even if you don't hear him in the podcast being fully persuaded of what consoles Nick now, to him it is still a testimony. One that bears reckoning with. One he is glad to tell others. One that responds to, even if it does not fully supplant, that earlier disorienting thought that God was not good. For John, we might reasonably surmise, Paul's confident promise—spoken by someone intimately acquainted with suffering—may be something we can't casually dismiss.

What might we take from this exchange, both tragic and tender?

Following Jesus is at times less an act of persuading others of God and His goodness—as it is of surrounding them with living pictures of that belief. It's in the showing of the faith that the telling may find traction. The words of a passage we might prefer to omit come alive when they are incarnated in those who don't need to say them. Romans 8:28 will likely need to be seen and felt before it can be shared and perhaps in time savored.

Let this prayer be a lead sheet from which you yourself prayerfully riff on its theme:

Father, when I am too weak to trust, to tired to follow, may some with stronger backs carry me in truth and in love. And when your courage is found in me at higher tide, may I do likewise for another when they are on an ebb.

One More Sunday

A Reflection on Revelation 8:3-5

Written by Andrew Kerhoulas

Transformative conversations don't happen every day. But a recent conversation with a Chinese pastor friend reignited my heart with love for Christ and for gathered worship in particular. I shared some of this story in a recent [sermon](#) but I want to share the rest of it for your encouragement during this advent season. To protect the identity of my friend laboring in the underground church, I will refer to him as John.

John reached out to me, seemingly out of the blue, wanting to catch up via Zoom. I hadn't heard from him in a couple of years since he moved his family back to China to plant a church. I was delighted that he wanted to connect with me, but I didn't anticipate it being one of the most important ministerial conversations of my life.

After sharing about our respective families, things shifted towards his church plant. I asked him what Sunday worship looks like, and he shared some things I wasn't expecting. Before worship each Sunday, they gather as volunteers and staff to pray for the service at hand. Getting more specific, he explained that each Sunday they ask God to give them *one more Sunday*. *One more Sunday* to share the good news of Jesus; *one more Sunday* to worship the triune God; *one more Sunday* to baptize new believers and children; *one more Sunday* to extend the balm of Christ to sinners and sufferers alike. *One more Sunday*. Every. Single. Week. What's the fruit of that kind of urgency in prayer and worship? Renewal.

Behind the prayer for *one more Sunday* is a fervor and urgency to declare the good news of Christ, such that each pastor and church member risks their safety, their freedom, and their livelihood every Sunday in order to gather to worship the One True God.

As I have reflected, it has dawned on me just how much I take Sunday for granted as a Christian in America. Though the pandemic has provided some minor bumps in the road, our

“As I survey the evangelical landscape in America, the urgency of one more Sunday is not what marks most of our churches, and it shows.”

corporate worship has never been threatened by police shutting our church down or imprisoning a pastor.

Sure, we had to move online for a while in the beginning of the pandemic. Yes, we had outdoor services for many months, some of them chillier than I liked. But these restrictions have mostly been self-imposed. But throughout and certainly before the pandemic the urgency of *one more Sunday* was nowhere to be found, either in my heart or on my lips. As I survey the evangelical landscape in America, the urgency of *one more Sunday* is not what marks most of our churches, and it shows. The fruit of this lack of

urgency is not renewal.

The Holy Spirit spoke to my heart through my brother to help me see that each time we gather for worship, we are presented with a precious gift. We are presented with a sacred space to share in and enjoy the good news of Jesus Christ and to adore our triune God as his beloved people once again.

In Revelation 8, there's a vision about the nature of corporate prayer. This is a great passage to meditate on during this advent season as we are reflecting on the once and future coming of Christ.

3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Take a moment to allow this heavenly perspective on corporate prayer to sink into your heart. Prayer is powerful; it flames and thunders around the world. Reflecting on this passage, Robert Muholland Jr. [writes](#), “Prayer is the act by which the people of God become incorporated into the presence and action of God in the world. Prayer becomes a sacrificial offering of ourselves to God, to become agents of God's presence and action in the daily events and situations in our lives.” In other words, our prayers, inflamed with

God's presence as an offering to him, impact our world more than we tend to think.

Throughout biblical and church history, corporate renewal movements have always been accompanied by [prevailing corporate prayer](#). It's no mystery then that pervasive renewal is happening in China in the churches underground, but is often absent here, in the churches above ground.

On that note, like many of you I've been greatly encouraged by the corporate prayer gatherings on Sunday mornings. Jesus is at work in our church family, and this is one of the surest signs. But what might happen if, dare I say it, all of us joined in what Jesus is doing to make us a more prayerful, and in turn, spiritually renewed church? Granted, there are logistical issues for many of you. Nevertheless, we'd love for you to participate in what he's doing among us if you're able.

Back to John. Their prayer for one more Sunday wasn't the only impression John--and really Jesus--made on me that night. In God's providence, prior to our Zoom meeting I had to reignite the pilot

light in my hot water heater. We had moved into a new house days earlier, and were getting tired of cold showers. I consulted my friend Youtube to learn how to reignite the pilot light that had gone dark. As John was sharing, the Lord gave me a picture of the Chinese church being a pilot light for the global Church. When we go dark--when our affections for Jesus have moved from hot to tepid--we can look to our faithful brothers and sisters in China and similar places to ignite again our love for Christ and his people. When we consider the imprisonments, beatings, and worse that many have endured for the sake of the gospel, it compels us to press on to know and love Christ and to treasure gathered worship anew.

The final moment I'll share is John's answer to my question, "If you had a microphone where every preacher in America could hear you, what would you say?" Was that a dramatic question? I'll own it, but just go with me. He took a few seconds to consider, then said, "The way of Jesus is suffering, not comfort. Choose the way of suffering." Mic drop.

Here's the other thing I want you to know: at no point in our conversation did John have a hint of self-righteousness. He didn't make me feel ashamed of all I had taken for granted. He didn't make me out to be a comfort junkie. Not at all. Instead, like Jesus, he spoke with kindness. And that's what has led me to repentance.

One more Sunday.

Pray with urgency when we gather to worship.

God uses our Chinese brothers and sisters like a pilot light for the global Church.

The way of Jesus is uncomfortable. Choose suffering, not comfort.

Jesus is alive and well, even--and maybe especially--in the darkest of places.

Jesus is kind, even to tepid Christians. But he loves us too much to leave us that way.

Who knew, besides Jesus, that I needed yet another Zoom call in the midst of this pandemic? Perhaps you did, too.

Closing Prayer

Father in heaven, every good and perfect gift comes from your hand. Sunday worship is one gift we can easily take for granted. In your kindness, forgive us and give us a renewed passion for worshipping with your people. Father, be near to our brothers and sisters around the world who worship in the shadow of persecution. By your good Spirit, fill them with the courage and compassion they need to continue to follow you. Provide them with impermeable joy, come what may. Help us to imitate them as they imitate the One who for our good chose the way of the cross. We humbly ask that you would give us one more Sunday to proclaim and to enjoy the good news of Jesus. Light us up, we pray. Amen.

What Has Been Your Fuel?

Written by Lee Hunt



Red fuel bottle for our stove on the BC tundra, where the midnight sun barely dips below the horizon

Many of us in WNC love backpacking and the outdoors. Sometimes those adventures gave us more challenges than we planned on. Can you remember such a time for yourself, your friends, your family? When the tent nearly collapsed in freezing rain or your friend's ankle broke three miles from the car?

Once I found myself needing more spiritual fuel than ever to face those challenges on a NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) course. For 30 days in far north British Columbia, I lived an absolute struggle

of hunger, emergency helicopters, sinking through waist deep mud with a 60 pound back, searching for days for lost members of the expedition, mosquito swarms that left scars on my arm for a year, and more beyond the scope of this Advent page.

What was my fuel then? Psalm 30. God's word, His inspiration, all His strength rendered into words I can carry in my pocket like rocket fuel.

So pray with me, in whatever tough time you may be going through, Psalm 30.



Psalm 30, my more important fuel

Psalm 30

A psalm. A song. For the dedication of the temple. Of David.

1 I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat
over me.
2 Lord my God, I called to you for
help,
and you healed me.
3 You, Lord, brought me up from the
realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to
the pit.
4 Sing the praises of the Lord, you his
faithful people;
praise his holy name.
5 For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.
6 When I felt secure, I said,
"I will never be shaken."
7 Lord, when you favored me,
you made my royal mountain[c]
stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.
8 To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
9 "What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
10 Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help."
11 You turned my wailing into
dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and
clothed me with joy,
12 that my heart may sing your praises
and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you
forever.
Amen.

Down and Out

Following the God Who Came Down into Desolate Places

Written by Rebecca Cochrane

A Reflection from Mark 1:35-45, with Isaiah 9:2, 6

35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to **a desolate place**, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was **out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.**

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light; those who dwell
in a land of deep darkness, on them has
light shone. . .

6 For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given;

and the government shall be upon his
shoulder, and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.



*Click the image above to listen on YouTube

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKi-uKfCXYQ>

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel by Future of Forestry

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

. . .

Long lay the world in sin and error pining, says the John Sullivan
Dwight translation of a French poem that became O Holy Night.
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel acknowledges mourning in lonely exile
that describes life in the world that began as a garden of fellowship, but
descended into a desert wilderness of division.

Sin. Error. Desert. Wilderness. Mourning. Pining.
But God...

Love came down at Christmas, Christina Rossetti penned in 1885.

All the best seasonal hymns celebrate that unfathomable but desperately
needed reality: A thrill of hope! Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to
thee! Far as the curse is found!

Come where? He came down into the desolate place of this world, into
the wilderness, to undo the curse and to restore the garden of fellowship
between God and man, to return desolation to the fullness of creation.
God with us, Emmanuel.

Mark's gospel opens with urgency. (Just count the uses of the word
"immediately" in the first chapter.) Heaven opened. God has arrived.
John the Baptist is crying out for preparation to receive the Lord. The
people have been pining, mourning, waiting, longing. And there he
is: The beloved Son of God, in whom heaven declares God's pleasure.

Immediately prior to beginning his earthly ministry, Jesus appears, is baptized, and then is driven with urgency where? Not to crowded, milling towns; not even to pastoral countrysides populated with the noble, rustic poor. The Holy Spirit himself drives Jesus first into the wilderness, the desolate place, alone. And who waits for him there but the evil one himself. Our God who came down into this desolate world to do battle on behalf of his beloved will first meet the enemy face to face and claim the victory he will not be denied.

We are not given most of the details of that 40-day battle, but this much we know: When the time was fulfilled, Jesus had only to speak and the evil one departed from him immediately. “Be gone, Satan,” Jesus says... then the devil left him. (Matthew 4:10-11) As surely as that. “One little word shall fell him,” Martin Luther reminds us.

But that wasn’t the end of Jesus’ time spent in wilderness. Even as his outward ministry begins, he retreats into those desolate places. Rather than terrify him, he takes strength there in communion with the Father. The wilderness does not empty him. Rather, he fills it. He fills lonely places. He brings water to deserts, living water to mortals, life to barren places.

What does it mean to follow the God who came down into desolation to redeem and restore and fill it?

Before Jesus ascended, he gave his disciples these encouraging words: “I go to prepare a place for you.” Those who follow him in this life will follow him to our eternal home. But what if following him here and now also means following him out into those desolate places which he first

populated? What if in his coming down to the pining world, and then out specifically into the places in most need of his presence, he was preparing the places for us to go after him, here on this needy planet?

Mark’s gospel tells us that when his disciples find him in the lonely place, they relay that “Everyone is looking for you.” And he graciously goes. He comes out of the wilderness to the bustle of the towns. But the desolate still are not far from him. Consider the leper. Who in that time knew personal desolation more intimately? A diseased one, cast out from the healthy community to live a desolate life. Isolated and unclean. The desolate soul here is drawn in hope to Jesus, who touches the untouchable.

“God came down to a desolate place to fill it, redeem it, and restore it.”

This Jesus: The wilderness does not empty him, and the unclean do not dirty him. He fills the void with his presence, binds the evil one with his word, and cleanses the unclean with his touch.

This beauty, power, and goodness inspire awe in those who are observing. He draws us to him as our knowledge grows. Mark says the crowds were so great that he could no longer openly enter a town. How tragic, right? That the Lord could not reach the citydwellers due to his popularity? Perhaps not. Perhaps that

was by design, that he might model for us what it means to follow him. God came down to a desolate place to fill it, redeem it, and restore it. As the crowds pressed toward him, he withdrew again to desolate places, drawing those who would follow with him, filling those places and multiplying his presence there with every believer who in faith went out with him.

He comes to rocky places in souls and removes hearts of stone. He equips new hearts of flesh with the same Spirit that drove him with urgency into the wilderness, to the desert places in our world today. His followers, in union with him, can go in obedience and tell and love and restore and fill—to take Christ to the desolate. To share the knowledge of the ransoming of the captives. To declare: Love came down at Christmas! And unto us a Son is born! The people walking in darkness have seen a great light! The fellowship that began in a garden is restored in him! The wilderness and the evil one who desires desolation is overcome!

A thrill of hope for the down and out, because of the God who came down and sends out!

Carry Me Home

Written by Lee Hunt



*Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BnRyb1puIA&t=7s>

Matthew 11:28-30

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Rarely does a song give me the chills, rarely does a song haunt me and yet convey the raw power of God.

Sometimes we need to be moved by Him this way, moved like someone is rolling away the rock blocking the empty tomb.

And sometimes we just want that raw power of God to simply carry us home, to carry us through. Here is that song, The Sweeplings *Carry Me Home*. Grace Worship played it once years ago, I hope it gives you the chills and moves your soul too:

[Listen Here: https://youtu.be/2BnRyb1puIA?t=7](https://youtu.be/2BnRyb1puIA?t=7)

Pray with me, with the lyrics from the song *Carry Me Home*:

Lord, “Easy my soul, carry me home. Quietly I feel your whisper settle on me, Quietly I’m carried on.” Quietly I’m carried on through the joys and sorrows of the Christmas season, quietly you settle on me, carry me home to you Lord every day. Amen.

Effie and the Bell Ringer

Written by Katie Winkler

Deuteronomy 15:10-11(NIV)

10 Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. 11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

It is 7:00am when Effie decides that because of the supply chain problems going on in the world today, she is not going to be ordering her Christmas gifts online this year. She can't risk them not getting to her in time to dress up in her red dress with the white fur trimmings and distribute them at the family Christmas dinner. Everybody expects Aunt Effie to be Santa Claus every year, and she doesn't like to disappoint people if she can help it.

Besides, she is tired of being stuck inside the house with nothing to do, and truth be told, it is a whole lot easier to spend more money than she has budgeted for gifts if she buys everything online, and that has got to stop. She needs to stay within her budget. That means her time budget as well, don't you know. Time is every bit as precious as money, maybe even more so, she has heard tell.

So Effie has a plan.

She has her Bible group at 9:00am, and she hasn't done her studying yet, so she will need to take an hour or so for that. Before that, though, she needs a shower. Although she had

one last night, she woke up sweating a little around 2:00am, so jumping in the shower again this morning sounds like a good idea. It wouldn't do to go out of the house feeling grungey.

About five minutes into the shower, it occurs to Effie that she promised to bring treats to the Bible study. She hasn't had time to do any baking, but she had said she would bring something, so she will need to stop at the grocery first and pick up some of those delicious little two-bite brownies that everybody loves. Sometimes around this time of year they have a two-for-one sale. Maybe she can find iced ones with little red and green sprinkles. That's always a nice touch.

Oh, she can save a bit of time by stopping at the coffee place in the grocery store and not have to make a pot here at the house. She loves that coffee shop. It's so convenient when time is short. And those peppermint mochas are so good.

The next step in the plan, she thinks, as she begins to lather her hair, is to stop herself from talking too long after the Bible study like she usually does. Her favorite part each week

is talking to her friends afterwards, but today, there is just too much to do. She thinks as she rinses a couple of minutes later, that maybe she will slip out during the prayer at the end. She'll say something quietly to the hostess about having an appointment or something. They'll understand. It's that time of the year, after all.

After the Bible study, she thinks as she towels off, she will do some real old-fashioned Christmas shopping downtown. She has heard that they have the big tree up and decorated. The shops open at 10:00, so if she plays her cards right, she can be through by lunchtime and eat at that cute little bistro near the park.

Plans are made.

It is 8:30am, and Effie is a bit behind her time. She has her reasons.

It took her a bit longer than she planned to get dressed because she couldn't find the green sweater she always wore to go shopping this time of year. She finally found it in the back of the closet, right where she had put it, so she wouldn't forget it, of course. Just as she sat down to study her Bible,

her neighbor called and asked if she could talk. She did say that she didn't have much time, but she also said that she could spare a few minutes. Just a few, but the neighbor kept on and on about all of her problems and Effie felt that it was important to listen, so in the end, Effie didn't have but about 15 minutes before she just had to go, so she thought 15 minutes wouldn't be enough time to do a proper study. She decided to just go on because she hadn't had any coffee yet and was getting a bit grumpy. It wouldn't do to be grumpy at the Bible study. People would think there was something wrong, and she couldn't have that.

So, she has just pulled into the parking lot at the grocery store when she sees the bell ringer beside the big red kettle. She frowns. Oh, right, I haven't given yet this year. She opens her purse to pull out a five but sees that she only has a ten. I will wait until I get my coffee. That's about five dollars. Then, I'll have five dollars to drop in the kettle when I leave. That's plenty.

She takes the ten out and puts it on top of her purse, so she can get to it in a hurry, then glances at her watch. 8:32am. Times a-wasting! Effie gets out of the car, slings the purse over her shoulder, and heads for the door, glancing at the bell-ringer as she goes by.

He is tall and thin with a neatly trimmed long white beard and swarthy skin. When he smiles at her, she sees that his teeth are tinged yellow, but none are missing. His blue jeans and red jacket are worn, but clean.

Effie passes with her head down but stops when she hears a voice behind her say, "Excuse me, ma'am."

She turns. It is the bell ringer.

"I'll pay you when I come back out," she says.

"But, I think you dropped something." He holds out a ten-dollar bill. "I think this is yours."

Effie takes the bill from his gnarled hand. "Thank you," she says and feels the need to stop, just a moment, and explain, now that he has been so nice. "I just need to get some change in the store. I promise I'll pay you when I come out."

"Whatever you can give, Ma'am, will be greatly appreciated. I will be here when you come back out."

Effie stuffs the bill in the front pocket of her purse. "Okay, I will see you soon." She turns away when he stops her.

"And if you can't give nothing, then that's okay, too. I hope you have a blessed day."

Effie, a little less frantic now, makes her way into the store, buys the brownie bites with icing and sprinkles, and stops in the line to buy her peppermint mocha. It is a long line. She glances at her watch, 8:45. It will take ten minutes to get to the Bible study. She sighs and leaves the grocery, still holding the ten in her hand.

On the way to her car, head down, she drops the ten into the red kettle and looks into the deep brown eyes of the bell ringer.

"Thank you, ma'am," he says, smiling again. "You have a blessed day now, okay?"

Effie smiles back this time. "Thank you, sir. I plan to."

Prayer:

Father, I concede that I am taken in so easily by what will not last. Help me instead to be taken in by what cannot fade—that because of who You are, the world You have made, and the grace you have shown me, that I "will always have what I gave to love."

The Holy Land of The Broken Heart

Written by Rebecca Morgan

THE HOLY LAND OF THE BROKEN HEART

By Michael Kelly Blanchard

Jesus, in this life of mine, more and more Your Grace I find
in the kingdoms I decline, in the battles lost.
All that I would hold onto, hide away and keep from You,
fade like diamonds made of dew--underneath Your Cross.

All the useless ways of my will,
claiming peace while peace-less still,
And all the dreams so unfulfilled-- bitter empty air.
Hollow brag, ambition's boasts,
haunt the heart like tired ghosts,
leave their lessons and their yokes-- and their cold despair.

**JESUS, LORD OF ALL I AM,
HOLD ME WITH YOUR WOUNDED HANDS.
KEEP ME IN THE HOLY LAND
OF THE BROKEN HEART.**

Victory's an empty word, success simply seems absurd
when compared to You my Lord and Your Hope that heals.
No conditions but the truth, all the shackled shame let loose.
Forgiveness-- the living proof that Your love is real.

Oh, the eyes of humankind--
show the pain that numbs the mind;
search the sorrow for a sign of mercy in this maze.
There in tears of our sin confessed,
wrapped up in humble blessedness,
Lord, You live, the honored guest of your people's praise.

**JESUS, LORD OF ALL I AM,
HOLD ME WITH YOUR WOUNDED HANDS.
KEEP ME IN THE HOLY LAND
OF THE BROKEN HEART.**

And when my dance of days is through,
when my oldest hour seems brand new,
when all desires are for You--may my story be
that my treasures weren't of gold,
that my pride lost all its control to You,
O Lover of my soul. Jesus, all to Thee.

**JESUS, LORD OF ALL I AM,
HOLD ME WITH YOUR WOUNDED HANDS.
KEEP ME IN THE HOLY LAND
OF THE BROKEN HEART.**



**Click the image above to listen if viewing on a digital device.*

John 11:33-35

[With Mary at the Death of Lazarus]

When Jesus saw her weeping... he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

She lives alone. She is elderly but strong, with a no-nonsense kind of self-reliance and a quick tongue. But something is out of order. Not answering the phone, she doesn't come to the door either, though I pound on it. The back door is unlocked. I've never been asked inside her house, but I push through the heavy door. I am hit with an intense smell of mildew and mold and close, dank air - and also with undeniable evidence of the mental disorder that deprives its victim of power ever to discard anything. She was born in this house and cared here for her mother, father and brother until they died years ago. She has been here alone ever since. Now, she is in need of an ambulance to the hospital and will lie in critical condition for days. But today, finally, she is discharged to a rehab hospital for two weeks.

And then? Home? To *this* sad house?

And then, Lord, what part would You have me play?

“Jesus, Lord of all I am, hold me with your wounded hands. Keep me in the Holy Land of the Broken Heart.”

What does it mean to follow You into another’s suffering, Lord?

“Oh, the eyes of humankind show the pain that numbs the mind, search the sorrow for a sign of mercy in this maze.”

You have asked me before to follow you, Lord, into the land of the Broken Heart. I didn’t think I would ever get out. Grief is superhuman work and I was not up to the task. But there I found out things about you that I had never known. You, Lord of all I am, walked gently with me in my brokenness. I thought you had left me there alone-- but You never did. And after a long time, coming to You with my complaint and despair, I learned I could be yoked beside You, Gentle Savior, taking your easy load, while you took mine. You did all the pulling. And, one day, I wanted to live again.

Jesus, in each of your days on earth, you knew your Father had given you the broken-hearted to love and help. Your heart was troubled for each one, your compassion rushed out to them and you wept and healed them.

And when John the Baptist, your cousin, friend, and forerunner was murdered, you went alone to your Father with your own broken heart. But on the Cross, for our sake, you chose to die in desolation, utterly without Him. You endured the Cross alone so that we could enter into your joy--the same joy that you would have again with Your Father.

Have I forgotten again how you rescue me over and over from my own helpless trouble? Forgive me Lord, for I see that my default is to live in a mindset of entitlement and in the pride of believing that I have more important things to do than to engage with another who is hurting.

Lord, lead me. Teach me. Help me to listen. Sometimes my part is to ask others for help in taking practical action. And sometimes my part is to be still and pray. Lord, today, as I take up my cross and follow you, I have a foretaste of the wholeness and shared joy that led you to redeem us-- at such a cost.

*“And when my dance of days is through,
when my oldest hour seems brand new,
when all desires are for You, may my story be
that my treasures weren’t of gold,
that my pride lost all its control
to you, O Lover of my Soul, Jesus all to thee.”*

This Advent season, Lord Jesus, keep us in the Holy Land of the Broken Heart, following You.



Image: Getty Image iStock-958588576 .jpg

Following is the Fitting Response

A Reflection from Psalm 96

Written by Nick Dotti



**Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.*

Hi Church. I'm Nick Dotti. My Wife (Martha) and I, along with our three children (Maggie, John, and Cate) have been attending Grace Mills River since the summer of 2017 and have been members for a little over a year.

I was honored to bring part of the Advent message to you last year and this year I went back to the same location to video the reading of another psalm. This year I have chosen Psalm 96.

If enthusiastic repetition is the mark of joyous, exuberant worship, this psalm, shared by the congregation, must have been a thrilling anthem, a spiritual experience.

The substance of this psalm, and portions of the ninety-seventh, ninety-eighth, and hundredth, are found

in 1 Ch 16:7–36, which was used by David's directions in the dedication of the tabernacle on Mount Zion.

Almost every form of worship is mentioned: song, praise, credal recital, ascription of glory and honor, offering, worship, "holy array," reverent fear, and declaration. Equally comprehensive are the reasons offered: God's "salvation," glory, deeds, greatness, creative power, splendor, majesty, strength, holiness, sovereignty, and (most of all) for an unjust, often oppressive world, the promise of his righteous judgment and equity.¹

The occasion for this psalm was establishing a more permanent seat of worship, and the introduction of additional and more spiritual services. It is within this understanding of this psalm that we catch a glimpse of

having a higher importance than the occasion of establishing a new, earthly tabernacle.

Finally, the excitement of worship bursts forth from the sanctuary (assumed in v. 8) to include the joyous heavens, the glad earth, the jubilant fields, the wild creatures, and the wind-blown forest, because God comes. Comment is inappropriate; the only fitting response is to join in.

Comment is inappropriate; the only fitting response is to follow Him.

¹ White, R. E. O. (1995). [Psalms](#). In *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Vol. 3, p. 390). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

A Beautiful Thing

A Reflection from Mark 14:6

Written by Patrick Lafferty



Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose, Francisco de Zurbarán, 1633, oil on canvas

It was 2014—the Christmas before my father died. Jedidiah, much smaller and wigglier then, sat with me on the front row of the church I then served. We were there to hear the choir with full orchestra for its annual Advent choral celebration. The lights were low, the candles in full brilliance, the whole ensemble's eyes fixed on the towering conductor.

You live long enough, you can pretty much anticipate what the lineup for a holiday concert will include. But I wasn't prepared for the a capella piece I was to hear. It caught me up short. It brought tears, and to that point I do not remember a song ever having that effect on me.

The piece is by Martin Lauridsen, a professor of composition at the University of Southern California, who was inspired by a painting from the baroque period by a Spanish painter named Zurbarán. To our modern eyes it looks only like still life. To anyone from Zurbarán's period, meaning would've leapt from the canvas.

As you can [hear Lauridsen explain here](#), every element of the painting points to something about Mary the mother of Jesus who then became the subject of the arrangement's text.

*O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile
sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent
Dominum natum,
iacentem in praeseptio!
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Iesum Christum.
Alleluia!*

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the
newborn Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the virgin whose
womb
was worthy to bear
the Lord, Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!*

Beauty is hard to define, it being the province, we're told, of the beholder's eyes. Some call it the moment when the universal is contained in the particular, when something fundamentally real and true is found in the most unexpected and inconsequential places. However we define beauty, it tends to beget more of the same.

It's Mary's life that inspires the beauty of the painting, and the painting, in turn, the beauty of Lauridsen's arrangement. But we see that same cascade in a moment not long before Jesus is arrested.

A woman not his mother enters a home where Jesus is reclining at table. She breaks open an expensive jar of ointment to anoint his feet. Some look on, scandalized by the extravagance. To which Jesus fiercely responds:

Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

What made her extravagance beautiful?

In the era of Zurbarán's painting, the citrons—their texture, color, and luminance perfectly captured in his still-life—were an easter fruit. Whatever kindness Jesus had shown to this woman that she had found beautiful, here in a room in Bethany, she chose to let his beautiful love to her beget her own to him: a sacrificial, loving demonstration of insight into what he would soon suffer on a cruel cross.

Beauty all the way down, from the vulnerability in a manger, to an impromptu moment in a home, to the horror on a tree.

In a recent sermon, we heard Sheldon VanAuken, a friend and colleague of C.S. Lewis, realize that there was a gap between him and faith in Jesus, but also a gap between him and rejection of Jesus. When he conceded there could be no proof of either conclusion, what would lead him to leap the gap into faith?

A choice was necessary: and there is no certainty. One can only choose a side. So I—I now choose my side: I choose beauty; I choose what I love. But choosing to believe is believing. It's all I can do: choose.

During college, when faith was new to me, credibility was everything. Now older, beauty, while it does not supplant my interest in credibility, has nevertheless surpassed it. I think it has to.

That is why I am asking this Advent for another glimpse of Advent's beauty. And I think it is no imposition upon God for you to ask as well.

"If you who are evil," Jesus curiously speaks, "give good things to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give good things to those who ask."

So ask.

I'll Never Be Thirsty Forever

A Reflection from John 4:13-14

Written by Melissa Beggs

Have you ever longed for something so badly that it hurts? For the toddlers of our church family (like my two-year-old) it may be for another two minutes of Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood, a ride on the swing that the other little girl is already enjoying *insert tears of heartbreak*, or for a snug embrace from your mom when you've taken a major tumble. For others of us, its much deeper things: a job to end the joblessness, a spouse to fill the loneliness, a baby to complete the family, to be seen, to be known, or to heal from profound hurt. Whatever it is, we all have thirsts we desire to be quenched within us.



*Click the image above to listen if viewing on a digital device.

Over the last few weeks, I've had the lyrics of the song [*"You Came For Me"*](#) by the [FAITHFUL Project](#) on repeat in the back of my mind (I encourage you to listen before you continue reading). The bridge echoes, "I'll never be thirsty forever, forever. I'll never be thirsty forever, forever." The song is written by a group of women as what they imagine the woman at the well would say in response to her surprising encounter with Jesus. Jesus pursues this woman who has a past I'm sure she herself would describe as shameful and worth hiding, and he says to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:13-14)."

The Son of Man, God wrapped in flesh, answered this woman's longing, longings I assume she didn't even know she had, with something that would satisfy her soul for eternity. The ache in her heart, the dissatisfaction that came with the repeated attempts to fill it with five husbands and another lover, the emptiness that flooded her heart, Jesus stepped in and provided her with Himself forever, forever. He Himself quenched her deepest "spiritual longing to know God personally [and she] will, amazingly, be satisfied

forever (ESV study note)." What Jesus did for this woman at the well all these years ago is what He has done for us, those whom He has chosen, pursued, and redeemed by His blood. He has quenched an eternal longing and satisfied it perfectly, so that we can join in the bridge declaring, "I'll never be thirsty forever, forever."

When our unmet longings this side of heaven sting, when all we can do is cry out in lament, let's urge one another to recall what this baby's coming—who we now celebrate—has won for us in his death and resurrection as we see in Revelation 21:1-6.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"

And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' Also, he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' And he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.'"

Let's lift one another's eyes to what Christ has secured for us in the Gospel, calling one another to live in light of the fact that there will be a day when we no longer have competing desires, when the dwelling place of God will be with man, when it will be done, and we will behold in full glory what it is like to have our spiritual thirst quenched unfettered by the flesh.

Prayer:

Jesus, give us eternal eyes, give us a taste for what will truly satisfy us, and call us to "leave all that [we] know just to go where you go."

He Left Nothing to Chance

A Reflection from Mark 2:17

Written by Patrick Lafferty

In 1492, while Columbus was sailing the ocean blue, two families in Ireland—both the beneficiaries of the peerage system of land and title—were embroiled in a violent conflict over power. The Butlers, of the Earldom of Ormond, and the FitzGerald, of the Earldom of Kildare, had let their longstanding feud give way to a smaller, Irish version of the War of the Roses.

At the height of the murderous feud, Jack Butler, a nephew of the Earl of Ormond, takes refuge in the chapter house of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. He and his men are then surrounded by a contingent of FitzGerald soldiers.

So much blood had been spilled already that Gerald FitzGerald, the premier earl of the clan, comes to the cathedral overwrought by the madness of the conflict. He's come not to smoke Butler out, but to press for peace.

FitzGerald calls through the door of the chapter house for Butler to come out to discuss a truce. Sensing a ploy, Butler refuses. There in the sacred space among bloodthirsty men, an impasse—until FitzGerald makes a most curious move.

He calls for one of his men to chop a hole in the door dividing the two parties. But rather than launch an assault he instead thrusts his own arm—unprotected—through the splintered opening. He extends his open hand, exposing his very body to whatever defensive or opportunistic measures Butler's men might inflict, both to underscore his desire for peace



*Door of Reconciliation,
St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin*

and to validate the integrity of his offer. He knows what he might lose in offering his arm but the peace he sought was worth the risk.

The English have a saying about taking a risk for an unlikely outcome: “chancing one’s arm.” Ascribing the inspiration for the phrase to this dramatic moment in Irish history is more forced than found, but what happened at that door—what came to be known as the “Door of Reconciliation”—could not illustrate the adage more vividly.

But that door was nothing compared to the manger.

The birth of whom we sing, for which we'll gather tonight, and in which we scrounge for joy is God himself

chancing his arm before hostiles that peace might be struck. He came to us as a child, and later styled himself a physician—not mainly to apply a remedy for physical wounds, but to heal that congenital, chronic condition of thinking we belong only to ourselves.

You can't quite say Jesus risked himself for us; He knew where it was all leading. But He did make himself vulnerable on our behalf so that we who resist Him, refuse Him, think Him unable to really answer our deepest fears might still receive and know that “peace on earth with whom He is pleased.”

Given the season we're in, and the longer season we've all been through, it's worth asking: is there anyone in your life who stands on the other side of some metaphorical door of conflict? Someone for whom an issue has become a reason for distance, for avoidance?

On this Christmas Eve, when God came to reconcile us to Himself, and in turn, us to each other, is it time to chance your arm?

Prayer:

Father, wherever I have made *what I differ* over more than *what I share in common*, help me to see – to believe – what you ventured to make me yours. Help me to *love the one with whom I differ* more than the *thing that stands between us*.



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