



Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Luke 2:11-12

Merry Christmas! Today is the day we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Unlike other years where we gather in crowds and fill the churches to celebrate Christ's birth, our celebrations are smaller and quieter this year. However, one thing has not changed in our Christmas celebrations for this year, and it is to examine what is important to us. This pandemic challenged me to deeply examine every aspect of my life even more in my faith journey. During the season of Advent, I tried to deconstruct the definitions of the themes we explore in the season of Advent- hope, peace, joy, and love. I am then reminded of a beautiful picture I saw on social media two years ago.

It is a beautiful portrait of Mary comforting Eve drawn by Sister Grace Remington from the Sisters of Mississippi Abbey. In the garden of Eden, Eve clutches the forbidden fruit in her right hand while the tail of the serpent coils on her ankle. Standing on the opposite side of her is Mary, Jesus' mother, placing one of Eve's hands on Mary's pregnant belly and cradling Eve's face in the palm of her left hand while stamping on the head of the serpent. In this powerful image, I see hope in which Mary reminds Eve that the child in her womb has freed her and humankind from the bondage of sin. I see peace as Mary cradles Eve's face to show her that she is not alone in her bondage. I see joy as two strong female figures who changed the course of humankind in different ways, find strength in each other. More so, I see love because it is Mary's love for God that she is willing to risk her life to give birth to our Savior so that others can feel God's love through him. Therefore, my understanding of these themes of Advent isn't what the world teaches me but what Christ brought to this world and has united us in his act of grace. Therefore, the source of my hope, peace, joy, and love is Christ and I hope that is the case for you too. As children of God, we are assured by the love and grace God has shown us. Therefore, I encourage you to show that love and grace to others in the way Christ has shown us in his life, death, and resurrection. This is how we can truly celebrate Christmas.

Questions for Reflection

1. What does hope, peace, love, and joy mean to you?
2. Are these terms framed by spiritual understanding or a worldly perspective? Is there a way to balance both of these perspectives?
3. Look up the image of Mary comforting Eve. What caught your attention? How does it shape your understanding of Christ's sacred mission on Earth?

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for sending your son who gave his life to save us. Provide for those who are facing all kinds of challenges due to the pandemic and comfort those who have lost loved ones. Guide us in understanding the meaning of hope, peace, love, and joy the way you intended it to be. May we share the love and grace you have shown us through your Son, Jesus, to our neighbors. In your most precious name, we pray, Amen.

Reflection by Vicar Hephzibah Penumaka, Redeemer Lutheran Church, McLean, VA



It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up
and carried them all the days of old.

Isaiah 63:9 (NRSV)

Like so many of us, I look forward to the tradition of Christmas Eve and Christmas morning services. But, for months, in the back of my mind, I've known this Christmas season was going to look and feel different because, maybe more than any other Christmas in my life, there is going to be more sadness and grief this year. Acknowledging my own sadness and grief as we enter into these twelve days has let me experience differently the hope Christ's birth proclaims to our troubled world. His birth, over 2,000 years ago, was a profound act of love, of commitment, of liberation. The exercise of claiming my vulnerabilities coming into this season has allowed me to see the divine light more brightly. It has liberated me from the darkness of ten-months of uncertainty and upheaval and brought me in deeper relationship with God and neighbor. Today's devotional text is a reminder that God, all those years ago, experienced the same vulnerabilities and more, to care for us and save us from the darkness.

Questions for Reflection

1. How are you feeling today?
2. What holds you back from sharing your feelings?
3. How has the gospel helped you embrace your vulnerability?

Prayer

The following prayer is an English translation of the *Tefilat Haderech* or Jewish wayfarer's prayer:

May it be your will, Lord, our God and the God of our ancestors, that you lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace. May you rescue us from the hand of every foe, ambush along the way, and from all manner of punishments that assemble to come to earth. May you send blessing in our handiwork, and grant us grace, kindness, and mercy in your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us. May you hear the sound of our humble request because you are God who hears prayer requests. Blessed are you, Lord, who hears prayer. Amen.

Reflection by Eric Randolph, Seminarian and Candidate from the Metro D.C. Synod



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5 (NRSV)

Tucked behind the Capitol Building and Supreme Court downtown lies my favorite lesser-known museum, the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument. It was the home to the National Woman's Party for over 90 years, it is full of history, stories, and artifacts showcasing the suffragette movement that afforded white women the right to vote. Walking up the staircase there is an original banner that reads: Forward, out of darkness, leave behind the night. Forward out of error, forward into the light. The words struck me the first time I read them and my mind continues to go back to them during trying times; these words seem especially fitting for both the final days of 2020, a year that was truly difficult, and our celebration of Christmas. Christ, our Light, has come into the world through humble means; we are no longer beholden to our past errors because in Christ, through the work of God and the power of the Holy Spirit we are made new every single day. The Christ child, born in Bethlehem, pulls us forward out of error, forward into the light.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is a saying that continually comes back to you? How have those words helped you in difficult times?
2. What does forward look like for you?
3. How can you remember that we are moving forward through Christ, our Light, and that God's mercies are new every day?

Prayer

Loving Creator, You know how hard this year has been because you have been there with us through every stumble and set back. As we look to move forward into the Light that is your son, Jesus Christ, continue to be with us. Remind us that each morning we are made new and our past errors are no more. Be with us this day and always, through Jesus Christ, our Light and Lord, Amen.

Reflection by Alyssa Prinzivalli, Director of Congregational Ministries at King of Kings Lutheran in Fairfax, VA; Endorsed Candidate for Word and Service, Wartburg Seminary



Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you.

Isaiah 35:4

If Jesus was born in the 21st century, today, three days after his birth, would possibly be Mary and Joseph's first full day at home with their first newborn baby. Full disclosure, I am not a parent, but I can only imagine the worry, anxiety, and fear of parents that first day at home out of the hospital. There are no nurses checking in. There is not immediate medical attention if something goes wrong. There is probably a silence that is a little uneasy (besides the crying, of course)! While Mary and Joseph wouldn't have had this experience, the fear of the unknown, the questions of what is to come, would certainly be lingering in their minds. As we turn toward a new year with 2020 behind us, there is good reason to be anxious, worried, and fearful. We are exhausted from living through history. The pandemic continues to rage on. Vaccines are in the works but how will they actually work? There is a transition of power in our politics ahead. As much as we want to believe that we will wake up on January 1, 2021 and all of this will have been a dream (or nightmare), we know that not to be true. So, what is to come? It can be a scary thought. The beauty of Christmas, of this baby who is now only three days old, is that we do not need to fear. In the Christ child comes hope with the proclamation from Isaiah 35, "Here is your God." This baby whom Mary and Joseph surly feared for, despite the multiple angels saying, "Do not fear," is the living, breathing, incarnation of hope, love, grace, and the God who has come and saved you!

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the things you are fearful of in the future?
2. What peace have you found this year?
3. How do you live out your hopefulness over your fearfulness?

Prayer

God of peace rest our hearts and minds this day. Provide us places to put our fear and anxieties about the future so that it may not become a roadblock for a life of hope and peace. We thank you for the peace brought to us through Christ Jesus and pray that we may experience this peace with hearts opened to the world. May we be signs of hopefulness in our communities proclaiming boldly Your gift of peace to all of creation. Amen.

Reflection by Deacon Kenny Champagne, Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Fairfax & Clifton, VA



O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.

Psalm 131

The holidays often bring excitement, lots of activities, and many places to be. This year, much of that usual hustle and bustle has been different as fewer trips were planned and more gatherings took place over Zoom. And yet, a different kind of harried energy has surrounded us this season: our minds busy configuring pandemic holiday logistics, a flurry of online Christmas shopping, perhaps the pressure to try to make Christmas feel “normal.” In these days following Christmas, may your busy mind begin to slow down, to rest, to take a moment to reflect on the heart of this season. The Christ-child does not need a flurry of activity, but desires only your presence. Today, be still. Know that Immanuel dwells with you here, offering rest for weary souls.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the *noise* going on inside you today?
2. What kind of “things too great and marvelous” have you been chasing?
3. Imagine God like a parent: How does sitting in God’s lap bring peace and calm?

Prayer

God of true peace, calm our unruly souls. Help us to quiet our desires, fears, opinions, anxieties, agendas, and irritabilities. Tune our hearts instead to your peace, which meets all our needs, feeds our souls, and renews us each day. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Reflection by Miriam Hanson, Intern at Faith Lutheran Church in Fairfax, VA



But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:8-9 (NRSV)

Two ways that time is expressed in the Bible is through the Greek words *kairos* and *chronos*. *Kairos* is God's time...an appointed/an opportune moment/season in time—quality time. *Chronos* is our human time...a specific amount of time measured in seconds, hours, days, years, decades, millennia—quantity time. I remember as a young girl, my mother would frequently say, “You’ll see—time goes faster and faster as you get older.” Of course, time seemed to move sooooo slow... waiting to be a teenager at 13, earning the coveted driver’s license at 16, finally becoming “legal” at 21. That’s *chronos* time. The year about to end, 2020, has seemed for many people like a thousand years, dragging on and on, one unwelcomed event after another. “When will this year come to an end—2021 must hold hope,” is the frequent comment that has rested upon many hearts. Yet for God, who rules over all time and space, “one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” That’s *kairos* time. The promise that is referred to in 2 Peter is not limited by our quantitative human *chronos* time. God’s promise is a qualitative patience. God patiently waits for us to respond to God’s invitation to embrace God’s love, understanding, compassion, grace. God’s time is infinite in waiting for our season to respond to God’s promise of eternal life...a promise made manifest through the sacrifice of God’s blessed son on the cross.

Questions for Reflection

1. After reading the reflection, how has your perception of time, human versus God’s, changed?
2. What does it mean to you that God is patient, waiting on you and with you?
3. As you practice the meditation, what stirs within you through the inhaling and exhaling?

Prayer

Gracious and tranquil God, as we move into a new year filled with new hope, may we be patient with all Children of God as we experience your patient waiting on us and remember your infinite promise to us all. Amen.

Reflection by Sharon Glass, OSB, Vicar, Christ Lutheran Church, Washington, DC
M.Div. Class of 2022, United Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg, PA



For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

Romans 8:15-17

“Happy New Year!” Those are the words we will shout in just a few short hours. I don’t think I have ever wanted to say those words more. Saying goodbye to 2020 and hello to a brand new year seems promising. For many of us, it is hard to put into words all that we have experienced in 2020. At times, I felt like I was one of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. Those things that often make me feel safe, comfortable, and secure, were ripped away, and I found myself in places of tremendous discomfort, insecurity, and vulnerability. Yet, I wonder if what I experienced this year, and maybe what we all have experienced, is part of what it really means to be truly human; to find ourselves both dependent on others and one upon whom others depend. Can you imagine how 40 years of this might shape humanity for generations to come? Perhaps, in this frightening thought is what it means to move beyond a spirit of fear and into one of adoption. As we discover our interconnectedness, we become participants in an inheritance far beyond anything we alone can imagine. Waves of liberation, redemption, and renewal come because we stand on the promises of the One and ones with whom we are heirs. Romans 8:15-17 states, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” Pause and let those statements sink in for a moment. Read them again if needed.

Questions for Reflection

1. What does it mean to receive the spirit of adoption? How does this cast out fear?
2. Paul shifts from singular to plural, stating we cry “Abba! Father!”. How does this reflect our interconnectedness and interdependency?
3. What does it mean for us to be co-heirs with Christ, receiving the same inheritance and rewards which Christ deserves? How might this push us beyond fear towards participation?

Prayer

God of liberation and freedom, free us from the shackles of fear and wrap us in your promise of perfect love. Grant us courage to participate in the unfolding Kingdom that surrounds us. As we are swept off our feet, may we rest assured knowing that the One who has always carried us still holds onto us today. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, we pray. Amen.

Reflection by Garrett Wolf, Mission Developer | Pastor, King of Kings Lutheran Church



If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Philippians 2:1-7

I like to make New Year's resolutions, even though some people say it's an arbitrary tradition that doesn't result in real change. The beginning of a new year, in this season of Christmas, is a wonderful time to give thanks for the gifts we've been given, contemplate our world, and start fresh. With trouble-filled 2020 behind us, I am filled with hopeful anticipation of all that 2021 could bring if we could allow the Spirit to truly live in us and overflow into our daily lives. When Jesus took the form of a human, he emptied himself for our sake – for my sake, for your sake – and called us likewise to serve. Can we, following Jesus' example, empty ourselves for the sake of others? Today seems a good day to start. How will 2021 look if we do?

Questions for Reflection

1. Did you make a New Year's resolution? In what ways does it mirror Christ's humility and love?
2. What does it mean to "empty oneself" for others, and how can we practice this?

Prayer

Loving God, you emptied yourself to become human, your only thought and sole purpose to reconcile yourself to us. Help us to model this humility and love, resolving not to promote and serve our own needs but those of others. May 2021 be a year of love and reconciliation, of healing and wellness, of mended hearts and friendships, and may we be your instruments of peace. In Christ, Amen.

Reflection by Seminarian Cate Florenz



Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James 3:13-18 (NRSV)

Do you ever think about what makes a person wise? We often have ideas on what makes someone wise. Maybe it is someone who wears glasses or someone with a head full of gray hair? Or maybe someone wise has a wall covered in framed academic degrees or is it someone with a big library at home? James challenges us to demonstrate what we claim to have. He tells us that wisdom is not purely intellectual knowledge, but it is also our associated behavior. The wisdom that comes from God will be seen in our good behavior.

Questions for Reflection

1. What damage can bitter envy do to you? What about selfish ambition?
2. What kind of well-meaning advice might lead you to feeling jealous and envious?
3. In what way can we help each other to be wise?

Prayer for Deeper Knowledge of God

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Prayer Book for the Armed Services, page 57, © Augsburg Fortress, 2013

Reflection by Michael Sonnenberg, Seminarian Candidate from the Metro D.C. Synod and Administrative Assistant for ELCA Federal Chaplaincy Ministry



All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Matthew 1:22-23

God is with us. I do not know about you, but the idea that God is with us is a particularly challenging message to hear in these times. Amidst the bleakness and difficulties of the past nine months, seeing God at work in our world has become tough. Where is God when countless people suffer from a global pandemic? Where do we see God in the conflicts that plague our world?

Today’s scripture shows us one way in which God responds to these questions. In a world similarly filled with suffering, hardship, and death, God chose to incarnate God’s self in a baby born to a virgin on the edges of an empire. Despite seemingly-impossible circumstances, God entered the world as the embodiment of weakness and vulnerability.

In naming this baby “Emmanuel,” meaning “God is with us,” this scripture reminds us that there is no circumstance too challenging for God to appear among us. To see God we must look beyond our conceptions of what is possible and what is not. Just as we see in this story, we must look to those considered weak, to the vulnerable, and to those who are marginalized to fully see God in our world. As we look for God in these unexpected places and unexpected people, we can better understand how God accompanies us as a source of comfort, strength, and challenge as we encounter difficulties and suffering.

God is with us. Let us look for God beyond what we know and what comforts us.

Questions for Reflection

1. How have you felt God’s presence over the past nine months? Where have you seen God at work in the actions of others?
2. Who are the weak and vulnerable of today’s world among whom God appears? How can you begin or continue looking for God in unexpected people and places?

Prayer

Good and gracious God, we give you thanks. We thank you for your reminder that you are with us through all challenges and difficulties. Help us to better see you at work in our neighbors and walk with us as we look for you beyond what we think is possible. Give us faith to recognize your presence in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors, so that we might continue to live into your call to love you and love one another. Amen.

Reflection by Adam Fairchild, recent graduate of the University of Maryland in College Park; Served as synodical intern last semester; Will begin M.Div. studies in Fall 2021



Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:18-19

We are four days into a new year. A new year is often met with commitments made to ourselves or others, or a feeling of hope in the promise of new opportunities. This year, much like most of 2020, it may be hard to know what will happen in a week, let alone in a month or more. For some, it might feel difficult to make commitments or set goals that would've been set in the past. For others, it's hard to find hope, and if hope is found, it spurs from the chance of "going back to normal" or "back to the way things were." While it's easy to find reassurance in what is known, God reminds us in the verses from Isaiah to not get caught up in our past or our old ways. God calls on us to recognize God's work in creating a new way forward, not back. As our country moves closer to a vaccine, and God willing an end to this pandemic, it becomes easier to slip back into the things of old, especially for those of us who benefit from our current system. This is when we need to find community in one another to hold each other accountable to stick to the new paths God is calling us walk. Paths that lead us to addressing the injustices we witness, and bringing our loved ones on the journey with us. Working towards a country where all people can find justice and hope.

Questions for Reflection

1. How are we holding ourselves accountable to continue working for racial justice?
2. How are we bringing our communities along with us in this journey?
3. What practices or actions could help us from slipping back into the old ways of the past?

Prayer

Loving God, walk with us on our journey into this new year. Give us the strength to keep moving and to not get stuck in the trap of what is easy or comfortable. Guide us as we work to address the injustices of this world. Amen.

Reflection by Katie Evans, Metro D.C. Synod Administrative Assistant for Mobility & Candidacy



When they saw him, they related what they had been told about this child, and all who heard it were astonished at what the shepherds said. But Mary treasured up all these words, pondering in her heart what they might mean.

Luke 2:17-19 (NET Bible)

At the time of Jesus's birth, there was a lot going on. His parents made the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem; there was no guest room for them, so the baby was born in a stable. Then a group of shepherds come to see the baby and share what they had been told about who this child was. His mother, who had already been told by an angel that this baby was "Son of the Most High" was now hearing other people tell her what they understood about what had happened in this place. She listened and treasured what she was experiencing. She does more than remember, though – through everything, she's trying to understand what all this means! In our own lives at Christmas, life often becomes a whirl of work, holiday music, preparation, and celebration. "Doing the holidays" may also be a source of stress and sadness. This truly amazing year has forced us to approach the season differently. We have an opportunity that perhaps we don't always get to reflect on just what it means that this little infant was born; a chance to reflect on how God comes to us as the weakest of all human beings; a chance to think on what that means we must do to help nurture and grow this gift that we are given from God's own self.

Questions for Reflection

1. Imagine yourself as Mary hearing the words of the shepherds. What do you feel?
2. What in particular about the Christmas Story do you treasure in your heart?
3. Howard Thurman wrote that after "shepherds are back with their flock / The work of Christmas begins." How does the Christmas story inspire you to live and love day to day?

Prayer

Gracious God, we are so often surrounded by sights, sounds, and activity that can overwhelm us, and divert our attention away from you and your abounding love. In these times, when we are not able to be with family and friends as we would like to be, turn our thoughts to you and your love. Remind us of the love you showed to us and let us be inspired to live in that love with the world around us. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Reflection by Alex Stall, Seminarian and Candidate from the Metro D.C. Synod