DEVOTIONAL



A THRILL of HOPE

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WHAT TO EXPECT

DEVOTIONAL



Advent–Epiphany, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary)

Advent begins in a weary world, fractured by division and despair. Yet across generations, humanity has clung to the hope of restoration, and God continues to draw near. The Messiah has saved us, is saving us, and will save us. Suffering is not the final word.

As we journey through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, we watch for God's saving work all around us: healing where there is hurt, courage where there is fear, hope where there is despair. The miracle of Immanuel did not end in Bethlehem. The thrill of hope persists.

Whether you're using *A Thrill of Hope* on your own, with your family, or with your church, it's here to help you pause, reflect, and reconnect with that radical hope. Feel free to adapt it in whatever way works best for you.

Devotional

Spend time each week reading the scripture and reflection. Ponder the provided questions or discuss them with someone in your home or your community. We hope this resource gently guides you through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany—creating space for reflection, connection, and meaning along the way.

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I

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOPE

How do we recognize God's saving work?



Fig. 1—Jesus teaches the disciples

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

KEEP AWAKE



Scripture: Mark 13:24–37

My friend awoke at three o'clock in the morning. As soon as she opened her eyes, her vision flooded with brilliant orange light. She was immediately irritated, deciding to climb out of bed to give a piece of her mind to whoever had the nerve to be messing around with those bright lights at that hour. As she slid her feet into her slippers, her other senses rallied, and she realized she was hearing more noise than usual at that time of night—crackling, crumbling. And she was smelling—*what was she smelling?*—smoke!

I saw her at noon that same day, only because another friend bumped into her and texted me: "I'm at the deli and just saw Rosie. She said her house burned down last night. She's here in her pajamas."

I headed to the deli and found her seated at an outdoor table, together with her sister who had come in from the nearby town where she lives. Small cups of cold pasta and lentil salads sat on the table between them, barely touched. I pulled up a chair. My friend told the pieces of the story she could: a roommate, a cookout, a grill in the shed still holding a lot of heat . . . Maybe? The details were fuzzy. It was all so new, and still unbelievable. Nobody was hurt. She thanked God for that. Everything was destroyed, but nobody was hurt. She wasn't interested in blaming the roommate.

She'd already decided she'd go live at her sister's house for a little while. Needing to feel useful, I told her whenever she was ready, I could get the word out. I was sure I could gather sheets and towels, pots and pans, chairs and tables, books and board games, spices and cupboard staples, from all the people who loved her.

She smiled at my certainty. She kindly told me what I should have already known: she was not even close to being ready to think about setting up a new household. She hadn't even begun to grieve her old one.

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In this week's reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells his friends to pay attention to what happens "after the suffering." Reality is different, he tells them, after suffering. What was once ordinary becomes strange. What once felt solid and dependable now threatens to shift or give way. There is something else on the other side of suffering—something that may even have been impossible before. That doesn't explain or excuse the suffering. It is just true. My friend said, "I had been needing to do something new."



Fig. 1.2—Flowers

She didn't say, "Everything happens for a reason," or "God won't give me anything I can't handle," or "Every time God closes a door, somewhere . . ." She didn't try to minimize or romanticize or theologize her suffering. She just recognized that—in addition to everything else this fire did—it meant she would be doing something new.

Years ago, I was hiking with my family in Glacier National Park and asked a ranger about the delicate pink flowers all around us, their long, thin stems reaching tall from the dark soil. He identified the plant as fireweed. Bees and butterflies and hummingbirds are attracted to it, he told us. It blooms in disturbed settings. The area we were exploring was so beautiful, he explained, because wildfires had raged there a few months earlier.

After the suffering, something new. A field of pink petals. An eruption of these blossoms used in honeys, teas, and medicines. A gentle habitat to which creatures can return. A promise that life persists.

"I had been needing to do something new," my friend said. She does not know yet what that will be. She is paying attention, keeping awake, to what will reveal itself in the aftermath of suffering. She is grateful for the salvation coming her way in the shape of tangible kindnesses: a prayer shawl knit by her church; a check from the Red Cross to buy new clothes; donations tucked into cards gathered from friends; a ukulele from the group she plays with to replace the one lost, like everything else, in the fire.

We all have been needing to do something new—to look honestly at the suffering that surrounds us—that of our own making, and that which comes, despite anything we might do or not do. To be faithful today means to confess our role in creating the conditions which keep some folks at the mercy of chaos; to hold fast to our commitments as disciples of the nonviolent, revolutionary Jesus; to keep vigil and to keep working for the world of peace and justice trying desperately to be born among us. Even amidst uncertainty and suffering, may we trust that world is on its way.

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QUESTIONS

1. What are some uncertainties you are living with in this moment? What about your family, or your community—what uncertainties are you carrying together?
2. In what ways has struggle opened up something new in your life or in your community?
3. When you have suffered, in what form(s) has salvation come to you?
4. Where in your own life do you feel called to try something new? Where in our communal life do you pray and work for newness?
5. What is a hope you carry this Advent season?

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II

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

PEACE

How do we prepare the way for God's saving work?



Fig. 2—John the Baptizer

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SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

PREPARE THE WAY



Scripture: Mark 1:1–8

When Immigration and Customs Enforcement began to show up in nearby towns, my own town sprang into action. A local organization that serves folks likely to be targeted put out a call for a strategizing meeting at their office. On the day of the meeting, organizers frantically texted everyone who had RSVP'd to inform them of a last-minute location change; more people were registering than their space could hold!

Once we packed into the new room, the organizers briefed attendees on the situation. They let us know when ICE had been active in Oregon and where. They described the encounters that had been made public so far. They showed pictures of dark, unmarked SUVs, of plain-clothed men with face masks, of the apartment complex in a neighboring town that had seen a lot of activity.

Then they invited all attendees to gather around tables based on the part of the plan we thought we could contribute to: communication, transportation, shelter, food, emergency needs. Each table had a clipboard with a sign-up sheet. We spoke our names aloud to our tablemates as we recorded them on the paper and shared what resources, information, or suggestions we could offer the group.

I sat at the shelter table. I recognized a few other faces, but there were lots of folks at this meeting I didn't know. The not-knowing was exciting (look how many people are coming out to support the community!) and nerve-wracking (how do we know we can trust everyone here?). I hated how the circumstances made me suspicious of strangers.

We brainstormed churches we thought would open their doors to individuals and families needing sanctuary. We discussed the community center and the library as possible host sites. We wondered if private homes might be the safest, most discreet option, and some folks at the table offered their guest rooms for the list we were compiling. We elected a table captain,

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and the next week, she called each of us to set individual meetings and follow up on our ideas.

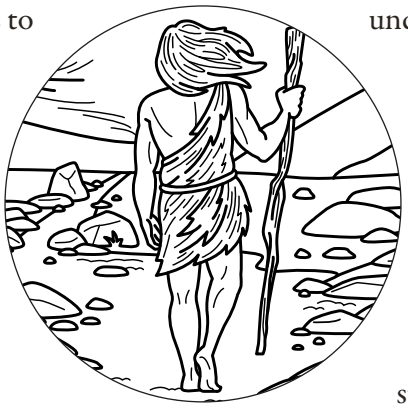


Fig. 2.2—The Baptizer

A lot was accomplished at that initial gathering. The urgency of the moment snapped us to attention. We understood we weren't building an infrastructure for a hypothetical "someday"—we were setting up safety nets that might be needed tomorrow. The situation was dire. And we were led through each session methodically, emphasizing at every step how we can help each other weather this storm.

As the meeting ended, the energy was high. People shared words of appreciation with the organizers. A spontaneous round of applause broke out for the facilitators. Attendees offered short testimonies about the good work the organization had already quietly been doing to educate and rally the community. The organizers smiled but refused to take credit. Their role was that of John the Baptist: voices in the wilderness, preparing the way. They were not bringing salvation. They were inviting people to join a communal effort to care for and protect and save one another.

We didn't exit the doors of that meeting and step into the streets to rescue vulnerable people from abuses of power. The goal—in that moment—wasn't rescue, but deepened connection and understanding that together made way for more dignity, more justice, and more possibility. The goal—in the long term—is the re-making of the world, so all powers are life-giving and all abuse is ended. What we worked at together that evening was the making straight of a path, so when we are called upon to support one another, the way will be easier to travel.

Long ago, John welcomed his community to the river for a baptism of repentance—a *metanoia*, a turning away from self-centeredness and a turning toward all others, toward God's peace, toward the fullness of shalom for all the earth. The turning is connected to the path-making, John tells his friends. The baptismal waters symbolize our commitment to cleanse ourselves of all that blocks the path to peace: the fear that compels cooperation with empire; the despair that degrades our trust and our hope; the lack of imagination that makes violence seem inevitable.

As we begin to shift, we make space for the world trying to be born. As we begin to orient our lives around God's promises, ways and hearts and minds that have been closed begin to open. A thrill of hope sneaks in, dancing before us, transforming our Advent waiting into way-making.

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QUESTIONS

1. Has someone ever "made a way" for you? What did that involve?
2. How have you been part of efforts to "make a way" for others?
3. If you've been baptized, what does remembering that moment now mean to you? If you have or haven't been baptized, what are other moments, scriptures, stories, or songs that remind you of your belonging to God and your place in God's kin(g)dom?
4. How are you hearing John's call to change your heart, or your mind, this season? Is there something you're invited to turn away from, in order to turn towards God's peacemaking work?
5. What prayer for peace are you saying this Advent season?

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III

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

JOY

How do we recognize signs of God's presence among us?



Fig. 3—Jesus among the crowds

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THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

AMONG YOU STANDS ONE



Scripture: John 1:6–8, 19–28

Over the summer, I had the privilege of participating as a driver in the caravan taking high schoolers from our hometown to their camp at the foot of the mountains where they would spend the week. My car held four boys. We piled blankets and pillows high on the lap of the one who claimed the front passenger seat. The other three squeezed into the back, shifting constantly, trying in vain to figure out a reasonably comfortable arrangement for their six long legs and giant feet.

For the two hours in the car, they chatted about last year's teachers and test scores; next year's course schedules and team rosters; cross country camp and tennis pre-season workouts; which of the Star Wars and Spider-Man movies are any good, and which are full of "fan service"; who they were cheering for to take it all in the World Cup.

Once we had passed through the more familiar territory and turned onto the road they only travel when they're going to camp, the conversation shifted in that same direction. Two of the boys had attended this same camp since they were small. One had been three times. One was coming for his first summer camp, though he'd come to the winter retreat held there in February.

The two who had been attending for so many years had a text thread going with camp friends from other towns, so the other two started asking who would be there.

"Is Dylan coming?"

"Yeah, Dylan's coming. Not until Tuesday, though, because camp overlaps with his family's vacation."

"What about Lucas?"

"Lucas'll be there."

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"Kyle?"

"Not this year. Honestly, I'm kinda relieved. I think his girlfriend is mad at me, because I just broke up with her best friend, so, like . . . that could have been awkward."

"Andre?"

"Yes! He missed last year, remember, and he said he's never missing again."

"Oh, Caleb! Is Caleb coming?"

At the mention of Caleb's name, the car went wild. Caleb is, I came to learn, everyone's favorite guy at camp. He is the best soccer player any of them have ever met. He is funny and smart and kind. He brings giant bags of candy and shares generously with his cabin mates.

"Oh, you guys, though . . . Caleb is bringing a friend this year."

The car fell silent. They weren't sure what to think. Would Caleb still hang out with them? Would they like this new guy? Finally, they settled on any friend of Caleb's is a friend of theirs. This friend must be cool, because Caleb IS SO COOL.

I wonder if this car conversation about camp friends was anything like what was happening with the Pharisees when John the Baptist came on the scene. John was a new guy, strange and unknown,

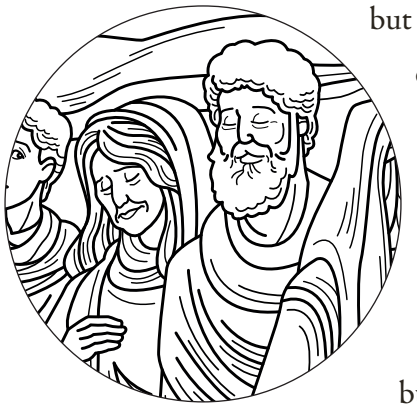


Fig. 3.2—The crowd

but something in the way he talked sounded familiar. I've tended to read this story as though the Pharisees are suspicious of John, but I wonder: could we imagine them as curious instead? Could we imagine the Pharisees approaching John not with accusations, but with eagerness? Could we imagine this scene not as an interrogation, but something more like a celebration, a reunion where everybody is just trying to figure out who's who?

"What did you say your family's name is? 'Cause you look just like my Great-Grandpa Elijah!"

"So, I never got the chance to meet my Uncle Isaiah, he was generations ago, but my family still quotes him. You know, you sound a lot like him when you talk . . ."

"You're sure you've never been here before? I could swear I've seen you. What was your name again? John . . . that's right. I'll remember this time."

"Oh, John?! You guys, this is the one Nathaniel was telling us about! Come on over, man—any friend of Nathaniel's is a friend of ours."

What if this is a joyful scene?

John is a prophet. It's been a long time since this community has known a prophet, and at least some of them would likely have welcomed him with open

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arms. A prophet is a sign of God's presence with the people, a promise God has not forgotten them. Imagine the joy the people experienced in recognizing God's continuing faithfulness.

And John tells them he's coming with good news: there's someone else, coming right on his heels, who they're going to want to meet. John has come, he tells his new friends, to introduce Jesus. Jesus comes from the heart of God. Can you imagine the Pharisees' curiosity, their eagerness, when they hear John's testimony about Jesus?

Can you imagine a world where, every time we meet a new friend or reconnect with an old one, we celebrate joyfully, recognizing each one as beloved kin, each one as a revelation of God's heart?

QUESTIONS

1. What is difficult about meeting new people? What is wonderful about it?
2. Try reading this scripture out loud a few times, using different tones of voice for the characters—suspicious, curious, or excited. What difference does the tone make to your understanding of the story?
3. Reflect on a time you have been eagerly, joyfully welcomed, or a time you have worked hard to eagerly, joyfully welcome someone else.
4. Who has shared good news with you? What do you remember about that encounter?
5. How are you experiencing joy this Advent season?

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IV

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LOVE

How do we participate in God's story of salvation?



Fig. 4—Mary's encounter with the Angel

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LET IT BE WITH ME



Scripture: Luke 1:26–38

Did you know, as artists have depicted this scene over the centuries, they've imagined the angel Gabriel came to Mary as she was reading? Several paintings of the "Annunciation to Mary" include this detail. Other common elements include white lilies (a symbol of purity) either in a vase or the angel's hand; a bird, sometimes a dove or a pigeon, to symbolize the Holy Spirit; Mary's hands visible in a gesture of response that in some paintings looks like openness, in some, more like resistance. In some of these paintings, God is portrayed as an old white man with a long gray beard sitting on a cloud in the sky, leaning forward, looking down, as if to check up on the scene. And in painting after painting, Mary has an open book in her hand, or propped on a stand next to her.

The book is meant to symbolize her faithfulness. She's been reading scripture, some suggest. Maybe she was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Maybe even the verse that many will connect to her: *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.* The historical improbability doesn't seem to concern these artists. Mary likely would not have known how to read; she wouldn't have had the opportunity to learn. But these aren't doctored photographs to try and convince us something happened; they're imaginative paintings, aiming to convey what it all meant.

I think about my own kids, who had favorite books even before they learned to read for themselves. They wouldn't be able to decipher the words out of context, but when we turned to the final page of *Go, Dog. Go!*, they knew what was happening with all those animals up in the tree—"a dog party!" They knew on the page of *Jamberry* where the boy and the bear are traveling in the train cars piled high with berries, the words that follow "trainberry, trackberry" are the delightful "clickety-clackberry." They knew exactly what *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* ate, in what order, before his transformation into a beautiful butterfly.

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Maybe she couldn't read, but I wonder if Mary might have known her scripture that well. If she knew, when she heard her father begin the evening prayer, how it would end. If, when other women came to visit her mother and talked about their struggles, Mary could finish their sentences when one began to quote a Psalm to comfort the other.

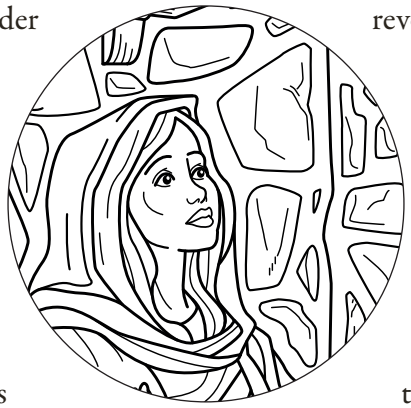


Fig. 4.2—Mary meets the angel

I wonder if Mary had favorite passages—maybe, as a young woman, she often thought of the Isaiah verse about the miracle that comes to the world through the young woman. I wonder if—in addition to the awe and confusion and terror that might also have been there when she heard the angel's invitation—she felt a thrill of hope at those words, recognizing herself as part of a long-ago promise coming true.

Knowing the history and scriptures of her tradition, Mary would have understood that the angel's message was extraordinary, but not out of character for God. The Hebrew Bible is filled with stories of ordinary people who take on social, political, and theological work because of their encounters with God's faithfulness: Hagar names "the God who sees" in the wilderness, even in her despair; Moses leads the people to liberation, despite his uncertainty about his qualifications; Hannah sings the revolutionary song on which Mary's is based, in celebration of her own unlikely pregnancy. Each of them trusted in God and still found themselves incredulous at the idea that God was paying attention to them, witnessing their struggle, and calling them to participate in God's work of remaking the world in love.

Even when we imagine ourselves as characters in the stories we read—following Jack and Annie from their treehouse in Frog Creek to ancient civilizations; joining Percy Jackson on a mythic quest; fighting for our district alongside Katniss Everdeen—we tend to keep some distance, always aware our exercise is a creative one, separate from reality. But God's imagination includes us all as participants in the story of salvation. God's creativity gathers ordinary people and offers us roles to play in the coming-true of what we once thought were tales from long ago and far away. God's salvation continues to unfold in our world, wherever hungry people's bellies are filled, exploitative powers are turned on their heads, those disenfranchised have their dignity recognized, and all of us come to know our own belovedness. As we retell Mary's story this Advent, may we, too, come to know the story that's ours to tell, of how God has been faithful to us and how God is still loving the world into abundant life.

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QUESTIONS

1. What's a story you like to imagine yourself as a character in?
2. What do you wonder about Mary? What would you ask her if she were here?
3. Reflect on a time when love—for God, or a friend, or a family member—inspired you to say "yes" to something big, even if you didn't know how it would turn out.
4. Who's an "ordinary" person you know that has helped make extraordinary things happen?
5. What's a story of love unfolding in your community this Advent season?

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V

CHRISTMAS

How does God bring salvation through community?

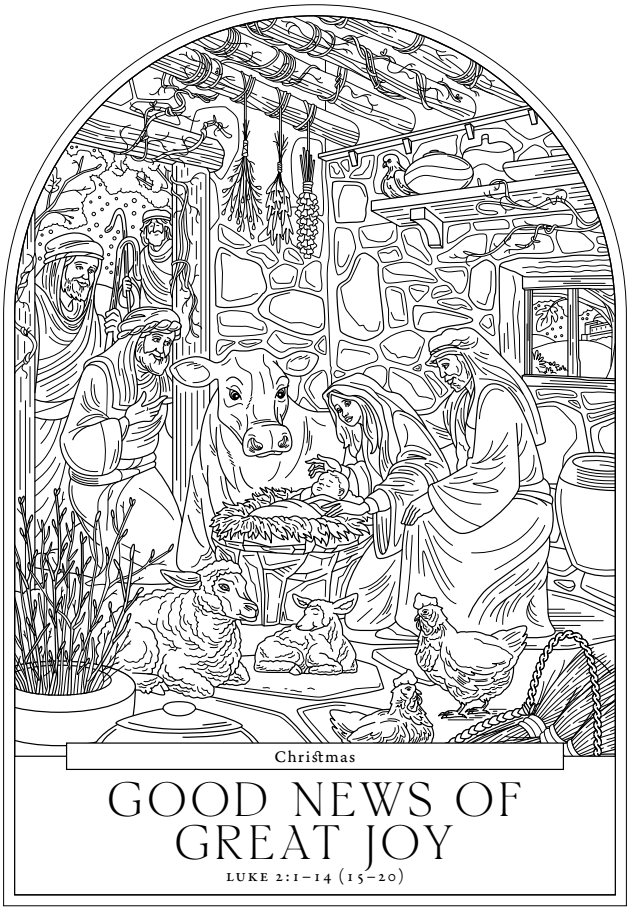


Fig. 5—The baby Jesus

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CHRISTMAS

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY



Scripture: Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

We waited in line for an hour to make sure we could get enough seats together for all the assorted relatives. We listened to the endless strains of *Pomp and Circumstance* as the class of 2026 filed onto the football field. We heard stories of struggle and overcoming, in both English and Spanish. The teachers alternated reading the names of the 570 graduates, who, at the end, tossed their caps high in the air in celebratory tradition. After parents with cameras and crushes with roses flooded the field to swoop up their graduates in giant hugs and let them go again to find their friends, we made our way to Third Street to wait for the bus parade.

It was my first time, but that made sense to me because Oscar was my first graduate. I soon learned that having a kid on the bus is in no way a prerequisite for coming to the parade. Tickets to the ceremony are limited, but anybody can show up and cheer as the buses pass through downtown before driving on to the top-secret location of the school-sponsored Grad Night party.

We found our friends outside the ice cream shop. The younger siblings broke away with a hacky sack. All of us parents hugged, laughed, and cried. We'd made it through the ceremony. Our kids had their diplomas. They had accomplished something big. So had we.

As we waited, someone said this was the favorite assignment of every bus driver in town; they negotiate with each other over who will get the honors. Could that be right? The job didn't begin until nine o'clock at night, lasting until the sun came up the next morning. The buses would be rowdy, loud, and travel far away. But when the first of them rounded the corner, and the street erupted in applause, I knew it must be true.

The buses proceeded according to a self-imposed two-mile-an-hour speed limit; they inched forward down the street. But that was the only safe way to move, because each one

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carried about eighty teenage bodies hanging from the waist up out of the windows. They waved and cheered—for themselves, but maybe also for this town that raised them, that had come out to celebrate them.

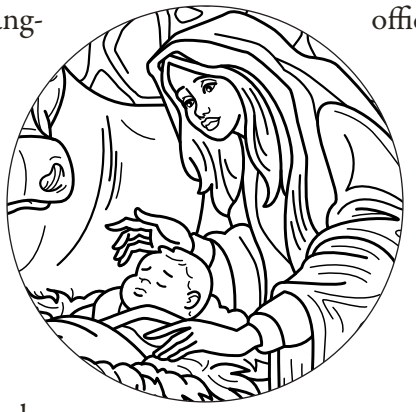


Fig. 5.2—The baby Jesus

The drivers laid their hands on their horns and did not let up. They flashed their hazard lights. They revved their engines. They had so much fun.

We recognized our son's friends, called out their names. His face appeared in the crowd of all of them hanging out the window. What was on those faces? Elation? Jubilation?

I can't tell him this, but I think the feeling on the streets came close to matching the one on the buses. We cheered for our kids, for the future. People carried balloons, waved banners, and blew bubbles. They yelled: "Way to go!" "Congratulations!" "You did it, Grizzlies!" Every once in a while, a parent would spot their own kid and call out, "I love you!" or shout, "I'm so proud of you!" Those intimate words would almost get drowned out in the noise of revving engines and honking horns and other exclamations, but not quite.

I spotted a friend. I knew her children had both graduated years ago. I wondered if she had nieces or nephews, if there were kids who interned at her office. She waved, and I called over the heads separating us, "Hey! Who are you here for?" Grinning, throwing her arms open wide as if to embrace the crowd, she said, *"I am here for all of these wonderful people and all of their wonderful children!"*

I looked again at the crowd. I didn't know everyone, but it was clear they weren't all parents. I started asking strangers why they were there. "Do you have a graduate in your family?" Many did. But I got a lot of other answers, too. "No, we just live close to downtown and this is a favorite event of ours. We walk over every year." "No, but some kids I used to babysit are graduating this year, can you believe it? So I'm here for them." "We're visiting, actually, from out of town, but heard that this was happening, and wanted to come be part of it." "I don't have kids, but—this is my town, you know? We're all family here."

It was a fascinating, if imprecise, survey. Folks had come for so many reasons. Some with eighteen-year connections to those graduates on the buses, some who just wanted to add their cheers to the cacophony rising from the streets. I felt a twinge of regret that this was my first year at the parade. It was almost a Christmas story, all of those strangers like angels, shepherds, wise ones—gathering around,

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celebrating the joy of new life, putting our hope in the promise of a future yet unknown, trusting that our cheering might help bring it into being.

QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on a time you joined with your friends, family, or community to make something wonderful happen.
2. How have people supported you or cheered you on?
3. What do you think the shepherds talked about on their way to find Mary, Joseph, and Jesus? What do you think they talked about on their way back home?
4. If salvation is a communal event, not just an individual one, what does that make you wonder about? What does it make you hope for?
5. Where, or how, did you feel the strength of your community this Advent season?

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VI

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER
CHRISTMAS

How do we recognize God's saving work in difficult times?

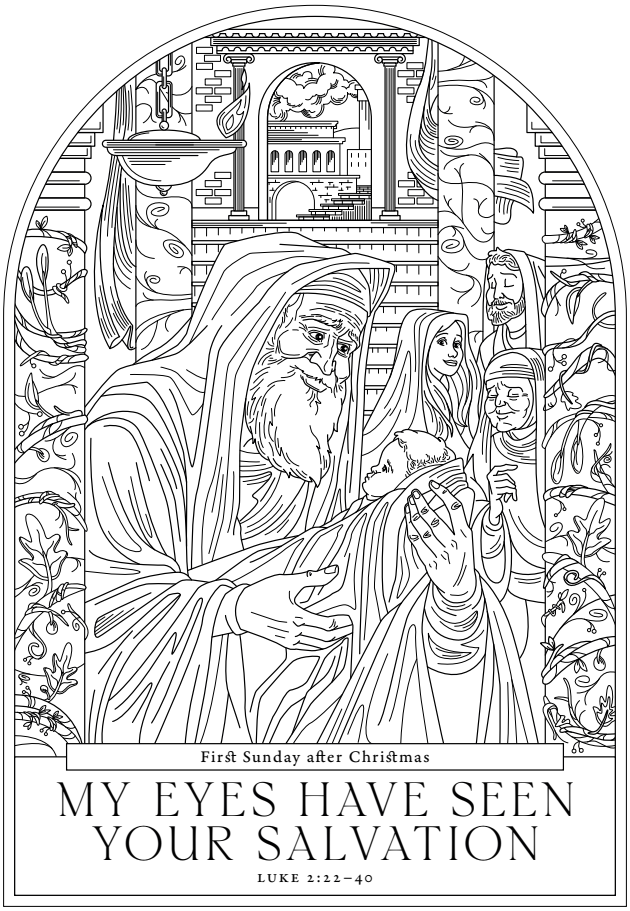


Fig. 6—Anna & Simeon

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FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION



Scripture: Luke 2:22–40

When I was a brand-new pastor at the church I've now been at for a decade, someone told me at the beginning of a Sunday service, "We need to sing 'happy birthday' to Juliet today." I remember just looking at them blankly. I hadn't yet met Juliet. It's not a giant church, but it's not small. Would we be singing 'happy birthday' every Sunday? Was this a ritual that is meaningful to people here? Do people identify themselves, or would it be my role as pastor to come every Sunday with a list of those celebrating?

I didn't ask any of those questions out loud, but the person saw my overwhelm beginning to rise and quickly, kindly explained: "We're singing to Juliet because she turns 106 today. We've been singing to her every year on her birthday since she turned 100." Ah. I breathed a sigh of relief. This seemed much more manageable.

Juliet lived to be 109. I got to know her a bit in her last years. She was a funny, faithful woman who had seen endless change. She witnessed major cultural shifts; danced to more varieties of music than I can name; mourned multiple wars; and chose to let the pace of technological change pass her by. She celebrated and delighted in her family and community as they grew. She outlived some of her own grandchildren. She didn't understand it. Once, when I visited her, she was agitated, sitting up in bed. When she saw me, she threw her hands in the air and said, "I'm still here! God, why am I still here?" Her cry was part wonder, part anguish.

I was always impressed that—even with three children, seven grandchildren, 21 great-grandchildren, and 18 great-great-grandchildren of her own—Juliet knew my two kids and called them by their names every time she saw them. I learned that in her younger years, she and her husband had spent time each week hanging out at the community pool, watching and playing with children so their mothers could swim without worry. She still knew all those kids by name, too, and greeted them around town now as adults. I came to know some of those adults. Their memories of that time were vague, but they were honored and amazed

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at how this matriarch could recognize them now, 50 years later, in a grocery store aisle or at the park. They were astonished at how she could greet, or ask about, their grown children by name, too.



Fig. 6.2—Simeon

Her recognition was not just impressive, though it certainly was that. It was also a gift to each person she remembered, each person she called by name. It was good for her: her acknowledgment kept her connected to her community and rooted in relationship. And it was so good for each of those kids, whatever their ages now, to be noticed and named and known by her. She had seen so much in her lifetime, and she saw them, still.

Did Simeon and Anna know the gift they were giving Mary and Joseph when they saw Jesus, when they focused their attention and their words on him? These elders who had seen so much change, who had endured so much conflict, were able to look beyond all of that and into the eyes of this tiny baby, into the souls of these new parents, and claim them all as beloved kin, as fellow laborers in the work for the liberation of all people. They didn't forget about the trouble of the world or the trouble facing their own community, but as they met this family, they understood and proclaimed that God was with them.

They said more, too. Simeon named his peace but also prophesied pain and piercing hurt; Anna sang to those searching for the redemption of their people. These aren't typical baby blessings. They are complicated and must have left their hearers—Mary and Joseph and any other temple-goers within earshot—with complicated reactions. Yet even with the recognition of all that might be hard, of the heartbreak that would surely meet them, this scene bears witness to the Advent promises coming true.

In this new birth, and every time we say yes to new beginnings, we find a thrill of hope.

In this proclamation of God's faithful presence, even in the midst of struggle: we know a deep and abiding peace.

In the wonder of the makeshift community that continues to gather around the Christ child, and every time we open ourselves to wonder and community: we encounter profound joy.

In the giving of ourselves to one another, and in the blessing of each other as we give: we share the love that makes each of us and all things whole.

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QUESTIONS

1. If you had been in the temple and overheard Simeon and Anna offer these words to, or about, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, what questions would you have—for any of them?
2. How has an elder blessed you, or your family, or your community?
3. What is a hope you carry for someone(s) younger than you?
4. How has your community experienced God's presence in the midst of struggle?
5. What is one way you can help bring comfort to someone, or participate alongside others in a process of liberation, this season?

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VII

EPIPHANY

How is God revealing salvation in the world around us?



Fig. 7—The journey of the magi

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EPIPHANY

ANOTHER ROAD



Scripture: Matthew 2:1–12

Last year, my younger son, a sophomore, participated in a German-American exchange program with a dozen other students from his school. Our families each hosted German students who visited the United States for a few weeks, and two months later, the students from my son's class went to Germany, staying with their new friends in their families' homes.

When our student arrived, he came bearing gifts. Not just ***any*** gifts, but the ***perfect*** gifts. He brought my son, who loves to build and to bake, a kit of blocks. When assembled, they formed a small figurine of a German woman holding a Black Forest cake in one hand, a knife with a slice on it in the other. He brought my son's dad, a foodie, some wonderful German delicacies. And he brought me, a local church pastor, a piece of rough stone, rubble from the restoration of a German church dating back to the 1600s, embossed with a red wax seal of authenticity, and accompanied by a book telling the history of that particular long-standing sanctuary.

I was struck by this thoughtfulness. We'd been told it was customary to bring gifts, and that we might expect German candy, flags, or keychains. Any of that would have been kind and lovely. But these gifts, so personalized to each of us, from someone who had only read the most basic of details about us from sterile paperwork, were a real offering, a true attempt at connection and care. Each of us felt known by this stranger, who would soon become family.

I think about the magi, who journey to an unfamiliar land to extend their own family. Even before they arrive, they have some idea of the complexity of their journey, the complicated identity of the one they seek. The gifts they bring are for a king (gold), for a high priest (frankincense), and for care of a dead body (myrrh). Like Simeon and Anna who give atypical baby blessings, the magi give unexpected baby gifts. But their gifts correspond to the themes of Simeon's and Anna's words in the temple—the child, Jesus, will grow to be a new kind

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of ruler, a revelation, a radical. The magi come to learn all this, but there are some truths they already understand.



Fig. 7.2—The magi return home

Even so, did they know how bold they were being when they came into Herod's territory, full of curiosity, and asking around about the just-born king they were seeking? Did they have any idea how threatening Herod would find their inquiry, what lengths he would go to to silence their questions? Did they wonder if others might also have seen the star, might also be curious about this wondrous event creation itself was celebrating? Had anyone else looked up? Where would they meet other stargazers? Who else was being drawn into this story in the sky?

When they finally make their way to the child's home, offering gifts and receiving welcome, the magi let themselves be changed by what they find. They come not as "discoverers," to spy or to conquer, but to see and to commune. They bring no agenda except adoration. Their situatedness in a different religious and cultural tradition opens them to God's work in other places, amongst other people, and they come to celebrate it!

After their encounter with Jesus' family, they take a different route home than what they'd planned. They do this not out of fear of Herod but in defiance of him. They know Herod is anticipating their return, waiting for their report and plotting to preserve his power. But in Mary and Joseph, the magi meet friends who had listened to their own dreams; who had trusted each other when so much was uncertain; who had made their own fraught journeys. This meeting helps the magi understand what is at stake in their choice of route, encouraging them to trust that the God who brought them this far—the God who is always preparing a way—will open a new path for them to journey home.

By the time they take their leave, these curious, generous strangers have become courageous, inspired friends. Their open-heartedness has made them co-conspirators with Mary and Joseph, with all who seek the ways the sacred reveals itself on the margins and among the disenfranchised.

I wonder if Mary might have taught them her song, if they might have departed singing of a day when the hungry are filled and the humble lifted up; when all who rule like Herod are cast from their thrones; when God's salvation—peace, and justice, and flourishing—is known by all people, and all the world. I wonder if that song put a skip in their step, a thrill of hope in their hearts, for the journey home.

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QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on a time when you received a gift that made you feel like the giver really knew you. Why was that so special?

2. What's one thing you have learned from an encounter with someone of a faith tradition different from your own?

3. Which of the magi's ways of learning—paying attention to nature, seeking out authority, traveling in community, asking questions of strangers—have been important to you as you explore your faith and understanding?

4. Even as our own world struggles with fear, abuses of power, and violence, where do you see God's salvation being revealed?

5. How might you—or your community—take a brave posture of learning, or explore a deep curiosity, this season?

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