



*How Will We Welcome  
the Prince of Peace?*

*An Advent Guide for Lectionary Year A  
from the North Carolina Council of Churches*

## Contributors

Jennifer Copeland, Executive Director

Aleta Payne, Deputy Executive Director

Joy Williams, Regional Coordinator, Partners in Health and Wholeness

Susannah Tuttle, Director, North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light

Chris Pernell, Director, Partners in Health and Wholeness

Jennie Belle, Director, Immigration, Farmworkers, and Rural Life

Nicole Johnson, Regional Coordinator, Partners in Health and Wholeness

Jessica Stokes, Regional Coordinator, Partners in Health and Wholeness

*A publication of  
The North Carolina Council of Churches  
27 Horne Street  
Raleigh, NC 27607  
919-828-6501    [info@ncchurches.org](mailto:info@ncchurches.org)  
[www.ncchurches.org](http://www.ncchurches.org)*

## **Introduction**

In the absence of kindness and consideration, we have become less civil and more mean-spirited with one another.

Lord have mercy.

In the presence of fears and hurts, we have become destructive and dangerous.

Christ have mercy.

For every ungentle personal act, our leaders push policies of anger or invest in division so that our governments, at a higher level, feed our individual hostility.

Lord have mercy.

How do we stop this?

Let us begin by reconsidering all the ways we are called to be peaceful people. In this season when we prepare ourselves to welcome the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace, perhaps we can renew our commitment to living in love and walking in light. Let us rediscover our ability to be merciful toward one another, to be patient, thoughtful, and compassionate. Let us act from a place of generosity and joy.

Let us reclaim peace.

**~The Staff of the NC Council of Churches  
Advent 2016**

## First Sunday in Advent — November 27

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

### *Isaiah 2:1-5*

---

These readings for the First Sunday of Advent, especially Isaiah and Matthew, provide ample fodder to talk about war and peace. It should be easy for me to write something about beating a sword into a plowshare or a spear into a pruning hook. In fact, I've preached that sermon a few times already this year... no problem to do it again, except for one thing.

I carry a sword. It's mostly a sword of self-defense, although sometimes I have wielded it offensively. I'm not particularly fond of it, but I find it necessary and in some respects comforting. Not comfortable, mind you, but comforting because I need it and it's comforting to know that I have it. People who carry swords get a little uncomfortable when Isaiah starts talking about plowshares. If I can't protect my turf, what's the point of having a plow? So, while I'd really like to rise to the occasion, what I must write about are our swords and our spears, where we hide them and when we use them.

As it turns out, war isn't just between nations, fought in some far-off place like Assyria or Babylon, Iraq or Afghanistan. War isn't just waged with bullets and bombs calculated by experts who spend months practicing for the opportunity to use a rocket launcher. War is also personal. Weapons don't have to make the NRA's top ten most desirable list to deal death. We create weapons all the time. Our words; our lack of words. Think about how much damage silence can do. What about absence? War isn't

always caused by being there; sometimes it's about not being there. Think of the Church's absence and silence during slavery, during the Holocaust, during the last election (just a little politicizing). Think of our own silences, our own refusal to stand up for what is economically right because it could impact our portfolio, or socially just because it could jeopardize our jobs, or faithfully true because the church has no business meddling in that stuff. Silence is definitely a weapon. Absence is a great military tactic. We use these more effectively than we launch offensives. What other weapons do we have that keep us under the tutelage of war, that make us pupils of this art?

Waging war doesn't come easily whether it's nation-state against nation-state, hand-to-hand combat, or verbal haranguing. We must learn it – Isaiah says as much. We must study it extensively; practice it rigorously. The world and our lives would look different if we dropped that class. One of the more prominent features of this vision for peace from Isaiah is that everyone needs to learn about peace. The directional flow of this instruction makes all the difference in the world – first we must gather in God's presence on equal terms, no one nation more just than another, no one person more righteous than another and we learn – we all learn from God – we all study peace. Under God's instruction no one nation gets to tell another nation what peace looks like; no single individual gets to tell another individual what justice looks like. Each of us takes our cue from God, but we have to show up for class. We must make ourselves open to the presence of God in our lives. We must gaze always on the faithful, loving embrace of the only one who can be trusted to carry a sword because God is the only one who knows how and when to use it. In the certainty of that gaze we can learn to plow rather than fight, prune rather than kill. None of us have the luxury to stop evaluating our ways in light of God's ways.

If war is hard to learn, peace will not be any easier. Peace is serious business. We can't pick it up like a hobby. We have to practice it and, like any acquired skill, we have to use it over and over and over again to get really good at it. I used to know the periodic table from beginning to end, but I don't even know what the first five elements are anymore. I don't use chemistry; I haven't used it since the first week of my freshmen year of college when I went to two lectures, one lab, and the drop-add office in that order. Why do we think it would be any easier for us to retain the lessons of peace – if,

indeed, we had ever learned them in the first place – if we don't continue to study them and practice them? We shouldn't expect to retain it. We can't. We don't.

When we come into God's presence and review the grand tapestry of God's mercy throughout history, we can't help but notice its totality: no trouble is beyond the reach of God's mercy, no quarrel is beyond God's reconciliation, no abandonment renders us so helpless that God cannot help. What would our lives look like if we studied those truths more fervently than we study office politics, corporate networking, or weapons of mass destruction? For starters, it would mean we don't need a sword. Most of our swords are for self-protection anyway, and even when they aren't we still convince ourselves they are. Most of us keep our swords carefully out of sight because we have no intention of using them unless there's no alternative. But what if we actually believed in the possibility of God's mercy, that no trouble, no quarrel, no abandonment is beyond God's reach? With God reaching out to enfold us, right along with all the ones from whom we believe our swords will protect us, we will find that we don't need our swords.

The Prince of Peace whose advent we announce this week carries no sword, no spear. How can this one come into our midst unprotected when we've all got something hidden that we can use to protect ourselves or harm others? Where do we keep our swords hidden? And how do we know when to use them? Most of life is lived in this wide gray area of ambiguity and uncertainty. Sometimes there's a sliver of pure right or absolute wrong on the outer edges, places where we convince ourselves we might need a sword. So we keep one handy, just in case. But there has only been one who stood with certainty in the place of no ambiguity, the only place where a sword can rightly be put to use. And the one who stood in that place told his followers – and we are they – put away the swords.

You know the story when they came for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. They came out to arrest him with swords and clubs as if he were a bandit; and one of his disciples took a sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. But Jesus touched his ear and healed it. And he said, "No more of this."

No more of this. Amen.

**~Jennifer Copeland**

## Second Sunday in Advent — December 4

**A** shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

### *Isaiah 11:1-10*

---

Isaiah had a way with words. Even for a prophet, he could paint an extraordinary picture, and the images from this one feel....unattainable. The hair-brained vision for the wilderness wandering, sack-cloth wearing hippies of his day who were still faithful enough to believe we could all just get along. Species-transcending world peace on steroids – really, it's almost quaint.

Wolves and lambs, calves and lions. What self-respecting mother would let her child have tummy time near a snake hole or put her in charge of this wildlife brigade of enemies turned allies?

We live in a world where neighbors ask the court to decide who must sweep up the autumn leaves that accumulate in shared spaces or who must scoop the poop of each other's pets. Fender benders lead to screaming matches, punches are thrown at little league games, miscommunication begets gun violence. We don't trust each other, we

don't completely trust ourselves, and our burgeoning paranoia makes it difficult to see beyond 24-hour news cycles that reinforce our worst fears.

It is terribly hard to be peaceful when everything is a threat. We are not good allies and collaborators when we are afraid.

Some of the most horrible things human beings have done to each other throughout history have been done in the name of faith. Never mind that those of us who call ourselves Christians follow one who, in the totality of his ministry called us time and time again to peace and to reconciliation.

From time to time, we talk a good game. We elect a president of color and declare our nation collectively "post-racial" only to find how deeply, disturbingly racism still runs through the fabric of this country.

At an international level, we have made progress in recognizing the causes of and necessary corrective measures for climate change. Closer to home, leaders in high elected offices dismiss the science of our collective responsibility but accept donations from the worst polluters. Make no mistake, at this point denial of climate change amounts to an act of aggression against our poorest sisters and brothers who are already feeling its affects.

Reading Isaiah's poetic and prophetic world view given how the last year, in particular, has unfolded in our country, you wonder how we got here and if we can ever leave. Some of us are so entrenched in our enmity that we seem to prefer mutually assured destruction over peaceful coexistence. Are we even capable of following the example of that unexpected menagerie and the precious child in charge?

Here's the thing – we have. Not seamlessly. No perfectly. But we have. In wars of oppression and aggression, there has been an underground, a resistance. Throughout history, there have been people who spoke truth to power, who protected the vulnerable, who turned the tide of limitations and hate. Just in the last century, there were those who hid and protected Jews during World War II. Martin Luther King and his allies led a movement that transcended race, gender, denomination, and class. Mandela saw apartheid end. The saints and martyrs lived as examples to us all.

Of course it's not easy. Isaiah doesn't offer us a shortcut, but he does offer us a map. The path is marked with wisdom and understanding, with righteousness toward the

poor and equity for the meek. But it doesn't have to be all noble and global – imagine the change we begin in our daily lives with a return to kindness and civility

Peace requires deep, thoughtful, consistent consideration. In this season of Advent, perhaps we can work to put aside fear and move toward a world view defined not by our enemies but by equally beloved creatures of God. And with that knowledge, hurt and destruction begin to cease.

**~Aleta Payne**

## Third Sunday in Advent – December 11

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### *Isaiah 35:1-20*

---

Rejoice, again I say rejoice! These words from Paul make me smile and cringe at the same time. I smile because of the glory that rings forth when someone is free to rejoice. Your belly is full of love and your spirit light of grief. Your eyes can glow from the peace within, knowing that everything is in order, for that is the reason why rejoicing happens. There is peace.

While that may be true, Paul's command to rejoice comes from knowing that everything is in order through a relationship with God, despite not having peace within, peace around the world, or peace in relationships.

In our world, where hurricanes destroy homes, war tears apart families, crime disintegrates neighborhoods – where do we find peace?

Further, our social structure and social categories beckon us, no, encourages us to spew hate on each other, whether it is for your race, economic level, social status, sports team, or political affiliation – we are full of reasons for why hate is sanctioned, condoned, and even warranted. Right? Not at all. Spewing hate on any level is not OK, according to the word of God. We learn through God's word that there is protection for those who are marginalized and respond with weak hands or feeble knees.

Isaiah 35:4 tells us that, "...to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

And it is this reason why Paul employs us to rejoice. Rejoice despite the hurricanes, despite the broken families, despite the crime – rejoice despite the hate that is spewed for reasons that are not warranted or fair, rejoice. And when you rejoice, remember you do not have to fear, for there is a God who comes with vengeance, and He will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf.

During this Advent season, we can remember to rejoice in what is to come, the peace that comes with justice; while we also rejoice for the peace we can have now within ourselves, for we know that there is a God who watches. And as we strive to bring heaven to earth, we can peacefully work with each other.

And as Isaiah promises, the future holds singing, everlasting joy, and gladness.

**~Joy Williams**

## Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 18

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

### *Isaiah 7:10-16*

---

The first chapters of Isaiah give the name "Mighty God" its proper meaning and create a setting for God's coming into the world in Christ as divine intervention. The verses depict a population who have fallen far away from identifying as God's people and disconnected from their roles and responsibilities bestowed up on them. They need to be rescued and saved from themselves.

This makes me reflect on how a similar scenario is taking place in our country with regards to our consumptive lifestyles in relation to the realities of a changing climate. Impacts of global warming are occurring at an ever-increased rate while our daily actions and consumer choices continue to support the corporate dominance of our fossil fuel-based culture. We need a kind of "divine intervention" to guide us back into our role as caretakers of creation.

El Gibbor, the original Hebrew word for "Mighty God," can be literally translated as hero – our rescuer – the one who brings order out of chaos. No matter how we have failed as a people, God's power is perfect.

It is at the moment when Ahaz thinks he might be left to suffer that Isaiah announces God is coming in the form of a newborn.

The significance of this timing again rings true for us with regards to climate change. God has been rejected by his people's pollution of creation and although there has been begging and pleading for us to live a righteous and peaceful existence, we have been

unable to stop the cycle of destruction on our own. So God must come to be with us so we can begin anew.

It is all too easy to sink into despair as the realities of climate change play out in the news and in our lives. Through the lens of faith, hope triumphs over despair.

Rather than considering global warming as the greatest threat to our existence we must place trust in our hero and recognize the signs that this is the very moment to be reborn, to create an entirely new way of being and behaving as God's people. The season of Advent is in celebration of this very anticipation, the more we believe – the more beautiful and peaceful our world will become.

**~ Susannah Tuttle**

## Christmas Eve and Day — December 24 and 25

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

### *Isaiah 9:2-7*

---

As with most published works, this reflection is being written well in advance of the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. This requires focusing mind and heart on the season that many of us love the most – Christmas. No other holiday in the Christian faith shines as brightly with brilliant lights, sparkling decorations, and our favorite holiday carols as we celebrate Christ’s birth. It is proclaimed the season of peace on earth and goodwill toward men.

Yet we don’t have to look far to see our world is not at peace. Father David McBriar, O.F.M., Ecumenical Officer, Diocese of Raleigh, writes about the wars’ raging in the Middle East, the United States and Britain under heightened alert for a terrorist attack, our home front torn by racial and economic discrimination, and whether or not health care and a living wage is even possible. [This reflection](https://www.ncchurches.org/peace-pentecost/) by Father David was written in August 2006. <https://www.ncchurches.org/peace-pentecost/>

Trials and sorrows are not new or unexpected. As promised in John 16:33, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Where do we as believers find Christmas in a world that seems flooded with darkness? How do we embrace the spirit of Advent, and claim the peace that transcends all understanding that was given to us with the birth of our Savior?

We can choose to deny hate. We can choose to not be afraid. We can choose to not meet evil with evil, whether in our thoughts, our words or our actions. A few verses are referenced above but there is a multitude of scripture available to strengthen our hearts and focus our minds on living in the light of God's love and responding in peace to the darkness that can surround us.

The United States just experienced one of the most divisive seasons in our history. The outcomes of November don't eliminate the intense outrage and disagreements expressed over the long months leading up to November 8. Christmas for some brings into sharp contrast the gilded homes and gifts on one end of the spectrum and the loneliness and grief experienced by many, and amplified during the holiday season. War still rages.

However, the Advent season is a perfect opportunity to remember the promise of peace and the love of Christ. It is a time to replace retaliation with love, anger with action, condemnation with gratitude, and despair with hope.

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. John 14:27*

*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7*

*Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10*

**~Chris Pernell**

## First Sunday after Christmas Day — January 1

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarene."

### *Matthew 2:13-23*

---

Today's reading is not a particularly pleasant text. In the afterglow of Christmas, I read it as a companion text to the post-Christmas blues. The candles have burned out, the relatives have left (that may be a good or bad thing), the presents have been opened, and now it is time to put away the tree. The excitement of a new baby has come and gone, and now reality sets in. In fact, today's text is actually rather horrific. We read about a jealous Herod trying to end the life and ministry of Christ before it has even begun. Although Jesus' life is spared, we learn that all of the children in Bethlehem under the age of two are murdered. We have only finished celebrating the birth of baby Jesus and now we are forced to consider his death and resurrection.

The world into which Jesus was born into was likewise horrific. Jesus was born into a

world of darkness – a world of murder, violence, suffering, and fear. The Palestine of Jesus' day was a world of extreme poverty in which wealthy tax collectors benefited from the poor, and those who ruled used extreme forms of punishment, such as crucifixion, to silence any uprisings. Two thousand years later, our world looks very similar as the income gap continues to grow and senseless acts of violence against minorities have given rise to the deepening significance of the Black Lives Matter movement. We still live in a world of deep darkness, although the promises of God to us through the birth of Jesus at Christmas continue to bring us hope for peace. We still live in a world where children and families are forced to flee their homes out of fear for their safety, a world in which "Holy Innocents" are murdered or deported by those "doing their duty," a world in which parents feel incapable of protecting their children from the terror and fear that is growing around them.

Matthew's words remind us that Christmas does not stop on that "Silent Night" or "Holy Night" when Christ was born. Because we don't live in a world of silent, serene nights, we need Emanuel, "God with us," defenseless child and crucified Messiah. This text reminds us that Christmas isn't just lights and happy carols about perfect families; rather, many of the stories in the Bibles are about reaching past the margins into chaos, uncertainty, and violence. Christ who comes to be with us is a God who comforts those who mourn, shares our struggles, and dies the most agonizing death enforced by his oppressors. This is our God who "comforts those who mourn," claims "peacemakers" as "children of God," and grants inheritance in the kingdom of heaven to those who "hunger and thirst for justice." As we look toward a new year in a world plagued with hatred and fear, may this Christmas season allow us to renew our hope in the One who comes to bring a lasting and holy peace.

**~Jennie Belle**

## Epiphany — January 6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### *Matthew 2:1-12*

---

The story of the Magi is included in many of the plays, iconography, and storytelling that happens during the Advent and Christmas seasons. We are familiar with the components of that story, a baby, three magi, three gifts, a power-hungry ruler, angels, and a star because we see them year after year. The season of Christmas with the manger scenes and the Magi story in the annual Christmas play, the tinsel and glitter, the presents and parties are the outer trappings of a season that ends for many of us not long after December 25. There may be those of us who hold on to the outer trappings of the season a little longer and wait for the start of the New Year to put away our decorations, deliver the last of our cards and presents, put away our Christmas trees, and recount the "Christmas Story." Then there are those of us who wait until Epiphany

Sunday, the traditional liturgical Sunday that remembers the gifts of the Magi being brought to the baby, Jesus.

Despite having heard this story over and over, this year, I am captivated by the star. The Magi saw a star that they took to be a sign and they followed it, as surely as astronomers today track the patterns of the constellations that give signs of the different seasons and times of the year. Three/four/five Magi followed a star that took them away from their home, away from familiar territory to show their respect and reverence for a king. I wonder what they expected to find. When they did find him, regardless of who they expected to find, they were “overwhelmed with joy.”

The Northern Star was thought to have been a fixed star for many years and was the inspirational source for the phrase in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, “I am constant as the Northern Star....” Now we know that the Northern Star both moves and changes, but we still see it as a relatively constant fixed point to locate North. The Magi followed a star that led them to a king. Beneath the trappings of the season, maybe we too are looking for our fixed point. What if our fixed point becomes the life of a man who was dedicated to compassion, peace, love, and actively rejecting injustice in all its forms?

Maybe if his life becomes our Northern Star, our fixed point, our star that we follow we could pay homage with transformed and peaceful lives that seek to “love God and love our neighbor” in ways that, like the Magi, makes us walk in unfamiliar territory. Maybe then, the possibility of a world that can be changed for the better, a world where injustice does not have a place, a world where all the -isms are rejected by a peaceful people who are inspired by the life of the king that the Magi found by following a star will become inseparable from our life’s journey. Maybe then, we could be less afraid of our neighbors who worship differently than we do, who don’t look like us or circulate in our circles because we’re not afraid of the people that we love when they are no longer strangers.

This Epiphany draw your line in the sand, set your fixed point, and live into a fearless and peaceful life inspired by the birth of a king who said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.”

**~Nicole Johnson**

## Baptism of the Lord — January 8

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

### *Matthew 3:13-17*

---

Jesus' baptism is the final piece in our Advent and Christmastide mosaic. Advent teaches about the fruition of receiving something long awaited. We celebrate the coming of Immanuel – God with us! We celebrate the tangible hope of physical newness that only a newborn baby can offer. We celebrate the spiritual hope that a beginning brings. We celebrate the symbolic birth of a new way of living and relating with the world. The hope of birth, whether it is metaphorical or literal, revitalizes us during this time of the liturgical calendar.

There is a succinct parallel between the birth of Jesus and the baptism of Jesus with the new ways that the Spirit reveals itself. Of course an infant is 'new' but there is also newness found in Matthew 3 with the baptism of Jesus. Baptism, in itself, represents new life. Jesus was always the Immanuel, but this marks the beginning of an entirely new season, including the wilderness and then the start of his public ministry.

It is during the baptism of Jesus that we first see the union of Creator God, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This unification empowers Jesus to be tested in the wilderness for 40 days and then onward throughout the rest of his ministry. However, this is our first tangible introduction to this relationship. With baptism comes new revelations; Jesus could better witness and articulate the world around him as soon as the Spirit embraced him. Baptisms symbolically realign us with God, resuscitate us, and refocus us as we are batted within the chaos of this world. In the newness of his baptism, we see that Jesus has favor with God because of his public commitment. In the same way that Jesus' birth-event would change everything, so would this baptism. That the Spirit of God

descends in the form of a dove – a symbol of peace for many of us – underscores that the one being baptized, this Prince of Peace, will conduct a ministry characterized by reconciliation and justice.

Newness can only come from endings, and so it is appropriate that this is the gospel reading shortly after Christmastide. I say this because in many ways, it seems that the baptism of Jesus is the benediction of Advent. The Spirit is here, with us, and sends us. No more waiting – we, too, are loved and in the presence of God. An important piece of Advent and Christmastide is that God is with us; the baptism of Jesus teaches us that God is with us no matter when and where, and that God also sends us.

Matthew tells us that the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove after two actions: John agreeing to baptize and Jesus being baptized. This reminds us that our participation is required in order to experience God. After all, if John the Baptist didn't agree to baptize Jesus, he would have possibly missed out on this event. We are given an opportunity to recognize the holy and sacred throughout each day. Even in the midst of post-holiday burnout, there are holy acts happening around us. Yes, God is with us, but we must be looking for the Spirit.

The newness of a savior being born, a person being baptized, a world being awakened...it all comes with us being able to witness the transforming newness that the Spirit invokes.

The liturgical calendar gives us a chance to walk closer with God in all the seasons of the year. We are offered these readings as a way to experience the seasons of Jesus alongside the seasons of our own lives. Each year we arrive at Advent tired and worn out, needing new energy and new life. We are given hope with this birth but then quickly the narrative of Jesus hits a remarkable pace. It is evident that the Spirit is moving and we are offered revitalization through the swiftness of this short but important time in the church-year.

In the newness that is found in advent and baptisms, we are basking in a God who offers a chance to strengthen our spiritual energy to carry us through the year. We participate in this life with an ever-dynamic God that invites us to participate in a narrative far bigger than what we can imagine. The Spirit is here, with us, and sends us.

**~Jessica Stokes**