

# Study Guide for Advent 2021

This study guide invites you to look at all four lectionary readings for each Sunday in Advent. “Advent” refers to waiting for an important arrival, and is above all a time of preparation. It covers the four weeks before Christmas, and is the beginning of the church's Liturgical Year.

The readings are taken from the Revised Common Lectionary, which sets out Bible readings selected for their relevance to the time of year and the questions it brings to the fore. The lectionary was developed by a broadly based consultation among many Christian denominations worldwide, and it is used within the United Church of Canada.

This study guide gives some background for each reading, and offers questions for your private consideration. We suggest you consider organizing your week along the following lines, journaling your reflections day by day.

Tuesday - first reading for the next Sunday

Wednesday - second reading

Thursday - third reading

Friday - fourth reading

Saturday - It can be instructive to try to discern the linkages between the readings that led to them being placed together, so review the past four days' reflections for patterns; and also for any light shed on your 'big question' (see below).

Sunday - worship service and/or Holy Listening Circle (one or more of the readings will be selected as scripture-in-focus for the Sunday Holy Listening Circle, so you will have an opportunity to share some of those reflections if you choose to participate.)

Monday - rest day

Before you dive in we suggest you try to get clear on what 'big questions' are calling to you. Big questions usually spring from your life circumstances. Examples would be

- Jesus giving voice to his doubt and despair in crying out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'
- a new parent praying 'How can I live out my gratitude for the blessing of this child?'
- a person at a crossroads asking some variation on 'how then shall I live my life?'

There is no guarantee that articulating your big questions will lead to answers, but it will raise your sensitivity to the whisperings of the Spirit.

May you have a blessed Advent

*This study guide is brought to you by Harcourt's Spiritual Life Committee*

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Jeremiah wrote prophecies (truth-telling) to a people suffering repeated hostile invasions. He issued warnings of disasters that would strike because of the people's faithlessness, and chastised them for following foreign gods and practices. This week's passage addresses a dire situation: The King of Babylon's armies are advancing on Jerusalem, and Jeremiah is imprisoned by the Jewish King Zedekiah.

"The worst has not yet happened, but it is inevitable. Any reasonable person can see that the city is doomed. Jeremiah's many prophecies of judgment—prophecies that have landed him in prison—are coming true. Yet now, in the midst of catastrophe, the prophet finally speaks words of promise! In the previous chapter, he has purchased a piece of land, a foolish thing to do in a country soon to be conquered by invading armies. Nevertheless, he has purchased the land as a pledge, as earnest of God's redemption: "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15). In the midst of impending doom, a sign of hope is enacted." (Kathryn Schifferdecker, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-3314-16-2>)

Also in this chapter, Jeremiah speaks of the restoration of everyday life "There shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride." (33:10-11). And then in verses 14-16, the promise of the restoration of the Davidic line of kings:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." (33:14-16)

These words of hope are spoken by a person imprisoned by their own government for speaking truth to power. The promised 'righteous branch' is not obvious to people dreading the imminent arrival of hostile armies. Jeremiah's action and words exhibit tenacious hope despite all the soul-sapping, despair-inducing evidence to the contrary.

The Davidic line was not restored, and in time the passage came to be interpreted as speaking instead of the coming of the Messiah, God's anointed, the ideal ruler.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Jeremiah about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

In Hebrew, each line of this Psalm begins with a different letter of the alphabet, beginning with the first, aleph, and proceeding in order to the 21st, tau (the final, 22nd line is not part of this pattern). The form is familiar: an individual's complaint, request for God's help and professed faith that God will answer. However, the complaint is not specified, and the Psalm is thought to be a model prayer that people could use in many situations. Perhaps for this reason, it appears three times in the lectionary, once in Advent, once in Lent and once in Ordinary Time.

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. (Ps 25:1-10)

“Psalm 25:1-10 expresses some of the most central and important theological themes in the Psalter (and in the Bible): dependence on God for protection from enemies (verses 1-2); requests for God to direct and teach (verses 4-5); confession of sin and cries for forgiveness (verses 6-10; cf. verses 11-12); and confidence in God's abiding presence and faithfulness (verses 6, 10). References to “waiting” for God make this section of the psalm particularly appropriate for Advent ...

“... Such waiting is not passive, however. The person who waits for the Lord must be attentive to what God will do. Prayer and reflection are the main expressions of this waiting. Such active waiting, in turn, naturally encourages kindness and compassion to others. Verse 9 says this directly: “He leads the humble in what is right.” “ (Jerome Creach, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-psalm-251-10-4>)

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask the psalmist about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

Paul's passion for the people at Thessalonica shines through this letter, and this little extract from it.

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1Th 3:9-13)

Some readers today might criticize Paul for showing an unhealthy level of attachment to this little congregation; some might cringe at his emotionality; certainly he is not maintaining the professional 'pastoral distance' recommended in seminary. Three considerations may have led Paul's audience at the time to have received his passion more sympathetically.

First, Paul needed to be a passionate, driving force in order to challenge the status quo so successfully. Second, his belief that the end of the world was coming soon lent almost frantic urgency to his work. Third, as we read in Acts 17, he had stayed in Thessalonica and gathered followers during a mere three weeks before they spirited him away by night to escape threatening opposition.

Paul had suddenly left behind the fledgling community to face intense hostility without his support and presence. He knew he was personally responsible for leading them into difficulty, and sent Timothy to find out how they were faring. When Timothy reported that all was well, Paul wrote this letter probably fuelled by a release of pent-up anxiety.

Paul's audience at the time would know all this. Perhaps they were hanging on to the hope of hearing from him and seeing him again, to be reassured and to hold their little community together. They had risked a lot by following him; they probably needed to hear and feel Paul as fully committed as they were.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Paul about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

The Coming of the Son of Man: There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree: Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Exhortation to Watch: Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

What a way to start the Advent season this year! We're told about an earth-shaking cosmic event: the coming of the “Son of Man”! Are we yet again ritually waiting for Jesus? Are we waiting in a passive way to be somehow “saved” by the arrival of some superhero? Is this who the “Son of Man” is?

The expression “Son of Man” comes from the Book of Daniel, in which four Kingdoms are described, each symbolized by a beast. The first three are oppressive regimes. Then, says the text, will come the Kingdom symbolized by the “Son of Man.” This is the Dream of God of a time when humans treat each other with justice and compassion. Typically, apocalyptic literature like this announces to the poor and desperate that God's “Great Clean-up” - to use John Dominic Crossan's expression - is coming.

Crossan notes that there are two strands throughout the Bible in both Jewish and Christian scriptures: a God of mercy and love and a God of judgment and vengeance and violence. For Crossan, the latter is a “backsliding” into typical human ways of dealing with evil: retributive violence. Only the first strand shows the real God, “slow to anger and quick to love”, the “Abba” of Jesus. Only by disentangling the two strands can we properly deal with these scary texts. We don't need to believe that such a time of tribulation and vengeance is necessarily coming – as some of our fundamentalist friends do. We can see the text as an invitation to be vigilant, attentive, mindful, and intentional about our lives.

What might we make of the text, then? One reading might be that the church is called to get its head out of the skies and its body out of a passive / waiting modality, and into the

active mission of bringing the good news of an alternative way of being human, based on compassion and distributive justice, to the four corners of the earth. Only after it has accomplished this can the community expect the fulfilment of the Christ.

At the very least, these texts help us realize that the scope of the evolution of this Universe is indeed far vaster than anything we can conceive of. The recent understanding that we are living in an evolutionary universe that is moving ever so slowly – and not inevitably or necessarily, either - towards greater compassion and justice, so that God can be ever more fully present, should help frame our lifestyle. Some scholars talk about the “Christ Project,” in which we are called to play our role to bring about the fullness of Christ.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Luke about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

Malachi is the last of the twelve 'minor prophets', the final book of the English Old Testament. The prophecies date to around 450 BC, when the disappointing realities of the return from exile in Babylon were all too apparent. We can read in Second Isaiah of the enthusiasm that greeted permission to re-establish a Jewish way of life in Palestine. The reality, however, was disappointing: only a small portion of the nation returned, and the new community occupied scarcely more land than Jerusalem and the immediate environs, which were rocky and unproductive.

It seems from Malachi's account that depression settled on the community. The priests conducted the worship services with indifference, and neglected to give religious instruction. People asked why they should bother following the Law, and 'where is the God of justice?' (2:17). Verses 3:1-4 are Malachi's response to that question:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. (3:1-4)

In Malachi's thinking, God's messenger (in Hebrew *mal'ākhî* which gives the book its name) will come to clean up the life of the temple so that it is fit for the coming of God in judgment. This is an event to be looked forward to and also feared. "We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience." (Kathryn Schifferdecker, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-malachi-31-4-2>).

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Malachi about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests that the story of the high priest Zechariah and his aging wife Elizabeth and the improbable conception of their son John may be a parable, the same way the story of the conception and the birth of Jesus are. Zechariah questions the doings of Yahweh and the angel Gabriel strikes him dumb for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy, after which he pours out this inspired prayer and prophecy.

Treating the passage in this manner shifts the questions: we are no longer concerned with what actually happened and whether or not it did. Instead we ask questions such as: why would the author of the Gospel of Luke tell this parable? How does it fit in to his overall understanding of Jesus and his mission?

This parable conveniently links Jesus with the long line of prophets in the Jewish Testament. It's almost as if this high priest is spelling out the legitimization of Jesus. We remember that this Gospel was written around the time of the fall of the Temple, and the words of comfort and reassurance which the author puts into the mouth of Zechariah would have carried considerable weight: Jesus is in strict continuity with God's promise for God's people, and will fulfill that promise.

The poem also sets up the mission of John, known as the Baptizer: he will prepare the way for Jesus by urging people to repent of their sins. This is exactly what we see John do later in this Gospel.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Luke about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?



Paul's affection for the congregation at Philippi shines through his letter; the word 'joy' is used more than in all his other letters put together. Paul established the congregation when he journeyed to Europe for the first time with Silas and Timothy and apparently Luke as well (Luke's travel diary in the Acts Of The Apostles begins at this point).

Paul made a number of converts among the people who met at the 'praying place' beside the river, the Jewish community being too small to support a synagogue. One of these converts was Lydia, a woman of some wealth who threw open her house to Paul and his companions as a centre for their work. She was not a Jew but a 'God Lover', the term used to describe pagans who were attracted to the Jewish religion. Interestingly, Luke dedicates his two-volume Gospel and Acts to 'Theophilus' which means God Lover.

The congregation flourished in this small town on the 1100 km Via Egnatia that connected Rome to its eastern provinces. The Philippians gave strong financial support to Paul's collection for the Jerusalem congregation and to him personally. Paul's letter was to be carried back to Philippi by Epaphroditus, who had been sent to Paul with a gift of money to meet his needs in prison, and to stay and care for him. Amongst other things, the letter tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus is returning at Paul's request after an illness that almost killed him.

Paul wrote from prison, probably in Rome and probably charged with causing a riot at Jerusalem a few years before. Despite the seriousness of the charge and the likelihood of receiving a severe, politically-driven penalty, Paul seems optimistic and happy. He is not fearful in his predicament but focuses on his hopes for the Philippians. Chief among these was his prayer that they would be 'pure and blameless' on the day of Jesus Christ, the hoped-for but terrifying day of judgment that was expected soon.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Paul about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

In Advent of Year “C,” the focus is on John, Isaiah, and a young woman. This underlines the outsider character of the alternative vision and program Jesus will come to incarnate and implement. It is the voice from outside the central corridors of power, it is the voice from the margins, indeed from wilderness places, it is the voice that comes from the marginal and weak - from those who are political nobodies - namely women - that the alternative will come.

The Isaiah text quoted in this passage is a statement of reassurance and hope: the people in exile will be led back to the Holy City of Jerusalem along a broad, smooth highway. What a beautiful expression: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God!” This is not a vision of some otherworldly “heaven.” Our very “flesh-and-bones” existence is what will experience the fullness of God's Presence.

In many ways, we are still a people in exile: exile in a dominant culture that holds us captive. We long for a world in which peace is achieved through justice and distribution of wealth, while our governments talk of expanding the military and destroying our “enemies”; where everyone has a chance to blossom as they are meant, instead of only the “rich and famous”; where there is no oppression, no poverty, and where governments are truly concerned about the well-being of people. We long to belong to communities that accept us as we are and help us deal with our shortcomings and exercise our strengths and gifts.

The real question may be whether we wait passively for the “salvation of God,” or have an active role to play in countering evil and bringing about a more just community. If we wish to be faithful to Jesus' life and message, the only answer is the latter!

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Luke about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

Zephaniah lived at a time when the Jewish nation was decaying. King Manasseh, king of Judah, made multiple compromises with his Assyrian masters. Zephaniah shouts out warnings of the resulting destruction that will come on the Day of the Lord because of worship of false gods, adoption of foreign ways, violence, fraud, complacency etc.

After two chapters of dire warnings of destruction, Zephaniah allows that a remnant of Israel will survive. Today's reading sets out a vision of the golden age they will enjoy.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

“But we are not allowed to assume that this coming is all sweetness and light. Zephaniah's announcement of the Lord's promise rests on the need for rescue ... each phrase of promise is coupled with the negative it implies, reminding the hearer that disaster has come as reproach for failings, oppression exists, the lame and the outcast suffer alone, shame needs to be changed into praise, an in-gathering is required because the people are scattered ... This is an accounting of the inevitable inability of human life to follow the commands of the Lord. This is an accurate depiction of our need for God.” (Melinda Quivik, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-zephaniah-314-20>)

The promised destruction did not happen: the ills that Zephaniah names were instead soon addressed by the reforms led by King Josiah (perhaps the cousin of Zephaniah) with the introduction of the Deuteronomic code. In our time we might wonder, are we among the people threatened with destruction, and for what transgressions of God's laws? And if we are to be part of the faithful remnant that will participate in a new golden age, what actions must we take to remedy those transgressions?

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Zephaniah about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) includes the usual prophetic variety of public oracles. The first eight chapters, speaking very broadly, mostly consist of reproach, threat and exhortation to change. In chapter 9 comes a promise: the restoration of the Davidic line of kings, including “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”, often used as an Advent scripture reading as the hopeful promise was transferred to Jesus the Messiah.

Chapter 10 sees a resumption of threatening oracles, and in chapter 11 the hopeful theme returns with “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse ...”, also often encountered in Advent. Today’s scripture consists of two brief psalms of joyous thanksgiving that burst out in celebration of that hope:

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

The first little psalm echoes Moses’ song following the deliverance of the people from Pharaoh’s army. This echo carries the implication that God can continue to be trusted to provide deliverance. The second little psalm calls on people to live in expectation of the day of salvation, to sing to make that known, and to recognize that God lives ‘in their midst’.

In today’s world, it seems fairly easy to identify occasions for reproach, threat and exhortation to change. Occasions for hope and joyous thanksgiving can be harder to identify. That, however, is the task set before us by this lectionary reading - not to turn a blind eye to the problems, but to find grounds for hope - and to celebrate.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Isaiah about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

This reading is part of the closing of Paul's letter to the congregation at Philippi. Refer to the page for Second Sunday, third reading for background on this letter.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The passage sounds the note of joy which runs through Paul's letter. The Greek word for 'rejoice' was also used as a goodbye, and Paul is using the word with this double meaning. The Christians were surrounded by people to whom their conduct and beliefs seemed strange. Be gentle, says Paul, so people can see that you are not hot-headed fanatics. 'The Lord is near' (in Aramaic *māranā thā*) was a watchword of hope for the early Christians, a hope of the Lord's return that sustained them.

Do not worry, says Paul, but in prayer state clearly everything that you want. But do so with thanksgiving for all you have already received. "The unthankful person cannot pray, for they have no real sense of the goodness of God" (Ernest Scott, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon Press 1983).

Notice that Paul does not promise the Philippians that they will get everything they pray for. What he promises instead is something even better: the peace that passes all understanding. This peace will be like an armed guard protecting the traveler from all danger. Paul's words are echoed in the words of Jesus to the disciples in John's gospel: "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."

Paul writes from prison, facing personal danger. Through the power of his example and his words he says to the Philippians: be joyful; don't worry; be thankful; don't be afraid; the peace of God will guard you.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask Paul about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

A powerful text of anticipation. First century Palestine was filled with apocalyptic notions of end-times, of retribution, of divine vengeance. People would flock to every prophet who offered some way to survive, including John the Baptizer. He speaks with scorn to those who came, not out of a desire to repent, but out of fear of things to come.

People wanted to know what to do; John's instructions echo sabbath economics, a main theme of Luke's gospel. The Jewish Scriptures laid out a very clear economic program to achieve God's Dream for humanity based on compassion and distributive justice, in contrast to the less-than-ideal ways in which Jewish kings and the ruling class lived their lives. That tension - between our yearning for the "Kingdom of God" and our addiction to the dominant culture - exists to this day.

This text makes clear that the vision of God's Kingdom which Jesus will live out and proclaim does not originate with him. It is in strict continuity with the Jewish Testament. This Jewish vision was lifted up by Jewish prophets and taught and sung to him by a Jewish mother. What does that say to us about how we should raise our children?

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask the author about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

Micah wrote in the latter half of the eighth century BC, along with Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. Assyria menaced from the east, with Judah a front-line buffer between her military activity and Egypt. Domestically, Judah was plagued by corruption and King Hezekiah, despite initiating some religious reforms, seemed relatively powerless to do much about it. Micah counselled care in international relations and, like Amos, took up the cause of the oppressed.

Chapters 4 and 5 set out visions of a glorious future, and were probably added to Micah a few centuries later, as was the custom in those times with material thought relevant to the original. Two themes jostle: the first, dating from the closing days of the Exile, expresses optimism for one world of universal religion, justice, law and peace. The second, dating from the colder realities after the return, anticipate the restoration of Israel by way of monarchy, militarism and vengeance.

Today's scripture gives a panoramic view of the Hebrew monarchy. Verse 2 repeats God's prophecy to Bethlehem when David was being called to be king. Verse 3 continues God's prophetic voice during Exile, when Mother Israel would give birth to a new king. Verse 4 describes his rule, heralding the peace spoken of in 5a.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has  
brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty  
of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.

When the magi come, Herod's scribes refer to these verses (Matthew 2:5-6), and many Christians read these verses only as if they prophesy the coming of Jesus. But that was not their original intent. Instead they were written to give hope to a people struggling in difficult times, reminding them of God's constancy, telling them to look for God in the most unlikely places, even insignificant little villages like Bethlehem (and by implication in insignificant little people like David, the youngest son of a Bethlehem family).

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask the author about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

Psalm 80 laments Israel's circumstances: their diet is tears, their neighbours scorn them and their enemies laugh at them.

The psalm pleads for God to save Israel in the refrain that appears twice in this passage and again at the end of the psalm. It may have been sung by the congregation in response to the cantor's lead.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
Before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbours; our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

God is imaged as the 'Shepherd of Israel', a metaphor for the kingship of God, the 'Lord God of hosts'. And this God is mobile, enthroned on the cherubim whose wings spread across the ark of the covenant, ready to race to redeem his people. The plea is that God 'let your face shine', helpfully paraphrased in the Message Bible as "smile your blessing smile".

As we draw closer to Christmas, it can be tempting to focus on the comforting image of the Christ child. This lectionary reading once again reminds us that even in advent, we are called to remember the wrongs of this world, and be in action as well as we are able to address them to prepare for the coming of the Christ. "In advent, we confess the world remains undone; the world remains a place that leaves people drinking tears by the bowlful and in need of the advent of God." (W. Dennis Tucker jr, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-psalm-801-7-17-19>).

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask the author about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
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The Book of Hebrews is one of the less popular books in the New Testament, and different from what we find in the gospels and epistles. People have questioned whether it belongs.

The book is based on a two-story view of the universe. We exist on the ground floor made up of shadowy, transient events; on the upper story is the permanent, perfect realm of reality. The book also gives a unique perspective on Jesus. Unlike other high priests down here Jesus is a proper high priest; he knows temptation but is without sin, and is the Son. Thus Jesus the Christ, human in experience and divine in nature, through self-sacrifice (not animal sacrifice like earthly priests offer) gives to us humans a new and living way 'through the curtain' (10:19), i.e. immediate and permanent access to God. And the law is outmoded, an imperfect foreshadowing of the true priesthood.

Angels could not give us that access, because they are ministering spirits not sons, and cannot enter into our suffering and temptation. Moses and Aaron had the required humanity and faithfulness, but operated exclusively in this shadowy nether realm. Jesus is the perfect high priest, after 'the order of Melchizedek', who blessed Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and to whom Abraham gave a tithe of everything. Throughout his book, the author cites the scriptures to prove his points.

The author says in 10:4 'it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins', and continues with a quote from Psalm 40 followed by an explanation.

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,  
Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
but a body you have prepared for me;  
in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.  
Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'  
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Strange as the worldview and arguments may seem to us today, their conclusions can still resonate today: Jesus the Christ can reach us in our humanity and draw us closer to God; Christ 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power' (1:2-3); faith is loyalty to unseen values which characterized all the worthies of the past.

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask the author about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
- what does this passage suggest to you today?

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

This text transports us to a moment when Jesus is still in his mother's womb. The heart of this text is the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. Let's be honest: this is hardly the kind of poem that a 14-year old peasant girl would be rhyming off as she visits her cousin... So this visit is a set-piece to put into the mouth of a young, obedient girl, symbol of our obedience to God's Word, the vision of God's Dream of an alternative community, in which the mighty and the wealthy are brought low in the name of distributive justice.

The Magnificat fits into a long line of social critique in the Jewish Scriptures: Hannah's song at the birth of her son Samuel, ancient texts on Jubilee ( Sabbath economics), the critiques of the ruling class by prophets like Amos. The text declares that "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Can you imagine what our culture would be like if the proud lost their status and became incoherent? If the powerful were brought down? If the lowly in society were given a voice? If the wealthiest 1% no longer had access to their fortunes? In what ways might we already start living out of a Sabbath economic model? In what ways might we help others wean themselves away from the culture of consumption and ostentation?

Questions for reflection:

- what questions would you ask the author about this passage?
- what message do you think the author was trying to convey to his community
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## Christmas Week

The Guide has now addressed the readings for the four Sundays of Advent. If you have followed the suggested timing for studying them, however, there are still a few days to go to December 25. In this remaining time of Advent, we suggest that you read two different accounts of the birth of Jesus in the gospels:

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 2:1-20

Notice what is said in each, and how they differ.

We suggest that one way of spending your reflection time in this week would be to ponder questions such as:

- how is Christ present in unexpected places in today's world?
- in what ways would I like to see today's world 'cleaned up'?
- how might I prepare myself even better for the fuller coming of Christ into my life?

Blessings on you, on those you care for, on this world and on the whole creation!

*Spiritual Life Committee*