

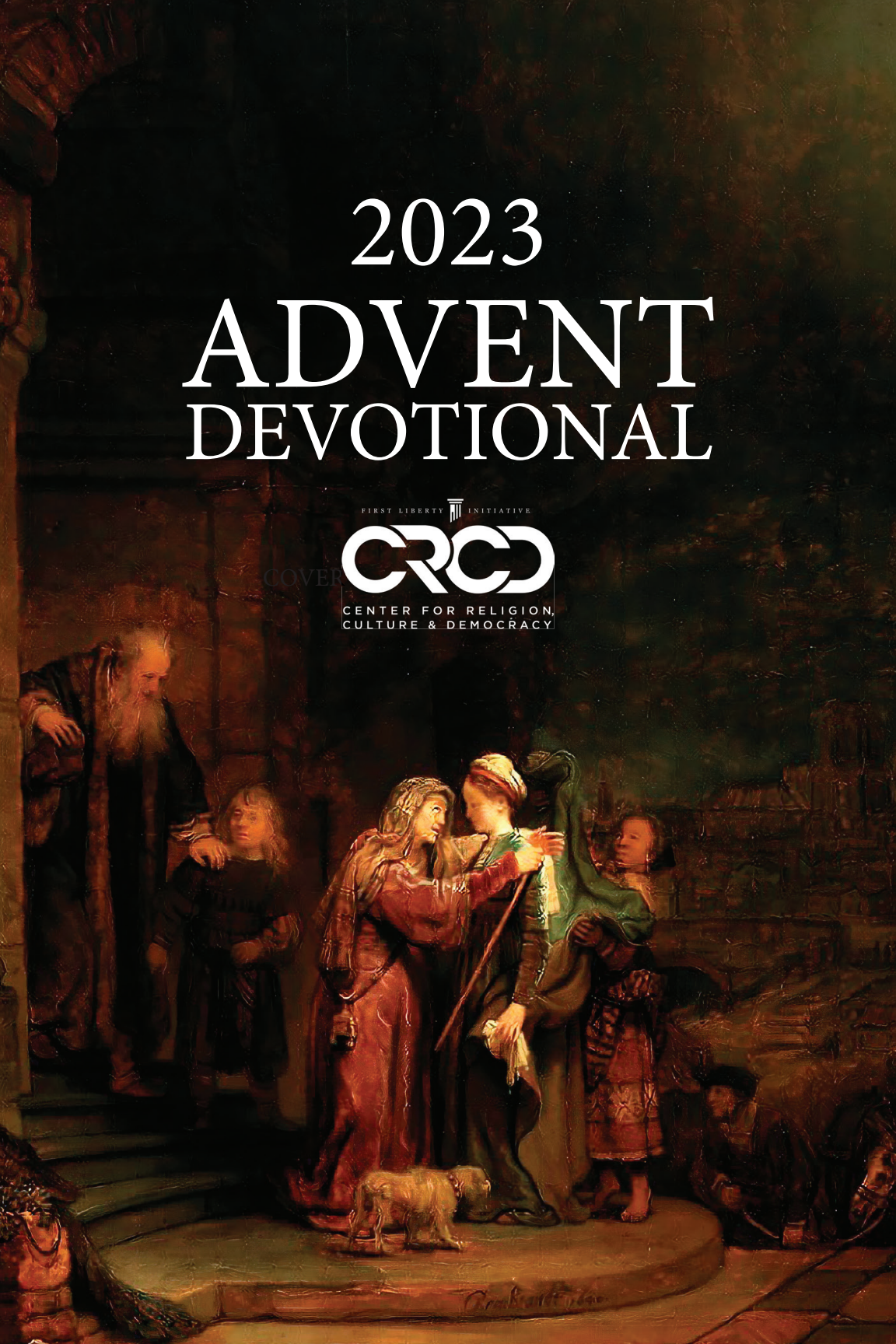
# 2023 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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CENTER FOR RELIGION,  
CULTURE & DEMOCRACY

COVER



# 2023 Advent Devotional

The Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy



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CENTER FOR RELIGION,  
CULTURE & DEMOCRACY

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## Introductory Letter

Dear Friends,

As Advent dawns and 2023 draws to a close, I hope that each of you is enjoying the blessings of God. It was just over three years ago that the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy was launched with a counter-cultural mandate—to make the case that religion, religious institutions, and religious people are good for society even in an age when religious participation is waning and skepticism of religious belief is growing.

Among the varied traditions associated with Advent the virtues of hope, peace, joy, and love—one for each week—are reflected in the Scripture readings, prayers, and reflections of the season. Rather than focus on other aspects of Advent observance, like various biblical figures that play a role in Advent and Christmastide, these virtues form the basic outline of the volume that you now hold. It is only because of a disposition informed by these virtues that the work of the CRCDC and our partners is possible.

Advent is the liturgical season that best corresponds with the mission and the vision of the CRCDC. Without the hope that tomorrow will be better than today, the peace that confidence provides, the joy inspired by the thought of it, and the love that animates and makes possible such a vision, this civilization-affirming work would be impossible. The CRCDC is fortunate enough to have staff, friends, and partners that seek to embody these virtues in their lives and in their work, and for this I am incredibly grateful. Some of these friends and partners have been gracious enough to contribute to this ecumenical collection of Advent reflections. You will note among them Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Christians, as well as academics, ministers, and students. You will be able to hear this diversity of experiences and backgrounds as you read the reflection for each day.

I hope that this small expression of our appreciation for you and for your work is a blessing and helps to remind you of just how great the mystery of faith is: Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

So, as you make use of this book, I encourage you to pray with us the

Collect that God's people pray each Sunday of this season: ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

With hope, peace, joy, and love this Advent season,

**Trey Dimsdale**  
**Executive Director**  
**Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy**

| *About the Artwork* |

“The Arrival,” by Morgan Kathleen Miller, is a block print series symbolizing each of the four candles of the traditional Christian Advent wreath. These prints are created by carving a design into blocks of rubber which are then layered with ink and used to make a relief print. The four pieces of this series are reflections on the virtues and other themes that traditionally correspond with each respective Sunday of Advent.

| *Prophecy Candle.* |

The candle representing the first Sunday of Advent is known as the Prophecy Candle. This first week we reflect on the Old Testament prophets (especially Isaiah) who foretold of Jesus’s coming. In this first piece, the dove and olive branches symbolize hope, another theme of this Sunday of Advent.







## Sunday, December 3

### Between Normandy and Final Victory

*Isaiah 64:1–9*

*1 Corinthians 1:1–9*

*Mark 13:24–37*

On June 6, 1944, nearly 160,000 Allied servicemen converged on the beaches of Normandy, France. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the commander of the Allied forces, warned them, “Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped, and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.” General Eisenhower was right. The war raged on for another fifteen months and claimed the lives of tens of thousands more soldiers and civilians across the continent.

In the weeks following the initial invasion, a total of 875,000 Allied soldiers landed in Europe, opening a western front that pressed the German army out of occupied nations and eventually saw the collapse of the Third Reich. While many citizens of Central and Eastern Europe would have to wait fifty years more for the collapse of communism and for life in free and open societies, in Western Europe governments were reestablished, nations were rebuilt, and the survivors of the German concentration camps were liberated. It may not have been entirely clear to those still fighting or still living in occupied nations or languishing in concentration camps, but June 6, 1944, marked the beginning of the end. The success of the D-Day invasion, the eightieth anniversary of which the world will remember next year, provided a glimmer of hope that one of the darkest chapters in human history was finally coming to an end.

When Adam sinned, he introduced corruption, darkness, and death into God’s perfect creation. A single moment of rebellion ushered in brokenness and suffering for all humanity—suffering so great and so pervasive that we are told in Scripture that the whole of creation groans for the coming of the new Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will ultimately restore that which has been marred and marked by sin and death to its intended glory. Before

Christ was revealed in the flesh, God's people looked to the promise that he would not leave them without a redeemer. There were quick glimpses of the Messiah. Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, sacrificed what he had for the social and economic redemption of Ruth, although he stood to gain nothing. David, born a simple shepherd and a man after God's own heart, was elevated by God to establish the throne on which King Jesus would reign.

It was through the regular demonstration of God's grace to men and women like Boaz and Ruth that God provided glimmers of hope for what was to come. The magnanimous generosity of Boaz and the (mostly) righteous rule of David pale in comparison to the generosity, grace, and righteousness of the one whom they prefigure. But still, even with these reminders of God's faithfulness to his people, the Hebrew people grew discouraged and often proved to be just as faithless and impatient as we can be today.

The birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ serve as a vindication of the faith of the prophets and as an anchor for our hope today. Through the prophet Isaiah we are reminded that this hope is a universal hope—"we are all [God's] people" (Isa. 64:9). And Saint Paul the Apostle acknowledges that the church of God consists of "all those . . . in every place" who have been "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2). Christ's first coming, which we remember at Christmastide, has not settled all accounts, nor has it ended the savage fighting of our enemies. The first appearing of Jesus should orient our vision to the even more glorious second coming of the Lord, at which time the broken world will be restored and every captive to sin will be set free.

Saint Mark the Apostle warns us to wait and to watch for Christ's second coming. We must "stay awake" (Mark 13:37). His return is so certain that we are to order our lives rooted in the reality of his first appearing and oriented toward the hope of his second. The victory that will attend his second coming is so sure and so certain that we cannot risk a moment's distraction by the things that tempt us to disobedience, to diversion, or even to despair. Just as his first appearing overshadowed the brief glimpses of his character imperfectly embodied in others, we can only imperfectly imagine the glorious fullness of his eternal reign that will accompany his second and final return.

For the moment, however, we live between Normandy and final victory.

The enemy will fight savagely, and there will continue to be casualties. There will continue to be temptations to faithlessness and impatience. But the Lord's promise, which was vindicated in Christ's first coming, will be fulfilled in his second when evil is defeated with finality and God will "gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (Mark 13:27).

**Trey Dimsdale**  
**Executive Director**

# Monday, December 4

## The Reign of Righteousness

*Micah 4:1–5*

*Revelation 15:1–8*

We live in the opposite of a triumphal time for the church and for Christians. Every day we see signs of the rejection of God and his law by the modern world. While we pile up wealth, power, and comfort, our eyes seem to wander far from the Lord and in the direction of increasingly individualized visions. The people crave rights without duties and effortless order without virtue. We empower our governments to spend ever more and to make dictates unmoored from law. Increasingly, we watch the caesars of the world acting as though there is no God. They do so because we, too, act as though God is not real. We have come to believe that all political authority emanates from the people themselves rather than from God's greater authority.

Yet, Micah 4:1–5 tells us that “in the latter days” the Lord's house will rest on “the highest of the mountains” and that the “peoples shall flow to it.” Many nations will seek “the God of Jacob” in the hopes that he will instruct them in his ways. The God they seek will provide righteous judgment even for “strong nations far away.” In response, they will abandon their wars by turning weapons into tools of cultivation. Each man will sit under his own fig and vine tree (an image that inspired George Washington) without need of fear. God's wisdom and authority will direct us all to peace.

Revelation 15 depicts a scene in which the beast has been defeated and those who have conquered him stand “beside the sea of glass with harps . . . in their hands.” They praise the just and true God who is “King of the nations.” Echoing the theme of Micah, the text proclaims that “all nations” will come and worship him as a response to his righteousness.

These beautiful texts, one featuring a holy mountain and the other describing an incomparably beautiful sea (“glass mingled with fire”), point us toward the future. While we live in a time when it seems that the nations

have little regard for God, and the people walk away from him and disdain his followers, we see in these descriptions of the last things a world where the wrongs will be set right. The earth and its peoples will acknowledge, obey, and crave the leadership of our God. The consequence of his reign, rather than the ceaseless rule of our appetites or the domination of petty imitators to God's throne, will be that true justice and peace will prevail.

There is a constant temptation to look around us and to fall into despair at the combination of indifference and rebellion we see toward God in the world. Perhaps worse, we may succumb to the desire to regard a world headed toward perdition with a kind of grim satisfaction. Instead, we must take courage and joy in the belief that God will neither be mocked nor rendered irrelevant. Rather, he will reign. And the wrong things will be set right.

**Hunter Baker**  
**Senior Fellow**

## Tuesday, December 5

### Bells of Hope

*Micah 4:6–13*

*Revelation 18:1–10*

Today's readings from Micah and Revelation provide a somber picture of people and nations who rebel against God. At the same time, they offer hope that one day justice will be satisfied and the Lord will rescue his people.

In Micah's day, nations came together, wanting to destroy God's people and gloat about their demise (Mic. 4:11). The prophecy in Revelation details a society with "sins . . . heaped high as heaven" that revels in rebellion against God (Rev. 18:5, 7). Perhaps those descriptions bring to mind present-day situations. From local stories to international headlines, our news is full of accounts of individuals, corporations, and governments who attempt to silence or even eliminate those seeking to follow God. We see and hear of many who defy God's commands, at times even celebrating that defiance. Even during an Advent season characterized by "holiday cheer" and idyllic depictions, we still daily confront the realities of a world marred by sin and suffering.

As we live day by day in a broken world, trying to walk in faithfulness while surrounded by sin and sinners, we may struggle to have hope. With the psalmists, our hearts may cry, "How long, O Lord?" (Ps. 13:1; 90:13). The passages we reflect on today point to the Christian's hope in the midst of trouble, our certain hope that justice will one day be satisfied. Revelation 18 predicts the fall of Babylon, which represents the evil of the world. Judgment will come. Micah reminds us that those gathered against God's people "do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan" (4:12). God will one day reign over his people "from this time forth and forevermore" (v. 7). As we prepare to celebrate Jesus's incarnation and first coming, we can also celebrate his anticipated return as judge at his second coming.

Like the passages we read today, the poem "I Heard the Bells on



Christmas Day” poignantly captures the dissonance between the suffering and sin that surround us and the promise of peace on earth that we celebrate at Christmas (Luke 2:14). Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned the poem on December 25, 1863. Not long before, his wife had died tragically, and then his oldest son was seriously wounded in the Civil War. Longfellow recounts that he “heard the bells on Christmas day,” and then “the cannon thundered in the south.” He continues:

*And in despair I bowed my head;  
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;  
“For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

But just as the prophet Micah and the apostle John in the book of Revelation do not stop with recounting the sin, oppression, and suffering in the world, so Longfellow follows lament with a reminder of our hope:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”*

What a beautiful conclusion—that, even louder than despair, rings the message that “God is not dead” and “The Right [shall] prevail.”

With Longfellow, the prophet Micah, and the apostle John, may we too rejoice in hope. Even amid the sin and suffering of our times, may we find comfort in our confidence that one day Christ will come again to judge evil and make the world new.

**Becky Dummermuth**  
**Counsel**  
**First Liberty Institute**

## Wednesday, December 6

### Advent Is about Opposites

*Micah 5:1–5*

*Luke 21:34–38*

Advent cannot be contained in any December. It bursts beyond a liturgical cadence of candles and hymns and readings. The themes of Advent are more than a season's worth of exhortations calling us away from sin and toward hope. Advent is about hope himself. Jesus Christ comes into our lives carrying the entire future that God holds for us. With eyes open, we see the promise in his hands: In the face of our certain death, life overflowing with life. In the grip of our inevitable failures, grace upon grace. In the tumble of our shortcomings, freedom. Opposites!

Once we shivered with the excitement of great expectations, but these we squandered and sent drifting into the abyss. Once we dreamt noble dreams; now we slumber in a nightmare. Opposites!

The duration of pain for those who miss the meaning of Advent lasts for more than four weeks. It can be a lifetime of drought. The opposite of Advent's flourishing is the death of the soul, withering in sin and guilt. And not only one's own spiritual self, but all that's meant to make life meaningful—our family, friendships, and the relationships that form the bedrock of our very culture. Rather than moving together toward a common future, we fracture when we overinvest in the opposite of Advent, the present moment.

Western culture too often provides an ample supply of the ready-made remedies falsely promising to ease our existential bruises and spiritual pain. Attempting to anesthetize ourselves, we feast on overindulgence. We taste too much of life's pleasure. We waste and abuse the Creator's gifts. It is not by accident that overdrinking and loneliness are conjoined in the holiday season.

We are not the first to feel this sense of being cut off—this slow dying in a dusty valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37), this deep descent into a “waterless pit” (Zech. 9:11). That we're not the first is good news. It means that there

is a precedence, a path back to life. God has a history of calling people in groups, cultures, and societies back into rightly ordered relationship with the Father. This call to come home is not individualistic. While it is personal, it is not private. Martin Luther, in lectures on Micah, punctuates this point: “Because of His goodness, God Almighty warns us, just as He warned the Jews with many prophets and an abundance of words. He calls us to repent” (Luther’s Works, 18:208). God does the opposite of deserting us.

The Spirit speaks through the prophet Micah—his words as trustworthy and fresh as the ancestral wisdom from which they spring. Because despite the surging river of true promises that flow for us, we, like God’s people of old, have a disappointing history of sluggish unresponsiveness. Yet, the Ancient of Days visits us still today. The water of baptism and the blood of the cross “come forth . . . from of old” (Mic. 5:2).

Micah shatters the torpor, sounds the messianic alarm, blows the trumpet. He cries out, “Muster your troops! Marshal your forces! Mobilize your defenses!”

But then, once more, the seeming opposite happens. Jesus isn’t born in a prestigious cultural center like Rome or Athens or Alexandria. The fullness of God arrives in an unexpected location. God renews our broken culture from worldly sources that are the opposite of what we might expect—from the unsuspecting town of Bethlehem, “too little to be among the clans of Judah.” Yet, ironically, from that backwater “shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel” (v. 2).

And neither is God’s manner of ruling quite what we might expect. It is no well-funded political machine, nor ideologically righteous revolution, nor charmingly powerful cult of personality. This one with strength and majesty (v. 4), this one, the consummation of our wholeness (v. 5), this one who carries the entire future that God holds for us, enters our culture in a crib and redeems it on a cross.

So, wake up. Hear him, as if for the first time. Have hope. Be the opposite of dead.

**John Nunes**  
**Senior Fellow**

## Thursday, December 7

### Faithful Tenacity

*Hosea 6:1–6*

*1 Thessalonians 1:2–10*

What kept William Wilberforce going on his quest to end the evils of the slave trade and Lord Shaftesbury in his endeavors to halt the use of child labor in sweeping chimney flues? Wilberforce proposed his first resolution to the British Parliament on the slave trade in 1789, some seventeen years before the abolition bill passed after years of toil, setback, and defeat. Shaftesbury introduced legislation to outlaw child sweeps in 1840, with final success coming in 1875 after some thirty-five years of gathering evidence and organizing campaigns against a practice he saw as satanic.

In our Advent devotion today we focus on faithful tenacity, perhaps the best description of what Wilberforce and Shaftesbury represented. Faithful is, of course, the opposite of what we see in the people of Israel throughout much of the Old Testament, not least in our reading in Hosea, which concentrates on Israel's faithlessness and, indeed, fickleness. For Israel, faithfulness was passing, shallow, vacillating, erratic and unpredictable; in other words, something temporary, deployed when useful, but not character forming or shaping. Hence, Hosea 6:4: "Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away." It is a love that does not last. God, however, requires the opposite: conviction, commitment, and steadfastness. We see this set out in verse 6: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." This steadfast love for the Lord is what provided the faithful tenacity that drove Wilberforce and Shaftesbury. They could so easily have given up when the going got tough, their faith mocked, friends and allies deserting them. Yet, rooted in the steadfast love of God, in the hope of the Lord Jesus and his return, they did not. Faithful tenacity.

But what about us? Will we, in our own active citizenship, in our defense of liberty, demonstrate equal tenacity and similar depth of character? Advent

is nothing if it is not preparing for the deep things of God to take root in our hearts and lives, that we too may rejoice when the nation revives and returns to the Lord (vv. 1–2). This requires commitment, a passion to know God and to live for him.

The moral formation of character begins with the idea of call. Without moral character and without Christian call we will live for ourselves rather than God—a problem that seems to beset so many of our political and civil leaders. Let us show a better way. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 that God “has chosen you.” Now, of course, this is written partially in the context of being chosen for salvation, but there is also the underlying concept of responding to God’s call on our lives. Chosen, spiritually, for salvation, but chosen, temporally (on this earth), to serve. That is the dynamic combination that ensures an active Christian life of service and avoids an unbiblical separation of the sacred and the secular.

God has chosen us for a purpose and we live out that purpose in his sight. That, of course, is the source of the formation of Christian character and Christian ethical behavior. Wilberforce and Shaftesbury were clear about that call on their lives. Wilberforce sought counsel from John Newton, the ex-captain of a slave-trading ship (and author of “Amazing Grace”) about his call to public life. Shaftesbury wrote that he wanted nothing but usefulness to God and his country and that he wanted to establish a public policy based on the Bible. Thank God they did not give up; thank God for their faithful tenacity.

Paul praised and gave thanks for the Thessalonian church’s “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3). It is the call to service, to faithfulness and hope, empowered by the Holy Spirit (v. 5), and to place our hope in the promise of faithful revival (Hos. 6:2) and in the promised return of Christ (1 Thess. 1:10). Let us, then, in the light of these promises, live out, in our own service, lives of faithful tenacity.

**Richard Turnbull**  
**Senior Fellow**

## Friday, December 8

### Rejoice Freely!

*Jeremiah 1:4–10*  
*Acts 11:19–26*

In the first reading for today, the Lord tells Jeremiah that he has commanded him to break down, destroy, and overthrow—yet his instruction does not stop there. Jeremiah is also instructed to build and plant. As we are reminded of Mary’s conception of Christ this Advent, we are also reminded of the newness to come—the creation of the new order given to us by Christ the incarnation. The Lord not only became man to merely fulfill prophecies, but also to establish a new law for the rest of humankind. And even further, to give us the grace of the Holy Spirit for all Christians to be filled with and guided by him.

In the second reading, Barnabas is said to have been “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Because of Barnabas’s faithfulness and the grace of the Lord, many believed in the gospel. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the disciples built and planted communities of believers. Christians of the modern age share the same instruction to build and plant just as the Christians in Antioch did and just as the Lord commanded Jeremiah. As Christians, we live out our faith as our religious traditions instruct us and how our own personal convictions compel us to exercise them in our daily lives.

Thankfully, we live in a nation that allows for religious freedom, unlike the early Christians who suffered persecution. As we know, however, this has not always been the case. The early American colonists of Plymouth Plantation shared a similar type of persecution to that of the early Christians: religious intolerance. Our country is established out of persecution to allow for people of all religions to practice their beliefs freely.

Just as the Christians of Antioch, we are to “remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (v. 23). Living out the right to live according to our religious convictions, we are free to build flourishing, Christian



communities. This Advent, we publicly assemble for candlelight vigils and privately observe religious traditions in our homes without fear of being fired from our jobs or thrown in jail. On the contrary, when religious peoples exercise their obligations and convictions, society more favorably respects the dignity of individuals and the rights of its citizens. Flourishing societies emerge when citizens within a civil society practice their individual faiths with sincerity and piety. Together, families, churches, and other institutions play a key part in forming society, just as Barnabas and Saul worked with the church in Antioch to spread the gospel of the Lord.

Despite our age and ability, as concerns Jeremiah in our first reading, and because of our freedom of religious expression, shared by the Christians in Antioch and colonial America, let us rejoice freely and celebrate ardently this Advent season as we await the birth of Christ that marks the newness that has already come and will return again in glory!

**Morgan Kathleen Miller**  
**Alumni Relations Manager**

## Saturday, December 9

### Who's in Charge?

*Ezekiel 36:24–28*

*Mark 11:27–33*

Who's in charge? Who's the authority? Often I think, or at least act like, I am. Much of the time, however, I discover that is the farthest thing from the truth. When I think about a misplaced sense of authority, I'm reminded of a story I once heard about a governor in the midst of a reelection campaign. One day after a busy morning where the governor had made several campaign stops, he arrived at a church barbecue. It was now late afternoon and having skipped lunch, the governor was famished. As the governor moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put one piece of chicken on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

*“Excuse me,” the Governor said, “do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?” “Sorry,” the woman told him. “I’m only supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person.” “But I’m starving,” the Governor said. “Sorry,” the woman said again. “Only one to a customer.” The Governor, a modest and unassuming man, decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. “Do you know who I am?” he said. “I’m the governor of this state.” “Do you know who I am?” the woman said. “I’m the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister.” (Bits & Pieces, May 28, 1992, 5–6)*

In today's passage from Mark, the Jewish leaders seek to question Jesus's authority. They want to know “by what authority” he is doing “these things” (Mark 11:28). As chief priests, scribes, and elders, at the very top of Jewish society, they mistakenly see themselves as the ones in authority, not the itinerant, young carpenter turned preacher. But Jesus knew what they failed to grasp. He didn't need their approval. He wasn't under their authority.

Instead, he understood that God the Father had given him complete authority over everything (John 13:3). Scripture reveals that Jesus is the one really in charge, not the Jewish leaders, and certainly not me. So when questioned, Jesus's response is somewhat like the chicken lady's retort to the governor: move along, Jewish leaders.

Like these leaders, we frequently question Jesus's authority in our lives. That's our nature, our flesh, our heart of stone that today's passage from Ezekiel references. We fail to recognize that Jesus is the one who's truly in control, despite our own sense of importance. But the good news for us as believers is that God has given each of us (literally, put within us) a new heart of flesh when we receive him and his Spirit (Ezek. 36:26). Once received and recognized, his Spirit within us causes us to align with his authority, "to walk in [his] statutes" and "to obey [his] rules" (v. 27).

We cannot do this on our own. It happens only when we receive and activate his Spirit in our lives, take up his cross, and follow him daily (Luke 9:23). Only then can we live a Spirit-controlled life with a proper recognition of his authority over everything.

This principle of a Spirit-controlled life that enables us to live under proper authority not only governs us as individuals, it applies to our families, our communities, and even our nation. In his letter to the Massachusetts militia, founding father and America's second president, John Adams, observed, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. . . . Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Likewise, in his presidential Farewell Address, George Washington, the father of our country and our first president, concluded, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

Our founders recognized the biblical principle that only through true religion (a life enabled and controlled by the Spirit) can a democracy flourish. As the passage today from Ezekiel concludes, then we "shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezek. 36:28).

**Jeff Mateer**  
**Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer**  
**First Liberty Institute**

| *Bethlehem Candle* |

We remember Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem during the second week of Advent. The Bethlehem Candle represents this event and the virtue of peace.



## Sunday, December 10

### A Risk-Free Investment

*Isaiah 40:1–11*

*2 Peter 3:8–18*

*Mark 1:1–8*

To purchase a ticket to an outdoor event is an act of faith. The big baseball or football game, the outdoor concert, and the air show are all fragile things. Though promised, they are not guaranteed to come to fruition. Bad weather, a pandemic, or simply the illness of a key performer can ruin them.

Skilled planners will take those risks into consideration. Nevertheless, to spend money in advance for the right to attend such an event remains a risky investment. The future is not ours to control. And there are other risks that we may not think about. We seldom build riots, military coups, and civil wars into our event planning. Especially if we live in a stable republic or democracy with an established rule of law, we take civic peace for granted. Whatever else we hope will happen, we hope—we generally expect—that we will enjoy peace. Peace is a necessary condition for all of the social goods that we enjoy. Many of us take it for granted. But those who have lost it long for peace before all else.

Supernatural goods also depend upon peace. We cannot glorify a violent god, nor enjoy friendship with an unjust and capricious god. Eternal life would be an eternal misery in a condition of war or exploitation; it would be hell. Only a God of peace is worthy of our trust and adoration. “Comfort, comfort my people,” the God of Israel instructs his prophet (Isa. 40:1). Tell the people about an event when warfare will have ended and when God has returned to rule his people. This God is not like the other gods. He does not rule capriciously. He is righteous. He rules by his ordering Word, the same Word by which he created and sustains all good things. Unlike other gods, this God does not demand infant sacrifices. Instead,

*He will tend his flock like a shepherd;*



*he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young. (v. 11)*

The God of Israel is the God of peace

Centuries later, another prophet appears, John the Baptist, preparing the way for the ordering Word who brings peace. The peace he promises to those who follow him is not merely the absence of violence and political turmoil. It is the absence of all sin—perfect righteousness. So, to receive him we must first confess our own sins and repent of them.

Peter later writes at a time when the Word has come and gone. The Messiah gave his followers hope for the inauguration of a future kingdom, an eternal gathering of all who love righteousness and peace. But then he left. And still peace is elusive. Scoffers mock those who follow the Word. “Where is the promise of his coming?” (2 Peter 3:4). Nothing has changed. “Remember what the prophets told you,” Peter admonishes. And have faith that the kingdom of peace is imminent. Yes, it seems like a long time from our limited, time-bound perspective. But Peter teaches “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (v. 8). The kingdom of peace will arrive suddenly. In an instant, the world of disruption, war, and turmoil will dissolve away. Then it will be as if the only existence we have ever known is one of peace. God will rule in righteousness forever.

Let us invest in that future event, which neither storms nor traffic jams nor civil wars can disrupt or ruin. To be sure, the price is high. We must “be diligent” about ordering our own lives, so that when the ordering Word returns he will find us “without spot or blemish, and at peace” (v. 14). But this investment is risk-free. We know beforehand what is coming. Peace is on the way.

**Adam MacLeod**  
**Research Fellow**

# Monday, December 11

## Called to the Common Good

*Isaiah 26:7–15*

*Acts 2:37–42*

It seems as though we're constantly living in "these uncertain times." At this moment, we're concerned with ongoing global conflicts, wars, injustice abroad and at home, and our country is seemingly fracturing along political and cultural lines. Despite the events of the world, we see throughout Scripture that God will lay out a path for those who believe in him. (Isa. 26:7)

But how do we know what that path is? It's easy to remember that God will judge the unrighteous and unleash his wrath. We love to hear verses like Isaiah 26:11 that mention God bringing down his fire on his adversaries. We could sit and wait and yearn and pray for God's judgment on the unrighteous, but is that what we are supposed to do?

In Acts 2, while the apostles are preaching on Pentecost, thousands are being saved and asking Peter what they should do. To which he replies, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38). But he doesn't stop there. He continues, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (v. 40). Now, we know Peter doesn't mean that we can literally save ourselves, as though we could bring about our own salvation. So, what could he mean?

Peter says we've been filled with the Holy Spirit. We know of another verse that mentions receiving the Spirit: 1 Corinthians 12:7, which says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." So, instead of waiting, judging, and praying for the downfall of our enemies, we should be using our God-given gifts to work toward the common good, to be good citizens, to be involved in civil society, and to transform the world we live in, saving ourselves and others from this crooked generation. We can be good citizens by volunteering in our communities, creating institutions

that provide a societal good, and sharing the love of Christ through our involvement. As Christians, we should be actively striving to heal the divides we see in our communities, find peace, help those less fortunate, and care for the needy and the sick and the orphans and the widows. These are commands given by Jesus himself. We know that where the church is active outside the walls of a building, societies flourish and nations grow and prosper. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and the other compilers of the Book of Common Prayer understood how important it is for the church to work toward the common good, and they included an entire section of Prayers for the Social Order. As we enter into the season of Advent and go onward into the next year, let us remember the Prayer for Social Justice and the common good to which we are called:

*Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Lindy Dimsdale Dolenz**  
**2021 Shaftesbury Fellow**  
**Managing Editor, The Reading Wheel Review**

## Tuesday, December 12

### God's Surprising Work

*Isaiah 4:2–6*

*Acts 11:1–18*

When I read through Scripture I find one undeniable truth and one almost unbelievable promise illustrated again and again: we have made a terrible mess of things, and God is in the business of setting things right. The undeniable truth that we have besmirched God's good creation is everywhere throughout the Scriptures, and everywhere in the news and in front of our eyes and ears (and in our hearts if we are honest). It is hard to think of a more verifiable Christian doctrine than that of original sin!

And yet the forever surprising and miraculous truth of our faith as particularly manifest in this Advent season is God has not left us in the mess we have made but entered the mess himself so that someday we can be taken out of it. It's only by taking the mess seriously that we can appreciate the good ending described to us in Isaiah's prophecy. The beauty and the glory, the fruit of the land, God's provision and shelter for us by night and by day—this vision of God's eternal goodness for us only makes sense against the backdrop of the filth and the sin and the blood that made God's rescue of us necessary. We must take the bad news seriously before we can begin to appreciate the almost unbelievable good news (gospel) of what God has done for us. It may sound strange, but this relationship between the mess and the promise helps me when I'm discouraged by the particular messes our culture is stewing in our particular moment. As disappointing as the latest downturn in our society may be for the common good and our flourishing, I shouldn't be surprised by how strong and stubborn our brokenness remains. If human sin and injustice were a trivial matter, it wouldn't have taken the sacrifice of our Lord to set things right.

If the what of God's promise is amazing, the for whom is also encouraging and surprising. Peter's account of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts should be a constant reminder that our struggle for what's right in our country and

beyond is not against “flesh and blood” but against powers and principalities (Eph. 6:12). The first gentile convert was an officer in the occupying army of the enemy of Israel. The most prolific author in the New Testament, Paul, got his start as a persecutor of Christians. The culturally despised Samaritans and turncoat tax collectors make several key appearances in the Gospels. Peter’s testimony that the Holy Spirit came upon the gentiles must have been a terrible shock for him and for his pious Jewish audience. And yet when they saw the evidence of the fruit of God’s work, they accepted their unlikely new brothers and sisters and rejoiced. This is a good lesson for me, as I am sometimes tempted to write off my neighbors and fellow citizens who advance causes I find harmful, puzzling, and sometimes even abhorrent. I cannot pretend to know the mind or plans of God with regard to whom he will bring to himself, but I should act myself so as to further that prospect and rejoice in it as opposed to sulking like Jonah when God reached out to save Nineveh. God calls us and our culture to righteousness, and in this season we remember that he sent Jesus to make our righteousness possible. The power that authored the incarnation and powered the resurrection is still at work today despite this present darkness. Let us be open to furthering God’s work for the good news he has proclaimed and for those made in his image to whom he has proclaimed it. May our response to God’s surprising work be like Peter’s: “Who are we to think we can stand in God’s way?”

**Micah Watson**  
**Shaftesbury Fellow Mentor**

## Wednesday, December 13

### The Wisdom of the Just

*Malachi 2:10–3:1*  
*Luke 1:5–17*

Although not Catholic, I have been listening to two podcasts by Father Mike Schmitz daily this year. In early November 2022, I read an announcement of his new podcast on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which struck me as interesting. Then I saw that he had previously created a podcast titled “The Bible in a Year,” which had become Apple’s most downloaded podcast in the religion and spirituality category. That made me curious. So, I started listening to that one too. Since, at the time of writing this devotional, I had not yet arrived at the readings for today in the latter podcast, I consulted Ascension’s combined Bible and catechism app to get a better idea of the background of the reading from Malachi in particular.

The prophet Malachi probably lived around the year 450 BC, in the period of the return from the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people, which had begun in 538 BC. The physical exile was ultimately due to the spiritual unfaithfulness of the Jewish people. That is all too recognizable to us. As Ascension’s app describes it, “Here, Israel’s story is a microcosm of humanity’s larger story of alienation from God due to sin and our separation from his holy presence.” The purpose of the exile was to bring the people of Israel to repentance and purification. Although after their return, the people want to live more in accordance with God’s law, the reading from Malachi shows that their efforts were only moderately successful.

Indeed, once again, Malachi denounces the people’s unfaithfulness to God and to one another. However, Malachi does something more. He announces the coming of an even greater prophet, who is also the last, in the person of John the Baptist. We read about the announcement of the birth of this “prophet of the Most High” (Luke 1:76) in today’s second reading. John the Baptist, in turn, will pave the way for the coming of God’s Son himself, the commemoration of whose birth we look forward to in this

Advent season. Jesus, through his death on the cross, will bring about the forgiveness of sins and thus restore our relationship with God forever.

Although the entire second reading may be called iconic without exaggeration, the most beautiful passage for me comes at the very end of it. There it says that John the Baptist will “turn . . . the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” (v. 17). Last year I reread the integral wisdom books of the Bible: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, as well as the deuterocanonical books Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach, and was very impressed by them. There is simply no scholarly or other literature that can even match these, with the exception of the great works of the European tradition, the Christian ones of which are themselves stamped by these wisdom books.

It indeed takes wisdom to be faithful to God and our neighbor. Here lies a great responsibility, for example, also for the CRCDC. After all, the CRCDC wants to engage in cultural advocacy, among other things. It must do so by offering only the best of the best. Some of my colleagues have therefore begun to teach students integral books of the Bible, such as Exodus or the Gospel of Matthew. That is the opposite of the narrow-mindedness that is so often visible in contemporary scholarly literature, in particular. God himself is wisdom and truth. To be just is to be wise, and to be wise is to be just.

The CRCDC does not need to evangelize directly, nor do I or my colleagues. There are other institutions for that, which are better equipped to do so. However, if the above is true, passing on wisdom can be considered an indirect form of evangelism. In any case, it contributes to realizing (public) justice. There are lesser goals to engage or reflect on during Advent time.

**Hans-Martien ten Napel**  
**Senior Fellow**

## Thursday, December 14

### Faithful Patience

*Habakkuk 2:1–5*  
*Philippians 3:7–11*

The prophet Habakkuk foretells the Advent message: Wait for it; it will surely come. And those who wait in faith shall live (Hab. 2:4). God commanded that the prophecy be written down so that future generations can verify its fulfillments. But God also said that the prophecy would not be fulfilled for a long time, that patience was required.

In writing of the Babylonian conquest, Habakkuk preaches that those who trust in the Lord shall survive the impending doom, that those who wait patiently for God's mercy will receive justification and eternal life. In previewing a key message of the New Testament, Habakkuk warns that earthly wealth is transitory and treacherous (v. 5).

Saint Paul repeats this message when he writes that nothing on earth can compare or compete with a true encounter with Christ—an encounter made possible through Christ's birth at Bethlehem. Compared with the supreme good of knowing Christ, everything else is a loss (Phil. 3:8). The only path to true life leads not through the law or earthly gains but through faith in Christ Jesus (v. 9). This path cannot be constructed through human endeavors nor the accumulation of worldly gains; it can only pass through Jesus. Faith is the only reliable compass. And through his nativity, Jesus gives us the direction for that compass.

No greater message can accompany our Advent journey—that our whole lives and pursuits must be focused on Christ. In their simplicity, the shepherds on that first Advent showed us how to live: to marvel at the joy and salvation that only God can give us. As Christ teaches in Matthew's Gospel, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19–21). "Those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches . . . their



graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations. . . . This is the path of those who have foolish confidence (Ps. 49:6, 11, 13).

There is so much about faith and the divine mysteries that is difficult to accept and trust. As Saint Paul cautions, there is much in the Christian faith that is foolishness or a stumbling block to nonbelievers (1 Cor. 1:23). But the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. This message of the true treasure of life, the only lasting guide to life, stretches from Habakkuk to Saint Paul. It is a foundation of Christian life. And yet, how often do we ignore or forget it? How often do we live in disregard of this truth?

We want to focus on material wealth and human accomplishment. We yearn to measure our lives by the standards of the world. But Christmas pulls our vision and our tendencies back to the one truth. Christmas reminds us to resist lowering our pursuit from the one true treasure. How easy it is for us who strive to create a more enlightened democracy and uplifting culture to forget that faith in Christ Jesus is all that ultimately matters. Our work is important; it is what God calls us to do during our time on earth. But it can never substitute for the only thing that really matters. To paraphrase Christ's teaching in Luke, celebrate not that you accomplish certain deeds on earth but that your name is written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

This is not to say that we should not try on earth to do our very best to build in our own way a culture compatible with and supportive of the will of God, mindful that it is not our work that really matters but God's will. We do not know where God takes us or our work; we do not know when what we think of as human failure or folly is really the wisdom or strength of God. Maybe all we can do is our best, and then remember that God is behind everything and that we, under Habakkuk's guidance, must be patient.

**Pat Garry**  
**Senior Fellow**

## Friday, December 15

### In the Midst of the Years, We Have Hope

*Habakkuk 3:2–6*

*Philippians 3:12–16*

“O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy” (Hab. 3:2). In the midst of the years—Habakkuk was in the midst of the years when he penned his book in the seventh century BC awaiting Babylonian captivity. Mary and Joseph were in the midst of the years when strenuously journeying from Nazareth to Bethlehem with scandal at their heels.

Today we often feel as though we are simply in the midst of the years as the daily struggles of life in a fallen world weigh heavy around us in our various vocations. Toil, strife, boredom, waiting, grief, anxiety, and seclusion fill our heads with the pounding notion that we are simply in the midst of the years. In a very real sense, we are. As Paul says, we spend our lives “straining forward” toward perfection, which is impossible on earth (Phil. 3:13), and sometimes we find ourselves losing hope, losing faith in our mighty God’s works much like the Israelites to whom Habakkuk preached. And just like Habakkuk, God’s prophet to the Jews, and Paul, God’s prophet to the nations, we have one foot in two different kingdoms: this temporal world and the eternal gospel.

The beautiful thing is that we are granted hope in both realms—hope that is longing and hope that is fulfilled. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, has come into the world to die in payment for our sins and to rise in defeating death for our eternal life. Our hope—the hope of Habakkuk, the hope of Paul, the hope for eternal life in perfection in a new heaven and new earth, a hope for righteousness—has been and will be fulfilled through Christ. “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil. 3:12). The work that was begun in each of us through our baptism will be completed on the

last day.

While we wait in the midst of the years with a foot in both kingdoms, we have the option either to live in what Saint Augustine calls the city of God, which is the love of God, or in the city of man, which is the love of self. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we live in the city of God, the city of hope, a city called Bethlehem, where Christ was born for us, a city called Jerusalem, God's holy house. As citizens of the city of God yet still living in our world today, we are called to hold true to the faith and to live holy lives according to it. It is here that we take another note from Saint Augustine: while we live in the city of God while on earth, as pilgrims, we are "happy in hope." We are able to, "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call," and "hold true to what we have attained," which is our heavenly righteousness and daily sanctification, through our hope in Christ (vv. 14, 16). No salvation, eternal life, good works, or acts of heroic service that we pursue are ours through any merit or capabilities inherent within us. Good works are enabled within us through Jesus, who has called us through the Holy Spirit to them.

Without Christ, we are unable to live in the city of God, but through the faith and hope given to us, we struggle, we persist, and we are victorious. The city of God is where human flourishing takes place. For our hope is not in vain. Christ will return. "His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power" (Hab. 3:4). Like the sun rising in the east, as Habakkuk describes, Christ's glory and his ways are everlasting. His light shines before us this Advent, guiding the way toward the manger, to our Lord, to our hope in a world full of darkness. In him there is no more fear, and his praises are due. So, in the midst of all the years, lift your voice to him, in all circumstances, following the example of Habakkuk and Paul, in praise, thanks, and most importantly, hope.

**Nadia Hartwig**  
**2023 Shaftesbury Fellow**

## Saturday, December 16

### A People Brought from No to Yes

*Habakkuk 3:13–19*

*Matthew 21:28–32*

I remember very well the first time I read Habakkuk 3. I had only been a Christian for a few years, having been raised in a nonbelieving home. I was in my first year out of college, teaching in a small Christian school in rural Virginia, toiling in a position that was fraught with difficulties and new tribulations and trials almost every day. The children were difficult to motivate. The parents were often uncooperative and suspicious of those in authority. And the administration of the school was often small-minded, petty, fickle, and unsupportive.

But by God's grace, I had the hope and trust of a new believer. I was reading many passages of the Bible for the very first time. With fresh eyes and fresh perspective, I was astonished at God's promises—that God was indeed in control of time and space, that no circumstance escaped his notice, and that his work in the world was for his glorification and the blessing of those who put their trust in him. Even the bad things in the world—the sin, grief, tragedy, perplexity, frightfulness, and oppression—all these things worked toward the salvation of God's people. As a new Christian, and without the jaded attitude that often comes with age, I was profoundly amazed.

And who are those who put their trust in the Lord? Who are those who can be called God's people? God's people are those who initially said "No!" to God, but later considered his call and submitted to his rule over them. Not one of all those saints, apostles, prophets, or martyrs that we know so well from the Bible and church history ever made the initiative with God, ever started with obedience and trust in him, or upon hearing God's voice for the first time said, "Yes." Every single person—dead, living, and yet to be born—who is a follower of Christ initially revolted against him. But by his grace, they are children of God because they thought better of the

matter, and believed in him. Their circumstances might not change, their world might not get better, but they crossed over from death to life.

And that is the message of Christmas. While sin and death are all around us, while we ourselves are hopelessly slaves to rebellion against God, God came down in the person of Christ. He took the initiative. He called our names. And while in ourselves we respond with “No!,” God by his Holy Spirit enables us to respond to his call by saying “Yes.” Our world goes on in sin, but we have crossed from death to life.

The people of God—those who have believed in Christ while most others have rejected him—are in the position of shining the light of God in this dark world. At home, at work, in the neighborhood, the town, the county, the state, the nation, and the world, the people of God make up the instruments he uses to bring life from death, light from darkness, and rejoicing from weeping. The culture in which we live may be rotting, but the people of God are the salt of the earth. It is through the people of God that he preserves culture, in order that when he calls, his Spirit moves in such a way as to bring his own to himself.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

**John Wilsey**  
**Research Fellow**

The third Sunday of Advent is unique. This week we light a pink candle, the only candle in the traditional Advent wreath that is not purple. Gaudate Sunday, as the third Sunday of the season is often called, takes its name from the Latin term for “rejoice.” The candle that we light is the Shepherd’s Candle, because this week we remember especially the joy that the shepherds experienced when the angels announced to them, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). The print for this week incorporates references to the traditional themes and special liturgical color for Gaudate Sunday.





## Sunday, December 17

### Preparing for Joy

*Isaiah 65:17–25*

*1 Thessalonians 5:12–28*

*John 3:22–33 or John 1:19–28*

The entire Advent season is about preparation, about getting ready for something—indeed, someone—worth celebrating. Mary was preparing for the birth of Jesus, and when she traveled to visit her relative, Elizabeth said to her, “When the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44). The theme of joy reverberates throughout the prophecies concerning Christ’s coming. Many passages in the Old Testament tell God’s people to rejoice and be glad for what he has done. We can think of Miriam’s song, celebrating God’s deliverance of the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Ex. 15:21). Again and again throughout the Prophetic Books the people are reminded to remember the good things that the Lord has done for them, to rejoice in them and to be thankful for their blessings and God’s good gifts.

But this passage in Isaiah (65:17–25) looks forward rather than backward. Instead of remembering what God has done, Isaiah is proclaiming good news of what God will do in the future. The prophet is telling of a time when there will be even greater cause for rejoicing and for praising God than what he has already done. God promises to “create new heavens and a new earth,” where “the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (v. 17). This promise of a new creation anticipates the picture God reveals later of a time when he “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Or as Isaiah puts it, “No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress” (Isa. 65:19).

Isaiah goes on to list a whole host of kinds of suffering and loss that



will no longer happen in this new creation. Death will no longer hold sway. People will work profitably and enjoy the fruits of their labor. “They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity,” God promises through Isaiah, “for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD, and their descendants with them” (v. 23). The theme of rejoicing echoes throughout this passage. Indeed, God directly commands us to “be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create.” God creates “Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people” (vv. 18–19). Reversing the curse of sin that resulted in toil and struggle, God promises that in his new creation “my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands” (v. 22).

In this way the new heavens and the new earth are occasions for and objects of joy, for God and for his people. The prophet proclaims here the inbreaking of God’s coming kingdom. And we know that the coming of Jesus is the inauguration of that coming kingdom, which will be fully realized when he comes again. John the Baptist leaped for joy in his mother’s womb when the reality of Jesus’s coming came near him. And we are called to be joyful in anticipation of Christ’s second coming, even as we look backward and rejoice in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

We are given a foretaste of what God’s kingdom looks like in the prophetic foretelling in this passage from Isaiah and others throughout the Old Testament. We are given more insights into God’s kingdom and the new creation throughout Christ’s earthly ministry and the apostolic testimony. All of these teachings are helping to prepare us for the joy that we will experience in the new heavens and the new earth.

There’s a gospel song that picks up on Jesus’s teaching, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:3). Jesus has indeed gone to prepare a place for us. But he is also preparing us for that place. So in this time when we rejoice in Christ’s first coming and eagerly await his return, let us live joyfully and in so doing prepare to “enter into the joy” of the kingdom of our master, Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:23).

**Jordan Ballor**  
**Director of Research**

# Monday, December 18

## Standing in Righteousness

*1 Kings 18:1–18*  
*Ephesians 6:10–17*

“A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, ‘You are mad; you are not like us.’” This quote belongs to Saint Anthony the Great, the champion of Christian monasticism who is credited with being the father of the great tradition of monastic communities in the deserts of Egypt. This saying of his is found within a larger collection titled *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, which is a treasure trove of Christian wisdom on adhering to the Christian way of life in the midst of one’s lifelong struggle with sin and the passions.

For many Christians today, however, this quote is not merely a historical musing of a bygone age, but rather a prophetic saying that can easily describe our own time. We look around at what our communities, our churches, and even our families in some cases have become. We witness with horror the rising levels of depression and suicide among the youth of the nation. We see sexual deviancy not only widespread through all corners of society, but also promoted by our leaders and celebrities, to the point where even children are not spared. Little ones, who have been “knit together” in the womb by the Lord have their lives extinguished almost before they even began in the name of convenience or autonomy (Ps. 139:13–14). And most devastating of all, we see the name of Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the name at which “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10), disparaged and reviled and scorned, with those who confess Christ as Lord being told more and more with each passing day that they are not welcome in this new world. Not only are Christians being told that their faith is unacceptable in a private sense, but even more so in a public sense. To confess Jesus Christ in the public square is tantamount to blasphemy against the new religion, an offense against the new order. No longer are people told to “render to Caesar the things that

are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25), but rather told that everything belongs to Caesar, and nothing to God.

Yet despite these harsh circumstances, we have much to be joyful over. Indeed, Scripture not only warns Christians that these times are coming, but even gives us examples of them, particularly for what happens when the name of God is slandered and abandoned. In the first book of Kings, when the tyrant Ahab accuses the prophet Elijah of being a "troubler of Israel," it is Elijah who proclaims the truth of God: "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals" (1 Kings 18:17-18). The nations who abandon the Lord will face great hardship and suffering. Silencing the voice of conscience on matters of faith comes with grave consequences, and Christians throughout the ages have been fed by these words, willing to have their blood shed by the sword of Caesar in the name of God. Though we haven't reached this point in America, it is evident that Christians are now in the place of the prophets of the Old Testament; we must stand firm and proclaim the word, even in the presence of the Ahabs of today. This is not merely a religious but also a civic duty. If we wish the best for our nation and fellow countrymen, we should encourage our friends, our families, and our communities to adhere to Scripture and practice true Christian piety and fellowship, not only for the sake of their individual souls, but also for the soul of the nation.

The New Testament affirms this idea for the Christians of today. In Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Christians are called to "put on the whole armor of God" to fight a cosmic war against "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:11-12). This armor of God, of course, is not physical, but rather it consists of the virtues necessary for the struggle against sin: "Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (vv. 14-17). Christians are called to work with just governments and spread the news of the gospel to all people, from the lowliest peasant to the mightiest emperor. Yet at the

end of the day, the word of God must be obeyed over the word of man. When the authorities force us to take a stand, it must be a stand clothed in the righteous and true message of the triune God, armed with only the virtues of the Christian faith. Even when everyone seems to be against us, we are ultimately not alone, and God has shown time and time again that it is he, rather than the world and its rulers, who will have the last word. I end with a quote from Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, the great champion of the Christian orthodoxy of the First Ecumenical Council: “If the world is against the truth, then I will be against the world.”

**Giovanni Delpiero**  
**2023 Shaftesbury Fellow**

### Communities of Loving Service

*2 Kings 2:9–22*  
*Acts 3:17–4:4*

When I pick up a good book, I try to make myself receptive to the text and the truths it contains. I want to let the text stand for itself, and hopefully I can discover truth, goodness, and beauty within it. So, when I was asked to reflect on 2 Kings 2:9–22 and Acts 3:17–4:4, I opened my Bible, read the passages several times, and thought about the lessons and truths that these passages convey. By inviting you into my own reflections and thoughts about these passages, I hope I can help you think about the fundamental and eternal truths God reveals to us.

In 2 Kings 2:1–8, the Lord sends Elijah on several journeys, and Elisha follows each time, even though Elijah tells him it is not necessary. After completing these journeys together, Elijah tells Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you” (v. 9). Elisha only wants one thing, and that is for Elijah’s spirit to reside in himself. Elijah promises Elisha that his request will be fulfilled if he sees Elijah go home to the Lord. Fifty servants promise Elisha to go and find Elijah after he is taken from Elisha, even though Elisha tells them not to leave. When the servants fail to find Elijah, Elisha reminds them, “Did I not say to you, ‘Do not go?’” (v. 18). The passage for today then ends with Elisha healing the water in Jericho through the power of the Lord. The story of Elijah and Elisha reveals to us the importance of community and fellowship with each other. By loving and supporting each other, Elijah and Elisha were able to pursue the truth and the good. We should always endeavor to pursue truth and goodness even as it takes us out of our comfort zone. Cultivating a strong community filled with good, kind, and faithful people is so important because we become like the people who surround us. The servants’ fruitless search for Elijah reminds us to place our trust in the Lord. The Lord loves us and has a plan for each and every one of us. And when Elisha heals the water, we are reminded

that we can do great things for others and for our communities through the Lord.

In Acts 3:17–4:4, Peter and John meet a man who has been lame from birth. This man is unable to provide for himself, and he cannot do what most people take for granted. The lame man asks Peter and John for alms, but Peter replies, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (3:6). The people who witnessed this event stared with amazement at Peter, John, and the man they healed. From the moment this man was born, he was unable to walk, yet in one command, the man stands up and leaps with joy. Peter questions this wonder, and tells the people that this man is able to walk because of Jesus Christ. Peter says, “And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all” (v. 16). While Peter has the people’s attention, he preaches the good news to them. Peter says, “God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness” (v. 26). This story reveals how we can always help the people in our community, even if we do not have money or food to give. God works through us, and we can always help others by loving them. Our kindness and compassion toward others can make all the difference in someone’s life. We also can help those around us by inviting them to join us in loving God. It is our faith in Jesus Christ that gives us strength. It is through Jesus, who died on the cross for our sins, that we can live a flourishing and fulfilling life until we join him.

As we wait and prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, I hope we can reflect on the importance of being a part of a community and of serving the people in our community. My hope for all of us is that we love each other just as we love Jesus Christ, and I hope we never stop striving to love Jesus and each other more perfectly.

**Ardith Amon**  
**2022 Shaftesbury Fellow**

## Wednesday, December 20

### Devotion, Discipline, and Refinement

*Malachi 3:16–4:6*

*Mark 9:9–13*

As we inwardly digest these Scriptures, three themes emerge: devotion, discipline, and refinement. Malachi contrasts the righteous as the “one who serves God” with the wicked as the “one who does not serve him,” a distinction that reminds us of the importance of our devotion to God (Mal. 3:18). We all face daily demands that distract us from this essential calling—to be the righteous ones who serve God. But we need more than mere devotion. We need the discipline and refinement that keeps us on the narrow path leading toward God. Through devotion, discipline, and refinement we learn how to order our lives in such a way that it becomes instinctual to serve God and not ourselves.

When evaluating these things, I realized that devotion and discipline have elements within my control, making them more attainable. It is the refinement that often presents the tallest mountain because it requires such deep surrender. As we surrender, we trust God to remove from our lives that which is not of him. This is often painful—in Scripture, it is often likened to the “burning away” of something. When we allow ourselves to be refined, we trust God with the burning away of our selfishness and pride; this is essential if we want a life solely given unto him.

We can see the same image in nature. Fires, for example, have stages: ignition, growth, full development, and decay. It is what happens after these stages that is vital: the regrowth. After the fire has burned away what was there, something healthier can grow. Our spiritual lives mirror this process. To cultivate a healthy spiritual life, family, and community we must be willing to let the old die so that something greater can grow.

As we sit with teaching of the Scriptures and the challenge of devotion, discipline, and refinement, I hope the words from John Donne’s poem “Holy Sonnet 15” pierce your hearts with the joy that comes from being one of the

righteous.

*Wilt thou love God as he thee? Then digest,  
My soul, this wholesome meditation,  
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on  
In heaven, doth make His temple in thy breast.  
The Father having begot a Son most blest,  
And still begetting—for he ne'er begun—  
Hath deign'd to choose thee by adoption,  
Co-heir to His glory, and Sabbath' endless rest.  
And as a robb'd man, which by search doth find  
His stolen stuff sold, must lose or buy it again,  
The Sun of glory came down, and was slain,  
Us whom He had made, and Satan stole, to unbind.  
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
But, that God should be made like man, much more.*

**Jillian Barr**  
**Director of Programs**



## Thursday, December 21

### The Last and Lasting Word

*2 Samuel 6:1–11*  
*Hebrews 1:1–4*

“Poor Uzzah! He was only trying to help.” That may be what King David was thinking when the ark of the covenant’s homecoming parade turned into a funeral procession. We know David was angry. We know he was afraid. He learned that the ark was not to be trifled with because the Lord of all the earth had set it apart as the symbol of his glorious presence. More than that, it was set apart as the place where the Lord would speak to his people and where the sins of his people would be atoned for (Ex. 25:20–22; Num. 7:89; Lev. 16). David later learned that the error was not merely Uzzah’s, but that he and the other leaders of Israel had failed to follow God’s rules for transporting the ark. They weren’t allowed to drive it around on a cart. They weren’t even allowed to keep it from falling. To move it, touch it, or approach it in an unauthorized way was to receive the sentence of death (1 Chron. 15:13–15; Lev. 16:1–2).

If the Lord’s execution of Uzzah was shocking to David, who lived in that ancient Israelite culture of ritual, symbol, and sacrifices, how much more shocking is it to moderns like us who struggle to understand even a fraction of the symbols and system that were second nature to David? The incident of Uzzah and the ark is a stark reminder of God’s holiness and human sinfulness. How serious is the sinner’s crisis in the light of God’s holiness? So serious that God told his people about it over and over again, in many ways, for thousands of years. Even King David needed repeated reminders of the crisis of our sin and the purification required for sinners to approach the Lord of glory. The ark, the symbols, and the sacrifices of ancient Israel were a recurring word to a world that so easily forgets the Creator. More specifically, they were a recurring word to God’s people, who so easily forget their Redeemer.

After the Uzzah incident, King David was afraid to bring the ark into

his house. It was too dangerous. But what if the Lord of glory enters our house uninvited? What if he draws near to us?

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews seems to be every bit as familiar with Israelite culture as King David was. Nevertheless, he says that the Lord's entrance into this world is not a death sentence to be feared but a blessing to be embraced. The writer of this letter, like the apostle John, experienced the blessing of the entrance of God into this world in the person of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1–3). He was writing to first-century Christians who had Jewish heritage and who were ostracized from their families and communities because they had turned to Christ. It was a time, though, when any Christian, regardless of his or her heritage, might face the wrath of a Roman empire that despised dissent. In short, it was a world that had forgotten its Creator, and in that context God's people were tempted to forget their Redeemer.

The many times and many ways that God spoke in the past, including all that he said in the symbol and rituals of the ark of the covenant, are embodied and fulfilled in his Son. The blood of animals was sprinkled annually on the ark's mercy seat for the purification of sins; Jesus himself finished the work of purification, and so he sat down at the right hand of the Father. The ark was an outpost of God's power and reign in the midst of a sinful world; Jesus rules over the world—his world—and upholds all things by his powerful word. The ark contained the tablets of the law; Jesus has spoken the final word of grace in the gospel.

As Christians who live in a world where the Creator is forgotten, where the facts of God's holiness and humanity's sinfulness are disdained, and where we are tempted to forget or give up, God has provided a word for us. God has drawn near in his Son, not to break out against sinners as he did against Uzzah, but to make purification for their sins, to reveal his rule over all things, and to speak a word of grace in the gospel. God's Son, the last and lasting word, has rescued us from sin, and he upholds us even as he upholds the universe.

**Drew McGinnis**  
**Assistant Director of Research**

## Friday, December 22

### A Humility-Shaped Joy

*2 Samuel 6:12–19*  
*Hebrews 1:5–14*

These verses in 2 Samuel 6 tell the familiar story of King David dancing joyfully for the Lord “with all his might” before the ark of the covenant (v. 14). Finding his exuberant behavior to be unbecoming of a king, Saul’s daughter—and David’s wife—Michal, “despised him in her heart.” King David allowed himself to be overcome by joy, “leaping and dancing before the Lord,” despite whatever scorn he may receive, because he lived for God rather than the world (v. 16). As the verses in Hebrews 1 remind us, this world will pass away, but the Lord will remain forever.

The story of King David’s rejoicing in the presence of the ark is especially pertinent to the season of Advent. Not only does it present the type of disposition we might embrace in anticipating the coming of our King, but it contains parallels with the Advent story of the visitation between Elizabeth and Mary. Just as David leapt for joy in front of the ark, within which God’s law dwelt, the unborn John the Baptist leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary approached with Jesus dwelling in hers (Luke 1:39–45). Earlier in 2 Samuel, an awestruck David had asked, “How can the ark of the LORD come to me?” (2 Sam. 6:9). Similarly, Elizabeth exclaimed, “And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). Like David, Elizabeth’s joy was shaped by humility: both recognized that God was blessing them beyond what any human being could merit.

Hebrews 1 presents a glorious image of the Messiah who is the source of this joy. Christ, the true King, whose throne is “forever and ever” (v. 8), sits at the right hand of God and is worshiped even by the angels, who are themselves high and mighty. While these verses emphasize Christ’s eternal nature, they also paint a stark image of this world’s transient nature. The earth and the heavens are the works of his hands, and they will “all wear out like a garment.” Like a robe, the Lord will “roll them up” (vv. 11–12).

Creation, wondrous and vast, pales in comparison to the resplendency of Jesus Christ, who reigns over all.

This vivid imagery from Hebrews, contrasting the temporal world with the eternal kingship of Christ, brought to my mind C. S. Lewis's essay "The Weight of Glory." In it, Lewis provides the sobering reminder that the world is fleeting, and that our interactions with one another have eternal consequences: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit— immortal horrors or everlasting splendours." Thus, he states, "It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another." The world is transient, but it is not insignificant: it is through this temporal realm that we help lead one another to our ultimate end.

Thus, in our relationships, our work, and in our endeavor to create a culture devoted to true human flourishing—an endeavor that often earns us the same scorn that David received—we proceed knowing that our ultimate goal is the salvation of souls, and that we do not strive for this goal alone. As we seek to share the message of eternal life with our fellow immortals, let us share in King David's joy as well as his humility, knowing that God's love is greater than our weakness, and that Christ has already won the victory.

**Debbie O'Malley**  
**Research Fellow**

## Saturday, December 23

### God's Mighty and Unexpected Intervention

*Judges 13:2–24*  
*John 7:40–52*

Those of us who use a Bible lectionary to organize our daily devotions often find ourselves perplexed when we read, as we do in today's selection, two very different passages of Scripture placed in juxtaposition to one another. What, we wonder, are we to make of this odd combination? What, to be more specific, does the backstory to the birth of Samson have to do with a quarrel between the people and the Pharisees over the identity and ancestry of Jesus? But our appreciation of the multifaceted character of Scripture is greatly enhanced by such an exercise, since in the process we come to see how all the elements of the Scriptures are linked together, in conversation with one another, echoing and foreshadowing one another at every turn, and always showing us the ways of God, as expressed most perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the various ways that people respond to him.

The passage from Judges follows a pattern very familiar to us. There is an annunciation by an angel of a divinely ordained and miraculous birth, a child given to a humble woman who is thought incapable of having children. We see the same pattern in other places in the Bible: with Sarah, the mother of Isaac; Rebekah, the mother of Jacob; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. We could even include Mary, the mother of Jesus, as approximating the same pattern, since it required the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit to cause the virginal Mary to give birth.

The common theme in all these examples is that they overturn our human pretense to knowledge and certainty and insist that the powers and promises of God are superior to everything that we think we know. The authority who proclaimed that Manoah's wife (who curiously has no name here) was sterile—well, he did not know what he was talking about and did not reckon with God's mighty power to make all things new. And interestingly, we are

told that the angel of the Lord came first to the unnamed wife, returning only later, by request, to talk to her husband. And when asked his name by the husband, the angel declines to answer, and instead delivers a bit of a rebuke, informing Manoah that his name is “wonderful,” beyond human understanding (Judg. 13:18). And at the time of Manoah’s sacrifice, when the angel ascends heavenward miraculously within the flames, Manoah is paralyzed with fear. But his unnamed wife knows better, and recognizes that it is God’s hand at work. She humbly declines to expect understanding, seeking only to follow faithfully. One guesses that the angel declines to offer his identity partly out of humility, because he does not want to claim any importance for himself apart from the will of the one who sent him.

In the passage from John’s Gospel, we see something similar going on. Christ has just appeared and has spoken vividly and prophetically, capturing the minds and hearts of many of his auditors, convincing them that he may indeed be the long-promised Messiah. But others are not convinced. He’s from lowly Galilee, you see, and they know what that means. They know about his humble origins. The Scriptures say that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem and be a son of David. But Jesus doesn’t have the right pedigree for the job. He didn’t have the right parents, didn’t go to the right schools. But the people listened to him intently, and the temple guards were so moved by his words that they could not bring themselves to seize him. “No one ever spoke like this man!,” they say (John 7:46). But the Pharisees scoff and curse the unpedigreed mob that “does not know the law” (v. 49). The people are being taken in by a charlatan, they believe. When Nicodemus, the learned Pharisee who had secretly come to Jesus in the night with questions, suggests that Jesus should be given a chance to explain himself, they hurl it back at him in mockery: “Are you from Galilee too?” (v. 52). They think they know it all and have no desire to hear from the man who has so captivated the people. They are the experts, after all. Since when do the people know more than the experts?

But of course, sometimes they do. The experts are wrong here, and the common people are right. In both passages, we see how our commonplace expectations, our preconceptions, the things we “know” to be the case, can be overturned in a blink of an eye by the unexpected intervention of God’s mighty power. That is the reality we live in, not the day-to-day routine of the things we think we know. How often we need to be reminded of God’s

astounding power, and the thrill of possibility that comes of living in its shadow! Not just on special occasions, but every single day.

**Wilfred McClay**  
**Senior Fellow**

The virtue associated with the fourth Sunday of Advent is love, and the event in the nativity that we remember is the announcement of Christ's birth through the angel Gabriel. The candle for this Sunday is appropriately referred to as the Angel's Candle.





## Sunday, December 24

### The Greatest of These Is Love

*2 Samuel 7:1–17*

*Romans 16:25–27*

*Luke 1:26–38*

On this last Sunday in Advent, we focus on the virtue of love. Today, love has many faces. Love, as the culture defines it, typically focuses on the immediate and earthly experience. Love is tantamount to satisfaction and personal choice and is manifested in the form of tolerance and acceptance. Many slogans captures these sentiments, “Love is Love,” “All we need is love,” or “Love is a human right.” These mantras appeal to love, but a love rooted in self-love, or the notion of “expressive individualism” discussed in the works of Robert Bellah and Carl Trueman. This love is not the expression of self-sacrifice; it is the opposite. The love of self is tailored to this world and this life.

But then we have our Scripture passages. In the readings for today, we discover a deep, profound, cosmic love that captures the beauty of this splendid virtue—a love that originates in the Divine, but condescends to covenant with his people and relate to them. 2 Samuel 7:1–17 is the summary of what is traditionally called the Davidic covenant. This is the special promise God made with David that someone in David’s line will sit on David’s throne forever. This Son would have a special relationship with God (indeed, we now know that the Son is very God!). David’s Son would rule over an eternal, divine kingdom. This is the same kingdom promised to Abraham way back in Genesis 12, when, because of Abraham’s faith, God granted him a nation and a kingdom where God’s people would enjoy the blessings of God.

True love, then, is found embodied and exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ, the true Davidic king, who fulfills the Davidic covenant. As the angel said to Mary, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom

there will be no end” (Luke 1:31–33). This Son will be given “the throne of his father David,” yet this child is not merely a son, but the Son of God. As verse 35 says, “Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” The mystery of the incarnation defies the rational mind, but “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37), Luke assures us. This is the mystery that, Paul tells us in Romans, “was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God” (Rom. 16:25–26). This fulfillment of the covenant with David points toward the love of God for his people—a love that is providential and transcendent, that orders and governs all things for our good and for his glory. This mysterious love of God leads, guides, works, encourages, and keeps promises. Now this is the mystery, the love of God that condescended for us, that we celebrate together at Advent.

In the work we do at CRCO, we celebrate this love of God, a love that works in and through the people of God, the church. Love should and will ultimately define the people of God. Of the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and love, the greatest is love, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Augustine argues that love is the greatest because eventually, when Christ returns again, our faith becomes sight and our hope becomes realized and only love remains. “Now abides faith, hope, charity, these three,” Augustine writes, “but the greatest of these is charity: because, when a man shall have reached the eternal world, while the other two graces will fail, love will remain greater and more assured” (On Christian Doctrine, 39). Love between God and his people and among God’s people pervades the kingdom of God.

Democracy needs religion—and so it needs love—to function. “Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people,” John Adams wrote, “it is wholly inadequate to the government of any other” (“Letter to Massachusetts Militia”). Morality and virtue are the foundation of our republic and necessary for a society to be free. We need love, and the love of God is the love we need. May we remember this blessed Advent season the condescending love of God to send the Son to fulfill God’s promises, save his people, and prepare them to serve others in love until Christ comes again.

**Stephen Presley**  
**Senior Fellow for Religion & Public Life**

# Monday, December 25

## Our Ultimate Hope

*Isaiah 9:2–7*

*Titus 2:11–14*

*Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)*

The book of Isaiah is replete with lamentations about the sins of God’s people and the corruption of its rulers. Chapter one begins by describing a “sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evil doers, children who deal corruptly” (1:4), and its rulers are compared to those of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9–10). Today’s reading from Isaiah similarly describes a “people who walked in darkness . . . who dwelt in a land of deep darkness” (9:2).

And yet the book is also replete with the hope of salvation. The first chapter promises that “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (1:18), the second contains the beautiful image of “all the nations” beating “their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (2:2–4), and our passage makes it clear that this redemption will come about through God’s Son, who shall establish an everlasting kingdom characterized by justice and righteousness (9:6–7).

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, followers of God are called to repent of their sins and to actively seek the peace of the city wherein they dwell (e.g., 2 Chron. 7:14; Acts 2:38; Jer. 29:7). But it is noteworthy that in our passages for today, salvation comes through God’s work alone. Isaiah 9:6 states that “to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Similarly, in his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul makes it clear that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (2:11).

I love the United States of America, but it is hard to deny that we are coming to resemble the sinful people and rulers described in the first chapter of the book of Isaiah. We are far too willing to accept and participate in

sinful deeds, and far too many civic leaders promote such activities.

Christians have an obligation to seek the peace of the city. We do so in various ways, including sharing the gospel, taking care of widows and orphans, and advocating for peace, justice, and equality in the public square. It may be tempting to give up and withdraw to insular communities of fellow believers, but especially in a country where we enjoy the freedom of speech and the ability to vote for civic officials, such isolationism is irresponsible and unbiblical.

Nevertheless, on this of all days, we should remember that our ultimate hope comes through the birth of a baby in a dirty manger in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire. Jesus Christ is God's unearned gift to humanity, and through him we shall be redeemed and purified (Titus 2:14). When his kingdom comes in full, justice and righteousness shall be established "from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7).

**Mark David Hall**  
**Senior Fellow**



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