2024
ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

CENTER FOR RELIGION, CULTURE & DEMOCRACY

2024 Advent Devotional

The Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy

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CENTER FOR RELIGION, CULTURE & DEMOCRACY

Plano, Texas

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Contents

Intoductory Letter

Dear Friends,

The late Roger Scruton always took great pains to remind his audiences that no matter what else civilization is, "it is an inheritance, constantly expanding, constantly including new things." I often refer to the work of the CRCD as civilization-affirming. And in a world that calls on us to affirm all manner of things, I think it is particularly important that we affirm the things that have made it possible for us to live in a world largely, but imperfectly, marked by an appreciation for the dignity of each human person that has given rise to liberty, innovation, and a forward-looking optimism even when that world at times seems uncertain and unstable. Our civic virtues, which are informed by our Judeo-Christian heritage, are necessary prerequisites for our civilizational inheritance. As we see appreciation for that heritage erode, we'll see the blessings of this inheritance erode, too.

As Advent approaches, we are moved to remember that the arrival of Jesus was long anticipated by the Jews and celebrated by the gentiles. That inflection point in history set the ancient world on a new path. The coming of Jesus meant a rethinking of basic concepts of social life, such as family, citizenship, dignity, rights, and authority. This new trajectory ultimately gave birth to a new civilization. It is one that borrowed from the past, confidently innovated in the present, and passed along good things to the future.

Of course, Jesus was born into time and space and into a family and a larger community. Among the various traditional themes of Advent is a focus on the various biblical characters most intimately involved with his coming: John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus himself. That is the theme that we've selected for the 2024 CRCD *Advent Devotional*. Each week will begin with a reflection on verses specifically related to the roles that each of these people play in salvation history, and the week is then filled out by writings from a diverse and ecumenical mix of CRCD staff, alumni, friends, and partners.

We hope that you enjoy this small gift and that reading these reflections

will inspire a fresh gratitude for the civilizational heritage made possible only by the coming of our King. Thank you for all of the large and small ways that you've been a friend to the CRCD this year. We are looking forward to many more fruitful years working together.

Trey Dimsdale
Executive Director

Sunday, December 1

John the Baptist

Isaiah 40:3
John 1:1–34

Every Christmas season for the past twenty-five years, the Christian musician Andrew Peterson has hosted a concert tour titled "Behold the Lamb of God." He travels to different churches and venues all over the country, including the famous Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, but the concert is always the same: a carefully arranged set that journeys through the story of the Old Testament and culminates in the glorious birth of the Messiah. The title of the concert tour comes from John 1:29, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," a passage found in our reading for today. The song with the same title is the last one of the concert; the whole set builds to the crescendo of John the Baptist's revelation of the Son of God: behold he is here, the one who takes away the sin of the world!

Peterson's music helps situate our reading for today and the place of John the Baptist in the story of salvation. Our passage tells us that John was a man sent from God to bear witness about the light. The Jewish leaders were confused about John's message: "Who are you?" (v. 19). He confessed that he was not the messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. He is the herald predicted many years ago in the words of Isaiah 40:3: The voice of one crying out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

When we examine the life of John the Baptist, two virtues stand out. First, John conveys the theological virtue of faith when he confesses Christ. He boldly announces to his disciples that this Jesus is the Lamb of God, who is going to deal with sin and death. John's message contains the blueprint of the gospel, the proclamation of hope that through the sacrifice of this Messiah, God's people will be saved.

Second, John exhibits the virtue of humility. When he sees Jesus, he reminds his disciples that though he comes after John, he ranks before him.

John was an older, established prophet, but he knew his place when he stood before the Word of God who became flesh. John is not concerned for his own position, power, or prestige. He does not care that he has disciples; he only cares that those who are following him know that the one they have been waiting for is here. When John's disciples heard him say this, they knew what he meant. They turned and followed Jesus.

The chorus to Andrew Peterson's song "Behold the Lamb of God" captures the sentiments of John's proclamation:

Behold, the Lamb of God
Who takes away our sin
Behold the Lamb of God
The life and light of men
Behold the Lamb of God
Who died and rose again
Behold the Lamb of God who comes
To take away our sin

These are the final words of the concert that ring out and announce, once again, that the Lamb of God has come. Listening to these words, we can hear the echoes of the faith and humility that characterized John's life, and I hope that it can characterize our lives as well. May we walk with faith and humility this Christmas, pointing others to the good news of the birth of Christ.

Stephen Presley
Senior Fellow for Religion & Public Life

Monday, December 2

Social Order or Heavenly Glory?

Numbers 17:1–11
2 Peter 3:1–18

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, something of a radical thinker, and one of the inspirations for the French Revolution, sought to break human nature down to its most basic constituents. Employing powers of imagination to peer back through the mists of prehistory, he concluded that men were once free and simple creatures, as much animal as man, with little in their nature to shape them morally other than their interest in self-preservation and a certain amount of pity they would experience in seeing others suffer. This re-envisioning of man's origins and development was part of an attempted escape from the Christian civilization Rousseau viewed as an imprisoner of human beings.

The apostle Peter, writing during the years of the early church, saw things differently. He encountered human beings as they are revealed by Scripture. In other words, they are not simple (not even in the beginning), but complex. They are moral creatures capable of such great evil as to occasion the near destruction of the world by water (with a warning of a later assault by fire). But they are also susceptible to an appeal, which is what Peter makes. He argues against the impatient view of time applied by short-lived humans to the activity of God. And he counsels the faithful not to fall prey to the acidic attacks of "scoffers" who wish to follow "their own sinful desires" (2 Peter 3:3). Peter knows, as do his readers, that those who mock God are simultaneously preparing the road that leads to their own destruction. And when that time comes, they will be found crying out for salvation.

Rousseau thought a civil religion would be necessary for the regulation of the citizenry so as to preserve social order against predation and chaos. His constructed faith would include a general notion of a god and an afterlife in which good would be rewarded and evil would be punished. Peter, on the other hand, encourages his readers in the church to "be found ... without

spot or blemish, and at peace" (v. 14). This peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but instead the more robust sense of peace, which includes justice in relationships. That justice, as Augustine later reminded the world, is a justice which gives Jesus Christ his due. It is a justice which is even more vertical than it is horizontal.

Peter's God is not one drawn up as an instrument of social architecture. His God is the true transcendent God who must be obeyed rather than mocked. Thus, Peter counsels his readers to consider "what sort of people" they ought to be "in lives of holiness and godliness" (v. 11). They are aiming not at a proper social order, but rather at a "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (v. 13). How is this goal to be obtained? Not through some broad scale of goods outweighing evils, but instead through the pursuit of "the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Those who live rightly will seek his glory "both now and to the day of eternity" (v. 18).

Hunter Baker
Senior Fellow

Tuesday, December 3

Humility, Praise, and Prayer

2 Samuel 7:18–29
Revelation 22:12–16

Today's 2 Samuel reading drops us into King David's story just after the prophecy that David's "house and ... kingdom shall be made sure forever before" the Lord (7:16). The Revelation reading gives us a preview of that prophecy's fulfillment as Jesus identifies himself as "the descendant of David" (22:16). These passages point us to God's sovereignty over rulers and nations, his care for his people, and the surety of his promises—truths that have comforted God's people throughout history and that can encourage us, too, especially in uncertain times.

None of us will hold a place in God's sovereign purposes like David's, starting a dynasty that would culminate in the everlasting rule of the Messiah. Yet God calls each of us to be stewards on his behalf in our own spheres, whether they be small or great. As image-bearers of God, we are to display his character, pursue his purposes, and reflect his glory. We do this each day in how we attend to our work, care for our families, serve in our churches, and invest in our communities. And our unchanging God cares for his people today just as he did for David and his family. We too have promises that God will do us good (e.g., Rom. 8:28; Ps. 84:11). We too have assurances that God will fulfill his purposes for us (e.g., Phil. 1:6; Ps. 138:8). And when we, like David, ponder God's rule over history and the way he works through us, we can mirror David's responses of humility, praise, and prayer.

First, David responded to God's call and care with humility, asking, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (2 Sam. 7:18). Likewise, we can remember that we have nothing that we did not receive from the Lord (1 Cor. 4:7). Often God chooses to work through those the world would not deem wise or powerful (1 Cor. 1:25–27). We easily forget that "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build

it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain" (Ps. 127:1). Yet this realization of our weakness paves the way for us both to stand in awe of the God who accomplishes his purposes and also to cry out for his help in our work. That is where David's thoughts turned as well.

David's second response to Nathan's prophecy was praise, exclaiming, "There is none like you, and there is no God besides you!" (2 Sam. 7:22). David celebrated the "great and awesome" wonders God had worked in Israel's history (v. 23). He marveled at how God redeemed his people. We know even more than David of God's glorious work to redeem his people through Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, giving us much cause for praise.

Finally, remembering God's work in the past and pondering his promises for the future prompted David to pray. Recalling that God has promised him "good," David asked for God's blessing. It may seem odd to us that David prayed that God would "confirm forever" his promise and do as he had spoken (v. 25). Yet many of the psalms do just that, pleading with God to act according to his promises and character (e.g., Ps. 25:6–7). And the book of Revelation does the same. A few verses after our reading from Revelation 22, we are told, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon,'" and the response of the writer of Revelation is a spontaneous prayer—"Come, Lord Jesus!" (v. 20).

This Advent season, let us remember not only Jesus' humble first coming but also the promise of his return. As David praised God for his past redemption and prayed for the fulfillment of God's promise that David's kingdom would be made sure forever, let us praise God for his faithfulness and pray that Jesus would soon return and establish his kingdom forever.

Becky Dummermuth
Counsel
First Liberty Institute

Wednesday, December 4

The Kingdoms of Men and the Kingdom of God

Isaiah 1:24–31
Luke 11:29–32

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

So begins the seventeenth-century poet John Milton in his "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity." As we contemplate the blessings conferred to all believers by virtue of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is also fitting that we contemplate the innumerous temporal blessings that Christ has brought into the world.

In Isaiah 1:26 God promises Israel that he will "restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning." This is not only a promise made to Israel, but also a declaration of the origin of all forms of human government. As Saint Paul admonishes us in Romans 13, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (v. 1). All social compacts made among men were once decreed by God. Here in Isaiah and in Romans, we receive a declaration of God's sovereignty over not only spiritual affairs, but also temporal.

This declaration of God's sovereignty should give us comfort. Whether we are under the tyrannous yoke of Caesar or the benevolence of Emperor Justinian, all political power is subject and should be in submission to the divine power. It is no doubt that America is divided, but Christianity, and particularly the incarnation of our Lord, provides us with hope. The divine

Son of God taking on human flesh provides us a picture of the end of political life. All political life is oriented toward some good, and the good of Christian political life is the union of temporal and the spiritual in the life to come. Christ through his incarnation has subjected all the nations to himself and his reign. He has secured the nations by his birth, life, death, and resurrection—and in securing the nations he has secured the souls of his elect. Christ is the greater king, who rules his people in righteousness. But he is also the greater prophet, as our Lord says in Luke 11:32, "and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." And, in the incarnation of the Son of God the Word itself becomes flesh, in order to preach to us the good word of eternal life and the kingdom of God.

Though we labor under the kingdoms of men, may we not lose sight of the hope that lies before us. May we look to Christ, who remained what he was, and took on what he was not. The incarnation gives us hope in times of confusion, disarray, and pain that by faith in Christ our humanity will be redeemed. Christ is the living Word of the Father and will make all things new. May this life-changing reality inform the way we live every day of our lives.

Joshua Janniere
2023 Shaftesbury Fellow

Thursday, December 5

Judgment

Malachi 3:5–12
Philippians 1:12–18

Judgment is an Advent theme we would rather ignore. Malachi tells us that the Lord draws near to us for judgment at his coming.

In 1807, William Wilberforce, a renowned Parliamentary orator, devout Christian, and the leader of the campaign against the slave trade published his *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. He wrote:

> Providence governs the world. But if we are not blind to the course of human events, as well as utterly deaf to the plain instructions of Revelation, we must believe that a continued course of wickedness, oppression, and cruelty, obstinately maintained in spite of the fullest knowledge and the loudest warnings, must infallibly bring down upon us the heaviest judgements of the Almighty.

A few weeks later the Abolition Bill passed both Houses of Parliament. The prime minister, William Grenville, was effusive in his praise of Wilberforce.

Note Wilberforce's starting point: providence governs the world. Do we really believe that is the case? We often act with a dualism which undermines the Christian faith: God rules our lives, but not the societies in which we live. Wilberforce would not have recognized such a dichotomy. We should not tolerate wickedness and oppression in society because doing so is contrary to the plain instructions of Scripture (Wilberforce's reference to "Revelation" above is to the whole of Scripture).

The prophet Malachi reminded the people of Israel that they had turned against God and would face judgment. Chapter 3, verse 7, reads: "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them."

Wilberforce is a reminder to us that the moral law of God is intended for the goodness and flourishing of all people for all time. If we wish to influence society we cannot retreat into a sort of pietistic "holy huddle" and pretend that the moral law is only for us personally but not for the rest of society. Neither Malachi nor Wilberforce would have countenanced such a view.

Malachi knew he was dealing with a rebellious people. In verse 5, he lists the ways in which the people have departed from the ways and the will of God. He has three categories, spiritual, moral, and ethical.

First, the spiritual. Malachi promises that he will witness against sorcerers, those who distort the spiritual purposes and powers of God. We should be under no misapprehension, as Wilberforce was under no illusion, that we have spiritual choices to make and that national decisions have spiritual implications. We are involved in a spiritual battle of good and evil.

Second, Malachi warned against moral failure, particularly adultery. It might be unpopular to say, but adultery is against the law of God, causing irreparable damage to individuals, marriages, and families. We cannot stand aside. Our witness to our society means contrasting the priorities of our culture with the ways of God.

Malachi is not only concerned with our spiritual and moral failures, but also, third, for ethical values. He weighs in against irresponsible business and social ethics, the suppression of fair wages, the vulnerable widow, the oppression of the foreigner.

What we discover is that Malachi has something to say to society, to today's culture of secular humanism, instant gratification, and business and social ethics—exactly what Wilberforce recognized and from which the church, in the modern age, seems to have retreated. The power of Malachi's injunction is that he deals with all three aspects: spiritual, moral, and ethical.

Back to that difficult word, *judgment*. We tend to prefer to avoid any idea of judgment, either on ourselves or on wider society. We sometimes feel embarrassed or that we might be forcing our views on others. Wilberforce was clear that the judgments of God fell upon any society that deliberately and obstinately failed to follow God's ways—slavery and the slave trade being the examples of his day. He was simply following Malachi.

Maybe this Advent we need more courage: a willingness to recognize that God seeks the flourishing of all in society. But the converse is that

God's judgments also fall on a society that departs from the moral law of God—perhaps a society like ours, whether Britain, from where I write, or the United States, where most of you will be reading.

Richard Turnbull
Senior Fellow

Friday, December 6

What Difference Does It Make?

Malachi 3:13–18
Philippians 1:18–26

What difference does it make? You might be asking Saint Paul's question from the perspective of the prophet Malachi's audience or from that of the apostle himself. Maybe you're just barely limping your way to Christmas this year, feeling tired from worldly work, burnt out from holiday preparations, spiritually dry. Maybe, like the prophet's contemporaries, you're feeling like all of this is somewhat useless. Rather than rejoicing in the season and its reason, you're going around like a mourner. Maybe you're even a bit jealous of those who don't bother with Christmas.

If that's you, Malachi has good news: God is listening attentively and lovingly. He notes who puts in effort in spite of themselves. He is promising that you are special to him. He will have fatherly compassion on you. He will provide the reasons you need to put him first, even when you don't feel like it.

Maybe, though, you're coming at Christmas from the opposite direction. You've got pep(permint) in your step. Bring on the carols! Your praise of God is one with Saint Paul's—what difference does *anything* make, from long shopping lists to big gift budgets to frosty feet, as long as Christ is being proclaimed? You're already on the far side of Malachi's promise! You see clearly what God is doing in this season, delighting in the incarnation.

If that's you, Saint Paul urges you to take the feeling even further and realize that it's just part of one eternal experience of redemption. The joy of Christ's birth is carrying you through Advent. So too should the hope of eternity with the risen Christ carry you through life. If you're *this* excited about Christmas in mid-December, why not be this excited about heaven in whatever stage of life you're in?

Whether you're in a Malachi mood or a Pauline one, today's readings are good news. The truth is, we all experience both attitudes in any given

year. Christians live in a way that's both "not yet" and "already." "Not yet" do we look around the world and see the fullness of the kingdom. Our own lives are imperfect and stressed, and so is the world around us. It does not yet reflect God's justice, the fraternity of his fellow children, love for one another and what he has made, and reverence for him. Those absences make us groan as we wait for God's promises to come fully true.

But there's also the "already." God is here. Traces of his handiwork surround us in the beauty and surprises of creation. Echoes of his voice and glimpses of his image surround us in each other, and even in the depths of our own selves. His Spirit urges us on to work with all people of good faith and let his light in. As Christians, we also already see God cooing in the manger, walking along us as our brother and true shepherd, and triumphant through his passion and resurrection. We already believe that just beyond the dark horizon will break the greatest of dawns. This sustains us—despite whatever frustrations life and the world bring—as we work for a good church, a good city, good families, and good homes.

Whichever way things are going for you right now, I pray that the words of the prophet Malachi and Saint Paul shine brightly for you, 'til the daystar rises brilliant in our hearts and in our world.

Matthew Cavedon
Research Fellow

Saturday, December 7

Called to an Adventure

Malachi 4:1–6
Luke 9:1–6

I love adventure stories. A hero sets out on a quest, seeking to fulfill a mission. He battles evil while overcoming obstacles set before him. My all-time favorite adventure story is J. R. R. Tolkien's classic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. In part one, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien describes the quest of Frodo and his Middle Earth colleagues. When they reach the elven kingdom of Rivendell, Elrond, the lord of that land, calls together an unlikely group of allies. He gathers the leaders of the various races of the western world—elves, men, dwarves, and hobbits—to discuss the growing evil in their land. The mission set before them is to destroy the powerful ring that has come into Frodo's possession and thus prevent the ring and its power from falling into the hands of their common evil opponent, Sauron. The cause of good in their world depends on their successful mission of destroying the ring by throwing it into the fires of Mount Doom. Tolkien describes the scene:

> "You have done well to come," said Elrond. "You will hear today all that you need in order to understand the purposes of the Enemy. There is naught that you can do, other than to resist, with hope or without it. But you do not stand alone. You will learn that your trouble is part of the trouble of all the western world. The Ring! What shall we do with the Ring, the least of rings, that trifle that Sauron fancies? That is the doom we must deem.
>
> "That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world."

And, thus, having been called, Frodo accompanied by Gandalf the wizard; Legolas the elf; Gimli the dwarf; two men, Aragorn and Boromir; and three fellow hobbits, Sam, Merry, and Pippin set out on an adventure, a mission to destroy the ring, overcome their enemy Sauron and his evil servants, battle evil, and preserve the western world of Middle Earth.

In today's New Testament reading, Luke describes the adventure to which Jesus calls his disciples. Our passage tells us that, having called them together and given them power and authority, Jesus sends out the twelve on a quest "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." (9:1). They, too, will do battle with enemies and face opposition (vv. 1, 5). Nevertheless, the disciples go and do what Jesus called them to do (v. 6).

Likewise, our Old Testament passage from Malachi describes the quest of the second Elijah, John the Baptizer, to "turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (4:6). This will occur "before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes" (v. 5). The passage describes a coming day—for the unbeliever, a day of judgment and destruction, but for the believer, a day of grace and salvation—a day of restoration and vindication for God's people (vv. 1–3)

As followers of Christ, we are called to a God-given adventure before the great day of the Lord comes. Like the disciples, we have received power and authority to pursue God's mission for our lives. While called individually, we are to set out collectively, working together to further God's purposes. Without a doubt we face a real enemy who opposes our pursuit of our calling.

Before setting off on his adventure, Frodo says, "I will take the ring although I do not know the way." Often, that is us as well. We are called to a mission but do not know the way. But through Christ, who is the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6), we can confidently proceed into the adventure Jesus calls us to, knowing that the one who is the way will also guide us in the way to go. Are you ready? Let's go on God's adventure!

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

Sunday, December 8

Joseph

Isaiah 7:14
Matthew 1:18–24

Early and medieval art can sometimes leave us with the impression that Jesus' earthly life was more mystical or ephemeral than embodied and human. But in his wisdom, God the Father made provision for the Lord in that he provided for him a family. Mary gets almost all of the press, and consequently many Christians think of Joseph as an incidental figure in the story of salvation. After all, he made no biological contribution to Jesus as he was "manifested in the flesh," as Paul describes his entry into the finite world (1 Tim. 3:16). And Scripture doesn't record much about him. We know he was obedient when the angel came to him as he contemplated divorce. He faithfully cared for Mary as they were forced to travel in the last days of her pregnancy. And we also know that he took Jesus to the temple. But there are no anecdotes or sketches of family life included in the Bible's accounts of Joseph.

But we *do* know that Jesus entered the world like the rest of us: an embryo entirely dependent upon *his parents*. Note that I did not say that as an embryo he came into the world entirely dependent upon his mother. No, he, like all of us, entered the finite and physical world entirely dependent upon the unique community of husband and wife turned father and mother who would be responsible to see that he, the Creator and Sustainer of the world, would grow "in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

Fatherhood begins at conception, and as with Joseph, so also there is no father who is an incidental part of the story of any child. Statistics regarding the outcomes of fatherless children are staggering: 90 percent of all teen runaways come from homes with no father, and more than 60 percent of all teen suicides occur among young people without fathers involved in their lives. In God's wise providence, Jesus wasn't merely born to an earthly

mother with no husband so as to avoid social stigma. He was born into a family because fathers, mothers, and families are the first "little platoons" that shape children into adults who can thrive personally and as part of a society. Such a serious task disguised as mundane work should never be undertaken alone.

Later artwork that includes Jesus and Joseph often depicts the two woodworking. *Childhood of Christ* by Gerard von Honthorst and *Joseph the Carpenter* by Georges de La Tour are both notable in that a young Jesus holds a light as he watches Joseph plying his trade. Interestingly, the Greek word *tekton* used to identify Joseph's and Jesus' trade is most often translated as "carpenter," but the word carries with it a more nuanced meaning. It implies creativity and artistry rather than mere technical skill. The omnipotent and omniscient Second Person of the Trinity stepped into time fully human with a mind wired for creativity and hands ripe to be trained by a mere mortal.

Unfortunately, our world is facing a fatherhood crisis. We seem to have forgotten that fathers matter, and we are quickly forgetting that mothers do, too.

Jesus was and is Immanuel, "God with us." And he is the Savior of the world, too. But it is his divinity *and* his humanity that have uniquely qualified him alone to live, die, and rise again for the people of God. But he didn't fall out of the sky fully grown and mature. No person does. He was loved, mentored, and nurtured by one of his Heavenly Father's greatest provisions to him—an earthly father in the person of Joseph who was certainly more than an incidental part of the story.

Trey Dimsdale
Executive Director

Monday, December 9

Our Shared Hope

Isaiah 40:1–11
Romans 8:22–25

There are few Christian virtues more nebulous than hope, but this is not for lack of trying to define it. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that hope is that "by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy spirit." Alternatively, the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism reads:

> Q. What is your only hope (or comfort) in life and in death?
> A. That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

By these definitions, it would seem that Christian hope is fairly straightforward. What Christians must hope for is unity with Christ and the fulfillment of his promises. But, because Christians are fallen, and human, and confused, this simple understanding of hope gets fractured and refracted in all sorts of different ways. While, in theory, we might cleave to these definitions of hope, we end up wasting our hope on all sorts of other things. We hope for protection, for preservation, for wealth, for power, for things to go our way. We hope for certain political candidates and sports teams to win and others to lose. We hope for good weather and good health. We pray for these things. Sometimes, when we get them, we even regard them as God's fulfillment of his promises.

Isaiah 40 and Romans 8 remind us that Christian hope often feels like a fruitless enterprise, like an endless waiting. It awards no instant gratification. Christian hope is often not an avenue toward feeling like a "winner" or scoring victories over one's adversaries. Rather, it is the ever-humbling anticipation of something that we may never see or touch within

this mortal coil. As such, this Christian hope requires an attendant faith that the thing hoped for will be worth the wait. Isaiah 40 and Romans 8 indicate that it is. Every created thing, even those things which to us feel so grand and monumental, is fragile and impermanent in comparison to the everlasting nature of God and his promises. We hope not in futility, but in the complete assurance that God's vows to adopt us as his sons and daughters, to tend his flock like a shepherd, to lift the valleys and lower the mountains, will all come to pass.

These verses remind us that we, as Christians, do not hope for the sake of this world. We do not hope for the sake of ourselves. Our hope lifts our eyes to God. The things of this earth that reveal his glory, that bear his handiwork, only whisper of the great glory of heaven. This season, as we celebrate the birth of Christ—the incarnation of God's good works and good plan for his creation—we ought to remember this hope. Our short lives are grass, mere passing mentions in the grand metanarrative of God's creation, but our shared hope keeps us looking beyond what is immediate to us, and toward the eternity that awaits us in the presence of the Lord.

Kirstin Birkhaug
Research Fellow

Tuesday, December 10

Living as Pathways of Christ's Presence

Isaiah 19:18–25
2 Peter 1:2–15

We are no strangers to conflict these days. The past five years alone have seen widespread unrest, mistrust, riots, and international turmoil. Meanwhile, social and other media have brought us closer than ever to the grave losses, suffering, and violence experienced by others. In the face of such tragedy, we may fear for the loss of freedom, order, and respect for human dignity. We may fear, in short, for the future of our very world, and we may be tempted to lose hope.

Yet such trials hide an invitation from the Lord to draw close and to call upon him in confidence and faith. We must remember that our daily efforts to live virtuously can, through the power of Christ, greatly move and shape the lives of others. And we must have faith that communities wracked by violence can be healed and renewed by Christ, and perhaps are experiencing his balm already.

Scripture tells us that even grave conflict can be a vehicle for rebirth, because working in the nations' midst, "striking and healing," is the promised Savior (Isa. 19:22). In Isaiah's prophecy of Egypt, the nation is destroyed, neighbor turns against neighbor, and the pillars of community, leaning on their own strength rather than the Lord's, crumble (vv. 10, 20). God himself is the architect of Egypt's turmoil, but his aim is not to destroy; rather, it is to reveal Egypt's profound sickness in order to provide a lasting cure. When Egypt's idols fall silent, its people turn at last to the Lord for deliverance. United to the true God, Egypt proclaims his presence among them and becomes a pathway to him for all.

Yet while Egypt is united to the Lord, it remains a distinct nation, bearing its history, past, and ultimate triumph in and through the Lord (vv. 24–25). We, too, may become pathways to Christ, even as we retain our unique identities and stories, through which God brought us from ignorance

and death to knowledge and life. Consider how Saint Peter opens his second letter, calling himself, not simply "Peter," but "Simeon Peter" (2 Peter 1:1). The apostle is testifying to how God worked through the darkness of his old life to bring him to a new one, and now invites him to share that life with others.

Saint Peter also reminds us that we must safeguard our share in this new, divine life by active knowledge and faith. We cannot hold our conversion as a distant and impersonal fact; rather, we must keep our salvation from death and sin fresh and tangible. We must do so by practicing the virtues that Jesus' power awakens in us daily: self-control, steadfastness, brotherly affection, and love (vv. 5–7). Only by living in this way can we keep from falling into the "blindness" that hides Jesus from us, and only by living in this way can we bear effective fruit (vv. 8–9). When we obey the law of love, keeping in mind the source of our love, we find security amid the conflicts of the world.

All of this echoes the theme of Advent: that God works in hiddenness, with humble instruments, toward purposes that are good and lasting. Understandably, we often wish we could live by sight and not by faith, but we must remember that God is always at our side, not only in the promises that he fulfills, but in the seeds of expectation he plants within us. In the face of the world's many troubles, we must take heart and boast in the greatness of the Lord that makes use of our unique yet humble selves and actions. We must do as Saint Peter instructs us, fanning the flame of faith with virtue, meeting God in the people he places before us, acting as pillars of his presence, thereby bringing comfort to a groaning creation.

Like Mary, we bear within us a marvelous, hidden truth. We look with hope to the dawning of this truth, the birth of our Lord, as well as to what his birth portends. Let us do our part as pathways to the Lord, trusting where he has placed us in the midst of our world's distress, living with the joy and love that come from knowing Jesus, who already reigns over sorrow, sin, and death.

Gabriella Hsu
2023 Shaftesbury Fellow

Wednesday, December 11

Messianic Justice

Isaiah 35:3–7
Luke 7:18–30

John the Baptist couldn't figure it out. Jesus' ministry wasn't going the way he thought it should. The villages in Galilee where Jesus had done most of his miracles had turned away when Jesus started talking about the cost of discipleship. Most of the Jewish leadership rejected him. Even the common people misunderstood what he was saying about the kingdom of God.

Now even John was doubting.

John was also demoralized. Just as Elijah (whom Jesus had said was John's prophetic type) was nearly suicidal in his depression after defeating the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, John was dejected.

He had been in an underground prison for a year, in the mountains near the Dead Sea. For a man of the desert and big sky, the four dark and narrow walls of his cell were closing in on him.

Besides, he wondered if he got his cousin Jesus wrong.

Where were the "vengeance" and "recompense" which Isaiah said the Messiah would bring? When would he start burning up the wicked?

So John sent two of his disciples to ask if the Nazarene was really "the one who is to come" (Luke 7:19). This was the Messiah's most common title, derived from Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (v. 26).

Jesus' reply invited John to think about the parts of Isaiah's messianic prophecy that *were* being fulfilled: "the *blind receive their sight, the lame walk*, lepers are cleansed, and the *deaf hear*, the *dead are being raised up*, the *poor have good news preached to them*" (v. 22; cf. Isa. 35:5–6; 61:1; 26:19; 29:18–19).

Jesus answered John's question (*Are you really the Messiah?*) but suggested a theological twist: *I am doing what the Messiah is to do, but not everything now. Judgment is delayed.*

Jesus was subtly urging John to hope: *Don't doubt that I, the Messiah, will*

defeat the powers of darkness. I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven, but not in the political and military ways that you expect at the moment (Luke 10:18).

Then Jesus added, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me," that is, *the one who recognizes that I am the Messiah but is open to my defeating evil in my own way and time* (7:23).

Boris Nicholayevich Kornfeld also wanted political and military justice but discovered that he would trust the Messiah's way to bring that justice. He was a medical doctor in the 1950s in Stalin's slave labor camps.

Kornfeld was sent to the Gulag Archipelago because he had dared to suggest that the Soviet dictator was fallible.

Boris was also a Jew. He hated Christianity because it was the religion of the Tsars, who had persecuted Jews for hundreds of years in Russia.

But because of the daily cruelties he saw in the camps, he lost his faith in communism.

Then Kornfeld met a prisoner who talked about Jesus the Jewish Messiah. This prisoner had also been arrested and sentenced unjustly. He spoke almost solely to Jews. He often prayed the Lord's Prayer out loud.

One day Boris was operating on a guard who had been knifed. He detested this guard, and was planning to tie a blood vessel with a suture that would open after surgery and make him bleed to death. Suddenly he was ashamed of himself for falling to this depth.

Boris found himself repeating a part of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Dr. Kornfeld experienced a new freedom he had never imagined.

He did two things in the next few days that were extraordinary and gutsy. He stopped signing orders to put prisoners in solitary detention. These were prisoners the guards didn't like. To sign the order meant saying the prisoner was strong enough to survive, which usually was a lie.

Second, Kornfeld turned in an orderly for stealing food from a starving patient. He knew those who squealed on orderlies always wound up dead.

But now he felt like the freest man in Russia.

The surgeon looked for someone to tell. He had just operated on a young, fearful man for intestinal cancer, and this man was now coming out of anesthesia. He talked to this young Russian all afternoon and long into the night.

The next morning when the young man woke up, he heard running.

Someone had smashed Boris' head with a wooden mallet eight times.

The young man went on to write the greatest Russian literature of the twentieth century, literature that is suffused with faith in Jesus the Messiah—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

This Advent season, learn *hope* with John the Baptist, Boris Kornfeld, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—that the Messiah has come and has seen Satan falling from heaven like lightning. But the final outworking of his messianic justice will come in times and ways that are not yet revealed.

Gerry McDermott
Senior Fellow

Thursday, December 12

Give Generously

Amos 6:1–8
2 Corinthians 8:1–15

I recently watched an interview with a philosophy of law colleague who reads books of the Bible with his students as examples of great books. One of his points was that books of the Bible are best read in full. He disapproved of the church's custom of reading a piece from the Old Testament and a piece from the New Testament and then trying to connect them in a sermon. Although the comparison is not entirely valid, he said this practice is like reading separate passages from two books by the same author. We don't gain a full picture of an author's thinking by reading in this way.

I must confess that this position, which I do not share, nevertheless came up momentarily as I read both of today's passages. For what exactly do they have to do with each other? For the passage from Amos, to get at least some context, I consulted a brief introduction to this book. There, I learned that at the time of this prophet's appearance in the first half of the eighth century BC there existed a "well-to-do class" that had material prosperity and trampled on those "lower classes" who were suffering in poverty.

Amos denounced these social abuses; thus, his oracles have a thoroughly recognizable biblical content. The translation of these themes to the present, moreover, is easily made. After all, don't many today also experience a similar dichotomy between the global North and the global South and certainly also within the West? Undoubtedly, there are various ways in which we can precisely define the "affluent class." One common way is to contrast, rightly or wrongly, the profiteers of globalization with the inhabitants of "fly-over country" or the French countryside.

Amos addresses "those who are at ease in Zion" in such a constellation in a characteristic fashion (6:1). Verses 4–6 are full of imagery: "Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing

idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" "Complacent"—as a different Bible translation calls it—and we had better not show ourselves to be so.

How then can we avoid being complacent? Indeed, the passage from the second letter to the Corinthians offers one, indeed *the*, answer. The eighth chapter, again according to an introduction to the letter, is committed to encouraging the Corinthian believers to join a significant relief effort on behalf of Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine. Paul attached great significance to such an expression of solidarity with other Christian congregations, which he had previously initiated in Macedonia. The section in question, therefore, contains, as the ESV heading says, an "encouragement to give generously."

In verse 5, where Paul presents the Christians in Macedonia as an example to those in Corinth, he indicates how they came to this: "They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." Moreover, in addition to this, the closing verses give a surprisingly practical directive: "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness" (vv. 13–14).

Verse 5 thus clearly indicates that the horizontal and vertical dimensions of being a Christian cannot be separated. It always begins with a surrender to God. From this, devotion flows to one's (distant) neighbor. The practical advice is that we should not get ourselves into financial or material difficulties by supporting others. There must be a certain balance. The idea is that this balance is maintained when we need help. We can then count on others to help us according to their ability.

Although the passage doesn't say so explicitly, this approach likely also applies to the nonmaterial effort required of us. This is what the immediately preceding verses are about, where Paul praises the Christians in Corinth for, among other things, their "speech," "knowledge," and zeal in all kinds of fields. The latter, called "earnestness" in our translation, certainly includes the type of work we do for and through the CRCD. For this, too, we may legitimately practice moderation and thus not overreach ourselves. We should avoid overextending ourselves in the interest of preserving our closer

relationships, such as our families, so long as we ensure we do not become "complacent" but "give generously."

Hans-Martien ten Napel
Senior Fellow

Friday, December 13

Give Joyfully

Amos 8:4–12
2 Corinthians 9:1–15

Advent is a time of preparation: a time to prepare for the arrival of Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. As part of that preparation, we pray and we fast—and we give.

We give to those in need because that is what Christ did and what he commands us to do. It is a command rooted in the Old Testament prophets.

The prophet Amos proclaims God's anger at those who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor (8:4). God condemns human greed and the exploitation of the vulnerable, and he calls for those who have been blessed with riches to minister to the poor. But material poverty is not the only kind of poverty. Through Amos, God announces that the day is coming when he will send a famine upon the land: not a hunger for bread, but for hearing the word of the Lord (v. 11). Therefore, to prepare ourselves to welcome Christ into our hearts, we must address both material and spiritual poverty.

Carrying forward the words of Amos, Saint Paul stresses the need for generosity among the faithful. He advises that generosity to those in need must come as a bountiful gift and not as an exaction (2 Cor. 9:5). Thus, the true measure of generosity is not simply what is given, but how it is being given: "God loves a cheerful giver" (v. 7).

According to Saint Paul, a spirit of generosity comes as a gift from God to the generous giver. Grace infuses true charity, and this grace produces bountiful rewards for the giver: "whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (v. 6). Saint Paul assures us that abundant graces will accompany our charity. Through charity and generosity we glorify God and give thanks to him (v. 13). Consequently, charity is not just a social or divine command, it furnishes us a way to thank and glorify God. And what an indescribable gift that becomes to the giver (v. 15). Through generosity to our neighbor, we can achieve the purpose for which we live: to thank and glorify God.

Charity may yield divine graces, but in actuality it can be difficult to accomplish in our complex and often impersonal world. Poverty exists in many forms, and perhaps the form most difficult to alleviate is cultural and moral poverty. The question of how we use our talents, energy, commitments, and resources to help raise neighborhoods, communities, and nations from their poverty can be daunting and overwhelming. But this is where unified associations help focus our energy and strengthen our resolve. Organizations like the CRCD exist to help us determine how to address the cultural, political, and spiritual needs of the world in which we live.

Under Saint Paul's vision of generosity, our social duty is even greater than simply contributing money to charitable causes. Our duty is to devote our talents and resources to improve the world around us, especially for those most in need. But the only way to do this effectively may be to join together in a like-minded mission that will amplify our individual efforts.

Saint Teresa of Kolkata, in reflecting on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, wrote that "all over the world people are hungry and thirsty for God's love, [and] we meet that hunger by spreading joy." In this modern world of division and conflict, joy can be difficult to come by. But perhaps that is yet another reason for banding together: to help each other find and experience joy, and then to spread that joy in our efforts to uplift the world around us.

Pat Garry
Senior Fellow

Saturday, December 14

Restoration to Community

Amos 9:8–15
Luke 1:57–66

In both the Old Testament reading and the New Testament reading for today, we are reminded that God's mercy always includes relational restoration. In the reading from the prophet Amos, the prophet declares God's condemnation of the sinful kingdom of Israel and that "shaking," death, and disaster will follow (9:1– 10). However, the prophet also repeats God's promise that this destruction will not be the end of house of Jacob, but rather will be followed by restoration of the line of King David. This restoration is described in very concrete, communal terms. The ruins of the cities of Israel will be rebuilt and the people will again plant vineyards, harvest their fruit, and remain in place long enough to drink their own wine (v. 14).

At first, this cosmic description of Israel's future seems to be a far cry from the domestic scene described in the Gospel of Luke about the birth of John the Baptist. However, a closer look reveals that this vignette is telling the same story of God's redemptive mercy, although here in human-sized rather than cosmic terms. After all, as the angel prophesies to Zechariah, John the Baptist will be filled with "the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17) and is the forerunner to God's Redeemer, Jesus Christ. However, whereas in Amos we see restoration in cosmic terms, here we see it in very human terms. In Luke 1, we learn that both Elizabeth and Zechariah were "righteous before God" (v. 6). However, we see that both have in some way been separated from their community. Elizabeth, who has been unable to conceive, however, feels that her barrenness has made her disgraced among the people (v. 25). First, the neighbors and relatives of the priestly family rejoice because God has "shown great mercy" to Elizabeth in giving her a child (v. 58). In enabling her to bear a child, Elizabeth, the barren woman, is restored to her community—God having lifted the curse from her womb.

Second, in (finally) following the angel's command and stating that his son will be named John, Zechariah is restored to his own community by being given back his speech. In effect, he is restored to his priestly role. Interestingly, the reaction to Elizabeth having a child is rejoicing but the reaction to Zechariah's speech being restored is "fear" (v. 65). God's mercy is not always accepted or celebrated by all, but can, in C. S. Lewis's words to Sheldon Vanauken, at times appear to our eyes as "severe." There is both a "shaking" of the community's expectations and a restoration of "the booth of David" (Amos 9:11).

Of course, this is the first stage of the fulfillment of Mary's prophecy in the Magnificat. Even the people in the village see that "the hand of the Lord was with him" (Luke 1:66). John is the forerunner of Jesus. The small restoration of community that attends even his birth will be expanded from encompassing "all the hill country of Judea" (Luke 1:65) to include Israel, Edom, and "all the nations who are called by my name" (Amos 9:12). Advent reminds us not only that God's plan is cosmic, but also that he always starts with a baby, a family, and a community restored to peace by God's mercy.

Elisabeth Kincaid
Research Fellow

Sunday, December 15

According to God's Word

Genesis 12:1–3
Luke 1:26–56

One of the most remarkable things about the narratives that describe the conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel is the manner in which Mary responds to the miraculous news. An angel appears to her and tells her that she is going to conceive, even though she is a virgin, and that her son will be holy, set apart, and shall even be called the Son of God.

"How will this be?" Mary naturally wonders at how such a thing could happen. To this Gabriel responds that all this will indeed take place, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Mary exhibits great faith and obedience in her further response: "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:34, 37–38).

That final phrase is striking—*according to your word*. Mary had been the recipient of a special message from God. And she models the right response to divine revelation: obedience to the will of God as it is communicated to us. In Mary's case that revelation was indeed special. It was direct and personal. It was a message from God to Mary, communicated through Gabriel. Very few human beings have been the recipients of such special messages, and none of them have been as significant or momentous as the good news that Gabriel told to Mary.

But each one of us has received a message about God's will for our lives. That is precisely what the Bible is: God's message to us. The Reformed tradition characterizes the Ten Commandments as summarizing God's will for our lives. We may not have a direct message from God as specific and personalized as the one Mary received, but we cannot claim ignorance about what God truly desires of us. The response to a communication of God's will to us should be the same, whether it is given to humans in conversation with an angel or in the form of the inspired, written word of God: "Let it be to me according to your word."

That's the passive side of obedience, the response that is required when God reveals what his will is for our lives. But there's more that is expected as well. God has revealed what his will is in Scripture. He has given us his word in the Word. But that will of God has not been entirely and effectually manifested yet. That's why we are instructed to petition God in prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). We are thus called to pray that God's will and his kingdom will be realized in this world, here and now. God's kingdom is already manifested in heaven, and earth is meant to be like heaven in this way.

We are called to respond faithfully to God's word to us, through obedient acceptance and through prayer. But we are also called to another form of obedience as well, through our work. We are to work to realize God's will for his world. That is one lesson from the earliest pages of the Bible. God gave the first human beings a mandate: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Human beings have been placed in creation with a special task. Human beings are supposed to work to bring God's will into actuality throughout all of creation. We are to work to see that God's will is done everywhere and always *according to his word*.

For Mary this meant something special and specific. Mary was the mother of God's Son, "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15). She was called to live according to God's word by bearing Jesus, birthing him, nursing and nurturing him, following him, and finally by burying him. All of this and more was communicated to her through Gabriel: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:31).

Each one of us has our own calling and our own responsibility to respond to God's revelation to us: *Let it be to me according to your word, O God. Let me pray and work to manifest your will throughout all creation—according to your word*. For some of us that means forming and reforming our families and our churches according to God's word. For others that means taking leadership and responsibility to form and reform a school, or a business, or a school board according to God's word. For others that means ensuring as far as possible that our classrooms, our courtrooms, and our civic associations are aligned according to God's word.

In Mary's short confession of obedience to God's sovereignty, we have a wonderful model for responding to God's commands for each and every one of us. *Let God's will be done to me according to his word.* Amen and amen!

Jordan Ballor
Director of Research

Monday, December 16

Humility and Submission

Numbers 16:1–19
Hebrews 13:7–17

For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.

— 1 Sam. 15:23

God expects and requires proper obedience. Such a requirement often grates on modern Americans. After all, why should we submit to and obey fallible leaders—whether in government, in our churches, in our workplaces, or in our families? Themes of resistance on the political left and nonenforcement on the political right express our inclination not to obey authorities we don't respect and with whom we disagree.

Korah and the other Levites along with Dathan and Abiram were not some random rabble. Numbers tells us that they were leaders in their families and tribes. We can infer their importance and influence from their ability to rally most of the Israelites to their side. And what was their complaint? That Aaron and his sons were the priests and they weren't. Rather than recognizing that Moses spoke God's words to them, they presumptuously told Moses, "All the congregation is holy!" and "You have gone too far!"

Such presumption was wicked and rebellious. God's wrath was swift and complete. The earth swallows Abiram and Dathan *and* their families *and* their possessions. Korah, his sons, and his relatives were consumed by fire from the Lord in a moment. So God deals with arrogance and rebellion, which is like the sin of divination that turns away from and rejects God. So, too, the author of the book of Hebrews exhorts his readers to obey the leaders who preach and teach the gospel. He says Christians should submit to their leaders that they may shepherd with joy.

Returning to our own day, how often do we see the weeds of division within our churches? How often do congregations split over any issue at

all—times of service, styles of worship, uses of the building, focus of the ministry, doctrines presented from the pulpit, or even styles of preaching? And how often do people feel territorial about their part or place in the church? These and other types of division should not be!

This Advent season let's remember our duty of submission, not because our leaders are always right or wise or admirable, but because God asks us to be obedient. And not only does he ask, he demonstrates obedience in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, whose coming we remember and celebrate. Jesus submitted to the Father, and we should too. But his submission also extended to the Jewish authorities and the Roman authorities, and even to death itself.

This is why Peter exhorts Christians: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution," and "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:13, 23).

The humility and submissiveness God calls us to does not mean silence or assent to things we disagree with. Nor does it mean we shouldn't resist evil. Rather, it is a posture of openness and of being willing to lay down our rights and comforts—even willingness to suffer—because we entrust ourselves to God, just as Jesus did.

Paul Mueller
Research Fellow

Tuesday, December 17

With All Boldness and Without Hindrance

Numbers 16:20–35
Acts 28:23–31

Advent calls for a deep renewal of heart and mind to receive the Savior more faithfully, to grow closer to him, and to let the salvation that is to come wash over us. The Scriptures warn us of the dullness of our hearts, but the Lord, who is never outdone in his mercy, also offers a calling to deeper devotion, freedom, and boldness in Christ.

The Apostle Paul often encountered opposition to the teaching of the gospel. The objectors, however, were not the gentiles, but the Hebrews. Those who knew God rejected his Son. In the Acts of the Apostles, we get an account of how Saint Paul "from morning till evening … expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets" (28:23). Although some were convinced, many rejected the good news. In frustration, Saint Paul recalls the words of Isaiah: "This people's heart has grown dull" (v. 27). Their disbelief did not make Saint Paul give up on them, for "he lived there two whole years … proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ *with all boldness and without hindrance*" (vv. 30–31).

This episode in the life of Saint Paul offers deep wisdom to Christians in our confused culture. When the gospel is proclaimed today, it is often met with the same scoffing and condescension Saint Paul encountered. In Christian communities, the truth of the gospel has become scandalous. To proclaim Christ crucified, to speak of the life to come, to remember that one day we will give an account for our life—all these have been replaced with feel-good sermons and empty pews. For those who do not believe, the gospel seems harsher now more than ever; it is labeled as hateful, discriminatory, or guilt-inducing propaganda.

What should we do when the gospel is met with hostility by both those

who claim to know God and those who do not? Following the example of Saint Paul, the Lord calls us to fulfill our calling boldly. Every person is called to live for Christ, and imperfection in practice should not be the cause of our wavering. The answer to the world's dismissal and the antidote to our churches' faults is cultivating sincere hearts for Christ. The time is at hand.

In this time of Advent, let us have faith that the Lord can bring about "something new" (Num. 16:30). As God beckons and we turn our hearts to him, may he who in his Word calls us to not be afraid, grant us the grace to live boldly for Christ and to seek him without hindrance.

Alba Blanco
2024 Shaftesbury Fellow

Wednesday, December 18

Accepting the Wisdom and Ways of God

Micah 4:8–13
Luke 7:31–35

In Luke 7:31–35, Jesus confronts the people of his generation, particularly the religious leaders, with a powerful critique of their attitudes toward both his ministry and John the Baptist's. Through this parable, Jesus shows the deep-seated dissatisfaction and stubbornness that prevent many from recognizing the truth of God's work in their midst. As we reflect on this passage, we are challenged to examine our own hearts and to consider how we respond to the ways God speaks to us.

Jesus begins with a parable about children playing in the marketplace. In the story, the children are frustrated with each other because some do not respond to the others' games, whether they play a happy tune, like that of a wedding, or a sad one, like that of a funeral. The children complain, saying, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep" (v. 32).

This parable highlights our inconsistency and dissatisfaction. No matter what's offered, if it's not what we want to hear, we find a reason to reject it. When John the Baptist came with a message of repentance and self-discipline, the people dismissed him. When Jesus came, engaging in the joys of fellowship and eating with sinners, they labeled him a glutton and a drunkard. The people were determined to resist God's message, regardless of how it came.

This rejection of both John and Jesus reveals a deeper issue: a refusal to accept the wisdom and ways of God. John the Baptist represented the call to repentance and preparation, a voice crying out in the wilderness for people to turn from their sins. His strict lifestyle and fiery preaching were meant to awaken the people to their need for God's forgiveness. Yet many rejected him because his message was too harsh and uncomfortable.

On the other hand, Jesus represented the grace and love of God, reaching

out to the marginalized and the outcasts. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, associating himself with undesirables, showing that God's kingdom was open to all who would come. Yet many rejected him as well, because his approach did not fit their expectations of what the Messiah should be like.

For us today, this passage serves as a call to humility and openness to God's voice, however it may come. It challenges us to examine our own responses to God's messengers. Are we quick to dismiss messages that challenge us or make us uncomfortable? Do we judge the method rather than the message? Or are we willing to see the wisdom in God's diverse ways of reaching out to us?

God's wisdom often defies our expectations. It may come through a stern word of correction or through a gentle invitation to fellowship. It may confront us in ways that are uncomfortable, or it may surprise us with grace we did not expect. Our task is not to judge the method but to be open to the message.

As we reflect on Luke 7:31–35, let us pray for hearts that are open to the wisdom of God, however it is revealed. May we not be like the children in the marketplace, finding fault with every approach, but instead, may we recognize the hand of God at work in our lives and in the world around us.

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

Thursday, December 19

Peace over Anxiety

Zephaniah 3:14–20
Philippians 4:4–9

Christians today often hear messages about how the nation is in crisis or the church is in decline. Negative messages always seem to get more attention than positive ones. We seem wired for "fight or flight," to strike out at the threat or run away from it. Some Christians want to conquer their enemies and rule over them in vengeance, but the sin will follow them into battle and will become the law of the conquerors. Others want to abandon the world in the hope that sin will not follow them into the wilderness. This is not the hope of the gospel; this hope is folly. Yes, we face hardships, but God calls us neither to fight or flight. He calls us to rejoice. How can one experience hardship with joy? We see that today in our readings.

God calls us to offer our hardships to him. While Christians experience hardship, they cannot allow the hardship to overtake their souls. The truth of the gospel is that our God will prevail over what we bring to him. Scripture tells us, "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies." God speaks directly to us through his prophet Zephaniah: "At that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together" (3:15, 19–20). Sin will follow us wherever we go, but God has saved us from it. He has already vanquished sin itself on the cross! When we experience hardship, have faith that this hardship will not be the end of things.

If we are not to cower in fear or lash out in rage, how then are we to live? Scripture tells us what we should already feel upon learning the gospel: joy! "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion," says the prophet Zephaniah, "Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!" (v. 14). One of Saint Paul's most famous exhortations—set to a song many of us

likely sang as children and still sing today—is "rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" Maybe because we are so familiar with this passage we have forgotten its meaning. Remember! God saved us from sin! He gave himself up for us! Yes, we might experience fear or anger, but we must remember, as Saint Paul continues, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:4, 6). God will answer them.

Therefore, when you are anxious, when you experience fear or anger, know that in these moments you must call upon God to restore in you the joy that comes from knowing that he will overcome these hardships for us as he has already restored to us our heavenly place. It is natural that we experience anxiety in a fallen world, but we should always use that anxiety as an opportunity to remember that God is in control. Sometimes, the anxiety will be deep, even agonizing. We may lose a job, a house to disaster, or a loved one to sickness or violence. It is okay to feel anxiety, fear, and anger during these periods, but we must not succumb to them, because God has a better way for us. God calls out to us even then to remember that his peace, "which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

Therefore, at these difficult moments—large and small—remember the cross! Remember our infant Christ bore your struggles when he grew to manhood. He knows your pain because he bore it on his back, felt it nailed to his hands and feet, and suffered it as the thorns pressed against his brow—and rejoice! He calls us from the cross to rejoice! He has freed you. Pray to know the peace that he has brought his people. It is not easy. The way of the cross is hard, but God can help us bear it if we recur to him. As Saint Paul concludes in our meditation today, put the gospel into practice, "and the God of peace will be with you."

James Patterson
Research Fellow

Friday, December 20

Truth Became Flesh and Blood

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Hebrews 10:10–18

Universally, we long for truth. This quest is more than a hunger for knowledge—it is a deep desire to understand what is real beyond our fickle feelings. Jeremiah 31 proclaims that we have access to truth because it is written on our hearts, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (v. 33). Just as our heart pumps life-giving blood throughout our bodies, so does God's truth flow through our innermost being, giving life and purpose. This is a remarkable promise—that divine law is knowable simply by God breathing life into us. Earlier in Jeremiah 31, God makes an even greater promise. He declares that he "will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (v. 31). The old covenant served its purpose with laws written on stone tablets. We have the joy of living under the new covenant God promised. The new covenant is not a new set of laws but a holy invitation to know and abide with God through the finished work of Christ.

In the New Testament, Hebrews 10 reflects on the fulfillment of the new covenant through Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews explains that Jesus, by offering himself as a perfect sacrifice, brought forth this new covenant. Unlike the sacrifices of the old covenant, which had to be repeated annually, Jesus' sacrifice was once for all—complete and sufficient. This is where we find eternal truth: Jesus' sacrifice ushers in the new law we receive through faith. This internalization of truth is the result of grace, not the works of man. The Holy Spirit bears witness to this transformation, reminding us that our sins are forgiven and that we are now invited into a relationship marked by grace and forgiveness. This truth changes everything. It reassures us that we are no longer bound by the old ways of seeking approval through ritual and sacrifice. The old system of trying to fulfill the law has been replaced by faith in Christ. The quest for truth, therefore, is not a pursuit

of rules or rituals but a journey into a living relationship with Jesus. This divine promise is comforting and challenging for the soul searching for truth. It assures us that truth is not a distant concept but a personal reality experienced through Jesus Christ. It challenges us to embrace this truth fully, allowing it to reshape our hearts and minds.

The soul's quest for truth is ultimately a quest for a relationship with the living God, who has promised to dwell within us and transform us from the inside out. Reflect on the new covenant and the assurance that God's truth is written on your heart. Let it guide you, comfort you, and empower you to live out this truth in your daily life. In seeking this truth, you find not only answers but a deeper connection to the divine grace that makes all things new.

May this truth, written on our hearts, lead us to serve Christ and one another faithfully.

> O God, without whose beauty and goodness our souls are unfed, without whose truth our reason withers: Consecrate our lives to your will, giving us such purity of heart, such depth of faith, and such steadfastness of purpose, that in time we may come to think your own thoughts after you; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer* 2019, 668–69)

Jillian Barr
Assistant Director of Educational Programs

Saturday, December 21

What Is Enlightenment For?

Isaiah 42:10–18
Hebrews 10:32–39

In the December 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, the philosopher Immanuel Kant famously contributed his answer to the question, "What is enlightenment?" In sum, Kant said enlightenment is using one's understanding "without guidance from another." Less famously, in the journal's September issue, another philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, had already offered his answer to the question. Mendelssohn was less clear than Kant (which is no small feat). He noted the difficulties of defining the term and said, in effect, that whatever enlightenment is, it must be consistent with the "destiny of man." Though Kant had not read Mendelssohn's answer before penning his own, he agreed that enlightenment must square with humankind's essential destiny. But what is our essential destiny? What is enlightenment for? Mendelssohn doesn't quite say. And Kant seems to speak in circles when he says that enlightenment is for human "progress," which he defines as more enlightenment.

For several years now there has been a lot of talk about "waking up," "educating yourself," and "staying woke." We might say that these phrases are contemporary and popular variations of the terms *enlighten* and *enlightenment*. But as in the essays of Kant and Mendelssohn, there's little clarity today about what human beings ought to be awake or enlightened *for*. What's the purpose of it all? Sometimes it seems that the purpose of enlightenment today is perpetual revolution, debunking, unmasking, and destruction. Suffice it to say that absent clarity on enlightenment's purpose, it's very difficult to evaluate how enlightened we are, still less whether we're making progress toward anything worthwhile.

Scripture presents the arrival of Jesus as the great enlightenment, as the inbreaking of light and the dispelling of darkness. The prophet Isaiah foresees the Servant of the Lord bringing light, scattering darkness, and opening the eyes of the blind (Isa. 42:6–7, 16, 18; cf. Isa. 9:2; Matt. 4:12–

17). The apostle John tells us that light and life shine in the person of Christ, and those who receive him experience the blessing of life as children of God. In short, Christ brings true enlightenment to those who receive him (John 1:1–18).

But still we ask, What is it for? Is the purpose of our enlightenment in Christ simply more enlightenment in Christ? On the one hand, we shouldn't shy away from the circularity of answering yes to this question. The apostle Paul declared that knowing Christ was of such surpassing worth that it made all his accomplishments look like garbage by comparison (Phil. 3:8). If that's the case, we can say that knowing Christ is itself the ultimate goal and that there is no "for what" beyond it. And yet, Scripture also indicates that our enlightenment in Christ moves toward something more, something beyond ourselves and our personal knowledge of him.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews helps us see the greater purpose of enlightenment. In his letter he repeatedly encourages his readers to persevere in the faith despite the many pressures and persecutions they faced in their culture. In chapter 10, he exhorts them to remember the days shortly after they were "enlightened," that is, after they had first received Christ by faith (v. 32). Here we learn that, for those early Christians, true enlightenment had resulted in external, visible acts that blessed others and bore witness to the truth of the gospel. It had resulted in their enduring of suffering, reproach, and affliction; partnering with others in affliction; compassion for those in prison; and joy even in the midst of great injustice (vv. 32–34). Their enlightenment was for purposes and people beyond themselves. The light they received was not meant merely for their own benefit. Rather, like a lamp in a room or a city on a hill, it shone out in blessings for those around them.

Whatever clarity Moses Mendelssohn may have lacked in his response, he at least recognized that enlightenment should be evaluated by its aims and results. As he wrote, "The misuse of enlightenment weakens the moral sentiment and leads to heard-heartedness, egoism, irreligion, and anarchy."

What is your enlightenment for? And what results does it produce? As we celebrate the light and life we received in the person and work of Christ, let us remember that enlightenment—much like faith and love—is known by its fruits.

Drew McGinnis
Assistant Director of Research

Sunday, December 22

Prince of Peace

Isaiah 9:6–7
Luke 2:1–21

At the moment of the incarnation, God's people lived in occupied territory. Roman soldiers trod the promised land with the swagger of unchallenged champions. Roman governors enforced Roman law using Roman punishments.

For centuries, sieges and wars had destroyed the lives of the people of God's covenant. Then the Romans arrived and established peace. And the people paid for that peace dearly. The Romans placed the burdens of government squarely on the shoulders of those whom they ruled, taxing and enslaving the people, and crucifying dissenters.

Roman law produced Roman order, which produced Roman peace. But Roman peace weighed a ton. The yoke of oppression rested heavily on the people to whom God had promised the land.

Overnight, hope arrived. The angels who appeared at the first Christmas delivered to the shepherds "good news of great joy." Having slipped through enemy lines, they delivered their message in code. But they also provided the key to decipher the message: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior" (Luke 2:10–11).

The key words had been sent ahead centuries earlier by way of the prophet Isaiah.

> For to us a child is born,
> to us a son is given;
> and the government shall be upon his shoulder. (Isa. 9:6)

This child would sit "on the throne of David" and exercise government "over his kingdom" (v. 7). He was to be the Prince of Peace, successor to the king of Israel who would restore rule under God's righteous law and free the

promised land from injustice and oppression. Best of all, the promised king would bear the government upon his own shoulder.

Many kings of Israel in centuries past had placed the burdens of political peace on the shoulders of the people. As Samuel had warned, the kings of Israel had taken the people's sons, their finest fields and vineyards, and the best of their servants, and spent them for their own purposes. The price of peace under David's descendants was dear indeed.

Then, conquered by foreign empires, the people had borne the yoke of oppression in exile. Assyrian and Babylonian emperors demanded tribute and obedience to foreign laws. The cost of political peace in those empires was total subservience to the commands of kings who claimed the authority of mercurial gods.

By contrast to those earlier kings, the Prince of Peace would bear the weight of government himself. God promised through Isaiah that the Prince of Peace would bring justice and righteousness, and peace without end. He would restore the rule of God's perfect law. And he would carry the cost. He would later prove how dear that cost really was, sacrificing his own life to make possible the righteousness that produces everlasting peace.

This good news of great joy, encoded in the angels' message to the shepherds is "for all people" (Luke 2:10). The first King David ruled over the people of Israel. His ultimate successor, the Prince of Peace, will bear the burdens of government for the people of Israel and Assyria and Babylon, Greece and Rome, France and England and the United States of America.

He asks only one thing in return, that we accept his rightful claim to rule over us. To submit to the Prince of Peace is to accept his rule of righteousness. His law is love. His righteousness is perfect, and he already paid for it. His yoke is easy. And "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end" (Isa. 9:7).

Adam MacLeod
Senior Fellow

Monday, December 23

God's Purposes for a Flawed People

Genesis 25:19–28
Colossians 1:15–20

Today's passage from Genesis 25 perfectly illustrates a fascinating distinctive about the Bible: its willingness to depict its founding figures in an unflattering and even sometimes quite negative light. When you think about it, it is astonishing that this most sacred of books would so often treat its heroes so irreverently. Secular people in our age who know little or nothing of the Bible insist on dismissing it as a fanciful and prettifying fairy tale, but they cannot have gotten this idea from actually reading it. In fact, it is tempting to argue that the most salient feature of the Bible is its attentiveness to moral complexity.

One can even venture a generalization: the biblical stories of the Pentateuch, foundational texts not only for the Jewish people but for the entire family of monotheistic Abrahamic religious faiths—these biblical texts are anything but tracts of unrelieved patriotism and piety. Quite the opposite. In fact, there are times when they feel more like an exercise in collective self-humiliation. They are replete with the disreputable deeds of their imperfect and dissembling patriarchs, who pawn off their wives as sisters, deceive their fathers, cheat their brothers, murder, and commit incest—together with tales of God's chosen but incorrigible people, the people of Israel, sheeplike men and women who often forget the theophanies and divine favors granted them, and who prove unable and unwilling to follow the law that has been given to them for their own good.

The biblical narrative does not blink at those things. It is itself the harshest critic of the things it describes, and every one of its human heroes is presented as deeply flawed. And yet they are the ones who achieve God's purposes in the world.

The story of Jacob and Esau is a good example of this complexity. In Genesis 25 we are told that the Lord granted Isaac's prayer for offspring, and

Rebekah, after twenty years of barrenness, was able to conceive twins. That was a great and miraculous blessing, echoing the blessing God had given to Isaac's mother, Sarah. Yet we are told that during Rebekah's pregnancy "the children struggled together within her," and when she asked the Lord why this misfortune had befallen her, he did not really answer her "why me?" question, at least not on the terms in which she asked it. Instead, he informed her that she was to be the carrier of a great struggle, and that the battle within her womb would have a profound historical meaning, representing as it did the two nations and the two unequal peoples that will arise out of this antagonism between prenatal brothers.

Nor is that all. It soon emerges that out of the antagonism between Esau and Jacob would come a source of division in the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. We find out later that Rebekah will guide Jacob into cheating Esau out of his birthright, an act of deception that brings lasting enmity between the two into the world. Eventually she even deceives her husband in order to protect the favored Jacob.

Yet in spite of this mess of misdeeds, God's ultimate purposes are being achieved. He uses flawed people to achieve those ends, since there are no other kinds of people to be had. The story of the two brothers, Jacob and Esau, is about God determining who shall carry on the Abrahamic line that will constitute his people. Jacob and Esau share both good and bad traits upon which to try to build leadership for the future. The Bible leaves us trying to understand the rationale for God's choice between two flawed individuals and what that means for us.

Why does God operate in this way? Why not allow Rebekah to enjoy an untroubled path to motherhood for the Jewish people? Why the introduction of conflict at the very beginning of the story—conflict for which she has no obvious responsibility? Why the choice for the younger Jacob, who is clearly no moral paragon?

There is no easy answer to any of these questions. Perhaps the best answer is the fact that we are constantly being reminded that God's ways are not our ways, and his manner of fulfilling his covenant with us, working in and through our flawed natures, is sometimes just as inscrutable as it is faithful.

Today's passage from Colossians expands on that insight. It is in Christ alone that "all things hold together," not in the moral perfection of our forebears, or in a pattern of secular logic wholly accessible to our human

intellects. It is only through the recognition of his preeminence that all things come to be reconciled, so that we come to see his hand working in the stories of flawed men and women, in their crises and conflicts, and their various and often surprising ways of serving his purposes in the world.

Wilfred McClay
Senior Fellow

Monday, December 24

Suffering and Glory

Genesis 30:1–24
Romans 8:18–30

While the famous story of Rachel and Leah's competition over their shared husband seems peculiar and unrelatable to our modern world, the sufferings and longings of these women are all too familiar. Now, half a century after the dawn of the sexual revolution—a movement that promised greater fulfillment and happiness, especially for women—contemporary society is plagued by an epidemic of loneliness. As individualism is celebrated, the family and other institutions that once provided community are quietly crumbling. Marriages are delayed and occur less frequently, and as a result many share Rachel's yearning for children and Leah's desperation to be loved.

But today's New Testament passage from Romans 8 provides one of the Bible's most striking calls to hope amid the heartache of this fallen world. Saint Paul tells us that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (v. 18). Those who love God, for whom "all things work together for good," will not merely receive a release from suffering; they will receive, from the extravagant grace of God, blessings that are simply unfathomable (v. 28). We learn from 1 Corinthians 2:9 that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." Amid the tumult of this world, we can boldly hope and patiently wait to attain "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21).

The verses above put earthly suffering into perspective, but it is important to note that Scripture does not trivialize our sorrows and travails. Saint Paul is emphasizing the immensity of the heavenly joy that awaits followers of Christ, not belittling the reality of human suffering. Indeed, it is the suffering of Christ that makes possible this heavenly joy. Our hope is not in an abstract idea or an unknowable deity, but in the God Incarnate who

chose to enter into the very depths of human suffering. This Advent, we rejoice over the arrival of the Word made flesh, who willingly shared in the groaning of his own creation to save us from sin and death. We have a God who knows the fullness of what it means to be human, including the crushing loneliness that afflicted Leah and so many today. Because of Christ's humble suffering, we can share in his victorious resurrection and hope for the unseen glory that awaits the adopted sons and daughters of God.

Romans 8 leaves us with the consoling reminder that we do not wait for this unseen glory alone. Christ left us the gift of the Holy Spirit to be our helper and advocate. Saint Paul encourages us to rely on the Spirit who "helps us in our weakness" and "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (vv. 26–27). This Advent, as we prepare for the coming of the Lord, let us renew this reliance on the Spirit, seeking his help in discerning the noble work that God has for each of us in the redemption and renewal of this world as we wait in eager anticipation for the world to come.

Debbie O'Malley
Fellow

Monday, December 25

No One Shall Make Them Afraid

Micah 4:1–8
Ephesians 2:11–22

God said to the Jewish people, "You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6). And yet it is hard to think of a more persecuted and harassed group. Enslaved in Egypt, exiled to Babylon, dispersed throughout the globe, subjected to the Holocaust, and attacked on October 7, the Jewish people have known little peace.

It is easy to imagine Jewish men and women throughout history taking comfort in the prophet Micah's assurance that a time will come when

> they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> and their spears into pruning hooks;
> nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> neither shall they learn war anymore;
> but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
> and no one shall make them afraid,
> for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. (4:3–4)

Micah's promise is an eschatological one, but the United States has served as a haven for Jewish refugees from as early as 1654. This is not to say that our nation has been free of antisemitism, but it is hard to think of a country other than Israel in which Jews have been treated with more respect and dignity.

In 1790, leaders of the Jewish synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, wrote to President George Washington and expressed their gratitude that they live in a country that protects the "liberty of conscience" of all citizens. In his response, the president emphasized that the United States "gives

to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance" and then concluded with a blessing replete with references to Scripture, including Micah 4:4 (Washington's favorite verse):

> May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while *everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid*. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

Jewish citizens have found relative peace in the United States, but Micah's vision wasn't about our country. It involves something far greater.

The Jewish people were chosen of God, and among the chief blessings they received was the inspired Word of God known to Christians as the Old Testament. And yet as our passage from Ephesians makes clear, Christ's death has abolished "the law of commandments expressed in ordinances" (2:15). This is great news for Jews and gentiles alike. Once separate peoples, we may now be reconciled into "one body" through Christ's work on the cross (v. 16).

Today, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ—the "chief cornerstone." It is a day that should be filled with joy and feasting, but even as we enjoy it we should look forward to that day when

> I [the Lord] will assemble the lame
> and gather those who have been driven away
> and those whom I have afflicted;
> and the lame I will make the remnant,
> and those who were cast off, a strong nation;
> and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion
> from this time forth and forevermore. (Micah 4:6–7)

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