



My Soul Magnifies the Lord

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

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A publication of
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First Sunday of Advent – Luke 21:25-36

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

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

Searching for signs of the times is nothing new. Jesus is really only offering up what should be obvious to anyone paying attention. When there is distress, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” When is there not distress?—would be my question if I’d had the chance to raise my hand in discipleship class that day. Of course, the answer would be—Never. There is always distress and the real question is—How will we respond? Will we stand up and raise our heads? Jesus said we ought to do that because our redemption is drawing near.

In a culture that has minimized redemption to an event that happens after we die, we readily spiritualize what Jesus is saying about distress. In truth, Jesus taught that redemption is always present for the taking, dependent most often on the choices we make in the dilemmas, also known as distress, that confront us. Observation of the signs is only preparation for action.

Historically, most scholars attribute these verses in Luke (and similar ones from Mark) to sayings that arose after Jesus rose—from the grave, that is. Bearing in mind that the Gospel of Luke was penned nearly 60 years after the resurrection, there would be ample time for the timeline to get fuzzy. It's hard to recall who said what 60 years ago when we're all sitting around trying to remember it, especially if the one we're trying to quote said so many memorable things. Whether Jesus said these exact words before he died or whether they emerged from the community that formed after he was resurrected is beside the point. The point is, those who follow Jesus have a responsibility to pay attention and behave accordingly.

"Be alert at all times," Jesus tells us, so we will be ready to "stand before the Son of Man." Son of Man is the typical way that Jesus refers to himself and can readily be translated from the Hebrew as, "the human being." It is not an honorific title, but actually a leavening title. Through the course of his life and teachings, Jesus has been showing us how to be human. Now, he implores us to be ready to stand before the one who has been showing us how to be human. Will we measure up as humans, the humans that Jesus knows we are capable of being, the humans that do not "faint from fear and foreboding," but act as his disciples in the face of distress?

Distress is all around us:

- Thousands are marching toward our border seeking a better life for themselves and their children. Will we stand up and raise our heads to welcome the stranger?
- 11 worshippers were massacred at Shabbot. Will we stand up and raise our heads to demand that the "right to life" include some sensible gun laws?
- The income gap between the richest and the poorest in this country is the greatest it's ever been for any nation at any time in the history of humanity. Ever. Will we stand up and raise our heads to proclaim economic justice? Jubilee year, anybody?

Yes, our redemption is at hand. It's Advent. We should expect Jesus to show up and ask us—What will it be? Will we seize redemption and act like the human beings Jesus showed us how to be or will we continue down the road to hell? May we be the ones who "stand up and raise our heads."

~Jennifer E. Copeland
Executive Director

Although we modern Christian folk might dismiss the desire for divine signs and symbols as atavistic superstition, I'm not so sure we don't have a quiet, secret yearning for them, even now. I receive a progressive Christian blog called "Signs of the Times" and one of my closest friends, ambivalent about a marriage proposal, confessed to closing her eyes, opening her Bible, and letting her finger land on a passage as a sign of what her decision should be. She's not the only one. I also know a number of forward-thinking, highly rational Christian friends who spent the week before Election Day hoping for some divine clue as to what the outcome might be (I was one of them).

Why this yearning for divine intervention that signs and symbols supposedly represent? Because human beings aren't keen on living with uncertainty. We want guidance to make the right decision, reassurance that everything is going to be okay. We want God to move in and show us somehow, someday, that things will be different than they are in this highly uncomfortable and downright scary present moment.

I can't imagine many people who ever experienced uncertainty at the high-pitched level as did Mary, the Mother of Jesus. An unwed, low-status young virgin, she did receive a whopper of a sign—visited by an angel!—who tells her she's going to birth the Son of God, of all things. Her immediate response is right on target: "How can this be?" But what has always caused me to wonder is her final response at the end of this Visitation: "Let it be." How was it possible—even given this mighty big sign/thumbs-up from God—to go from the uncertainty of "How can this be?" to the certainty of "LET it be"?

It wasn't as if things miraculously worked themselves out during that Visitation. Afterward, Mary took off "with haste" to the Judean hills and the home of her kinswoman Elizabeth—and no wonder she was in such a hurry, because she couldn't just LET THIS BE. She had to find the one human being on earth who could know anything about any of this, who could possibly help her understand Gabriel's impossible message. And soon Mary would undertake yet another arduous and hair-raising journey with Joseph to Bethlehem where there would be no room for and her child. Then would come Herod and the slaughter of the innocents, and yet another journey, this time into Egypt and exile. Years later, Mary would journey into Jerusalem and then back again, searching with growing terror for three days for her lost 12-year-old. She would journey to a wedding feast in Cana with him, now a grown man, and

having pondered in her heart all that she has seen of him for more than thirty years, turn to the servants of the house and say, “Do whatever he tells you.”

And then, one day, Mary would journey back to Jerusalem to stand at the foot of a cross to watch her son die.

In other words, Mary would experience: want, loss, political persecution, genocide, exile, horrific government-sanctioned violence—all the living darkness and terror of our own world.

And then, one bright dawn, Mary would make her final journey, to stand before an empty tomb.

How can this be?

Let it be.

What I love about Mary’s story is that it shows us a unique form of faithfulness, what I would call being Advent people. Those whose faith is based not on certainty, but on pondering the difficult mysteries of faith in our heart. Those whose faith is based not only on a sure and happy outcome, but which is embedded in the struggle to see a promise made by God come to its fruition, through fear and pain and death and despair and darkness. It’s not about lining up beside the empty tomb in the victory stretch, but about walking the long, miraculous, unpredictable, and sometimes seemingly pointless journey that leads to the empty tomb, one step at a time, holding on to that promise made by God and affirmed by the beloved human beings who walk alongside us.

How do we go from “How can this be?” to “Let it be”? By seeing. By listening. By paying attention. By believing, not with utmost certainty, but by pondering these things in our hearts. By showing up for the journey, and refusing to take any shortcuts.

This Advent season, I invite you to walk the journey of Mary, to begin not with the certainty of your destination, but with the question “How can this be?” Not fleeing from the darkness but moving through it, through the infinite and incomprehensible

pain of the world, remembering that always we are contained by the love of God that led Mary through the darkness, that overcame the darkness. So that we, too, with Mary, trusting in the promise that has been made to us, might arrive at that place where WE say, "Let it be."

**~Karen Richardson Dunn
PHW Regional Coordinator**

Second Sunday of Advent – Luke 3:1-6

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

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

Imagine hearing about a person way out in the furthest reaches of society, prophesying that all would soon change in our world. A person that lives so far out that they are not dependent on the conveniences of society. You might wonder whether to trust this person and the message. We are familiar with urgent messages from the government, businesses, and leaders of all sorts, but it is jarring to hear such a message from one without clout or title. It seems familiar though, knowing something of the life of Jesus and his radical influence despite being born in a lowly stable surrounded by animals. This passage is another offering of non-institutional power, saying that all is going to change, and it will be of God.

This passage is made up of preparation, urgency, and perspective while having double-meanings and comparisons. Unlike the other Gospels, Luke is much more concerned with dates and the sequence of events. We see this in the first few verses with the naming of leaders. The list of rulers and structures of empire are in stark contrast to John the Baptist, who shows us what it means to be anti-empire. This is a deliberate

message from Luke, who positions John as one who predicts the ability of Jesus to move beyond empire. With this lens, a reader can assume that the writer of Luke knew a great deal about leaders and systems of governing. Yet, here is one sent by God, who possesses more knowledge and influence than any humanly conceived seat of power listed in this passage. None of leaders showcased in these verses possessed the truth John was sharing, a truth that would change every system we know. John knew his message would reach far beyond the Jordan region.

Preparation is another theme introduced by Luke through John the Baptist, who proclaims the need for baptism and forgiveness of sins. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” is a bold announcement requiring action from his listeners. There is urgency in these words because God will soon be flesh. John serves as a connector between Isaiah and prophets of the Old Testament—all that was prophesied is now happening and we must be ready.

When I reflect on this passage, I keep returning to the idea of “Shalom.” Shalom is a Hebrew word and a theme that is centered on wholeness and, ultimately, peace. Shalom is the wellbeing and flourishing of all that God has created. Shalom can be big, wholeness for all of creation on a global scale, and small, the capacity for wellbeing in one’s own life, encompassing a flourishing relationship with God. The peace of Shalom is ours when we are forgiven, relieved of our burdens, and have hope for our future. The idea of Shalom goes well when preaching this passage, because, of course John the Baptist is urgent and steadfast—the Lord is coming! But ultimately, this passage stirs urgency because God enters and moves in all of our lives, disrupting and calming, offering Shalom. We are nourished by a God that cares for our wellbeing and, like John begs of us, we need to be awake to the possibilities of a life with God.

After all, we can be agents of Shalom. We can be co-creators of Shalom with the help of our God. We are supported by an active and living God, and our lives can help bring wholeness and peace to our communities and world. We are always preparing for our encounters with God so that we join the work of peace and dismantling empires.

~Jessica Stokes
PHW Regional Coordinator

In this week's verses, Luke calls back to the prophet Isaiah by quoting "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

When I started to think about this reflection, I called my dad to discuss advent and this passage. As we talked, my dad mentioned that in college he had a religious studies professor that called this passage from Luke to Isaiah "as building a highway back home," meaning it was a way of connecting the New Testament to the Old Testament. In other words, it was a way for Luke to connect people across history by reminding the people that Jesus is the one about whom the prophets spoke as the Messiah.

Immediately the phrase "highway back home" brought to mind the literal highway I will drive to come back home this holiday season. However, the more my dad and I talked, the more I started to think about the metaphorical highways that are the traditions my family uses to stay connected to the past.

My family will tell you that I am a huge fan of traditions. For me, traditions are a way to feel related to something bigger than myself, whether that is my extended family or people across the world. Traditions also keep me grounded in the spirit and season. Every year we make family recipes for holiday Chex mix or cornbread stuffing for other holiday meals. As I have gotten older, my mom has been able to tell me where these recipes come from and how they became popular in the family. On my dad's side of the family, we have the same tradition of gathering together before Christmas, reading the Gospel of Luke from a bible that has been passed down through the family. This ritual of reading acts as a centering for us preparing us to share time with one another. These ties to the past keep us connected to the past while serving as a way for us to connect as a family in the present.

Advent is the season of preparation, and during that season we stand in between reflecting on the past year and looking forward to the future. We keep the past in mind as we participate in our traditions, but we anticipate the future with the birth of Jesus and the coming new year. Just like Luke quotes in the verses "prepare the way of the lord."

**~Elizabeth Brewington
Opioid Response Coordinator**

Third Sunday in Advent – Philippians 4:4-7

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

Rejoice in the Lord always. These words of Paul are echoed over and over again throughout this letter to the Philippians, a letter he wrote exhorting the early Christians toward unity in the midst of the difficult and trying times in which they found themselves. Their home, the city of Philippi, was striving to become a miniature version of Rome; modeling its constitution, architecture, and even its coinage in the ways of the empire. I imagine for many of them they had begun to feel like strangers in their own homeland. How can they continue to have faith and rejoice in the Lord at all times when so much feels like it is going all wrong?

Paul's message to the church is, do not worry. In a time when it would be easy and completely understandable to worry about a number of different things, Paul says, don't. Do not worry—about anything. How are we to do that when our natural response is to allow ourselves to be overcome with fear by our current state of things? We're instructed to pray. As one translation puts it: "to shape their worries into prayers." Paul's not suggesting that we huddle around together and wait for God to do something to change our current circumstances, but rather that we put some action into our supplications.

The opposite of fear is not courage. It is joy. Paul is telling us to replace our worry with joy, because as long as one exists, the other cannot. That's not to say that we should turn our heads in blissful ignorance away from the darkness around us. But it is to say, if we allow our fear to overcome our joy we will lose the thing that sets us apart. Our joy puts us in a position of strength, because weak leaders are the ones who always resort to fear-mongering to maintain their power. That is not who we are called to be in this moment. Rejoice in the Lord, always.

~Andrew Hudgins
Program Associate for Operations

Joy is a very curious thing. We often think of joy and happiness as the same thing, and while they coexist, one encompasses the other. If we compare the official definitions of “happy” and “joy,” they both are described by words such as luck, good fortune, delight, and success. The key difference between the two is that “joy” is described as a state of happiness; hence, joy is the permanence of happiness.

The transformation of happiness to joy is halted by fear. Fear is often associated with concern, a relationship that contradicts the one between happiness and joy. Concern is described as something that causes trouble or distress. Fear creates apprehension and anxiety, shifting the focus to what appears to be a threat. Concern then turns to fear when a situation starts to feel dangerous and harmful. Fear then is the state of being that contradicts joy. The biggest difference here is that concern can be healthy and does not have to turn into fear. Concern is also described as healthy interest and engagement in a situation, a way of maintaining balance.

We have allowed fear to seep into our society and create a culture of “us v. them.” We are constantly surrounded by rhetoric that fears the “other.” This fear is especially prominent in regards to immigration. For years now, we have been referring to immigrants as “illegal aliens,” a dehumanizing term that objectifies individuals as unknown “things” rather than people. More recently, this fear has been highlighted through news of the migrant caravan. This caravan has been described as an “invasion” and nearly 5,000 troops have been sent to the border to “protect” our border from a group of people, mainly women and children, seeking asylum.

Fear can be counteracted when we open our hearts and share with one another. As God’s children we share experiences together, but feel them differently. This sharing begins to breakdown divisions and bring us closer as we begin to understand one another. This understanding opens a path to unity, and unity opens our hearts to joy. As Paul expresses in this scripture, this relationship between joy and unity is what allows us to truly embody the spirit of Christ.

**~Lindsay Barth
Office Manager**

Fourth Sunday of Advent - Luke 1: 39-45, 46-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

The gospel reading for this Fourth Sunday in Advent includes Mary's Magnificat.

This is a powerful piece of poetry, perhaps borrowed, at least in form, from royal annunciations—declaring the arrival of a king. The words sit with me as a song—one that I sang in high school, which still floods my being when I read or hear it. A line from that high school version stands out for me: "Sing my soul, the greatness of the Lord."

Americans are hearing a lot about being "great" these days. Some think being great requires a harkening back to something we had, or were, in the past. Others think it requires moving forward toward a new way of being. I require something more precise and meaningful than "great." But I am also certain that greatness requires a spiritual centering and the ability to seek the divine in our search for greatness. The Magnificat, along with the reading from the prophet Micah, both use the idea of greatness in a context that can form our own striving.

Mary's song lists attributes of God who has done great things for her.

- God has looked with favor on her status—which lacks material wealth or political power;
- God is merciful to those who fear God—who are willing to receive divine course correction;
- God has scattered the proud with a strong arm;
- God has brought down the powerful from their thrones;
- God has championed the lowly;
- God has filled the hungry with good things—and also sent the rich away empty.
- God's mercy is rooted in love for the People Israel, and to faithful remembrance of the promise to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

If these attributes are a model of greatness. Those who join in Mary's song of worship, join in the worship of a God who directly addresses political glowering and material need, who is ever present in desert—even through generations of brokenness, a God whose promises reach backward and forwards.

The prophet Micah also uses the word "great" in the text for this Fourth Sunday of Advent. Micah describes one who has been brought forth through labor to rule over Israel, seeming to prophesy about the birth of Jesus. This one who will be born will "be great to the ends of the earth," according to Micah.

Significantly, this status of being great is the reason, according to the prophet, that the people will live secure. This security is inextricably linked to peace: "and he shall be the one of peace." Furthermore, this one "shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD."

The one who is great meets material needs and seeks peace, say Micah.

When we tend to the scriptures, we allow the Magnificat and the prophet Micah to inform our worship of God and our centering in the divine who forms us.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into this world, the inbreaking of the light that the darkness cannot overcome, the arrival of embodied love, we soak in remembrances of what greatness is: justice for the lowly; filling the hungry with good things; scattering of the proud; merciful love; and security through peace. So may it be.

~Mary Elizabeth Hanchey
Program Associate for Interfaith Outreach
And Legislative Advocacy

Hebrews 10:5-10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

In the season of Advent we remember that Jesus came to Earth to do the will of God. Because Jesus lived and died among us, "a holy and living sacrifice," we no longer need to make blood sacrifices to God as was offered in the past. God no longer desires such sacrifices nor takes pleasure from them; the life of Christ has abolished their need. Instead, we are to love God with our whole heart, whole mind, and whole spirit and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our lives are to be a holy and living sacrifice. We are to live from Jesus' example.

During the Advent and Christmas season we talk about peace on earth and good will towards all. This is the time of year that we remember why Jesus came among us and to recall how his birth changed the course of human history. We are to love God with all of our being and to love one another as we love ourselves. Sacrifices and offerings can be hollow and meaningless; loving your neighbor takes effort and real feeling. Spreading Christmas cheer is more than just playing songs and sharing cookies; we need to do the work. Everyone is our neighbor. Everyone needs love. Everyone deserves love. As followers of Christ, we are to show the love of Jesus Christ not only at Christmas but all year. We can take this time to reflect on how we celebrate the holiday season. Are we just going through the motions or are we showing real love and compassion?

We must keep in mind that Jesus was the embodiment of God's love for creation and that love should live within us. It is important that we listen to hear what God is telling

us. Jesus showed us how to have abundant life. What am I meant to do? How will I bring the kingdom of God to earth? If we keep our minds and hearts open, God will make it clear.

~Josie Walker
PHW Regional Coordinator

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers”.

Micah prophesied to the Israelites about the coming of Jesus, *The One to be Ruler in Israel*, and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would care for his flock in the strength and majesty in the name of God. Micah not only let the Israelites know Messiah was coming, but he also let them know from where Messiah would come, and what Messiah would do while on earth.

On this 4th Sunday of Advent, we anxiously await the coming of Messiah. What should resonate with us during this time of year is that Messiah is peace. A popular activist slogan is “Know Justice, Know Peace.” To truly know peace, we must know Messiah, we must know Jesus. With so much division and animosity in our country, we must remember that to find peace, we must understand and follow Jesus’ teachings.

We can spread the peace of Jesus by working for justice. Many of us choose to increase our charitable giving and activities in the spirit of Christmas, but we must not pat ourselves on the back. Helping those in need is nice and a necessity in times of scarcity, but eradicating scarcity is the work of Jesus. Can we help people learn to be more

resilient? More self-sufficient? Is there something we can do, personally, that could change someone's life? On December 25, we celebrate Jesus' birth, his incarnation among us to fulfill the will of God. Jesus healed the sick without discrimination. As Christians we are called to love everyone without discrimination. To love as Jesus loves is to pick up his call for justice. We can help our neighbors experience justice and in doing so, show them that Jesus is peace.

~Josie Walker
PHW Regional Coordinator

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day - Luke 2:1-20

The Lectionary Gospel Reading easily is divided for Christmas Eve, Luke 2:1-14, and for Christmas Day, Luke 2:15-20. Taken together, they create the full narrative of Luke's witness of the decree to register, Mary's pregnancy, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, and the visitation of the shepherds who "made known abroad" (King James Version) the joyous news of the Savior's birth to all whom they encountered. From beginning to end, Luke tells the story of a journey begun by a secular command to go and register and ended with the reign of God made visible through the birth of the Messiah.

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered.

Rulers throughout time have issued decrees, calling for registration and taxation. Only the King James Version uses "tax" to describe the registration in 2 Kings 23:35 by Pharaoh and this registration in Luke 2 by Caesar Augustus. Luke's description of this registration as "the first" implies more registrations to come. Registration is one way to keep up with people, money, and the location of each. Perhaps the present day registration process for Social Security, voting, and Selective Service can enable an understanding of the decree issued so long ago. Governments and leaders have their goals for finance and wealth while those who are ruled by them hope their cooperation will elicit benevolence and justice from the leaders.

The Gospel of Matthew also provides a birth narrative, with some similarities and some striking differences from what we find in Luke. Matthew begins his story with a list, listing the ancestors of Jesus all the way back to Abraham. The genealogy of Jesus is more interesting to Matthew than the actual birth. In the lineage of Jesus, the writer includes a list of "outsiders" whose blood courses through the veins of the Messiah, pointing to the inclusiveness of God's salvation for all people. Matthew uses pedigree to establish legitimacy for this child of questionable parentage.

Luke, on the other hand, invites us into the story through this family's experience of travel to Bethlehem, the search for shelter, and settling the newborn into a "manger because there was no place for them in the inn."

4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke establishes Joseph's heritage, placing Jesus in the house of David. Luke draws a parallel between David, who was a shepherd and the youngest of Jesse's sons before being chosen to succeed Saul. Furthermore, Jesus is born in David's hometown, Bethlehem, a small town in comparison to Jerusalem. To remind us of God's preference for the powerless, Jesus is born without a proper roof over his head, in a stable among the animals. A visitor to the Church of the Nativity in present-day Bethlehem, in Palestine, might be surprised to see this ancient structure made of stone, within a cave-like portal, no hay or animals in sight.

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Jesus is often depicted as "The Good Shepherd" in the earliest images that celebrate his life. Shepherds lived among their flocks in order to protect them. In one parable, Jesus tells the story of a shepherd leaving the "99" to save the "one" that wandered off. As we recall the birth of Jesus, we recall the promise of salvation he offered to those who gathered to hear him, often the poor and marginalized. The shepherds' journey from their fields to find the one announced to them by the "heavenly host," reminds us of the journey of our own faith journey.

9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in

bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

The shepherds were said to be “sore afraid” in the KJV, “terrified” in the translation of New Revised Standard Version and New International Version, and “feared great fear” in the Greek. The angel’s response, “Do not be afraid” delivered the good news of the Messiah’s birth, the one for whom the world had waited. The child is, himself, the sign, indicating the completion of God’s promise to deliver a Savior.

“The glory of the Lord” is associated in the Old Testament with the presence of God, filling the temple, above the temple, and on the threshold of the temple. It is an expression of the holiness of the place where God is found and experienced. Ezekiel describes the glory of the Lord in 1:28, “Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

The multitude points to the bountiful gifts that God provides. Throughout the Old Testament there are promises of a multitude of blessings, including the increase of children as well as protection from those delivered into the hands of Israel by God. In the KJV, there is a multitude of the heavenly host only in Luke 2:13, marking the event of this birth with their song of praise.

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

As the “heavenly host” departed, the shepherds likewise departed, taking up the charge to “go now to Bethlehem and see this thing . . . which the Lord has made known to us.” Christians the world over are accustomed to seeing the tableau of “Mary, Joseph, and

the child lying in the manger,” surrounded by the adoring shepherds and the gentle beasts.

Having seen the sign, the shepherds are fearless and the story continues with their witness, amazing all who hear them tell the story. But wait! There is an important interruption to the shepherds’ story. Luke returns our attention to Mary who “treasures all these words and ponders them in her heart.” Mary’s quiet reflections are folded within the action of the shepherds, bookending her pondering with their amazing journey to Bethlehem and their ensuing glorification and praise of God.

~Para Drake
NC No Torture Project Coordinator

Hark! The herald angels sing! Glory to the new-born King!

Christmas day is upon us. We have been listening to Christmas music for the entire month, while decorating our homes for the holidays. We probably spent the past week scrambling to get those last minute gifts.

And here is it: Christmas day—a time when we can finally slow down, come together, and absorb all the joy this holiday brings. Christmas tends to be a busy season for us all and it becomes difficult to relax in all the hustle and bustle of this month. But now that Christmas day is here, this is the perfect time to begin to rest, to remember, and to reflect.

For over a year now, my family has been celebrating Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) every Friday. The Sabbath is a day of religious observance and abstinence of work, kept by Jews from Friday evening to Saturday evening. Most Christians claim Sunday as their “day of rest.” My parents (clergy and clergy spouse) decided to celebrate their Sabbath on Friday night since Sundays are among the busiest days for pastors, and a Sunday nap doesn’t measure up as a day of rest. They decided to celebrate Shabbat and set aside a day of rest that would bring together family, friends, acquaintances, and church members to share a meal and have thoughtful conversation together.

We begin every Shabbat by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. We then share a meal together, tell our highs and lows of the week (good things and not so good things that occurred), and answer a thoughtful question. Many of these meals are followed with desserts, games, and often dance sessions (featuring music from Disney movies and the 1980s). Since we’ve begun celebrating Shabbat, we have been given the

opportunity to slow down and take time to rest and enjoy being with family and friends, catching up each week.

I mention Shabbat because now, on Christmas day, is the perfect time to recognize the Sabbath. Starting on Christmas day and throughout the Twelve Days of Christmas try and set aside some time to relax and enjoy the company of others. Bring family and friends together, share meals and memories, and practice great belly laughs. This year has been hectic for many of us, with December as the capstone. For the next Twelve days, make it a priority to take a break for Sabbath: rest, worship, remember, and reflect. This can be a time when we can truly enjoy the Christmas season, giving thanks for the birth of Jesus Christ.

Merry Christmas! And Shabbat Shalom!

~Rachel Baker
Immigration Advocacy Program Coordinator

First Sunday after Christmas - 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord”; and then they would return to their home. Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.

Luke 2:41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, ‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.’ He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’* But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,* and in divine and human favour.

The events recorded in 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 are not lost on this mother considering what has gone before. Earlier in Chapter 1 we read that Hannah is a barren woman who seeks the favor of the Lord over and over for a child. Even when her prayers are not immediately answered, even when her womb fails to bring forth a child—she doesn’t stop asking, doesn’t stop praying, doesn’t stop going to the temple. The earlier parts of the story do not tell us if she ever wanted to give up or considered her efforts to be pointless. We just know that she was so very faithful.

In the background of Hannah’s pleas is a hint of what it meant for her not to have a child in the societal context in which she lived. A woman’s worth was judged harshly if

she didn't have a child. As we move through the story her husband takes an additional wife, who did bear him children and subsequently mocked Hannah for childlessness.

By Chapter 2 Hannah's prayers have been answered and she has made a promise. Indeed, when Hannah is blessed by the priest Eli, her answers echo through the years and take root in Mary's response to the news that she would bear a child, as is told in the Gospel of Luke. Hannah says, "Let your handmaid find favor in your sight." Mary says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it to me according to your word." Mary's Magnificat parallels Hannah's Song. The parallels don't end there. Samuel 2:26 is again echoed in Luke's gospel as both Samuel and Jesus are said to have grown in wisdom and stature, finding favor with both God and people.

Samuel 2:18-20, 26 presents the character of Hannah in much the same ways as the earlier chapter, faithful and ever willing to do what God asks of her. Now we see Hannah as a mother remain faithful to her promises. She made a promise to offer her child in service to God for God's answer to her prayers. We aren't told how often she sees the son she offered in service to God, but it seems, not often. Certainly not as often as a mother who wakes up everyday with her child in her home, sharing meals with him, working alongside him, teaching him and praying with him at the day's end. Hannah still finds a way to be faithful and be his mother. Every year on her pilgrimage to the temple, Hannah takes Samuel a robe to be used as he serves God. Eli, the priest, blesses both her and her husband this time, just as he blessed Hannah earlier, before Samuel's birth. Ending with verse 20, we are haunted by his blessing, a child to replace the one she had given up, and Hannah as faithful and mother.

~Nicole Johnson
PHW Regional Coordinator

Christmas Day is behind us. The new year is soon upon us. Reflecting on our time with family and friends can be healing and nostalgic. We celebrated the birth of Jesus with food, love, and laughter.

On this day, as we read the story of Hannah and her child, her faithfulness is undeniable. Likewise, in the story of the curious young Jesus, his faithfulness to God shows forth. Upon being found by parents who believed him lost, he replies, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

(Luke 2:49). The virtue of faithfulness is often connected to religion. Loyalty is almost interchangeable with faithfulness. But loyalty is more descriptive of our sentiments toward organizations, jobs, political parties, or our partners. The difference between loyalty and faithfulness could lie in the fact that loyalty is based on a past experience or previous encounter. A person is loyal to a partner because they have a relationship. One cannot be loyal to a partner not yet met. Faithfulness, on the other hand, (special attention to the word faith) is based on the belief of a hope-filled future. One is a faithful Christian because of the imbedded hope and promise of a more bountiful and flourishing life.

Faithfulness can take the shape of many things. Some people may even conflate faithfulness with tradition or “blindly following” an established institution. A more productive perspective, however, is to view faithfulness, rather than loyalty, as seeing the future for what it can be. Being full-of-faith can feel like peace and trust that we, each of us in our human forms, are enough.

Jesus, as a spry 12-year-old, is transfixed by the teachers in the temple. He yearns to learn more, connect more, and understand more. He is so at peace in the temple that his parents’ concerns are lost on him. I picture him seated, cross-legged, at the feet of the teachers, eagerly smiling and speaking enthusiastically. What a wonderful example of faithfulness.

As we prepare for the new year, it’s natural to reflect on our life. The new year is an opportunity to allow ourselves to evolve. It is so easy to feel pressure on us to stay faithful to a job, a partner, a way of life, or a belief. But pressure should not be at the root of our faithfulness. I have been asking myself a few questions to sort through the loyalty/faithful conundrum. What am I faithful to? What pieces of my life give me hope for a better future? What trends in my life will I look back on and be proud of? My answers may come in the form of people, ideas, or organizations. I am not faithful because that is what is expected of me. Staying faithful is a choice that I make every single day. As Jesus did: ask questions, be curious, and find your home place.

~Michelle Peedin
Program Associate, PHW and NCIPL

Epiphany Sunday – Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany celebrates God's presence with humanity through the person of Jesus Christ. With the birth of this baby, the reign of God breaks through the barriers between God and humanity. Epiphany is observed 12 days after Christmas Day. In some traditions, it is called "Three Kings Day," acknowledging the scriptural witness of the three gifts brought by three magicians, or wise men.

Welcoming the shepherds and the wise men into their life together, Mary and Joseph encourage the baby's being revealed to all the world.

The Visit of the Wise Men

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

King Herod was a Jewish king who was allowed to exercise his power by the Roman authorities. He ruled through fear, having put members of his own family to death so they would not challenge his right to the crown. In contrast, the wise men, or magi in the Greek, seek the real king. They respond to their observation of a rising star, recalling Micah 5, which some understood as a prophecy predicting the birth of the Messiah. This "star of Bethlehem" has been described as a natural phenomenon (Origen) and as a miracle (John Chrysostom).

3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Herod's position as king is challenged by the birth of this child. Having already murdered family members who threatened his authority, he makes haste to discover the origin of this latest threat, summoning his advisors to lead him to the one called "king of the Jews."

5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2 combine to bring the prophecy of the birth and the geographic connection with King David to life, indicating the fulfillment of God's promise of the Messiah.

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

Herod's nickname was, "the Fox." He hoped these magi would reveal the whereabouts of the baby to him when they returned. He deceitfully solicited the location claiming that he would go and worship the new king. The fear he holds for the baby's presence hints at his desire to destroy him as a competitor for the kingship of the Jewish community.

11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The wise men's entry into "the house" points to a later time than immediately after the birth. The gifts of gold or kingly wealth, frankincense used by priests in the temple, and myrrh, used to anoint the dead point to Jesus' role as king, priest, and mortality. They also give rise to the tradition of three kings, though there could have been more or less than three. In the same way that Joseph's dream speaks to him about remaining with Mary and the child, the wise men are warned against returning to Herod in their dreams. Heeding this warning, they journey home a different way.

~Para Drake
NC No Torture Project Coordinator

Back when I was a kid, in Brazil, my mom would never let us put the Christmas decorations away until “*Dia de Reis*,” the Day of the Kings, January 6. Only then were we allowed to place the final three figures in the nativity scene, positioning them around Jesus for a few hours, talk about their significance, and start dismantling the tree and all the “Christmasy” things we put around the house.

Until I prepared to write this reflection, being from another country, it had escaped me that the Day of the Kings is also called Epiphany. I love the name and find it very appropriate. According to the Merriam-Webster, epiphany means “an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking.” I still keep the same tradition my mom taught me, now with a deeper appreciation for its significance. We wait for the wise men because although the Christmas season with all its busyness has ended and life’s routine is returning, it is still important to mark all the events of the most important story ever told.

Magi were a famous class of astrologers and dream-interpreters that served the Persian King. Astrology at that time was considered the science of its day. These astrologers likely traveled with a significant caravan, motivated by the appearance of the star. Once they got to Jerusalem, the palace was the obvious place to go look for a new king. It was also common for dignitaries to come and congratulate a new ruler. But the King wasn’t in the palace. Since the star was no longer visible, the current king was the person to ask for directions, and his scriptures revealed to them where to find him—in King David’s hometown, Bethlehem. After they left Herod, “The Fox,” the guiding star showed up again! This time it stopped above the right place. The home was probably a simple house, “out the nice part of Bethlehem, through the not-so-nice part of town, into the really-not-nice-at-all part of town, down a little dirt track,” as told by the Jesus Storybook Bible.

Simple . . . and striking. Can you picture this? A long caravan, animals, people in shiny clothes, the Magi in wealthy, extravagant robes . . . kneeling to a toddler, Jesus. Gentiles from a far foreign land, coming to bow down to the new King. In a poor house. Far

from banners, flags, and wealth. Just a boy and his mother. Surrounded by astounded wise men, bowing their noble heads to the ground, giving Him great treasures.

Simple . . . and striking to think about the way God chose to become incarnate among us. Even though Jesus was, at that time, a helpless little boy on the poor side of town, wise men worshipped him. Such a powerful picture of the most important and ultimate King of our world. Certainly, he should be in the best house and with the best adornment, but our king is different. He has come to serve, so he comes into a house where people said “Yes” to God’s unorthodox plan. Along with that willingness comes communion with God and the means to see life in a new way.

This reflection ends with the wish that we learn to need not so much stuff and focus more on what is important. May we contemplate how simple and striking, wonderful and important, it is to marvel at the now reachable God. C.S. Lewis said “I believe in Christ, like I believe in the sun—not because I can see it, but by it I can see everything else.”

“Jesus, please do not let me miss the epiphany of your presence in the simple and striking moments of my everyday life, so I can see everything else through you. Amen.”

**~Sabrina Visigalli
NC Interfaith Power & Light Intern**