

# Advent & Christmas

by Katie Z. Dawson

## N ovember 30

Isaiah 64:1-9, Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19,  
I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Isaiah thinks that we need a dramatic wake up call. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” we hear in the first verse. Mark, too, seems to be drawing our attention to signs and wonders in our readings for this first Sunday in Advent. Get ready! Be prepared! The signs are all around you!

Maybe we are too distracted by the Christmas music that has been playing in stores since the end of October. Maybe we have let the election steal our attentions for the past two years. Maybe our church has been so preoccupied by a building campaign that we forgot to notice the gospel right in front of us. Whatever it may be, Advent is the time of year when we get slapped upside the head with the challenging images of the heavens shaking and the earth trembling and voices crying out prophetic words from the wilderness. Advent isn’t a time for the soft and cuddly, but a reminder of the ever present Kingdom of God that is about to fully break into our midst – whether we are ready for it or not.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the signs and wonders, but unlike Isaiah; I don’t necessarily believe that God has hidden from us. Maybe we just aren’t paying attention. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her sermon, “Late Bloomer,” (found in Gospel Medicine) “... what better way to live than in the grip of a promise... to wake in the possibility that today might be the day. To remain wide awake all day long, noticing everything.” What if the call to keep awake was not a call to be prepared for catastrophic billboards from on high, but to simply notice every day where God is present around us?

Yes, Christ promises to return, and in the Advent season we eagerly await the return of Christ. But

Advent is also the reminder that God has already come down and made his life among us, and that while there may have been a star in the heavens, the presence of God was found in the ordinary. An infant born and laid in a manger of hay. Smelly shepherds coming in from the fields. A life lived among the people of God. A holy meal of wine and bread.

We claim and proclaim a Kingdom that is already here and not yet fully realized. To live in that tension is a call to be always aware of where God is active and moving among us, and also to be aware of where and when God is about to do a new thing in our midst.

## D ecember 7

Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13,  
II Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

Anticipation is not an emotion that we experience too often these days. We live in a “have it your way, fast” kind of culture. Anything you want in the entire world is at your fingertips through the wonders of the Internet, and now that the Internet is built into many of our cellular devices, we can literally take the world with us wherever we go.

Not only can we access information, music, images, and people with lightning speed, but we actually seem to be able to fit more things and tasks into our lives through the wonders of multitasking. The other day, I was driving to a meeting, trying to go over my notes, eating pretzels and listening to NPR on the radio. Coincidentally, the morning program was about multitasking. According to the neuroscientist on the program, our minds really can’t do multiple things at once; we simply shift our focus between all of these tasks very, very quickly. The problem with all of these rapid shifts between

activities is that we leave ourselves very little time and space to prepare for what comes next.

More importantly, we have forgotten about the importance of waiting. We think we are avoiding all of those terrible feelings like anxiety and impatience and frustration when we occupy our waiting minds with other things, but we also miss out on feelings of what Merriam-Webster calls “pleasurable expectation,” or anticipation.

Just think of the anticipation that would have surrounded the crowds who came out to hear John preaching there in the wilderness. He was a sight to see for sure, with his camel hair garb and that strange diet of locusts and honey. We get to experience Advent every year. It’s on our calendars and so we know it’s on its way. But those crowds who traveled from Jerusalem out to the countryside had no idea how long they would have to wait or what they were even waiting for. All they knew was that this crazy guy was standing in the river, washing away sins, but that someone even more powerful was coming. Someone who would not only wash them clean, but who could make them whole. Someone who was about to turn the whole world upside down.

Now, that’s what I call anticipation.

## D e c e m b e r 1 4

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Psalm 126 or Luke 1:47-55, I Thess. 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28

A few summers ago in seminary, I participated in a course called “Church in the City.” We traveled around Nashville exploring many diverse neighborhoods and heard many powerful stories of how churches were impacting the communities that they lived in. Throughout our lessons that summer, one scripture kept coming back to us—today’s lectionary passage from the book of Isaiah. Whoever this author was, he was speaking to people in exile, people who were longing to go back home, people who were desperate for a word of hope. And his word of hope was that good news was on its way—that they would soon be set free and that God would lead them back to Zion.

The verse that really struck us, however, as we

read this good news is found in verse four: “They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities...” Yes, God will lead them back, but they will be blessed with the opportunity to repair and rebuild and restore the devastation of many generations. That is what we witnessed in those communities in Nashville. Families that had been exiled by gentrification, individuals who literally had been imprisoned, churches that were broken down and falling apart, were returning to and reviving these neighborhoods, rebuilding the city around them.

This message of promise and hope from Isaiah was renewed this summer as my state of Iowa was devastated by flooding. Five months after the waters crested twenty feet above the flood stage in Cedar Rapids, many city blocks still look like a war zone. Many families have crowded into homes with friends or relatives or into the FEMA trailers delivered to the area. Exile is a very real concept to many of these close-knit neighbors who are now scattered across the city.

But little by little, they are returning to these flooded neighborhoods. Little by little, there are signs of rebirth. Whether it is another business re-opening or another home that is gutted and rebuilt, the people of Cedar Rapids are raising up the former devastations. They are rising above the floods that threatened to overwhelm them. It has been amazing to witness how the good news and the grace of God have been present in the recovery. Strangers are going out of their way to help one another. Churches have become beacons of hope. There is a very real sense that while this was a terrible tragedy, while the way forward is unknown, God is there. And the people are not rebuilding alone.

There is a sense of pride, as there should be for the countless hours of hard work that have gone into making a dent in the devastation. But that pride is tempered by the knowledge that the job of the church is not to take credit, but to simply point to the gospel and the One who came to bring the good news to life. Like John the Baptist, we know that we are not the Messiah, but we are witnesses to the light of Christ that has broken into our midst. And we hold onto and proclaim the promise that

“all will be well. You can ask me how but only time will tell.” (All Will Be Well, by the Gabe Dixon Band).

## December 21

II Sam. 7:1-11, 16, Luke 1:47-55 or Ps. 89:1-4, 19-26, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38

We read the beautiful telling of the annunciation in Luke’s gospel and imagine Mary as a mature, wise young woman, full of the grace of God and ready to face any challenge that might come her way. We witness her willingness to accept the burden (or joy) that God is bestowing upon her. We hear her song of praise to the God who has come to her, a lowly servant. And perhaps in light of our contemporary visions of teen pregnancy through such movies as “Juno,” “Saved,” and television shows like “The Secret Life of the American Teenager,” we are ready for the happy ending and to find out how it all works out in the end.

In doing so, we skip over the part about what a struggle it must have been for Mary in her pregnancy. How was she treated by her family? We are told in the gospel of Matthew that Joseph probably would have quietly broken off the engagement had not an angel of the Lord intervened. Her kinswoman Elizabeth was overjoyed to greet Mary and her unborn child – yet Elizabeth was also in on the secret of this divine birth and was in the middle of her own miraculous pregnancy. With the exception of these two, we don’t know how the rest of the family responded, or how her community responded. A young woman, still unmarried, becomes pregnant and the people are supposed to... what? Celebrate? Extol her virtues? Even if Mary told everyone that it was the Son of God in her womb, who would have believed her?

Luke gives us Mary’s song, commonly known as the Magnificat, precisely because it is the cry of a woman, or a people, waiting for liberation. It is the song of someone who has nothing left to lean on but God alone and whose sole trust lies in the promises of the scriptures. She sings as if the promise has already been fulfilled, “He has scattered the proud... He has brought down the powerful... he has filled the hungry.” Yet in her reality, life was

still hard and the promise was still waiting. Mary’s joy is not the happy emotion of someone leading a perfect life, but the true joy that comes only from communion with the most holy God. It is the outpouring of emotion that comes only from surviving oppression and affliction and adversity.

As the angel appeared to Mary, he offered her comfort: “Do not be afraid,” the angel whispered in her ear. The words of the hymn, “You are Mine,” seem to express the words of encouragement that might have helped Mary find the strength to accept this blessing in her life, in spite of the difficulty, in spite of the whispers behind her back, in spite of the stigmas that would be attached. “Do not be afraid, I am with you... I love you and you are mine.”

## December 28

Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 148, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40

While the Advent journey takes us through an emotional rollercoaster of joy, fear, humility, and anticipation, there is no other emotion to guide the days after Christmas than pure celebration. Each of the readings for this Sunday call us to take a deep breath of relief, to look around at the beauty of what God has done, and to simply enjoy it.

As an avid user of Facebook, I have come to realize that people are excited and grateful for many things in their lives. I frequently check on the status updates of friends and family and get to hear all about the amazing pie they just had at a local deli, or how terrific their new fuzzy socks are. But these updates are not always so material. Facebook is now often the first place where friends announce engagements or tell the world that they are expecting a child. We simply cannot be silent, we can’t hold our tongues (or our fingers) still one moment longer and must tell the world about the joys in our life.

The question is, do we do the same for those experiences of God’s grace? Do we rush to the computer to promptly type in “Katie just witnessed the good news of God in...”? Do we even share those encounters with the risen Christ when we head to

church on Sunday? Sometimes, but usually not.

Our scriptures from Luke for this Sunday tell us of two people who simply couldn't be silent when they encountered the Christ-child. Perhaps it was the fact that Anna and Simeon had been waiting for such a long time to see the Messiah. Perhaps they were just more in tune with the power of the Holy Spirit after lifetimes of faithful service to God. Or maybe they just allowed themselves to be overcome by the joy of the moment and couldn't help but be silent. In any case, both Anna and Simeon rushed to the new parents and their infant son, God-in-the-flesh, and gave praise to God.

We don't know much about what happened to Simeon after this encounter with God. He had been promised after all that he would not see death before he had witnessed the coming of the Messiah. But we do know that Anna simply couldn't keep her mouth shut about the good news of God. Luke writes that she began to tell the story of this amazing child to everyone that was looking for redemption and hope in the city of Jerusalem.

She may have been eighty-four years old, but she wasn't going to let anything stop her from sharing what she had experienced. Maybe she thought in the back of her mind of our text from Isaiah today: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest." If an eighty-four year old woman can share the joy of this birth with all of those around her—why aren't we?

January 4

Jeremiah 31:7-14, Psalm 147:12-20,  
Ephesians 1:3-14, John 1:(1-9), 10-18

While our church year technically begins with the Advent season, Epiphany has always struck me as a time of new beginnings and fresh starts. Perhaps this is in part because of its close proximity to the New Year in the Gregorian calendar. But liturgically, Epiphany has the feeling of a beginning of a journey. A star had risen in the sky and a band of men from the east began an unknown voyage to discover its source. They probably had no idea how long it would take them to get there. They didn't

know what friends or foes they would meet along the way. In reality, they didn't even know who they were looking for. They set out anyways.

In many ways, our journey of Christian faith is like that of the wise men. In each of our lives, there has been a moment, however small, however insignificant, that has led us to begin this journey. It may have been words of a Sunday school teacher that first caused you to follow Christ for yourself, like the faint glimmer of a falling star. Or perhaps it was a dramatic moment of hitting rock-bottom and having no where to turn but to Christ, like the glimmer of light calling out from behind an eclipse. Perhaps the call to follow has always been there in your life, from the very earliest memory, much like the multitude of stars in the night sky. We may not be able to name the moment or recite the date and time, but at some point in our lives, we began to take steps toward Christ.

Inevitably, there are times in our lives where we have strayed from that path, when we have let the cares of the world or the demands of family or job lead us in other directions. But just like the New Year brings with it a time for making resolutions, the season of Epiphany is a reminder of who we have promised to follow. In the words of Isaiah, "Arise, shine; for your light has come!" The path is still there, the light of Christ still beckons, and now is as good a time as any to begin the journey again.



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