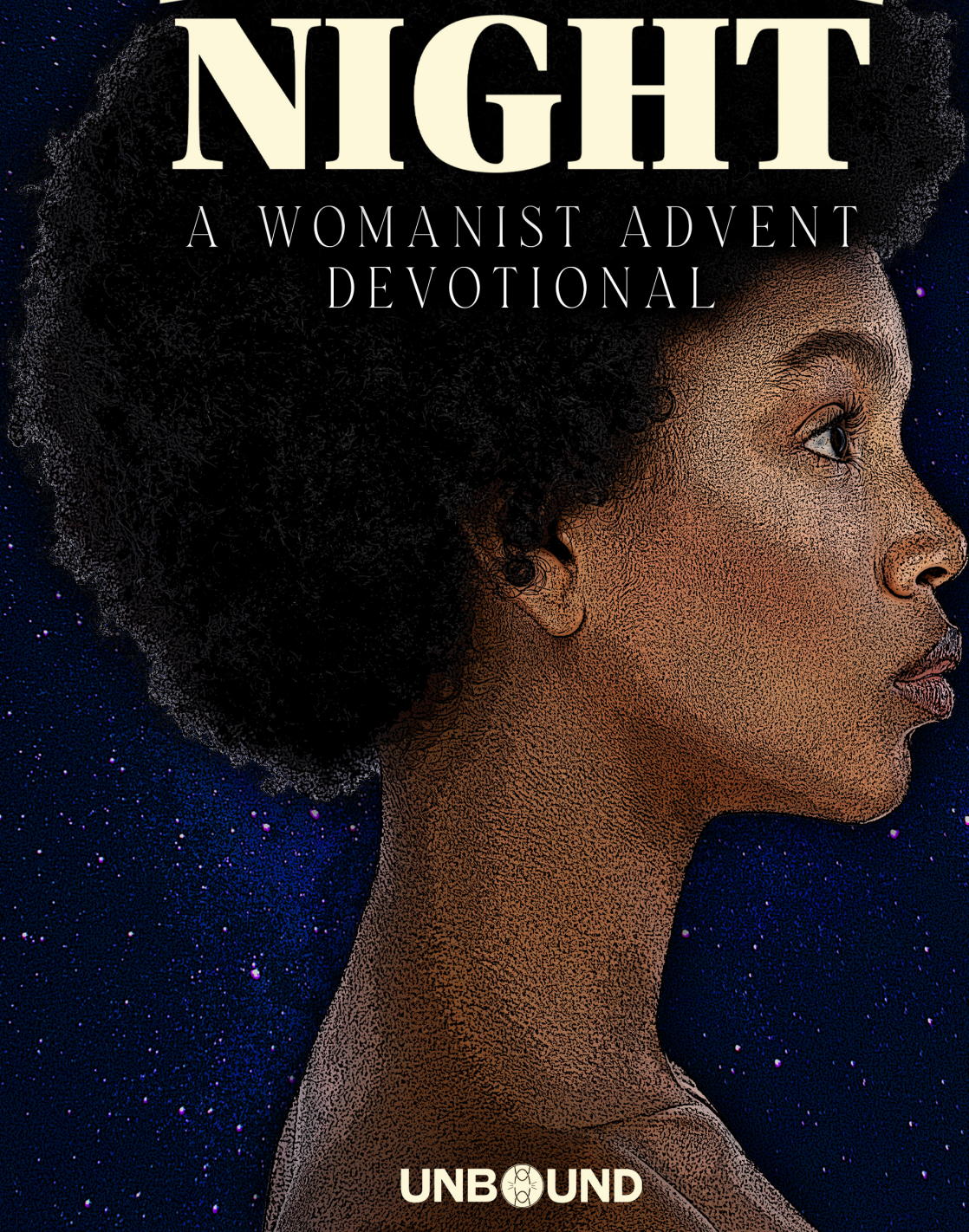


# STARRY BLACK NIGHT

A WOMANIST ADVENT  
DEVOTIONAL



UNBOUND



# 1st Sunday of Advent

KELLE J. BROWN

## **MARK 13:24-37**

*“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Humankind coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

*“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.*

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Parent. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a person going on a journey, when they leave home and puts their enslaved ones in charge, each with their work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the owner of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else they may find you asleep when they come suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

## **THE LUMINOUS DARKNESS**

It is dark and getting darker. Times are as challenging as they have ever been. As we wait and walk through Advent together, let us wrestle with the myths and metaphors that work to keep us locked in whiteness, and away from the gifts buried in the luminous darkness. Keep awake.

When God made the heavens and the earth, the light was not born as a correction to the darkness. The light was spoken into existence out of blackness, and there is no inherent evil attributed to the dark. The vast and nurturing embrace of blackness birthed the light. I contend that the dark is where God begins God’s work with and in us. It is but the inside of the chalice where the sacrament of communion with God occurs.

In 1965, Howard Thurman wrote a book entitled *The Luminous Darkness*. A prolific writer, mystic, theologian, and pastor, Dr. Thurman reframed the definition of “darkness”. In addition to his assertion that segregation, as a result of the maintenance of white supremacy, was sinful, he came to terms with the darkness of his own skin in the light of a society who vilified and dismissed him for his skin’s hue. Thurman found beauty where many could not, as he did under the canopy of his favorite tree in the darkness of the night. His Black skin was no trap, no burden—but a conduit to the welcome wisdom that God is also God in the dark. Black lives have always mattered.

As we stand in the darkness of Advent, stand in the liminal space that is the longing and waiting for the new thing God in covenant has promised, we are called to welcome the darkness. This includes creating new myths of healing and wholeness that cannot admit blackness is beautiful.

I write today as one born in the dark, who enjoys the sound of Blackness. I speak as one who watched the beautiful, dark fingers of her grandmother weave magic in her love, in a pot of collard greens, making something out of nothing. She was called “Black Beauty” as a youth because her skin was so dark, it reflected all the light around her. Luminous darkness, indeed. Because of her, I see well in the shadows, in dim circumstances,

and I am not afraid of the dark. I am utterly convinced that God is up to something in the pitch black nights of our lives, in the womb of our own souls and being. There is something gossamer and brilliant about the night in God, and in the promises that only come in the dark. We are being born!

This Advent season asks questions of us. We are missing something when we spend our time longing for the light while missing the treasure in this darkness. Why do so many linger immobilized, counting down to the lighter days? Advent reminds us to value every state in which we find ourselves, especially as we stand waiting in the dark.

We are in a time in history where the suffering is great, where it seems the sun is less radiant, and the moon will not give its light; a time where day by day the very stars are falling from heaven, and the powers are shaken. And yet, in the journey of Advent, because of the darkness, the sleeping are awakening, equity and wholeness is being required, by any means necessary. Moments are pushed aside for movements, and the voices of the most vulnerable are rising. We are recovering our moral selves. I declare this is a result of the transforming creation of the dark that positions us to do what we often are unwilling to do in the light.

The gift of living into the darkness is self-love and preparation, of truth-telling while breaking the false images of God as the poster child of white supremacy. So many are welcoming a new way of being. In the dark, folk are disarmed, and cannot discern the kind of difference that leads to hate, vilification, and abuse. In the dark, no one's eyes can tell them who to profile and dismiss, and our senses become heightened. Together, we reach out for hope and find strength with those others of us who dare to be in the dark night of our lives with purpose and vision.

When we welcome this lived experience of welcoming the gifts of the dark in Advent, we become like writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston who understood the gift of her life to be immersed in luminous darkness. She wrote in her book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "It is so easy to be hopeful in the daytime when you can see the things you wish on. But it was night, it stayed night. Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in [God's] hands . . . They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against cruel walls and their souls asking if [God] meant to measure their puny might against [God's]. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God."

Let us watch and wait for God in this dark night. May we refuse to rush through this time, filling our lives with distraction and artificial light—or we can use these long, dark nights to heal, to dream, to love, to imagine, to carve and create ourselves into a better likeness of who God created us to be. This Advent season be reconciled to the gift of the luminous darkness. Blessed be.

# 1st Mid-Week Devotion

AMANTHA BARBEE

## **PSALM 124**

*If the Lord had not been on our side—*

*let Israel say—*

*2 if the Lord had not been on our side*

*when people attacked us,*

*3 they would have swallowed us alive*

*when their anger flared against us;*

*4 the flood would have engulfed us,*

*the torrent would have swept over us,*

*5 the raging waters*

*would have swept us away.*

*6 Praise be to the Lord,*

*who has not let us be torn by their teeth.*

*7 We have escaped like a bird*

*from the fowler's snare;*

*the snare has been broken,*

*and we have escaped.*

*8 Our help is in the name of the Lord,*

*the Maker of heaven and earth.*

We stand between Faith and Hope in our journey through the Lenten season. To be sure, our Psalm for today lands firmly between the two. Clearly, King David penned this Psalm nearing the end or after a tumultuous time in his life. David faced doubt by those he led. He felt anger towards and from them. The floods he experienced were his war scars. He was always under attack. But if it had not been for the Lord on his side, he would have perished, been swept away, ravished.

This is where Black women in America live. From the very beginning of our time here in America, those engulfed by greed sought the strongest, smartest, wisest, and healthiest of the African women to buy and then entered the women into a harrowing and demeaning stripping of everything for which they were purchased in the first place, thus creating the “mammy syndrome”. The slave owners subscribed to Aldous Huxley’s “One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them.” But all along the Black women subscribed to Idowu Koyenikan’s “The mind is just like a muscle – the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets and the more it can expand.” Our faith and our hope were and are foundational in this very belief.

Every industry has fallen prey to what is called “the mammy syndrome.” Stephanie Mitchem describes this phenomenon as ‘the unspoken expectation that Black women can take any position, work, or discomfort and ought to be grateful for a job.’ This rang true then by the harsh treatment of working in the fields all day, raising their children (often born of the slave owner by rape), and caring for their families which were often broken apart by a simple sales transaction. Yet, these women performed all the required duties and somehow, by the grace of God, survived. If it had not been for the Lord on their side, where would they have been?

Today, after years of white male activities designed to keep the status quo, and them in power, a Black woman is called in under the guise of progressive change. Her entire staff has been formed and informed by yesterday and those are the true and underlying expectations for today and the future. In order to change that culture to face a

brighter, exciting, and promised future, she must decompose the mammy syndrome to journey through to hope. Black women will not be swallowed up, ignored, broken, or swept away because each mountain scaled has only served to make her stronger. Her faith is the strongest thing about her and many simply cannot understand why she never falls. She never falls because she stands on the precipice of delight and freedom simply by her connection with the Holy. A Black woman who lives between faith and hope is unshakable, not because she alone is perfect, but she serves a perfect God. She knows that if it had not been for the Lord on her side that she never would have made it. She builds on her personal experiences and calls upon the sweet and enduring memory of her strong mother, grand-mother, aunts, and neighbors. All of them have the expectation that she will call upon the name of the Lord from where her strength will and does come. She knows that in God there is no failure and those who seek to defy her strength and courage will be the very ones who will be gnashed by the teeth of faith and hope and be utterly broken. Those who see and realize the connection will move from faith to hope in a lifted ethereal-ism with the Holy. They will not cling to her but embrace her faith in God from which to glean, grow, and excel.

Black women know the pain of oppression, unrealistic expectations, othering, and emotional poverty. What Black women rarely have is a depletion of the spirit. The Lord we serve is a reservoir for enlightened perseverance. I remember growing up in the Baptist church as a child, listening to the choir sing, "This joy I have, the world didn't give it, the world can't take it away." This joy, inner peace, faith, and hope which reinforces the very fiber of the soul of and for Black women is not of this world. Like King David, our soul support/help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

As you reflect upon this text and this season of Advent, challenge yourself with the following questions, prayerfully, and thoughtfully:

- 1 – In the perilous and stressful time of COVID and racial unrest, from where is your help coming?
- 2 – Who have you perceived to be your albatross? How have you embraced the God in that person?
- 3 – Who have you not seen as one created in the image of God, but a foe?
- 4 – Where do you currently stand between faith and hope?
- 5 – How is this stance living out in your life today?
- 6 – How have you grown through adversities in your life?
- 7 – How will you grow with any current adversities? Who will you be on the other side?
- 8 – How are you truly caring for your soul system? Have you taken on too much?
- 9 – Are you compromising to the point that you can't hear God's word?
- 10 – As we journey towards a new birth, what are you carrying? What will you birth?

Amen.

# 2nd Sunday of Advent

GAY BYRON

## **MARK 1:1-8 (NRSV)**

*1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*1:2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*

*1:3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"*

*1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

*1:5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

*1:6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*

*1:7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.*

*1:8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

Advent marks a time of new beginnings. Although this four-week period of watching and waiting occurs at the end of the calendar year in December, it is the beginning of the liturgical calendar. It is the Christian "New Year" when we focus on birth and new beginnings, which the life of Jesus brings into the world and into our lives.

The lectionary reading for this week, Mark 1:1-8, introduces John the Baptizer and alludes to the prophet Isaiah's reference to a voice crying out in the wilderness (Is. 40:3). In both texts, the setting is away from the crowds, away from the hustle and bustle of life, and away from traditional and "acceptable" ways of doing things. In the wilderness, John is considered a wild man -- wearing camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and eating locusts and wild honey. Yet beyond how he looks, it is the words coming forth from his mouth and the actions he takes with his hands in preparation for "the one more powerful" than he, that matter. It is John's words and his deeds that are worthy of our devotion during this season of Advent.

For as the Scripture says John came preaching a baptism of repentance. Beyond the quote from the prophet Isaiah in the Markan text (vv. 2-3), there is something symbolic about being in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of testing, a place of struggle, a place for divine encounters, and a place to release those things that keep one separated from God. The wilderness motif is central for womanist theologians and biblical critics. Going back to the groundbreaking book by Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993), womanist interpreters look for models of survival, wholeness, and agency in biblical traditions and in real, lived, experiences of Black women. Hagar is considered a paradigmatic figure of one who was in the wilderness with her son Ismael and found a path into a new world of possibilities (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:9-21). Though the text does not identify who the people are from the Judean countryside or in Jerusalem who came out to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist, surely we can imagine that women were lined up to confess and repent of their sins and to experience forgiveness through the ritual of baptism. This going into the wilderness is not a sign of weakness. At some point in life, we all have wilderness experiences. The words and deeds of John the Baptizer, a prophet of his time, remind us that there is a way through the wilderness.

In every generation, God calls prophets and leaders who are willing to go out into the highways and byways, the back roads, and the wilderness places in people's lives to let them know that what they are experiencing is not the end. They remind those who will listen that God always has the final word. Prophets speak to everybody and they are charged to raise their voices whether the people are listening or not. They speak to the downtrodden, they speak to the elite, they speak to adults, and they speak to the children. They speak across generations, find-

ing a way to reach souls that are drifting and longing for a deeper plunge into the life of the Spirit. So, it is a sign of humility and trust that in order to receive the great promises of God, seekers must first renounce worldly passions, renounce the ways they have colluded in the sinfulness of their day, and renounce the interlocking systems of oppression that keep them trapped in bondage. All the people coming to John for this baptism of repentance were going into the wilderness to find a way through some type of wilderness experience impacting their lives. Ask yourself, what type of wilderness are you experiencing? Is it a moral wilderness, an economic wilderness, an ecclesial wilderness, a vocational wilderness? Resources like *The Desert Mothers: Spiritual Practices from the Women of the Wilderness* (Mary C. Earle, 2007) or *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, [eds.], 2016) help to open up spaces for transformation in whatever wilderness experience you may be facing.

During this season of Advent -- as we seek the peace of God and as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of Jesus, find some time to go into your wilderness place. Find some time to dwell in the desert. You may not be able to go out to a physical place, especially in light of travel restrictions and social distancing practices brought about as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. But this season of Advent is an opportunity to cultivate new spiritual practices and find a renewed sense of purpose in your life.

This season of Advent is also an opportunity to connect with contemporary prophets, those in your own community or those in other spheres of influence whose voices are crying out in the wilderness, “prepare the way of the Lord.” One such prophetic voice is the Poor People’s Campaign, a movement seeking to build a moral agenda rooted in a framework that uplifts the deepest moral and constitutional values to redeem the heart and soul of this country. They declare that the moral public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, women, LGBTQ people, children, workers, immigrants, communities of color, and the sick. They advocate for peace within and among nations and the dignity and respect of all people. They are ultimately consumed with repairing the moral infrastructure of this country. Rev. Dr. William Barber, Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, Rev. Alvin Jackson and other leaders of this prophetic movement could be viewed in the same way that John the Baptist was viewed back in his days in the wilderness. They are making a national call for a moral revival in this country. They are saying, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2). Many people may be thinking they are out of sorts and unrealistic to run what they call a “Poor People’s Campaign.” Yet as we bring closure to the unforgettable Year 2020, a year of protest and pandemic, now more than ever we need a message of repentance for all who are willing to get involved and do something different to shift the injustices and the immoral acts that are taking place against the poor and disenfranchised in this country.

As we see with John the Baptist, it was in raising his voice -- calling for repentance, and in carrying out tangible deeds -- baptizing people, including Jesus, in the Jordan River, that we see his true witness come to fruition. Talk is not enough. Being radical and different is not enough. Rather, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God and preparing accessible paths for those who have been left on the margins of society is one way through the wilderness. Come Holy Spirit. May we know the power of water and fire (Mark 1:8; Matt. 3:11).



# 2nd Mid-Week Devotion

KARYN BIGELOW

## **PSALM 27; MALACHI 2:10-3:1; LUKE 1:5-17**

As I reflect on the Advent scriptures for this day, the theme of a path prepared jumps out to me. I find this idea of the path to be challenging. As a Black woman, 2020 has been exhausting to say the least between the global pandemic (and the consequential deaths), scarcity of food and basic needs, massive job loss, policy brutality, political divisiveness and civil unrest. With all of the chaos of this year, the impact has not been felt equally. Black Americans have been disproportionately impacted by all of these things. The path toward freedom, peace, and Heaven on Earth feels so much further away. How sweet it must have felt for those who knew about the coming of Christ!? How wonderful it must have been to know that the event they and their ancestors waited on was almost over?

In Malachi, it is promised that the path was prepared for Elijah, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”(Malachi 3:10)

Despite the promise of the arrival of a savior, it did not happen right away. Israelites waited for 400 years—they were in a holding pattern. Multiple prophets spoke of the one to come and life went on as they waited. As we meet Israel in Luke 1:5-17, they were in an in-between moment. In between the promise from God and the fulfillment of that promise. In between oppression and liberation. In between the mundane and one of the greatest events in history. Zechariah was told by an angel of the Lord that his wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a child who would prepare the way for the Lord. (Luke 1:5-17) Very few people knew at that time that Israel was moments away from their generational prayers being answered.

Like we see in scripture of the nation of Israel, generations of Black people are connected through a threading of prayer, traditions, stories of joy, and stories of trauma. Black Americans whose ancestors were forcibly brought over to the US through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade were in essence put into exile and slavery from their homeland. Since then generations of Black people have been in this “in between” of waiting from bondage and freedom. And right now the fruition of freedom that we have waited for feels so far away.

Despite how hard this year has been, I trust that God is present in the midst of the chaos and the time will come for victory. I imagine that Israelites felt like this after hundreds of years of waiting and being separated from their land. For generations, they experienced land of plenty and it was taken away. They had moments of conquering and then seasons of being conquered and experiencing exile. Several times Black Americans have had comparable feelings and experiences as the nation of Israel in scripture.

When we pray and wait for a prayer to be answered, we may cry and plead to God. We may have moments of doubts, moments when our hearts can grow weary in waiting. We may have moments when we wonder if God even has heard us. And wonder, where is the God of justice?(Malachi 2)

Reading the three scriptures from today was a much needed reminder that the waiting will one day end. There is a time for everything and every matter under heaven. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.(Ecclesiastes 3) All of this pain and sorrow will end one day. It will be replaced with justice and righteousness.



I want to leave us all with this charge of knowing that when we are in the in-between moments of transition, we may not know what is going to happen and understandably it gets scary and frustrating. But we cannot let it stop us from hope and action. Know that God is God and is at work, even when we can't see it in all moments. In this season of Advent, let us wait on the Lord and long for the time to where we "will see the goodness of Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13)

As we wait in this season ponder these things. Where do you see God acting in the world? Where do you see hope? How can you take action to help goodness come to the land of the living?

### **PRAYER**

*God—our creator, redeemer, and sustainer, many of us are in a season where many people have heavy hearts and sorrow, instead of feeling the joy of this season as we celebrate the birth of Christ.*

*We pray for the time to come of sweet justice and peace.*

*Oh God, how we pray that in this season of waiting on the Lord that justice and righteousness will come to pass in the world.*

*We can't see where the path ahead is taking us, but we know you are on the path with us.*

*In Jesus name, Amen.*

# 3rd Sunday of Advent

ANNANDA BARCLAY

## LUKE 1:46B-55

*1:46b "My soul magnifies the Lord,*

*1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

*1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

*1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

*1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

*1:53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*1:54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,*

*1:55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

The Magnificat is the canticle Mary sings/proclaims when she is visiting her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant with John the Baptist. For me this song is the cry of liberation for the oppressed. It is the proclamation of a messianic birth, in which we are all invited to take part not only as witnesses but as fellow children of G-d.

This Advent I hope you meditate on the questions asked of this poem. I hear the Magnificat and go back to the book of Genesis to the Garden of Eden where our creation myth began. I think of Mary's song whaling in the air. Back to when Adam and Eve plucked from the fruit of the Tree of Life. Back to the origin of human beings violating sustainable relationship with God's creation. A creation, this planet, this rock, this earth, hurling through space that has always been a paradise.

I think of the cost of touching and consuming life that was never meant for us to take. The cost of not living into God's abundance and to thinking we have dominion over anything as if all that we know and have isn't a gift designed for us to enjoy. As Mary sings, she speaks of the liberating new way of life that has come to draw us back into sustainable relationship, or love, with all of God's creation. So, I ask... what are your expectations of a messiah in this world broken by human design? Are you willing to do the difficult, yes even hard spiritual and emotional work of dealing with the things you don't want to see or hear about yourself and society? Or do you wish for a bubble gum Christ, swaddled and cute in a manger, filled with a hollow gospel and theology but gives you temporary comfort? Indeed, Mary's song is a choice to be birthed alongside our brother, Jesus or to remain asleep as G-d continues to do, what G-d has come to do.

## **POEM**

There are disappointments that linger  
In this world filled with expectations and potential  
That name delicate ways in which life is sustained.

There is real poverty in otherness  
There is practical comfort in wealth  
Such obvious barriers  
Smothered in sins of loathing and entitlement.

what are your expectations for the messiah?  
what is required of you to walk this new path of liberation?

when you pray at night, who is your God?

Black inquiring minds would like to know.  
Sincerely.  
Over 1 billion christians on this planet.

who is their god?

As fruits from the Tree of Life  
Are regularly harvested  
The Great Illusion is repeated

We reject paradise given as birthright  
Soil  
Wind  
Is our body's name.

Mary  
it is a miracle your throat is not raw.  
Mary  
it is a miracle your praise has not ceased.  
Mary  
your stubborn lips know your first son's teachings.

By choice  
We too are the fruits of your womb



# 3rd Mid-Week Devotion

DESTINI HODGES

## **PSALM 125; MALACHI 3:16-4:6; MARK 9:9-13**

In our Christian structured Bible, we know Malachi to be the last book of the Old Testament. The hermeneutics of this text is known to be one of fire and brimstone as Malachi foretells to the people what our Heavenly Creator states, “surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day is coming will set them on fire” (4:1). God instructs Malachi that God “will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the [God] comes.” At the same time the Mark passage tell us that Jesus instructed, “Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him” (9:13). The message was clear, the time was approaching, but were the people ready?

As we are preparing and waiting for the season of Advent, we are also facing a dual pandemic of COVID-19 and systemic racism. Although the race pandemic is not new to our society, COVID-19 forced our country to notice the racial tension that has been structurally oppressing people of color, particularly Black women, since the constitutional foundation of our country. The United States of America received a similarly fire and brimstone message like the one that Malachi told the people of Israel; it was blunt, direct and in their faces, but were they prepared to listen?

While many have the luxury to work from home; they have received the message of the racial, social and economic injustices that many Black woman face in America. They have received the message as they turn on their evening news every night to hear skyrocketing statistics of COVID-19 disproportionately affecting people of color, especially Black women. They have received the message while enjoying their morning cup of coffee, being forced to wrestle with the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery while reading their morning newspaper. Meanwhile, not printed in the national paper at the time of her death was the story of Breonna Taylor: an unarmed, law abiding, Black woman murdered while sleeping in her bed. They are brutally faced with the message being ever so clear every time they handed a Black woman cashier their money at the grocery store, conveniently waited in their cars as Black women brought them their takeout dinner; and as a Black woman placed the must have bread maker that you ordered from Amazon on your front porch. Exhausted, tired, and putting their families at risk for the sake of your comfort; they do it all with illuminating crinkled eyes and with a smile covered by a mask to keep you safe. Despite all of the misfortunes that Black women are faced with, we too are waiting and preparing for advent and believing in the message of hope.

As we reflect on the current state of the world and with further reading and close evaluation of the Malachi and Psalm text, there is a clear message of hope. God uses Malachi to state that he will send the prophet Elijah before the day of judgement to turn the hearts of the people (Malachi 4:4-6). Psalms 125 comforts us by stating, “those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround the Jerusalem, so God surrounds the people both now and forevermore” (Psalms 125:1-2). This is God’s promise to us to stay faithful during our season of preparing and waiting. As we lament the current condition that Black women are faced to endure during the dual pandemics, we are hopeful because we know that “the scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted of the righteous” (Psalms 125:3).

Most importantly, many across the United States received the message and instead of ignoring it they reacted. This was evident when many had the luxury to stay in their homes, they responded to the message by pouring into the streets in droves demanding justice for Breonna Taylor. While some read their morning papers with their families at breakfast, they engaged in the hard conversations around race, gender and class disparities due to COVID-19. Lastly, there were some who responded to the message by turning their homes into justice advocacy offices by writing letters to their elected officials, donating money to cash bail funds and educating others through social media.

We have big challenges to face not only as Black women, but as a society. Our faith needs to be justified by our actions this Advent season. We cannot only wait, but we need to be actively preparing ourselves because we know how the story begins and the good news that is yet to come.

# 4th Sunday of Advent

ROSLYN BOUIER

## **LUKE 1:46B—55**

As an unapologetic Black female, senior clergy, serving on the frontlines as community pastor, advocate, and organizer in a community 200% below the poverty level, in one of the most depreciated and disenfranchised sections of Northwest Detroit, I see the age-old constant appropriation and commodification of bodies and choices. Most especially regarding women of color, and most often by men in power. As uncomfortable as it may be, I challenge each of us to experience this text not as a sacred text but as a window into the life of a young girl of color. This young girl who is grappling with decisions that her young mind should not have too. Having to accept decisions made for her and her body. It is incumbent that the lens that this text be read through be that of a Womanist lens, one of empowerment and liberation.

The deep waters of intersectionality that most women, most especially women of color, are forced to wade in and out is often-times murky, muddy, and polluted. The expectation that is placed upon one person to be the acceptable spokesperson for an entire group is too heavy a weight to bear. Yet we see this continually in our communities, movements, churches, and more so in our sacred texts. Far too often, women have been expected to toe the line and operate in accordance with what others—usually men, more specifically white men - have designated as acceptable behavior. Our originality as individuals with unique lives, thoughts, dreams, and ideas is often-times disregarded for the ‘good of all.’

In present day, we continue to see this long-standing tradition of women most especially women of color being expected to be quiet, follow the established norms and procedures at all cost—even when the fee is our physical bodies. We are critiqued, admonished, sometimes physically attacked, shunned, and even cast out when we opt to break from the expected norm.

As little girls we are taught that we are to present, perform and please at all cost. When we push back and decide to honor the voice from within, we are demonized, categorized as loud, unreceptive to direction, and not concerned for all. At an early age we are taught to question our dreams and hopes. Too often women most especially women of color are forced to exist on the margins of society deemed as unworthy to be heard. Our voices are muted, and our bodies are not considered to be our own. We are not permitted to talk back and if we do, we are either labeled loud and brash or we are forced to pay the ultimate price with our lives—say her name Sandra Bland.

If we decide to protect and defend ourselves, we are slaughtered in our homes -- say her name Breonna Taylor. When we decide to take our lives and agency back, we are tried and convicted as the criminal and never allowed to be the victim—say her name Cyntoia Brown. When we are elected to political offices by overwhelming voter support, we are still expected to be seen and not heard, not permitted to operate within the vested powers of the offices we are elected —say their names, Madame Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Ayanna Pressley. In Alabama, a rapist’s parental rights are protected over the women who have been raped. For women, most especially women of color, it is and has always been the battle-cry to self-rule, govern and make unilateral decisions around our own bodies. In most recent news, we see the U.S. under the presidency of this current administration (refusing to say the name as an act of protest), joining 19 nations, including Saudi Arabia and Russia: declaring there is no international right to abortion. More disconcerting is the extreme measures we are seeing to over-throw Roe v. Wade. There is a battle-cry going out—do you hear it?



The battle-cry begins in our text. Mary sounds the clarion call. It was and has been historically labeled as the Magnificat, Mary's Song of Praise. A beloved song that Mary sung. But within this devotional, I would submit that what we are reading is a battle-cry—a clarion call by a young girl devoid of her choices, to challenge future generations. Challenge what others determine good and acceptable for each of us. To take back control of our bodies, our voices, our future, and our agency. That when we see this warped need to cast a net to challenge the validity of women's rights to make decisions around our own bodies—that while we see the advertisements that state all life is precious, that too, Black lives really do Matter—right now!

This is not to say that Mary was not a willing vessel. But we must challenge ourselves to see through the eyes of this young female child of color. This pre-teen who has just been told that she will bear a child. All her choices are taken from her. Mary has no say—she is told this will be a blessed event and for her part she is to go along as instructed. All her dreams are deferred. Where were her choices, who was advocating for her? To think that God was limited only to Mary merely serves to minimize the unlimitedness of our God. To declare that Mary was blessed is undeniable—but that is not the question. The question is do we continue to view this pericope as a song or a battle-cry?

This is our opportunity to disrupt narratives of oppression. Mary, I believe has raised her voice in a battle-cry. The first thing we see is Mary declaring that she has decided to magnify her Lord (v.46b) —Mary takes back her power. Even in these dire, uncertain times we must be clear who the oppressor is and after identifying we must decide how much power we are willing to give up. Mary says her deliverer has toppled thrones and raised up and exalted the lowly (v.52), this is what protestors, Black Lives Matter say every day. Is Mary saying this as an empty rebuttal to what she has no say in? Mary's silence is broken when she declares I will bear this child; I will accept what I have no power to refuse.

But Mary's cry magnifies so much more—Mary recognizes that it is the poor and the hungry that need good things (v.53). Mary advocates for others when others do not advocate for her. Mary chooses to be a participant in this moment with the understanding that certain promises have been made and expected to be fulfilled (v.55). Mary declares if I am to be a part of this then there must be some future changes for all generations—we just cannot expect that things continue as before this moment. There should never be another young teenage girl, woman, who hungers for choices. Sacrifice if I must, but no one else should be compelled to such a weighty cost. Mary declares just as so many who have followed—if my body, my agency is to be the cost then let others have a choice and not be the sacrifice. And then this baby that I am carrying through no choice of my own, this man-child, be the last to be brutalized and sacrificed.

In this season of Advent—this season of arrival—I pray that Mary's battle-cry goes out. That we see the long-awaited arrival of justice, equity, and inclusivity. That women's bodies be honored as just that—their body! In this season of 'newness' some old ways and beliefs are cast out. That as we await the second coming of our Lord, we do not fall back into oppressive behavior and beliefs. That just as Mary passionately points out, we see and live into the need to 'topple' and dismantle systems of oppression against all, but most especially against the bodies of Black, Brown, LGBTQIA (+), the disinherited and disenfranchised. And that those that are hungry receive good sustenance.

Then maybe, just maybe, we too like Mary can hope to experience the Magnificat.

# 4th Mid-Week Devotion

ELENORA GIDDINGS IVORY

## **1 SAMUEL 2: 1-10, LUKE 1: 46 B -55**

*Hannah, Hannah, Hannah. Say her name. In the streets of our cities, we hear demonstrations full of marchers who chant in rhythm to 'say her name'. In the name of justice, they are crying out to all to say the names.*

*Hannah, Hannah, Hannah. Say her name. Say the name of all women who have succumbed to the violence that engulfs them. During this season of Advent, as prayers are brought forth on behalf of so many who need them.*

In 1 Samuel chapter 2, we see Hannah's beautiful prayer. Hannah is a woman who did not have children, but she prayed to God for a son. She promised to dedicate her life and the life of a child given to her to the Lord's work.

Her prayers were answered with the birth of Samuel. Hannah praises the Lord by saying, "There is no Holy one like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." She gives all praises to the Lord. A Lord who can bring us through the painful times of wickedness is a Lord who will be there for us in joy also.

Remember, that after the pain of what feels like wickedness, comes the fulfilment of the birth. Jesus said we would have birth pangs. We could categorize those birth pangs as the images in the Old Testament of devastating fires, floods, pestilence, and societal violence.

In recent times, I have been struck by the presence of large consuming fires on the west coast, unrelenting floods on the southern borders and the illusive pestilence of COVID throughout our nation in addition to ongoing violence among the people.

It is almost as though those biblical historic events of fire, flood and pestilence are always there to challenge our resolve and our steadfastness. Not all of us get through it. We lose friends and dear ones. But those events are not all consuming of each and every one of us. These events are not new to humanity. Maintain your tenacity through a grounding in faith in God. Faith is something bigger than us.

Hannah's prayer said, "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail."

We need to remember that the wickedness of the terrorism is in many places. We must "Pray without Ceasing". Remember to pray, pray, and pray and when you finish, pray some more. Hannah was overwhelmed with sheer gratitude.

In Samuel, we see it said that "The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts." His words have exalted this woman and brings low the people who would dare to question what she did.

With so many unnamed women within our scriptures, it is spectacular that we have the name Hannah from whom to draw spiritual sustainability. From Hannah, we see the juxtaposition of the favorable and the unfavorable aspects of our lives identified through her prayer. We see both humility and exaltation. We see possibilities and potential against all odds that may thwart our mobility. We see acceptance that does not permit us to

stumble over rejection. Hannah shows us how to pray through it all. Her prayer shows us how to shake it off. It is mere dust on our feet (Mark 6:11).

Hannah delights in the presence of God and leads us to be able to triumph over enemies and those challenges that may hold us back. There is a way for struggling women to gain renewed strength. It is their faith in a God that is bigger than all else.

It took a woman's faith to break a jar that contained the expensive oil to wash the feet of Jesus (John 12:3). This woman's action reverberates beyond the pages of the text, and much more than a jar breaking. Her witness suggests the breaking of inequality, the breaking of injustice, the breaking of social barriers and most of all the breaking of old traditions. Mary shows how to adapt anew to a society in which divisions—created by religion, class, social and patriarchal order—are abolished while demonstrating that all are equal in Christ Jesus.

Not only do we have the name Hannah, but we also have Mary, mother of Jesus. Our Christian faith is based on the faith that Mary had in God to bring God's child Jesus to us. We could say that this is all about Mary. We could say that Christmas Day is the ultimate of Mother's Day that we celebrate. A young woman was chosen to bring forth the Child of God. Yet, even with this miraculous birth, we know that the world may not be as we would like it to be.

Just as Hannah did, Mary sings with Joy and we are to listen with Joy. Mary, mother of Jesus, says that her spirit rejoices in God who is her Savior. Our spirits are also to rejoice with God who is our Savior.

Mother Mary says that God looked with favor on her lowliness as God's Servant and that all generations will call her blessed as we continue to do during our time of Advent. Mother Mary reminds us that God made a promise to the ancestors of Jesus going back even beyond Abraham and to the descendants of Abraham forever and ever.

A popular song, "Mary Did You Know," has 17 questions for Mary. Wouldn't it be great to have had a conversation with Mary before the birth of Jesus? Mary, how much did you truly understand? We hear the declaration of Mary, mother of Jesus as conveyed through Luke 1.

We often hear the stories of a family, on their way to the hospital. The baby is born along the highway. This is one of the images that may come to mind as we read about the travels of Joseph and Mary during her pregnancy. Joseph and Mary had probably been in Bethlehem for some days before the actual birth of Jesus. You will remember that Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, to be counted in the census as dictated by King Herod. Today we might ask, did Joseph and Mary have time to fill out their census form? Did they have time to put their absentee election ballot in the drop box? If we are truly in anticipation of a second coming of the Christ Child in our Matthew 25 view of the world, we may ask such questions. Today, we might ask, is the Christ Child waiting to be re-born at the southern borders of the United States and will we accept that child as our God incarnate?

So. Let's all say their names. Say all their names. Say the names of the many strong women who follow their faith and bring God's dominion into the world. Amen



# Christmas Eve

KERRI ALLEN

## **ISAIAH 9:2-7**

- 2 *The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —  
on them light has shined.*
- 3 *You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.*
- 4 *For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*
- 5 *For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*
- 6 *For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*
- 7 *His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

## **I AM DREAMING OF A BLACK CHRISTMAS**

Advent is the liturgical season of preparing, waiting, anticipating, and expecting. In preparation, each week during this season, we have lit a new candle to mark the drawing closer of Jesus coming into the world. We anxiously long for this time where God – Emmanuel – comes into the world. But are we really prepared to embrace the fullness of what it means?

A closer reading of the biblical text might offer some insight. This biblical text feels eerily apropos for 2020. The Isaiah oracle 1-39 consists of condemnation of Judah and the ruling monarchy. By this point in the biblical story, the people had experienced devastation after being betrayed by their idolatrous ruler, King Ahaz. This left them vulnerable to God's righteous anger, and divine retribution came by way of destruction at the hands of the Assyrian army. They were in the midst of great suffering and seeking some measure of holy hope like what was articulated in this oracle of Isaiah 9. Even as the people had abandoned their covenant with God, God would return to them, promising them a Davidic ruler to institute peace.

In 2020, it is not too hard to imagine suffering and destruction. We live in a world that has been turned upside down by the death and devastation of COVID-19, racism, social inequity, poverty, and bigotry aimed at LGBTQIA communities. These things make me wonder just how ready Christians are for the presence of Emmanuel – God with us – this Christmas?

I ask this question because womanist New Testament scholar, Mitzi Smith, suggests that the womanist perspective “unapologetically prioritizes Black women’s experiences, voices, traditions.” In biblical interpretation, this is critical for Black women and the most marginalized in the world. Smith’s insights invite me to think about this Isaiah passage through my lens and experience as a Black woman. In the context of that experience, this passage is nothing like it seems on the surface.

Black women know something about walking in the dark. In fact, Black women are experts at navigating darkness because we are experts at “making a way out of no way.” Just as Harriet Tubman led enslaved people to freedom under the cover of darkness, Black women have found our most extraordinary creativity while feeling our way in the dark.

Reading this Isaiah passage reminded me of this small but radical act that my big sister engaged every Christmas. She would play Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas,” and every time that Crosby sang “white,” my sister would belt out “black,” emphasizing that she was dreaming of a Black Christmas. Like my sister inverted white and black, I want to reverse light and dark to reflect Black women’s realities. Black women’s freedom will not come from white light. That is not the Womanist story of Jesus that will liberate the most marginalized in the world.

That child that has been born for us - the wonderful counselor, mighty God, Prince of Peace - is the little tiny baby who was nurtured and sustained in the darkness of Mary’s womb and was born into a world that cared about him as much as they would any child born to a Black woman today. Jesus was born to a mother who could be considered a trope lifted straight from the 20th Century Moynihan Report.

The truth that we find in the womanist reading of this biblical text means that too many Christians are nowhere near ready for the radical birth of Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us. This savior entered the world only to be despised and discriminated against as a little baby. He grew up to challenge the powers and principalities and the unjust structures of government, society, and religion, and he was lynched for doing so.

On this Christmas Eve, if we truly seek for Jesus to enter the world, we must ready ourselves for what that means. That means that we should be more concerned with achieving justice for Breonna Taylor than we are about what presents are under the Christmas tree. That means that migrant children reuniting with their families is a higher priority than your Christmas vacation.

The baby Jesus who enters into our world in a few hours, in a dark and dingy stable, will grow up to march on the streets with Black Lives Matter, amplify science that saves lives, condemn keeping babies in cages at our borders, and know the name of every Black trans woman murdered in this horrific year of 2020.

While some make their way through Advent to this Christmas Eve, ready for festive celebrating, the womanist anticipation and devotion have a different flavor. That is why I am dreaming of a Black Christmas. Where we await and prepare for the one who will establish and uphold justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. Amen.

# Christmas Day

RHASHELL HUNTER

## **PRAYER**

*Gracious God. Pour out upon us the spirit of justice and peace that we may see what you have revealed. As we live and thrive by every word that comes from your mouth, nourish us today with your word and in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.*

A couple decide to get married, but they have an unexpected pregnancy. Little did they know that the whole world would remember this child, born of an unwed young woman of color in the Middle East over 2,000 years ago.

I imagine that Mary was afraid. It was scary enough that she would soon live in Joseph's house and be his spouse. Then, she learned that she would be both a wife and a mother. And she would not be just any mother; she would be the mother of the savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

An angel first told her about her baby whom she and Joseph were told to name Jesus, as that means "the one who saves" for Jesus would save people from their sins. Then later, an older man named Simeon told Mary that her baby would become a leader and was destined to be a "sign" that would be opposed. "And a sword will pierce your own soul too," he said (Luke 2:35). I wonder how often Mary replayed Simeon's words in her head?

Mary and Joseph had their child in a stable (or in a cave according to some traditions) with animals, hay, manure and straw all around. This poor couple couldn't even find a hotel room. The only crib available was a trough where the animals fed. This family was not one of privilege.

And even though their circumstances were challenging, I can imagine that they saw the light of the world in Jesus' eyes. They saw goodness, kindness, beauty and peace. And a big, bright star stood right over the stable where they were like it was pointing right at them saying, "See, here is the place where the baby Jesus lies." I envision that Mary and Joseph were joyous, and the word spread that this special baby was born.

Rich and poor came to see him. Young and old peered into the manger. Class distinctions went away. Race, as we experience it today, an ideological social construct anyway, did not matter. People from all around came to pay their respects to the Sovereign One who would save the world.

Three wise ones from the east came. They brought expensive gifts -- a rare perfume called frankincense, and another one called myrrh. They smelled heavenly, which was fitting, as this was a heavenly child.

No one laughed at how ludicrous it seemed for these wise ones to bring expensive gifts to a baby born in a barn or in a cave, who didn't even have "a crib for a bed."

Even King Herod was afraid that his power and authority would be challenged. He tried to find out where the baby was. When that failed, he sent out a hit squad and had all the newborn baby boys killed. And even then, he didn't quench the light. He missed the child. The family had fled to Egypt.

Jesus learned early how to travel from place to place. First, his family traveled from Galilee to Bethlehem. Then they fled to Egypt. Later, they went to Nazareth in Galilee.

And when he was a man, Jesus traveled from place to place, preaching good news that the kingdom of heaven

was near. Sometimes, though, history repeats itself. And just like when he was a child, the young adult Jesus had to flee for his life from his own hometown. This time they came at him threatening deadly force, almost hurling him off of a cliff when he preached his first sermon at home.

“Who does he think he is? He is Mary’s boy. He is the son of that carpenter, Joseph. Get a hold of him. Throw him off the cliff!”

I wonder if Mary was there that day, thinking of Simeon’s words: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel...and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34-35)

How many times this year have mothers had their own souls pierced? How many times have African American parents and parents of color watched the Christ in their child, the breath in their bodies, snuffed out by a bullet, viewed on a smartphone video posted on social media? Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Atatiana Jefferson, Merci Mack, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and so many more.

Some of us are struggling today. We are essential workers in a global pandemic. We are scared to go to work. We have lost jobs in the economic downturn. Our unemployment has run out. Our loved ones are sick, and we are not allowed to sit with them in the hospital. Family and friends have died, and we cannot safely hold a funeral service for them. Our mother lives overseas. Our father is in another state. We are stir-crazy from working from home for most of the year. We do not want to wash another dish, wash another shirt, or cook another meal. Our children graduated, with no pomp and circumstance, have left for college, and we fear they will become infected with the coronavirus.

Though this time seems challenging and unending, as people of hope, we believe that suffering will not last forever. “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:5b)

Some of us have lived through difficult circumstances before. Even those of us with humble beginnings had parents who, in the midst of their fear, smiled when they held us, knowing that they didn’t have a whole lot but they had each other.

Jesus had a humble beginning, and Mary and Joseph had limited resources and threats all around them. The world of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus was a difficult and dangerous place, one with harsh conditions. Even so, I can imagine that they must have smiled when they held Jesus, knowing that they didn’t have a lot, but they had each other.

Some shepherds, who were watching their flocks of sheep nearby, raced to Bethlehem to see the child, and they began spreading the good news: “We bring ‘good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord’.” (Luke 2:10-11)

Angels were all over the place – in the fields, in houses, in the near East, in the West Bank. At one point, angels filled the sky, singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom [God] favors!” (Luke 2:14)

I can see baby Jesus laughing and cooing, and his mother and father feeding him and rocking him. Little children may have played with him, and people talked baby talk to him. And, this rag-tag community held him and looked out for him. And he slept. Protected, cared for and comforted, he slept. He had plenty of time to prepare for the amazing work he would have to do, but there, in the manger, he slept -- this small, helpless ruler of the world.

There is a lesson here. Those of us suffering from justice fatigue and sinking into despair after hearing the news



of yet another African American sibling left to bleed out or asphyxiate in the street; those of us learning that yet another person has died of COVID-19; those of us who are stir-crazy because we have been sequestered in our own homes most of the year, will need to sleep, to rest, to renew our souls this Advent and Christmas because there is still ministry and work to do, and the church and the world need our witness.

So we pause and are still, to pay homage to the Messiah. We celebrate Christmas, the “Mass of Christ,” the birth of Jesus. Who would have thought that his birth would be remembered over 2,000 years later? Who would have thought that the angel who spoke to Mary at Jesus’ birth would have such powerful and lasting words? Do you think that Mary and Joseph really knew what they were getting into, when a star filled the night and led shepherds, wise ones, and seekers to God’s child? We join with those who praised God, paying our respects to the family and giving homage to the child. We peer into the manger once again this season, and kneel before the child.

Poet and liturgy writer Ann Weems said it best in her poem “The World Still Knows” from *Kneeling in Bethlehem*:

The night is still dark,  
and a procession of Herods still terrorizes the earth,  
    killing the children to stay in power.  
The world still knows its Herods,  
    but it also still knows men and women  
    who pack their dreams safely in their hearts  
    and set off toward Bethlehem,  
        faithful against all odds,  
        undeterred by fatigue or rejection,  
            to kneel to a child.

And the world still knows those persons  
    wise enough  
to follow a star,  
those who do not consider themselves  
    too intelligent  
    too powerful  
    too wealthy  
        to kneel to a child.

And the world still knows those hearts so humble  
    that they’re ready  
    to hear the word of a song  
    and to leave what they have, to go  
        to kneel to a child.

The night is still dark,  
    but by the light of the star,  
    even today  
        we can still see  
            to kneel to a child.

# 1st Sunday of Christmas

DENISE ANDERSON

## **LUKE 2:22-40; GALATIANS 4:4-7**

In 2008 Michael E. Ross wrote a piece for The Root examining the misuse of the word/song “Kumbaya” in American politics. Ross noted that “Derision of the song and its emotional foundation has become a required sign of toughness and pragmatism in American politics today, and this is especially true since the Sept. 11 attacks.” Indeed, many instantly imagine white hippies around a bonfire when they think of the song, but too few understand its origins or what the word “Kumbaya” even means.

For enslaved Africans and their descendants, it was a pidgin construction from the English, “Come by here.” It was/is an invocation, asking God to step into their situation and save them from their oppression, to lift their heads and hearts. That my ancestors are so often removed from the song’s narrative and that this prayer has somehow become pejorative is a prime example of how the wounds of my people are treated carelessly. The powerful (by this world’s standards) cannot fathom having to cry to God in this way, much less can they imagine God answering such cries. Truthfully, it’s also hard for the oppressed to imagine God hearing these cries, especially after we’ve been singing the song for so long.

We’re in that odd space between Christmas Day, the day that we commemorate Christ’s birth, and Epiphany, the day that, with the Magi’s revelation of who Jesus is, the rest of the world realizes/learns what has happened. Before this, we spent four long weeks of Advent, pining for the coming of Christ. We sang, “O Come O Come Emmanuel.” We sang “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.” And if you were like me, you sang Walter Hawkins’ rendition of “Come By Here, Dear Lord” -- and you meant it.

You meant it because over 250,000 people in the U.S. have died of a disease that did not exist last year.

You meant it because one thing a global pandemic couldn’t stop was extrajudicial killings of Black folks.

You meant it because you may be like thousands of others who lost their jobs this year.

You meant it because every time you turned around, you were greeted with the news of the loss of a friend or loved one.

You meant it because the so-called “Most Wonderful Time of the Year” is in any given year the most heart-wrenching time because it’s when you most miss the ones you’ve lost.

You meant it because, more than anything else you ever wanted, you needed the Lord to show up. You needed the in-breaking of Christmas to affirm the hope of Advent. You needed to know that help was indeed on the way and that you weren’t naive for expecting and believing it was.

With Christ’s in-breaking, something changed. Israel under Roman occupation was profoundly affected by the birth of a baby in Bethlehem -- indeed, the world was profoundly affected. But at the same time, the effects weren’t palpable at first. Not everyone realized what had happened because they couldn’t yet feel it.

Israel was still under Roman occupation. They were still being taxed into abject poverty. There was still a ruthless puppet monarch in place who was arguably worse than Caesar himself. They were still worshipping in a temple that was, more than anything, a shrine to this puppet monarchy. They were still living in the specter of a promising, yet failed revolt. They were still looking for their redemption from somewhere. Anywhere. Even after the in-breaking, it still wasn’t all good.

So it is for us. In these days immediately following Christmas, we’re still in a pandemic. We still miss our lost loved ones. We’re still inundated by the most horrific of stories of violence and death whenever we read the paper or watch the news. We’re still climbing out of financial holes that were dug during the recession. We’re still looking, waiting, and hoping for redemption from somewhere.

Come by here, dear Lord, come by here!

Yet, the promise of the in-breaking is this: not only is the help you longed for during Advent on the way, but it's never been closer than it is now. In fact, it is here! Even if you can't yet see it, it is here. Even if you can't yet feel it, it is here. Even if you can't yet enjoy it, it is here.

During the ritual dedication of Jesus, we listen to Simeon's words and hear that the child's birth -- the in-breaking -- had implications not only for now, but for later. With his birth, the wheels were set in motion for revolution.

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and [Mary] a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Everything was about to be shifted, though they didn't see it at the time. They were shocked by Simeon's words.

Enter the prophet Anna to further confirm what was going to happen with this 17-week-old baby. She was a widow who hadn't been married for long before her husband died. In her context, there likely weren't many options for housing and community available to her. Widows were often at the mercy of others. For about sixty years, Anna's days had been spent in the temple, fasting, praying, working and waiting for redemption. Her people were hurting. She was hurting. I imagine there may have been times even in her very steadfast life where she felt discouraged. Sixty-ish years is a long time to wait for relief. Now, like Simeon, she felt assured that all her dedication hadn't been for nothing.

And please don't miss the significance of all these things occurring in the temple built by the one who was taking up space on that baby's throne! Things had indeed changed.

The in-breaking teaches us that looks can be deceiving. Just because we can't yet feel our help doesn't mean that our help isn't here. But, goodness, a little reassurance goes a long way! Some years ago, my mother had been experiencing stomach pains for a week, which her doctor attributed to gallstones. She was scheduled for surgery to remove her gallbladder a week and a half later, but if you've ever had gallstones, you know that's too long to wait! And since my father was out of town, I'd agreed to come and help her out until he could come back. A few short hours after I got to her house, she could no longer take the pain and asked me to drive her to the ER. Though the stones were still in her gut, things had changed for her by virtue of being in the hospital. Because she was somewhere she could get some help, even as the pain persisted and would persist for some time after the surgery, she could yet breathe easier. Even if her circumstances didn't change immediately, she knew help was coming and that meant everything.

We are witnessing the in-breaking, as Trito-Isaiah would say, the earth bringing forth its shoots. In summer, we see the lush vegetation all around and we know that life is and has been among us, even when the trees were without their leaves. With the first shoots of spring, we are encouraged that life has been at work all along.

With these glimpses of hope, our Advent songs give way to songs like the one sang by the prophet:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,  
and her salvation like a burning torch.

That is the challenge of the Christmas season: to keep believing, to keep hoping, to keep pushing, to keep singing until vindication comes. It's to believe in the hope we clung to during Advent because God has confirmed for us that our hope is not in vain. Indeed, God has — and will — come by here.

# 1st Mid-Week Christmas Devotional

CHRISTIAN BROOKS

## **PSALM 148; PROVERBS 9:1-12; 2 PETER 3:8-13**

As I reflect upon these scripture passages three themes come to mind: faith, wisdom, and the promise of liberation. These themes have been essential to the Black woman's survival for centuries.

Black women always had an intimate connection with God and played a divine role in protecting and sustaining life. Before colonization, women of African descent were hunters, explorers and caretakers of the earth. They grew food and gathered water. They used their knowledge of the earth to make medicine for the sick and elderly. They cared for the children. They built villages and cultivated community. Then and now, Black women were the backbone of society.

This strong connection to faith and community was passed down from generation to generation. It endured the middle passage and manifested as a tool of survival during enslavement. Enslaved Black women helped create necessary spaces, like hush harbors where enslaved Blacks found security and community with one another. They used hush harbors to pray, sing, shout and truly praise God. Through their praise, they drew closer to God, which strengthened their spirits and gave them peace amid an endless storm.

For Black women, their praise was like armor that guarded their spirits so they could endure the battle ahead. It kept their eyes focused on God's promise of justice and liberation which kept them motivated to fight. Looking ahead towards freedom, they used their faith as an avenue to fight the insidious system of white supremacy and patriarchy. Women like Harriet Tubman used connection with God and nature to escape to freedom and escort over 300 enslaved persons to freedom. She also served as a spy for the Union army, which aided in defeating the Confederacy ending slavery in the United States. Sojourner Truth used her gifts as a charismatic preacher and activist to advocate against slavery and patriarchy. She fought fiercely for all human rights, especially the rights and equality of Black women.

Many other Black women followed in their footsteps. Focused on God's promise, they used their faith and spiritual gifts to confront white supremacy and patriarchy head-on, making endless contributions to our society. Black women were instrumental to the passage of the nineteenth amendment and ratification of the fifteenth amendment, though Black suffragist receive little to no recognition. Black women played a vital role in the success of the first space flight, breaking through racial and gender barriers. The contributions of Black women led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act.

Remembering the Black woman's legacy of love, resilience and faith is important as this year has been a hard year for Black women. We've watched as our community suffered disproportionately from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic because of systemic racism. Our elected officials have done very little to help. We've watched in horror as one Black person after the next has been executed in the street like animals while their murders go free. Organizations that have maintained the legacy of racism and white supremacy put out statements saying BLACK LIVES MATTER. However, they've not done any introspective work to understand what valuing Black lives means. They just followed the trend, then moved on.

The pain and suffering that we have experienced for years has been showcased for the world to see, but still the world ignores us. We have continued to fight for justice and equality, but it feels like our cries are disregarded. This season has been tiresome and weary. It has been difficult to remain faithful and even harder to have hope. However, just as our ancestors endured, so must we. Not only for ourselves, but for the generations that come



after us.

As a child my grandmother always told me “Never lose your faith. Without faith you can’t fight.” I never really understood what she meant until now. For the Black woman, our faith has been a conduit for justice and liberation. It is by our faith that we have been able to fight against the systems of oppression that sought to destroy us. It is by our faith that we’ve overcome the middle passage, enslavement, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, police brutality, misogyny and more! Our faith is grounded in Jesus Christ, the promised messiah, who came into the world to “execute justice and righteousness.” (Jeremiah 23:5) Jesus came so that all humanity might be set free from the yoke of oppression.

As we reflect on the Black woman’s fight for liberation in this season of Christmas, we are reminded that they followed Jesus’ model to disrupt systems of injustice. We are called to do the same. Just as the many Black women before us, we must continue Jesus’ mission for justice and liberation.

### **PRAYER**

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
-Amen (Isaiah 9:6-7)*

# New Years

SHANEA D. LEONARD

## **TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON....**

I remember January 1, 2020 with so much fondness. I spent the first few hours in sheer bliss of celebratory optimism with friends as we imagined all of the wonderment that the year would hold. We declared fervently that, "THIS WAS OUR YEAR!" We had expectations of healing, wholeness, progression of projects, fulfillment of visions, and the general overall well-being of mind, body, and soul for ourselves and those around us. We lamented and remised over the joys and pains of all that 2019 was as we stood at the incipience of what was yet to be. Goodbye to the heartache, mistakes, disappointments of yesteryear. And hello to the Will of God for our lives in 2020.

Unfortunately, the sparkle of hope and twinkle of anticipation quickly faded as we, just like the rest of the world, found ourselves faced with the reality of dueling pandemics within the first quarter. What was not known during that first quarter of 2020 was that the world as we knew it would never be the same. I can remember being in my home in March still teetering between isolation and ignorance when the news came out about the horrible slaughter of Breonna Taylor in her own home. I remember that this tragedy was right on the heels of the Black community attempting to muster through the inhumane murder of George Floyd and calling to God, in your infinite wisdom, save us now! I cannot describe to you the depth of the pit of sadness, anger, and fear that gripped my soul yet again as another Black life meant nothing in the hands of their executioner. For it often seems like the sacrifice of Black & Brown bodies is as germane to the history, fabric and breadth of this nation as baseball, apple pie, and the 4th of July.

I cannot tell you the number of times in 2020 when I have had to push aside my own feelings in order to console another person of color who had succumb to the gravity of bigotry and victimization of hatred spewed throughout the year. It was as if the impact of COVID-19 and yet another awakening to the sin of racism in this nation was almost unbearable for those most affected and most vulnerable. In fact, the plight of the Black body is the story I know most intimately, and it has often felt like this past year has been a multi-faceted attack on our mental, emotional, and physical health all at once. I contend that the dominant culture has identified and proliferated a profound ability to "other" the most marginalized in even more dynamic ways than pre-COVID to the point of many of us feeling like what is at stake is our very lives.

However, in the midst of all of the weight of the moments of darkness of 2020, I can also clearly declare that there have been tremendous pockets of joy that have carried me through and reminded me of the Biblical principle outlined in Ecclesiastes 3, to everything there is a season and nothing last always.

For what the wisdom of the Holy Spirit has been able to make resonant to me is that death and dying, pain & sorrow, hurt & anger, are all temporal and that the preverbal tomorrow will come. It must. It has to. It is declared in the word of God and I am a firm believer that it is so! As someone who has lived for over 41 years in this brown skin, I am aware of the triumphs that my people have had to endure to even get me to a place of somewhat freedom to craft this devotional. I am conscious that their seasons of sacrifice have resulted in small, but substantial gains that have afforded me my very life. I am also acutely mindful that their hardships and their anguish often persisted in seasons that felt like relief would never come. Nevertheless, here we are on the shoulders of the ones who made it through with the tenacity, courage, and fortitude to do so. I am because they were, and still are...

And so, as we look to what this next year 2021 may have in store for us, let us move forward with the meditative

stance of three key things. First, we are still here. Through seen and unseen danger; through tear that have been watered; treading through the blood of the path of the slaughtered. We are here. Not without feeling the loss of some of our own, but we are here. We the bruises and scars, both internally and externally, we are here. We have made it to the precipice of a brand-new year with the love of God and the spirit of our ancestors pushing us along. We move into 2021 realizing we did not arrive at this moment by ourselves. But often the reason any of us is standing is because somebody prayed, someone sacrificed, someone persisted, and someone made a way. And so, we celebrate this January 1st declaring as Miss Celie declared as she drove away from Mister's house, I'm HERE!

*"Never to forget where we came from  
and always praise the bridges that carried us over."*  
- Fannie Lou Hammer

Second, that in 2021 we have been amply challenged to remember that our womxnhood is a gift from the Divine. And furthermore, the added bonus of being able to exist in the socialized racial category of Black is an unrivaled privilege and challenge that was neither asked for but yet cannot be denied. Therefore, given this critical moment in history, there is an invitational mandate to carry the fullness of what one personally determines it means to be a Black and Brown womxn in humanity and to live into the freedom of self, spirit, and truth. God has positioned and called all of us to be. And not just exist, but BE fully self, in your race, orientation, culture, spirituality, faith, and the core of your existence. And even beyond that, revel in the fact that your life...your Black life matters!!!

*"If any female(or non-binary person) feels she  
need anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence,  
she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency."*  
- bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*

And final, do not lose the hope that it can get better. That every situation can turn around. Our hope has never been built on the instability of humanity. We reside under the cover of the Almighty who is our firm foundation of expectation even in the midst of uncertainty. God has always been on the side of the oppressed and has held our hands through the tears just as much as dwelled with us in the dawn of the brighter day. I invite you to walk into this new year with all of the excitement and anticipation of what shall be. And yes, I know we still have battles to fight and wars to be won, but for this moment...let us rest, even if briefly, in the joy of Christmas and the season of newness. Remembering in the recesses of our minds that we made it even if just for a fleeting instant...because to everything there is a season...

*"won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman(womxn)  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed."*  
— Lucille Clifton

# 2nd Sunday of Christmas

MELVA LOWRY

## **SIRACH 24:1-12 / WISDOM OF SOLOMON 10:15-21**

*If only we would give her glory  
If only we would humble ourselves before her  
If only her power was measured equally with others  
If only we held her in highest esteem  
She is more precious than gems and the finest gold  
She speaks so soft it reaches down to the core  
She is modest under the banner she waves  
She is the truth we seek yet often ignore*

I do not know where this day's devotion will find the reader. Many of us have come through the year 2020 with bruises and broken hearts. No one was left unscathed. However, Black and Brown bodies, Black women in particular are still left to bear the brunt of America's newfound revelations of injustice and trauma. What I pray for the reader of today's devotion is that you sit again with yourself, with wisdom. Acknowledge her presence. Accept her into your space. Wisdom has been made the silent partner in the Holy Trinity. Her works are mentioned in passing, but her ways of being are rarely studied outside academic spaces. Wisdom waits patiently for patience comes from her. In these devotional readings, we get to learn from Wisdom. We get to hear her voice alone. Wisdom's works and strength are on full display for us to see.

As I read these passages, I see the faces of the women in my family. I feel the presence of matriarchs who died long before I was conceived. Wisdom is their mother. Wisdom is the teacher of how to survive in a "nation of oppressors" (Wisdom of Solomon 10:15). I am, because they held onto her. They believed her words and gave heed to her correction. They shared the stories Wisdom told them directly or in passing. From the gathering circles, to the cotton fields of slavery and in the kitchen or while doing hair, they retold the works of Wisdom and "of her glory" (Sirach 24:1). They praised her strength and thanked God that Wisdom was there in their own weakness. It is the relationship with Mother Wisdom that has allowed Black and Brown female bodies to withstand the assaults on our bodies. Wisdom gathers us together and opens "the mouths of those who were mute" (Wisdom of Solomon 10:21) to lament and speak our truths when the world silences our cries.

2020 was not the first time a Black woman was murdered. The physical death of Breonna Taylor received a lot of media attention, however, Black and Brown women's bodies have often experienced a type of death or taking away innocence long before their physical death. Slavery and the rape culture that characterized Black women's enslavement was a "rite of passage" experienced by both young and old. The murder of their bodily autonomy for economic gain and male pleasure is a death that has perpetually shaped the world's narrative of Black womanhood. Our sexuality was made shameful and a threat to be subdued. What drew our oppressors to rape and attack us, is now a commodity that white women idealize and recreate using modern surgery. The physical features that have brought Black women shame and violence have allowed white women to receive praise. For too long the male gaze fractured women's unity, but Mother Wisdom reminds us that in the death of our collective nakedness, she was rooted, and she was constant. Wisdom gave us songs to sing through our tears and balm to heal our scars. Wisdom did not leave us but took root inside of us for we are the personification of her resilience.

Now that white America has had a taste of the trauma that is our constant reality, Black and Brown women offer to you a chance to sit at the feet of Mother Wisdom. You have an opportunity to learn from her experiences and to let her guide your actions. We invite you to lament and to cry out for justice as Wisdom comforts you.



2021 is time to join the fight for justice. Learn the history of Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, African-Americans and other Brown hued people. Listen and believe their stories of assault and survival. Hear how Wisdom guided them and “became a shelter to them” (Wisdom of Solomon 10:17). Join with us as we practice our faith and belief in a Triune God. Wisdom will guide you with empathy. She will direct you to the places you should go. And just as she has been “before the ages, in the beginning,” so Wisdom will be “for all the ages” to come (Sirach 24:9).

Creator of wisdom, you called her to dwell within us and yet, we close our hearts and ears to your words. We pray to you for wisdom but seek only what seems right and feels good to our bodies. We have denied wisdom for too long by ignoring her power to calm our internal raging storms. We have allowed the imagery of her femininity to judge her worth in our life, instead of following the works she has done throughout history. We pray now for forgiveness. We have experienced a year without Wisdom. We have seen the destruction caused when we ignore Wisdom. Merciful God return Mother Wisdom to our hearts. Allow us to humble ourselves before her. Allow us to rebuild her throne in our souls where she can rest once more.

Creator of all humankind, you shaped us and colored us to be a vibrant pallet of beauty, but we have hated the diversity you set before us. We have chosen to feel threatened and uneasy by those you called to be our neighbors and siblings. Mother Wisdom guide us back to unity. Remind us that the color of our collective skin is to be celebrated and not demeaned. Teach us to honor the vessels in which you dwell and to fight for all bodies to be protected and appreciated. Where our gaze caused us to do harm, we seek wisdom’s direction towards restoration. Where we shamed one’s identity and co-opted it for our own good, we seek wisdom’s patience as we relearn how to uplift ourselves and others.

Wisdom you stand in honor in the high places with God, and yet we tear you down and overlook the might of your works. Return us to the foot of your throne, reminding us that you were ordained to dwell within us. Speak loudly to us so we can no longer ignore your teachings. Correct our evil ways so we can no longer do harm to ourselves and others. Ase and Amen.

*Let the mist of Wisdom fall upon you  
May Wisdom saturate your total being  
Let Wisdom, the co-creator with God free you  
May she lead you into righteousness and freedom  
Mother Wisdom, we honor you and lift you up!*

# Epiphany

SHANTELL HINTON-HILL

## **LUKE 2.22-40**

In 1937 - as America began recovering from the Great Depression - one of my favorite Harlem Renaissance writers, the honorable Zora Neale Hurston, wrote what would become a classic novel entitled, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As her main characters wrestle with Black life, Black love, and a God of the oppressed, Hurston powerfully opens her story with a line that I want to place at the center of this devotional for today. She writes: "There are years that ask questions and years that answer."

There are years that ask questions and there are years that answer.

2020 was certainly a year that left us with so many answers - both painful and purposeful. In other ways, with hundreds and thousands of lives lost due to multiple pandemics of health and racial turmoil, months of divisive political discourse, and countless other calamities, 2020 is sure to go down in history as one that asked us the hard questions.

Hard questions like why is it that we still have learned nothing from this nation's sordid past with wiping out indigenous people and the inglorious enterprise of slavery - that we would resort to caging children and families along a border that isn't really ours to claim?

Or hard questions like why is it that principalities and powers in high places have monopolized the conversation on reproductive rights when most of those in power have never shouldered the responsibility of carrying a child?

And, lastly, hard questions like why is it so hard to distinguish the followers of Christ from the oppressors these days?

In the selected text, we meet Anna and Simeon, both of whom likely had these same hard questions of the soul swirling in the forefront of their minds.

You see, both Anna and Simeon, older in age and devoutly religious, had seen a lot in their many years as people of faith. At the time of Jesus' birth, they would have experienced the tensions between the roman empire's governance of the Jewish people and may have even heard rumblings of the oppressive policies of kings like Herod, who would decree that all recent born Jewish males in the proximity of Bethlehem were to be killed as news of the so-called Messiah spread throughout the region.

The scripture tells us that Simeon, who was most likely a temple priest, had been waiting patiently on the consolation of Israel - meaning he was actively looking for relief and maybe even redemption from the plight that had plagued his people. Likewise, Anna - an elderly widow who practically lived at the temple fasting and praying all day and night - had clearly dedicated her life to God with an expectation that there would be something more on the other side of her righteousness.

And, that is how and where we meet Anna and Simeon. Both waiting and still watching for God. Both grappling with their present troubles in the midst of trying to keep the faith that there was even a point to all of their striving. Both wrestling with the possibility that it might indeed be a year that answers instead of a year that asks questions.

I wonder if you'll pause with me so that we can be honest with ourselves for a moment. Honest enough to admit the anxiety that 2021 might stir within us. And the hard questions about who we are and who God is might arise along with it.

Anna and Simeon and the infant Jesus can show us a lot about how we might handle these questions. That's why I picked this text. Because I figure if people knew Jesus, the lover and the liberator, then maybe these questions wouldn't exist at all.

If people knew that Mary's baby struggled with the double consciousness of his human reality of an oppressive empire and His divine destiny of setting captives free, perhaps people would understand that His message wasn't about a feel good, personalized version of salvation that absolves us of our duties to wrestle against powers and principalities - especially when those powers create misery and suffering for Black, Brown, impoverished, and same gender loving people.

And, maybe, if people knew the way miracles worked - like the miracle described in Luke 2 - there would be fewer years that end in open-ended questions and more years defined by answered prayers and progress towards a more just, healed world.

I contend that the revelation of the messiah would never have happened that day if not for a posture of readiness as illustrated by Anna and Simeon. And because of their eyes, fixed on watching God, and their minds made up that they would believe in a miracle they could not see, Anna and Simeon show us the power that converges when holy disruption meets human obedience. Beloved, I believe that there are moves of God, miracles just waiting to happen, if we would only posture ourselves in a way that communicates an earnest heart to obey God. Both Anna and Simeon had prepared themselves to be in a place where God could show up and deliver on a promise that they had been waiting years to see. They were not weary in their well doing, when the time came.

Though I am quite sure that there were many days of frustration, anger, and maybe even resentment as they navigated the years that left questions unanswered. Still. They somehow managed to wrestle themselves away from whatever cynicism or doubt they may have felt under the weight of oppressive rulers, unfair governance of the Jewish people, and dangers seen and unseen. And they showed up, obediently, just as God began making a move to overturn the very power structures that had subjugated them all those years.

Let's pause for another moment and consider the thought: The movements we are seeing now. Movements for fair pay for women. Movements for Black Lives. Movements for protected land and environmental justice. Whose obedience warranted these shifts? Whose decades of fervent and effectual prayer moved the very hand of God? Whose years of waiting, watching, and working God's plan compelled God to finally show up and show out? And, to be clear - these are not the kind of prayers that only require us to look pretty on Sundays. These are the kinds of prayers that mean showing up with our feet. The kind of prayers that cost you something. The kind of prayers that look like public protests and a willingness to put your privilege on the line. That's the kind of prayers I'm talking about. That is what Anna and Simeon teach us, friends. That a lot can happen when holy disruption meets human obedience.

As we reflect on Advent and all that the messiah's birth means for us, my prayer for 2021 is simple.

*God of miracles, may we see the questions before us as opportunities where holy disruption can meet our obedience to do what You require of us: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with You (Micah 6.8). Amen.*

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