

A woman's face is shown in profile, looking upwards with her eyes closed. Her hand is gently touching her cheek. The background is a vibrant, cosmic scene with swirling galaxies, stars, and nebulae in shades of blue, orange, and red. The overall mood is ethereal and spiritual.

ANOTHER STARRY BLACK NIGHT

A WOMANIST ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL

UNBOUND

Introduction

MELVA LOWRY

Where to Begin When the Ending is Just the Beginning

When I started, it was clear what I should write for this devotion. Like all good procrastinators I did not write anything down. It was raw and emotional, and though that makes for great content, it needed to settle. So, I began again from a place still filled with emotion and rawness, but more medium rare. How does this start to tie in with Advent?

The vibrant colors on the trees as they change and prepare for the coming winter reminds people to look up and to notice what is around them. Though Advent comes near the end of a year, it also marks the preparation and planning (or obsessive social media posts on resolutions) for the coming year. Advent starts a few weeks after my birthday and has always played the role of keeping me in a reflective space as I celebrate ending one year with gratitude and thankfulness to see another year start. Advent, this time of reflection, allows me space to remind myself of how much I have grown, changed, and to let go as the days passed by. As we prepare for this particular Advent, it is filled to the brim of things to reflect on beyond our personal lives. We have been constantly bombarded over the past decades with acts of violence against children, persons of color, and those who are not Christian, especially our Muslim siblings. As I am writing, our own government is still in a state of imbalance and confusion and the governments of Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine are engaged in war, as the media ignores events happening around Africa. Who knows what else or where else in the world something might happen! We have had major natural disasters across the globe, the next phase of covid continues to mutate and cause sickness and death to families and their communities. It seems as if the end is near, and yet, we know this is the best place to start. When it all seems like it is falling apart, this is the place where something new emerges. Where engagement and deep reflection and honesty take over, and we let go, trusting and allowing the pieces to shake out as it will.

This is the beginning. We have tried to make the end of the year sound sweet and peaceful. Colorful with decorations and utopia-like acts of kindness and harmony. However, the ending months of holidays in our modern time have been anything but slow paced, calm, with time for reflection or intentional planning. This time of year has turned into trying to outdo each other in gift giving, while holding on to past bitterness and anger towards those we say we love. We speed up our daily activities just to say with bragging and much complaint, that we did it all, when others ask us to reflect on

how we enjoyed the holidays! So what if this Advent, we intentionally do it differently? Instead of preparing ourselves for the end to the holidays, where we end up tired and upset by the minute things that went wrong, or because we did not get the gift we really wanted, we take this time to really prepare our own selves for the reason and meaning of Jesus' birth.

How? By focusing on how the Bible has called us to be as Christians, loving. From Leviticus 19:18 to Mark 12:28-34 and Matthew 22:37-40, accounts of Jesus' parables, we are commanded to, "love our neighbors as ourselves" which is an intentional shift of looking inward and outward with a sense of grace and compassion. Instead of allowing our minds and personal feelings to get too involved in our decision making, we seek wisdom from God instead; and we actually listen. I am not asking you to ignore hurt and pain. I am asking you to look inward and see the pain of those moments as an invitation to a new beginning for yourself and how you move outwardly. It has become far too easy to be numb not only to what is going on around you, but what you are feeling personally in relation to or to acknowledge you are triggered by the event. I believe there is a time for anger and outrage and there is a time for forgiveness and acceptance. However, acceptance is not one sided. It comes with compromise and understanding from both sides. When we ask ourselves, "why is this thing still happening" we are stating the need for others to join in with us in creating a new way forward from that thing which is causing pain. We use the devastation as a clarion call to look inward and outward for the solution.

It seems that in each year time speeds up as if the universe itself is ready for us to get on with it and not linger too long. We time our meditations and leave our sick days and vacations more hurried than when we left. The Bible has countless scriptures inviting us to reflect and rest however, we would rather look at social media posts and react to the latest celebrity death, due to unspoken mental ill-health, before we initiate with what our bodies and minds have been calling to us to do all along which is to seek healing. We are hanging on by the merest of threads, and yet, there is still hope. We are just getting started if we look hard for that tiny glimmer of possibility that shows up and shines bright to pull us from the edge of despair. That call from a friend, that deep laugh that made you cry, that loss that led you to reflect in gratitude, that sheer pain that reminded you of your humanity. All these moments and more are a starting point. An advent moment to look forward to what is to come next. So where exactly do we begin?

When the sky was at its darkest, and the threat of death loomed heavy in the air thick enough to tighten the throat with each breath, Mary and Joseph set out, destination... known? The direction was clear, but the end point and the ending were shrouded by the events and the politics causing them to make this journey to be registered amongst their family. They followed the brightest light provided to them by the heavens above. Led by prophecy and hope, they, Mary in the depths of her pregnancy, and

Joseph set out to follow the order, the rules governed to them by their political leaders. During their journey, they were caught between the joy of seeing their son born, casting hope and belief into what had been proclaimed to them months before, and the sudden fear in the unknown by having to change the direction of their journey because the birth of their child threatened the powers that be. How often do we journey out only to be forced to change course mid route? The story of the events of Jesus' birth is short and condensed, but the layers upon which circumstances unfolded allow us to see how what seems like the end, is really just the beginning. (Read Luke 2:1-21 or Matthew 1:18-2:12).

Reflection:

- 1. When has my course been rerouted? What led to the redirection? How did it make me feel?*
- 2. What have I learned over time about myself when things go differently than I expected?*
- 3. What threatens my peace right now? How have I contributed to allowing my peace to be threatened?*
- 4. What actions do I need to take to change my outlook when things look dire or at its end?*

I do not know how clear your path has been lately, but I can attest to the power of a tiny light giving the brightest and clearest way forward. As I stated earlier, this time of year for me is often very reflective. I begin to recount my movements from January through the summer days. Death has been a theme for me and my family since August. These recent deaths blend with the anniversaries of past deaths that occurred just a few years prior. This marked change, the movement from life to death, are not solely reflection moments, they are redirections. I have heard it said that grief can happen not only between a person, but also between you and a thing. So, when we grieve we must reflect on our relationship to that person or to that thing. These times of loss propels us into a new way of being and doing. A new way of thinking and acting. As we gather in community or sit in quiet alone this advent season, what are we grieving during this time of celebration? How has that person or thing we lost changed us for the better? How is this loss inviting us to change direction and start something new?

First Sunday of Advent

CARLA JONES BROWN

Mark 13:24-37

"24 "But in those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, 25 the stars will fall from the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see the Promised One coming in the clouds with great power and glory; 27 then the angels will be sent to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. 28 "Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29 In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the Promised One is near, right at the door. 30 The truth is, before this generation has passed away, all these things will have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 32 "But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it—neither the angels of heaven, nor the Only Begotten—no one but Abba God. 33 Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come.

34 "It is like people traveling abroad. They leave their home and put the workers in charge, each with a certain task, and those who watch at the front gate are ordered to stay on the alert. 35 So stay alert! You do not know when the owner of the house is coming, whether at dusk, at midnight, when the cock crows or at early dawn. 36 Do not let the owner come suddenly and catch you asleep. 37 What I say to you, I say to all: stay alert!"

– *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation by Priests for Equality*

Oh, [expletive redacted]! This is the gospel reading for the first week of Advent this year? We start the season with a visual of the sun darkening and the moon losing its brightness? The sky grows dark and the heavens are shaking? Really? The sky over the holy land is darkened and those are not stars falling - those are the air strikes that are killing children in Gaza. Of course, the heavens are shaken - so many of us have been shaken by these events. They point to past history and also to an unknown future.

In some translations, this text instructs us to stay awake. Who can sleep? So many of us are afraid to close our eyes at night because we don't know what we will find when we open them again. We see these events and we are painfully aware that we are living with eyes wide open but we find it hard to believe what we see. We need the sun and the moon and the stars to help us discern when the day has given over to night. We need something to remind us of the rhythms that keep us alive. How can we enter the Advent season with an image of the disruption of what we know to be so familiar? Oh, that's exactly how we enter the Advent season...with an image of the disruption of what we know to be so familiar. Violence, poverty, domestic terrorism, hatred, racism, wars and rumors of wars are all too familiar. It is time to disrupt that familiar with a revolutionary Advent.

For us, the sign is not the collapse of the sun, moon, and stars but the collapse of the systems we hold so dear. We rail against them but they are familiar to us and we believe them to be inextricably enmeshed in our lives so it can often feel like we are fighting a part of our own selves. Advent asks us to consider who we might be apart from these systems. When the systems begin to collapse, shake, and fall, who might we be? We might be the free people we have been longing and fighting to become. This is a sign that it is time to re-examine our urge to repair the world, and to ensure that we are repairing what is healthy and resisting, and maybe even removing what is malignant.

We are called to stay alert. We are called to learn to read and interpret the signs. We are called to notice when the time is right for us to make our move. We may not all be called to move at the same time but we will be in sync with the other disruptors. Perhaps the call to stay alert is a call to take our much-needed rest and then also to awaken gently and with the rhythm of the created day and not with the frenzied pace of the system that wants to grind us into dust. Be alert. Be in your body. Be in that precious space that you occupy in the world. That may be the work. But you must be alert to discern for yourself.

What if the stars are not falling from the sky because they have been evicted but they are leaving the sky to co-create a new way forward? Perhaps the stars noticed that the sun and moon were darkened but the work of the world had not been completed. The stars did not stay stuck in the sky because that is how things have always been. They left the sky to continue the work of giving light in a new and courageous way. Perhaps they left the sky to find us and to guide us and to join us in creating the world that is to come.

Advent is not calling us to simply sit with the distress of what has already happened. Advent is calling us to consider that we may have to create a whole new world out of the pieces we have in our hands. We are reminded of the words of bell hooks, "[O]ne of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone." (bell hooks (2014). "Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics", p.227, Routledge) We are called into a community of resistance. We are called into communities so that we know and remember that we do not do this work alone. We do this work in collusion and cooperation with each other and with the sun, moon, stars, and all of creation. We are alert to the work of death-dealing systems and we are alert to the ways that we might participate in birthing something new, something beautiful, something that pulls us from our slumber and into the revolutionary work of repairing the world. Be alert for the star that will guide you...all the way!

God of All Creation,
Holy is your name. As Your kin-dom does come, we pray that Your will would be done

on earth with help from heaven. As the stars leave their place in the sky to guide us, may we find ourselves awakened to the signs and strengthened for the journey. Amen and Asé

Reflection:

- 1. What are those pieces in your hands that will be used to co-create something new?*
- 2. What systems should be dismantled in your own community and in our world?*

Mid-Week 1

BRIDGETT A. GREEN

Advent's Hope Fuels Our Possibilities

Isaiah 41:14-20

*14 Do not fear, you worm Jacob,
you maggot[a] Israel!
I will help you, says the Lord;
your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.
15 I will make of you a threshing sledge,
sharp, new, and having teeth;
you shall thresh the mountains and crush them,
and you shall make the hills like chaff.
16 You shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away,
and the tempest shall scatter them.
Then you shall rejoice in the Lord;
in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.

17 When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I the Lord will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.
18 I will open rivers on the bare heights
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water
and the dry land springs of water.
19 I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together,
20 so that all may see and know,
all may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,
the Holy One of Israel has created it.*

Hope is powerful. It fuels our imaginations and actions today to prepare for a better tomorrow. It is significant that we begin the Christian liturgical year with hope. Like the start of a new calendar year, anticipation and preparations accompany our expectations for fresh starts and new realities.

The advent of our Christian faith comes to us through God's love and grace made

flesh in Jesus, the Messiah. He is Emmanuel (God is with us) and he is our hope, help, and redeemer. According to the Gospel writers, the earthly mission and ministry of Jesus were foretold by the biblical prophets. The witness of Isaiah is frequently referenced to provide greater understanding of Jesus's ministry and its direct connection to God's work in the people's lives. This continuity helps us to understand our lives in God's greater narrative and as disciples of Jesus.

Isaiah 41:14-20 is reassuring and empowering. In it, God reassures Israel that God, the Holy One, is both their help and redeemer. God recognizes the plight of the people, who are exiles from home and oppressed by a government that cares little about them. Hope comes in God's promise to empower and equip people to crush mountains and cut down hills. Mountains and hills are formidable, strong, and seemingly insurmountable, much like the many obstacles in people's daily lives. Hope is in God's movement to transform what seems etched in time or sewn in the fabric of destiny. The Israelites suffering from their captive hand were looking for hope and a new reality. As Christians, we have inherited the abiding hope as testified in this Isaiah scripture. We believe that God brings us to and keeps us in an existence of love, freedom, joy, peace, and thriving.

Rampant gun violence and egregious politics that allow easy access to assault weapons; policies that encourage erasure of stories, histories, and lived experiences of black, brown, and queer, people of all genders from our libraries and schools; laws that greatly inhibit and even outlaw women's reproductive health; lack of affordable housing; and the abundance of food deserts where people have little access to grocery stores are some of the many mountains and hills that must be leveled. Isaiah's response is that God will answer and not forsake us in our time of need (v. 17).

Undeniably, God can do great and wondrous things. That which is impossible to us is possible for God. The prophet describes God's ability to turn "dry lands into springs of water" and deserts into lush forests of cypress and pine trees. Isaiah punctuates his message by exclaiming, "so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it" (v. 20, NRSVue). And the people of Israel witness God's power in the defeat of their Babylonian captors and in their resettlement back on their homeland.

Mary births baby Jesus into an economically and politically fraught world. Besieged by Roman colonial power and imperially backed governors, Israel ached for liberation, justice, agency, and getting above the throes of financial insecurity. Her radical song about the time and her sense of Jesus to overturn them is well documented (Luke 2). National and local governments not only ignored the needs of the people but exploited them—their labor, their health, their time, and their resources. The testimony and prophetic witness of Isaiah was just as relevant to them as it was for their ancestors. This is made evident by the fact that the Gospel writers quote Isaiah more

than any other scripture.

With Jesus's arrival, the people of God anticipated a new reality where food, shelter, safety, freedom, healing, justice, compassion, and love are in abundance for everyone, and God's commands order their existence. With Jesus a new reality emerges! Present circumstances shift! Hope abounds! A new song glorifies! Through Jesus, we know and understand what God had done and is doing.

Advent rekindles our hope in the possibilities of God in our lives. We are reminded of the inheritance that we receive: the power and love of God and the grace of Jesus to help us through our current reality and God's promise for a better day.

While we rely on God's work, we demonstrate our hope through our actions. Black women in the United States are often on the frontlines of hope. We work with God as God works through us. As Black women, we nurture our families, care for our communities, serve in our churches, protect our democracy, and fight for justice. We overrepresent in the pews, in the polls, and on streets. Because of our faith, we recognize that our work is not in vain but rather choreographed in a dance with God's creative and transformative power. Isaiah 41 describes not only God's sovereignty but God's work through us. God equips us to be instruments of justice and to upend oppression. God empowers us to create an abundant life of love, tenderness, compassion, and strength for individual and collective health and well-being. Isaiah 41 admonishes that we are the ones who will crush mountains and will give God the glory (v. 15). God provides for all our needs according to means and modes of God's will.

As disciples of Jesus, we know we are strong Black women with Black girl magic beautifully and wonderfully made by the grace of God. God pours courage or confidence or both into us, allowing us to get up each day. We traverse through a world that does not always recognize our greatness, our brilliance, our beauty, our spirit, our joy, our struggle, our story, our perseverance, our perspectives, and our enough-ness. Yet, we do what we are called to do out of duty, out of passion, out of agency, and out of the urgency of now. Baptized in the name of the Triune God, we are disciples who experience, live, teach, and testify to the gospel of Jesus, continuing in his mission and participating in God's redemptive narrative.

But being every woman is hard and exhausting. Our labor often goes unrecognized at best and exploited at worst. All of which can leave us drained. And God says, I will help you. When we are tired and feeling burnt out, God is helping us recognize our need to slow down and take care of ourselves. Being everything for everybody, many of us forget to care for ourselves mentally, physically, as well as spiritually. To love God with all our hearts, all our souls, and our might, it helps to bring the healthiest versions of ourselves. We may have to work to find the resources for this type of deep care, but this type of deep care allows us to honor and love God. Further, loving God by caring for

self gives us the clarity, energy, and ability to love others with hands, arms, feet, voices, intellect, and wit. With such, we live by faith and abide in hope for a new wondrous reality awaiting us this Advent season.

Reflection

1. How does hope manifest in your life?
2. What actions are springing forth from your hope?

Second Sunday of Advent

BROOKE SCOTT

Mother God's Porch Awaits

Isaiah 40:1-11

Growing up, the embrace of Black women was a constant source of solace in my life. Whether it was my mom, aunts, grandmother, stepmom, cousins, friends, hairdressers, or women in church, their prayers, stern words, problem-solving abilities, and pots of soup when I was sick held a magical quality. Because of their influence, I often find myself envisioning God as an older Black woman perched on her porch, tending to the neighborhood, fixing my blouse, and reminding me not to let her good air out of the house. This protective, yet nurturing image is what God feels like in this chapter.

As history tells us, the ancient Israelites had been pushed into exile, losing everything, including their land, holy places, their ability to self-govern, comfort, and security. They were stripped of everything that made them who they were, brought low and subject to someone else's standards, dreams, and desires. In Isaiah Chapters 1-39, the people of God received a very stern "talking to." God was angry with them, and many charges were brought up against them due to their neglect of the poor and suffering, worship of other gods, and more.

Yet, here, the same God approaches them with divine comfort and reassurance that things would still be okay. Though they made mistakes and may have thought that they were abandoned, God's deep commitment and love to them could never be broken. In psychology, this is called "unconditional positive regard." Though God had been unhappy at times, God's love was still there. The people were still the apple of God's eye; who they were could not be defined by their current circumstances or by the societal violence that was threatening to tear them apart or crush their self-love.

Just like the women who nurtured me, God's love was fierce and unwavering. You can almost hear God saying, "you are still beautiful and precious in my sight. I will protect you, I will support you, I will keep showing you the way. Who I made is still worth fighting for - every part of you."

My connection to such an intimate passage traces back to my earliest memories. As a young child engrossed in TV shows with my mother, a pivotal moment emerged. One day, she turned to me and said, "Brooke, if you ever decide that you want to be with another woman, I want you to know that it would be okay with me." The weight of her

unconditional acceptance was confusing to my younger self, but in later years, as I grappled with my queerness, those words became a balm to my soul. They reflected a divine comfort mirrored in Isaiah's message—an unconditional love that transcends societal brokenness. For many Black queer women, navigating the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation can be a daunting journey. Yet, the love of family (chosen or biological) who still see us, can be a sanctuary where we find the courage to rise above the pressures around us. I like to believe that such love is an extension of God in Isaiah's imagination.

In Isaiah's words, there is not only personal comfort but also hope for societal transformation. For people actively experiencing violence and marginalization, this passage brings hope for a future where they finally live safely in their own bodies, on their own land, and can worship the way they want to. It is comfort that is a balm for the wounds inflicted by systemic injustice—wounds we now also recognize as racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Isaiah's words gave people something to hope for and work towards. The image of a voice crying out in the wilderness resonates with the voices of Black women who have historically been marginalized, yet bring one another comfort through church, hair braiding shops, and kitchen tables. It resonates with the tireless work of womanists who advocate for a world where all are free from oppression.

As a teenager, I sang a similar hope with fervor in the high school chorus, and my favorite tunes were from Handel's Messiah. I did not yet understand the historical nuances of Israelite exile, but when we sang, "Comfort ye my people," or "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed," something shifted in my spirit. I belted Isaiah's promises as if my life depended on it. It was like something in my body remembered those blood memories of my own people, with their own history of displacement, dehumanization, and humiliation. Those songs became a spiritual anchor, a place where I felt seen, heard, and known. I wanted to live and work as if such a world were possible.

The words of Isaiah would continue to find me throughout my life. Fast forward to a season of profound grief, the year my mother passed away. The Christmas carols lost their luster, and I found myself broken, grappling with loss and pain. It was then that my stepmother, attuned to the power of music, broke out in a boisterous dance to Handel Messiah's Soulful Celebration (the Black version). Pretty soon, my tears of sadness mixed with tears of joy, as we burst into laughter at her attempts to bring a smile to my face. Her dance, a spontaneous response to Isaiah's verses, lifted my spirit in a time of need.

In Isaiah's verses, we find solace in the promise of comfort, and it's not just a fleeting reassurance but a profound, transformative intervention. In the music, in the dance, and in the shared pain, we find the echo of Isaiah's words bringing comfort when we need it most. When it seems like everything has been taken away from us, the promises of scripture come alive not only in the ancient texts but in the dance, the song, and

the shared cultural moments of sorrow, love, and joy.

This is a profound passage with a lot to teach people who are longing. It not only brings comforts to our personal and systemic wounds but also centers our vision on the kind of world we are fighting for—a world where peace is dependent on justice, a world where all can be their true selves, where pain and sorrow are no more, where systemic violence has ceased.

As we journey through this sacred season, may the promises of Isaiah resonate in the melodies of our lives, offering comfort, liberation, and a vision of a world where only beauty, freedom, singing, dancing, and visits to Mother God's porch await.

Reflection:

1. What do you find beautiful today? What does your dance look like?
2. In what ways have you experienced your own transformative intervention?

Mid-Week 2

SHANTELL HINTON HILL

Body Language

Luke 1:5-17

What happens to the abandoned and unanswered prayers that we've set aside due to God's silence?

What happens when everything you ever hoped for slips away after years of doing everything "right" for God?

I think many of us have had this experience at one time or another in our lives. When we begin to wane in our expectation of God and wax in our apathy. Or, perhaps it's the barrage of bad news and oppression-riddled realities that have caused us to simply go along to get along. Because continuing to hope would only point us in the direction of persistent pain as we are still met with a lack of response or respite.

Zechariah, too, was living in dark times like the ones we are experiencing today. Not only had God been silent for over 400 years, with no prophets recorded to give God's people direction, but the people of Judea were struggling under the weight of a tyrannical regime of a king who had no honor. According to religious and historical scholars, King Herod ruled his empire with an iron fist - using security measures to both suppress the contempt of the people and stop them from protesting his authority. Not to mention, it would be Herod that would not only kill his own sons but also order the massacre of innocent children upon hearing the news of Jesus' birth.

It is against this backdrop that Zechariah maintained his commitment to his priestly orders and continued showing up to serve in the temple. In spite of God's unwillingness to answer his personal prayers for a child and the apparent lack of concern God had for God's people, Zechariah did not abdicate his role as priest nor release himself from living a "blameless" life according to the commandments of God. Year after year of unregulated disappointment and unrequited desire. And yet, day after day, Zechariah still made it his business to be an unrelenting disciple.

And on this otherwise ordinary and routine day in the temple, God decided to break that silence and set in motion a divinely orchestrated and ordained plan that would not only meet Zechariah's particular personal desire but also lay a path for liberation for God's people. As Zechariah performed the sacred ritual of burning incense at the

altar, an angel of the Lord appeared and told him of his son's (John the Baptist's) pending birth and coming ministry. That this boy child would grow up full of the Holy Spirit and become a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

I wonder what compelled God to meet Zechariah with such a favorable response after years of silence? I believe God was moved, not by the act of burning incense, but by the consistency of Zechariah's body language before God. Indeed, there are times when we've retired our prayers and ceased lifting our voices to God that our bodies become the very vehicle through which our prayer requests are offered. Because Zechariah kept showing up, bringing his whole self into the temple - whether he felt excited or sad or despondent or ambivalent - his body was a prayer language that signaled his capacity to remain faithful even when God had let him down.

Stop and think about that for a moment.

That even in the midst of hopelessness, our hearts toward God can still utter the secret prayers that we have stopped believing were possible. That though our hearts are broken with longing, our bodies can still serve as a portal to God's grace and favor. What an awesome reminder of what happens when we co-journ with a holy and powerful God and refuse to leave our posts or assignments even when we are met with heartache and pain.

I'm reminded of Stacey Abrams who, even after being defeated for the seat of Governor in the state of Georgia, stayed steadfast and immovable in her mission and (with the help of other amazing Black and brown women) was able to help win two run-off elections and balance the scales of power within the Senate. She did not let the unanswered prayer of not winning the gubernatorial election stop her from continuing to "do the work her soul must have" (in the words of late womanist pioneer, Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon).

Upon seeing Zechariah, the angel said "do not be afraid...for your prayer has been heard." Beloved, there are some prayers that you've prayed that God has heard and is waiting on the appointed time to answer. An appointed time where your body language signals you are in the right place and in the right posture to receive that which you've been waiting a lifetime to receive. An appointed time where God reminds you of your first works and responds swiftly with yes and amen.

So then the question becomes: what are you doing with your silence? And what does your body language communicate about your expectation of God? When met with resistance or lack of response, does your anger turn into bitterness that becomes a barrier to your divine purpose? Do you fold your arms and remain stuck in annoyance when things don't go your way? Or do you, like Zechariah, continue showing up to

complete the God-given tasks assigned to you?

I pray that it is the latter. Because there are some prayers that are only received as righteous body language.

Reflection:

1. What are you noticing in your own body language? What is your body telling your right now?
2. What are you doing with your silence?

Third Sunday of Advent

PAULA OWENS PARKER

Red Letters: Ain't Nothing But the Truth

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

A friend I had not seen in years met me for lunch recently. In our conversation, she said during COVID, she participated in a Bible Study. She committed to reading the Bible in a year. She had never done that before and was appalled at the violence and corruption. Quoting Psalm 137:9, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants / and dashes them against the rocks," she leaned back in her chair, looked at me, and said, "what in the world?" I nodded in agreement and said, "I decided to just read the red letters of Jesus in the four gospels because I didn't want nothing but the truth."

"Ain't nothing but the truth" was a saying I heard my parents, and their friends say when they tried to express something intangible, beyond words, but right and pure like a sermon, jazz rift, gospel solo, peach cobbler, or a starry black night. Nothing but the truth.

And didn't Jesus say I am the way, the truth, and the life? All who come by me will be saved? John 14:6 (red letters). What we need in this Advent season is nothing but the truth. Reading Isaiah 61, Jesus announced his mission statement in Luke 4:18. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the

captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord...This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. (red letters)

Jesus made public that he intended to preach, teach, heal, inspire, empower, give hope, protect, and comfort. He tells us, I will show you how to live, treat others, and pray. And then I will pass the Spirit to you so you can strengthen, restore, and repair what has been weakened, destroyed, or broken. If you follow me, model your life after me, and treat people with love and compassion, you will find your way to eternal life.

Have you ever seen a starry black night in person? I have. Unless there is a major power outage, you must go somewhere away from the blinding artificial lights on houses, cars, parking lots, billboards, and buildings. Somewhere rural, or out at sea, or in the mountains, or in the desert. Any isolated place where Creation can be seen in all its glory, where the sky is pitch black with millions of stars showing themselves so thick and close you feel like you can touch them. So many that it takes your breath away, and you feel at one with the Universe.

Quantum physicists tell us the Universe is made up of energy that vibrates. Everything, from the molten rock in the depths of this planet to the furthest galaxy, everything. The Universe, visible and invisible, is pulsating energy. Music therapists tell us that specific frequencies and energy vibrations will heal our emotions and bodies. Music is considered the universal language for a reason.

In keeping with the womanist emphasis on self-authored divinely inspired knowledge aimed at uplifting individuals and society simultaneously, Layli Maparyan, in *The Womanist Idea*, defines LUXOCRACY: Rule by Light, as "the potential of human spirituality to constitute a highly illumined form of social organization that does not require external mechanisms of control." She envisions intentionally putting spirituality at the center of human life using the womanist social change method of harmonizing and coordinating through creativity, ingenuity, improvisationality, and making a way out of no way.

LUXOCRACY takes as fundamental that all persons are a unique manifestation of the One, the All, the Source. The optimal purpose is to simultaneously foster, facilitate, nurture, protect, and coordinate the expression of every person's Innate Divinity. When we become aware of the sacredness of Creation, our neighbors, and ourselves, our mindset changes, and we become capable of operating within a frame of reverence. Reverence, she writes, evokes our most generous and respectful feelings and behaviors. In other words, she sees the world working at a higher frequency and vibration.

Jesus is energy who became human matter to teach us how to ignite the Innate Divinity lying dormant or neglected in us. The Spirit is pulsating energy, a vibration, a

frequency that heals, inspires, empowers, protects, comforts, and precipitates hope. The scriptures speak tell us that in Isaiah 61/Luke 4 (red letters).

Jesus, our role model, mentor, and spiritual director, reminds us of our potential. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." John 14:2 (red letters) implies we can make all things new, too. Rev.21:5 (red letters)

These are weary times. We are living with international and domestic wars and rumors of war, mass shootings, inflation, out-of-touch politicians, and inadequate health care. Advent tells us again to celebrate the joy of his coming to give us life more abundantly. John 10:10 (red letters) and evoke the Spirit He gave us to heal a weary, war-torn world until he returns. John 14:16-21 (red letters)

Starry black nights are pinpoints of light energy held together by Dark matter. Dark energy. Dark flow. Under that starry black night, I felt swaddled in an eternal blanket of protection, comfort, and love. Its cosmic presence reminded me that one of the stars came to grace us in the night to light our path back home. And that's the truth.

Reflection:

Read the red letters in one of the four gospels.

1. Where are the red letters of truth in your own life?
2. What energy do you feel during this time of Advent?

Mid-Week 3

DARTINIA HULL

All will be well.

To visit the Black Madonna in Montserrat, Catalonia, visitors can take a ski lift into the sky or drive along a winding cliffside road that winds to the foot of the snaggle-tooth mountain that's unlike any around it, unlike any that most have seen, with magical finger-like rocks reaching toward a blue so impossible it will make you weep.

Legend has it children heard angels singing in this mountain, and they followed the song and a bright white light to find a statue that became known as the Black Madonna, a deep-hued woman sitting serenely in a protected grotto, a child in one arm and a silvery sphere in her other hand.

Despite attempts by villagers, shepherds and priests, the Black Madonna - La Moreneta - would not move. She sat - still sits. The church built a basilica around her. Centuries later, she holds her child and the sphere and watches visitors - believers and otherwise - as they pay homage (or gawk).

Even for gawkers, it's hard to remain unchanged after a visit to the Black Madonna.

Change is one thing. It's still lost to many that this woman of color planted herself so firmly in a space that the world had to shape itself around her, despite trying to demand otherwise. She holds the past and present in one hand, cradles the future in the other. Whether she is serene or bemused or determined or just plain done with everything - or all four - depends on the visitor's state of mind.

Maybe this ancient Black woman already possessed the wisdom of the ages, and knew she needed to take her rest. Maybe she needed to catch her breath, rest her eyes and heart for a minute, or a millennium, before a world that gawks at her determination began its best to break her, and then came after her child. We call her the Madonna, but who knows if this really is her child, or another mother's child, or, perhaps, everybody else's child. There's not a Black child walking around who doesn't belong to every Black woman. Maybe La Moreneta knew what would be demanded of this child, and that it wouldn't stop there. That this child's fate would be demanded over and over, from other mothers and children, from other aunties and their nieces and nephews, from other grandchildren and cousins and playground friends, from generations born after the trauma of captivity, from generations born into systemic hatred.

Maybe she prayed “all will be well.” But first ...

“All will be well.”

What you need often finds you when you take your rest – especially when rest is at your insistence. “All will be well” doesn’t feel like a trite sermon from a privileged speaker when it’s a Black woman’s prayer and meditation, a battle cry and declaration. It’s hard. A place of capitalism sees rest as laziness. There’s little wonder that “Rest as Resistance” is manifesto, ministry, and mystical, bone-deep necessity.

And yet, “all will be well” is the promise of Advent, however simplistic that message feels, or however far away it feels to people who categorically know that walking out the door isn’t a guarantee anything will be “well.” It wasn’t well, literally, for years after the first advent. How many babies were slaughtered to satisfy Herod’s fear? Why does it feel that Herod himself never truly died? “All will be well” skims the category of “all lives matter.” But nothing can be “well” until it’s well for the ones most targeted.

Or for the ones who love the ones most targeted.

Take your rest

So, perhaps the Black Madonna wasn’t serene. Maybe she needed a minute to rest her eyes and protect her heart. Maybe this Madonna’s “Magnificat” meant she decided that for all to be well – she needed to say, as the spiritual goes, “I’m going to sit down and rest a while.”

Maybe she knew what was going to be required of her and of her child, and she needed to sit for a minute and prepare herself the same way our grandmothers sat in the quiet, dark cold of December. Maybe La Moreneta’s song was one of resistance.

Maybe she knew that one day so much would be required of so many women who looked like her that it would spawn a whole movement about rest. About taking a moment to think about next steps. About finding the solitude needed to reclaim one’s clarity in the face of certain adversity. To hell with what everybody thought. This was between her and God, and she needed the clarity of silence. Maybe Mary understood that it would all be well one day, but it was going to require women who looked like her to make it well, and that started with keeping themselves well.

Maybe she knew she’d have to demand her time to hear the Lord’s direction, to declare herself for herself, and this was her way of letting her future siblings in Christ know they’d need to do the same. On this side of 2020, it’s still necessary.

Go ahead. Gawk at her. She's used to it. When the Black Madonna decides she's rested, she's heard God's word and it's time to move, it will be to move mountains.

Reflection:

1. Where do you find your rest so that you will move mountains?
2. Where are you hearing the words of God in your life?

Fourth Sunday of Advent

SHAVON STARLING-LOUIS

Luke 1:46-55

As we round out the Advent season, we are again reminded that in the birth of Jesus The Christ, we find the embodiment of God's liberative promise. This Christmas Eve, we have an invitation to ponder this glorious liberation through a womanist exploration of the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise and prophetic proclamation in the gospel of Luke.

Womanist theology, as we have seen, is rooted in the experiences and perspectives of Black women. In this Black woman's body, the energy of womanist thought provides a holy intimacy and powerful vantage point to understand the embodied message of liberation in the Gospel. I assert that there is something in how Mary sings her way through a time of deep disorientation and reorientation to be fully present for what God is up to that speaks to the Womanist disposition. Mary offers to God a coordinated groove composed of spirit, lyric, and movement. As we ruminate on Mary's Magnificat and how it reflects the theme of glorious liberation, it feels faithful to bring it in conversation with phrases from *The Color Purple* author Alice Walker's original definition of the word "womanist" from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

Mary and her "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior."

v.46: "And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,'"

Mary's soul-searching song signifies, signals, extols, and expands the divine liberation made possible with God. Her declaration sets the timbre and tone for the transformative power of God about to be birthed into the world through Jesus. Furthermore, in the lifting of her own voice in a space of patriarchy, I hear echoes of the womanist call to center the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed, including our very own.

Mary the "Responsible. In charge. Serious."

v.47: "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," v. 48: "for he has looked on the humble estate of God's servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed..." v. 49: "for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is God's name."

In acknowledging God as her Savior, Mary is not playing around as she recognizes the source of her liberation. She is grounded and clear about who is the center of her joy.

Womanist theology affirms that liberation is intertwined with authentic spirituality and faith, and Mary's rejoicing underscores this connection.

God's regard for Mary's humble state exemplifies the womanist principle of recognizing the marginalized and their potential for greatness. Mary's song reflects the idea that God chooses the overlooked and oppressed to be agents of transformation.

Mary was open to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one.

Mary's declaration highlights the might and holiness of God, underscoring the divine source of liberation. Womanist theology often emphasizes God's power in the face of adversity, and Mary's words affirm this truth.

v. 50: "And God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." v. 51: "God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;" v. 52: "God has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;"

Mary's wise words holler out that God's mercy is not a limited resource; it extends to all generations. Mary's words belt out womanist thought, the promise of liberation that is a deep and enduring one, providing hope for the oppressed across time and space.

Mary's song is an anthem for faithful folk "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."

God's strength is evident in God's glorious acts of liberation. The Holy One makes the proud run like roaches and disrupts their oppressive intentions. Mary's musical musings emphasized the reversal of oppressive power dynamics reflective of yet another blessed central theme in womanist thought. Mary's words affirm the theme of liberation through divine justice while emphasizing the divine intervention that uplifts the marginalized and humbles the powerful.

Mary's hype song for the baby in her womb invites us over and over to love the God who teaches us how to "love love" and "love the folk."

v. 53: "God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent away empty." v. 54: "God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy," v. 55: "as God spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to God's offspring forever."

In these stanzas, we see God's justice in providing for the hungry and challenging the excess of the rich. It echoes the womanist commitment to addressing economic disparities and ensuring justice for the oppressed. Mary's acknowledgment of God's help

to Israel reminds us of the collective liberation experienced by communities. Womanist theology emphasizes the communal aspect of liberation, addressing systemic oppression. God's promise of liberation is rooted in God's covenant with the ancestors. Womanist theology recognizes the continuity of God's liberating work throughout history.

Mary's soulful magnification of the Holy One projects in ways big and wide the kind of wondrous work God is up to in, through and beyond her. As we consider the Magnificat from a womanist perspective, I find it resonates deeply with the experiences and struggles of Black women and marginalized communities. Mary's song hums in the hearts of many as a call to action for all believers, encouraging us to align ourselves with God's liberating mission.

Might we prepare to enter the light of Christmas joy like Mother Mary in touch with the glorious liberation of spontaneous creativity and hope. Might the annual reminder of miraculous new birth made present in the Christ-Child inspire us to find new words and rhythms, ways that center the marginalized and yield to the voice long silenced like that of the young, marginalized woman sent as a vessel of divine liberation in Mary.

Mary's recognition of God as her Savior highlights the interconnection between spirituality and liberation. In womanist theology, faith is not separated from the fight for justice; it is a powerful catalyst for liberation. Furthermore, Mary's acknowledgment of God's might in the face of adversity is a womanist reminder that divine power is a source of strength for those experiencing oppression.

Mary's healing hymn emphasizes the subversion of oppressive structures and the exaltation of the humble. Womanist theology calls us to confront systems of oppression and work toward justice. Mary's proclamation of filling the hungry and emptying the rich underscores the call to address economic disparities. In womanist thought, economic justice is a crucial aspect of liberation. There is a care for the WHOLE of the FOLK through community-centered Liberation evident in Mary's recognition of God's help to the people of Israel as community.

Mary's song reminds us that God's promise of liberation extends across generations and that we are all called to be agents of transformation in a world in need of liberation and justice.

Viewing The Magnificat through a womanist lens feels like an invitation for all of us to celebrate the divine promise of collective dignity and to actively participate in God's redemptive work made possible through joining Mary in bearing Christ within us. As we close this Advent season, let us lift up our life-songs to magnify the Lord like Whitney, rejoice in our Savior like Aretha and embrace the communal call to work for justice and liberation for all, especially the marginalized and oppressed like Ella Baker.

Reflection:

1. In what ways does the Magnificat speak to you in this moment?
2. How are you working toward liberation for all? What are you doing in your own communities to bring about the care for the "WHOLE of the FOLK"?

Christmas Day

TRACI BLACKMON

God Shows Up

Isaiah 52: 7-10 (NRSVUE)

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices; together they shout for joy, for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth; shout together for joy, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Isaiah is speaking to a people whose homes have been destroyed, whose land has been taken, and whose temples lay in ruins. The prophet is speaking to displaced people living in a strange land, with strange customs, and a strange god. Babylon is not their home.

The psalmist writes of this exile in Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion...How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"

In the aftermath of defeat and in the midst of physical exile, the prophet Isaiah speaks a word to remind the exiles that God is still near. He delivers a message of life, hope, and joy to those trapped in despair: Despite evidence to the contrary, God has not forgotten you and God will show up!

This is the summation of the gospel: God shows up. This is the essence of faith that bears witness to the immutable nature of the God of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, of Ishmael, Isaac, and Rachel. This is the God who sees us in every time and space. This is the God of both the present and the not yet. This is the God who always shows up.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news. Such poetic words may seem metaphorical to some. Yet against the realities of exile, Isaiah's words disrupt the temptation to accept the finality of exilic circumstances. The prophet shows up as messenger to those for whom God has shown up time and time again, and he reminds them that God still reigns and God still shows up even for those living in the midst of realities that run counter to this claim.

Mountainous areas have changing terrains. There are rocky edges, slippery slopes, and peaks at higher elevations than the surrounding area. From the mountain one can see farther than those on the ground. The Hebrew word *na'ah*, translated as beautiful in this text, may also be understood as "to be at home." In other words: How at home upon the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news!

Some might suggest the prophet is foretelling the coming reign of Jesus. This certainly works for many Christians reading Isaiah today. But I offer for your consideration the long lineage of messengers beginning with Adam, from which Jesus descends, and who continue to this present day. In every generation, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, people need to be reminded of what is always true: God shows up.

Over 2,000 years ago on a cold night in Bethlehem, Jesus was born into a poor family living underneath the shadow of militarized oppression. Not unlike today, 10% of the people controlled 90% of the resource and the government favored the rich while taxing the vulnerable. Against a backdrop of homelessness, poverty, and the domination of Empire, Jesus comes as both message and messenger of the good news: God has not forgotten us. God incarnate shows up, unplanned and unexpected, to a poor teen girl from the wrong side of the tracks so that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. (John 10:10 NRSV)

The prophet Isaiah knew nothing of the coming of the Christ child. The beauty, peace, joy, and salvation of which Isaiah speaks is not clothed in the majestic pageantry of our Christmas morns. To every generation prophets come to bring this good news because embodiment is faith's only evidence and its only defense.

This Christmas season our world is in turmoil. The birthplace of Jesus is under siege. There are wars and rumors of war in the Sudan, Ukraine, and the Middle East. Carnage is all around and the most vulnerable among us suffer most. Families are forced to leave their homelands in search of refuge across guarded borders that declare there's no room. The earth groans from our abuse and people still die of hunger in a world of more than enough.

And yet, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, prophets still rise among us to declare what is always true. God has not forgotten us and God will show up.

And how welcome upon these mountains are the feet of those who declare peace, who bring good news, who announce salvation, who remind us of what life has taught us time and time again. God shows up in the midst of our trials and our triumphs. God shows up in our joys and our pain. God shows up in the mundane and the miraculous of our lives.

Today let us shout for joy and sing praise to our God who sees farther than we can

see and knows infinitely more than we can know for God is with us for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulders. He is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.(Isaiah 9:6 NRSV)

Reflection:

1. On this Christmas Day, where is God showing up in your life?
2. In what way are you prophesying? What are you saying?

First Sunday after Christmas

VALERIE IZUMI

Joyful Resistance: The Power of Hope

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
For God has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
the Holy One has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks themselves with a garland,
and as a bride adorns themselves with their jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
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.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
And you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

I can still recall the horror and shock that engulfed me when I first heard the news of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, where four innocent young Black girls lost their lives and over 20 others were wounded. The sheer magnitude of such unthinkable evil was beyond my comprehension, leaving me overwhelmed with a deep sadness and fear. The abrupt end to these young girls' lives, their unfulfilled dreams extinguished in an act of unimaginable hatred, was a harsh reality too bitter to swallow. Though I didn't have the language then to ask God to dismantle systemic racism, the naïve little girl I was prayed to God to enter our world and re-create it so love, not hate, would reign.

It soon became clear to me that I could not keep silent. Although I didn't know the verbiage, I was very young, I possessed the motivation and commitment to work for the eradication of systemic racism and to advocate for racial justice. That commitment remains an important part of my life and ministry.

While the following decades have shown some meaningful forward movement, in-

creasing violence, both domestic and state-sanctioned, against Black and Brown women, trans women, and girls remains concerning.

There have been substantial improvements in health, yet Black and Brown women, girls, and trans women continue to face health disparities.

The loss of generational wealth in the Black community through systemic racism is a profound issue that has had lasting impacts. Systemic barriers to wealth accumulation, such as discriminatory housing policies and unequal access to quality education, continue to result in significant wealth disparities. These disparities, in turn, have far-reaching implications, affecting everything from homeownership rates to opportunities for higher education. It's a cycle that perpetuates inequality and inhibits social mobility.

Despite some progress over the decades, the predicament of Black and Brown women and girls continues to be unsatisfactory. Vanderbilt University Intersectional Study of Black Women and Girls in Society tells us that, "Black women and girls are invisible. Invisible in society, invisible in research, invisible in discourse, policies, practice, and praxis. They are invisible in large part because of the tendency in our society to treat race, gender, and other socially constructed identities as mutually exclusive categories of experiences."

The impacts are particularly pronounced for Black girls and women. In addition to the systemic barriers faced by the Black community as a whole, Black women also face gender-based discrimination. This intersection of racial and gender discrimination often results in lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement, further exacerbating the wealth gap.

We continue to pray, O Holy One, when will we be restored?

Although not included in this day's lectionary, without the first two verses of Chapter 61, it's difficult to fully appreciate the First Sunday after Christmas Day.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me;
The Holy One has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God; to
comfort all who mourn.

From generation to generation, the Black community has held on to this promise of liberation and restoration expressed through joyfulness and celebration intrinsic to our community. Black joy embodying a range of emotions, experiences, and expressions illustrative of the Black experience – a potent form of "resistance, resilience, and

reclamation of Black Humanity.”

Our inherent joy, our celebration, as our lectionary text begins at Isaiah 61:10-11, is deeply tied to the profound joy we feel towards the Holy One. We exult with our whole being for the numerous blessings God has bestowed upon us. We are confident in God’s promise that the path before us leads to liberation and restoration. James Cone declares that the role of Christian theology is to interpret the meaning of hope in God in such a manner that the oppressed community in any given society will risk everything for earthly freedom. This freedom is made possible through the resurrection of Christ.

We exult in God with our whole selves, because in Jesus Christ, the Holy One comes near to us and clothes us with the garment of salvation and covers us with the robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). We respond to these profound acts of faithfulness, love, and hope with the full measure of our joy because these are not passive acts; our God acts with nurture, intention, and purpose.

During this Advent and into the Christmas season, I invite you to embrace joy; sing and dance with your whole body, spirit, and heart. Find yourself some of what Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes calls “cultural safe space [i]” and sink into the freedom of it all. You are a joyful blessing!

Prayer

“How can there be rebuilding, hope, or joy amidst so much pain and destruction, the devastation of many generations?

“And yet, the current of black joy is not dissolved. Rather, it emerges all the more insistently. It serves as a holy incarnation among us, the embodiment of God’s vision that blesses us into new ways of being.

“During this season of Advent as we yearn for and look forward to God’s arrival among us, let us not forget to look at the flesh and blood already surrounding us. Jesus isn’t born somewhere back there or beyond us, but within and by us. Amen. [ii]”

[i] For Women Of Color Who Have Considered Quitting When The Isolation is Enuf, Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, July 27, 2015

[ii] Kindred Ministry, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Gospel of Black Joy, December 16, 2020

Reflection:

1. Where are you finding joy in your life?
2. What new ways of being are you discovering for yourself?

New Years

AMY E. STEELE

Birthing Liberation in Bethlehem

Luke 2:15-21

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The manger is a powerful symbol in the nativity setting. A literal cradle of redemption, it is a container troubling the intersections of race, class, and gender for the ancient and contemporary world. Like so many mothers of Black liberators, written on Mary's body are the markers of oppression, but engraved upon her soul is the tune of justice, a song familiar to freedom loving people everywhere. When the community of shepherds behold the manger and confirm "what had been made known about the child," Mary ponders these things in heart. Standing over the manger, Mary grapples with the possibilities of hope in a broken world, and she wrestles with the prophetic tradition out of which her song emerges. Mary's story, while unique, is woven into a broader narrative of Black women birthing liberation in the face of adversity.

Luke 2:12-15, through a womanist lens, invites us to perceive the nativity as a radical act of divine resistance and incarnation. Mary, a Black woman, becomes a symbol of redemption, birthing hope in the midst of oppression. The shepherds, on the margins of society, bear witness to a divine intervention: the overturning of social hierarchies, and Jesus, the incarnational son of God, born in solidarity with the marginalized and proclaiming a teleological and eschatological shift in the reign and purposes of God. The meteoric celestial vision cast over the shepherds that night in the angel, the multitude of heavenly host and the light surrounding them, is a special message, "good news of great joy."

This summer I had an opportunity to travel to Europe on pilgrimage to the Black Madonna. The artistic depictions scattered throughout Europe, South America, the Caribbean and the USA are more than an aesthetic commitment to equity, they are preservation of legend, and a deepening of our encounter with an inescapable liberating

darkness embedded in the nativity. The failures of our histories and racialized past obscures our capacity and stifles our willingness to receive her Blackness and to behold her as divine, but this hermeneutical shift is an ethical necessity. Legend has it, after all, that Luke the Evangelist painted the first portrait of Mary upon a plank of cedar wood in the presence of the model herself. Her darkness is vital. It is an especially important message to Black and women of color since science, religion, and empire have been conspiring to prove a blanket Black inferiority. Mary's Blackness is critical to white supremacist cultures who have justified a collective violence and oppression of Black and dark-skinned people in the name of disciplining an inherent corruption and lack. Embracing the Black Madonna is a critical embrace of the divine intent toward birthing liberation in Bethlehem. Embracing the Black Child is a confrontation of our unacknowledged and unrepentant attachment to a colonized faith.

On my pilgrimage I encountered The Virgen of Montserrat. The story unfolds that many years ago, in the mountains of Barcelona, shepherds found her likeness, a beautiful carving of ebony wood. She was shrouded in light and from the area where she lay, they heard singing. One of them ran to tell the local bishop. He and the townspeople who followed him, confirmed that they too saw the light and heard the singing. Something in and around her was alive! When they tried to move her to a more accessible spot, they quickly discovered that they could not. So, they kept her on that mountain, which now is mostly accessible via cable car or train. When I made the trek to visit her, I noticed what the shepherds, perhaps, of the first nativity recognized, and what these shepherds of Spain noticed as well. The Virgen of Montserrat held an aliveness in her gaze. Her eyes flickered with a flame of knowing. While this experience is beyond explanation, now, when I imagine Mary standing over the manger, pondering the shepherds' words in her heart, I imagine her eyes aflame with the song she sang just before Jesus' birth, a song of liberation, God scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, filling the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty! These may be mere reminders, but her voice and her song still rings out across time and eternity. And, we began the New Year with an invitation to situate the birth and Holy Name of Jesus as a divine intervention, unbound liberation for the whole earth.

The Black Madonna and child may disrupt our narratives about the bookends of liberation. They may interrogate the very idea of power at the center of Mary's prophetic song. In that little town of Bethlehem its dark stillness held a single prophetic truth, liberation is the divine intent for the world. This truth is indeed good news of great joy for every generation.

Reflection:

1. How will you disrupt the narratives that oppress?
2. Where does truth-telling exist in your life? How do you make truth-telling central to your being?

Mid-Week Christmas

SHANI MCILWAIN

John 6:15-27

Years after the divorce I returned to the dating pool, (which is completely filled with bacteria, and all other debris by the way.) I was very confident in the fact that in the few years prior I did the self work. I went to therapy, I journaled, I dated myself. I became selective on who I shared space with. It was a new and exciting time to say the least. But, I soon realized that not everyone in the dating pool was looking for the same thing. Not everyone was who they said they were. Not everyone came with the right intentions. And, I didn't always see the signs. Instead I chose to fill myself with the bread of lies I wanted to hear.

In John's account of the crowds running after him to make him King after the miracle of the loaves and fishes, we find Jesus running from the crowd. Once the crowd found him and asked "when did you come here?" Jesus answered with, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

When we seek out things for the wrong reasons it can be devastating to our souls. I was so eager to date and move into the next season I was more concerned with how I was reacting to certain things, but I ignored the signs. I even had a temporary epiphany at one point when I saw the red flag, and asked myself "Shani, how red does the flag need to be?" And, when I talk to myself, "she" gets really dramatic, and started to name the different shades of red- burgundy, scarlet, crimson, maroon, vermillion, carmine, falu, candy apple, like, for real? What color red does the flag have to be?

John uses the term *signs* to describe the miracles Jesus was performing and the entire sixth chapter is dedicated to recounting these signs. Jesus then tries to use the miracles as a teaching mechanism but it does not land with the people. The crowds were more concerned with having their physical needs met that they couldn't see the real message. This entire journey toward a life of abundance and eternal life is to believe in the spectacular miraculous. The spectacular miraculous is the entire theme of this season. Being intentional about seeing all the signs. How many times have you asked God, "show me a sign", "give me a sign", "I just need a sign, Jesus". We often ask for things we are not ready for and then we have to inspect the color red of the flag.

What would it look like for us to rely solely on the signs of Christ? To affix our hearts and minds on the One who came simply because of love, who walked the earth for

love, and died knowing love would always win.

What would it feel like for us to experience this life day in and day out, always searching and looking for the signs? If we woke up each day with an expectation of a miracle happening before our eyes. What if the song of our heart was The Clark Sisters,

"I'm Looking for a miracle

I expect the impossible

I feel the intangible

I see the invisible"

And, when we expect the impossible miracle to move us, we also believe that we deserve it, that just by existing we can be benefactors of something good, holy, and right.

Many of us have endured relationships where we were sought after not for who we are but what we can provide someone else. Black bodies have always been commodified to advance an agenda that does not benefit ourselves. Our God given power and strength is always demonized before it is celebrated. What do we do when people, systems, and the familiar want to take our souls?

We are reminded to look to where our help comes from. As this new year unfolds before us, we stay in the beauty of now. Today. Look for the miracles moving all around. Find comfort in those signs that remind us of a Creator made in our own image. Define God for yourself. Look for God inside you. Do not get cynical and box God into this compartment that you only take out when you need bread, but seek Jesus to fill your cup up, restore your soul.

Consider that resting may be the miracle of the day.

Consider that the embrace of a hug from a loved one is the impossible expectation.

Wonder if the feeling of something longed for and not coming together is forming and is tangible.

And, then know you had an encounter with The Divine who loves you and invites you into an abundant life with everlasting love.

Reflection:

1. What are the signs in your life that show God dwells among us?
2. How are those signs transforming you in this season?

Epiphany

KAREN GEORGIA THOMPSON

Discovering the Divine

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

The new calendar year begins. The liturgical calendar turns to Epiphany, following closely on the Advent season with its clear themes of love, joy, peace and hope. Epiphany feels quiet, nested in the reflection on the year past, as the new year begins with the quest to identify aspirations, hopes and dreams for another year ahead. The celebrations and festivities of Advent, Christmas, and the New Year are past, and the first Sunday of the new year is upon us. The words of the prophet Isaiah call us forward into newness, beyond the challenges, the angst and the woes of the past:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
-Isaiah 60:1*

The light of the world has come and is celebrated in the world as God made present among us. The arrival of the light is the manifestation of the Divine among us, the baby born, bringing the hope, peace, joy and love of God to the world. Epiphany, which acknowledges the coming of the magi to see the baby Jesus and his family points us toward discovering God in new ways. The baby is sought, discovered and seen in ways that change the world as previously known and invite our attention to be witnesses and participants on a journey with God. We too can seek, discover and see God present and at work around us in these days, and for our times.

As told in Matthew 2:1-12, the magi were guided by a star which foretold the birth of the child who was to be king. They went to the palace and visited with King Herod expecting he would know of this auspicious birth which was acknowledged in the stars. The unfolding of the story brings a different set of themes than those observed during Advent. This story is about deceit and fear, it is about hope and courage, and too it is about the ways in which God can be made known and manifested in our lives and in the world around us. The light has come and we are reminded of the ways darkness is present.

An epiphany is a manifestation of a divine or supernatural being. The story offers layers of revelation of the Divine in a few short verses. We become witnesses to miracles and visions of the possibilities of God revealed. The supernatural becomes real in the

birth of this baby. An epiphany is also the unusually sudden manifestation of the essential truth or meaning of something. This too is a part of the story told in Matthew 2. There is the suddenness of truth and light breaking forth as we understand the depth and meaning of the baby predicted by the star and followed by the magi. This is the child born of Mary, heralded by angels and the prophets. The visit of the magi and the revelation of the stars point to the extraordinary moment.

With all its possibilities and wonder, Epiphany falls flat among us at times. The season of hope gives way to the busyness of life. The wonder of the baby born to Mary is lost in the post season holiday haste. Epiphany is a call to return to the joy and miracle of the Divine made known. Epiphany is an invitation to experience God manifested in us and around us. We are invited in this season to be open to the possibilities, to see the supernatural present and at work.

Our faith opens us to the awe and wonder of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Throughout scriptures there are stories about God showing up and doing the impossible in peoples lives. The arrival of the magi following the star is beyond our comprehension in an age when we are tethered to the GPS to go anywhere. These people read the skies, they understood the earth, and they journeyed believing they would find what they were looking for if they followed the stars. There is a deep faith which is exercised in their journey, a reminder there are mysteries unfolding and we too can experience God in many ways. Epiphany calls us to a journey of deep faith, one that asks us to believe we can follow God on a journey without knowing exactly where we are going and get to where we need to be.

Too often we want to know exactly where we are going. We want to know when we are going to arrive. We want to know how long the journey is going to take. The journey with God is about being able to discern where we are going next, not in the exact, and yet in a way that allows us to step out in the right direction. Perhaps a bit like following a star, which disappears during the day and reappears some place in the night sky. Believing God is with us is what we need to follow into the unknown. In the crafting of intentions for this new year, Epiphany beckons following God in faith and embarking on a journey which will allow us to experience God in new ways. Epiphanies are possible for us.

The journey takes us where we need to be. Where we need to be is not always logical and when we attempt to discern from our heads and not with the Spirit we make choices that are problematic. The logical place to find a king prophesied was the palace of the current king. Kings are descendants of kings - just not in this case. The arrival of the magi was problematic. Herod felt threatened with the news that there was a new king born, a prediction of the stars. He was deceptive and wanted the knowledge they had to eliminate the threat a new king would have on his own power. After listening to the king, the magi set out once again and there before them was the star. They left

the place where logic ruled and things made sense. When they resumed following the star, they found their way to where the baby they sought was located.

There is a suddenness in the text which mirrors the suddenness with which wisdom falls upon us and we find our way to where the Holy Spirit is leading. This is the epiphany that comes when we take a leap of faith and get back on the road to follow in obedience even though we still lack certainty and the journey does not make sense. It is the suddenness that visits when we have the “a-ha” moments on the journey, when we experience the presence of God with us in the midst of the unknown.

The faith journey calls. The invitation to step out is before us in the early days of another new year. The opportunity to live lives with deeper spiritual meaning pushes us beyond the comfort zones where we know what to expect and the ease of the journey rests in the knowledge we have gained from our own understanding.

Epiphany calls us deeper, pulling us away from ourselves and pushing us into new ways of experiencing God. The magi brought gifts for this king with them. In spite of the uncertainty of the journey, they trusted enough to believe they would find who they were looking for and they were prepared to celebrate the king with appropriate gifts.

The Holy Spirit invites us to be prepared. This is the hope we live beyond Advent. Our hope is about expectation beyond the reality of the moment. We dare to hope for the celebration of the baby and now we live beyond that hope with renewed hope for what is to come for us as people of God. The coming of the light brings hope beyond the darkness and moves us to living out the journey calling each one of us.

*Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice.
- Isaiah 60:5a*

Regardless of where we are on life's journey, a deeper relationship with God calls us. We wait with patience to see more of God revealed. We wait with hope believing God is ever present with us and accompanies us through the fears and the doubts. God is God of the impossible. May the presence of God be revealed with us in days to come as we journey following the Holy Spirit.

Reflection:

1. Where do you see Epiphany in your own lives?
2. In what ways do you experience the unexplainable? How are you following the Spirit?

Biography

Rev. Traci Blackmon is the Associate General Minister of Justice & Local Church Ministries for the United Church of Christ.

An ordained minister, public theologian, and nursing professional, Rev. Traci Blackmon's life work focuses on communal resistance to systemic injustice.



She is a featured voice on regional, national, and international platforms, and her pastoral response in Ferguson to the killing of Michael Brown, Jr. resulted in international recognition, gaining her audiences spanning the breadth of the White House to the Carter Center to the Vatican. Rev. Blackmon is a pastor at heart and a frequent speaker for local congregations, religious institutions, and public platforms engaging religion and politics. She currently serves as Pastor in Residence for Eden Theological Seminary. Featured in several publications and documentaries with PBS and National Geographic, Rev. Blackmon's ability to reach diverse audiences with messages of hope and challenge to address moral and theological issues in both the church and society resulted in her being named one of St. Louis' 100 most influential voices. As a result, Rev. Blackmon was appointed to the Ferguson Commission by Governor Jay Nixon and to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnerships for the White House by President Barack Obama. She is also a recipient of the NAACP Rosa Parks Award; The Urban League of St. Louis Woman in Leadership Award; and the National Planned Parenthood Faith Leader Award, to name a few. Rev. Blackmon has been named one of Ebony Magazine's Power 100 and is a featured writer in several religious publications. She is a graduate of Leadership St. Louis and currently serves as an Auburn Senior Fellow, a member of the Antoinette Brown Society, and a member of the 2023 Racial Justice & Religion Collective for the Aspen Institute. Rev. Blackmon serves on the editorial board of the St. Louis American, the single largest weekly newspaper in Missouri, and as a trustee on the boards of The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Americans United for Separation of Church & State, and the World Parliament of Religions.



Carla Jones Brown (She/Her) is a Teaching Elder in the PCUSA. She is a pastor, preacher, sister, mother, wife, and friend. She enjoys creating on paper and in the kitchen! She longs to see people live in ways that allow them to clarify their deepest desires and dreams and also to discern where the Holy is leading them. She has served several congregations in Philadelphia and is currently serving as the Senior Pastor at Arch Street Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia.



Bridgett A. Green is the vice president of publishing and editorial director of Westminster John Knox Press. Prior to this role, she taught at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary as an assistant professor of the New Testament. She is a minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(U.S.A.).



Shantell Hinton Hill is a native of Conway, Arkansas and is married to Rev. Jeremy Hill. They recently welcomed their first child, Sophie June, to their growing family. Shantell obtained a Master of Divinity from Vanderbilt Divinity School. She also earned a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from Vanderbilt University and a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering from Colorado State University. She is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the National Society of Black Engineers. She is also an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Her vocational experiences include work as a Process Control Engineer, a Bible teacher, and as Assistant University Chaplain at Vanderbilt University.

At Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Shantell focuses on community engagement, faith-based coalition building and narrative change to imagine more just communities in Arkansas. Notable markers of her work include the recent formation of the Micah Fellows Program, a fellowship opportunity bringing together local faith leaders to expand their theological education and praxis while receiving grants and training to focus on economic justice and advocacy.

In her spare time, Shantell enjoys public speaking, doing freelance writing, and curating digital content that centers the wholeness and thriving of Black women. Her favorite quote is, "Do the work your soul must have," coined by the late womanist pioneer Rev. Katie G. Cannon, Ph.D



Dartinia Hull is managing editor of the Presbyterian Outlook magazine. She holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from Queen's University of Charlotte and her essays and stories have been published in Bitter Southerner magazine, CNN, MUTHA Magazine and the Sad Girl's Club, and her poetry has appeared in the anthology "We Were Not Alone."



valerie izumi serves the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as an assistant stated clerk in the Office of the General Assembly coordinating the General Assembly nominations process. Her longtime commitment to racial and gender justice, and to promoting racial equity is widely recognized.

Her passion and commitments to exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class in justice and advocacy work is not just rhetoric; she puts her words into action to promote racial equity. More than a mentor, valerie works to foster community and collaboration.

Why I say I am a womanist: I am a womanist - authentically and audaciously myself. I exist not because of others' wishes or expectations, but because I am a child of God, created in God's image. I am unapologetically woman, bi-racial and Queer. Despite my lived experiences and struggles with brutality and oppression, I embody Black joy; I am Black joy! I live in the real world doing the real work to create a better world for Black people. I am fierce!



Melva Lowry is an ordained Ruling Elder. She is currently the Development Communications Coordinator for The Common Place Philly. Melva has served the PCUSA in many capacities from Hands and Feet Fellow to working in Camp and Conference Ministries at Massanetta Springs, including writing for many of our publications. Yes, Jerrod Lowry is her brother!



Shani McIlwain is a storyteller. She is committed to telling the stories of a God and God's people. As a bestselling author Shani, has worked passionately at the intersection of faith and justice, hosting podcasts, and anything that allows for her creativity to shine. A 2023 Luther Seminary Seed Fellow, former moderator of National Capital Presbytery, Shani has served the church in many different capacities as a ruling elder. She recently began a new chapter as a communications strategist for Presbyterian Mission Agency which she continues to say is her dream job.



Rev. Dr. Paula Owens Parker is passionate about womanist mysticism, spirituality, and healing generational trauma in the African American community. She has spoken at conferences, retreat centers, churches, and in classrooms nationally and internationally. Her mission is to illuminate, validate and inspire healing and wholeness for individuals, families, and communities.

A Presbyterian minister (PCUSA), she is the senior program developer of Roots Matter LLC and the former program associate for the Katie Geneva Cannon Center of Womanist Leadership at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA. Dr. Parker is a spiritual director and a Spiritual Directors of Color Network board member. She earned her DMin from San Francisco Theological Seminary, MDiv from Union Presbyterian Seminary, and BA from Fisk University.

Dr. Parker is the author of *Roots Matter: Healing History, Honoring Heritage, Renewing Hope* (2016) and has contributed articles to *Christian Century*, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* and chapters in *Kaleidoscope: Broadening the Palette in the Art of Spiritual Direction* (2019) and *Walking through the Valley: Womanist Explorations in the Spirit of Katie Geneva Cannon*. (2022)

Dr. Parker's ancestral roots are in Princess Anne County (Virginia Beach), Norfolk County (Chesapeake), Virginia, the home of the Powhatan, the Piscataway, and the Nanticoke and Currituck County, North Carolina, the home of the Yeopim. Her DNA reveals relatives in South Carolina, Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo & Ghana, England, Scotland, and Ireland.

She currently lives in Richmond, VA, the former capital of the Powhatan Federation and is the mother of two sons and has eight grandchildren. Her favorite quote: "Trauma travels through family lines until someone is ready to heal it. Your ancestors and descendants celebrate every time you do the work."



Rev. Brooke Scott (she/her) is a Presbyterian pastor of two new worshipping communities in Delaware, "Church on Main" and the emerging group called "Seek Respite." She is also a trained social worker with experience in homeless intervention, mental health, and suicide prevention. Brooke is originally from the Philadelphia area. She is passionate about the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, mental health, and religion. Brooke is an intentionally interfaith practitioner. In her free time, she enjoys reading, music, musical theater, and practicing yoga.



The Rev. Shavon Starling-Louis was born and raised in St. Petersburg, Florida, and is the daughter of Trinity and Lakeview Presbyterian Churches. She graduated from St. Leo University with a degree in Psychology.

Shavon discovered her call to ministry while working as a church office administrator, campus ministry intern and ecumenical community organizing office administrator. She received her Master of Divinity from Columbia Theological Seminary with Honors in Practical Theology.

She has served as a pastor or co-pastor of several churches, including First Presbyterian Church in Midwest City, Oklahoma, Meadowlake Presbyterian Church in North Carolina and Providence Presbyterian Church in Rhode Island. Shavon is currently serving as senior pastor at Memorial Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Shavon organized the establishment of The SPACE (Sanctuary for Prayer and Creative Expression) and has been active in national leadership roles in the denomination. She served on the Leadership Innovation Team for the Presbyterian Mission Agency – NEXT Church, the National Committee for the Self-Development of People and as co-creative director for GA225 Worship.

She has written numerous articles and faith formation curriculum for Christian publications, served as church leadership consultant, facilitated workshops and collaborative learning spaces, and is a certified antiracism facilitator. Shavon is also in demand as a conference preacher, having participated in Montreat's Youth Conference as well as MoRanch Women's Conference.

She is married to Kirk Louis and shares two children, Sariah and Kamden.



Rev. Amy Elizabeth Steele, PhD, is the Executive Director of Program and the Dean of the Chapel, The Upper Room. Amy is a newly minted Spiritual Director, a writer, and a lover of music and art. Her scholarly interests are in 20th Century Black Religious Thought with emphasis on the work of Howard Thurman, womanist social ethics, and homiletics. She has written several peer reviewed articles, book chapters, and is working on her first monograph. In addition to her scholarly life, she is ordained by the National Baptist Convention, Inc., and has served Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches for over 20 years. Amy is the mother of one son, Isaiah Alexzander, and spiritual friend to many. She calls Tennessee home but appreciates the global ecumenical community as the context out of which she thinks about ministry



Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson is the General Minister and President/Chief Executive Officer of the United Church of Christ. She is the first woman and first woman of African descent to serve as leader of the denomination.

Rev. Thompson served in the UCC national offices for 14 years, most recently as Associate General Minister for Wider Church Ministries and Co-Executive for Global Ministries since 2019 and previously as minister for racial justice and minister for ecumenical and interfaith relations. Prior to joining National Setting staff, Thompson served on staff of the UCC's Florida Conference, as a church planter in Florida and in family ministries in New York. Her passion for justice and equity moved her work on behalf of the UCC into a global context, affording the opportunity to participate globally in efforts to reduce the marginalization experienced by African descendant peoples and other communities globally. She also worked in the nonprofit arena for over 10 years in senior leaderships positions.

Rev. Thompson earned a Bachelor of Arts from Brooklyn College in New York, a Master of Public Administration from North Carolina Central University in Durham, NC, and a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She also studied Public Policy at Duke University and earned her Doctorate in Ministry at Seattle University. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg University.



UNBOUND
©UNBOUND ADVENT 2023