

# A Devotional for Advent



# A Devotional for Advent

COLLEGE *of the* OZARKS®

Cover: *The Nativity*, Ulyana Nyshchuk, Egg tempera, gilding, and acrylic on gessoed wood, 2002, Courtesy of the artist and the Boger Gallery Sacred Art Collection, College of the Ozarks.

TOC: *Streams of Living Water (details)*, Natalya Rusetska, Egg tempera, gilding, and acrylic on gessoed wood, 2017, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

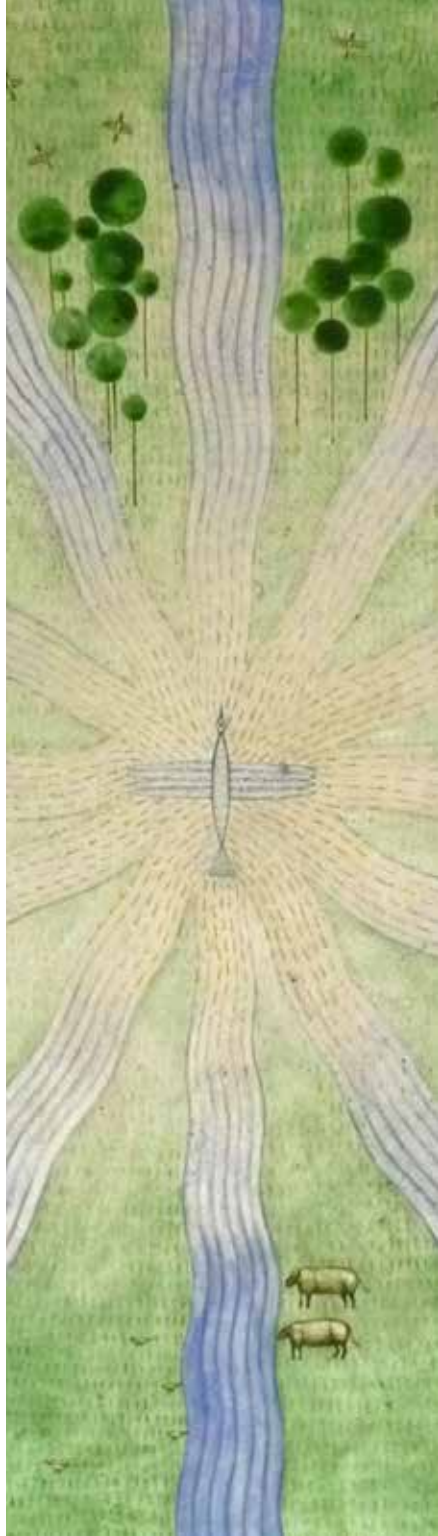
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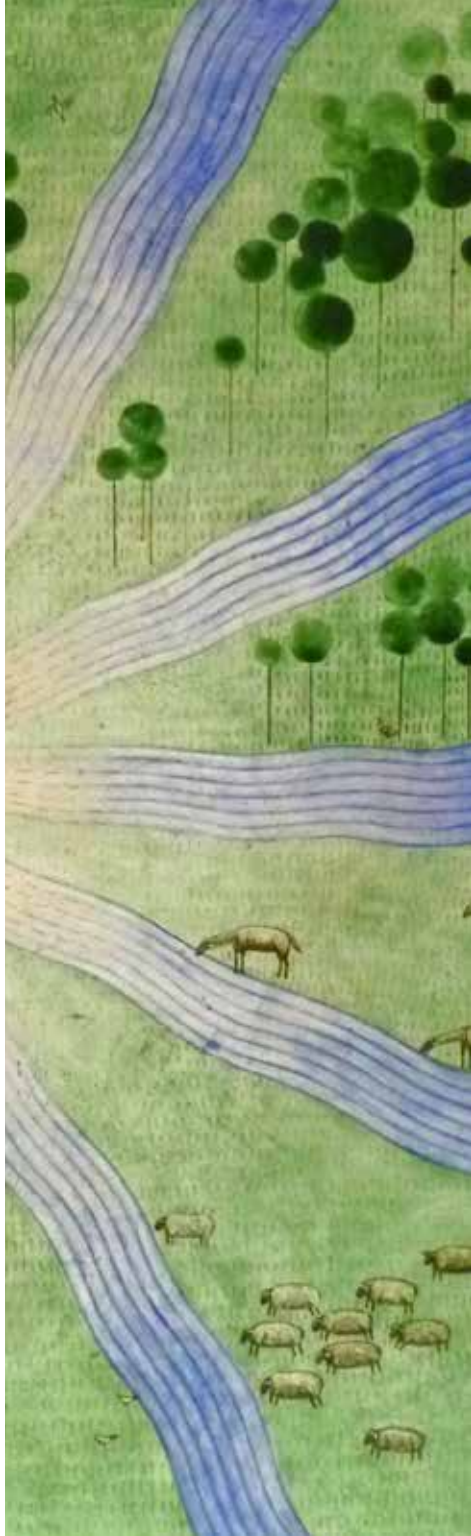




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# Foreword

College of the Ozarks is delighted to offer you the first-ever Advent devotional to encourage your faith as we enter the season that celebrates the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Laura and I hope that as you read the reflections included in this book, your faith will grow stronger, and you will find fresh hope for each new day.

A special project like this takes a community of talented and dedicated colleagues who collaborate on the many aspects of publication. We are deeply grateful to the writers, proofreaders, C of O print shop team, and editor Dr. Eric Bolger for their tremendous work on this book. Countless hours went into this project, and the hard work of these professionals does not go unnoticed.

We live in troubling times, not unlike the period in which Christ entered the world in Bethlehem. We need the hope and peace Jesus offers now more than ever. Through the pages of this book, we invite you along on a journey of inspiration and encouragement.

During this Advent season, we pray you will experience the love, joy, comfort, and peace that comes through the Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11).

Brad and Laura Johnson  
President and First Lady of College of the Ozarks

Right: *Little Angels (detail)*, Khrystyna Yatsyniak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2022, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.





# Inviting Children into Jesus' Story

My wife does an excellent job helping our children personally connect with Jesus' story, especially during Advent. Each year, following Thanksgiving, we pull out our Christmas decorations, Advent calendars, Advent wreaths, and other decorations to remind ourselves of how Jesus' story shapes us: not only in the past but also in the future.

As my three daughters unveil Scripture readings from the Advent calendar, light the candles of the Advent wreath, and recite "Jesus is the light of the world," we remind ourselves that in Jesus, we are saved and will be restored – something that is so easy to forget in our culture.

Christians throughout history have found that Advent provides an excellent time to welcome children – no matter their age or stage – into Jesus' story. During this season, there are many active ways for children to learn about Jesus' story and begin to see themselves in it.

Our prayer is that this Advent devotional sparks your imagination about creative ways, as we all walk towards Christmas and beyond simply opening Christmas gifts, that you may remind yourself of Jesus'

birth story, remembering Jesus' first coming and with hope anticipating his second.

Here are some easy steps for sharing Jesus' story using this devotional:

1. Read the Scripture passages out loud at your evening meal.
2. Discuss as a family how Jesus' life impacts our lives.
3. Read a Gospel account of Jesus' birth each Sunday of Advent, following your evening meal.
4. Get an Advent wreath and light a candle each week to signify that Jesus is the "light of the world."

However you choose to do it, actively invite the children in your life into the Advent season so they can begin to see how Jesus' life impacts their own.

Andrew T. Bolger  
Dean of Mission Advancement

Right: *The Transfiguration (detail)*, Hlafira Shcherbak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2020, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

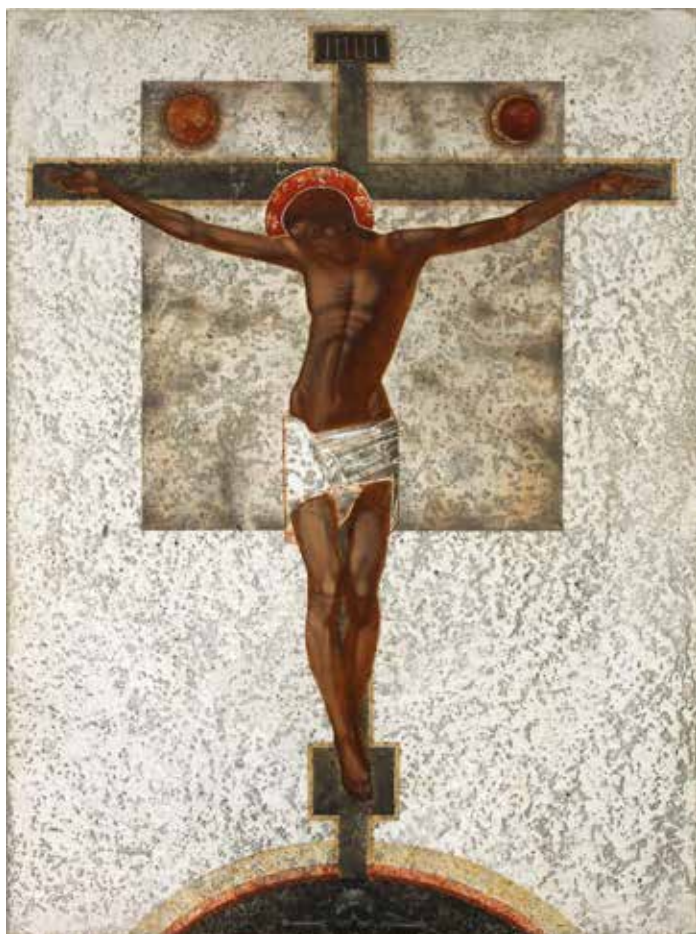
# The Art in this Devotional

The artwork that appears in this Advent devotional comes primarily from two sources: the sumptuous illuminations created for Saint John's University's ambitious and masterful *The Saint John's Bible* (Collegeville, MN) as well as artwork by contemporary Ukrainian women icon painters educated in the Greek Catholic icon school located in the city of Lviv in Western Ukraine. The work of these talented icon painters is currently travelling in two Sacred Art Pilgrim exhibitions—*East Meets West: Women Icon Painters of West Ukraine* and *East Meets West: Art in Time of War*. Also included is an image of one of my melted plastic paintings that I have made specifically for this Advent season titled, *the anticipated dawning of...* It will be part of Sojourn Arts' Advent exhibition, *Light in the Dark*.

Regardless of one's Christian faith tradition, I hope that the viewer of these images will be aided in his or her connection to the themes of Advent through the humble and prayerful works of the artists. May these images not just illumine a historical moment or even spiritual truth, but may they work in harmony with the text to deepen your faith and draw you deeper into relationship with the triune Creator of the universe.

Richard Cummings  
Professor of Art and  
Director of the Boger Gallery

[stjohnsbible.org](http://stjohnsbible.org)  
[sacredartpilgrim.com](http://sacredartpilgrim.com)



Above (and border detail): *The Crucifixion*, Ivanka Demchuk, Mixed media on wood, 2016, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

# Preface

The Season of Advent is rooted deeply in Scripture and the historic practices of the Christian church. It is a time of anticipation and preparation leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. It looks backward to the first “advent” (coming) of Jesus and forward to his second advent, when He will set all things right. We are invited during this season to experience the love, hope, joy, and peace associated with the incarnation of the Son of God.

This booklet contains a series of 31 reflections on Advent passages of Scripture. These reflections have been written by faculty and staff members at College of the Ozarks. Each writer has a different background and work experience, but each one is a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. You will read thoughts by biblical scholars, stained glass makers, Christian ministers, scientists, artists, and so many others. Our hope is that the breadth of these devotions will not only draw you closer to God, but also grant you understanding of the beauty and complexity of the world God created.

The 31 devotions shared here are meant to be read with their corresponding Scripture passages. In some cases, the Scripture passage is included in the devotion, but otherwise the Scripture reference is given for you to read in your favorite translation of the Bible. The devotions are accompanied by artwork from the Saint John’s Bible, along with Ukrainian works from the College’s

East Meets West - Women Icon Painters of West Ukraine exhibition, which is part of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection. This artwork provides visual images of the biblical themes of Advent and Christmas.

We offer this booklet as an Advent gift to you as a friend of College of the Ozarks. The central mission of the College is to provide a distinctively Christian education. The devotions and artwork in this booklet clearly reflect that mission. Our prayer is that you would be drawn deeper into fellowship with the Living God through His Son Jesus as you engage with these pages.

Eric Bolger  
Vice President for Academic Affairs and  
Dean of the College  
Advent 2023

Right: *We Are Together (detail)*, Kateryna Shadrina, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2022, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.





## **December 1**

### **Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

In June 2018, an assistant coach and twelve players from a Thai junior soccer team entered a cave in Northern Thailand only to be trapped 2.5 miles in when heavy rains flooded the cave. The team took refuge on an incline just above the water, and although they were out of the water, they had no way of getting out of the cave. The team was completely at the mercy of the rescue workers who were working tirelessly to locate them. Miraculously, after two and a half weeks in the cave and a massive effort by the international community, the boys and their coach emerged from the cave alive.

One can only imagine the emotions the boys experienced as they sat miles deep in the dark cave with no way out. Feelings of despair and hopelessness had to grip them as they faced the dark reality that they may never see the light of day again. Yet, as they saw the first glimmer of light radiating from the headlamp of the first rescue diver, their hearts must have surged with hope and happiness. Seeing the light in the dark cave signaled the possibility they might be saved, and this possibility soon became a reality.

The nation of Israel found itself in a dark place of their own many times throughout the Old Testament as a result of their sin and God's judgment. Psalm 80 provides us a glimpse into one of these seasons of judgment. Israel's enemies have defeated her, and unlike the soccer team in the cave, they knew who could rescue them, so they cry out to God for restoration. The refrain of Psalm 80 aptly summarizes their prayer: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!" Israel's cry for restoration acknowledges God as their only hope for salvation. When God has

favor ("let your face shine") upon his people, they experience his salvation. God did restore Israel countless times through the Old Testament, but his ultimate restoration took place when his face shined on them through his Son Jesus Christ, "the radiance of the glory of God" (Hebrews 1:3).

As we enter the season of Advent, let us remember God's salvation in Christ was not limited to Israel but extended to all the world. Since Adam and Eve's rebellion in the garden, humanity has been trapped in darkness, but by sending his Son into the world, the light has shone in the darkness to bring hope and joy (Isaiah 9:2). Like the first glimpse of light in a dark cave, the coming of Christ gives life to those who call upon his name (Ps 80:18).

I invite you to think about two truths as you meditate on Psalm 80. First, I encourage you to reflect on the darkness you lived in before you met Christ. Many Christians forget about our sin-en-slaved lives before Christ and therefore lose sight of the amazing hope and joy Christ brought us in our salvation. Most of Psalm 80 describes Israel's suffering, and although our experience was not the same as Israel's, we have the same root issue as Israel: sin. Christ came to rescue us from our sins, and we must never get over the moment when God shone his face upon us in Christ, a moment that continues daily as we walk by the Spirit.

Second, most of us do not need a reminder that we live in a world still in the grip of darkness. Sin, brokenness, and suffering surround us, and we know the only hope for our world is Christ's return to bring an end to sin and restore all things in a new creation (Revelation 21:1–22:4). Our salvation finds its completion

when Christ returns, so with the Apostle John, we must regularly cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 21:20). Until he chooses to answer this prayer, he has given us the task of being his light in a dark world (Matthew 5:14). As those who have been rescued from the darkness, let us be found faithful to the task of shining the light of Christ into the dark places of this world. Such is the task for the church, and such is our goal at College of the Ozarks. May we be found faithful to the One who has been so faithful to rescue us from the dark cave of sin and chaos.

*Dr. Jay Todd is a professor of biblical and theological studies at College of the Ozarks*

Right (and previous border detail): *the anticipated dawning of...*, Richard Cummings, Polyethylene, metal leaf, metal foil, acrylic, glass, 2023, Courtesy of the artist.



day'

## December 2

### Matthew 24:15-31

Growing up on a farm in southern Iowa, it was with much anticipation that I looked forward to December. Not only was my birthday in December, but so was Christmas. Now, most children look forward to the joy and excitement of the Christmas holiday and the opening of presents, but for my family it seemed extra special because December meant that the harvest had been taken in and it was the *one* time of the year that Dad and Mom had a little extra money to be able to spend on us kids. After a long year of hard work and eager anticipation, December's arrival meant gifts and blessings!

When I watch the news or scroll through the headlines of the day on social media, it can be rather discouraging and disheartening. Stories of a horrific mass shooting, another senseless crime, and a hopeless soul choosing to take their own life fill the airwaves. Even the most recent updates from my dearest Christian friends can fill my heart with sadness, as they explain that the cancer has spread, and the end may be closer than they had hoped.

Just prior to our passage of scripture for today, Jesus prophesies of the coming distress that will fall upon his people. He warns of "false messiahs" (24:5), "wars and threats of war" (24:6), "famines and earthquakes" (24:7), Christians will be "arrested, persecuted, and killed" (24:9), and those who are not true believers will "turn away" from Christ (24:10). And just when you think it can't get any worse, it does!

Amid treacherous times, we can choose to live lives of abundance rather than succumbing to the fears of these days. God

gives us this strong, abiding promise to close our passage:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (24:29-31).

The volatility of our present day makes it feel like we are living in the perilous times Jesus describes in Matthew 24. But the hope and anticipation and promise of this passage are a great reminder for us during this Advent season. Whereas the first time Jesus came to earth as a crying babe in a manger, the next time Jesus comes to earth, it will be as a conquering King.

The following encouraging thoughts can help us live in his strength. First, live in confidence, not fear. In Isaiah, God says, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you" (41:10), and in 2 Timothy we are told, "God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power" (1:7). Next, rest in the assurance that God is in control. None of our tough situations, and none of the world's mess catches God off-guard! Paul's reminder in Romans that "all things work together for good, to those who love Him" (8:28) is a solid rock on which to stand. Last, trust in God's promise to come again, and when he does, he has promised to gather "his elect from the four





winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:31).  
"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'  
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20)

*Jeff Elliott is a professor of psychology at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *Vision of the Son of Man*, Donald Jackson  
with contributions from Aidan Hart, Copyright 2005, *The Saint John's Bible*,  
Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission.  
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## December 3

### 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

**N**ow that we're getting into December, it's easy for our minds to be flooded with thoughts of gifts, traveling, and family gatherings. Stress and anxiety run high as we fly through our mental checklists for the holidays. In the midst of this season, I like to take time to reflect. I was just celebrating how thankful I was for the wonderful blessings God has been pouring into my life at Thanksgiving, and now with my focus shifting to Advent and Christmas, I should be rejoicing in the knowledge that, because of God's provision, I am able to give to others. I shouldn't be leaving behind those feelings of gratitude or the peace that comes from dwelling in the knowledge that God provides, but instead, building on them.

In this passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul's focus is first and foremost on grace. I think of God's grace as the primary reason for gratitude. I can be grateful for the life I am blessed to lead and the wonderful friends and family that surround me, because God's grace for us is so abundant that he willingly sent his son to be born of a virgin, tempted, tortured, and sacrificed for us. Although we sin and fall short time and time again, we can still have hope that we will reside with our Father in eternity because of his sacrifice that was so freely given.

It's also interesting to note the way Paul incorporates giving thanks as a way to reframe the issues he's addressing in his letter around a bigger picture. He reminds those that he's writing to in the church of Corinth of how thankful he is to God not only for them, but for the grace, enrichment, knowledge, and gifts God has given them, and ends his declaration of thanks with a

statement reminding his readers of God's faithfulness. It reminds them, just as it reminds me today, that no matter how big and unsurmountable the issues and problems that stand in the way seem, our God is faithful and will continue to provide just as he always has. When I'm going through hard times and my focus is on the problem, it is overwhelming. However, when I shift my focus and reframe the problem from a perspective that focuses on God and his faithfulness and grace, I am afforded a peace that makes me wonder why I was ever overwhelmed at all!

Paul implores us all to stay steadfast in the faith, focusing our eyes upon God and never forgetting his faithfulness, no matter the trials. Though I may stumble, I will fix my eyes upon the Lord, knowing that his promise to return is good and will be fulfilled in his timing. Meanwhile, as we await that glorious return, I will strive to do as Paul reminds us and remain in fellowship with Christ as God calls all of us to do.

*Jenna Hamilton is the supervisor of the faculty services office at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Transfiguration (detail)*, Lyuba Yatskiv, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



## December 4

### Micah 4:1-5

**W**e believe that history matters, and that our lives matter. So, Advent finds us pressing our faces closer to the dark glass to see more clearly what in the world God is doing. Yes, we want to know what God is up to in the in-between-time when Jesus came down the ladder the first time (first Advent) and when Jesus will come down the ladder the second time (second/final Advent). We live in the tension of those two “comings.” Paul Simon, in *Slip Sliding Away*, understood this tension: “God only knows/God makes his plan/The information’s unavailable to the mortal man.” So, the Reformation idea of the “already but not yet” is a grace to each of us.

“Already” Jesus came and began the restoration of his Father’s creation through his birth to his ascension, but “not yet” is his Kingdom work finished. There’s work to be done to remove the false, bad, and ugly and restore what is true, good, and beautiful—the image of our triune God. Sometimes, as we press close to the dark glass, hands cupped, it looks like there is *a lot* of work yet to be done! Micah’s passage encourages us with five hopeful things God is doing in the in-between-time of the “already but not yet.” We can rest in his glory, power, wisdom, and love in these “last days.”

1. Vs. 1, “already” God’s gracious governing over creation has returned to and through his people, the church, always and everywhere. If we have eyes to see, God, through the Spirit, rules over every location, situation, and relationship that is ours, but “not yet” is his will

“done on earth as in heaven.” The brokenness that adversely affects our circumstances and relationships remains. So, we still need the empowering grace that came with Jesus’ first coming.

2. Vs. 2, “already” God’s church on the earth has an international flare. People from all over the globe stream into this kingdom asking to be taught the word and way of King Jesus, that “we may walk in his paths.” This multi-ethnic community is shaped by the word of the Lord, but “not yet” have all the idols been circumsised from our hearts. So, we need God’s grace to continue to set us free from our individualized agendas.
3. Vs. 3, “already” we are in his kingdom of peace. We desire to keep the bond of the Spirit that unites us. Already, Jesus is the Prince of Peace and we are kept in perfect peace if we keep our minds on Him, but “not yet” have we turned our swords into plows and gardening tools. Not yet have wars, self-centeredness, and a hostile pride to rule over others ceased. So, we need God’s grace to continue to conquer our hearts to be peacemakers.
4. Vs. 4, “already” God’s people are spreading shalom (life as God intended) for human flourishing, cultivating a garden-like world, overcoming the weeds in a chaotic world. Already, we can live without fear or anxiety as the King walks with us in our street-level lives. Complete shalom will be accomplished since it is





promised from the mouth of the God of the Armies of Israel, but “not yet” do we live in a peace-filled garden. Not yet are we free from anxiety and being frightened by all sorts of things. So, we need God’s protective grace to keep us from ultimate harm until we are in the garden of Jesus’ presence.

5. Vs. 5, “already” God is on the scene rescuing us from the “I am the god of me!” lie and reorienting our hearts to the truth that he alone is God and we walk in his name, but “not yet” do all walk with joy and singleness of heart in the name of our God. So, we need his grace to help us delight in his name and to tell others about our God.

Bono, the Irish poet of U2 fame, believes we “still haven’t found what we’re looking for.” And we haven’t, not completely, not yet, but we will: when we see Jesus. Until then, glorious and sufficient is his grace for today and tomorrow and until the final Advent. Micah reminds us that Aslan is still on the move!

*Daniel Chinn is a professor of biblical and theological studies at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *We Are Together (detail)*, Kateryna Shadrina, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2022, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



## December 5

### Psalm 79

In August, I spent several days working with my mother to process peaches. A strong summer storm broke branches on orchard trees that were loaded with fruit; some peaches on the branches were ripe, yet others still needed time on the tree. If the peach in my hand was ripe, the fruit could easily be removed from the pit; if the peach was not entirely ripe, it stubbornly refused to release from the pit and my work was much harder. As a result, in the quart jars I had a combination of beautiful golden peach slices and mangled peach pulp. Both were flavorful and technically still peach fruit, yet the ripe fruit released from the pit with less effort on my part and yielded consistent results in my peach slices. When I became impatient or tired in the process, the result was evident: an occasional pit slipped into the jar; some skin of the fruit could be observed through the jar; or fruit missed the jar entirely when well-lubricated hands, grasping the fruit too tightly, sent projectile fruit flying, hopefully missing my mom.

While working on my task, I was meditating on the meaning of Psalm 79, applying its principles to my life, and wondering how to make its application meaningful to my students. Any student who has entered my classroom at College of the Ozarks knows I love the psalms of thanksgiving and praise, yet the imprecatory psalms make me uncomfortable. If we are modeling our prayers to God as we read through the Book of Psalms in the classroom, what can we learn from the psalms that ask for God's judgment and wrath to be poured out on the enemies of the psalmist? In our season of Advent, waiting for the Messiah's birth and his return, Psalm 79 stands out with a different tone and message: it

is a lament, acknowledging as a community their sins of the past while calling on God to remember his covenant to his people. The psalmist is calling on God to remember his promises, and to fulfill his part of the covenant relationship with the assurance that his people are repenting and turning back to him. We remember, and we return to the promise of a covenant relationship.

But the psalm is not just a lament of remembrance and repentance. It also includes a call for God to punish evildoers - the nations who invaded Israel, killing God's prophets while desecrating the temple. How can the imprecatory curses, asking God to avenge sevenfold the wrongs committed by their enemies, reflect the mercy the psalmist desires for the sins of God's chosen people? And where are we in this process, Gentiles grafted into the vine of God's chosen people?

While I struggle with the cursing, vengeful elements in the psalmist's cry, I relate to the petition for forgiveness: this is me. I have sinned; I have remembered and returned; I will sing praises of His goodness forever. As I wait for the second coming of the Messiah, I daily ask: "How long, Lord, will the wicked taunt your people, scorn what is holy, and esteem evil as good? How long, Lord, until your Son returns to us and restores his creation?"

So, we wait. We repent. We see ourselves as that peach, hiding sin deep within the core of our lives. Remembering our covenant relationship, we release that pit we cling to so tightly: Collectively as a community, we confess our sins, and we wait for the One who removes those sins - forever. Instead of nurturing that sin and clinging to the pit of its false promise, mangling our lives in that process of rebellion, we choose Christ. We claim he holds the answer for the chaos sin creates. We, who were doomed to die, cry daily: Come, Lord Jesus, and give us life. Purify us while we wait for your return. Convict us if we have, through our actions



or private thoughts, scorned your holy law, rejecting the words of prophets who warn us of hidden sin. Give us your peace, and help us nurture love for our community, family, and friends— and our enemies who need a covenant relationship with you. Help us to be patient while you complete the work you began in us, refining and pruning so we can produce good fruit. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, bringing your light and love to a world of darkness as we celebrate your birth.

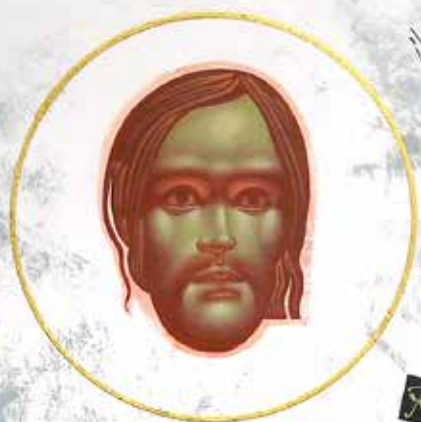
*Aleshia O'Neal is an associate professor of English at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): Hlafia Shcherbak, *You Can't Catch My Soul* (detail), Acrylic on gessoed panel, 2023, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

Shcherbak's *You Can't Catch My Soul* visually resonates with the despair and anger of the psalmist's voice in Psalm 79. The war in Ukraine has cost Shcherbak dearly. In 2022 her fiancé was killed in the Battle of Mariupol, and her father faces danger every day defending Ukraine against Russian invaders. What moves me about this piece is how Shcherbak depicts Christ's presence with us in the darkness. He never leaves us. His sovereignty, divinity, and holiness is represented by the gold circle surrounding his face, and that face, his *human* face, seems to be bringing light into the very darkness of the painting. When I view this piece I am reminded how Jesus came to us in our flesh—fully God but also fully human. Because he took on our flesh he also took on and shared in our suffering, giving himself as a sacrificial offering for our sin so that one day, when he returns, we too will share in the New Creation which we are given a vision of in Christ's resurrected body.

*Richard Cummings is a professor of art at College of the Ozarks.*





не спимати

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## December 6

### Micah 5:1-5

**T**he most famous site in Bethlehem today is the Church of the Nativity. Around the Christmas season each year over 120,000 pilgrims make their way to the church built atop the Nativity Grotto - a cave historically connected with the birthplace of Jesus. To enter the historic basilica, every visitor must bend under the four-foot-high entrance, or they too will see the stars of Bethlehem, as one tour guide lightly quipped. Likely, originating in the Ottoman Empire (16-18<sup>th</sup> century), the door was restructured to keep people on horse-back from riding into the basilica or other livestock from coming into the worship space. However, it has now taken on a more spiritual quality, named the Door of Humility, where people must lower themselves before they can enter the church and visit the historic site.

Bethlehem has always been a humble little town. In the time of Micah the prophet, Bethlehem was not worth mentioning among the list of important Judean cities (Micah 1:10-15). In the massive Neo-Assyrian Empire, it was utterly insignificant politically or geographically. Yet, this little backwater town in Judah would be where God's "ruler in Israel" would arise!

The verses of Micah 5:1-5 describe a people under siege, most likely the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, where Sennacherib came up against king Hezekiah (701 BC; Isaiah 36:1—37:38). Sennacherib had just destroyed the fortified city of Lachish and was now attacking Jerusalem. If Lachish and Jerusalem were threatened by these enemies from the north, what hope did little Bethlehem have? In the midst of this geo-political crisis, God promises a future leader for his people that will arise from Bethlehem—one

whose origin goes back to ancient times. Unlike the wicked shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34:1-10) and the maniacal despots of Assyria, this ruler will shepherd God's people and establish peace by his rule.

At this point in Israel's history, there has already been a shepherd-king who was from the city of Bethlehem and established peace for the people of God: "Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons" (1 Samuel 17:12). Micah 5:1-5 draws on this Davidic lineage and prophesies of a new David who would rise up to rule "when she who is in labor has given birth" (5:3).

These famous words in Micah 5 echoed down through the centuries, eventually resonating among the learned halls of Persian wise men who were seeking the birth of a new king. Matthew's gospel records a certain group of Magi from the East—king-makers—who were trying to find Bethlehem because the prophecy told of a ruler rising up out of Bethlehem. Micah the prophet and Matthew the evangelist both recorded that God's king would arrive on the way of humility. The power, wealth, and control maintained by ancient kings like Sennacherib (Micah's day) and Herod the Great (Jesus' lifetime) is difficult for us to imagine. These men ruled with absolute authoritarian control over their empires, but God's king was different. He would not come with an army to overthrow the current regime—but he taught with an authority that made religious leaders stand in awe. He would not establish peace by slaying his enemies, but by shedding his own blood as an atoning sacrifice for sin.



The gospels portray Jesus as God's king, but his kingdom would look very different from the kingdoms of this world. Micah 5:1-5 prepares the way for this new vision for God's kingdom and its people. While we may not be able to enter the Advent season passing through the Door of Humility in Bethlehem, we can follow our incarnate king Jesus in walking in the way of humility this holiday season. Pray about ways you, your family, and your Christian community can embrace and reflect the humility of Christ this Advent and Christmas season and ask yourself if there are areas of pride keeping you from following Jesus on the way of humility.

*William R. (Rusty) Osborne is an associate professor of biblical and theological studies at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): "Door of Humility," Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, Palestine, Public domain.



## December 7

### 1 Thessalonians 1: 2-10

Growing up in the Church, my experiences of the joyful time of Advent focused on Jesus' first arrival to us in that holy, quiet moment as a baby, as the divine incarnate. Those memories in my mind are full of candlelight and the stillness of Christmas Eve services. For us, as time-oriented beings, honoring Advent involves looking back to the moment God saw fit to enter our world and take upon himself the complete and perfect redemption of mankind. It is an infinite celebration.

However, at other points in the year, I find myself a bit stuck, struggling under the weight of looking forward in a dark and hurting world, waiting for the promised second arrival. In the hardest moments, it is my hope that wavers a little. This is where I think our present context, many centuries later, intersects with Paul's words to the Thessalonians. They, too, were in waiting.

Context tells us that though the new Christians in Thessalonica were of great faith, they were still troubled. The surrounding pagan culture was a source of oppression and persecution. And even within the fellowship of their young church, many were confused about the timing of Christ's return, a point that caused tension among them. In the face of these difficulties, though, Paul compassionately and earnestly leans in, encouraging the Thessalonians in both their practices and their identity.

Paul begins by praising the faith made evident by their work, the love apparent in their labor, and the hope sustained by their steadfast patience. In fact, the apostle confirms that this great triad not only demands our efforts but also directs them: we strive

to live by faith, hope, and love, and we are likewise compelled by them to do good work in the world. In laudable fashion, the Thessalonian Christians had received the Word of God, turned from idols, and sought to imitate the gospel made known to them by Silas and Paul.

In the following verses, though, Paul expresses his confidence that their labors, while admirable, stem not from fervor or mere human will, but from their identity in Christ. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they are chosen recipients of a gospel that came to them “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit” (1:4).

This group of Thessalonians came to know Christ on the heels of his time on earth, just after his witnessed life and death. They lived with a new understanding of the one, true God, a new energy to serve him, and the fresh anticipation of his return. You and I are standing now, with the same fellowship in the Body of Christ, 2000 years later. What I am both convicted of and encouraged by in Paul's letter is that, like the Thessalonians, existing with hope in this span of years between Christ's first arrival and his second is not done by our fervor, will, or even our reputation as believers. It is done by continually remembering our identity as chosen recipients, empowered by the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is by this power that we not only turn from our idols to serve the Living God, but also turn and wait, full of holy hope in the candlelight of a Christmas Eve service.

*Paige Ray is an associate professor of English at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *Pieta (detail)*, Khrystyna Yatsyniak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2021, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

## December 8

### Jeremiah 1:4-10

*Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant. (Jeremiah 1:4-10, KJV)*

**W**e might be inclined to think of God's words to Jeremiah as a gift. What could be better than to be given the Word of the Lord, and to be set over nations and kingdoms? And a gift these words are. But like many another gift, Jeremiah's commission is not an unmixed good. To speak the word of the Lord is a fearsome responsibility. And the message Jeremiah is to carry is not a welcome one: a message of clouds and deep darkness, of the coming kingdom that will "root out," "pull down," "destroy," and "throw down." Not very comfortable.

So too, shaped by our optimistic American culture, we might be inclined to think of Advent as a warm and cozy time, an

anticipation of the pleasures and gifts of Christmas. But we should not too quickly rush past the challenge of Advent. Contemporary Americans know something about feasting, but we are too inclined to hurry the preparation for our seasons of pleasure. The early Christians who established the church calendar knew that God's gifts come with duties attached—otherwise they would just be a sugar rush of cheap grace. So, the church calendar never provides a celebratory season without a corresponding time of preparation. If we forget these fasting seasons, our celebrations become mere consumerism and not the observance of a Christian holiday at all. The Resurrection does not happen without the sufferings of the Garden. Salvation does not come without the pangs of repentance. The Second Coming—anticipation of which is the point of Advent just as much as preparation for Christmas—does not arrive without the travails of the church here in the “already but not yet.” We should take Advent, then, as a call to repentance and a time of reflection upon the seriousness of our calling.

The prayer for the first week of this season from the Book of Common Prayer is illuminating:

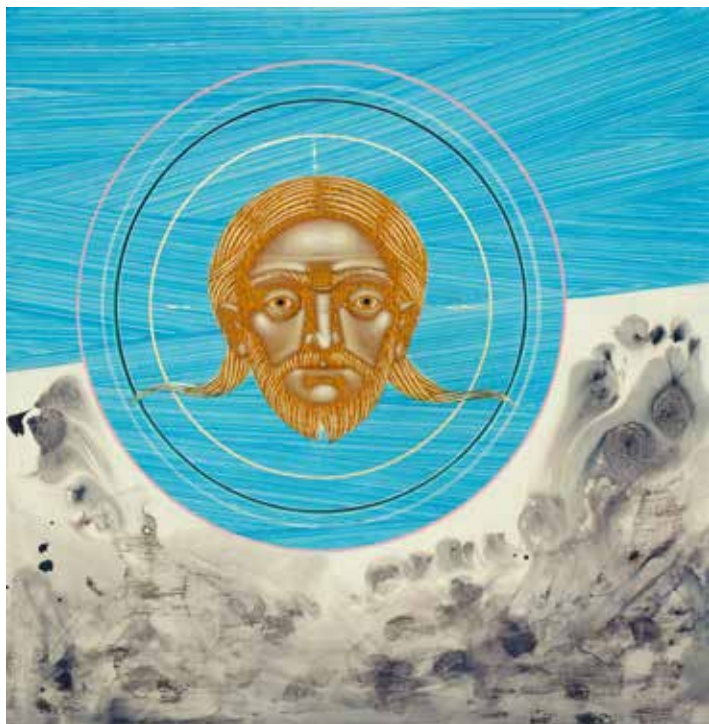
Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

If we are to proclaim the coming of Christ, we must know that he comes not just as a baby, but as the one at the end of time who will “judge both the living and the dead.” Like Jeremiah, we must “cast away the works of darkness” in order to make ourselves ready for this proclamation. We must acknowledge our insufficiency, as Jeremiah does so beautifully in the words of the King James Version: “I am a child.” And we must know that if we would speak the words of the Lord, we should first quiet ourselves, and take his touch upon our mouths.

Advent is a time for such quiet: for rest, for peace, and for a dedication to fasting and prayer. By committing to such practices, we can best make ourselves ready for the return of the King who comes “to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down,” but also, crucially, “to build, and to plant.”

*Matt Miller is an assistant professor of English at College of the Ozarks.*





Above (and border details): *The Second Coming*, Kateryna Kuziv, Egg tempera, levkas, gilding on gessoed wood, 2023, Courtesy of the Icon Art Gallery (Lviv, Ukraine) and the artist.

As I read the devotional passage from Jeremiah I am especially struck by how the passage ends, "...to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." These words and the insights from the devotional bring to mind icon painter Kateryna Kuziv's vision of Christ's return. In her painting, *The Second Coming*, at Christ's appearance the broken world seemingly evaporates before his presence. The fallen, foul, and polluted world of gray is transfigured into an ineffable cerulean blue that exudes the promised New Creation. What is thrown down is destroyed not so that it can be repaired, but instead so that it can be renewed.

*Richard Cummings is a professor of art at College of the Ozarks.*



## December 9

### Ezekiel 36:24-28

**T**he poem *In the Bleak Midwinter* by English poet Christina Rossetti has become one of my favorites, especially the choral anthem version often sung during the season of Christmas. The first stanza explains the mood I often feel at the onset of winter:

In the bleak mid-winter/ Frosty wind made moan/  
Earth stood hard as iron,/ Water like a stone/ Snow  
had fallen, snow on snow,/ Snow on snow,/ In the bleak  
mid-winter/ Long ago.

The landscape it describes—frosty wind, hard as iron, water like a stone, and snow upon snow upon snow—feels personal. The darkness advances as the days shorten; the coldness hardens and buries our heart. Yet in that place we hear the voice of the Lord God from the prophet Ezekiel: “I (the Lord God) will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

This new heart message from the Lord is the center of these verses that describe the Lord acting on behalf of His people for His own glory to demonstrate to the world what He is truly like: a God who delivers, who redeems, who fills his people with his Spirit. The people of Israel were told to hope in God’s work for them. He promised to gather them, to cleanse them, to give them a new heart of flesh, to fill them with His Spirit as he called them to walk in His ways and be His people called by His name. It’s a message of hope in the midst of bleak circumstances of their captivity and exile.

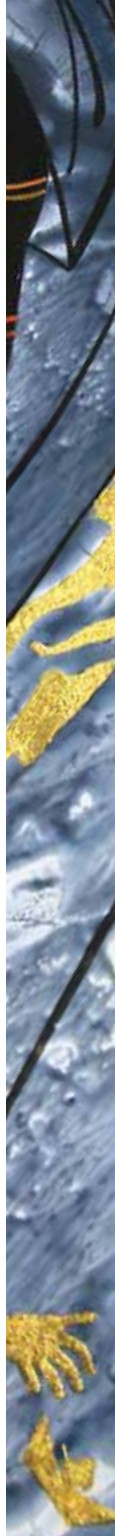
How has this season found you? Whatever your circumstances, these ancient words of Ezekiel call us to hope in the work of the Lord. There is a repetitive pattern to these promises of God. He says “I will” over and over to emphasize the reality that he is the one doing these works of gathering, cleansing, giving, and filling. These are not our works; it is our work to prepare ourselves and respond to God’s work in our lives with faith in the One through whom he has fulfilled these words, Jesus. The coming of Jesus is God’s work in the world to deliver and redeem all who believe from the bleakness of sin and death. By faith God reconciles all who believe to himself for his glory, “a letter from Christ . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3).

And so, it comes back to the heart—the ability of the Lord to restore and redeem and deliver us from the cold bleakness of our cold heart. Through Christ, he does, and it is a glorious thing. The last stanza of Rossetti’s poem is fitting as we consider our response to God’s work for us through Jesus:

What can I give Him/ Poor as I am?/ If I were a Shepherd/  
I would bring a lamb/ If I were a Wise Man/ I would do  
my part/ Yet what I can I give Him/ Give my heart.

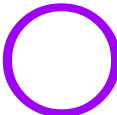
*Justin Carswell is vice president for Christian ministries and dean of the Chapel at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Virgin of the Sign (detail)*, Hlafira Shcherbak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2020, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



**December 10**

**Mark 1:1-8**

 ur familiarity with John the Baptist can numb us to the radical nature of his message that God's anointed one was coming to save his people. Around seven hundred years separated the prophecies of Isaiah and John's proclamation. Those were difficult years, which bore witness to the oppression of God's people by external empires and the continual inability of his people to live fully as a people devoted to him. God's people had waited centuries, praying the Psalms and crying out for him to act on their behalf. Waiting through more these seven centuries defined by brokenness and oppression left many doubting and questioning the work and promises of God. John's radical claim was that God was finally acting to rescue his people. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was coming to save his people. Yet that salvation was not at all what they expected. He did not come as a king to conquer earthly enemies. He came as a servant to die and rise again so that he might overcome death.

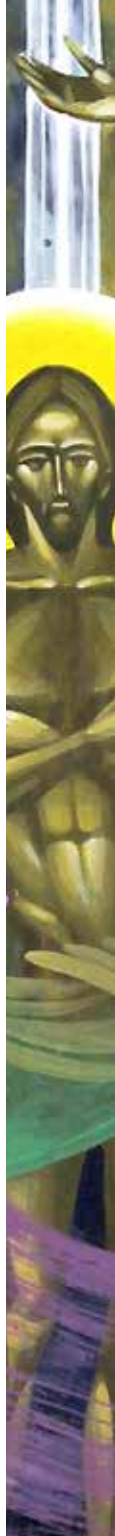
This is the great mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Although we know that through his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ has triumphed over sin and death, as the people of God, we continue to inhabit a world filled with darkness, brokenness, exploitation, and oppression. Although we know that Christ's work is sufficient, his victory over sin and death often feels incomplete. We know that our time is not God's time and, like the people of Israel, we impatiently await God's action. We cry out, "How long, O Lord?" But we wait in hope, knowing for whom we wait. And how we wait matters.

In this waiting we proclaim the coming Messiah. Our words and deeds proclaim this second coming. Like John the Baptist, we proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Like John, we preach that Christ, who is mightier than us, is coming again. Our deeds also proclaim our hope in the coming Messiah. Each act of grace or mercy directed toward a neighbor is a proclamation of Christ's coming kingdom, pointing to the ultimate joy we will experience when Christ restores all things to and through himself. Each day we get out of bed and live faithfully is an act of hope. Every small act of fidelity is an expression of loyalty as we await the return of the King.

Do we wait as though we have hope? Or do our lives reflect our doubts and lack of faith in God's timing?

*David Parrish is an associate professor of humanities at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *Baptism of Jesus (detail)*, Kateryna Shadrina, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2020, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



## December 11

### Psalm 27

“**T**he Lord is my light, and my salvation” is the opening statement in Psalm 27. It is followed by the rhetorical question in the same verse, “whom shall I fear?” Have you ever let your mind wander down a “what is the worst thing that can happen” path? In this psalm, David is doing just that. However, he is also reminding himself of the truth that since God is the protector of his life, he has nothing to fear. In poetic form he phrases the question again, “the Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” I am grateful that David acknowledges there are frightening things in his life. Admitting his fears is not a weakness, because it causes him to lean into God – his solid rock. His proclamation of his need for God is an act of worship; he looks to God and refuses to pay attention to the enemies around him.

My heart is familiar with this passage because, like David, I often encounter uncertainty in my life that leads me to fear. I have learned to breathe in the reality of Jesus being the light who guides my path. He knows far better than I when I need to turn, or stop and rest, and so I follow him. I have grown accustomed to trusting his direction, and like the psalmist, I find comfort in knowing he is always with me, “dwelling in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life” (27:4). I feel his foundational strength, “he lifts me high upon a rock” (27:5), when the circumstances of my day seem shaky. And my desire is to be fully known by him: “My heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek” (27:8).

We light candles in the season of Advent to remind ourselves and one another that Jesus is the light who came into the world

and dispelled the darkness. John 1 says that the darkness has not overcome the light, which leads us back to Psalm 27: since Jesus is our light and our salvation, we have nothing to fear.

Advent is also a time when we practice waiting. The anticipation of waiting for Christmas day is more than a desire to be with family and open gifts. We look forward to celebrating Christ's birth, but we are also longing for Jesus to set the world aright. Connecting those two desires helps us to grow in hope as well as patient endurance. This kind of hopeful expectation is how David ends the psalm. In verse 13 he says that he sees the goodness of the Lord in his life, so he implores himself and the countless generations who come after him, "to wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage" (27:14). I am grateful that Jesus is whom we acknowledge as our light and salvation. It is in his strength that we confidently take courage. We celebrate his first coming and we wait for his second coming, when his presence will light the world and he will reign forever (Revelation 22:5).

*Jennifer Freeman is director of Christian formation and associate professor of biblical and theological studies at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *People in Dark Times (detail)*, Hlafira Shcherbak, Acrylic on gessoed panel, 2023, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

## December 12

### Isaiah 4:2-6

Everyone loves gifts, don't they? The Oxford Dictionary defines a gift as "a thing given willingly to someone without payment." Which do you value more, the expectation of receiving a gift or the gift itself? For me, the expectation of receiving a gift is more exciting than the gift itself. However, I find that my excitement about receiving gifts is rooted in a personal fear: I fear that I do not deserve, nor can I repay, the gift; however, the expectation in waiting for a gift is free of charge.

It is no surprise that I feel this way when it comes to gifts, as our culture cultivates these feelings, especially around Christmas. Our culture preaches that Santa has a list of those who are naughty and those who are nice, so you better bet that it is instilled in every child that they must do whatever is necessary to get on the "nice list," so that they may receive a gift.

This cultural narrative has forced me to worry that I will not measure up to or deserve such a precious gift. In fact, I realize I am not concerned about measuring up or being enough for the gift; I am more concerned about being enough for the gift-giver. Although the gift might be special, it is simply a symbol of the attention and affection of the gift-giver. We live in a world where it is hard to comprehend that someone would give us something for free. Surely there must be a catch! Surely there must be a cost!

Christians and non-Christians alike have lost sight of the deep meaning of gift-giving. It is helpful to remind ourselves at this time of year about the true, holy gift of God: Jesus. The season of Advent is a season of expectation and gift-giving, which is why

I love this season so much. Advent lends a picture of the truth behind the expectation of receiving a gift and the gift itself.

During Advent, Christians reflect on the Israelites' expectation of the coming and promised gift of a Messiah. In Isaiah 4:2-6, Isaiah builds anticipation as he prophesies the restoration of the remnant people of God in Jerusalem. Isaiah writes of a "branch of the Lord," which refers to Jesus Christ, and talks about how this branch will make holy those who remain in Jerusalem, God's people. This holiness contrasts with the wickedness of the people in Isaiah's time.

We are familiar with what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:23: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We cannot do anything to make ourselves holy. There is no payment that we can make. Isaiah prophesies that "the branch of Lord" himself will *actually* make His people holy. What better expectation, what better gift is there than this? Though it is undeserved, it is still given. This is what the Old and New Testaments call grace: the gift of something we have not earned.

Isaiah's prophecy realigns our thoughts and emotions to the true meaning of gift-giving during this season. Isaiah relays a simple truth: sin corrupts and separates; the Messiah restores and connects. Isaiah clarified that we should expect a Messiah to save and purify. By this prophesy, Isaiah reminds us of God's gift-giving power: his gifts are freely given.

As we look back during Advent on the Israelites anticipation of Jesus's first coming, we can expectantly wait for the next holy



gift: Jesus's second coming. May this message fix your eyes on the true meaning of gifts and reveal your need for Christ and his abundant love to make you holy. Will you let these truths sink in so that you may expectantly wait for and cherish the gift of Jesus Christ?

*J. D. Kennedy is a 2023 alumnus and presidential fellow at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *The Birth of Christ (detail)*, Ivanka Demchuk, Mixed media on wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



**December 13**

**Luke 1:5-17**

**T**oday, many parents reveal their baby's gender with pink or blue balloons, posting the results on social media. The angel's revelation about John was more intimate and surprising than any gender reveal, as Zechariah learned all the details at once after a lifetime of waiting. There were no pink or blue cupcakes but instead the aroma of incense wafting in the holy place. This is a story of God's faithfulness, but it is also a story that subverts ideas about timely guarantees for good behavior.

It is tempting to assume that if we follow the blueprint, we will get the result, as if serving God is a transaction: we pay up in devoutness and then are awarded in blessings. Luke followed the statement that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous with a "but" because he anticipated readers would assume that things went well for them. Yet, for whatever reason, though God blessed them in some ways, he did not bless the couple with a child until they were old, very old to be exact. Despite their piety and their prayers, they found themselves in a quiet house while the houses of neighbors and relatives were filled with children. The refrain of barrenness for Old Testament women shows the effects of sin working to prevent the line of Jesus. Yet in this New Testament story of barrenness, John's birth did not impact Jesus's lineage; however, John was used by God to soften people's hearts to receive the Messiah.

I often view my struggles as solely personal, overlooking that my life is a part of a bigger story in which supernatural forces, both good and evil, may be at work in a variety of situations. Even if Satan is not personally picking on me and my struggles are

just typical life challenges that are common to man, I can forget that God refines me not only for my own edification but for that of my community. Especially as a woman in the ancient world, Elizabeth must have felt crushed not to hold the role of a mother, which was viewed as the pinnacle of femininity at that time. Her infertility was deeply personal. Yet, her struggle was also about more than just her. Elizabeth and Zechariah's steadfastness, serving the Lord blamelessly despite disappointment, resulted in God blessing their family personally and the larger community collectively. Not only did John minister to many, but he was, as the angel foretold, a joy and a delight to his parents. Zechariah and Elizabeth's personal trial was resolved in blessings for them and those who extended beyond them. This shows God's omniscience, his ability to work in various situations at once in ways we, in our human frailty, cannot fathom.

Each soul John baptized was blessed by the faithfulness of a woman who may have cried alone after another month of disappointment, which confirmed she was not with child. Each member of the crowd in the wilderness heard truth because of the faithfulness of a man, Zechariah, who performed his priestly duties despite not having a first-born son to inherit the priestly role, as was the Levitical custom. Elizabeth and Zechariah's longing for a child was a microcosm of the longing Israel had long felt waiting for the Messiah. Amazingly, God's answer to their personal prayer coincided with his introducing the world to Jesus.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's years of struggle and disappointment were not in vain. If we allow him, God uses our circumstances to shape us more into the likeness of himself. What sort of influence



may these parents have had on the man who defied social norms, living on locusts and honey, and boldly proclaiming the way of the Lord? What sort of righteous vehemence and courage may they have passed down to the man who dared to publicly criticize the king for his sin and face execution because of it?

What a patient God we serve. He sees our restlessness but loves us enough to teach us to endure and even embrace the wait, the unknown. The truth is, God would have been good even if he didn't bless Zechariah and Elizabeth with a child. He would be worthy of all praise even if he had not sent us Jesus. Yet in his infinite mercy, he did both. Today, we still wait. We have personal hurts for which we desire resolution, and we collectively long for the Messiah to again return, to establish his kingdom and administer justice. May we, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, remain steadfast and allow ourselves to become more like Jesus in the already/not yet.

*Charity Gibson is an associate professor of English at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *Canticle of Zechariah*, Sally Mae Joseph, Copyright 2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably  
on his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
70 as he spoke through the mouth  
of his holy prophets from of old  
71 that we would be saved from our  
enemies and from the hand  
of all who hate us.

72 Thus he has shown the mercy  
promised to our ancestors,  
& has remembered his holy covenant.  
73 The oath that he swore

## Day 14

### Philippians 3:7-11

**F**or many Christians around the world and throughout the last two millennia, the words in today's text are not hypothetical. Since the first advent of Christ, Christians have been losing everything in following Jesus. They have joined Paul in affirming that everything else pales in comparison to knowing Jesus and the power of his resurrection.

But others of us still have much to lose. For those with things we hold dear such as homes, health, careers, respect, financial stability, and so on, the thought of losing everything is rather unpleasant, if not terrifying.

This passage is a celebration of the surpassing worth of Jesus. Regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves today, all who profess Christ will face loss in this lifetime as we seek to follow him. However, the focus of these verses is not on loss, but rather on gain: the immeasurable riches of Christ.

If we are to live with peace and joy, if we are to live with open-handedness, if we are to join Paul in counting everything as rubbish compared to knowing Christ, then we must pray to catch a glimpse of the glory of our Lord Jesus.

This Advent season, take time meditate on the person of Jesus, coming to us with the humility of a child, in complete obedience to the Father. Consider his compassion and care for the people around him, people with hurts and needs.

Consider the gifts you've been given. In Christ, you are new creation: "the old has passed away, and the new has come" (2

Corinthians 5:17). In Christ, you are fully known, yet fully loved. You are forgiven. In Christ, you are granted peace and fellowship rather than condemnation.

Celebrate the victories of Jesus. Sin and darkness are defeated - death does not have the final word. Jesus is the Great King, and in the fullness of time his kingdom will be wholly established, and every knee will bow.

Pray to know Christ more, remembering that the Spirit of God dwells in you. You are sealed. The Spirit comforts, the Spirit guides, and the Spirit empowers you with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

As we grow in our conviction of the surpassing worth of Jesus, it becomes more natural to “count all things as loss” (3:7). We find our hearts no longer yearning for gains in this life: we can be grateful instead of clinging, and open-handed instead of fearful. In this Advent season, may we see and savor the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Dan Kline is an associate professor of mathematics at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Harrowing of Hell (detail)*, Kateryna Shadrina, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2021, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.





## December 15

### Philippians 3:12-16

**H**ow do we live in light of the cross and the work that Jesus did on our behalf? This question should motivate us to zealously pursue the things of God, in deep gratitude for what He has done for us. Are our efforts in this life purely motivated by the work of Jesus Christ and His ongoing work in us, or do our personal goals derail our pursuit of Him? As we prepare for and celebrate the coming of Christ during this Advent season, we do so understanding the hope of God's promise that was fulfilled through the death and resurrection of His Son.

Though we are saved by grace, the Christian life is not devoid of works that bring glory to God. We strive forward, toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, leaving behind and forgetting earthly things that distract us from the final goal. As when running a race, looking at what lies behind us only causes us to slow down, stumble, and deviate from the finish line set before us. Instead, our focus in this life must be a run of endurance towards Jesus Christ, looking only towards the glory of his presence. We must embrace this pursuit, even when it leads to suffering for His name's sake.

Pursuing Christ and perfection in Him will not be completed in this life. We struggle with the sins of our flesh and must constantly work to uproot its grip on us so that we may grow in maturity. This Advent season, it is my prayer that our Christian life is lived so that others can tell that Christ is our singular focus. Holding fast to the salvation that we have already attained, we must contemplate what distracts us from pursuing the things of God.

What draws us away from the truth of the gospel, from Christ? What causes us to run in vain and deviate from the path that Jesus Christ has laid before us? How do our work, worship, discipleship, and repentance demonstrate a changed life in our pursuit of Jesus Christ? In humility, we work through our sanctification every day so that we may grow into maturity. It was only through the birth of Jesus Christ that this was made possible, a gift from a loving God who wanted to redeem us from our sins and set our paths straight before Him.

*Ashley Exendine is an assistant professor of biology and conservation and wildlife management at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *Christ Pantocrator (detail)*, Lyuba Yatskiv, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

**December 16**  
**Matthew 21:28-32**

**G**od desires a repentant heart, and He hates the deceit and injury brought about by religious posturing—the act of pretending to be something we are not.

Growing up, I loved spending time with the many horses on our family ranch. Once, when I was 13, my father asked me to ride a horse named Goldie after my own horse was injured. Goldie is the boldest horse I have ever encountered. As a 13-year-old, I did not have the authority I needed to command her respect. When I rode her, she knew I was not in charge and often refused to submit to my commands. I struggled for a couple of days before my father intervened.

While I was in the saddle, my father took the reins and reminded Goldie of *his* authority.

Suddenly, I realized I had no authority over this powerful creature on my own. Rather, I carried my father's authority, who commissioned me to ride the horse in the first place. From that moment on, Goldie submitted to the authority I carried-- not of my own, but of my father.

Like Goldie, we often balk at submitting to authority until we are forced to recognize a power greater than our own. Thankfully, God always gives us the opportunity to return to Him with a repentant heart.

The Jewish priests and elders who challenged Jesus in this passage had perfected the culture's religious posture associated with faith. The community esteemed them as spiritual leaders with great

authority. But Jesus, in His perfect wisdom, saw the hearts of these people and knew they did not submit to the authority of God. These leaders, “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5) were like an untamed horse. They refused to repent and submit to the authority of the Father in Christ. In Mark 8:36, Jesus says, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his own soul?” In the same way, what good does it bring a person to posture as a follower of God without a repentant heart?

People often associate the Christian faith with a particular set of external qualities.

Satan leverages our human desire to integrate with a community by tempting us to posture our faith rather than submitting through repentance to Jesus. Without continual repentance and submission to Christ, we may continue to live in separation from God.

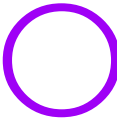
As we prepare for Advent, we anticipate Jesus’ future coming by repenting of our religious posturing and by choosing authentic relationship with Christ. This authentic relationship requires an honest appraisal of our state of heart. Are we missing out on the fullness of our relationship with God? Or, maybe, just convincing ourselves and others that we follow Jesus without submitting to His authority in our lives? Regardless, our God is the loving Father who desires for us to repent—that we may live in true relationship with Him in preparation for His return.

*Laura Hogan is a 2023 alumna and presidential fellow at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Virgin Who Shows the Way (detail)*, Lyuba Yatskiv, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



**December 17**  
**Luke 1:46b-55**

ne of the most beautiful paradoxes of the Bible comes underneath a term: *already but not yet*. It's a term that speaks of spiritual sustaining at present as we wait for the ultimate fulfillment to come. It is the foresight of the one who lays the foundation before the cathedral can be built: already, but not yet. The artist lays out her canvas and oils to bring to life the idea that has hounded her for many sleepless nights: already, but not yet. The sweet mother-to-be senses both the life inside her womb and the life to come beyond it: already but not yet.

Mary's response to Gabriel reveals obedience and assurance beyond her years, or maybe it shows what her future Son will call child-like faith. And as she begins her journey into the already but not yet, she visits someone else who has encountered the miraculous promises of Almighty God, her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth responds with encouragement, excitement, and awe; the beauty of testimony is met with appropriate celebration. Her joyous proclamation adds sun to the soil of Gabriel's message, water to the seed of Mary's faith and obedience, and a shoot of praise resounds from the young woman's heart.

Mary's Magnificat matches other proclamations in her lineage. They are the words of a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before her and seen the Lord's promises come to fruition. A great cloud that understands the already but not yet and magnifies the Lord through the tilling of the soul, rooting of deeper faith, growing in perseverance, and revealing the fruit of God's good graces in all things, no matter how difficult.

Oh yes, we've seen this before! It's the rightful response to seeing the impossible come true.

In Exodus, a shepherd stands with his sandals off while a burning bush tells him that God will conquer Egypt and bring the people back to this mountain (Exodus 3:7-12). After the plagues and the Passover, God rescues the people by parting the Red Sea. In Exodus 15, Moses, like Mary, *magnifies* the Lord. An impossible promise leads to an impossible deliverance because nothing is impossible with God.

In 1 Samuel 1:12-18, a desperate, barren mother has been "pouring out her soul" to the Lord. She longs to have her own child, and Eli, the priest, mistakes her silent, broken prayers for inebriation. The utter humble brokenness in her explanation encourages the old priest's heart, and he blesses her. She will be with child even in her advanced age. When this comes to pass, Hannah, like Moses, *magnifies* the Lord (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

In all three of these prayers of magnification, the one magnified is God. Each erupts in joyous praise; each speaks of the unmatched attributes of the one praised.

Mary's magnification of the Lord's goodness reminds us of the One to whom we still look today:

She rejoices in the only God who saves, who remains close to the humble in heart. He is mighty, holy, and merciful to all generations who revere, trust, and love him. He shows himself strong for those who stay near and opposes those who drift away in pride.

He is the sustainer and fulfiller; the helper; the merciful One, the keeper of covenants for all time.

He has promised an engaged virgin that she will carry the Son of God in her body, but it will not be her human husband-to-be who has a part in it, but the Holy Spirit will make it so. This sentence gives me pause as I think about the implications of what that means; what it means for the ugliness to come as people murmur and stare; as her fiancé must hear these words and come to his own conclusions; as she gets up daily to face a world that does not have the slightest bit of understanding about her already but not yet. But they will. And they'll talk about it forever (Luke 1:48).

As this season of Advent marches closer to the celebration of the impossible baby in the manger, what are we to make of these things in our modern-day leg of the journey, as we look to the promised return of our risen Lord? What shall we do with our own already-but-not-yets?

Our great promise seems impossible. One day our Savior will finish the work he has started by coming back again. I pray you, like Mary, respond in obedience and child-like faith this season. I pray that you will find people like Elizabeth who will love and encourage your humble service to our Father until your heart rejoices, remembers, and reveals the depths of your devotion through the magnification of our great and glorious Lord.

*Justin Sharp is the campus pastor at College of the Ozarks.*


Right (and previous border detail): *Magnificat (detail)*, Sally Mae Joseph, Copyright 2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



His mercy is for those who fear  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his  
he has scattered the proud  
in the thoughts of their heart  
He has brought down the  
powerful from their throne  
and lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty

## December 18

### Ephesians 6:10-17

hristmas for my family is such a fun a joyous time. Each member of our family has a level of excitement based on different factors. My youngest daughter is prepared and ready for the gifts. My wife is prepared and ready for the togetherness. My youngest son is prepared and ready to decorate the tree. My three oldest children are prepared and ready for a break from school. As for me, I often feel unprepared and not ready for the Christmas season!

It seems that the older we get, the more our preparation for Christmas comes with stress and sometimes anxiety, knowing there is so much to be done and that the world doesn't stop due to Christmas. I remember as a child driving through our little town in Colorado, and not one single business was open, it was like a ghost town. That is not how it is anymore. Where there used to be reverent silence, now there is noise. I sometimes foolishly focus on the noise of Christmas rather than the quiet.

In Ephesians 6:10, we are told to be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might by putting on the full armor of God. We are told this because we are to stand against the devil's schemes. One of the devil's schemes is to make us focus on the noise of Christmas: the busyness, the movement, the overwhelming feelings, the debt, the strained relationships, and the restlessness. All these things add up to distraction, and we can't focus on the real reasons for Christmas. Reasons like the gift of the baby Jesus, the sacrifice of our Father and our King, the obedience of a mother and father, and the beginning of an amazing

rescue plan for all of mankind. The noise skews our view of Christmas, and we are not prepared for the intended blessing.

To be prepared we must put on the armor of God. As we assemble this armor to be prepared for the blessing of the season, we start with the belt of truth. Simply put, we are believing that Jesus is the truth, and our lives must reflect the truth. How we live this out matters. Jesus did not live a duplicitous life, and neither should we. Our lives should always reflect the Savior.

This is followed by the breastplate of righteousness. It is such a great feeling of preparedness when I know that the ultimate rescue plan for all men and women started with the baby, Jesus, and ended with the man, Jesus, sacrificing His life for us and making us right with the Father. This was done by Jesus' work on the cross, not by anything we could do.

We then put on the shoes of the gospel of peace. This brings the idea of being prepared to a whole new standard. The Christmas season is a time where we should be prepared to share the hope that we have through the gospel. It seems that people are more open to the gospel message around the holidays, at least we often hear it said that Christmas is one of those times when the unchurched will attend a Christmas Eve service. If there is any truth to this phenomenon, we need to be prepared to share the gospel.

Our armor is then complete with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. These three items are what I have always thought of as the main tools for battle. As a



little boy during imaginative play, I would find something flat like a trash can lid to be my shield, something I could fit on my head, like a bucket for my helmet, and something long and pokey for the sword. A stick always came in clutch. Those three items were a must, and if I had them I was prepared to face whoever I was against. It could be Decepticons from the Transformers, Shredder from the Ninja Turtles, or the Cobra Commander from G.I. Joe (can you tell I was a child of the 80s?). When it comes to being prepared for Christmas, faith, salvation, and the word of God are three things we must have with us.

Equipping ourselves with the armor of God gets us ready for the Christmas season and allows us to get past all the noise. The armor protects us from the noise. When we are prepared, we can rest in the quiet stillness found in our Savior, who came as an infant child preparing us for rescue. This Christmas, allow the armor of God to prepare you.

*Ryan Knight is dean of students at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and border details): *The Conversion of the Apostle Paul*, Khrystyna Yatsyniak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2020, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.





Today's reading was taken from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians and speaks metaphorically about arming and armoring oneself for spiritual battle. In Krystyna Yatsyniak's painting on the subject of his conversion she depicts a sword lying near the apostle's cast down figure. In his letter to the church at Ephesus Paul tells us to take up the Sword of the Spirit, and Paul the Apostle was no stranger to violence. As a young Pharisee he eagerly persecuted early Christians in his fervor to uphold Mosaic Law, and as an apostle he endured regular violence while following his calling to bring the light of the Gospel to the gentiles. The sword included in the painting is a multi-layered symbol of his infliction and affliction of violence, and in art the sword is often held by the apostle as a symbol of his martyrdom which in Church Tradition is believed to have been by beheading by sword. Perhaps Paul's inability to grasp the sword in the painting reveals his inability to grasp the power of the Spirit before he had encountered the overwhelming grace and refining light of the risen Savior.

*Richard Cummings is a professor of art at College of the Ozarks.*

**December 19**

**Psalm 125**

**T**he word “remember” and its derivatives appears in the English Standard Version of the Bible nearly 250 times throughout the Old and New Testaments. Could it be that our Father knows us so well that he understands we need this constant reminder?

It is easy to allow life’s ups and downs to take us to a place of fear and doubt. When this happens, what are we as God’s people called to do? God calls us to remember his faithfulness through his son, Jesus, and to put our trust in him. This is not an automatic response for us as humans since we tend to struggle with anxiety, the desire to be in control, and assuming we know what is best for our lives and the lives of those we love. In fact, choosing to remember that we can trust our creator requires dedicated effort.

As we look forward to celebrating the birth of our Messiah, we press on in our remembrance of the hope and security that only trusting in him can bring. In Psalm 125, we see that the Lord surrounds his people. Verse 1 shares the promise that if we trust in the Lord we cannot be moved. The imagery of Mount Zion and the surrounding mountains reminds us of the strength and steadfastness we have when we choose to put our faith in the only one who offers us true hope and security. We are not only secure as we trust in him, but we also have the promise that he is protecting us from evil. He does not intend for us to live a life of chaos and panic, running scared at every turn. We are safe and secure in him.

I confess that as a young woman I lived in fear. I second-guessed myself multiple times a day, questioning what kind of destruction

I might bring on my life if I made a wrong decision in all sorts of scenarios. Mind you, these choices were not of moral consequence. What I failed to see is that I was allowing fear to limit me, leaving me unable to move forward and trust God to take care of the outcome. I was young in my faith, and I tear up as I remember how gentle and gracious Father God was with me. He was and is always faithful. As I come across new difficulties twenty-five years later, it has become easier for me to remember that I can trust this God who has carried me through the darkest of times. He has taught me that fear is not from him, and I should not allow it to be my motivation.

Praise God, we do not have to sit in our fear and doubt! Rather, we can be bold and be full of hope as we rest in the fact that we are his beloved children. May this Advent season be one of hope, courage, and freedom as we remember to wholly trust in our Savior.

*Lori Simmons is the community service coordinator at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Last Supper (detail)*, Ulyana Tomkevych, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.





**December 20**  
**Malachi 3:16 – 4:6**

Sometimes it may feel that we are not heard when we pray. Often, we feel unheard because we do not believe that we have received a response. A simple yes or no would be nice. Radio silence, conversely, can discourage us and make us feel unheard. We are, after all, used to talking with other people. When we talk to others, we expect a response, or acknowledgement, to know that we have been heard. We often expect the same from God. In this passage, we see that God has heard the pleading of His people. However, for the people of the day, they will not realize a response to those prayers until long after their lifetime. They are, however, heard and God will respond to them. We are told to come to God with our requests and prayers. We would not be instructed to bring our requests to the throne if these prayers were ultimately ignored. Our prayers are heard. In time, in God's time, we will hear a response.

This passage also assures us that, eventually, we will see justice. We have all heard the phrase "good guys finish last." When we see this in our own lives, it just doesn't seem fair. Certainly, in Malachi's time, some felt that there were no rewards or consequences for the actions of man. They saw great injustices that were allowed to happen, while righteous people suffered. The 'good guys' were having a tough time while the 'bad guys' were flourishing. They are assured, though, that justice will ultimately occur and that it will arrive in God's perfect timing.

The timeframe of the eternal God is different than that of mortal men. A child feels like the interim between Thanksgiving and Christmas is never ending, yet, for adults, this time will fly by. It

is not surprising that we grow impatient waiting for a response to our prayers, or waiting to see justice, according to our time frame. Generations prayed for the Messiah and never saw Christ during their life on earth. However, God heard those prayers and God kept his promise to deliver his people. We need to remember that we literally have an eternity to have our prayers heard. We also have an eternity to see justice. When we feel like life just is not fair, we should remember that our God is just and loving. We may not see answers to prayers, or justice in this world during our short lifetime, but rest assured that our God is a loving Father, and he is just. Whether it is in this world, or the next, we will see justice, we will see our prayers responded to, and we will see the loving grace of our Father in heaven.

*Nathan M. Roberts is an associate professor of conservation and wildlife management at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *Christ Pantocrator (detail)*, Hlafira Shcherbak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2020, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



## December 21

### Hebrews 1:1-4

**M**any people wonder why God does not speak directly to them. They would like to hear from the Lord, yet he appears to be silent. Some skeptics will even use this as proof of their beliefs: since God has not spoken, he must not exist. We have a built-in desire to hear from God.

However, we underestimate the difficulty of coming into God's presence. Our sinful selves cannot survive an encounter with God's holiness. Even those Old Testament figures closest to God could not survive the full revelation of God's being. God had to hide Moses in a rock cleft as the divine glory passed by. A seraph had to touch Isaiah with a hot coal to assure him he would live. An encounter with the living God, without any protection, would ruin us. Yet, God wants a relationship with us. We want to have a relationship with him. So how can we have a relationship with someone whose very presence would destroy us?

The miracle of the incarnation is we can now encounter God directly. Our passage tells us Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (1:3). When we encounter Jesus' words, we encounter God's words. When we see Jesus act, we see God act. God became a man. He lived as we live. Yet, he never gave up those attributes which made him God. He created the world. He sustains the world. The creator became part of the creation and shared his nature with us.

This should inspire us as we live. Are you a student? Remember, Jesus had to learn how to be a carpenter. Do you go to work every day to make a living? Jesus sold his products to support his family. Do you need to care for an aging parent? As Jesus hung

on the cross, as he made “purification for sins,” Jesus arranged for the care of his mother. Jesus revealed the glory of God as he did these very things. Thus, our education, vocation, and families are a place where we can glorify God. Jesus manifested the glory of God by undertaking these actions, and we can glorify God by faithfully undertaking the actions of our everyday lives.

As we prepare for Advent, we should remember our situation. Our sin has made it impossible for us to approach God. For that we should repent. Yet, God has approached us. The glory of God dwelt in the person of Jesus, and he dwelt in the world. In so doing, he gave meaning and value to what we do. Thus, he can speak to us in our everyday lives.

*Gary Hiebsch is a professor of communication arts at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Resurrection (detail)*, Natalya Rusetska, Egg tempera on gessoed wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



## December 22

### 2 Samuel 6:12-19

**H**ave you ever been to an invitation-only party? Or received tickets to a special VIP event? Or held tickets to a one night only, sold out, never happening again concert? What about receiving a gift that was a collectable item of which only 500 were ever made and you own one! For most, I would assume that when these rare moments happen, it makes you feel set apart or special. In fact, you might even thrive off these rare occurrences and seek them more. I must wonder if this is how the Levitical high priests or King David felt when they encountered God's presence in the ark of the covenant.

The ark of the covenant has always been a bit of a mystery to me. As a child, my Sunday school teachers taught me that the ark was a holy object, one that held the Ten Commandments which were divinely delivered to Moses by God. It also was an item to fear as the ark cannot be touched - lest you meet a deathly fate like Uzzah does in 2 Samuel 6:6-7, when God struck him down for his attempt to recover the ark from falling while in transit.

During the time of the ark of the covenant, we know the actual box itself was not holy, rather the presence of God coming to the box was what made the container unto itself a holy object. When the physical construction of the ark was finished, God commanded that the ark should not be touched, so it was carried with two rods holding up the ark through rings on each side. The ark itself was a wooden chest covered in gold. On top of the chest were two cherubim made of gold that provided a "mercy seat" as a place for the presence of God.

When King Solomon built the temple to house the ark, the interior of the temple was made of gold. The ark was an object of extremely restrictive access that only the high priest could access once a year (called the Day of Atonement). This is because the ark was placed inside the temple in the inner room called the "Holy of Holies," and was kept out of general access to the public. A veil separated the ark from the lesser "Holy Place," which still had limited access. Outside the temple was an altar built for sacrificial offerings to God, which would be burnt offerings of animals selected to honor God.

In 2 Samuel 6:12-19, we see the history of how the ark arrived in the City of David, eventually becoming the place where King Solomon built the temple to house the ark, in the city now called Jerusalem.

As I reflect on this passage, I am reminded of the fact that during the time of King David and his contemporaries, access to God's presence was very restrictive. Yet, in the presence of God, we see a wonderful example in David of worshiping with all one's strength and joyfully celebrating the Lord.

With the coming of Jesus, one can reflect on the overwhelming feeling that access to the Lord was granted to all. We do not need to be in a special place such as a temple, nor do we need to be a certain type of person to enter the presence of the Lord, for Jesus provides that divine connection through himself. We, as Christians, are no longer required to give burnt offerings or uphold sacrificial practices, as Jesus resides in us through the



Holy Spirit and is the ultimate, perfect sacrifice. No longer are we separated by a veil like in the temple built by Solomon, where only one day a year the high priest can enter the presence of the Lord. Access is no longer restricted.

As we near Christmas day, let us be grateful for the mercy of God. Let us rejoice in his compassion for us by granting us full access to himself through his son, Immanuel, who is God with us.

*Mollie Crawford is the director of sales and marketing at The Keeter Center at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *Messianic Predictions*, Thomas Ingmire, Copyright 2005, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



THEREFORE THE LORD  
HIMSELF WILL GIVE YOU  
A SON WHO WILL BEAR  
HIS NAME AND SHALL  
BEAR A SON AND SHALL  
NAME HIM IN MANUEL

**December 23**

**Psalm 89:1-4; 19-26**

**T**his passage in Psalm 89 is the epitome of both a covenant and royal psalm, articulated by Charles Spurgeon as “the utterance of a believer, in the presence of great national disaster, pleading with his God . . . expecting deliverance and help.” In the midst of Israel’s struggles, the psalmist expresses God’s faithfulness and steadfast nature in relation to David and his descendants: “You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations’” (89:3-4).

In this Advent season, may we reflect upon the significance of the hope the psalmist has foreshadowed with his allusion to this continuing line of David, through whom God’s promise to the prophet Nathan of the throne that would be “established forever” (89:16; see 2 Samuel 7) would find fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Hope for the future doesn’t always come easily, especially when our present circumstances are discouraging. Yet hope has remained a central tenet of the College of the Ozarks mission for over one hundred years. We serve students who are “found worthy, but who are without sufficient means . . .” In other words, the young men and women who come to us possess academic promise, work ethic, and appreciation of a Christian education, yet may lack the funding to pay for a private, four-year undergraduate college experience.

It is our goal to cultivate hope in our students, as we walk alongside them in pursuit of their Christian, academic, vocational,

patriotic, and cultural growth. Further, it is our desire that they come to know Christ personally and develop a rootedness in his Word and ways that will one day influence those around them, including their families, coworkers, neighbors, and the citizenry at large.

Yet hope is an active, not a passive, endeavor. Earnest hope for the Christian is expectation based on foundational biblical promises. David, though often oppressed, was instilled with the hope of God's love for him and plan to bring forth the Messiah from David's lineage. In this devotional passage, the psalmist notes, repeatedly, God's loving, anointed might and protection toward David:

"I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have raised up a young man from among the people." (89:19)

"I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him." (89:20)

"The enemy will not get the better of him; the wicked will not oppress him." (89:22)

"My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted." (89:24)

Our hope should reside on an even firmer foundation than David's, as we have experienced his future and can read of and believe in God's promises fulfilled in the life, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christmas is two days away. As we



prepare for this sacred and joyous celebration of Christ's birth, may we reflect upon the hope that God provided David and continues to afford us today. It is the only hope that never disappoints and brings the joy we desperately seek in this season. To this end, may we ask ourselves:

During Advent, are we focused on remembrance and gratitude for the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah through the first coming of Jesus Christ?

In this season, do we possess hope established in the promises of God found in the Bible, including strength and peace in trials, his steadfastness with us, and forgiveness of our sins?

Today, just as the psalmist wrote of David's active hope in God, may we pursue him with the same fervor: "You are my Father, my God, the rock my Savior" (89:26).

*Stacy McNeill is the assistant dean for academic support and a professor of communication arts at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *Psalms - Book I Heading (detail)*, Donald Jackson, Copyright 2004, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.





**December 24**

**Luke 1:26-38**

**D**o you ever wonder what the meaning or purpose of your life is? I think at one point in our lives we all question what we are doing here. Why was I created for a time like this? What am I doing with my life? What am I called to do?

For me, I am a daughter; sister; wife; mother; aunt, and a friend. Now, that is not what I do for a living, but that is what God called me to do within his design for my life. Our answers will all be different in some way because God's callings on our lives are specific to us, designed only by him, only for you. As I look in scripture, I am reminded of the calling God had on Mary's life. He called her to carry the Son of God, to be a mom.

Now if you ask me, that is a huge calling, and one I would look at and think that it was way better or more important than what I am doing. That is not how God sees it. He uses us just as we are, where we are, for his purpose. God gave a gift to the world through Mary, and he can use you too.

Your purpose and calling in life are not going to be like anyone else's. So, stop scrolling on social media, buying things to impress people, and stop comparing your life to someone else's. God can work through you if you are willing be a vessel for Him.

In the sanctuary of stillness, he will reveal profound wisdom and illuminate the path that leads to righteousness and fulfillment. He awaits our ears to listen and our hearts to obey. We need to cease from our own plans and agendas and fully embrace the plans he has for us. How easy it is to question what God might

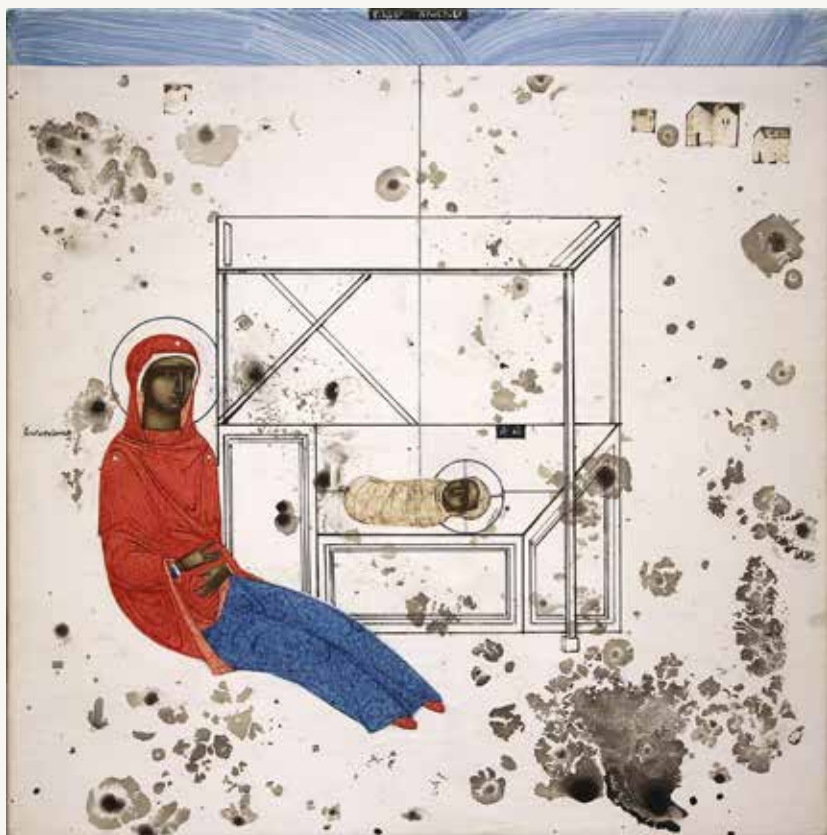
Right (and border detail): *Annunciation*, Khrystyna Yatsyniak, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2022, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

have for our lives but every day he sets us on a path to bring glory to him. From the very moment he called us every endeavor, every step we take has been ordained and meticulously designed by our Heavenly Father. What are you living for today that can bring purpose and glory to God? What has God called you to do?

*Amy Leaming is the supervisor of the stained-glass studio at College of the Ozarks.*







Above: *The Nativity*, Kateryna Kuziv, Egg tempera on gessoed wood, 2018, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

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GLORY TO GOD  
IN THE  
HIGHEST  
HEAVEN

AND ON EARTH  
PEACE AMONG  
THOSE WHOM  
HE FAVORS

To give light  
to those  
who sit in darkness  
and in  
the shadow  
of death

BY THE TENDER MERCY OF  
OUR GOD, THE DAWN FROM ON  
HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US

**December 25**

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

**W**e serve a mighty God who always fulfills His promises.

I woke up early this morning to put a delicate, wooden-carved baby Jesus into a manger within our nativity scene. Beside the modest wooden barn and small figurines stands a tall Christmas tree covered in vintage, mercury ornaments with shiny packages beneath it for my family. In the quiet, I cheerfully envisioned my kids waking up and unwrapping gifts that will excite them. However, none of that excitement compares to the joy my husband and I felt when each of them was born. After nine months of anticipation and a lifetime of wondering what it might feel like to become a parent, the moment I laid my eyes on my first baby, everything changed. She was vulnerable, dependent, and beautiful. To my husband and I, she was capable of achieving anything in her lifetime, from becoming an evangelist to curing cancer, because she was fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image. She was and is a precious gift from God.

Isaiah's prophesy of a Messiah comforts me, as God gave us the most precious gift. These words, paired with our traditions on Christmas morning, remind me of the joy that Mary and Joseph felt when Jesus was born - not only at their miraculously conceived child, but knowing that he was the Son of the Most High. I wonder what it was like for them to imagine all the ways that Jesus would change the world. They were gazing at a newborn baby, who would become the Deliverer, Lord, Counselor, and Prince of Peace. Much like reaping a harvest or winning a battle,

Jesus' birth has brought joy for over 2,000 years.

Soon my kids will race into the living room to look beneath the tree for a gift with their names on it. These gifts are insignificant compared to the gift that God gave us through the birth of Jesus. Wooden baby Jesus will sit quietly in the nativity scene, serving as a reminder that Christ Jesus sits on his throne watching over my family. As my children grow, I pray they understand that the joy and victory of Jesus is ours when we accept him as our personal savior. May I never forget that the prophecy was fulfilled through Christ Jesus and to accept the peace that only he can bring.

Lord, help me to be vulnerable and dependent on you. Help me to be a beautiful bearer of your image, so I may share the joy that you brought into this world, through Jesus. Thank you for fulfilling all your promises. This Christmas, help me to find my true joy in the miraculous birth of the Christ.

*Kalah Kemp is an associate professor of communication arts at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *Birth of Christ (detail)*, Donald Jackson, Copyright 2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Next: *The Birth of Christ (detail)*, Ulyana Tomkevych, Egg tempera on gessoed wood, 2016, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.









## December 26

### Hebrews 8

**M**erry Christmas! In the traditional Christian liturgical calendar, Christmas lasts much longer than a single day, December 25. Of course, the famous song tells us that there are twelve days of Christmas. For some, the Christmas season lasts forty days until February 2. Surely, the momentous event of Christ's birth deserves more than a single day's commemoration!

Along with the continuing celebration of our Savior's birth, the traditional liturgical calendar also designated December 26 as a day to commemorate St. Stephen, one of the first seven deacons and the first Christian martyr (Acts 6 and 7).

Hebrews 8:1-2 proclaims that Jesus is the "high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up," and the rest of the chapter distinguishes among the Old and New Covenants. The author is clear the New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant and rendered it obsolete. Nonetheless, what is obsolete is not necessarily useless. For instance, I use an engineless reel mower on my front lawn. Much of the world would declare such a mower obsolete given the preponderance of gasoline and electric-powered mowers, but it still cuts my grass (and it has the benefit of burning a lot more of my calories than a mower with an engine).

Likewise, the Old Covenant, though now rendered obsolete, is still beneficial for us to consider today. Those in the Old Covenant worshiped "in a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary"



(8:5). Copies and shadows, though falling short of reality, provide us insights regarding the things that are copied. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of “the shadow of things to come” of the Old Covenant anticipating the coming of Christ. Indeed, many of the Old Testament passages read during Advent are prophetic of Christ’s coming and still provide insights about who he is.

Outside the Bible, copies and shadows also benefit Christians. Most forms of creative arts—including the painting, sculpture, music, drama, and literature studied and produced at College of Ozarks—are copies of reality. These arts provide us insights and new perspectives about ourselves and how we fit into God’s creation. In many cases, they provide models for us to imitate. Artists who are Christians have the advantage of being able to copy or imitate the fullness of truth.

St. Stephen, the first martyr, was just such an artist. In imitation of Christ, Stephen copied our Savior in asking God’s forgiveness for his executioners (Acts 7:59). Stephen had certain knowledge of our “high priest” and offered himself as a sacrifice at the heavenly sanctuary. In the midst of our celebration of Christ’s birth, we should not forget the cost of being a Christian, which includes being a witness, sometimes a martyr. Like artists and like Stephen, we should craft our lives to be imitations of Christ’s life.

*Ethan Smilie is a professor of English at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Birth of Christ (detail)*, Ulyana Tomkevych, Egg tempera on gessoed wood, 2016, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



**December 27**

**Mark 11:1-11**

**H**ave you ever been in circumstances so overwhelming there was no way out, or at least no way to save yourself? When I was a young boy, we lived in Arizona for a brief period, so as you might imagine, our daily routine in the summer, particularly in July, involved trips to the local pool. As I was just learning to swim, I would stay in the shallow part of the pool where my feet could touch with my head above water. One day, while our babysitter was lounging poolside reading a book, I wandered just a bit too far, suddenly finding myself submerged, unable to touch the bottom of the pool, and still unable to swim. I don't recall if I was able to get my head above water to cry for help or if my slightly older sister, Denise, just noticed, but next thing I knew, I was being dragged by her to a place where I could touch. I was unable to save myself, but she saw me, came to me in my distress, and saved me physically. You might say, I experienced "Christmas in July," and not the cheesy summer sale advertised by a big-box retailer!

Similarly, at the time of Jesus' triumphal entry described in Mark's gospel, the nation of Israel was drowning in helplessness, not from water, but from Roman oppression. In a greater and more significant sense, however, they were hopelessly oppressed by sin. Sadly, most were only aware of the physical condition of Roman Rule. They were expecting the Messiah would come to remove and replace their physical oppressors. What a surprise it must have been that Jesus came into Jerusalem, not on a white horse like a Roman ruler, but rather, "humble, and mounted on a donkey," even though it had been prophesied to



be so (Zechariah 9:9). His first coming was not as a conquering monarch, but rather as a suffering savior. Nevertheless, the people rightly proclaimed, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father, David!" (Mark 11:9b-10). "Hosanna" is likely a transliteration of Hebrew which means "please save us!" It was happening. God had put on human flesh to save His people.

Christmas is a season of reflecting upon the anticipation of the come and coming Savior. Those in this passage realized the Kingdom of the Lord was near (although not in the form they anticipated), and were crying out for help, knowing they needed to be saved. Like those described in this passage, we need to realize that without Christ, we are "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:11-12). Christmas is good time for us to consider our own condition. We are over our heads, drowning in sin, unable to save ourselves. We should cry out, "Hosanna, please save us!" If you have already done so, he has heard you and he has promised that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). Then we can shout, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:15).

As we reflect upon the coming of the Savior and look forward to his coming again, may we examine his advent in our lives. Are you still waiting in anticipation for the Savior to rescue you from sin? If so, ask him to save you, and he will. Have you already cried out, "Hosanna?" Then we can rejoice the Savior has



come to the world and to us individually, so we can celebrate Christmas in July, December, and every month of the year!

*Brad Dolloff is dean of School of the Ozarks, the laboratory school at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *Son of Man*, Donald Jackson, Copyright 2011, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



**December 28**  
**Matthew 2:13-18**

**T**he placement of the memorial of the Holy Innocents (children killed by Herod) immediately in the wake of Christmas day appears puzzling. After all, Christmas represents superlative joy, as a commemoration of the wondrous miracle that the same Being of Infinite Majesty who created the heavens and the earth came to live with us in a human body. That the design of the liturgical calendar follows such an occasion with the first unwilling martyrs, Holy Innocents too young to choose to die for Jesus, may not seem to fit the celebratory mood we associate with Christmas. But this arrangement contains surprising wisdom. King Herod's command to slaughter young children reacts to Christ's birth as one of the first manifestations of John 1:5: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." By remembering the Holy Innocents and their martyrdom, we are reminded of three things.

First, Joseph's flight with Jesus at the command of the angel to Egypt illustrates the power of God's providence to turn enemies of God into friends of God. No Jew could read Matthew's account here without remembering the narrative of Exodus, and how Pharaoh had, like Herod, commanded the slaughter of innocents in an attempt to stop the growing population of the Israelites. Herod, as a Jew, should have had allegiance to his friendship with God, but in his lust for power he had instead become an enemy to his own people. Christ becomes as a result a new and greater Moses, whose safety is ensured by fleeing into a land of Gentiles where once his ancestors had been enslaved and endangered. Among other things, this event shows that God's ultimate plan is not for the dividing line between people to be what tribe they belong to, whether Jew or Gentile, but whether they

are enemies or friends of God. In John 15:15, Christ called his disciples friends. God used the Incarnation to open up the promise of salvation from the Mosaic Covenant to the entire world, thus fulfilling the true purpose of the Abrahamic Covenant. Christ, who divides between the sheep and the goats, reveals in his time the true enemies of God to be brought low and the true friends of God to be exalted. If Egypt, once the land of oppression of the Israelites, could become the safe haven of our Lord and Savior, then we should never look at unbelievers as an unredeemable Egypt, but as potential friends of God through Christ who could harbor the Lord they once rejected.

Second, we see starkly the difference in how God values human life versus how the sinful world does. Herod saw the life of this child as little more than a political threat to his power, an inconvenience at best to be removed so that he could do what was wise in his own eyes. Relevantly, in the daily lectionary for this evening in the *1928 Book of Common Prayer*, the reading includes Mark 10:13-6, in which Jesus tells his disciples to let the children come to him, "for of such is the kingdom of God." God loved babies so much that he became one. What an indescribably beautiful edification of human dignity - that we are made in the image of God to such an extent that a human body would be a suitable dwelling for the Incarnate God within his own creation! The heartless destruction of infants and young children clearly has no place in our hearts, or in the social policies we promote. Children are a litmus test of our willingness to open our arms to the vulnerable.

Finally, the prophecy concerning the massacre of the Holy Innocents shows that Christ's Incarnation fulfilled Jeremiah's

ancient prophecy concerning the ancient struggle between godly light and ungodly darkness. At Christmas, we generally focus on how the birth of Christ brings light to good things. Food, family, friendship, and festivities are all wonderful, and they take on the glow of the atmosphere of remembering one of the most remarkable supernatural events in human history. But Christ did not come to bring light to light. He came to bring light to darkness, to a darkness deeply embedded in us. For in our own ways, we are Herods who choose darkness over light, who maybe do not slaughter innocents but may at times put that which gives us satisfaction over that which pleases God. The power of Christmas is not measured by its ability to decorate already good and beautiful things, but in the power of Christ to bring light to the dark, bloody grief which strikes us and which sometimes we may even cause. The sacrifice of Christ, powerful only because of the truth of the Incarnation, can take our souls stained with blood and shadow, clothe us in pure light, and proclaim us blameless before the throne of God. And whatever unimaginable griefs cause our eyes to swell with weeping, the King of Christmas sanctifies our tears, that they may shine with the holy hope of Christ's return. Amen.

*Anthony Cirilla is an associate professor of English at College of the Ozarks.*

Right (and previous border detail): *Attack (detail)*, Natalya Rusetska, Egg tempera on gessoed wood from an ammunition crate, 2022, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.





## December 29

### Psalm 148

**T**he Christmas season is a time of celebration, and it does not get much more celebratory than Psalm 148. Praise flows out of nearly every verse. Not only people, but all created things praise God. Everything from mountains to sea creatures, shining stars to trees resound with worship of their Creator. All of creation unites in God's praise by fulfilling the purpose for which they were created.

The image is one of a creation unable to be contained as it overflows with praise. This is how it is with the things of God. It reminds us of the cup that overflows with goodness and mercy in Psalm 23. It reminds us of John's statement at the end of his gospel that if everything Jesus did was written, the world itself could not hold all the books. The things of God cannot be contained – unless he chooses to contain them.

We get a glimpse of this effervescence in the story of Christmas. Those shepherds, quietly minding their own business, get jolted into the midst of Psalm 148. All of a sudden, angels appear from nowhere and glory bursts forth from heaven. The normal order of things can't contain it.

In the midst of this outpouring, though, the angels direct the shepherds to the very opposite of uncontainable praise and majesty. They tell the shepherds to go find a little baby boy. Far from being uncontainable, Luke tells us that the boy's mother had fully contained his moving arms and kicking legs in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger. Uncontainable God himself, placed into a wooden box.



He comes this way as an act of love. As flesh and blood creatures, we struggle to wrap our minds around the uncontainable majesty of God. All of creation cannot even hold it. But God delights to be known and grasped, so He takes on flesh as an act of love.

The birth of Jesus is not the last time that God confines himself for us. The life of Jesus culminates as he is once again confined by wood. With the same humility with which Jesus' mother wrapped God in swaddling cloths and laid him in a wooden box, God allows himself to be nailed to a wooden cross. It's all for you.

Almighty God, by means of the miracle of the Incarnation, is confined to a tree, so that he can pay for your sin and redeem you. As you encounter the hardships of life, your God sets you free from the bondage of brokenness and corruption by taking the form of his own creation.

Then, Jesus is placed in a box again, this one the stone box of the tomb. Yet in His victory over corruption, brokenness, and death, Jesus breaks out of this box. The limits of creation cannot contain him once again.

Verse 14 of Psalm 148 notes that the reason for creation's uncontainable praise of God is the horn that God has raised up for his people. Jesus is this horn. He is God-with-us: Immanuel.

Christmas is an invitation to join the Psalm 148 party. Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil resounds throughout all creation, and these verses invite you to take your place next to the mountains and the sea creatures, the cedars and the stormy wind

Right: *Let Us Blossom in Our Own Way (detail)*, Oksana Andrushchenko, Acrylic on canvas, 2023, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



as the universe praises God. Praise the Lord with prayer and voice, praise him by hearing his Word. Praise him by loving and serving others. Do what the shepherds did and praise the Lord by pursuing God in the place that he has confined himself for you – in Christ Jesus.

The good news of Christmas is that the God whom all creation exalts is your God. Praise the Lord!

*Joe Western is an associate professor of history at College of the Ozarks.*





Above (and details): *The Tree of Life*, Kateryna Shadrina, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2022, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.

## December 30

### 2 Peter 3:8-13

*In the twinkling of an eye, we can go away;  
Like a flash in a pan, we come and go.  
Like the essence of a flower blooming in the morning hour,  
we'll touch more lives than we will ever know.  
And like the day Christ returns for his children to take  
them to a land where milk and honey flow,  
The days that we have left, we can never guess. But  
there's one thing we can always know:*

*It's not far from here to heaven; it's a short journey from  
here to the promised land.  
He has gone to prepare a place; all we need to do is be  
saved by grace  
And we'll be one step closer to heaven;  
One step closer to a land where we'll never die.  
Are you one step closer to Heaven?*

**T**he days are long, but the years are short. How often do we say this while we watch our children grow or see our students pass through their college experience? And indeed, we wondered as youngsters, will I ever grow up? And our students ponder, will I ever graduate?

We are reminded in 2 Peter that our Lord's days are fashioned like ours: one is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. As higher education professionals, we know an approximate timeline of natural growth and development for students, and we fashion our educational experiences accordingly. We have an idea about when students will reach the light at the end of their college tunnel, and we guide them there expectantly,

nurturing them along the way. Our Lord and Savior does the same for us as we await his day.

But when is the day of the Lord, and how will we wait for it? Everyone awaited the birth of the Christ-child with great excitement and enthusiasm, promised from ancient times to spring forth from the root of Jesse. In the same manner, we ought to be expectant of the day of the Lord, promised in God's Word, a day of which only he knows and which, he says, will come quickly.

We encourage our students not just to *spend* their time in college but to *invest* it. As we await Christ's coming, how are we investing? Are we growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18)? Are we taking advantage of every opportunity to serve and be served, to love and be loved?

College of the Ozarks uses imagery for our spiritual journey in what it calls the "THRIVE" way of life. The four stages of this journey (which occur over and over again in our lives) are till, root, grow, and fruit. These are action words that inspire us as we wait expectantly on the new heavens and new earth. We apply these to the student experience as images representing growth and development. We can also apply these to our lives as we grow in Jesus and excitedly and expectantly await his return. And each day, we find ourselves one step closer to heaven, and, hopefully, more fully conformed to the image of Christ. What a blessed gift.

*Marci Linson is vice president for patriotic activities and dean of admissions at College of the Ozarks.*

Right: *The Transfiguration (detail)*, Lyuba Yatskiv, Acrylic on gessoed wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.



## December 31

### Galatians 4:4-7

**W**hat is the key ingredient to achieving a goal? Hard work! Hard work is often the vehicle that allows us to accomplish just about everything worth pursuing in life. My first memory of this reality comes from a basketball camp when I was twelve years old. The coach that led the camp encouraged us to work hard each day if we wanted to improve. I was motivated by his charge. I went above and beyond all week in hopes that I would get better.

At the end of the week, the coach handed out workbooks to encourage players to record their progress as they worked hard on their fundamentals throughout the following year. I worked to check off each box in the workout book—dribble drills, shooting drills, and defensive drills were all completed. The following year, I took the book back to the coach and showed him my progress. “Coach! I finished my drills! I put in the work and got better!” That would not be the last time I learned the value of hard work.

As a student at College of the Ozarks, I worked in exchange for my college education and graduated debt free. *Hard Work U* was a lifestyle. As a student, challenges in the classroom, at my campus workstations, and on the basketball court continued to teach me to understand and appreciate the value of hard work. It continues to inform *almost* everything I do.

When it comes to our salvation, it isn't hard work that grants us our position as a child of God. Scripture clearly defines how hard work interacts with the Gospel—it doesn't. It's not about a checklist. It's not about who works the hardest. It's not about us earning our right standing with God.

In Galatians, Paul exhorts groups of believers to stay the course. He was often frustrated at how quickly people would turn to a different gospel—one that required works for salvation. We see this in Galatians 3 where he adamantly points believers back to faith alone.

Galatians is a perfect reminder for those of us who love to work hard. Paul describes our heirship and highlights that being a son or daughter of God requires zero work from us. Jesus has done the work on the cross. You simply must confess and believe that He loved you enough to send His Son to live a sinless life, to die on the cross to pay the debt for all sin, and to be raised to life. You do not have to do any work to receive the free gift. So, as we go about our lives, let us be constantly reminded to have hope in our heirship, which is possible not by works, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone.

*Weston Wiebe is vice president for vocational programs and chief operating officer at College of the Ozarks.*

Next (and border detail): *Holy Trinity*, Ivanka Demchuk, Mixed media on wood, 2015, Courtesy of the Sacred Art Pilgrim Collection and the artist.









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