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AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



What do you fear?

INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT



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Art, Poetry, &
Reflections
for Advent





What do you fear?
INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT

A Step Toward Home

I will not tell you to buck up,
to tough it out, to ignore the fear
rattling around in your chest.
I will not tell you that *all shall be well*
or that morning will come quickly.
I will not ask you to march into danger
without first repeating your name in my prayers.
But if fear stops you in your tracks,
if fear makes it hard to breathe,
hard to move,
hard to think,
then I will remind you
that even one step with shaking knees
is a step toward home.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



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Epiphany | What do you fear?
FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Read **Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18**

Reflection | Nic Faison

For years, there has been a nasty practice of shaming indigenous practices, such as the usage of sage, or the spiritual use of herbs, metals, and the stars, while high church settings actively use incense in worship. For years, I have been reminding people that Jesus was gifted gold, frankincense, and myrrh by people who followed the stars to find him. That is the heart of my piece, *King Tingz*. I wanted to emphasize the sky and the importance of the stars, a reminder that this was essential to their witness.

Of the magi, the one bowing is marked with the flower of frankincense on their robe. On their left shoulder is a map of modern Persia, reminding us of their journey back home having to take a new route. They are crowned with cornrows and covered with more greenery because of their position to the ground. While we celebrate the stars, I wanted there to be some grounding to the earth. As Jesus is both divine and human, he holds space in both worlds.

The one to the right has soft myrrh flowers on her elbow and collar. Her outer arm is holding an infant, not Jesus, while her sleeve holds the Palestinian flag with the Arabic word *Nakba*,¹⁶ reminding us of the genocide of 1947. She is weeping for the children that Herod commits to murdering because of their defiance. Her golden crown is surrounded by a blue bandana, a quiet nod to Chola culture found on the West Coast, as Latino Christians have always emphasized the importance of *los reyes*.¹⁷

The one to the left is plated in gold. He looks up to the sky, more concerned about navigation, as he is the guiding force for the three of them. I gave this king a durag after some research on Persian magi showed me variations of headwear or turbans that emulated that of a durag.

Above all, if there is something I have learned from living in a Hispanic community and attending a Spanish-speaking church, it is that BIPOC¹⁸ communities do not play about *los reyes*. I wanted aspects of my culture and other American subcultures to be able to see bits and pieces of themselves in this art. But to also see our connection to the stars and the earth alike.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹⁶ Meaning “the catastrophe,” this refers to the events of the 1948 Palestine war in which Palestinian Arabs were ethnically cleansed and displaced from their homes. These events continue to shape the ongoing Israeli-Palestine conflict.

¹⁷ Meaning “the kings.”

¹⁸ This is an acronym for “Black, Indigenous, People of Color.”



King Tingz | Nic Faison
Acrylic, paper, markers, synthetic hair on canvas

Luke's Gospel begins the story of Jesus with this opening line: "In the time of Herod. . ." This detail may seem minor to modern readers; however, it reveals layers of information about the fearful world Jesus entered, one filled with rampant oppression, economic disparity, uncertainty, and instability. A world not so unlike our own. And yet, throughout the stories of Christ's birth, we hear the whispers of angels delivering a surprising message: "Do not fear." When Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi are each called into God's redemptive story, they do not deny their fears—they move through them. They ask questions, hold fast to courage, trust in good news, and say, "Here I am, Lord." When we find ourselves in fearful times, can we acknowledge our fears while also insisting on hope?

This Advent devotional takes seriously the angels' message and trusts that Christ's birth truly is good news of great joy for all people. The weekly art and reflections look closely at the fear and terror looming in the background during the time of King Herod and invite us to consider the fears we hold now. Fear can divide and paralyze us and even be used as a tool for oppression. But what if we formed a different relationship with fear? Can we acknowledge fear without letting it rule us? Might we catalyze our fears into love and action? What if naming our fears helps us see more clearly how God is breaking in and where God is at work?

Each week of this devotional offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns to give you hope in a fearful world. As you journey through this season, may your hope become gritty and resilient. May you remember: hope that trembles is still hope. This season, let us insist on hope and trust that good news is greater than fear.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

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Anna Strickland (*she/her*) looks for the Divine in the everyday like treasure in clay jars and first encountered God in the integration of her spiritual self and artistic self. She is a former teacher and college minister, a proud Texas Longhorn and graduate of Iliff School of Theology, a Baptist to the core ministering in ecumenical spaces, and a lover of chaos anchored by the belief that the Spirit is most active in the spaces between us.

This is a different kind of kingdom—
a subversion of imperial logic.

The magi recognize the infant Jesus
as “King of the Jews,”
a title that terrifies Herod.

Their homage is not merely devotional—
it is political.

By kneeling before Jesus,
they make a bold and embodied
declaration: their loyalty lies not with
empire,
but with the vulnerable child who
reveals another way of power.

Fear permeates this story.
Herod is afraid.
Jerusalem trembles.

Yet the magi do not turn back.
They travel through uncertainty,
seeking truth.

After encountering Christ,
they return home “by another way”—
a phrase signifying not just a new route,
but a transformed life.

This is the power of epiphany:
not merely a moment of recognition,
but the beginning of a new path.

The magi become witnesses to God's
new order—
not by heritage or status,
but through their bold seeking.

While the religious elites remain static,
the magi cross boundaries,
bow in humility,
and respond to revelation.

They do what Herod and his allies
refuse to do:
seek, kneel, and listen.

Epiphanies are not always warm or
personal.
Sometimes they are disruptive, even
dangerous.
Sometimes they lead to confrontation
with empire.
Sometimes they ask us to cross borders.
Sometimes they send us home by
another way.

And always, they ask something of us:

Will we move the way fear
makes us move?¹⁵
Or will we move the way love
calls us to?

Their journey becomes an invitation
to us as well.

Who are the magi among us today—
those willing to cross borders for
truth and love?

Who are the Marys,
holding the Christ child in fragile arms,
waiting for a knock at the door?

Who are the Herods,
terrified their illegitimate power
might be exposed by the light?

In the face of fear, let us travel together.
Let us defy empire not with swords,
but with solidarity.

Let us kneel in awe,
not before the powerful,
but before the powerless Christ,
whose birth marks the beginning of
God's peace campaign.

Let us believe, with trembling hope,
that fear does not have the last word.

Because fear doesn't stop us.
Love leads us forward.

13 Old Persian is one of the Old Iranian languages, known to its native speakers as “ariya.” It primarily appears in tablets and seals from the Achaemenid era (600 BCE–300 BCE).

14 To read an alternate version of this commentary, in which Dr. Lee imagines the magi as women, go here: sanctifiedart.org/blog/the-magi-a-feminist-lens-a-bonus-commentary-by-boyung-lee

15 This line references the poem, “Keep Walking,” by Rumi.

Epiphany | What do you fear? FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Read Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



We arrive at the end of the Advent and Christmas journey, and yet the world still brims with violence, uncertainty, and fear.

The birth of Christ has not silenced the Herods of the world. Empire continues to rage. The innocent still suffer.

The question, then, is not whether fear exists—but what we do with it. Do we freeze? Flee?

Or move forward, as the magi did, refusing to let fear be the end of the story?

Matthew's account of the magi is often domesticated in popular retellings: exotic kings bearing gifts, bowing before a glowing infant.

But Matthew 2 is no fairytale. It is a political and theological narrative.

From the first verse, we are reminded: this story takes place "In the time of King Herod" (Matthew 2:1a), a puppet ruler of the Roman Empire known for violent paranoia.

Herod represents the worst of power—one who responds to threat not with humility, but tyranny.

The massacre of the innocents in verses 16-18, echoing Pharaoh's infanticide in Exodus 1, shows how fear—untransformed—can mutate into mass violence.

Into this volatile landscape enter the magi.

They are foreign, Gentile, astrologers—marginal figures in Jewish imagination, yet the first to recognize Christ's birth.

Matthew calls them *magoi apo anatonōn*—magi from the East—without specifying number, gender, or religion.

Christian tradition has masculinized and royalized them—"three kings"—but the term *magoi* comes from Old Persian,¹³ and in Zoroastrian tradition, both men and women could hold this title.¹⁴

Their journey disrupts not only imperial geography but also gender, racial, and theological boundaries.

Their epiphany is one of radical inclusion.

In seeking and honoring the Christ child, they embody the very logic of Matthew's Gospel—a divine movement outside expected places and people, away from centers of power.

Matthew's Gospel consistently places God's activity on the margins.

Jesus is born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. He is hailed by Gentile astrologers, not the religious elite. He is protected not by armies, but by dreams and a refugee father who listens to angels.

About our guest contributors



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What do you fear?
FEAR DOESN'T STOP US



Scan to hear
the tune!

We've Seen God's Face W ŻŁOBIE LEŻY ("Infant Holy, Infant Lowly")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

Traditional Polish melody



Like the ma - gi from the east we tra - vel in - to
If we find our path has led us to King Her - od's
We will trust that star to guide us to the place where
When new threats de - rail our jour - ney from the path we



the un - known Step by step we make the jour - ney, called by
den of fear Still we'll keep our fo - cus fixed on chas - ing
we were called Find - ing God em - bod - ied in the humb - lest
planned to take We won't let fear par - a - lyze us, no we



God to seek the throne O - ver moun - tains, through the des - erts
down that star so clear Though the ty - rants rage and threat - en
dwell - ing place of all As King Her - od sends his sol - diers
won't stay locked in place Stay - ing nim - ble, we'll move for - ward



Seek - ing Christ we fol - low e - ver 'Til at last
Noth - ing weak - ens our pro - fess - ion It is God's
Time stands still while we be - hold him Here's where we
Keep - ing safe by cross - ing bor - ders Move a - round



we reach the place Where we hope to see God's face
voice we have heard Fear will not have the last word
were called to be God's in - car - nate love to see
the fear with grace For we know we've seen God's face



Epiphany | What do you fear?
FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Choices to Make

There was a funeral in Charleston,¹²
a funeral for nine people killed by one gun.
There was a funeral in Charleston because the world is a scary place.
A violent place, a place full of Herods with pistols and broken agendas.
People could have stayed home. They could have locked their doors,
closed the curtains, buried themselves the way fear invites us to do.
We would have understood.

But instead, people came to the funeral.
They unearthed their hearts.
They carried the tenderest parts of themselves out into the world
where the sun could reach them, along with their fear.
They crowded the pews with black hats and mourning cries.
They sang "Amazing Grace" when the worst had happened.

In a world full of fear, we have choices to make—
bury ourselves and close the curtains,
or fill the church and choose to sing.

I'm not saying it'll be easy,
but if you want to carry the tenderest part of yourself out into the world,
I'll begin to sing.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

¹² This poem was inspired by President Barack Obama's decision to sing "Amazing Grace" following the mass shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17th, 2015.

INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT



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Prompts for reflection



IN THE TIME OF HEROD, WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

As you enter the Advent season, what deep longings do you hold? Offer these yearnings and desires to God and trust that God hears and holds each one.



WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE, GOD IS AT WORK

Name what makes you feel hopeless. Offer your emptied hope to God. Then name where you perceive the unfolding of God's dreams. What do you hear? What do you see?



EVEN IN OUR FEAR, WE ARE CALLED FORWARD

Reflect on a time when you said "yes" to an invitation that scared you. How did you move through your fears? What did you learn or gain through that process?



WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND

When have you been a companion to someone through a fearful and challenging time? When has someone offered you the gift of accompaniment?

Christmastide | What do you fear? LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Read **Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23**

Reflection | **T. Denise Anderson**

I used to think my mother was cheap. When we'd go on road trips, she'd spend the night before preparing food for the trip. I thought it was because she didn't want to spend money on fast food. She didn't. But her reasons had nothing to do with a drive-thru.

My mother was a Black child in the U.S. in the 1950s and 60s. When they went on road trips, they had to leave in the dead of night with everything they'd need for the trip. For Black folks, there was no casual stopping along the way. If you stopped at the "wrong" place, you might not make it home. Her elders taught her what they had to learn themselves, often the hard way. My mom grew up in the Steel Belt, but the family had moved there after leaving the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration for greener (and ostensibly safer) pastures. Her preparations were vestiges of a circumspect upbringing designed to keep her safe.

I was well into adulthood when I realized my family had been refugees in their own country.

The story of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt takes new significance as I consider not only the experiences of dear ones around the world, but also my own ancestors. My piece focuses on a parent's desperate grip of their child's hand as they escape a despot's fiery wrath, possibly in the dead of night. The colors subtly recall the Pan-African, Palestinian, and Sudanese flags. I remember those left behind, and the lower part of the composition depicts the anguish of mothers whose children were not spared. Rachel still weeps (Matthew 2:18).

Our fears aren't unfounded. Salvation may have arrived, but the world still isn't safe. How will we remember Rachel's children as we resist and rebuild?

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Stay With Me | T. Denise Anderson
Acrylic on canvas board

Throughout the season, return to these prompts to reflect on the weekly themes in this series. Use these questions to guide your journaling or discussions with others.



GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee writes: "In a world where fear is curated and fed to us, proclaiming good news is a countercultural act." What joyful, good news do you want to lift up today?



LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Reflect on a time when fear protected you from danger. As you enter a new year, commit to one action you can take to make the world more safe and just for everyone.



FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

List all of the fears that are bubbling up for you right now. Are there any that are holding you back or keeping you from living fully? Which fears are you acknowledging and moving through? Which fears might be at the threshold of transformation?



The First Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?

IN THE TIME OF HEROD,
WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

In the Time of Herod

I didn't live during Herod's time—that brutal, murderous king,
God save his soul.

But even hundreds of years later, I know the prayers of his people.

I know the prayers of the mothers and the children under
his rule.

I know the prayers of the young men under his angry arm.

I know their prayers, because anyone who has ever lived in this
soft world for more than two days knows how to pray for a miracle.

We rub our hands together.

We fold weary shoulders in,

a cage of bone to protect our bleeding hearts.

We sing, *we shall overcome* and *bind my wandering heart to thee.*

We walk across bridges and in front of powerful buildings.

We cover our cars in stickers that scream, *we will not give up!*

We allow a hungry cry to slip from our lips,
giving our lament a life of its own (with room to dance!).

And when all of that is said and done, we whisper to our creator,
*God, break through the yelling and the fear. Break through the
violence and the oppression.*

Get past the Herods of this world, and come be here.

Like every bleeding heart before, we pray for a miracle.

Poem by

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Matthew's Gospel constructs a
community not by bloodline,
but by shared commitment
to God's justice,
by family formed through
faith and solidarity.

The Holy Family becomes a model
for us—
not because they lived without fear,
but because they allowed fear to
move them
toward justice, safety, and protection.

So how might our fear do the same?

There are people in our communities
living in fear every day:

immigrants and asylum seekers
fearing deportation,
trans and queer youth fearing
rejection or violence,
Black and Brown parents fearing
for their children's safety,
people living in war zones
or under constant threat of
violence, fearing that the conflict
will never cease.

Their fear is not born of irrationality,
but of injustice.

And if we allow ourselves to listen—
truly listen,
we may find that our fear is not
something to push away,
but something to transform.

Fear is energy.
And when grounded in love,
it can lead to fierce compassion,
courageous solidarity,
and the fire of justice.

In Luc Olivier Merson's painting,
Rest on the Flight into Egypt,¹¹
Mary rests in the arms of a sphinx—
an unlikely source of safety.

The image disturbs and unsettles
traditional sensibilities,
but it beautifully captures the truth that
hospitality often comes from
unexpected places.

Those who flee from violence
often find shelter in the arms of strangers.

What stories of unexpected kindness
do we hold?

What new alliances,
what new communities of care,
might our own fear lead us to build?

God does not leave the Holy Family
alone in their fear.
And God does not leave us alone either.

The Christmas story does not
promise us a world without Herods,
but it does promise us Emmanuel—
God with us—even when we're running.

The presence of God does not
remove the threat,
but transforms how we respond to it.

So this Christmas season, let us ask
not only:

“What do I fear?”

But also:

“Whose fear am I called to notice?”

And may our fear, like Joseph's,
become movement.
Become action.
Become protection.
Become fire.

¹¹ Luc Olivier Merson, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, 1879, oil on canvas, 71.8 x 128.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, collections.mfa.org/objects/31734.

Christmastide | What do you fear?
LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Read Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



Christmas is not a conclusion—
it is a beginning.

The manger glows with peace and
promise,
but the world around it remains
dangerous.

In Matthew's Gospel,
the good news of Jesus' birth is
immediately met with a violent
response from the empire.

Herod, threatened by the news of a
new king,
responds with fear turned lethal.

Once again, fear drives people into flight.

Joseph, warned in a dream,
takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt.

This is no small journey—
it is a border-crossing,
a dislocation,
a story of becoming refugees in a
foreign land.

Matthew's account intentionally
echoes the story of Moses:

a tyrant ordering babies to be killed,
a child of promise narrowly
escaping death, and
God's presence moving through
exile toward liberation.

What do we do with fear in this story?

We often imagine fear as something
to overcome or silence.
But here, fear becomes a catalyst for
movement.

The Holy Family's flight to Egypt is
born of fear—
but it is also born of love,
of protection,
of resistance to unjust power.

Fear becomes fuel:
adrenaline that turns potential
energy into action.
It doesn't freeze us;
it propels us.

Matthew's Gospel doesn't ask us to
pretend that Herod is gone.

By the time the family returns,
Herod's son Archelaus is on the throne,
and Joseph, again warned in a dream,
reroutes the journey to Galilee.

The danger remains.
And still—God is present, guiding,
whispering, showing another way.

Fear can be holy
when it draws us to protect others.

It reveals what we love,
what we value,
what we are willing to risk.

The gospel does not spiritualize fear.
It names political evil for what it is.

Herod's fear is the fear of losing power—
fear turned into destruction.

But Joseph's fear is for the safety of
a child.

It is fear that leads to compassion,
rooted in love.

What do you fear?
IN THE TIME OF HEROD,
WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

In the Time of Herod

CRANHAM ("In the Bleak Midwinter")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

Music by Gustav Holst, 1906



Scan to hear
the tune!



In the time of Her - od, fear had ta - ken hold
Thick as fog the fear grew, slow - ly creep - ing in
Pierc - ing through the stra - tus comes the an - gels' song
In the time of Her - od, fear has ta - ken hold



Hope was bur - ied deep and hid - den, rare as gold
Day by day the peo - ple bent and drew with - in
"Do not fear!" rings hol - low when we've feared so long
Still we share a long - ing for a glimpse of hope



Or - di - na - ry peo - ple dared not speak a - loud
With the clouds so hea - vy, who could see the stars?
Still in the re - cess - es of our wea - ry souls
Or - di - na - ry peo - ple shout the truth we trust:



Dreams of the Mes - si - ah break - ing through the clouds
Hope - less - ness had trapped them, strong as pris - on bars
Some - thing is a - wak - ened— could it be our hope?
God will stop at no - thing to be here with us

The First Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
IN THE TIME OF HEROD,
WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

Read Luke 1:5-13; Lamentations 3:55-57
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



“In the time of Herod...” (Luke 1:5)

With these words, Luke’s Gospel grounds the birth of Jesus in a world shaped by violence, occupation, and fear.

This was no golden age of peace or spiritual clarity—it was a time of survival under empire. Herod, the Roman-appointed ruler of Judea, governed with paranoia and cruelty. His power, secured through imperial alliance, was maintained by coercion, surveillance, and brutality.

Luke situates the story of Jesus within these political realities. His Gospel is not only spiritual but political—resistance in the face of empire.

Amid this context, Luke introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth—an aging priestly couple not marked by prominence, but by longing.

They had no child. In their time, barrenness was often interpreted as divine judgment. Elizabeth’s childlessness brought not just personal grief but public shame.

Yet, Luke insists: they were righteous. Their faith endured, even in waiting.

It’s tempting to rush ahead to the angel’s announcement and the joy of John’s birth.

But Luke slows us down, inviting us to notice the interruption.

While offering incense in the temple, Zechariah encounters a divine messenger. His response is not relief or joy—but fear.

Luke uses the Greek verb *tarassó*—to be troubled, disturbed, or agitated.

This is no fleeting startle. It evokes deep inner shaking, a disruption of body and spirit.

Tarassó is the soul’s recoil from the unexpected, the mind’s clamor in the face of uncertainty, the body’s trembling at the threshold of something it cannot control.

Fear, in this context, is not failure. It is a natural human response to divine disruption.

But fear can become more than a reaction. It can take root and become a way of being.

In John 14:27, Jesus says, “Let not your hearts be troubled (*tarassó*), and do not be afraid (*deiliaó*).”

The second term, *deiliaó*, implies a shrinking of heart, our spirit—a fear that inhibits action and diminishes courage.

Together, these words describe fear that doesn’t just visit—it settles. Fear that shapes our posture toward the world.

What do you fear?
LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Let the Fires of
Justice Grow

JEFFERSON (“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”)

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

Music from Tennessee Harmony, 1818



Fear is grow-ing all a - round us, plant - ed there by
Bind the chaff and light the mat-ches, let the fires of
A - ny - where God's chil-dren suf - fer, a - ny - where they



hu - man power Chok - ing out our li - ber - a - tion
jus - tice grow Watch the flames con - sume our bon - dage,
live in fear A - ny - where op - pres - sion deep - ens,



as King He - rod o'er us towers Yet the force of hu - man
trans - form - ing our fear to hope May the fire that we ig -
a - ny - where they sow in tears Let us shine the light of



em-pires can't take root in kin - dom ground We'll up - root
ni - ted fuel us for the work a - head Free the cap -
jus - tice, fueled by fear that had us bound Hand in hand,



the fear they plan - ted, li - ber - ate those whom they bound
tive, heal the bro - ken, fol - low - ing where Christ has led
pro - claim God's kin - dom 'til we top - ple ev - ery crown



Christmastide | What do you fear?
LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Until We Reach the Sun

Buffaloes are the only animals that run into a storm.
They can smell the snow coming. They can feel the temperature change—
deep in their bones. So they gather together, a pack on the plains.
And with their large lumbering bodies, they run.
They run through snow and ice, wind and rain. They do not stop
until they reach the sun.

When you are afraid, because this world is cruel and harsh,
or because humans are deported and shot without reason,
or because we cannot remember how to talk to each other civilly,
I will be your pack. I will stay by your side. I will run with you
until we reach the sun.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Many of us know this kind of fear.
Especially in “Herodian times”—eras
marked by empire, oppression, and
uncertainty—fear becomes embedded
in our bodies, relationships, and
public discourse.
It becomes background noise so
constant we forget it’s there.

Like Zechariah, we may grow so used
to disappointment that when hope
finally arrives, it startles us.
When God interrupts, we flinch.

So when the angel says, “Do not be
afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has
been heard,” it is not a dismissal.

It is a reorientation.
Your fear is real—but it is not the only
truth.

God has already been listening.
God enters the silence, the ache,
the barrenness—into the very place
where fear has taken root.

And God’s response begins not with
a miracle, but with recognition:
your prayer has been heard.

This is a word for all of us in Advent.

In a season of waiting, we are not asked
to suppress fear but to face it. To ask:
How does fear live in me?
What voices has it amplified?
What longings has it silenced?

Fear, as trauma theologians remind
us, can be a teacher.
It tells us that something matters.
That something is at stake.

It is the voice of our vulnerability
asking not to be erased,
but acknowledged.

Advent gives us room to sit with fear—
not to banish it, but to listen.

What are we afraid to hope for?
What have we stopped praying for?
Where has fear caused us to shrink back?

Zechariah’s fear doesn’t disqualify him.
It marks the beginning of
transformation.

Even in his silence, he becomes part
of the unfolding story—
his life bearing witness to a God who
hears, disrupts,
and enters fearful places with grace.

“In the time of Herod...”
the world was loud with empire’s threats,
echoing with grief and longing.

And still—God broke in.

In the time of fear,
God heard a prayer.
And responded with presence.

This Advent, perhaps the question is
not how we rid ourselves of fear.

Perhaps the deeper invitation is this:

Can we name our fear honestly—
and still believe God is near?

Christmas Eve | What do you fear?
GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Read Luke 2:1-20

Reflection | Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell

We often link fear and anxiety to bad news. But what about the moments when the news is good—almost too good to believe? The dream job offer arrives. The long-hoped-for pregnancy test is finally positive. The illness goes into sudden remission.

Euphoria, the fear of good news, often stems from past losses, fear of change, or the pressure of new expectations. Joy and relief may come first, but they're often followed by a quiet dread. *What now? What could this mean?*

In Luke's Nativity story, even angelic news stirs overwhelm. The shepherds tremble. Mary ponders. As she wraps her newborn in cloth, what thoughts rise in her heart?

The word “new” is nestled in “good news”—a reminder that even the best gifts lie beyond our control. In the birth of Jesus, we witness the mystery of it all: the terrifying, the unexpected, the good, and the new that hope often brings.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Zechariah and the Angel | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace and graphite drawing, backed with cyanotype print



Good, New | Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell
Acrylic on canvas

The First Sunday of Advent | What do you fear? IN THE TIME OF HEROD, WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

Read Luke 1:5-13

Reflection | Hannah Garrity

Within the political landscape of Herod's time, hope was not on the horizon—that's the point. And Elizabeth had been barren for many years. This miracle visited her—in her body, in her womb—because it was so unexpected.

In this piece, I imagine the angel in a female form arriving close to Zechariah in the darkened Temple, surprising him by her presence. His reaction is a fearful one in this image. He leans away, squints his eyes, and covers his head. He protects himself from her, from her presence, from her power, from her words, from her gaze. He hides. The incense swirls around them. In contrast to his fear, her message is one of hope: long-yearned-for-joy and family security. Here the angel's message is represented by the doves and the stars. Her message flows into his space with the same power that invoked his fear. I imagine Zechariah lets his guard down then, and listens to her in shock. I imagine he takes in her words, lets his arm down, meets her gaze, and holds onto joy, despite his ongoing apprehension.

In this image, I placed my paper lace over a cyanotype print, which is created using photosensitive paper, objects, and sunlight. The cyanotype didn't work the first time; I had to paint the light-sensitive solution again and then expose the print for longer in brighter daylight. I really needed plexiglass to hold my branches and leaves tightly to the paper, but I didn't have it. Nonetheless, the final print reflected the flow of energy in this text.

The movement in the cyanotype is horizontal—perfect for the lateral conversation between the angel and Zechariah. Pine needles created shapes that appear to reiterate the angel's words as they are leaving her mouth toward Zechariah's ear. These words, this unexpected and miraculous hope, are the focal point in the text and the art. In the cyanotype, there are deep blues with silhouettes of leaves and stems, but nothing so powerful as these words, these pine needles creating a high-contrast focal point. God is breaking in.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Depths | Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell
Acrylic, oil pastel, metal leaf on canvas

Like Mary—young, uncertain, and asked to carry more than she could have imagined.

Like Joseph—choosing to show up, even when it costs him reputation and comfort.
Like the shepherds—shaken awake in the night by glory and confusion.

The fear was real.
The risk was real.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth—poverty, displacement, estrangement—are not erased by the angel's song.

And yet,
the good news comes anyway.

It comes with sound—loud and full of light.

It comes with bodies—angels taking up space in the sky,
shepherds running through streets proclaiming glory,
Mary holding pain and promise in her arms.

It comes through fear,
not after it.

Luke's story insists that the good news of God has weight and presence. But it needs to be amplified. Proclaimed.

In a world where fear is curated and fed to us,
proclaiming good news is a countercultural act.

In a world that tells marginalized communities to be quiet,
that punishes joy and rage alike,
joy becomes resistance.

The church is called to be like the angels:
not polite, not palatable, but public.
Not cautious, but courageous.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace. . ."—
this is not a whisper.
It's a chorus.

And yet,
the good news ripples outward in quieter ways, too.

The shepherds return glorifying and praising God—
they become the first evangelists.

They tell anyone who will listen.
And the good news spreads—
not through Caesar's decrees,
but through trembling, joyful witnesses.

Tonight, we are invited to do the same.

Not because our fear is gone—
but because good news still breaks in.

Even when it's quiet.
Even when it's messy.
Even when it feels like the darkness will never end.

This is the shape of God's dream:
news born in vulnerability,
joy proclaimed by the overlooked,
power shown not through force,
but through flesh.

So let us proclaim the good news loudly.
Let us make space for joy that shakes the walls.

Let us resist fear's domination
by bearing witness to light, to peace,
to Christ among us.

Because tonight, we remember:

Fear may be loud, but love is louder.
Violence may be strong, but hope is stronger.
And the good news—God is here—will not be silenced.

Christmas Eve | What do you fear?
GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Read Luke 2:1-20
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



It's easy to believe that fear is louder than good news.

Just turn on the TV, scroll your feed, glance at the headlines—fear dominates.

It spreads quickly, echoes loudly, and lingers long.

In a media world driven by algorithms and attention, fear thrives because it sells.

It taps into our instincts. Studies show that it takes five positive messages to outweigh one negative one.

Fear is sticky—it clings.

But on this night—this holy, trembling night—Luke dares to tell us otherwise.

Into a world defined by empire, surveillance, and oppression, a birth breaks in.

Not in a palace, not under protection, but in the shadows of census and displacement.

Jesus is born in the time of Caesar Augustus, under an imperial system that controls bodies through taxation and travel.

Luke isn't writing a neutral tale—he's offering a counter-narrative to Roman propaganda.

Rome claimed peace through domination. Luke proclaims peace through incarnation.

And into this fragile moment, the heavens split open.

A messenger appears not to the powerful but to shepherds—people overlooked, underpaid, often mistrusted.

The text tells us they were terrified (*phobeō*). And rightly so.

The Greek word for “host” (*stratia*) used to describe the angelic multitude is military language.

To an occupied people, an army doesn't usually mean peace.

So when the angel says, “Do not be afraid,” and then declares “good news of great joy for all people” (Luke 2:10),

it is not a sentimental moment—it is a revolutionary one.

This “good news” (*euangelion*) echoes Roman proclamations of conquest and dominion. But Luke reclaims the word:

Here, good news is not Caesar's victory, but God's vulnerability—made flesh in a newborn wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a feeding trough.

Good news is not always louder than fear. But it is stronger.

That's the tension we live in.

The First Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
IN THE TIME OF HEROD,
WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

Read Lamentations 3:55-57
Reflection | Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell

I am reminded of my love-hate relationship with theme park rides as soon as the ride quiets into a slow, steady climb—creeping toward an edge that seems to vanish. It's at this point that full panic sets in and it hits me: a drop is coming.

It's not the speed or height of roller coasters that scares me. It's the weight—being pulled down by something far heavier than myself, strapped to metal with gravity dragging me into the depths while my stomach scrambles to catch up, my heart left behind in midair.

Many of us, like the writer of Lamentations, know this kind of free fall—in our personal lives, in our ministries, and in a political climate that seems to collapse our sense of security into a bottomless pit. Yet, when the fall ends, when the deepest depths have been reached, who hears us when we call? As we echo prayers from the depths of each of our lives, we can rest in the assurance that we are heard by a God who meets us at rock bottom.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

God in the Kitchen

I called home my first semester of college. I told my mom I was fine,
but I was homesick. She must have heard the truth in my voice.
The ache ate at me. It was a long, slow song, a million tiny ants
slurping the juice from a peach. I was tender and bruised,
in the doldrums of it all. But she could hear all of that.
So three states away,
she preheated the oven. Three states away,
she tossed blueberries in a thin layer of flour. Three states away,
she dusted a layer of streusel over the soft peaks
of a dozen warm muffins. And three days later,
I unboxed a package from home—
a dozen blueberry muffins, a love letter with my name on it,
a reminder that I was not alone.
If you're running out of hope, count to three.
God is in the kitchen. She's just waiting for yeast to rise.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

What do you fear?
GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR



Scan to hear
the tune!

Shout!
GREENSLEEVES ("What Child Is This")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

Traditional English melody, 16th cent.



When fear lies like a blan - ket thick and
The pierc - ing song the an - gels bring to
Sur - ren - der to the joy this night of



mutes the joy of li - ving When He - rod reigns with
un - sus - pect - ing shep - herds Is hard to hear with
God in - car - nate born for us Shout in the streets, wake



terr - or great, the an - gels break in, sing - ing
frigh - tened ears so used to news of ter - ror
those who sleep to join the an - gel cho - rus



Shout! Shout your glo-ri - as in all the earth and heaven a - bove



Shout! Shout the an-gels' news that hope is born in Je-sus



Christmas Eve | What do you fear?
GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Honeysuckle

There is an abandoned house on my block.
Maybe someone owns it and is just waiting to fix it up,
or maybe it belongs to a family that simply cannot let it go.
Either way, the yard is an overgrown tangle of weeds—
crabgrass and yellow nutsedge, horsetail and clover—
unforgiving and entrenched.
Over the summer, a honeysuckle bush crept
from that forgotten house over the fence and through the yard.
It spilled out in broad patches on the sidewalk. As a result,
you could not pass that mess of a house without the taste of honey
in your mouth.
You could not pass that mess of a house without being engulfed in
the sweet scent of something good.
It was almost as if the earth was saying, sure,
things are chaotic here,
but pause for a moment. Pull a flower bud off in your fingers.
Break the stem.
Slurp the tiny bead of honey at the base. Remember that even
when bad news is unforgiving and entrenched, good news grows
out of its cage, across the sidewalk, just to get to you.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

Looking Out a Prison Window

IRBY ("Once in Royal David's City")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

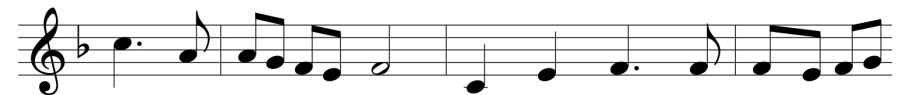
Music by Henry John Gauntlett, 1849



Scan to hear
the tune!



Look - ing out a pri - son win - dow, who can
All the things that keep us cap - tive shrink our
To our sib - lings still im - pris - oned be - hind
We are called to li - ber - a - tion, to be



see the flow - ers bloom? Hope dis - solves like dreams at
op - ti - mis - tic faith We must prac - tice hope on
bars of steel or fear Bring the mes - sage from our
freed and to set free Break - ing chains of world - ly



day - break leav - ing us an emp - ty room Still be - yond what
pur - pose e - ven when our spi - rits break 'Til at last our
Sav - ior: hope is real and dawn - ing near Tell the gos - pel
pow - ers who would claim our li - ber - ty Bo - dy, spi - rit,



we can see God is al - ways plant - ing seeds
free - dom comes And we fin - ally see the sun
all a - round New life springs up from the ground
mind and heart Li - ber - ate each cap - tive part

The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

Read Matthew 11:1-11; Isaiah 43:19-21
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee

By the time we meet John the Baptist in Matthew 11, he is no longer the bold prophet in the wilderness, crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4b).

He is a prisoner—held under Herod’s authority, cut off from the movement he helped ignite.
The firebrand voice has been silenced.

And in its place, we find a question, carried through his disciples to Jesus:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”
(Matthew 11:3)

It is not just a question—
it is a cry from the edges of despair.

John, the prophet who baptized Jesus and had declared him the Lamb of God, is now unsure.

In the dim light of his cell,
with execution on the horizon,
hope flickers low.
He does not ask for a miracle.
He asks whether his whole life—his ministry, message, and risk—meant anything.

It’s a question many of us have asked, especially when our efforts for justice and truth feel fruitless.

After every protest, election, vigil,
or prayer for peace that seems unanswered—
Did it matter?

Did I get it wrong?
Was any of it worth it?

This is not doubt born of cynicism.
It is the trembling that comes when conviction meets suffering—
when the cost of faithfulness has been high,
and the fruit appears small.

It is what hope sounds like when it’s running thin.

And how does Jesus respond?

Not with chastisement.
Not with a lecture.
He doesn’t say, “John should know better.”

Instead, Jesus answers indirectly—
with the witness of what is unfolding:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see:
the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk, lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matthew 11:4-5)

Jesus points not to grand victory,
but to quiet signs of transformation.

He doesn’t hand John certainty—
but invites him to perceive God at work. It is a reorientation toward Isaiah’s vision:

“I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19a)



The Fourth Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND

Read Isaiah 41:5-10
Reflection | Lauren Wright Pittman

Here we find the Israelites far from home, living in Babylonian exile. Fear and uncertainty hang heavy with the looming threat of Persian invasion.

“The coastlands have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble” (Isaiah 45:5). As some scramble to find courage in idols, God calls those exiled from Judah to be heartened by their rootedness in God’s story.

The image that formed in my mind was a community nestled in God’s hands amid the Mediterranean coastlands—the same lands conquered by the Babylonians, and to which the exiles longed to return.

While I was creating this image, the U.S. President shared an AI-generated video of his “vision” for Gaza, those same coastlands referenced in Isaiah. I was shaken by the contrast between his imagined future and the reality of U.S.-funded devastation. The video transformed rubble and the bone-chilling cries of mothers into panning vistas of high-rise beachfront resorts and casinos, rebranding Gaza as the “Riviera of the Middle East.”¹⁰

This bombastic vision mocks a people clinging to threads of existence. Watching the powerful revel in the demise of the vulnerable is horrifying—but fitting. In Isaiah, God’s people are exiled under the thumb of a world power. Fearful artisans solder golden idols, hoping for security. But God is not found in the hands of the powerful or the shine of idols. God is present amid the rubble, comforting the forsaken and reminding them of their place in God’s story. No matter which empire holds sway, God sides with the subjugated and disenfranchised. Despite the fear that causes the very earth to tremble, God accompanies the downtrodden, upholding them with a steady hand.

From my study of this passage and shock at the video, a counter-vision of hope emerged. Coastal Mediterranean plants—bougainvillea for peace, lantana for liveliness, and red valerian for strength—anchor the shifting sand. God’s hands cradle the community like a fragile flame as their light resiliently radiates. The twelve figures in simplified Palestinian garb represent the exiled Judeans in Isaiah, the Palestinians in modern day Gaza, and all crushed by empire—each cherished by a faithful God. The hands in the image *could* also be ours.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹⁰ Some of the imagery included: a child holding a golden balloon in the shape of the U.S. President’s head, crowds standing beneath a golden statue of said President, billionaire Elon Musk basking as money rained from the sky, and the U.S. President lounging poolside with the Israeli Prime Minister. While this imagery flashes, a song plays with the lyrics, “No need to fear, Trump Gaza is finally here.”



I Am With You | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper

The empire is still intact.
Herod still reigns.
John will not be released from prison.

Yet Jesus insists:
God's dream is unfolding.
Look again. Listen. Perceive.

What is powerful in this moment is not that Jesus performs miracles, but that he frames them as evidence of God's reign at work—an alternative kingdom not marked by coercion or fear, but by healing, liberation, and good news for the marginalized.

Matthew lifts up Jesus, not as a new Caesar, but as the agent of God's redemptive transformation. Those who perceive the signs understand what kind of Messiah has come.

For those in prison today—literally or metaphorically—because of their prophetic witness, this passage offers both solace and challenge.

Hope in the gospel is not grounded in outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in perception—in trusting God is still at work, even when systems remain unchanged, even when prophets die behind bars.

John's question echoes across generations.

Activists, caregivers, clergy, organizers, artists—anyone who has dared to hope in a better world—knows this moment.

The fear that nothing has changed.
The grief that our lives might not have mattered.
The silence from the people or institutions we hoped would transform.

And still, Jesus affirms John—not in spite of his question, but through it.

“Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11).

Jesus doesn't see John's crumbling hope as failure. He names it as part of what makes John faithful.

This is a pastoral word for us: hope that trembles is still hope. Even in doubt, John is still a prophet. Even in fear, he is still beloved.

Advent does not require us to manufacture hope. It invites us to bring our emptied hope to Jesus, to ask the hard questions, and to listen again for signs of God's nearness.

When we're running out of hope, it may be the perfect time to ask:

What do you see?
What do you hear?

And to trust that somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth.



Hope Like a Dancer | Lauren Wright Pittman
Gouache, paint pens, colored pencils, and ink on paper

The Fourth Sunday of Advent | What do you fear? WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Reflection | Nic Faison

My inaugural contribution to *A Sanctified Art* in 2023 focused on the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth.⁷ After having a challenging pregnancy, I used my art to explore the divine connections of people who carry pregnancies. But even after reading these pregnancy stories time and again, I have struggled to sit with Joseph and how he processes all of this change. Somehow life is always in alignment with the text, and now, as I process a divorce, I think of what it would feel like for someone else to try to fit into my established family system.

This made me think of a Joseph who can't sleep well at night, as his mind is uneasy with the words of Gabriel in his ear. I wanted Joseph to have an uncomfortable sleep form with a clenched fist that shows us he is tense even while he dreams. His foot is raised up in a way that looks almost as if he could pop up at any moment. His hair, while luxurious, has flowy movement to it, leaning into the uneasiness. I don't think Joseph's role needs to be a cornerstone for the birth story; however, as my own life changes, I can appreciate the importance of his devotion and obedience to God.

In the artwork, the angel Gabriel is talking to Joseph as he sleeps, with silver locs reminiscent of God from the children's book I illustrated, *God's Holy Darkness*.⁸ This is a nod to my own work, which honors holiness as brown, coarse textured, and wise.

The dreamy pregnant body we see in the top left is a nod to Beyonce's 2017 Grammys performance costume for the song, "Love Drought."⁹ At that time Beyonce was pregnant with her twins, Sir and Rumi, and gave one of the most outstanding performances someone so far along could provide. How appropriate for a woman of faith carrying twins—performing a song from an album about betrayal, heartbreak, and reconciliation—to perform at this last supper-like table in such an outfit, knowing her marriage and pregnancy could have killed her. In my painting, the pregnant belly is celebrated with rays beaming from it followed by soft clouds, reminding us this is a dream. The color choices are bright, detailed, and whimsical to keep us in the fantasy. There is vibrancy here because, while Joseph is uncomfortable, this is still something to be celebrated.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁷ sanctifiedart.org/image-licensing-library-advent/two-mothers

⁸ *God's Holy Darkness*. Written by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick. Illustrated by Nikki Faison. (Beaming Books, 2022).

⁹ Beyonce. "Love Drought." Track 7 on *Lemonade*. Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records, 2016.

The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

Read Matthew 11:1-11

Reflection | Lauren Wright Pittman

John the Baptist was thrown in prison after publicly questioning the legality of Herod's marriage (Matthew 14:3-5). He was not afraid to go toe-to-toe with the powerful, and perhaps he expected Jesus' ministry to look more confrontational and politically strategic. In questioning Jesus, I wonder if John sought a particular answer to hang his hope on, that maybe the Messiah would be how he'd imagined him. Maybe Jesus would bust him out of jail and take things straight to Herod, but Jesus offers something else.

In this image, John sits in prison, letting the disciples' testimony settle in. People with hearing, visual, and physical impairments experience new senses and mobility. Those with skin diseases are cleansed. Those with little material comfort are offered irrepressible hope, and the lungs of the dead are filled with the breath of life. I decided to image this good news through the dancing light of a lantern¹ in John's prison cell. I chose dancing figures because dancing feels like a primal response to the radical healing taking place outside the prison walls. As these six dancers illuminate the cell, I imagine John, even if for a moment, breaking into a bit of laughter at the magnitude of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was quite literally doing the unimaginable. He was removing barriers so that the marginalized were no longer reduced to begging and sitting on mats, shoved to the edges of society. He was not only healing physical ailments; perhaps more importantly, he was restoring people to community.

Out of all the miraculous actions mentioned, the news did not include "release of the captives" (Luke 4:18-19).² With this message, John would know that he was not going to be freed,³ and so, the number of dancers would remain one short of seven.⁴ As we know all too well, God's work isn't completed in Jesus' time. We are still woefully short of realizing the fullness of God's desire for all of creation, and the work is ours to see through. Until then, let us keep our eyes peeled for the glimmers of hope dancing all around us and work toward a day when all can join in that dance of wholeness.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



In Too Deep | Nic Faison
Acrylic and marker on canvas

- ¹ The lantern has very simplified shapes representing each of the miracles (received sight: eyes opening; walking: footprints; cleansed: bowls; hearing: volume symbols; raised: butterflies; good news: jar and anointing oil drops representing the Messiah).
- ² John's clothing includes open bird cages and birds taking flight, which represent how "release of the captives" is missing in the message he receives from Jesus.
- ³ Bonnie L. Pattison points this out in her commentary on Matthew 11:2-19 in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*, edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 286.
- ⁴ The number 7 represents wholeness or completion. This podcast episode provides more information about the symbolic use of the number 7 in the Bible: bibleproject.com/podcast/significance-7/



Something in the Water | T. Denise Anderson
Acrylic on canvas

Herod, Rome's puppet king, is watching.
Any child born and called "King of the Jews" challenges the status quo.

Herod's response—deception, surveillance, and eventually violence (Matthew 2:16)—follows a familiar imperial pattern.

Yet God responds not with might, but through dreams, courage, and embodied resistance.

Joseph becomes not only a guardian of Mary's dignity, but a protector of Jesus' life.

We might imagine a quiet moment between Mary and Joseph.

She has already said yes to God.
But that yes didn't make her fearless.
She still needs a companion.
She still needs someone to walk beside her.

And Joseph, moved by divine whisper, reaches through his own fear to offer his presence.

This story is not just about them.
It is also about us.

There are people in our communities today who, like Mary, carry something sacred and heavy—something that puts them at risk.

Perhaps it's their identity, their truth, their calling, or their hope.

And there are others, like Joseph, who hold more security, more safety, more voice.

Advent invites us not simply to "be not afraid," but to act with love in the midst of fear.

Not to fix everything, but to show up with courage.
To reach out and say:

"Give me your hand."

This kind of love—grounded in risk, humility, and faith—is what Isaiah evokes:

"Each one helps the other, saying to one another, 'Take courage!' ... Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isaiah 41:6,10).

God's work in the world unfolds not through lone heroes, but through the joined hands of those who choose: relationship over self-protection, accompaniment over certainty, and presence over perfection.

Mary's "yes" mattered.
So did Joseph's.
So does ours.

As we move into the final days of Advent, we ask:

Who among us is carrying something sacred and heavy, quietly in danger?
What fear might we be called to move through—not for our sake, but for the sake of others?
How might our love—fragile, imperfect, but real—become the ground where God's promise takes root?

This week, we're not asked to fix the world.

We're asked to take each other's hands and walk forward into it—together.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?

WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND

Read Matthew 1:18-25; Isaiah 41:5-10
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



Fear flows quietly beneath Matthew's nativity story, though it is never far from view.

It surfaces in Joseph's impulse to "dismiss Mary quietly" (Matthew 1:19), in the angel's first words, "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 1:20), and in the precarious world into which Jesus is born—an unwed mother, a fragile family, and an empire that meets any threat with surveillance, violence, and control.

Joseph's fear is easy to overlook, perhaps because the narrative highlights his dream, obedience, and place in Jesus' lineage.

But his fear is not abstract—it is rooted in a web of social and political risk.

To take Mary in would expose him to public disgrace and religious judgment. In a world where women could be stoned for suspected adultery (Deut. 22:23–24), Mary's pregnancy was more than scandalous—it was dangerous.

And Joseph's response becomes about more than personal integrity; it becomes an act of courageous solidarity.

Joseph could have stepped back. But instead, he steps in.

He does not fix everything.
He does not erase the risk.
But he chooses to share it.

He says, in effect:
"You don't have to go through this alone. Give me your hand."

This is not the language of saviorism but of accompaniment.

It's what we might call a theology of proximity—where faithfulness means drawing near to the vulnerable and aligning ourselves with those at risk, even when we are afraid ourselves.

As the angel reminds Joseph:
"Do not be afraid. . . for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20).

God is already at work.
Joseph is invited to join in—not as a hero, but as a partner.

In a world defined by empire, masculinity, and honor-shame boundaries, Joseph's posture is striking.

The Gospel opens with a quiet act of resistance:
Joseph lays aside patriarchal expectation and legalistic judgment, choosing instead to protect Mary and the unborn child.

In doing so,
he becomes a quiet but vital part of God's liberating plan.

But this is not only personal—it's profoundly political.

The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?

WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE, GOD IS AT WORK

Read Isaiah 43:19-21
Reflection | T. Denise Anderson

Deutero-Isaiah⁵ addresses a community that had been in exile for a while and had probably resigned themselves to their fate. But the prophet has the temerity to proclaim that God still has something in store and asks if they can "perceive" what it is. That word "perceive" would not let go of me. The Hebrew word can be translated as "know" or even "discern." Christian churches don't talk about this often, but one way ancient Israelite communities discerned God's direction was through divination.

The water imagery in this text is strong and shows up in contrasts ("rivers in the desert" and "waters in the wilderness"). The Holy One is making something out of nothing, providing life-sustaining water to a thirsty nation as God's "new thing" "springs" forth. It's also interesting to me that water itself is a tool of divination. To the extent the prophet is inviting the community to "discern" what God is doing, I was reminded of the practice of scrying or "seeing"—looking into a reflective surface like water to get clarity on what Spirit might be saying.

Another translation of "perceive" is "feel." Here I depict someone placing their hand in the water of God's provision and direction. Is it God's hand manipulating the water to send it forth, or is it the hand of someone trying to know/feel/discern the water? A sudden onset of water (like a flood or deluge) can be terrifying, but in this case water is coming to the rescue. What might be scary right now, but is actually coming to save us? How do the waters help us see God and ourselves? By claiming rest, what can we discern in the stillness when we divest from the cycle of fear and turn to the water?

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁵ Deutero-Isaiah refers to Isaiah 40-55, which scholars attribute to an anonymous prophet during the Babylonian Exile. It is characterized by themes of hope for the deliverance of the exiled Jewish people.



The Third Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**EVEN IN OUR FEAR,
WE ARE CALLED FORWARD**

The First Step

Watch any parent. It starts with the first step.
They kneel down. They smile with anticipation.
They reach for their baby, calling and cooing them forward.
And then before they know it, they're running behind a bike.
They're yelling,
"Keep pedaling! You got it! I'm right here!" And they're jumping up
and down,
because that little red helmet passed the mailbox.
And then, just like that, they're driving circles in the church parking lot.
They're giving instructions about easing on and off the pedal.
They're having conversations about curfew and heartbreak.
And then, before they know it, they're standing in a hospital room.
Their heart is bursting. And they say, *"Put her head right here.
Rock her gently. Do you remember the nursery rhymes?
You were born for this."*

The first step is always the hardest,
but you, beloved, were born for this.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

What do you fear?
WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND



Scan to hear
the tune!

We're Not Alone

ADESTE FIDELES ("O Come, All Ye Faithful")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

Music by John Francis Wade, 1751



Fear all a - round you tells you you're a - lone ____
Give me your hand to hold when you feel frigh - tened
When peo - ple live in fear ____ for their safe - ty
For - ward we march to - geth - er toward God's kin - dom



Urg - ing you to build walls and i - so - late
We can up - hold each o - ther in ____ our fear
Let us put priv - ilege on the line ____ for them
Build - ing a big - ger ta - ble, not tall - er walls



I know your fear be - cause I feel it, too ____
Per - son by per - son, we'll find strength to - geth - er
Stand with our sib - lings in ____ sol - i - dar - i - ty
Work - ing to - geth - er, no - thing is im - poss - i - ble



When fear grows deep in - side us, re - mem - ber what u - nites us



No, no - thing can di - vide us; we're not a - lone



The Fourth Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID,
 GIVE ME YOUR HAND**

Tethered

When we were children, we fell asleep
 with walkie talkies tucked under our pillows.
 All that separated us was a bathroom,
 a hallway, a few feet of empty space,
 but as children, even small distances can feel like miles.

So after the parents whispered prayers over our skinned knees
 and spelling tests, after they kissed our sweaty foreheads
 and tucked us into bed,
 we'd pull the walkie talkies out from under our pillows.
 We'd roll the dial on the top of the transceiver.
 We'd sputter that invisible tether to life.

And with a few crackles in the quiet of the night,
 you'd whisper my name.
 I'd press down the button.
 I'd promise I was close.

As an adult, I don't know what ever happened
 to those blue-grey walkie talkies.

But I know,
 that even today,
 if the monsters in the closet feel too real,
 and you whisper my name,
 I promise I'll be close.

Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

What do you fear?
**EVEN IN OUR FEAR,
 WE ARE CALLED FORWARD**

O Come, Take Heart

VENI IMMANUEL ("O Come, O Come Emmanuel")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2025

Plainsong adapted by Thomas Helmore, 1854



Scan to hear
 the tune!



O come, O come though tim - id and un - sure And
 O come, O come though you feel un - pre - pared When
 O come and join God's kin _____ dom work And



trust that God de - clares your worth Re - mem -
 cour - age fails you, do it scared Don't let
 be God's hands and feet on earth You're called



ber when you're feel - ing small That ev - ery child of
 the fear of ma - king mis - takes Im - pede you from the
 ex - act - ly as _____ you are To love the world with



God _____ is called
 path you're called to take Take heart, take heart! The One
 ev - ery bro - ken part



who calls to you Will give you strength and see you through

The Third Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?

**EVEN IN OUR FEAR,
WE ARE CALLED FORWARD**

Read Luke 1:26-39; Jeremiah 1:4-10
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, her response is not immediate acceptance but confusion, resistance, and fear.

The text says she is “greatly troubled” (*diatarassō*)—a word that intensifies *tarassō*, suggesting not just inner disturbance but a deep, bodily dissonance.

Mary is not simply puzzled—she is shaken, thrown off-balance, possibly afraid for her life.

And with good reason.

Mary was young, unmarried, and living under the weight of imperial and patriarchal control.

To be told—without warning—that she would bear a child by divine initiative wasn’t just a spiritual shock; it was a profound social and bodily risk.

Her “yes,” then, cannot be read as simplistic or naïve. It emerges from a complex matrix of vulnerability, trust, and survival.

That’s why it matters that Mary questions.

“How can this be?” is not doubt—it is agency.

It is a boundary drawn around her body, a claim to her own understanding before offering consent.

Gabriel does not rebuke her.

Instead, he offers a promise: divine initiative (“the Holy Spirit will come upon you”) and shelter (“you will be overshadowed”).

These words carry no hint of coercion; they speak of protection, not domination.

Still, her consent remains essential.

Mary listens, considers the impossible, and then responds with courage:

“Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38b).

This is not fear erased—it is fear acknowledged and moved through.

A choice made with trembling faith.

Mary’s story resonates with the call of the prophet in Jeremiah 1:4–10.

“I am only a boy,” Jeremiah protests, gripped by the fear that he is too young to speak for God.

Like Mary, he hesitates—aware that answering the call will come at a cost. And like her, he hears these words of reassurance:

“Do not be afraid . . . I am with you” (Jeremiah 1:8).

The Third Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?

**EVEN IN OUR FEAR,
WE ARE CALLED FORWARD**

Read Jeremiah 1:4-10
Reflection | Hannah Garrity

This scripture is Jeremiah’s call story. Jeremiah is a prophet just prior to the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. Once Jerusalem falls, Judea’s ruling class is taken into exile in Babylon. We learn of their story through the book of Ezekiel. Jeremiah stays as a prophet for those left behind in Jerusalem. At that time, the major theological question of the people was whether or not God was present without the temple and the Ark of the Covenant. In Jeremiah chapter 31, the prophet delivers a new covenant from God, written on the hearts of the people. “Fear not; God is with all people always” (Jeremiah 30:10-11).

As I explored the process of cyanotype printing for this piece of art, the visual metaphor of negative and positive space offered a parallel to this major theological question: Is God gone?

First, I painted a photosensitive solution on the paper in a dark room, then it dried in the dark as well. Once dry, I placed leaves, buds, blossoms, and branches on the paper and took it outside. These natural forms created a negative image as the paper was exposed to the sun. Just as Jeremiah will eventually offer the new covenant when the people fear that the absence of the tangible means the absence of the divine, so it is that in this artwork the absent spaces become deep and dark with color. The present spaces, where items were placed, become void of color, creating a negative image.

On top of the cyanotype, I overlaid a paper lace image of leaves, branches, buds, and blossoms weaving around the hand of God reaching out to touch the lips of Jeremiah. There are boxes too, portraying the building up after the tearing down. Do not fear. Like Jeremiah, we are but children ill-equipped for the call, but God reaches out and calls us anyway. So let us prepare ourselves for the planting and the building of God’s justice. The temple is gone. Hard work is ahead.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



To Build and to Plant | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace and graphite drawing, backed with cyanotype print

What connects them is not a lack of fear, but a deep, trembling resolve to move forward anyway—not with certainty, but with open hands and the courage to say yes, even in the unknown.

Neither Mary nor Jeremiah embody boldness as spectacle. Their strength lies in quiet resolve—in the holy, hesitant yes that dares to trust.

This week's texts remind us:

Call often comes when we're just trying to survive.

Mary, like so many marginalized women, was likely trying to make it through the day, avoiding shame, violence, and invisibility.

Survival mode leaves little space for dreaming—let alone imagining oneself “blessed among women.”

And yet God's call interrupts that quiet survival—not to exploit it, but to awaken her to a fuller, riskier, more radiant self.

This call is not without cost.

Mary's “yes” will bring silence, estrangement, and pain. She will bear not only the Christ child, but the burden of imperial suspicion, poverty, and loneliness.

Still, she says yes.

We're often taught that fear is failure—something to silence or push through.

But this Advent, we're invited to see fear as information.

Some fear protects us.

But some fear is the threshold of transformation—the fear that comes when we are on the edge of saying yes to God. The fear that signals deep vulnerability, and deep possibility.

Too often, dominant Christianity defines courage through heroic masculinity—loud, bold, certain.

But Mary and Jeremiah model a different courage:

the courage to ask questions, to hesitate, to need more time, to take just one uncertain step.

And they do not walk alone.

After her yes, Mary runs to Elizabeth, who meets her with joy and affirmation:

“Blessed are you among women”
(Luke 1:42).

Elizabeth becomes confirmation and community.

This too is part of calling—we are not meant to walk forward alone.

God calls us not only to action, but to become fully ourselves.

Fear doesn't disqualify us—it's part of the process. And God promises to walk with us, every trembling step.

This Advent, we ask:

What fear are you carrying?
What invitation are you resisting because you feel inadequate?
What would it mean to say yes—not fearlessly, but faithfully?

Mary's words can become our own:

“Let it be with me.”

The Third Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**EVEN IN OUR FEAR,
WE ARE CALLED FORWARD**

Read Luke 1:26-39

Reflection | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

In the *sixth month* of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the angel goes to Nazareth to find Mary. I was six months pregnant with my second daughter when I reread this scripture and began this image, so at first, this detail seemed like a happy coincidence. But as I pondered it, I wondered if Elizabeth's pregnancy might have everything to do with Mary's willingness to say yes to this wild, wonderful—but risky and terrifying—undertaking.

Elizabeth's pregnancy provides reassurance that Mary can trust the angel's impossible news. By the sixth month, Mary will be able to see for herself that Elizabeth is truly pregnant. By the sixth month, Mary can place her hands on Elizabeth's belly and giggle as the baby leaps and kicks. By the sixth month, the risk of miscarriage has significantly decreased. By the sixth month, Elizabeth will be emotionally, mentally, and physically preparing for birth. Her miracle is real, even as it is yet to be born. Therefore, Mary can rest her hope in an emerging—not empty—promise.

Mary's willingness to say "yes" is also fortified by the assurance that she is not stepping forward alone. Even as fears surely surround her, Mary will go to Elizabeth for protection and comfort. She won't fulfill her calling without support. Her hope will be strengthened in solidarity.

In this image, we see the angel greeting Mary in the form of dappled light.⁶ Mary's back is turned to the angel, but we see her in the process of pivoting toward the warmth of the cascading light. I imagine this is the moment after the angel responds to her initial question, "How can this be?" After hearing the angel's response, Mary closes her eyes, imagining her cousin Elizabeth and perhaps her many ancestors holding her up as she prepares to step forward. The wrap around her head carries the angel's good news, anointing her with the promise that fear won't stop her. Embroidered along her neckline is Mary's willing response: "Here I am." Her lantern earring is a sign to each of us, to anyone who is fearful. It's as if Mary herself becomes a lantern, emanating courage in the face of a fearful calling, lighting a way forward.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁶ I captured these textures by photographing the shadows cast by a lantern.



Mary's Yes | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Photography with digital drawing