



as we wait

Advent Readings



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To our readers,

Greetings from the MB Seminary! We are delighted that this Advent devotional has made its way into your home.

As you may have noticed, this year we have chosen to share our Advent reflections with a non-traditional Christmas graphic and title. As we considered the Scripture readings taken from the Revised Common Lectionary we were prompted to inspire you to think about this season of “waiting” in active ways (i.e. getting your hands dirty). The booklet is titled “as we wait” and carries an unfinished sentiment that invites you to anticipate the coming of Jesus in active ways that are consistent with what we are truly waiting for. Our contributors will challenge you to participate in four sub-themes as you work through the four weeks leading up to Christmas: Watch, Prepare, Proclaim, and Worship.

We hope each devotional will encourage and inspire missional living among you and your families this season.

Thank you for joining with us this Advent and have a blessed Christmas from all of us.

MB Seminary Team

week one

WATCH

watch

SUNDAY | Matthew 24:36-44

He Is Coming Back

The prominent French-historian, Pierre Chaunu, once observed that in just a couple of generations French society had lost the Christian understanding of death and, with it, the significance of human life. I believe the same could be said of the contemporary Western world.

Christianity once gave the Western world a profound sense of identity and destiny. Now secularism leaves it stripped of any historical perspective, devoid of hope, and without purpose. Such a reality offers no ultimate reason to live and precious little impetus to give anyone else a crack at life. The catastrophic birth rates that have plagued the Western world for the last few decades are entirely in line with a culture that is struggling with what it means to be human. We are indeed a people without a past or a future.

Like the people of Noah's generation, we go about our lives as if the present encompasses all of reality: "people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" (24:38).

But as our text reminds us, the universe is not locked in its current state forever. A loving, moral, and personal God is keeping watch. One of these days, He will bring the curtain down on human history again, but this time it won't be a simple course correction.

On that day, Jesus Christ will reveal, in blazing letters and for all to see, the ultimate purpose of history. There won't be space left to dither about our loyalties. Those who belong to Christ will be claimed lovingly as His own. Sadly, the others will be granted the desire of their hearts.

Let us not live like those who desperately embrace a present reality that will slip through their fingers. If we claim Christ as Lord, let us live each day with the full expectation of His imminent return.

Pierre Gilbert is Associate Professor of Theology and Bible at MB Seminary and Canadian Mennonite University and attends Fort Garry Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: What does it mean for a community of faith or an individual to live with the constant expectation of the Lord's return?

watch

MONDAY | Genesis 8:1-19

The Day Of The Lord Is Coming!

The ark was tossed to and fro on the raging waters, seemingly without any sense of direction or end, before it rested on the mountains of Ararat. The experience must have been a test of Noah's faith. Would he worry about a shipwreck or food shortage? It is doubtful. He was blameless in his time and walked with God. He trusted in the covenant that God made with him (6:18, 20). God had said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever ... but [now] God remembered Noah ... and caused a wind [His Spirit] to pass over the earth, and the water subsided" (6:3; 8:1).

Just as Noah remained in the ark during a trial of faith (8:2-14), let us remain in Christ. When hardships seem to drag on or when all hope seems lost, let us rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. "Weeping may last for the night," says the psalmist, "but a shout of joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5b). It must have been a pleasant sight for Noah to witness New Year's Day (8:13) when the water receded and "a new earth" appeared. Noah must have shouted triumphantly as he and his family walked onto dry land (8:15-19).

Scripture tells us that there will be a new era when all tears will be wiped away and there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). How joyous it will be when "we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2)!

Wing Wong Ha is Senior Pastor of Bethel Chinese Christian MB Church in Vancouver, BC.

Question: Take a look at 2 Peter 3:11-14. What can you watch for in anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth?

watch

TUESDAY | Genesis 9:1-17

At The End Of The Rainbow You'll Find Advent

The magnificence of a rainbow with its bands of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet has carried deep meaning throughout history. From the first time that Noah and his family witnessed the phenomenon there has been mystery and intrigue. What did it mean?

The first recorded appearance comes on the heels of an epic storm, one that wiped out most of creation (Genesis 7). In the solemn moments that followed, God made a promise. He entered into His first covenant with creation. God declared that He would never again destroy all of life with a flood (9:15). But more than a declaration, God acted. He formed a rainbow and hung it for the world to see. “Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between (myself) and all living creatures” (9:16). The rainbow continues to be a reminder of God’s covenant.

Although we live in an era of grace, Jesus’ advent is an invitation to a new covenant, a new relationship with our Creator. God sent His son Jesus to show that “He is not slow in keeping His promise ... He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

It’s unlikely that you will see a rainbow in the sky this Christmas. But you will see the twinkle of rainbow colors on trees and on houses. When the twinkle catches your eye, think of the rainbow. It’s God’s sign and it’s a powerful reminder of His grace and mercy that is extended to all creation, and most surely to you.

Ed Willms is Executive Director for the Ontario Conference of MB Churches and attends Southridge Community Church in Vineland, ON.

Question: During this Advent season, pay attention to the moments where the majesty and grace of God touch you. How might you share these moments with others?

watch

WEDNESDAY | Isaiah 54:1-10

Reversal

Sad things happen—a lot. As King Solomon said: “there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4). So, we know not to cry at a birthday party or to mourn at a wedding. We know not to laugh at a funeral or to dance when the doctor says the test results don’t look good. Sad things are sad. So we might not be out of line to wonder, as we read today’s Advent text, did Isaiah miss the point of Solomon’s wise musing or is he out of touch with reality?

Sing oh barren woman? Burst into song; shout for joy? Really? How can this be? How can a series of disappointments be an occasion to rejoice? For those of us who are familiar with the way God speaks in the Bible, Isaiah’s words don’t seem so strange. We’re used to seeing tragedies transform into celebrations. The stories of the Bible are all about unexpected reversals of fortune.

Isaiah is speaking to God’s children. The situation may seem grim. The circumstance may seem bleak. It’s not. It’s a time to rejoice because God is at work! We may feel rejected or abandoned, but God tells us it’s time to rejoice and to burst into song because He has something better for us.

How do we know this is true? How do we know God loves us, forgives us, and takes us back? How do we hope in a season of waiting? God’s Word is true. Jesus was promised. God’s people waited. He came; and we’re told He will come again!

Victor Neufeld is Lead Pastor at North Kildonan MB Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: Can you think of a recent example of how God has turned a sad situation in your life into a reason for celebration?

watch

THURSDAY | Psalm 124

What If ... When?

Two thousand years ago Mary might have asked: What if people ostracize me? What if Joseph is appalled? What if God is not going to be with me throughout this awkward pregnancy? What if I am left to manage on my own? What if God is not on my side?

“What if” questions inevitably lead to “when” questions. Mary could not have known all that would happen as a result of her commitment to letting God’s way shape her life. But Mary’s imagination could have run wild: What if ... when Joseph discovers the pregnancy? What if ... when the neighbours begin to notice? What if ... when we are miles away from family and friends?

Many of the same kinds of questions surface within us today. What if ... when we can’t make a mortgage payment? When we struggle to communicate? When illness overwhelms? When we try and fail? When we are lost or lonely? When we can’t afford to finish? When I can’t articulate myself?

Mary had an overwhelming confidence in God and knew He was on her side. We too can forge ahead, into the day, the week, the year, knowing that God is on our side. The psalmist doesn’t anticipate a struggle-free life and Mary wasn’t promised a struggle-free life. Nevertheless, both the psalmist and Mary move forward in confidence, knowing that God is there for them.

Eugene Klassen is a Development Officer for MB Seminary and attends Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: What are the “what if ... when” fears that are shaping your life? Do those fears subside as you consider them in light of knowing that God is on your side?

watch

FRIDAY | Acts 13:16-25

Watching For Divine Moments

In today's reading Paul is explaining the chronicle of God. Advent is a reminder to keep telling the great story. Paul starts in Egypt and moves his narrative through the history of Israel straight to Jesus. I find it amazing how God's story encompasses my life; He wonderfully wove my story into His. I continue to see this happening with others as well.

I remember one Christmas where shoppers were scurrying in and out of the packed shops. Pre-Christmas shopping was draining the life out of me, so I sought refuge in a small coffee shop. I was wearing my bright red sports jacket, which was an early gift. The server had a touch of grey in his hair, and was working frantically. He looked up at me, staring at my jacket, smiled half-heartedly and asked: "Man in red, man of anger, what can I get you?"

I was shocked. "I'm a man of peace," I answered.

"Why are you a man of peace?" asked the server.

"Because, I've met the Prince of Peace," was my response.

The man thought for a moment and then with a touch of pain said, "I knew the Prince of Peace once, but lost Him."

I invited him to sit with me on his break. Fifteen minutes later we sat sharing. I felt like Paul being invited to explain the word of God in a fresh and new way. The man had lost his peace after a poisonous divorce, and a decision to leave the church. Twenty years later, we sat in the coffee shop with *Silent Night* playing over the mall's PA system. After thirty minutes of listening to his story and his misunderstanding of God's love, we prayed together over the music: "Christ, the Saviour is born, Christ, the Saviour is born."

Phil Collins is Lead Pastor of Willow Park Church in Kelowna, BC.

Question: Have you experienced any divine appointments this Advent season, wherein you have been invited to listen to others and share the great story?

watch

SATURDAY | John 1:19-28

Clear Voice – Clear Identity

As I write these words the world is awaiting the start of the Olympic Games in Rio. Hordes of reporters are already there sending back stories of all the preparations, all the expectations, all the controversies. Everything about the big event is being scrutinized, but the real events are yet to happen. The world eagerly waits for the focus to switch to the athletes.

John the Baptist also lived in a time of expectation and watching for the Messiah. His preaching in the desert attracted considerable attention. “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan” (Matthew 3:5). And this caused a stir among *the Jews*, which is the term John’s gospel uses seventy times, most often in the sense of the Jewish nation or Jewish leaders who were hostile to Jesus. Although they were rightfully waiting for the Messiah to appear, they also were threatened easily by any kind of religious movement that would rival their authority.

So the Jews sent a delegation to determine the identity of this desert preacher. Was he the Christ? Was this the expected return of Elijah? Or was he the prophet spoken of in Deuteronomy? It was reasonable that the Jewish leaders asked these questions—they were watching and waiting. After all, John had the same unique fashion sense as Elijah (compare Matthew 3:4 and 2 Kings 1:8). John brushed off the questions. Instead, he referenced Isaiah 40:3 and called himself “the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

John was not concerned with his own identity, but with the identity of the Christ—who already stood among them at this time! Jesus was the Word; John was the voice proclaiming the coming of the Word. Even today the Word is among us and in us, but the voice is needed to have the Word be known.

Ben Wohlgemut is a Development Officer for MB Seminary and also serves as Pastor to Seniors at Fairview Church in St. Catharines, ON.

Question: As we watch and wait this Advent season, how can we be “the voice” pointing the way to Christ? What posture would help us focus on the Word rather than the voice?

week two

PREPARE

prepare

SUNDAY | Matthew 3:1-12

Tell It Like It Is

I once served under a pastor who fawned shamelessly when a prominent political figure visited our church. Why are Christians so enamored with status and power? Why do we associate ourselves with popular people and trends in an attempt to gain an audience?

In contrast, John the Baptist seems both unfazed and unimpressed by the power of people his ministry attracts. His significance is lofty (Luke 7:28), but his self-image is lowly (3:11). Of all the prophets God commissioned to bear witness to His call to repentance, John has the greatest reason to claim the privilege accompanying a divine anointing, yet he eschews the opportunity to act in self-interest.

John cuts to the heart of Christ's advent with singular, self-effacing focus. His message is unapologetic. In the face of critics, he resolutely embodies the message he proclaims. Here is a nobody, railing against establishment in anticipation of the coming Messiah and ultimate judgment. He does nothing to make his message palatable, much less winsome. Amazingly, establishment figures flock to him! Why?

The power of God's message is itself transformative. John understands this, and his example is instructive for Christians who are inclined to adjust God's good news to enhance its acceptability.

The advent of Jesus the Christ truly is good news, but only for those who receive it. Even those who understand but refuse to submit to the lordship of the Messiah will not escape awful consequences inevitably arising from their rejection. Jesus is a friend and a brother, but He remains Lord. No one can expect entry into the kingdom based on status. Like Abraham, all members of the kingdom enter in the same way—as proselytes. John understands this, and acts accordingly.

Do we live and speak a message that bears witness to this truth? Are we faithful stewards of our call, as John was? Even good news comes at a cost, and it demands repentance. God's good news needs no improvement from us.

Brian Cooper is Assistant Professor of Theology at MB Seminary and attends Mountain Park Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: What do you need to do (or change) to help prepare others for Christ's coming?

prepare

MONDAY | 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Why?

Watching my grandchild, I look forward to the stage when she'll ask "why" ten times, and then once more. She'll be laying essential foundations for life.

Adults also ask "why." During a person's 50s and 60s, they sometimes ask it because they've experienced reversals and disappointments that challenge their assumptions. Since God wants everyone to become His adult children—not remain infant children—I'm confident God welcomes our questions.

In today's excerpt from Paul's correspondence, he urges new converts to "do more and more" in two domains. First, learn holiness in your sexual lives—reserve sex for marriage, treat your own and others' bodies with respect, and don't take advantage of anyone. Second, love your families and neighbours—keep calm, work responsibly, and earn the respect of people outside the church.

I have two "why" questions: Why do these instructions matter? Why is this reading fitting for the Advent season?

Verse 1 addresses my first question. By living uprightly, we please God. God desires to reconcile the world and its people to Himself. Whenever His children develop His character, their actions show what God is like so that others can know Him too. This gives God pleasure.

A response to my second question lies in the verses that bracket today's reading (3:13, 4:13-5:11). Not only is God giving us His Spirit now (4:8), but also Jesus is returning to be present with us. We need to live in ways that are consistent with who Jesus is, so that we'll truly be "at home" with Him when He returns.

Andrew Dyck is Professor of Ministry Studies with MB Seminary at Canadian Mennonite University and attends Westwood Community Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: As you re-read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, which of Paul's reasons for living uprightly do you find compelling? Why or why not? Which of this passage's instructions are important for you to heed right now? Why that one?

prepare

TUESDAY | Romans 15:14-21

Waiting With Intention

The adage says a watched pot never boils, and in my house most pots go unwatched and regularly boil over. Waiting is a delicate balance. To wait for water to boil you stop your entire life to stare at a pot of liquid, which is not very useful and I would imagine very boring. And yet, ignoring the pot is just as useless because it usually results in someone scrubbing the stovetop.

How do we wait? Where is the balance?

Today's reading is from Paul's letter to the early Roman church, and Paul is waiting well. In chapter 8, he talks about waiting *eagerly*, and in chapter 13 he reminds his readers that "the night is nearly over and the day is almost here." And yet, Paul is not standing around watching a pot and waiting for it to boil.

Read the passage again and take note of all the active words Paul uses. He actually proclaims the gospel as he waits. He leads the Gentiles to obey God as he waits. He preaches where Christ is not known as he waits.

Paul is waiting, but with intention that is active. Why? The passage suggests that Paul intentionally waits so that people might know Christ. Paul is intentionally waiting so that more people may wait actively with him. It seems Paul is watching the pot *and* working in the kitchen.

Often devotionals for the Advent season challenge us to pull back and wait with anticipation, which has its place. But what if, this Advent season we were to lean in and wait with intention? What if we got busy in the kitchen?

Erica Boschman is Associate Pastor at River West Christian Church in Edmonton, AB.

Question: What do you find challenging about waiting with intention? What is one practical way you could incorporate this style of waiting into your Advent season this year?

prepare

WEDNESDAY | Genesis 15:1-18

Hate To Wait

It's hard to wait, especially when you are two-years-old! At that age, you're prone to mood-swings, temper tantrums, and full-scale meltdowns. As my son contemplated just how far-off Christmas seemed, he remarked hopelessly, "but I want to *go* to Christmas!"

If only we could skip waiting and "go to Christmas." Surely Abram and Sarai would have skipped the waiting and gone straight to the business of having a baby. But this is not the way of God. God's promises invite His people to wait. For Abram and Sarai, the words of promise came in a bleak and barren time, when waiting seemed like an impossible task.

Like a child searching for hidden presents, Abram asked for assurance that God would make good on His word. God responded by asking Abram to look at the stars. Instead of providing proof of the future, God pointed Abram beyond the promise to the promise-maker, beyond human control to God Himself. And Abram trusted God's word. It is this trust that was credited to Abram as righteousness; it was a trust that did not rely on human reason, but in the word of God. Walter Brueggemann comments that righteousness "means to trust God's future and to live assured of that future even in the deathly present" (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*).

Abram trusted God's promise, but the pain of his present circumstances did not change, at least not right away. Like Abram we are called to trust in God's future even as we live in the uncomfortable present. Our waiting may cause temper tantrums as we cry in frustration, "but I want to *go* to God's promised future." As we learn to wait on God we can only pray, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

Tabitha VandenEnden is Co-pastor at Grantham MB Church in St. Catharines, ON.

Question: In what ways do you try to take matters into your own hands, (in your personal lives or in your church community) instead of trusting in God's promised future?

prepare

THURSDAY | Ruth 1:6-18

Get Busy And Wait!

When my dad died suddenly at the age of forty-nine, I got a front row seat to both the provision of God and the do-whatever-it-takes attitude of a widow. Like Naomi, my mom chose to re-locate our family across the country to be near extended family and, I'm sure, there were many days that she hoped for a savior to rescue her from that chapter of life. Much of her rescue, however, meant "getting on with life."

Life was even more difficult for a widow during Naomi's time. Without a father, brother, uncle, or new husband to help, a widow was destined for a life of poverty and desperation. Truly, a widow was in need of rescue.

Naomi did not give up. As she waited for rescue, she was active. She heard God was on the move in her home community; she arose, set out for home, and spoke words of blessing and hope over her daughter-in-laws.

So often followers of Jesus confuse the act of faithful waiting with inactivity, yet Scripture speaks of waiting actively. Both Jesus and Paul talk about "making the most of every daylight hour" as a response to dark days (John 9:4; Ephesians 5:15-16). The Thessalonians were commended for their labour, their service, *and* their waiting (I Thessalonians 1:9-10)! Hebrews 9:27-28 speaks of "eagerly waiting" for the return of the King!

Mark Burch is Associate National Director of the C2C Network and attends Westside Church in Vancouver, BC.

Question: Have you confused waiting with "doing nothing"? As you look forward to the coming of the rescuer in Jesus' second coming, in what ways can you actively wait?

prepare

FRIDAY | Ruth 4:13-17

In The Little Town Of Bethlehem

A woman “bore a son” who would be “a redeemer” and whose name “would be renowned in Israel.” It sounds a lot like the Christmas story, but it is not yet the ultimate Christmas story. Here at the end of Ruth the newborn child is Obed, the mother is Ruth, and the name that would become renowned is that of David (4:17, 22). David would become Israel’s greatest king because he was a man with “a heart after God,” and God blessed him.

In the reading today, we are told how God brought about the kingly line of Israel through the faithfulness of Ruth and her husband, Boaz. Ruth and Boaz were a part of God’s plan, but weren’t able to see that plan fully expressed in their lifetime. They waited during the course of their earthly lives for God to bring about the kingly line of Israel, and then, like the saints of Hebrews 11, they greeted the promise from afar (Hebrews 11:13).

The hometown for Boaz, Ruth, Obed, and David was Bethlehem, and it was to Bethlehem that the descendant, Joseph, had to go when Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone in his empire should be registered. At that time Joseph took with him his pregnant wife Mary. Like Boaz and Ruth, Joseph and Mary seemed insignificant to the world and its troubles, and yet they were full of loving kindness towards each other. Boaz had redeemed Ruth and Joseph had redeemed Mary. Such love often goes unnoticed by the world, but it does not go unnoticed by God. In that little town of Bethlehem, God brought, once again, a great gift into the world.

Kris Peters is Lead Pastor at Linden MB Church, AB.

Question: Consider your own life. Are you able to identify ways that God has prepared a part of your life in advance? Do you give God enough credit for His ability to take care of the “big picture”?

prepare

SATURDAY | Psalm 146:5-10

Living With Refugees

Several months ago, God gave us the opportunity of a lifetime. Our family of six joined the New Hope community, which is a 13-unit apartment building in Surrey, BC that houses and serves newcomers to Canada.

Our refugee friends include Syrians, Kurds, Hondurans, Congolese, Ethiopians, and a woman from Eritrea. All of them are looking for friends and help as they settle into their new lives here. Every day we have opportunities to learn from them and bless them. Most of them are Muslim; yet, we have had the privilege of sharing the gospel with several of them.

In Psalm 146:5-10, we see a picture of a God who cares for the oppressed. He upholds their cause. He feeds the hungry. He sets prisoners free. He cures those who are blind and lifts up those who are burdened with the cares of this world. The Maker of heaven and earth is concerned about the plight of refugees and others who suffer.

One of our Muslim friends has been attending a local church to learn English and to connect with people. One night, he asked us about the little cups of juice that people sometimes drink in church. What an opportunity to share what we remember every time we celebrate communion! After our conversation, we gave the man a copy of the Jesus movie in his first language. He was so excited to learn more about Jesus.

During this Advent season, we celebrate Jesus' coming. Jesus clearly demonstrated a heart for the hurting. He lived out the words in Psalm 146.

Our seven-month experience of living with newcomers to Canada has given us the opportunity to express something of God's heart for refugees in tangible ways.

As we celebrate Jesus' coming, let's remember how He came to rescue people from both spiritual and physical oppression. Let's follow His example.

Randy Wollf is Assistant Professor of Leadership and Practical Theology and the Director of MinistryLift for MB Seminary and attends South Langley MB Church, BC.

Question: What is one thing that you will do this week to help someone in difficulty?

week three

PROCLAIM

proclaim

SUNDAY | Matthew 11:2-11

Are You The One?

At first glance this passage seems like a strange one to read in the Advent season! But it actually asks the perfect question, as we get ready for the birth and second coming of Jesus.

John prepared the way for Jesus' coming and was a courageous witness. The people of Israel, including John, were expecting God to send them a Saviour, who would free them from the Romans, and John thought Jesus was that person!

Jesus spent His time telling the crowds about God's love for them. God knew that the people needed someone who could show them God's love and how to live in relationship with Him.

Jesus wasn't who John was expecting and so he asks Jesus: Are you the one we should be looking for or should we wait for someone else? Jesus answers John by telling him all the things He is doing to proclaim God's love. Jesus says John will be blessed if he believes in the kingdom that Jesus is bringing into the world, the kingdom of God's love where people will be whole and will love God and one another.

We also will be blessed if we proclaim God's kingdom by doing the things Jesus did—helping the hurting, sharing with the needy, spending time with the lonely. Jesus is the one who shows us God's love and how we can be a part of God's kingdom on earth.

Christine Kampen is Pastoral Elder at Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: What is one way you or your family can proclaim God's love to others as you wait to celebrate Jesus' birth and look ahead to His second coming?

proclaim

MONDAY | Acts 5:12-16

Proclaiming The Power Of The Spirit

Last year I had a medical issue that required surgery. The local surgeon determined I needed to be referred to a surgeon in a larger medical centre. By the time the second appointment took place, I was healed. The surgeon was stumped. He checked and re-checked the MRI results and re-examined me. All he could do was scratch his head in disbelief.

There wasn't a medical explanation for the unexpected healing. *Unexpected?* That word caught my attention. We worship and serve a God of miracles and yet I didn't *expect* healing. I could understand God's working through doctors and surgeons, but I was surprised when He chose to work directly through the power of the Holy Spirit. Ouch. Had I completely forgotten the healings recorded in the book of Acts and healing I've witnessed in my lifetime?

As we remember Christ's coming and await His return, do we proclaim the power of the Holy Spirit? Do we see Him at work and share our stories? Or, in this age of self-sufficiency, do we rely on a worldly explanation for everything? What we can accomplish in our human power does not attract people to God's family—at least not deeply—but what we can accomplish by the power of the Holy Spirit is limitless in “adding to their numbers” (5:14)!

Holly Wolitski is Pastor of Congregational Life at Westwood Church in Prince George, BC.

Question: What are you attempting to do that cannot be done without the power of Holy Spirit? Pray and ask God to grow your trust in Him.

proclaim

TUESDAY | Jude 1:17-25

Channels of Mercy

Going to the beach is a favorite summer activity in our family. A sandy beach offers endless entertainment, but we love to build water channels. We start by making a miniature water reservoir and then dig a maze of channels to guide the water back to the lake. Our daughters' excitement is palpable the moment the reservoir is opened and the water spills down the channels. Then, excitedly, they rush to keep the reservoir full so the water is continually flowing out the channels.

In today's passage Jude encourages us to build up our faith reservoir by being rooted in God's love and praying in the Spirit as we await eternal life. He then urges believers to be actively drawing others into the kingdom of God by being channels of mercy into their lives.

Mercy (a kind action or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly) is no small task. God *is* mercy. How can we be channels of mercy? I think it's a bit like our beach reservoir. First we must accept God's mercy in our lives and be actively working on filling up our faith reservoir. Then, in God's strength, we choose to open the reservoir and actively let mercy flow out! It flows to the child who just dropped your phone in the dishwasher, to the difficult co-worker you share a workspace with, or to the family member when relations are distant and strained.

Through these acts of mercy we proclaim Christ and share the gift of God's love.

This Advent season I pray we can be actively filling up our faith reservoirs in anticipation of becoming overflowing channels of God's mercy to our world.

Kelsie-Lynn Harms is Children's Ministry Director at Hepburn MB Church, SK.

Question: What helps you to build up your faith reservoir? Who is someone you can proclaim God's love to by being a channel of mercy?

proclaim

WEDNESDAY | Matthew 8:28-34

Ready To Receive

After moving away from home, my brother and I decided to surprise our parents one year by showing up at Christmas unannounced. We were greeted with hugs, laughter, and the question: “what are you doing here?” It stimulated so much joy that every gathering our parents re-told the story of how we came home for the holidays that year. Even though we hadn’t told them we were coming, they were ready to receive us!

At Gadarenes Jesus also took people by surprise and was asked: “what are you doing here?” The difference is that He was not ready to be received.

The first to encounter Jesus was a set of demons. They expected to see Jesus, but not that day. A time and date had been set for this visit; hugs and laughter were not going to be a part of it.

The farmers witnessing this surprising encounter ran to tell all their friends the story of how their entire herd of pigs drowned themselves and the monsters that lived in the tombs were now speaking in their right minds giving praise to Jesus for their transformation. But the farmers were not ready to receive Jesus either, and in the end, begged Him to leave.

With spirits of violence controlling the people of the tombs they were unable to receive Jesus until they let go of their anger or until the demons let go of them. With greed and pride controlling the farmers they were unable to receive Jesus.

Carol Heynen is Associate Pastor of Worship Arts: Liturgical Congregation at Bakerview Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: As you anticipate the arrival of Jesus this Advent season, what do you need to let go of to receive Him?

proclaim

THURSDAY | Galatians 3:23-29

Jesus Changes Everything!

I inherited my grandpa's guitar. I don't remember any grumbles about it, but I do remember uncomfortable family conversations about who gets what when my grandparents' estate was settled.

Inheritance is a big deal. For some it's about wealth and for others it's about memories. Sometimes those two things are the same!

When the Apostle Paul tells the Galatians that they are all children of God, the point is not just to create warm, familial feelings. The point is to proclaim the full inheritance of those who are in Christ Jesus. For Paul, Jesus changes everything! You are no longer just any children, but now children who receive the full inheritance: the entire kingdom is yours.

What does it mean to be heirs of God's kingdom? Well, the first application for Paul is that people are no longer disqualified from full participation with God and God's people. Barriers are removed. The three barriers in Paul's day were race and religion (Jew/Gentile), economic or social status (free/slave), and gender (male/female). Has anything changed?

And then Paul writes, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

When we proclaim the good news of Jesus, let's do so with the freedom to proclaim the whole gospel, the full inheritance according to the promise. This is not the time to draw boundaries, but to invite others freely to also be heirs of God's kingdom come. And as we anticipate the Christ-child celebration this Advent season, let this be our proclamation: Jesus changes everything!

When you inherit everything, the exclusion of others makes no sense.

Jeff Peters is Director of Advancement at MB Seminary and attends Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: Do you own something special from an inheritance? How has your inheritance from God changed the way you view your brothers and sisters in Christ? Or your view of other people in general?

proclaim

FRIDAY | Galatians 3:23-29

Anticipation

I grew up in a traditional European family. Part of the tradition of Christmas was to go to church on Christmas Eve and then come home to celebrate a family meal, sing carols, and finally open the gifts! As a child, the preliminary events of December 24th couldn't pass fast enough. The church service was exceedingly long, the dinner took forever, and who knew that so many carols could be sung in German, Dutch, and English. I couldn't wait for the main event—opening presents!

Somehow my parents knew how to delay the gifts just long enough for me to follow their timing. Sure enough, at just the right time, my Dad would call out my name and it would be my turn to discover the treasure that had been waiting for me under the tree. Year after year, the gift I was given exceeded my expectations, and met the desire of my heart!

As Paul writes to the Galatians, he reminds them of the gift that God gave in the form of His Son (4:4-5).

Paul reminds us that God's timing is always impeccable, and His gift of Jesus meets our every desire. Christmas is a season to celebrate the perfect timing of God and to rejoice in the fullness of His provision.

Paul also reminds us that God's gift imparts to us the wonder of the full rights of being part of His family. We receive the gift of becoming members of the family of God, complete with all the attending privilege. The very Spirit of God lives in our hearts, allowing us to call to Him as Abba.

I encourage you to embrace the fullness of the gift that God has given this Advent season. Embrace the reality that you are a child of God, privileged to call Him Abba.

Ron van Akker is Associate Conference Minister with BCMB and attends Central Community Church in Chilliwack, BC.

Question: How will you celebrate the gift of Jesus this season? How will you share this gift with others?

proclaim

SATURDAY | Psalm 42

Life With God

Have you ever had the wind knocked out of you? Or choked on a piece of food? Straightaway your body does all it can to breath because it needs air to survive. As early as seconds old, humans experience this right before they inhale that first breath. Like air, water is essential for life and the writer of Psalm 42 begins by comparing a basic need to being with God: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You” (42:1).

The verb *pants* isn’t very common anymore. Martin Luther translates it as *cries*; the Septuagint and Vulgate use *desire*; the psalmist elaborates with *thirst*. There is an acute need behind all these actions. If a deer is tired and panting, running from hunter or predator, it won’t pursue a river to sip gently; rather it plunges into it (John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*)!

In a way, Psalm 42 is all about “gasping for air” or “plunging into a river to drink” because the poet is crying out for God’s presence—to talk with Him, worship Him, be with Him—in order to live!

It’s thought by some that David wrote this psalm during exile. If so, he would have been deprived of the opportunity to access the temple’s sanctuary and cut off from the privilege of public worship. During a time of waiting, he cries for the life-giving presence of God by remembering Him, despite being barred from the way the faithful of that time obtained access to God. David recounts that God, “consulting our weakness ... descends to us;” therefore, the psalmist is confident that he will “again praise Him for the help of His presence” (John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*).

Erika M. McAuley is Project Editor at MB Seminary and attends Arnold Community Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: What does Psalm 42 communicate about the human need for God’s presence and engagement with Him and what might that tell you about God Himself?

week four

WORSHIP

worship

SUNDAY | Matthew 1:18-25

Upright And Obedient In The Midst Of Difficulty And Confusion

Only two of the gospel writers (Matthew and Luke) give attention to the details surrounding the birth of Jesus. Both stories evoke considerable empathy for the young couple, Mary and Joseph, who are two of the central characters in the story. Matthew's version begins by matter-of-factly introducing Mary, a young woman committed to being married to Joseph, who as a virgin, inexplicably finds herself pregnant. Without commenting on the distress that this predicament would have caused Mary, Matthew quickly turns his attention to Joseph, who finds himself faced with intensely difficult relational and cultural decisions.

The focus on Joseph is consistent with Matthew's overall intent to show that Jesus was the Messiah who directly descended from the royal house of David, and to address some of the issues relevant to his predominantly Jewish audience.

Aside from Matthew's claim that Jesus was in the true lineage of David because Joseph was legally married to Mary, any reader cannot help but feel the agony of the couple's circumstances. Joseph knows the usual process of shameful public exposure that accompanies an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, but he determines instead not to subject Mary to such public disgrace. Can you imagine the awkward conversations that must have taken place between the couple? Matthew simply describes Joseph as a "good" man; his compassion makes him willing to break with cultural norms. And he is an obedient God follower: he recognizes and receives the incredulous message from God brought to him by an angel in a dream. Such divine intervention, and the supernatural origin of Mary's child, was not easily explained to family and friends! Nevertheless, Joseph does as the angel instructs.

Bruce L. Guenther is Professor of Church History and Mennonite Studies at MB Seminary and attends Bakerview Church in Abbotsford, BC.

Question: Have you experienced any difficult or confusing circumstances this year? Have you responded in ways that break cultural norms? What might you learn from Joseph's resolve to follow God and do what is good and right, despite awkward circumstances?

worship

MONDAY | Genesis 17:15-22

A Child Named Laughter

I don't know anyone who would classify the Bible as a comedy, but many of its pages are filled with laughter. For instance, God chooses a man named Abram (which means father) as His starting point for making a new nation. This sounds like an excellent choice except that his wife is barren. And as the years go by, God's promise is threatened even further. When God decides to give new names to the white-haired couple, the situation becomes so ironic that it reaches comedic levels. The man is now called "Father of many" (Abraham) and his wife's new name becomes "Noblewoman" (Sarah). Each of them laughs when they're told they'll have a son within the next year and I can't help but think that I would have done the same thing. The comedy reaches its apex when God tells them to name their boy "Laughter" (Isaac).

I used to think that Isaac got his name because his parents couldn't control their giggles, but God often gives names as a testimony for what He *will* do. I can't imagine Abraham laughing as he prepared to sacrifice his only son, but perhaps it was Laughter's name that helped the old man remember God's promise. No matter how much our present circumstances may threaten God's promises, they do not fully negate what He said He will do.

Many years later, a pair of unsuspecting couples would share in the laughter that comes from seeing God do the impossible. The births of John (meaning Jehovah is a gracious giver) and Jesus (meaning Jehovah is salvation) proved, yet again, that nothing is too difficult for God (Genesis 18:17).

When we witness God do the impossible, the most fitting reactions are to laugh and to worship.

Keith Reed is Associate Director of MinistryLift at MB Seminary and attends North Langley Community Church, BC.

Question: What has God done in your life recently that has caused you to laugh and to worship?

worship

TUESDAY | Psalm 96

The LORD Is King

C*hristmas Blessings* is the greeting I have used for many years as I sign our family Christmas cards. I write *Christmas Blessings* with the prayer that the Christ of the manger and the cross will bless our friends and family. I pray that He will note who they are and what they need and respond accordingly, for His glory. After I have mailed the cards, I anticipate receiving Christmas cards with similar greetings: *Season's Greetings, Best Wishes, Thinking of You.*

Psalm 96 is a responsorial psalm filled with the declarations of a praiseworthy God, for He is truly God and truly man. As we wait for Christmas Day, Psalm 96 directs us to be active in our worship. We are called to sing, bless, tell, declare, revere, and ascribe. We are to bring offerings for the LORD, the newborn, for He is King.

As believers we know the depth of my greeting *Christmas Blessings*. We live in the awareness of both the manger and the cross. "Sing to the LORD, Bless His name; tell of His salvation from day to day" (96:2).

When the Lord blesses us it can be said that He looks on us, sees us as we are and notes our needs in order to meet them. Psalm 96 instructs us to bless the LORD. Spend time considering who He is, note His glory, strength, beauty, justice, and grace. After reflecting on who the LORD is we can respond with the text of Psalm 96:10 as our testimony: "The LORD is King"!

Gloria J. Woodland is Assistant Professor of Chaplaincy Studies and Spiritual Care at MB Seminary and Chaplaincy Program Director at ACTS Seminaries and attends The Willows Community Church in Langley, BC.

Question: What action from the Psalm will you participate in today as you wait to commemorate the birth of the LORD?

worship

WEDNESDAY | Matthew 1:1-17

God's Story

I am the granddaughter of Chinese immigrants who moved to Canada seeking a better future. It was not an easy life for them, but their courage and perseverance as they sought a hopeful future, has had a dramatic impact on my life two generations later.

When we look at the genealogy of Jesus we see a long list of people who modeled courage and perseverance as they prepared the way for Jesus. From one perspective, it might be discouraging that generation after generation passed before He came. How impatient we can be in our own lives, never mind throughout 42 generations! Yet each of their stories, from Abraham to Rahab, David to Mary and everyone in between, are full of God's work that narrates *His* story.

Sometimes it can be hard to see where God is working. This passage, of which many readers skip over, sheds light into the brokenness of our world by showing how God was constantly active even when it was hard to see.

Because of God's ongoing work, my family story isn't defined by the racism and brokenness they experienced in their move. What is more powerful to me is the way God used a local church to draw my grandparents into the faith that I now follow.

God, whose faithfulness is being revealed in the lives of His followers as well as in this beautiful Advent season, calls us to remember what He has done, what He is doing, and what He will one day do. Respond by worshipping Him with joyful hearts and loving deeds.

Janessa Giesbrecht is Youth Pastor at Fort Garry MB Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: Whose story in the genealogy stands out to you as a story of God's faithfulness? What can you do this Advent season to take the hope of Jesus and share it with others?

worship

THURSDAY | Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20

Is Today The Day?

“Is *today* the day that daddy is coming?”

“No, honey. Not today.”

“Then how many more sleeps?”

Each time I called home from New York City my wife offered the same report. Her life was an endless loop of this conversation with our five-year-old daughter, who was eagerly awaiting my return. To her, my absence was palpable. Everything was a reminder that I was missing. Her world would be uneasy until daddy was home. Her life was charged with anticipation. Every day could be the day.

That same expectation supercharges the final section of Revelation, which is both the conclusion to the book and the grand finale of the entire Bible. This section opens and closes with the same promise on the lips of Jesus: “I am coming soon” (22:7, 20)! With these words, Jesus peels back the curtain of reality. He grants us preview of the final scene. Some day soon, this present moment, in all its brokenness, violence, and uncertainty, will disappear, chased away by Jesus’ coming, who will bring with Him a whole new creation! Every day could be the day.

Our world is missing its Saviour. If we look, we can see evidence everywhere that He is missing. Yet, unlike my daughter, we’ve become comfortable with Christ’s absence. We’ve learned to expect it, to accept it, to accommodate it. We’ve stopped noticing that Jesus is missing and stopped anticipating His return. What would it look like to live as though every day could be the day?

Let’s anticipate Jesus’ coming with all the fervency with which we anticipate Christmas. Let’s long for the new creation He is bringing, a world full of hope, joy, and peace. Let’s pray with John, “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

Michael Krause is Teaching Pastor at Southridge Community Church in St. Catharines, ON.

Question: Why is it so easy to not notice that Jesus is missing? Where in our world do you notice His absence? What does it look like to live in the anticipation of His return?

worship

FRIDAY | Luke 1:46b-55

An Uncomfortable Hymn

A Polish-Catholic professor of Old English introduced me to the notion that Advent—the church’s season of Christmas—is not intended to be filled with decorations, lights, and parties, as many have become accustomed. In church tradition, it’s a sombre time of waiting, mourning even. But it’s filled with hope, because the church is anticipating the coming of redemption, of the incarnation of already-but-not-yet shalom.

Mary’s hymn of praise and thankfulness to God in Luke 1:46–55 (also known by its beautiful opening words in Latin, “Magnificat”) is an example of this worshipful waiting. Mary overflows spontaneously with praises as she considers a God who is mighty but stops to see a servant, a God who employs His strength to lift up the lowly. There is comfort in these words for those who suffer or feel forgotten.

Yet, for some, this joyful song of thanksgiving and praise may be somewhat unsettling. This inspiring vision of a just world—where God humbles the proud and gives the poor good things—may actually place some of us on the other side of the balance. I recognize myself among the powerful and the rich rather than the hungry or servant Israel.

Amid the jolly carols and the twinkling lights that are oh-so-welcome in December’s days of growing darkness, Advent calls Christians to worshipful waiting that examines our own actions and probes our own culpability.

We long to see shalom now, yet perhaps its “not-yet” is a mercy, giving us time to learn the new economy of Jesus’ kingdom.

Karla Braun is Associate Editor of the MB Herald and attends Crossroads MB Church in Winnipeg, MB.

Question: Currently in your life do you sing with Mary or do you find yourself upset at the turning of the scales? When the King comes to bring justice, will you rejoice at His rescue or find yourself among those He rebukes?

worship

SATURDAY | Luke 2:1-14

Those Days

On this silent night, let us consider what Luke highlights as transpiring “in those days” (2:1).

We note that Caesar Augustus had an agenda. His imperial purposes were rearranging the plans of the world and forcing road trips for the masses. Emperors find ways to dominate headlines and bring everyone to chatter.

We note also that Syria was in the news. Quirinius was administering his first census; surely a logistical nightmare. Empirical outposts like Syria and Judea managed diverse populations including enemies and now everyone was experiencing unhappy, forced homecomings. Even Nazarenes were on the move; and the rumour was that nothing good came from there (John 1:46).

And we note there were shepherds out in their fields. The designs of Emperors and frustrated peoples were likely trivial matters to them. The daily grind, fresh air, and bleating sheep; the earthy and mundane consumed them. No matter who ruled, they plodded on happy for the peace to be found in the fields. How fitting that God would announce that peace on earth had come to a place of escape from the craziness of “those days.”

Our wait is over. Or, is it? “These days” don’t seem too different from “those days.” Leaders make disrupting decisions, Syria is newsworthy, people are migrating, and everyday work continues in a variety of fields. God has acted; the Messiah has come and will come again. Peace has interrupted our days, but this peace is not ours to pocket; it is to be acted upon and gifted to others (2:15-18).

Phil Wagler is Training and Team Health Team Leader at MB Mission and attends Gracepoint Community Church in Surrey, BC.

Question: How would you describe the days you are living in? What does it mean to be aware of God’s mighty acts to bring salvation and peace in days like these?

worship

SUNDAY | Isaiah 62:6-12

Embracing Our Saviour

I love coming home after being away for work. I love opening the front door of our house and having our daughters waiting at the top of the stairs for me. I love it so much that I find myself thinking about it well before I arrive. And I love—absolutely love—the long hug with each of my girls as we see each other again. That is when I know I am finally home.

As I read Isaiah 62:6-10, it seems that the watchmen were waiting for God's arrival with just as much longing. And I get the sense that the Lord's anticipation was likely as high as theirs, maybe even higher.

“No rest” is the phrase that is used to describe the nature of their waiting. Always be ready. Don't become distracted.

Have you been waiting for the Lord with no rest? Were you so desperate to be with Jesus today that you couldn't sleep last night?

Verses 11-12 paint a picture of the long-anticipated Savior finally arriving on the scene. Hallelujah! The Saviour has arrived!

The Lord's arrival was so transformative that His people were given new names: Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord, Sought Out, A City not Forsaken. Each name *pointed* to God. Each name was a *witness* to God. And each name was a declaration of *worship*.

Christmas Day celebrates the long-expected arrival of Jesus. From a chronological perspective, the waiting ended a long time ago.

Today, in the midst of the inevitable activity and busyness, make time to read the Christmas story. Step away from everything else and reflect on the Lord's love for you. And embrace your Saviour with a deep sense of worship.

Merry Christmas!

Mark Wessner is President of MB Seminary.

Question: Identify one or two activities in your life that have distracted you from focusing on Jesus this Advent season. What can you change now, so that you can start this next year with a healthy rhythm of time with Jesus?



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SEMINARY

LANGLEY CAMPUS 7600 Glover Road, Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1
WINNIPEG CAMPUS 500 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 2N2
advancement@mbseminary.ca
LIFELONG LEARNING FOR LIFELONG MISSION MBSEMINARY.CA