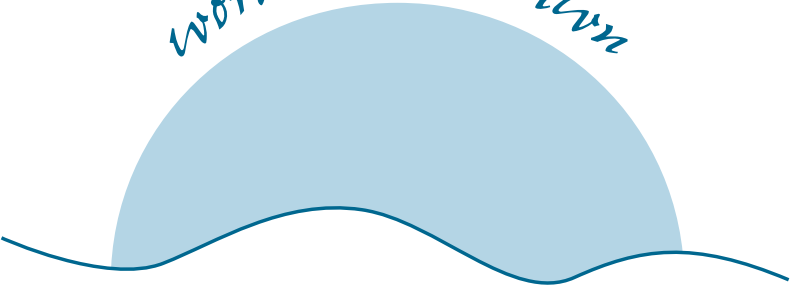


*words before dawn*



*Advent Devotional Booklet 2003*

THE  
LUTHERAN  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY  
AT PHILADELPHIA

# Words Before Dawn

## An Advent Devotional Booklet – 2003

### Introduction

The dark is rising still. Advent goes paired with the dark time of year, in the northern hemisphere at least, in the areas where most of us live who may read these words. And for most of the time of Advent the days keep getting darker.

Advent intends to be honest about that darkness, that failing of the light. Of course, we know that this darkness is the result of the earth's tilt on its axis as it travels around the sun, the result of the northern hemisphere now leaning away from our nearby burning star. That knowledge indeed helps us to know where we are in this solar system. But the dark is still symbolic for us – a little frightening, a little sad, a little mysterious, perhaps a little restful. The dark calls up many human longings. And also in symbolic ways, the dark is rising still – even where the days are still long or getting longer, where the only form of darkness is the agonized longing for justice and peace in the human community.

The Advent liturgy of Christians intentionally inhabits that darkness, making of this dark time of year a symbol for all human need of God. The Advent liturgy does that not because we Christians are so brave or so honest, but because of Jesus Christ. The amazing word at the heart of Advent is that Jesus Christ has come to share our darkness. We celebrate word and sacrament during Advent as a sign that Christ is already among us, hidden in the dark places of the world, already the fountain of living waters flowing where we did not think it possible. Because of Jesus Christ, we can face the darkness of ourselves and of all the world.

And because of the spirit flowing from the resurrection of Jesus Christ we can know that every darkness is a time just before dawn. At Christmas and Epiphany time, we will use the returning sun to symbolize our sense that there is a true sun – brighter and more reliable than the star at the center of our solar system – burning with healing and love for everyone. The sun is not in the sky, but among us on the earth, in the presence of the holy Trinity.

Because of this presence and grace of God, all our words of prayer in the rising darkness can become words just before dawn.

What follows here is a little Advent gift from The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Voices from our community invite you to go through this Advent season intentionally. They invite you to stand with the waiting ones, opening your heart and your life to them, and celebrating the Present One, being gathered already now into God's great mercy for us all and living your life out of that mercy. These devotions may be used by you alone, marking some quiet hour of your day. Or they may be used by a small group – in your family or residential community or workplace. They are intended to echo and reinforce your weekly gathering with the Sunday assembly of your congregation, proposing readings that are drawn from our

current lectionary or from the Augsburg Fortress publication, *Between Sundays*. An outline for a simple form of daily prayer throughout the season is included below.

In the honesty of the rising darkness and the rising dawn, in the embrace of God's presence and joy, good Advent to you.

## Outline for daily prayer

### Light

If it is evening or early morning, light a candle at the place where you will pray and say:

*Light and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

### Song

If you wish, sing an Advent hymn or read a Psalm (Psalms 24, 25, 72, 80, 85, 122, 126 or 130 are good choices during Advent).

### Word

Read the scripture indicated for the day.

Keep a silence, as long as is useful for you, in this Word.

Then read the devotional meditation for the day.

### Prayer

Pray for all the needs you can remember – in the world and among distant people, in your town and neighborhood, in your congregation and all the churches, in your family.

### For November 30 – December 6:

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins.*

### For December 7-13:

*Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world.*

### For December 14-16:

*Lord, hear our prayers and come to us, bringing light into the darkness of our hearts.*

### For December 17:

*O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, permeating all creation, strongly and delightfully ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of good sense.*

### For December 18:

*O Adonai and ruler of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.*

**For December 19:**

*○ Root of Jesse, standing as an ensign before the peoples, before whom all rulers are mute, to whom all the nations will do homage, come quickly to deliver us.*

**For December 20:**

*○ Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel, you open and no one can close, you close and no one can open: Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.*

**For December 22:**

*○ King of the nations, the ruler they long for, the cornerstone uniting all people: Come and save us all, whom you formed out of clay.*

**For December 23:**

*○ Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver, the anointed of the nations and their Savior: Come and save us, ○ Lord our God.*

**For December 24:**

*Almighty God, you made this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence and in the last day wake to the brightness of this his glory.*

**Conclude with the Lord's Prayer.**

— Gordon Lathrop

## **About our writers**

The authorship for this year's little Advent guide is comprised of several seminary voices. They include the Rev. Dr. Gordon Lathrop, chaplain for the seminary and its Charles Schieren Professor of Pastoral Theology and Liturgy; the Rev. Rick Summy, an ELCA pastor who is director of admissions at LTSP; the Rev. Marcia Bell, an ELCA pastor who is director of Student Services, and Maritza Torres Dolich, a recent graduate of the seminary and admissions assistant at LTSP. The seminary is deeply grateful for the contributions and reflections of these writers for the second annual Advent guide. We hope you enjoy this simple devotional piece. Let us know what you think of it.

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## Sunday November 30/Luke 21: 25-36

In the year of Luke, Advent begins not with a whimper, but with a bang.

This is not what we expect. If, in our culture, we come expecting anything at all of Advent it is something quite different. We expect to prepare for something like this: Sweet baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths and cooing cutely in a manger. Mary standing serenely by. Joseph confused but committed.

The picture is pastoral: All is calm, all is bright. The scene is both familiar and comfortable. It fits like a favorite old sweater, stretched in all the right places and cozy as a second skin. It is nostalgically nice.

But Luke takes this nice, comfortable, Christmas card cover and blows it up. In its place we get a not-so-nice picture of cosmic upheaval, of fear and trembling, of nations perplexed at the roaring of the primal waters.

On the one hand, the Bethlehem baby is a safely distant, pseudo-historical comfort. On the other hand, Christ's second coming is a startlingly strange and scary as-yet-to-happen scenario. The first Christmas stands, out of harm's way, in the past. The second coming is out there somewhere still waiting to happen. The well-known, concrete Christmas Christ contends with the unknown coming, cosmic Christ. It is no wonder that we have settled on what we know. We turn our faces to the past and our backs to the future.

In the process the edge of expectation has been dulled. The world goes round and round. Nothing new under the sun. Same stuff, different day. We have grown numb to the horrors, are complacent in our complicity, have been lulled into listlessness.

But Luke's Advent overture, despite its promise of portends that would clearly signal the coming day, instead sharpens the expectation of surprise—a splash of cold water on a sleeping face. "Be on guard...be alert," lest the day that is surely coming catches us "unexpectedly, like a trap."

The same Luke who promises "peace on earth, goodwill..." stirs it up at the start. Far from signaling a settling in for what we fully expect, Luke awakens the edgy, Advent expectation that God is not yet finished with us. Fair warning. And yet, salvation, not condemnation, is the Lord's desire. In the midst of foreboding and fear, "redemption is drawing near."

Whatever the signs or the timetable, both the here and now and the not yet of Christ's presence are real. The Lord is simultaneously ever the same and always surprising. Count on the former; alertly expect, even long for, the latter.

For the unexpected day is coming.

And the redeeming promise is sure.

— Rick Summy

## **Monday December 1/ Numbers 17:1-18**

The signs that God chooses to convey a message or warning can be unusual and mystifying. The blossoms and almonds that sprouted from the staff of Aaron were surely not what the Israelites were expecting. Advent reminds us to watch and wait, to be alert and to pray, for the Son of Man will return.

## **Tuesday December 2/II Samuel 7: 18-29**

Even with all the earthly power and might that he possessed, King David was in utter and absolute awe of the Lord. The promise of an everlasting relationship with God and his descendants was the reason for David's rejoicing. In these later days, we know that a righteous branch has sprung forth from the house of David, and we await his coming again.

## **Wednesday December 3/ Luke 11: 29-32**

Repentance was the message of Jonah to the people of Ninevah. Now one greater than Jonah has come, and he will come again. Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.

## **Thursday December 4/ Isaiah 1:24-31**

The harsh words of the prophet are not without their glimmer of hope. Amidst the predictions of judgment and destruction is the promise of redemption for those who repent.

## **Friday December 5/II Peter 3:1-18**

The day of the Lord will most assuredly come, and it will come with loud noise, fire, and judgment. Then the new heaven and the new earth promised by God will be realized. Until that day we wait in peace, growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## **Saturday December 6/ Psalm 90**

O Lord, our fragile lives are transitory and fleeting. You alone have been the dwelling place for generation after generation. Look with favor upon your people and grant us peace.

— Marcia Bell

## Sunday December 7/Luke 3:1-6

All flesh.  
All flesh shall see.  
Salvation.

Not just the flesh that looks like you and me. Not just believers who believed the right thing or workers who worked hard. Not even just those who are sincere and insightful and compassionate. All. Everyone. Will see salvation.

Even those who are eager to point out that seeing salvation is different than experiencing it (in a last ditch effort to separate their sheep selves from the goat others) will be included, much as that might shock and surprise and disappoint those of us who think we are so much more open minded but still build fences of our own.

Black, white, red, brown—most of us are OK with that. Male and female. Not a problem. Rich and poor. Fine. Oppressor and oppressed. That sounds nice. How about gay and straight? Hmmmm. Jew, Gentile and Christian brings no objection. But what of Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist?

### **Everyone means everyone does it not?**

But then, what about all our differences? What about right and wrong? What about fairness and justice and truth?

How can we be certain we are in if we can't point at others who are out?  
Well, I don't know.

But between now and then, some things are going to change. Mountains will be leveled. Valleys will be filled. The cramped and crooked will be relaxed and will straighten out. Like jagged stones massaged by the sea, the rough will be made smooth. A voice crying out in the wilderness will be heard.

Between now and then some things are going to change. And the changes are not ours to make. Only God can make a way through the mountains of misunderstanding we build, the valleys of discord we create and with which we are too often pleased. Only God can straighten the crooked ways in which we bend ourselves and one another out of shape and smooth the spikes we sharpen to a point. Only God can make a path through the wilderness that sometimes seems to swallow us whole.

### **How? Only God knows.**

We are called to prepare the way. And I am not at all sure what even that means.

But hoping, longing, and aching for the advent of that holy day might be something like the baptism of repentance to which John calls us.

— Rick Summy

## **Monday December 8/ Isaiah 40:1-11**

Comforting assurance, valleys lifted up and mountains made low! Surely the Lord is coming and the glory of the Lord will be revealed to all people.

## **Tuesday December 9/ Isaiah 19:18-25**

The prophet Isaiah envisioned a day when the bitter enemies of Israel, Egypt and Assyria, would unite with her in praise and obedience to Yahweh. It is a radical, outrageous vision. But Isaiah confidently dreamed of that day.

## **Wednesday December 10/ Luke 7:18-30**

Jesus' response to the disciples of John is straightforward and to the point: Go and tell what you have seen and heard. The blind have sight, the lame can walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. What timely advice for us: Go and tell what you have seen and heard.

## **Thursday December 11/ Numbers 3:5-13**

The Israelites, embarking on the trek through the wilderness, were in need of worship leadership. So God appointed the tribe of Levi for this special ministry. What a blessing and a challenge to be chosen to minister to God's people.

## **Friday December 12/ II Peter 1:2-15**

In this Advent time of waiting, we are reminded that everything we need for life and godliness comes to us through the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We are encouraged for the days and challenges ahead knowing that Christ has come and Christ will come again.

## **Saturday December 13/ Psalm 126**

"The Lord has done great things." That cry of the psalmist is the cry of all the faithful people of God down through the ages. And the Lord continues this day and will continue forever to do great things.

— Marcia Bell

## **Sunday December 14/Luke 3: 7-18**

John is Advent incarnate, a figure who powerfully recalls what has been, who presently challenges those around him to respond fittingly, and who eagerly anticipates what God is about to do. He straddles the boundary between the fiery prophets of old and the one yet to come who is mightier and more merciful than all who have come before.

He knows his history, knows that God's steadfast love was often met by Israel's less than steadfast response. And so his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins demands the bearing of fruit worthy of such an act. He understands that smug trust in status or birthright leads to disaster and is keen to remind those who come to him with such presumed privilege that they are not playing with water but fire.

His examples of fruit-bearing form a solid but quite limited ethic: If you have more than enough, share it abundantly. If your job tempts you to defraud, you have all the more reason to work honestly. If you have the power to extort or accuse, do not exercise it. His exhortation is all fine and good as far as it goes, but it is far from complete, is not enough to live on. John resides in the wilderness, in between what was and what will be. He is the prophet of the meantime, where many of us live much of our lives. There is plenty of darkness peppered by tantalizing slivers of light. His message deserves both hearing and response. Those who play with fire... But his proclamation is limited. It lacks the crucial difference made by the one who has not yet arrived.

And so when Luke says that John preached the good news, there is truth in it, but not the whole truth.

And when writer and preacher Fred Craddock writes that "When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news," there is truth in it, but not the whole truth.

John's wilderness proclamation is an indispensable part of the journey. It calls us to stop and take stock, to check our bearings. But it, like Advent itself, is not the final destination. Bearing fruit worthy of repentance is meet, right and salutary, but it does not save. It is at best a signpost that provides ambiguous information. There is truth in it. But you can't get there from here. In the wilderness, in that darkness just before the dawn, the journey is fraught with shortcomings, stubborn pride, self-deception—all the limits of humankind.

The whole truth comes when the one who is more powerful arrives, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and Pentecost fire. The whole truth comes when Jesus himself is baptized, resists the temptations of the wilderness, and stands up in Nazareth to preach promise beyond John's wildest and most eager imagination: good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed.

Thank God for Advent John.

But come, Lord Jesus.

— *Rick Summy*

## **Monday December 15/Numbers 16: 1-19**

Disputes, conflicts, and complaints plagued the Israelites, not unlike our own communities of faith. In the midst of the crisis, the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation.

## **Tuesday December 16/ Numbers 16:20-35**

It is difficult to understand the fury of God's punishment. But Moses listened to the Lord and remained steadfast, as the guilty were swallowed up by the earth and consumed by fire. Trust and obedience were the hallmarks of his leadership

— Marcia Bell

## **December 17/Psalm 98**

O Wellspring of Joy, you have made known your mercy in the Word made flesh.  
Come let us make a joyful noise to you O Lord.  
Let all the earth break forth into joyous song and sing praises to our Lord.

## **December 18/Psalm 19**

O God of Splendor, there is no speech nor words that tell of your marvelous deeds.  
Hold us in your peace and scatter the darkness surrounding our lives at the break of dawn each day.

## **December 19/Psalm 24**

O King of Glory, the earth is yours and all that is in it.  
Come and rescue us from our weary waiting.  
Keep awake our faith in the darkness with your holy light

## **December 20/Psalm 80:1-7**

O God of Power, stir up your might, and come to save us!  
Give us life that we may call on your name.  
Restore us to you and let your face shine, that we may be saved.

— Maritza Torres Dolich

## **Sunday December 21/Luke 1: 39-45 (46-55)**

A child leaps in the womb.

The first time it occurs there is sheer joy at the sign of life it heralds. This sign is gracious evidence of a living being with its own mind and will to kick as it pleases. What was understood in the head is now recognized in the body. In the dark, a new relationship has begun and with each movement the intimate conversation between mother and child continues.

When Mary greets Elizabeth, John leaps in Elizabeth's womb. It is not an act of mind or will to announce his own presence, his own emerging life. He

is not making a claim for himself but is reacting because he has recognized another, the one whose path he will prepare, whose advent he will herald, the one whose sandals he will not presume to loosen, even though John is the elder, the oldest, the one who comes first.

Elizabeth's child leaps for joy at the recognition of Mary's son, and, in a way, an age has already begun to close and a new one has started to emerge. The child has leaped for joy! And it is the one who is second, whose purpose is to point to the other, to pave the way for the one who will be Messiah, who celebrates. The older will serve the younger. Gladly. The first reversal of God's promised future has occurred without bloodshed or curse.

It is a sign of things to come. Mary herself is a monumental reversal of what would be expected, a prime example of the almighty God choosing to work not through the skilled or talented or experienced but rather through the young and lowly and humble. She sings of the great reversals of all time and space. The proud scattered, the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up. The hungry filled with good things and the rich sent packing with empty bellies.

Mary sings of promise not yet fulfilled, but, according to Fred Craddock, "So sure is the singer that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as an accomplished fact." (God *has* shown strength...*has* scattered the proud...*has* brought down the powerful.)

The one whom John recognizes from the womb will turn things upside down. The promise will be fulfilled by the one Mary carries in her womb.

Familiar images abound and give shape to our hope. The creation itself will mend. Mountains will be leveled. Valleys filled. The crooked made straight. Rough ways smoothed over. Human beings will be made whole. Good news to the poor. Release to the captives. Sight for the blind. Freedom for the oppressed. The Lord's favor among those who have been pushed down, kept out, cruelly used.

What has been understood in our heads, in theory, begins to creep into our very bones. In the dark, a new relationship is emerging and with each passing day the intimate conversation will continue.

In anticipation, a young girl sings of things beyond her reach and imagination, sings full of trust and confidence in a God who can do impossible things.

In anticipation, a child, still womb-bound, leaps for joy.

And as we sit at the far edge of this season of hopeful waiting, the Advent shadows begin to thin as the first sprays of light appear on the horizon just before dawn.

— Rick Summy

## December 22/Psalm 79

O God of our Salvation, how long, how long will you be angry?  
Help us, O Lord, for the glory of your name deliver us, and forgive our sins,  
for your name's sake.

## December 23/Psalm 27

O Lord of Light, you are our salvation, whom shall we fear?  
You are the stronghold of our lives, of whom shall we be afraid of?  
Give us strength in our longing and in our waiting.

— Maritza Torres Dolich

## Wednesday December 24/Christmas Eve/Luke 2: 1-20

The words are ancient and belong to Isaiah. But perhaps they are words for us as well.

"The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand..."

Her eyes are bright and new; her walk a contrast—slow, careful, meticulous, each step effort-full. "Well, that's the way it goes, yep," she says. But her face still wonders why. Finally, she sits softly in a hard chair and props up the failing legs that stand only to slow her down and that speak with every step a taunt, a reminder that she can no longer do what she used to do without pain.

"Well, that's the way it goes," she says.

He answers your question, but you can tell he's not really listening. His mouth moves, but his eyes dart back and forth scanning piles of neatly stacked folders and rows of "to do" notes to himself. You ask if something is wrong. And he says "no," but in the same breath begins to tell the truth. "There's just so much to do. I'm not sure where to start, and"—a deep breath, a telling sigh, completes the sentence. He apologizes for being distracted, but even as he does, his eyes dart again.

Well, that's the way it goes.

They are bright and talented and faithful. People are always glad to be with them. They are surrounded by friends. But beneath the surface, deep inside, there are shadows that haunt, wilderness that threatens to overgrow and consume. For one, childhood scars continue to be scratched open by those who inflicted them in the first place. For the other, a surface silence hides the raging agony inside. One is afraid to be alone; the other says there is utter worthlessness at the core.

Why is it that this is the way it sometimes goes?

These are our lives. A mixed bag of disappointment and discovery, of distraction and joy, of highlight and tragedy, of frustration and blessed communication. Mundane much of the time. Surprised by joy some of the time. Haunted by moments of sudden silence, glimpses of nagging insight,

by a pinprick feeling that something is a bit off center. Somewhere along the line we seem to have lost the comforting instincts of other animals, who know whose they are and where they belong.

Even so, surrounded by the darkness around us and haunted by the shadows within, we gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of a child. And perhaps we will find in our mind's eye what the angel-heralded shepherds found: Mary and Joseph and a child wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger.

A manger. When Luke wrote this wonderful story he had Isaiah in mind. An ancient lament is met by present fulfillment. And now, perhaps, we begin to know why we gather each year to hear again this story we know by heart. Into lives with darkness around and shadows within, God has given us a gift of good news and great joy—Jesus the Christ is born.

Before the glory of the Lord stops shining this night, perhaps we will understand that this child is God with us, God among us, God one of us, that this child is the crucified and risen Lord.

Before the singing of the heavenly host is drowned out by the rumblings of the new year, maybe we will realize that this is no romantic fairy tale, a story spun for the entertainment of children, but is rather a matter of life and death. In this one whose birth we celebrate there is life!

More than life enough to center our lives. More than life enough to bridge the gap between discouragement and a fresh start. More than life enough to embrace the tragedies and grief that beset us. More than life enough to breathe new life into us at the beginning of every day.

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger. Now we know the manger of our Lord. One who was born long ago and far away is present still among us. The Spirit of the risen Christ blows in and among and through our dusky lives.

When it comes right down to it, that's the way it goes.

— *Rick Summy*

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