

THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

Advent Devotions:
WEEK 4

Theme of The Child

"Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2).

These poems and prose reflections focus on the image of God as child or God in children. Themes of innocence, vulnerability and incarnation are explored as well as contemporary correlations to children and the vulnerable.

As you attend to these daily reflections, call children or the Christ child to mind, meditate on the role and character of children, locate yourself within their stories. How do you see yourself as a child of God? How do you not? Attend to these words this week and be blessed.

Sunday, December 18

POEM



Winter Night

Small red wreath,
single candle light in its center,
adorns our frosted-farmhouse window
that watches the gravel road.

Its light sifts softly,
over the snow and through the grove,
to Aunt Minnie passing by,
and to me, alone in our front room.

In this peace of darkness,
I hear angels singing,
see Joseph touch Mary's hand,
feel Mother Mary's love,
hear a baby cry.

ARLIN BUYERT was born and raised on an Iowa farm. He has published four poetry collections and edited three anthologies of inmate poetry. He has been published in The Christian Century, Coal City Review and Fine Lines Press. Arlin is retired and lives in Leawood, Kansas, with his wife Kristen Kvam.

PRAYER

In the hectic frenzy of this last week of Advent, as we make our final holiday preparations, wrap gifts, cook meals, mail cards to family and friends, help us find a moment of stillness, Holy One. Lead us to a place of quiet. Turn us to your peace so we, too, can hear the baby's cry. Amen.

Monday, December 19

POEM

The Magi Recall the Star
MATTHEW 2

Epiphanies always have consequences.
Apocalypses always require assembly.

A star. A distant pin-prick—maybe
light from an ancient orb gone supernova—
portends the end of something, and the birth
of something new. But what? Or who?
Why should this punctuation in the dark
become the instigation for the journey?

The journey. Set your foot to paths uncharted
impelled to some uncertain destination,
ask inconvenient questions of those whose power
disinclines them to acknowledge answers,
barter time from old, bloodthirsty fools
who sit on queasy thrones and dread the star.

The star. It moves, yet night to night the same
point of light in the aching windswept darkness,
the cold black emptiness of space.
Like you, it makes its own strange journey,
setting sail to catch the breath of God.
It finds its destination in those eyes.

Those eyes. The child sees you, and calls your name—
a name you had forgot, or did not know
you knew, a name whose riches, undeserved,
will cost you everything you have, and more.
He looks at you, and in his eyes you see
the rising and the setting of your hopes.

Your hopes. Leave them behind, these selves you carry
the journey long, like treasures of the heart;
return, then, empty-handed, knowing nothing
but the light behind the dark eyes of the child.
Be haunted by that light. It does not fade
even as the dark absorbs the star.

Darkness falls. You are night-blind, and groping.
Go home a different way, if home at all.

PAUL HOOKER
is an honorably retired Presbyterian minister and former associate dean at Austin Seminary. He is the author of two volumes of poetry as well as other works in biblical studies and Presbyterian polity. He lives in Austin, Texas. "The Magi Recall the Star" first appeared in P. Hooker, *"Sightings of the Holy" in Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary, Fall 2022.*

PRAYER

God of the journey, may we follow your star this Advent to the rough-hewn bed of the newborn Christ child and the eyes that give rise to hope. May the birth of Christ return us to our lives transformed, sending us home by another way. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

In her poem, "Black baby," Harlem Renaissance poet Anita Scott Coleman adores her child who looks at her with "eyes like coal/ They shine like diamonds."

What would we see in the eyes of the Christ child? What would we and the world look like through newborn eyes? Black and white and shades of grey are all these undeveloped eyes can see — which might frighten those of us used to color, dimension and perspective. But curiosity is born within that which is new. Wonder, too. What might appear possible through this newborn vision? What might we hope for through precious eyes shining like diamonds?

Advent takes us back to the beginning — a new year, a new birth. Through Emmanuel's eyes we see through darkness and beyond despair. We look to a hope-filled future of beloved community to come. Through adoring eyes, we see that we are precious in God's sight.

PRAYER

Through Christ you make all things new, Holy God. This Advent help us to look with new eyes upon your world and those who live in it. Help us see all your children as precious. Adjust our eyes to the dark, so the path to your glorious future is clear and sure. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

POEM

How Odd

How odd, they came to worship a child,
How odd, that someone so meek and so mild
Would gain the attention of the wise.

How odd, we come to him this night,
How odd, no matter our power or might
To change the world, or even our lives.

Perhaps the children are the key —
Those who from fear and violence flee —
To help relieve our worldly pains.

For when our hearts by love are stirred
And lines 'twixt us and others are blurred,
We'll come to this odd new Child again.

SCOTT L. BARTON is an honorably retired member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia who had pastorates in Northern New York, Vermont and Philadelphia. Now living in western Massachusetts, he enjoys writing, hiking and singing with Boston Symphony's Tanglewood Festival Chorus. His latest book is *Lectionary Poems, Year C: Even More Surprising Grace for Pulpit and Pew.*

PRAYER

God of grace, you turn our world upside down this Christmas, returning us to the manger where you risk being born into this world a helpless child. Stir our hearts with love for you and love for each other. May Christ's birth inspire us to new and nobler paths. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

I flew home yesterday seated next to a mother with a toddler on her lap. This boy began the flight engaging with his other seat neighbor, an older woman who offered to help entertain. Buttons to push on the tiny seat-back TV screen served as a curious diversion, allowing mom to get settled. When the plane's wheels lifted off the runway, the feeling of taking flight widened the boy's eyes. Watching him, I recalled my daughter's first flight, her chubby toddler's hand in mine squeezing in fear and glee.

After fussing and struggling, my young neighbor finally gave into the weariness that overtakes all travelers, falling asleep in his mother's lap, his head resting on her chest. I remember that too; my child's small body on my own, the warmth and the weight. The limited days when your children are small and needing to be held are both precious and exhausting.

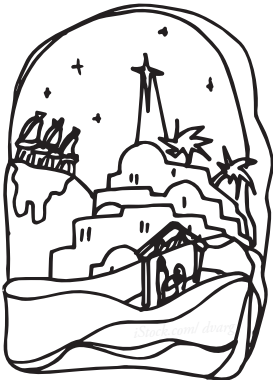
The child we welcome this Christmas was like all children: curious, wiggly and weighty, sleeping on his mother's chest. But this child, unlike others, came to serve and save. This child, whom we worship and adore, takes flight in our souls and leads us to look forward in hope. These days may be limited, but they are precious. For unto us a child is born, Emmanuel — God with us.

PRAYER

God whom we adore, we praise you for your son Jesus Christ, for his birth and the hope he brings. May all your children know a safe place to sleep and the warmth of your loving, protective embrace. Amen.

Friday, December 23

POEM



Late to the Manger

Those Judean hillside shepherds
tending their grazing flocks by night,
until splendid interrupted, must have arrived
at last, clamorous on Bethlehem's streets,
well past the midnight hour.

Those three sage monarchs,
confused and almost lost at Herod's court
– and finally twelve days late –
must have traveled all their way
completely overnight in order for a star
to light their wandering path.

And if I have any hope of making it,
seems I'll be arriving way beyond the sunset hour,
weary, wrinkled, sore, much travel-worn,
leaning heavy on my crooked stick
and limping slow beyond the stable door
to seek a vacant space against the rear wall,
there to kneel, my final burdens shed,
with nothing to be done or spoken,
nothing save to learn how to adore.

J. BARRIE SHEPHERD is an award-winning poet and an honorably retired PC(USA) pastor, the author of many books.

PRAYER

Eternal God, we often show up late, unprepared for the unexpected ways you break into our lives. Help us prepare our hearts this Advent to arrive ready for you at the manger. Help us shed all that hinders our path to Bethlehem so we may learn how to adore. Amen.

Saturday, December 24 | Christmas Eve



POEM

Nativity

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,
There He hath made Himself to His intent
Weak enough, now into the world to come;
But O, for thee, for Him, hath the inn no room?
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from the Orient,
Stars and wise men will travel to prevent
The effect of Herod's jealous general doom.
See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how He
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee?
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

JOHN DONNE, from *La Corona* (published in 1610 and in the public domain)

PRAYER

What joy, what hope emerges from a mother's womb tonight! We praise you, God of glory, for the immensity of Christ. We praise you for this child's life-saving birth, for the One who comes to set us free from prisons of our own making. We praise you for daring to dwell with us, weak and vulnerable as a newborn, yet threatening to every power-drunk king. Our souls magnify you on this Christmas Eve. We wonder at your love. Amen.