

Advent 2023
**UNVEILING
THE
DIVINE**



DISCIPLES
Home Missions

ANGEL LUIS RIVERA-AGOSTO
ERIN CASH
TIMOTHY LEE
ALEXIS TARDY

Welcome



Advent Greetings,

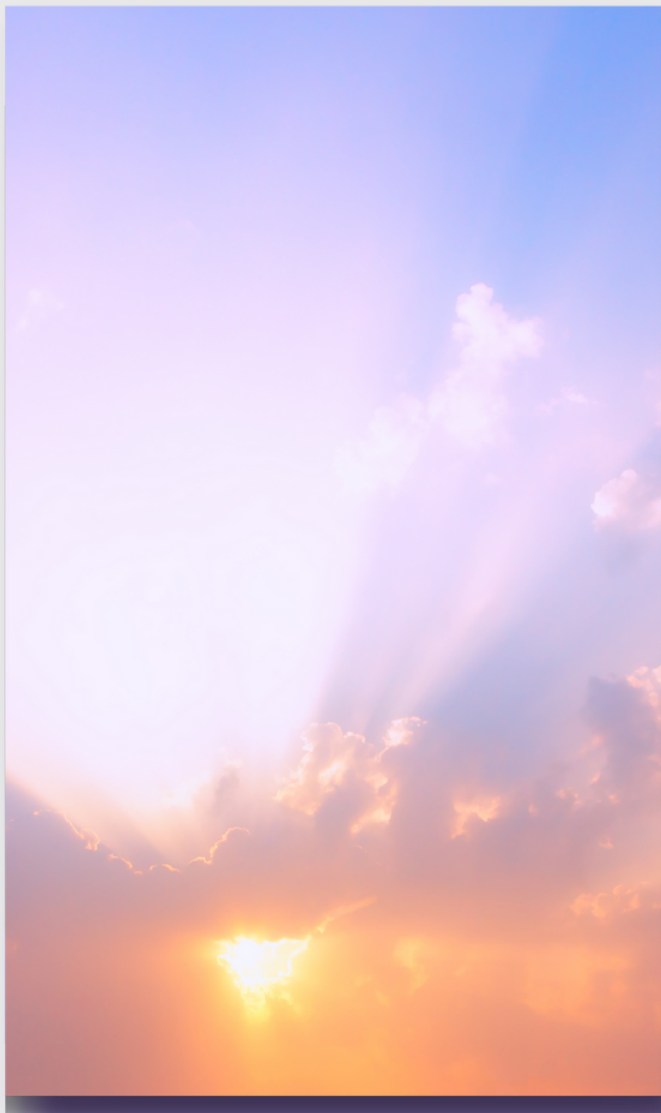
We approach the coming of Jesus from different biblical and theological perspectives. We consider a savior's birth with deeply diverse needs. Our theology is how we understand and characterize God in the world. Our needs are the things that sustain our being. The season stirs much in our hearts, minds, and faith. How each of us receives the coming of Jesus is directly related to our social locations as children, mothers, fathers, surrogates, immigrants, singles, partners, people of faith, and those who have had their hope abused. The pending arrival of Jesus is a preparation period where we center ourselves in the beliefs that God cares, God surprises, and a liberating change is on the way.

The life of Jesus is an expression of God's love. It is a reminder that Love is its own system not bound by the systems of this world. We pray you are encouraged by the prayers and meaningful reflections in "Unveiling the Divine."

Monique Crain Spells

Christian Education and Faith Formation

CONTENTS



DAILY ADVENT PRAYERS

I Believe You Will Reveal Yourself
Together We Walk Through the Night
Rev. Monique Crain Spells

REFLECTION ONE

Good Fruit or Unquenchable Fire
Dr. Erin Cash

REFLECTION TWO

Transformed for Unity
Dr. Timothy Lee

REFLECTION THREE

The Ax is Already at the Root of the Trees
Min. Alexis Tardy

REFLECTION FOUR

“Bendita” is She Among Women
Rev. Angel Luis Rivera-Agosto

SONGS TO ENCOURAGE

Daily Advent Prayers

I BELIEVE YOU WILL REVEAL YOURSELF

Holy Creator,
Sometimes, you are places I
have yet to discover.

What I can see of you is only
a small fraction of who you
are.

Mysterious Guardian,
There is no place we can
journey where your presence
does not also exist.

Blessed Compass,
When I cannot trace you,
summon my spirit to people,
places, and things that
radiate your glory.

Faithful God,
I believe you will reveal
yourself over and over again.

Amen.

TOGETHER WE WALK THROUGH THE NIGHT

God of Divine Friendship,
Together we walk through
the night.

Turn my sight towards the
invisible. The darkness is
your canvas.

Together we walk through
the night.

Turn my hearing toward
wisdom that whispers. The
darkness is your amplifier.

Together we walk through
the night.

Maybe afraid, curious, and
weary, we walk.

We walk assured that we
are walking THROUGH.

Amen.

Good Fruit or Unquenchable Fire

Erin Cash

And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Matthew 3:9-12 NRSVUE

What kind of fruit do you bear? In your daily life, do you have good fruit to share with the world? The author we call Matthew talks often about fruit – the good things we do. Numerous times throughout this book, Jesus talks about bearing good fruit. The Gospel of Matthew was written to Jewish Christians – it is a book written to those who already believe Jesus is the Messiah. In Matthew, the Pharisees and Sadducees are not always at odds with Jesus like they are in other narratives. Here, in the third chapter of Matthew, they have come to be baptized by John. These are the most religious of the religious people, and they believe they need to be baptized by John the Baptizer.

Their encounter with John doesn't go the way they imagine, though. These high holy men likely came to demonstrate just how deep their religious faith went. They believed John was the prophet Elijah, returning to Earth, and they wanted to be in his presence – because that's what a good Jew would do. When these Temple Leaders come to be baptized, they do it with the wrong motives. And John's words for them are scathing.

He tells them their rich history as faithful practitioners of the Jewish faith means nothing to God. Baptism is not to be a mark of their piety, but an act of repentance. John scolds them because their hearts are not ready for baptism. He reminds his listeners that their ancestry isn't enough, and that the coming Messiah will demand more than lineage. He will demand good fruit.

Good Fruit or Unquenchable Fire

Erin Cash

As you prepare for the coming Messiah, how do you approach the season of Advent? If you're like me, you don't prepare for Christmas by thinking about whether you are good wheat or if you are chaff to be burned. You begin meditating on the sacrifice of love that will be born into our hearts again. Maybe, like me, your heart sings the words, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" all season long, waiting for the holy to meet us in the candlelight.

The coming Messiah of Matthew's imagination is not the glowing newborn of "Away in a Manger." The coming Messiah is one who will cut down and destroy the trees that do not bear good fruit. The trees aren't pruned – they're removed and destroyed by fire. John the Baptizer knows the God who demands more than lineage to be considered faithful. The Divine isn't wrapped in swaddling cloths any longer. The Messiah who is about to come on the scene in Judea demands good fruit.

As you enter into this Advent season, reflect on this question: "Do you bear good fruit?" It isn't enough to live an internal life of faith. Prayer, scripture reading, worship attendance, and even this devotional aren't what the Messiah asks of you. They are tools to build you up, to prepare you for the work. Bearing fruit requires nourishment – your time in relationship with God is precisely how you nourish the roots to grow good fruit in the first place. But if your growth stops at your relationship with God and never transforms your relationships with other people, you aren't growing good fruit.

When the Messiah comes with the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire, may we be found to be bearers of good fruit.

Amen.

Erin Cash is the Project Director for the Thriving Congregations Project at Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS). Prior to this role, Erin served as Director of Admissions at LTS for over eight years. She is a past moderator for the Christian Church in Kentucky, a graduate of Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, and of Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, KY. Ordained in 2006, Erin enjoys preaching, guest lecturing, and lay leadership in her own congregation.



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Transformed for Unity

Timothy Lee

Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Luke 1:8-13 NRSVUE

Reading this vignette (Luke 1:8-13) in the midst of teaching a course on the history, thought, and polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I was led to think about the themes of the ordinary, holy encounters, and expectant outlook, with respect to the text and our Stone-Campbell tradition. The vignette begins ordinarily, at least for Zechariah, a priest, chosen by lot, "according to the custom of the priesthood," to serve as the dedicated priest in the sanctuary, dutifully offering incense, while an assembly of people prayed outside. Then he was brought up short by a sight: angel Gabriel at the altar. It was a holy encounter that overwhelms him. The angel assuages his fears and tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, thought to be barren, will bear a son, who is to be named John. In later verses, we learn that when Zechariah voices skepticism about that pregnant possibility, he is struck mute and when he finally comes out of the sanctuary to face the people, "they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak (v. 22)."

Now, let's consider another vignette, taking place in a hamlet, Cane Ridge, in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in early August 1801. The frontier pastor Barton W. Stone went about his business as usual, organizing a camp-meeting revival for his two congregations, one at Cane Ridge, the other at nearby Concord, and whoever else that would come, invitations having been sent out by word of mouth to diverse communities in the area. Stone was no stranger to camp-meeting revivals, just as Zechariah was no stranger to offering incense at the altar of the Holy One. He had noticed lethargy in spiritual disposition of his flocks, and hoped a revival would rejuvenate them. What resulted was the Cane Ridge Revival, dubbed "America's Pentecost."

Transformed for Unity

Timothy Lee

It occurred between August 6 and 12, 1801, attracting between 10,000 to 20,000 people when the largest city in the state, Lexington, had less than 2,000 people. "Cane Ridge" would become the most iconic of America's camp-meeting revivals. It overwhelmed Stone. As Zechariah's encounter with angel Gabriel transformed him from that of a quotidian priest to an awe-struck and expectant harbinger, Stone's encounter with the Holy at Cane Ridge transformed him from a quotidian revivalist to a convinced and expectant visionary. He envisioned Christians of multiple backgrounds dissolving their sectarian differences and sinking "into union with the Body of Christ at large." Such a unitive community would be anchored in the Bible, radiate love, exemplify justice, and relish peace. Such a church, he believed, would captivate and win over the rest of the world to Christ, whereupon the Kingdom of Christ in its full glory would unfold among all people.

Stone's vision attracted many of his contemporaries. Together, they formed a movement around their shared vision and called themselves "Christian." It so happened that not far from Cane Ridge, in what is now West Virginia, another group of visionaries was advocating a similar aim, their vision encapsulated in the statement "the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." They also referred to themselves as "Christians," or "Disciples," led by Thomas and his son Alexander Campbell, later also Walter Scott. In 1832, these two groups joined, giving birth to the Stone-Campbell Movement. In the mid-19th century, the Movement emerged as one of the most thriving communions in the country. Then came the conflicts--over slavery and modern theology, to mention just two triggers, dividing, as irony would have it, this unitive movement into three streams: Churches of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Transformed for Unity

Timothy Lee

Whenever I think of this irony, or a scandal, I am reminded of Romans 7:15 ("I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."). This irony, we have to admit, has compounded the challenge of our task: advocating for unity—Christian and human—perhaps making it as challenging as Zechariah trying to describe his holy encounter without the aid of speech. But the fact remains Zechariah did not--perhaps could not--give up trying ("He kept motioning to them."). Could we do otherwise?

1. In what document does this phrase appear?: "... into union with the Body of Christ at large." Feel free to google it and then read the document.
2. In what document does this statement appear?: "The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." Feel free to google it and read the document.
3. What is the identity statement of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)? Do you find resonances between this statement and the above two documents?

Timothy S. Lee, PhD, is Associate Professor of Church History and Director of Asian/ Asian American and Pacific Islander Church Studies at Brite Divinity School. His research interests include the history of Christianity in Asia, in particular Korea, and Asian America as well as the Stone-Campbell Movement. He serves as General Editor of the Journal of Discipiana. An ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), he has served as Moderator of the North American Pacific/Asian Disciples and Second Vice-Moderator of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).



[illegible]

The Ax is Already at the Root of the Trees

Alexis Tardy

"He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."- Luke 1:16-19 NRSVUE

Even though we are in the season of anticipation and waiting, some things are already done. It is the "already, but not yet." Under the reign of King Herod, Zechariah and Elizabeth were two people living under an oppressive Roman Empire, seeking to be faithful to their God. When the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah, Zechariah is in the midst of being faithful in his priestly duties – I imagine him going to the temple of the Lord and burning incense for another innumerable time. But something about this time was different. This time, he was visited by an angel of the Lord who came with a surprising and unlikely message. The angel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, who was advanced in age, would bear a son who had a very specific mission. This son-to-be would have a prophetic call of preparation, speaking truth to power and to his own community.

A response of resistance was in the lineage and bloodstream of this son-to-be. In second century Palestine, Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV ruled Syria and sought to capture Judah while severely restricting or ending the practice of Judaism in favor of worship to Zeus. This was extremely offensive to the Jews, who worshipped a transcendent God, not a human king. Antiochus went on to set fire and raid Jerusalem – which massacred many Jews – and afterwards mandated that the temple, where the Jews worshipped God, instead be dedicated to Zeus. As a result, Mattathias – a Jewish priest – mounted a resistance against the blatant acts of oppression by Antiochus by engaging in guerilla warfare against the ruler. Eventually, the Jewish people were able to rededicate the Temple to God by recapturing Jerusalem – this moment is still celebrated during Hanukkah.

The Ax is Already at the Root of the Trees

Alexis Tardy

When Mattahias passed down the revolution to his son Judas, he promised “salvation from enemies”. The revolution led by Mattahias, known as the Maccabees revolt, was a pivotal part of Jewish history and would have been in the close memory of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the angel. The spirit and power of Elijah that this son-to-be will have is a spirit and power that is not afraid to speak against and to defy human kings. It is a boldness that comes from God alone with the unshakable knowing that God, who is on the side of the oppressed, has already gone before us in completely destroying injustice. God only waits for us to catch up.

This son-to-be will be a voice in the wilderness. Alone in the wild bushes, eating locusts, before preaching a message of repentance and preparation before the coming of the Lord. He will call for a ministry that bears fruit. He will also prophetically name that those trees - structures, powers, and people that do not produce fruit that keeps with repentance – those trees already have an ax at the root. This prepares us for the One who proclaimed salvation from our enemies, the One who would take the ultimate stance of resistance against an oppressive empire and oppression in all its forms unto death, and who offers us the critical invitation to do the same.

Alexis Tardy currently serves as Coordinator for Ministry with Youth and Young Adults with Disciples Home Missions. Tardy earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and a Master of Divinity degree from Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri. She is currently pursuing a Doctor of Ministry in Womanist Preaching degree at Memphis Theological Seminary. Prior to joining DHM, Alexis served with Children’s Defense Fund where she managed development of faith-based programs, including their Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry.



[illegible]

“Bendita”¹ is She Among Women

Angel Luis Rivera-Agosto

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed."

Luke 1:45-48 NRSVUE

María Guzmán had always been a faithful leader in her Hispanic/Latino church in a neighborhood, El Barrio Latino[2], in New York. She was one of the lead singers in the choir, visited the sick at the hospital, served as the church's treasurer, and oversaw the food pantry. María was always grateful for the opportunities to serve God and Neighbor at church. However, she saw how the people in charge of Bible Sunday School teachings, preaching, and conducting church ministry were always men. In her congregation, she saw that those who taught at the Bible School on Sundays and the guest preachers were always men. She could realize how women were relegated to ministries of visitation, social witness, and ornament.

María always went to the altar early Sunday morning. Her prayers were always more or less the same. "God, bless my family, my church, my work at the Post Office, all my co-workers. I want to do your will and am glad to serve here at the church," and so on. One day, she felt something different in her heart, being at the altar on her knees, praying, like always. Deep in her chest, she felt a strong voice saying to her: "María, you are blessed and sent to preach My Word. Don't look back. I will sustain you in your way". She can't help but feel a thrilling joy in her heart. It is almost like singing of an anticipated triumph, like knowing that some unborn future harbored in her, one that would bring joy, peace, justice, and love of God incarnate. Basically, she felt filled with love from Above. *"You will triumph, invest, and make amends to humiliated people, and in you, Jesus Christ will become a reality for many people."*

[1] "Blessed" in Spanish.

[2] "Latin Ward", in Spanish.

“Bendita” is She Among Women

Angel Luis Rivera-Agosto

As soon as she opened her eyes, she heard other voices. "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Immediately, she closed her eyes again, ready to ask God to forgive her for being so out of line with what she was feeling in her heart. Then, her thoughts soared on a challenging biblical flight. María began to hear, deep within herself, other songs and other voices. It was like Anna speaking to her about Ramah (1st of Samuel 1-2), listening to the singing of Deborah (Judges 5), or even Mary, mother of Jesus. She felt how their testimony took on new life in herself. He went to speak with Isabel Ferreira, one of the church's elders, that afternoon after the service. As they shared a cup of café **prieto**[3], Isabel told her: "**Mija**[4], this is the time of God for you. **Ya yo estoy vieja**[5], but, let me tell you, I also felt that calling years ago but declined because of my insecurities. You are young, María, and God is calling you. My best advice is to discern that voice inside your heart and deepen in your service of God's Realm."

María continued visiting Isabel, praying, and discerning what God told her. Her visits to the hospital evolved. She took advantage of her visits to sick members in the hospital to visit other people there. They ended up naming her "the hospital pastor." A year after her dialogue with Isabel, the pastor requested the assistance of a group of leaders to accompany an incipient group of people who were gathering in Connecticut. María raised her hand and joined the group. She asked to be relocated to her current job and moved there. After some time, the group called her as her pastor. She accepted with some doubts in her head but was driven by the calling of God.

[3] “Black coffee”, in Spanish.

[4] “My daughter”, but it can also be translated as “dear”, in Spanish.

[5] “I am an old woman”, in Spanish.

“Bendita” is She Among Women

Angel Luis Rivera-Agosto

Nowadays, every denomination member could think as usual to have a woman pastor in their congregations. Even we can count on women elected as Bishops, Moderators, and General Ministers and Presidents. However, some seasoned people from that humble congregation in New York, there in the Barrio Latino, still recall, from generation to generation, that story, almost 90 years ago, of that young girl who accepted God's calling and became their first Ordained Minister.

1. Describe how María Guzmán lived her "unveiling the Divine" process?
2. How important could it be to discern God's call among our own faith community and through other witnesses outside of it?
3. What biblical, theological, and/or cultural assumptions could impede the exercise of equal rights between men and women, and how does this biblical text challenge those assumptions?

The Reverend Angel Luis Rivera Agosto is an Ordained Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico, with ministerial standing in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada. He is Global Relations Minister for Latin America and the Caribbean for Global Ministries. He has also served as Executive Secretary and Program Coordinator of Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) for the Puerto Rico Council of Churches. Angel Luis graduated from Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, holds a Juris Doctor from the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico, and a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences from the University of Puerto Rico.



All in One



Disciples,

We have chosen to follow Jesus--one sent for Love's sake to set the captive free by bringing hope, peace, love, and joy to us in counter-cultural ways. Moving toward the celebration of his birth takes us through a spiritual, ethical, and revelatory rite of passage with scripture, "powers...and wickedness in high places", the parents of Jesus, and with our own faith (both in word and deed). Thank you for taking time to pray, reflect with our contributors, and rest in a bit of music to encourage you this Advent season. Emmanuel is surely with us and also on the way!

In the Spirit,

Monique Crain Spells

Vice President for Mission, Advocacy, and Programs
Dir. for Christian Education and Faith Formation

Songs for this Season



- ☐ Lo, Here a Rose E'er Blooming
Hymnology
- ☐ Your Spirit
Tasha Cobb ft. Kierra Sheard
- ☐ O Come O Come Emmanuel
Tommee Profitt
- ☐ I Need You Now
Smokie Norful
- ☐ Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
Fernando Ortega
- ☐ We Are Christmas
Spelman College Glee Club

Reflections



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