

Everyday Connections

*Reflections and
Practices for Year A*

Edited by Heidi Haverkamp

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer



WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

Want to learn about more WJK books?
[Click to sign up for our email list.](#)

Contents

ix	<i>A Note from the Publisher</i>
xi	<i>How to Use This Book</i>
1	First Sunday of Advent
10	Second Sunday of Advent
19	Third Sunday of Advent
28	Fourth Sunday of Advent
37	Christmas Week
46	Second Sunday after Christmas Day
55	Epiphany of the Lord
58	Baptism of the Lord
67	Second Sunday after the Epiphany
76	Third Sunday after the Epiphany
85	Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
94	Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
103	Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
112	Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
121	Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany
130	Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany
139	Transfiguration Sunday
148	Ash Wednesday

151	First Sunday in Lent
160	Second Sunday in Lent
169	Third Sunday in Lent
178	Fourth Sunday in Lent
187	Fifth Sunday in Lent
196	Palm/Passion Sunday
206	Holy Thursday
209	Good Friday
212	Easter Day/Resurrection of the Lord
223	Second Sunday of Easter
232	Third Sunday of Easter
241	Fourth Sunday of Easter
250	Fifth Sunday of Easter
259	Sixth Sunday of Easter
268	Ascension of the Lord
271	Seventh Sunday of Easter
280	Day of Pentecost
290	Trinity Sunday
299	Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28)
308	Proper 4 (Sunday between May 29 and June 4)
317	Proper 5 (Sunday between June 5 and June 11)
326	Proper 6 (Sunday between June 12 and June 18)

- 335 Proper 7 (Sunday between June 19
and June 25)
- 344 Proper 8 (Sunday between June 26 and July 2)
- 353 Proper 9 (Sunday between July 3 and July 9)
- 362 Proper 10 (Sunday between July 10 and
July 16)
- 371 Proper 11 (Sunday between July 17
and July 23)
- 380 Proper 12 (Sunday between July 24
and July 30)
- 389 Proper 13 (Sunday between July 31
and August 6)
- 398 Proper 14 (Sunday between August 7
and August 13)
- 407 Proper 15 (Sunday between August 14
and August 20)
- 416 Proper 16 (Sunday between August 21
and August 27)
- 425 Proper 17 (Sunday between August 28
and September 3)
- 434 Proper 18 (Sunday between September 4
and September 10)
- 443 Proper 19 (Sunday between September 11
and September 17)
- 452 Proper 20 (Sunday between September 18
and September 24)
- 461 Proper 21 (Sunday between September 25
and October 1)
- 470 Proper 22 (Sunday between October 2
and October 8)

- 479 Proper 23 (Sunday between October 9 and October 15)
- 488 Proper 24 (Sunday between October 16 and October 22)
- 497 Proper 25 (Sunday between October 23 and October 29)
- 506 All Saints (November 1 or the Sunday following)
- 515 Proper 26 (Sunday between October 30 and November 5)
- 524 Proper 27 (Sunday between November 6 and November 12)
- 533 Proper 28 (Sunday between November 13 and November 19)
- 542 Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)
-
- 551 *Appendix: A Suggested Format for Small Groups*
- 553 *Sources of Further Connections*
- 557 *Contributors*
- 565 *Scripture Index*
- 571 *About the Editor*

A Note from the Publisher

This devotional resource is part of the series *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. *Connections* embodies two complementary convictions about the study of Scripture. First, to best understand an individual passage of Scripture, we should put it in conversation with the rest of the Bible. Second, since all truth is God's truth, we should bring as many "lenses" as possible to the study of Scripture, drawn from as many sources as we can find. The essential idea of *Connections* is that biblical texts display their power most fully when they are allowed to interact with a number of contexts, that is, when many connections are made between a biblical text and realities outside that text. Like the two poles of a battery, when the pole of the biblical text is connected to a different pole (another aspect of Scripture or a dimension of life outside Scripture), creative sparks fly and energy surges from pole to pole.

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which has wide ecumenical use, *Connections* offers hundreds of essays on the full array of biblical passages in the three-year cycle. Two major interpretive essays, called *Commentary 1* and *Commentary 2*, address every scriptural reading in the RCL. *Commentary 1* explores connections between a lectionary reading and other texts and themes within Scripture, and *Commentary 2* makes connections between the lectionary texts and themes in the larger culture outside of Scripture. These essays have been written by pastors, biblical scholars, theologians, and others.

During the seasons of the Christian year (Advent through Epiphany and Lent through Pentecost), the RCL provides three readings and a psalm or canticle for each Sunday and feast day: (1) a first reading, usually from the Old Testament; (2) a psalm or canticle, chosen to respond to the first reading; (3) a second reading, usually from one of the New Testament epistles; and (4) a Gospel reading. The first and second readings are chosen as complements to the Gospel reading for the day.

During the time between Pentecost and Advent, the RCL includes an additional first reading for every Sunday. There is the usual complementary reading, chosen in relation to the Gospel reading, but there is also a "semi-continuous" reading. These semicontinuous first readings move through the

books of the Old Testament more or less continuously in narrative sequence, offering the stories of the patriarchs (Year A), the kings of Israel (Year B), and the prophets (Year C). *Connections* covers both the complementary and the semicontinuous readings.

Because not all lectionary days are used in a given year, depending on how the calendar falls, you may not need some of the readings here until a subsequent lectionary cycle. Check the official RCL website at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu> for a list of readings for the current year.

We want to thank the many talented individuals who made *Connections* possible: our general editors, Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, and Carolyn J. Sharp; Psalms editor Kimberly Bracken Long and sidebar editors Bo Adams and Rachel Toombs; the esteemed members of our editorial board; our superb slate of writers; and our indefatigable project manager Joan Murchison. Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing *Connections*.

We are deeply grateful to Heidi Haverkamp for her exhaustive editorial and creative work developing *Everyday Connections* for the spiritual enrichment of every Christian who desires to delve deeply into Scripture. This insightful volume pairs weekly texts and reflections with prompts, prayers, and practices to spark connections between the Bible and everyday life as well as nurture one's own connection with the Divine.

Westminster John Knox Press

How to Use This Book

In this book, you will find a panoply of modes and methods for reflection on the Sunday readings of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A. Some are serious, some are playful, some are personal, some are relational, some are pastoral, some are prophetic, some are practical, some are poetic; all are centered in Christ's radical call and love for us. Whether you want to deepen your prayer life, your grasp of Scripture, your small-group discussions, your sermon preparation, or some other aspect of your Christian life and relationship with God, I hope you will discover in these pages a wide variety of resources, information, ideas, questions, and spiritual practices to support you.

Your conversation partners for each week's reflections are excerpts from the Connections preaching and worship commentary series, also published by Westminster John Knox Press. The series is a treasure trove of background and insights, with essays on each Scripture passage written by Bible scholars, theologians, and pastors. They are easy to read but offer significant historical and linguistic information, theological reflection, connections across the biblical text, and connections from the text to social and cultural realities in our world. Choosing a single excerpt from so many of these essays was incredibly challenging. There are great riches to be found in the full commentaries, for those seeking more.

There are many ways Everyday Connections can guide and strengthen your Christian life, leadership, and community, depending on what works best for you, your group, or your congregation in any given week:

- Personal reflection: use for prayer, study, meditation, and journaling
- Sermon or worship preparation: explore ideas, get inspired, and prepare to preach or plan worship
- Small groups: see the appendix for a suggested format to use Everyday Connections as a curriculum or study text
- Teaching: study and reflect as you prepare to teach a Bible study or class of any age
- Meetings: use an excerpt as an opening meditation or discussion for staff or committee meetings

- Beyond church: use on visits to individuals or groups in a hospital, assisted living facility, prison, or other social agency, or as part of a mission trip, retreat, or conference

Here are some other suggestions to get the most from this devotional:

Use alongside a Bible. Since this book offers only short excerpts from Scripture for the sake of length, reading the full passage in your Bible will expand your perspective.

Choose what to study. Each week of reflections offers multiple options and ideas for engagement with the texts. Focus on whatever is speaking to you that day. Or, over time, you may discover certain exercises or modules work best for you. Do not feel that you need to interact with every single entry, every single week.

Choose what order. Reflections have been laid out in a certain order, but you can use them in any order you like.

Choose what frequency. You may want to use this book every day, studying one or two entries at a time, or just once or twice a week, studying several or most of a week's entries at once.

The material for each week is divided into these sections:

- 1. A Scripture Overview.** On the first page of each week, a selection of verses excerpted from that week's readings gives you a sense of what to expect. (Excerpts from psalms and canticles are omitted in the season after Pentecost in order to accommodate excerpts from the two Old Testament tracks.) Then, a shortened form of **Lectio Divina**, Latin for "holy reading," is suggested, as a way to begin to reflect on the week's Scriptures: choose a phrase or a few words that speak to you, then listen in prayer or meditation for what God might be saying to you through those words. Benedictine monks have prayed in this way for centuries.
- 2. Themes from This Week's Writers.** Two themes, drawn from the week's commentary essays, are suggested for study, reflection, or sermon preparation. Brief quotes from the essays that support the theme are provided. See if the commentators' words inspire you or other connections emerge for you. A **Spiritual Practice** associated with the themes or liturgical season is also suggested. The practice

can be done on your own, as a family, with a friend or prayer partner, or as a small-group activity, and on any day of the week.

3. **First Reading, Canticle, Second Reading, and Gospel.** A deeper dive into four of the week's readings (five for Palm/Passion Sunday and six for Easter Sunday) includes a verse or two of Scripture, an excerpt from a commentary essay, some reflection questions, and a brief prayer. These reflections will invite you to make connections that (usually) go in different directions from the two themes. You could read one each day, read them all at once, or pick just one or two to read, depending on the week.
4. **Weekend Reflections.** Choose a way to wrap up the week's study and Scripture connections, perhaps on the day you are sitting down to write a sermon or plan worship. First, a **Further Connection** is offered: a quote from a source outside of Scripture and the commentary essays, which may speak to you in a new way or deepen a connection you have made with a theme or reading already that week. Full sources and citations for these quotes are available in the appendix. **Making the Connections** invites you to consider one of four questions (repeated each week) to focus your reflections and connections from the readings to a conclusion, sermon, or final theme for the week. **My Connections** provides extra space to write your own notes.
5. **Sabbath Day.** These exercises are meant to be done on a day you consider the end of the week or a day off. The **Scripture of Assurance** is meant to offer solace—and sometimes a little humor—to a weary soul. The **Weekly Examen** is adapted from the daily examen of Ignatius of Loyola. It can be done on your own, as a family, with a friend or prayer partner, or in a small group.

Again, choose what speaks to you; do not feel you need to engage every single section. The options in this book were designed to be used in different combinations to suit the needs of different readers, contexts, and schedules.

A few sections use slightly different formats:

Christmas Week. For this busy holiday time, a single week of reflections draws on the Scriptures from both Christmas and the Sunday after Christmas, since many of the readings and themes overlap and complement one another.

Weekday Holy Days. Five significant holy days always or usually fall on weekdays: Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Ascension of the Lord. Each has a separate, shortened entry (appearing before the start of the week leading up to the following Sunday) that includes Scripture quotes, excerpts from the commentary essays, a reflection question, and a prayer.

All Saints'. There is a full week of entries for All Saints' Day (November 1) or All Saints' Sunday (the first Sunday following November 1). Note that your congregation may celebrate Proper 26 or Proper 27 instead, depending on whether All Saints' is commemorated in your tradition or perhaps celebrated on November 1, proper, rather than the Sunday following.

May God bless you richly as you explore, study, connect, and pray your way through the pages of this book and God's Word as it is proclaimed in the lectionary cycle of Year A.

Heidi Haverkamp

Everyday
Connections

The Week Leading Up to the
First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1–5

Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.” (v. 3)

Psalm 122

For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good. (vv. 8-9)

Romans 13:11–14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. (v. 11)

Matthew 24:36–44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (v. 36)

LECTIO DIVINA

Underline a word or phrase that especially grabs your attention. Pray from that word or phrase and ask God to help you connect to its particular invitation for you this week.

Themes from This Week's Writers

THEME 1: *God's Future*

Isaiah 2:1–5

For many congregations and denominations that are declining in numbers, this is a genuine word of comfort and hope. God is not done with us yet. . . .

The promise of Isaiah 2:1–4, a text set immediately after a description of vast destruction, expands our understanding of hope.

LEANNE VAN DYK

Isaiah 2:1–5

This Advent question about “the days to come” strikes close to the heart for the followers of Jesus. It is that restless spirit that can be answered only by our hope in God. It is a longing that can be soothed only by the comfort of our future in God.

DAVID A. DAVIS

Psalms 122

These texts call us to see our faith not as the destination, but as an involved and continued journey, where we are always learning, always transforming our violent ways into instruments of peace, abundance, and provision.

MARCI AULD GLASS

THEME 2: *Staying Awake*

Romans 13:11–14

Staying awake or living in the divine light in the end times is not an individual or sectarian practice of spirituality. What is the life context in which today's Christians await the coming of Christ? Waiting is not passive but active resistance to darkness.

JIN YOUNG CHOI

Romans 13:11–14

The kingdom of God came into history in Jesus Christ, but we still wait for its final fulfillment.

Unhappily, the sense of the nearness of the end times can be a distraction from the task of living faithfully in the world. It can be and has been exploited.

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

Matthew 24:36–44

The preparedness of believers is judged by how they work for the benefit of others in the community rather than focusing solely on a future prize and, in the process, losing their souls. Believers are judged not so much by how well they are prepared to enter heaven but by how much they have been attending to the concerns of others in the community.

RAJ NADELLA

WHAT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT SAYING TO YOU THIS WEEK?

A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE FOR THIS WEEK

Find a bare stick, branch, or twig. Write some words of intention on slips of paper for this Advent season (for instance: watch, awake, slow down, be ready, prepare, listen, repent, etc.) and attach them to the stick with tape, paper clips, or blue or purple ribbon, and use as a prayer focus this season.

First Reading

Isaiah 2:1–5

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it. (v. 2)

REFLECTION

Advent is a season boldly to lean into God's future unafraid. The themes of Advent are as familiar as the liturgical decorations and the congregational song. Advent is a kind of comfort food for those who gather for worship, especially those for whom the church feels like home this time of year.

The word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, then, can be understood as a steady refrain in the season that proclaims and affirms God's promise. Isaiah's portrayal of the divine hope strikes familiar notes in the believer's ear about the days to come.

DAVID A. DAVIS

RESPONSE

What spiritual "comfort foods" do you enjoy in Advent worship? Does church feel like home in this season for you? What other Advent traditions or images are particularly hopeful or meaningful to you? What does it mean to you, this year, to "lean into God's future, unafraid"?

PRAYER

God of promise, show me the way to your mountain that I may walk in your paths and into your future, for your love's sake. Amen.

Canticle

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem. (vv. 1–2)

REFLECTION

The root of the word “advent” is the same root found in “adventure.” Is Advent something we are excited to experience or something we need to “get through” as we survive the holiday season? These passages help us invite people into a journey that leads us through a season of peace toward the mystery of the nativity.

Our Advent journey is not without a destination. We do not wander in the wilderness with no goal. The mountain of the Lord (Isa. 2) and the house of the Lord (Ps. 122) give us imagery for our destination, as does a stable in Bethlehem.

MARCI AULD GLASS

RESPONSE

How is Advent a time of endurance for you? How could Advent be a time of adventure for you? How could it feel less like a wilderness and more like a journey? What imagery for your “destination” would be meaningful to you: a mountain? a house? something else?

PRAYER

Loving God, my feet are already standing within your gates even as I journey toward your coming again, here on earth and in the times to come. Amen.

Second Reading

Romans 13:11–14

The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. (vv. 12–13)

REFLECTION

Viktor Frankl . . . was a survivor of Nazi death camps. After the war he reflected on his experience . . . [concluding] that the prisoners who survived were those who somehow did not sink into despair but lived with hope. . . . “Only those who were oriented toward the future, toward a goal in the future, toward a meaning to fulfill in the future were likely to survive.”¹

There is a freedom that accompanies trust and confidence that in Jesus Christ ultimate issues have been resolved: that whatever chaos, suffering, and cruelty are happening in the world at the moment, history’s final outcome remains safely in God’s hands.

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

RESPONSE

How would you describe what it means to you to trust in Jesus Christ? Does it comfort you to imagine that “history’s final outcome remains safely in God’s hands”? How would you ask God or Jesus to give you hope for your goals, your purpose, or your future?

PRAYER

O Christ, as night turns to day, help me to set aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, so to live honorably and with hope in you. Amen.

1. Viktor Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychiatry and Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), 139.

Gospel

Matthew 24:36–44

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.” (vv. 42–43)

REFLECTION

The issue is not merely “eating and drinking” . . . but rather being uncaring in gluttonous overconsumption and focusing only on the things of this world. The point here is that “preparation” or “watchfulness” has nothing to do with obsessing over numbers, signs, and meanings. Rather, it has to do with living in the expectation that the teachings and example of Jesus are the norm! To “fear judgment” is surely another way of trying to live the right way.

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

RESPONSE

What do you think about Smith-Christopher’s description of true watchfulness? What teachings and examples of Jesus are “the norm” in your life? What kinds of gluttony or overconsumption still get the upper hand? How would it help you to “fear judgment” in order to make changes? What changes do you most long for?

PRAYER

Gracious Lord, teach me how to stay awake: to watch for you but not to guard against you, that your love may break into my life and the world.
Amen.

Weekend Reflections

FURTHER CONNECTION

Science tells us that there is nowhere where life can succeed in going on for ever. There will indeed be an End of the World.

. . . We shall die, and the cosmos will die, but the final word does not lie with death but with God. . . . This does not mean that death is not real, but it does mean that it is not the ultimate reality. Only God is ultimate, and that is a sufficient basis to enable us to embrace the Advent hope.

JOHN POLKINGHORNE (1930–2021), *LIVING WITH HOPE: A SCIENTIST LOOKS AT ADVENT, CHRISTMAS, AND EPIPHANY*

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Choose one or two questions for reflection:

1. What connections have you noticed between this week's texts and other passages in Scripture?
2. What connections have you made between this week's texts and the world beyond Scripture?
3. Does either of this week's two commentary themes speak especially to your life or the life of the world around you right now?
4. What is God saying to your congregation in particular through this week's readings and commentaries?

MY CONNECTIONS

Sabbath Day

SCRIPTURE OF ASSURANCE

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all
generations.

I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. (Psalm 89:1–2)

WEEKLY EXAMEN

- Take a quiet moment, seek out God’s presence, and pray for the guidance of the Spirit.
- Consider the past week; recall specific moments and feelings that stand out to you.
- Choose one moment or feeling for deeper examination, thanksgiving, or repentance.
- Let go, breathe deeply, and invite Christ’s love to surround and fill you in preparation for the week ahead.
- End with the Lord’s Prayer.

The Week Leading Up to the
Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1–10

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fating together,
and a little child shall lead them. (v. 6)

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19

May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more. (vv. 6–7)

Romans 15:4–13

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (vv. 5–6)

Matthew 3:1–12

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (vv. 5–6)

LECTIO DIVINA

Underline a word or phrase that especially grabs your attention. Pray from that word or phrase and ask God to help you connect to its particular invitation for you this week.

Themes from This Week's Writers

THEME 1: *The Peaceable Kingdom*

Isaiah 11:1–10

The peaceable kingdom portrays unlimited inbreaking of the kingdom of God and harmony between humans and animals. These are clearly images that reflect an expansive hope for justice, good order, and the well-being of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

LEANNE VAN DYK

Isaiah 11:1–10

Maybe this is not a bad definition of Advent . . . the peacefulness of God's new creation, which is yet to come, spilling into the here and now; the eternal hope of Christ's glorious kingdom inspiring, informing, and guiding the life of God's people in the present.

DAVID A. DAVIS

Romans 15:4–13

Worshipping God cannot be separated from welcoming others. These are essential components of Advent hope as Christians eagerly wait for the Day of the Lord when all the nations—usually translated as the “Gentiles” in English—will worship God together.

JIN YOUNG CHOI

THEME 2: *A New, Radical Way*

Romans 15:4–13

In her book *When in Romans*, Beverly Gaventa observes that “being members of one another means there is a relationship from which there is no exit plan.”¹ Paul's radical ecclesiology, which claims the primacy

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 105.

of unity and community as Christ's gift to the church, . . . judges and challenges the contemporary churches, all of whom seem to reflect the profound divisions in American culture.

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

Matthew 3:1–12

John is not simply preparing the way for the Lord, as verse 3 seems to suggest. He is also showing the way. He is modeling for the many, especially the Judean elite, how to become a part of the new kingdom of God that is at hand. As John has demonstrated by example, participation in the new kingdom entails a radical change in one's lifestyle.

RAJ NADELLA

Matthew 3:1–12

It is important then to read these words with the appropriate joy in the hearing about coming judgment. . . . Do we imagine that "all Judea and the whole Jordan district" were streaming into the wilderness for fear of judgment or to celebrate the coming change? Clearly the latter.

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

WHAT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT SAYING TO YOU THIS WEEK?

A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE FOR THIS WEEK

Seek out an empty, wilderness place to reread Matthew 3. You could choose a desert, a park, or a parking lot. If you met John the Baptist in a place like this, what would you talk with him about? How would he ask you to repent, and for what?

First Reading

Isaiah 11:1–10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (vv. 1–2)

REFLECTION

The first verse refers to a shoot that emerges from a dead stump. A tender shoot is frail hope for new life. This evocative phrase reminds the reader of a similar image from Isaiah 42:3, referring to the Suffering Servant: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” The images of frail shoot, a broken blade of grass, and a barely smoldering candle wick are all precarious signs of life. This image from Isaiah 11:1 demonstrates how much God can do with so little.

LEANNE VAN DYK

RESPONSE

What is it like to imagine God’s kingdom as fragile or precarious as a tiny shoot, a broken grass blade, or a sputtering flame? What is happening in your life that might also resemble these images? If God can do “so much with so little,” what might you dare to hope for?

PRAYER

Lord God of the tender shoot, give me a spirit of wisdom and understanding to see that new life is always springing from your spirit, even in my own life. Amen.

Canticle

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice. (vv. 1–2)

REFLECTION

This branch from the tree of Jesse will be a ruler like the one described in Psalm 72, girded with righteousness and faithfulness. The spirit of the Lord will rest on this branch, which makes clear that this leader is an agent of divine goodness, not the source of goodness and mercy. It is human nature, perhaps, to bestow our hopes on, and credit our successes to, human leaders. Both of these texts make clear that even the most righteous rulers point us to the steadfast love, mercy, and justice of God. Our praise is misdirected if it does not point toward God.

MARCI AULD GLASS

RESPONSE

How have you seen your community set hope or praise on a human leader rather than God? How was this harmful? Who are some leaders in your life who point beyond themselves to the “steadfast love, mercy, and justice of God”? How have you seen this be life-giving?

PRAYER

Righteous God, teach me and all your leaders the justice and peace that comes from you, that we may point all people to your love and your kingdom. Amen.

Second Reading

Romans 15:4–13

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (v. 7)

REFLECTION

Paul's argument is consistently that the purpose of the Scriptures is to encourage Christians to love one another as they hope for their salvation. Actually, the source of the endurance and comfort is God, and that gift is for us, again, to "live in harmony with [or be like-minded toward] one another" (v. 5). This "life together" involves glorifying God in unison, which is extended to this worshiping community's practice of welcome (vv. 6–7).

Paul uses Christ's example one more time to explain how this welcoming of one another serves the glory of God.

JIN YOUNG CHOI

RESPONSE

What do you think of Choi's statement that Scripture is meant to encourage us to love one another? What does it mean, in your congregation, to "welcome one another"? What does it mean to you that Christ has welcomed you, first? How are welcome and worship interconnected in your context?

PRAYER

O Christ, you have welcomed me with steadfastness and encouragement; teach me to welcome others and to allow them to welcome me, for the glory of God. Amen.

Gospel

Matthew 3:1–12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (vv. 1–2)

REFLECTION

John is not simply calling on people to join the new kingdom. He is also inviting them to a new space that he has embraced and made home: the wilderness. Several scholars have noted that wilderness functions as a liminal space in the history of Israel. It was where the Hebrew community spent a considerable amount of time after fleeing Egypt and before entering the promised land. . . . Within the context of Matthew’s Gospel, wilderness is also an alternative space, one that espouses values that are diametrically different from the civilizational values of Roman cities.

RAJ NADELLA

RESPONSE

How is your church a liminal or alternative space for you, especially during this season of Advent? What is it like to consider your church as a wilderness in the midst of your wider community? What is a comfort for you in this? What is a challenge?

PRAYER

Merciful God, you invite me into the wilderness to glimpse my true self and the nearness of your kingdom. Teach me to repent, that I may know your kingdom more and more. Amen.

Weekend Reflections

FURTHER CONNECTION

When that primal fear of the dark—of the end—begins to slide over us, animals unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer unafraid responses. They take in the threat of dark and cold, and they adapt in amazing and ingenious ways. They shape themselves to life as it is given. . . .

The practice of Advent has always been about helping us to grasp the mystery of a new beginning out of what looks like death.

GAYLE BOSS (1957–), *ALL CREATION WAITS: THE ADVENT MYSTERY OF NEW BEGINNINGS*

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Choose one or two questions for reflection:

1. What connections have you noticed between this week's texts and other passages in Scripture?
2. What connections have you made between this week's texts and the world beyond Scripture?
3. Does either of this week's two commentary themes speak especially to your life or the life of the world around you right now?
4. What is God saying to your congregation in particular through this week's readings and commentaries?

MY CONNECTIONS

Sabbath Day

SCRIPTURE OF ASSURANCE

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (John 15:7)

WEEKLY EXAMEN

- Take a quiet moment, seek out God’s presence, and pray for the guidance of the Spirit.
- Consider the past week; recall specific moments and feelings that stand out to you.
- Choose one moment or feeling for deeper examination, thanksgiving, or repentance.
- Let go, breathe deeply, and invite Christ’s love to surround and fill you in preparation for the week ahead.
- End with the Lord’s Prayer.

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

