



ADVENT WEEK 4 | LOVE

December 18, 2022

PRELUDE | *This Is Jesus* (All songs found on the [Advent Resource Page](#))

WELCOME | Announcements (Homeless Donations, Advent & Christmas Resources, December Calander) & Advent's End

From the prayed poems of the psalms to the prophetic poems of Isaiah and the prophets, Advent is a season full of poems that imagine new beginnings. Even if the beginnings, as Walter Brueggemann observes, “are so odd.”¹ Odd as a child leading lions and lambs together into pastures of peace or upon that same child’s shoulders, the government of not a mere nation but all the world rest and rests securely.

We might think these poems too flimsy; the prayed poems of the psalms too childish in their expectant, waiting faith, especially in a world where sentimentality quickly gives way to cynicism and celebration to apathy. Yet, at least in the Advent season, especially in the days preparing for the arrival of Christmas, we are encouraged by all the sights and sounds and gathered services to “bet on the poet and on the poem, on the vision and on the possibility,” of God’s “creative, generative, healing, transformative” arriving. An arrival that takes us “Beyond loss—newness, beyond death—life. Beyond chaos—new creation.”

Yet here is the thing that Advent reminds us; the arriving newness is not ours. It is a child born *for us*, a son gifted for us. “Ours,” says Brueggemann, “is response, receptivity, repentance, good fruit, beginning again,”² in the song of joy that has stayed with us. The words we use to describe the gift which we receive, respond to, live up to—hope, peace, joy—seem too familiar, too saturated with the film and ill of life. Still, especially in this season, we at every turn hear and see the plea of Advent to stop and think, to notice the gift and the arrival “and to move toward them with yearning.” Making our way, like the shepherds and wise three of old, to the child who leads the lions and the lambs and whose kingdom’s wholeness knows no bounds or lack. We *arrive* in Advent, “to know the child of David through who” continues to arrive, along with him, newness born and sustained of **love**.

So today, this final Sunday of the Advent season, let us one more time, quiet our hearts and minds all alight in the chaos of Christmas colors, and begin again in the warmth of love's dawning new day. Let's pray.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance*, 43.

² *Ibid.*

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 25:4-10

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; **for you I wait all the day long.**

Remember your mercy, O Lord, and **your steadfast love**, for they have been from of old.

Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to **your steadfast love** remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are **steadfast love** and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

SONG #1 | *Love Divine All Loves Excelling*

ADVENT WREATH | King Of All Kings

“Far away, in the East, three clever men saw the star that God had put in the sky when Jesus was born. They knew it was a sign. A baby king had been born. They had been waiting for this star. They knew it would come. ‘He’s here!’ they shouted. ‘He’s here!’

At dawn, they packed up their camels and wrapped gifts for the baby. They brought their most precious treasures of all: frankincense, gold, and myrrh. Special, sparkly, lovely-smelling, gleaming things—just right for a king. So the three Wise Men set off, following the star across desert and mountain, through deep valleys, grassy plains, into the little town of Bethlehem, down a little dirt track, until it stopped right over...a little house.

Sure enough, in the little house that was no palace—there, sitting on his mother’s knee—they found him. The baby King. The three men knelt before the little King. They took off their rich royal turbans and gleaming golden crowns. They bowed their noble heads to the ground and gave him their sparkling treasures.

The journey that had begun so many centuries before had led three Wise Men here. To a little town. To a little house. To a little child. To the King God had promised David all those years before. But this child was a new kind of king. Though he was the Prince of Heaven, he had become poor. Though he was the Mighty God, he had become a helpless baby. The King hadn’t come to be the boss. He had come to be a servant.”³

“**This is how God loved the world:** He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have life forever.” (John 3:16)

HYMN/CAROL | *In The Bleak MidWinter*

DISMISS KIDS

³ “King of All Kings” found in the *Jesus Story Book Bible*, 192-198.

SCRIPTURE READING | Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who lived in a land of deep shadows— light! Sunbursts of light!

You repopulated the nation; **you expanded its joy.** Oh, they're so glad in your presence! Festival joy! The joy of a great celebration, *sharing rich gifts and warm greetings.*

The abuse of oppressors and cruelty of tyrants— all their whips and cudgels and curses— Is gone, done away with, a deliverance as surprising and sudden as Gideon's old victory over Midian. The boots of all those invading troops, along with their shirts soaked with innocent blood, will be piled in a heap and burned, a fire that will burn for days!

For a child has been born—for us! The gift of a son—*for us!* He'll take over the running of the world. His names will be: Amazing Counselor, Strong God, Eternal Father, Prince of Wholeness.

His ruling authority will grow, and **there'll be no limits to the wholeness he brings.** He'll rule from the historic David throne **over that promised kingdom.** He'll put that kingdom on a firm footing and keep it going with fair dealing and right living, **beginning now and lasting always.** The zeal of God-of-the-Angel-Armies will do all this.

SONG #3 | *All Who Hear*

SERMONETTE | Love

“Genesis [tells us]...It was by speaking his creative word into the primordial darkness that God on the first day brought forth light...and in a way the entire remainder of the Bible is about, how history itself is the record of the Creator's endless efforts to restore his creation to himself, to clothe it again in the glory [the splendid light] for which he created it in the first place...and it is by speaking and listening to each other that out of the darkness of our separate mysteries is brought to light the truth of who we are,” of where we are.

We said throughout this Advent season that we are “Somewhere between the fact of darkness and the hope of light.”⁴ Indeed, “We are the people who walk in darkness as to one degree or another people have always walked in darkness.”⁵ Darkness within and darkness without, not always overwhelming darkness, but darkness seemingly always near. And yet, as in Genesis and repeated again in our Christmas tales, the darkness is never where the story ends, but only the place from which the light breaks forth and shines. Darkness is but the background for new beginnings, the place where, in truth, love does its most essential work.

⁴ Buechner, 121.

⁵ Ibid., 122.

Next Saturday evening, we'll go to bed in the blueblack cold of a darkening day, only to wake to the fleeing of the night's favorite colors and familiar sounds as the warmth of the preparation done in the dark [without us knowing or literally in the night] of loved ones invites us to come and see, to taste and receive what has been done for us, given for us. And, usually, after mauling through our long-awaited prizes, we'll offer a genuine 'thank you' with a hug to the ones who banished the dark, at least on this morning, and filled us with the warmth of love's light.

It's not difficult for us to see the connection of darkness and new beginning, the work of love in the cold of night, at Christmas—in the stories and in the actually morning of. It is, however, not always easy for us to know love's essential work in the 364 other dark nights and cold mornings, where we no less awake into something, someone, already giving for us.

Faith speaks in near fairy tale, poetic language. At least that has been our contention this Advent season. Poetic, even if prophetic, words, like Isaiah's which speak of real truth in a way that that "show us something we think we already know, and in that showing, show us 'something more.'"⁶

So, as we've done during the first three Sundays of Advent, I want to read us a poem. A poem that speaks in a way that helps us see not only the love of Christmas and the cross, but something more of love inbetween Christ's arriving and his arriving again. And, a poem, I think, that will invite us into love's essential, if not unadorned, committed work.

We've heard from an Orthodox Priest (Cairns), an Anglican Rector (Grieves), an Episcopal Professor (Bauckham), and today, from the first African-American U.S. Poet Lauriete, Robert Hayden. As before, I'll read the poem once, then we'll work back through it, briefly drawing out the "something more." After that, we'll take advantage of this fourth Sabbath day of Advent to rest in love's austere and lonely offices, so that we might rise and dress and enter loves ever-preparing new day warmth.

THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS | *Robert Hayden*

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

⁶ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting On The Word*, 111.

Hayden was raised in an impoverished household in Detroit during the Great Depression. His life was not easy. He knew the cold and darkness of survival—litterally and metaphorically. His father was, like many in his time and place, a manual laborer who was paid not nearly enough to provide for his life nor his family's. The tension that comes with trying to just make it through life, the extra "gift" of oppression if you will, meant Hayden's daily relationships (with his father and others) and his internal life was often bombarded with "chronic angers"—a lashing out at faceless ills by lashing out at the nearest face.

In this poem, Hayden the adult recounts Hayden as a child. Lacking all nostalgia and naïveté, Hayden sees something that he had missed, hidden by indifference and the struggle to survive, all those Detroit winter Sundays—and the days inbetween.

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. [There was no day of rest, no sleeping in for Hayden's father. Just as he did every
weekday morning, His father, with labor worn hands, would wake in blueblack, 'the night's favorite
color', and 'ignite once again the tinder of our lately banked noetic fires,' beginning again the
breaking of the cold and dark.] No one ever thanked him. [A simple and necessary daily act, easily
passed without recognition.]

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

[Hayden recognized the sound of new beginnings, the ironic sound of the work of 'exorcising
dark'—splintering, breaking—which, when finally silenced by the presence of warmth and light,
he would hear the personal invitation to enter into a day coming to itself, beginning again—
though he'd enter it slowly—as most children do, but not just as child, but in the fear of
difficulties of living if only by survival.]

Yet, as Hayden recounts these winter Sundays, something in the way his account unfolds is
illuminating him to the something more that was at play, even if he can't put his finger on it just
yet. Commenting on the poem, Malcolm Guite says,

'All the words used to describe the father's labour and its effect, 'cracked', 'blaze',
'splintering', 'breaking', could describe what might happen if anger blazed out [if the
tension of mere surviving gave way to the lashing of oppression], if peace [the peace of
"wolf and lamb"] were splintered, if tempers, or even bodies, were to break. [But,] Like
the fires, though, the anger is banked [in meekness], and becomes a part of the energy
with which this father, instead of blazing out in temper, splintering or breaking his

family, splinters and breaks the wood, and makes the ‘banked fires blaze,’”⁷ bringing warmth and welcome to a new day.

Within his remembering, the poet is beginning to awaken to truth of what he awoke into each and every day. The final stanza recounts this re-arriving revelation.

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well. [Not only does he remember the father’s efforts to prepare a warm welcome for a new day, but even the extra preparation to make sure his child was ready for communion/worship now comes to mind. **Everything the child needed to enter into rest, the father did while the child was sleeping, while it was still dark and cold.** It is here, that the light finally arrives in the child’s mind, heart, and soul...]

What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere [simple, unadorned, yet disciplined and self-denying] and lonely offices?

[‘What did I know...’ is both a confession of ignorance, of indifference and apathy, to the daily disciplined love of the father for his children, as well as a new beginning of awareness, of “becoming full and thankful” and able to rise and dress daily into love’s work done in dark.]

⁷ Guite, 24.

REFLECTION / POEM

This poem shows us something more, invites to see “the working of love” of our heavenly Father, in preparing in the dark the warmth of a new day in which we can enter not in the fear of surviving, but in the love which breaks the cold. But it does even more than that. The poem invites us to see “think of all who serve us silently today, even before we wake, of ‘love’s austere and lonely offices’, of parents, of friends, of laborers, leaders, and the nameless servants.

And still one more, this poem invites us see that, while the love shown on Christmas morning through all the adorning of wrappings and feasting and trimmings is good, the way we live on the gift of Christmas is by taking up the unadorned and dedicated offices of love in the lives of those closest to us.

So, let’s spend a few minutes doing just that, seeing and resting in the work of love in the dark. Take a moment to quiet your heart and mind and still your body so that the words we know might draw your attention to something more of love’s simple and committed working.

In the silence of this space and the solitude of your seat, prayerfully **breathe in: “God prepares” and breathe out: “in love.”**

- Allow the Spirit to draw you to unadorned and consistent love
 - From Him
 - From Others
 - For Others (Give them a minute)
- Ask the Spirit, "Show me something more," in the poem’s rereading. (Give them a few seconds)
- Confess & Consider, “What did I know, what did I know’ (Remind them at the poem’s end)

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COLLECT & COMMUNION

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

[His body broken by our sins, for our healing. His blood, his life, poured out, poured into us, that we might be gifted what is his.]

*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
(1 John 4:9-11)*

COLLECT | *Fourth Sunday of Advent*

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his arriving, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Through the body, blood, and life everlasting of Jesus, amen.

SONG #4 | *Maranatha*

SCRIPTURE READING | Haggai 2:4b-9

Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit *remains* in your midst. Fear not.

For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts.

The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.'

SONG #5 | *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*

SONG #6 | *Hark The Herald Angels Sing*

BENEDICTION | 1 Peter 5:6-11

So be content with who you are, and don't put on airs. God's strong hand is on you; he'll promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you.

Keep a cool head. Stay alert. The Devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping. Keep your guard up. You're not the only ones plunged into these hard times. It's the same with Christians all over the world. So keep a firm grip on the *faith*. The suffering won't last forever. It won't be long before this generous God who has great plans for us in Christ—eternal and glorious plans they are!—will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.