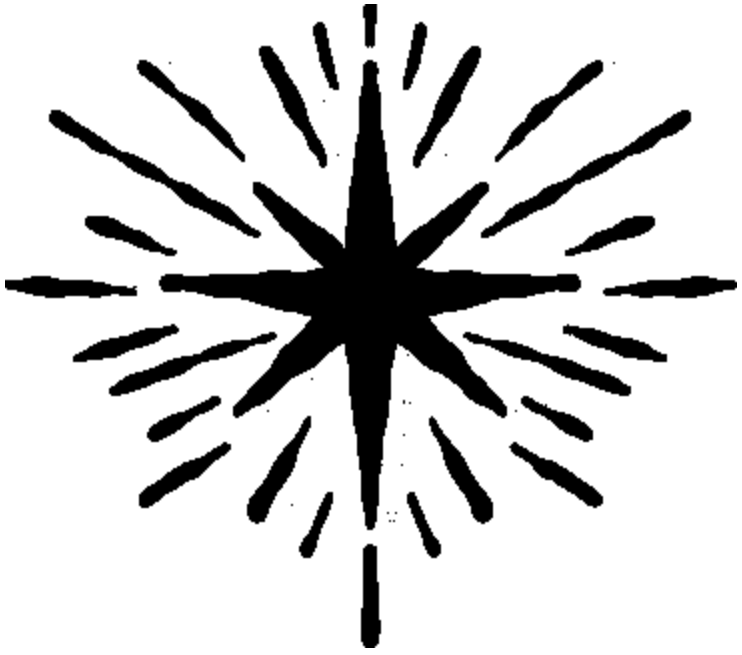
THE WORD WHO BREAKS THE SILENCE





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INTRODUCTION

So much of the holiday season is about sights and smells: fragrant Christmas trees, warm fresh cookies, and crisp snow falling silently through the air. But what about the sounds? They, too, capture our imaginations and bring us to the reality of the Advent and Christmas seasons. When "a multitude of the heavenly host" fills the sky in Luke 2 at the birth of the Christ child, saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (v. 14), it's not the sight nor the smell that enthralls the shepherds, but the sound of a word of proclamation: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people," proclaims an angel of the Lord (v. 10).

This good news is none other than the baby Jesus himself, born of a virgin, wrapped in swaddling clothes. He is both the light of the world (John 8:12) as well as the Word made flesh (John 1:14) in order to bring faith, life everlasting, and righteousness to all peoples.

"If the Word is spoken, all things are possible,"[1] says Martin Luther in his commentary on Genesis. This is as true when God creates as it is when he re-creates the sinner into the justified through his gift of faith, and all the times in between. God used his prophets in the Old Testament to both reveal and hide God from his people. And in times of trouble, it's a word from the Creator himself that the Israelites prayed for: "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer," states David in Psalm 22:2.

The season of Advent culminates not in a silent night, but in the boisterous and powerful speech of our Creator. While we would do well to reflect on the moments when he is silent during this season, the moments where we long for his return, we must also remember that we have a God who does not remain silent for long, for his goodness, light, and love are wrapped up in his voice.

HIS WORD ALONE CREATES,

JUDGES, RAISES THE DEAD,

REDEEMS, AND GIVES FAITH.

This year's 1517 Advent Devotional is broken up into five different sections meant to highlight the many ways God's Word works from Creation to Christmas.

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[1] Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 1: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 49.

In Part One, "The Word that Creates," we will look at how God's Word alone has the power to create that which it says. It is more than just descriptive or prescriptive, it is effective. Part Two, "Our Cries and God's Silence," reflects on our deep need to hear the words of law and gospel from our Creator in order to be saved and sustained through Christ alone. Part Three, "The Word Does Not Return Empty," includes Scripture passages that remind us of the faithful and sure work of the Holy Spirit through the power of God's Word. In Part Four, "The Word Draws Near," we reflect in particular on God's promises through his son, Jesus Christ and finally, in Part Five, "The Silence Breaks," we rejoice with all the saints over God's Incarnation in the birth of the babe lying in a manger.

Whether you use this as a personal devotional or in a group setting, we pray that this short study points you to the Word who breaks the silence of suffering, of sin, and of our greatest needs from Creation to Christmas. Christ has come in the flesh. Christ will come again in glory. And in between, he is not silent. He still speaks.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

CHAD BIRD is a Scholar in Residence at 1517, where he brings his deep knowledge of Scripture and theology to readers, listeners, and audiences around the world. He holds master's degrees from Concordia Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College. Chad has written numerous books, including *Night Driving, The Christ Key, Unveiling Mercy, Hitchhiking with Prophets*, and, most recently, *Untamed Prayers* (1517 Publishing). He is also the co-host of the popular podcast *40 Minutes in the Old Testament*.

DANIEL EMERY PRICE is the Operations Executive at 1517, where he helps lead the organization's mission to proclaim the gospel clearly and creatively. He is a frequent speak- er, author, and co-host of *40 Minutes in the Old Testament, 30 Minutes in the New Testament,* and *Tough Texts*. A former church planter, pastor, and worship leader, Dan brings a caring heart and a storyteller's voice to everything he does.

LUKE KJOLHAUG is the pastor of Elim Lutheran Church in Osakis, MN. Luke holds undergraduate degrees from Whea- ton College and the University of Minnesota and earned his MDiv from Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, MN. He is the author of Sinner Saint: A Surprising Primer to the Christian Life and Fear Not: How the Gospel Disrupts Our Deepest Anxieties, both from 1517 Publishing.

AMY MANTRAVADI holds a B.A. in biblical literature and political science from Taylor University and an M.A. in inter- national security from King's College London. She is a contributor to 1517 and the author of *Broken Bonds: A Novel of the Reformation* (2024) and *Face to Face* (2025), a two-part series which explores the theological and personal conflicts among Luther, Erasmus, and Melanchthon, as well as *The Chronicle of Maud* series of historical novels.

SETH MOORMAN is the Strategy and Marketing Executive at 1517, where he works to connect people to the good news of freedom in Christ through clear communication, creative planning, and the occasional spreadsheet. Before joining 1517, he served for 18 years as a parish pastor at Bethany Lutheran Church in Long Beach, California, He

earned a master's degree in theology and culture from the Cross-Cultural Ministry Center at Concordia University Irvine.

KELSI KLEMBARA is the online content manager for 1517 and host of the 1517 interview podcast, *Outside Ourselves*. She holds an MA in Reformation Theology from Concordia University Irvine. She is the co-editor of *Theology of the Cross: Luther's Heidelberg Disputation & Reflections on its 28 Theses*.

NOVEMBER 29 – DAY 1 – GENESIS 1:3–5 – CHAD BIRD

GENESIS 1:3-5 And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

When God kick-started the world, before any words were uttered, "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). This is what the world was like before the Word spoke light into being. This is also what a Wordless life is like.

Just ask Isaiah (34:11) and Jeremiah (4:23). These inspired preachers, reacting to the godlessness around them, used this precise lan- guage to describe a formless, empty, dark existence where hearts had become iron-hard, and ears were barricaded to the truth, lest the Word enter and do its work within.

I've lived there. My address was 000 Dark Wordless Place. What's it like? Let me tell you. "Death charades as life, midnight is draped in the costume of dawn, and one's daily grind is pretending that existence is satisfied with fleeting pleasures and shallow pursuits."[2] That's what it's like.

But when I was at my end, God said the same words he spoke at the very beginning, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). And indeed, there was light. The Word of the Father broke the silence and un-midnighted my life by verbs and nouns that pulsed with the illumination of divine mercy.

Our Father invades all our addresses of 000 Dark Wordless Place, his Son unleashes his speech, and the Spirit rushes forth to flood our lives with a light that is good—divinely good. God separated the light from the darkness in the beginning; God still separates the light from the darkness, making us children of light in Jesus and driving away the demons of darkness. In Advent, even as we see the darkness around us, we wait in hope for the unleashing of light at the arrival of the Christ Child.

What does a Word-filled life look like? It looks like Day, not Night, where we bask in the love of God, thrive in the light of Jesus, and walk the path illumined by the Spirit. It is a good life because it is lived in the good God, who brings form, fullness, and rays of hope to us every day through his son, Jesus Christ.

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[2] Oswald Bayer, Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

PRAYER:

O Father of lights, shine the light of Christ within us, that we might know your goodness.

NOTES:

NOVEMBER 30 – DAY 2 — PSALM 19:1–2 – DANIEL EMERY PRICE

> *PSALM 19:1-2 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.*

God was doing something very intentional when he spoke the heavens into existence. The sun, the moon, the stars, and the sky itself each have a voice. And they all speak without words. In fact, David says they not only speak but also declare and proclaim. The heavens are not asking questions. The sun is not talking to the moon. The totality of the heavens is declaring to us that there is a God. Day after day and night after night, the same sermon is being preached: There is a God, but you are not him.

This proclamation through creation is a gift, but it leaves us with questions that the heavens cannot answer. It leaves us knowing there is a God and seeing something of his glory in the meticulous- ness of his handiwork. But it does not tell us how to find him. It does not tell us how he feels about us. It does not make promises to us.

God's intention in giving the heavens' voiceless speech was to leave us waiting and wondering. His glory is the sermon preached by the heavens, but it is not enough. We desperately need another word. The heavens speak to our eyes. We need a voice speaking into our ears. We need the One who created the heavens to come and speak to us. We need words of forgiveness, hope, and redemption. We need the Word to become flesh and dwell among us, revealing the One whom the heavens proclaim.

PRAYER:

Father, I thank you for the heavens and all that they declare about your glory. And even more for not leaving me with that word only, but for sending the gift of your Son.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 1 – DAY 3 — PSALM 29:3–11 – LUKE KJOLHAUG

PSALM 29:3-11 The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, "Glory!" The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

You can tell a lot about someone by the tone of their voice. In Psalm 29, God's tone comes through loud and clear. His voice thunders. It is powerful and full of majesty. It breaks cedars, flashes forth flames of fire, and shakes the wilderness. In other words, the voice of the Lord does things. It is powerful and efficacious and always accomplishes its purposes (Isa. 55:11). Unlike human speech which merely conveys information, God's speech has creative power. Like the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2), David says that God's voice rings out over the chaotic waters of our lives. The Hebrew word for "hovers" has avian connotations and evokes the flapping of wings. God is "like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions" (Deut. 32:11). Like the screech of an eagle ringing out through the forest, reminding the rest of the animal kingdom of its regal presence, the unmistakable voice of the Lord rings out from his throne.

God's Word may seem terrifying at times. After all, "stripping bare," "breaking," and "flashing forth fire" are not verbs of comfort but judgment against sin. Despite our best attempts to tinsel over the truth, we are broken people. So God must daily strip, break, and flash fire against our self-confidence so that we might find our confidence only in him. It can be an uncomfortable experience.

But during this Advent season, we are reminded that God speaks another Word. His tone changes. The anger melts away. And the Word is made flesh. From the Incarnation to the Cross, Jesus was stripped bare, broken, and bore the fire of God's wrath so that we could be clothed in his perfect righteousness. As it turns out, then, that baby in the manger is the only Word that we need.

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, as I await your arrival this Advent, speak words of peace over the chaotic forces in my heart and the world around me. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 1 – GROUP DISCUSSION

Day 1 — November 29 – Genesis 1:3–5 — God Speaks Light into Darkness

Read Genesis 1:3–5.

Before God spoke, the earth was formless, empty, and dark. How does this picture help us understand our spiritual condition apart from God and His Word?

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. What does this tell us about the power of God's Word, and how does He speak light into our lives today through Jesus?

The devotion describes Christians as people who "bask in the love of God, thrive in the light of Jesus, and walk the path illumined by the Spirit." What might walking in the light look like in our everyday lives?

Day 2 — November 30 – Psalm 19:1–2 — Creation Declares God's Glory

Read Psalm 19:1–2.

The devotion says creation preaches this message: "There is a God, but you are not him." Why is it important for us to recognize the distinction between God the Creator and ourselves as His creatures?

What can we learn about God through creation? What can creation not tell us about God, especially concerning His love, forgiveness, and promises?

Why do we need God's Word and the good news of Jesus Christ in addition to what creation reveals about God?

Day 3 – December 1 – Psalm 29:3–11 – The Powerful Voice of the Lord

Read Psalm 29:3–11.

Psalm 29 describes God's voice as powerful and majestic, breaking cedars and shaking the wilderness. What do these images teach us about God's power and the effectiveness of His Word?

The devotion says God's Word strips away our self-confidence and exposes our sin. Why is this necessary, and how does God's Law prepare us to hear the good news of Jesus?

Jesus was stripped, broken, and bore God's judgment against sin on the cross so that we could be clothed in His righteousness. How does this Gospel promise give us peace when we recognize our own sin and brokenness?

Conclusion

What do the passages we read for the devotions tell us that God does for us?

What do these passages tell us about the character of God?

What do the passages lead you to want to pray about?

DECEMBER 2 – DAY 4 – DEUTERONOMY 8:3 – AMY MANTRAVADI

> *DEUTERONOMY 8:3 And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. What comes from the mouth of the Lord?*

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands…" (1 John 1:1). By God's words, the universe was made and the way of life revealed. But strangest of all, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The creative word of God, which kills and makes alive, gives us not only our original, bodily life, but also the new life in Christ. When Christ was made flesh, his body became for us a source of life and salvation. It is the very forgiveness of sins and life eternal. Now Jesus says, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:54).

We confess and believe that even as God fed the ancient Israelites with manna, he now feeds his church with himself—the bread of life—preserving us in the days of waiting until his second Advent. "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die" (John 6:49-50). As he sustained their physical lives, he now sustains our spiritual life, allowing us to endure the fears that would trap us in our beds, the tasks that bring us to our knees, the relationships that rend our hearts, the events we cannot control. Through it all, his life gives life to us, warming our hearts in the winter cold, feeding us in the wilderness. We look to his words as our daily bread, for by what other power could we stand? Yet in him we are more than conquerors.

O that his law would reveal our need and send us to the gospel that alone can save us! For the substance of the gospel is Christ for us, the Word made flesh.

PRAYER:

Lord, we praise you for the gift of yourself, the Word Incarnate! May our longings and needs drive us to the One who truly satisfies, that we may feed upon the bread of life as we wait between your two Advents.

NOTES :

DECEMBER 3 – DAY 5 — PSALM 33:6–9 – SETH MOORMAN

PSALM 33:6-9 By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap; he puts the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!

You live in a world that did not assemble itself. The heavens above and the earth beneath your feet are not accidents or afterthoughts. They stand because God spoke.

The thirty-third Psalm does not describe effort or struggle. It does not say God wrestled the chaos into submission. It says, "He spoke, and it came to be." The same mouth that gathers the seas into store- houses is the mouth that commands, and creation stands firm. By its nature, his Word is never a suggestion or part of a negotiation; his Word creates.

This Word works both comfort and confrontation in the ears of all who hear it. This Word works both comfort and confrontation in the ears of all who hear it.

It confronts because this Word also judges. The One who commands light into darkness also exposes what hides in the dark corners of your being. The silence of sin is not neutral. It is the silence of rebellion and death. When God speaks, nothing remains hidden.

But that same Word is your only hope.

The season of Advent is a reminder that the God who spoke the world into being does not abandon what he has made. The One whose breath filled the heavens has entered his creation. The Word that once said, "Let there be light," has come to shine in the deep darkness of your sin. And he will come again to command even the grave to release its dead.

In Advent, you do not wait for a fragile promise. You wait for the voice that made the stars. The voice that says, "It is finished!" And in that Word, you are forgiven and freed.

He has spoken. It came to be. It stands firm. And so will you, because his Word does not fail.

PRAYER:

Lord God, whose powerful Word spoke all things into existence, speak again into our darkness and cause your life to stand firm in us.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 4 – DAY 6 — ISAIAH 45:18–19 – KELSI KLEMBARA

ISAIAH 45:18-19 For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in vain.' I the Lord speak the truth; I declare what is right." For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

Sometimes, it's difficult to trust that God tells us the truth: you lose your job, you lose a family member, your health declines. You feel stuck at work or in life. Before an event like this, you trusted that God loved you and watched out for you, but now, it's hard to know. Why would he let such terrible things happen to you?

In Isaiah 45, God proclaims that he will use King Cyrus, a king of Babylon who won't even appear until 150 years later, to deliver his people. Those listening to Isaiah can't believe their ears because of the power of their eyes. Things are not looking up for them and now God is naming some future pagan ruler as his anointed (45:1)?

"When we are in tribulation, we find it difficult to believe, because flesh and blood judge on the basis of what they see,"[3] says Martin Luther.

This is why we must hear God's promises over and over again. We must hear that he created the heavens through his Word. That even if he hides himself, even if his Word works in the ways we least expect, he does not speak in cryptic messages nor primarily through random means. He doesn't whisper secrets, but proclaims loudly through the whole host of heaven the arrival of his dearly beloved Son. All that he promised he has done through the Advent of Jesus. And so now, as we wait again in the hard and in the heavy, we can trust he is the God who speaks the truth.

If you have trouble trusting that God is the truth-speaker, look at his track record. He is not one to say something and not follow through. What he says, goes. And that's as true today as it was during Isaiah's day.

[3] Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 133.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, when we doubt who you are, help us to look to where you've promised to speak in Word and sacrament and through the life and work of Jesus for us. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 5 – DAY 7 — PSALM 22:1–2 – DANIEL EMERY PRICE

PSALM 22:1-2 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.

The now sainted theologian Jim Nestingen used to say, "Faith and unbelief go hand in hand. They push against each other." If you have been a Christian for even a little while, you know the truth of this statement. No one makes it to heaven without the terrible experi- ence of feeling abandoned by God. David felt this when he penned the words of Psalm 22. David is searching for a word from God be- cause it is the word of God that feeds faith, and it is faith that fights against unbelief. David is crying out day and night, but no answer has come.

Psalm 22 is a Good Friday Psalm, but it is also an Advent Psalm. It's a psalm asking God where he is and why he hasn't come. It acknowledges the pain and faith-shaking uncertainty we experience in the silence and waiting. It tells us that the restlessness we feel while waiting for God to speak is not new or unique to us. But the silence of God is not cruel or malicious; it is meant to increase our dependency on the promises God has already made and the words he has already spoken. These are the steadfast words that our faith leans on while God is silent.

Jesus puts the words of Psalm 22 on his own lips while dying for the sins of the world so that you might know that he too knows the silence of God. He too has felt forsaken. Psalm 22 isn't simply David crying out for God to save him from his enemies. David is crying out on behalf of the world. He is crying out for Christmas and Good Friday. For the manger and the cross.

PRAYER:

Father, help me trust the promises you have already spoken in those times when you are silent. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 6 – DAY 8 — PSALM 88:13–18 – CHAD BIRD

> *PSALM 88:13-18 But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.*

All's well that ends well, so said Shakespeare. But what about things that don't end well, like Psalm 88?

This lament, penned by Heman the Ezrahite, spirals downward to Sheol. The psalmist is "like the slain who lie in a grave" (v. 5); God's wrath "lies heavy upon" him (v. 7); God casts his soul away (vv. 13-14).

Verse upon descending verse, this prayer plummets, until the final, gasping syllable in Hebrew sounds like "shock." The word means darkness. And so the psalm ends. It doesn't end well. It is, to pun off the Hebrew, a "shocking" end. The curtain closes, and darkness stands on the stage alone, microphone in hand.

Yesterday, we reflected on Psalm 22, which begins with Jesus' crucifixion cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 88 is its twin—not identical but congenital, birthed from the same womb of suffering. It is written by Heman, yes, but the "I" of Psalm 88 has spit on his face and thorns in his brow.

For that exact reason, darkness does not have the last word—either in the life of Jesus or our own. The true "shocking" end is not the death of Jesus but the victory of this Son of God who emerged from the tomb, shovel in hand, a smile on his face, having left death and darkness buried in an unmarked grave.

During the worst times in my life, I have prayed Psalm 88. Read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested its words, though bitter and ashen their taste. There is a time to pray words like these, on the Good Fridays of life and the Advent seasons of life when our tongues know no language but lament.

But even then, as our cries rise and heaven seems deaf, we know, we trust, that darkness must yield the microphone to light. The curtain rises. Light and life stream forth. For there stands the living Savior, who always has the last word of grace and

mercy. There stands Christmas morning where the birth of a Savior sets in motion the fulfillment of all of God's promises. All's well that ends well in Christ.

PRAYER:

O Lord, the God of my salvation, hear my cry to you. Stream life and light into me through the resurrected Christ.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 7 – DAY 9 – HABAKKUK 1:2–4 – LUKE KJOLHAUG

HABAKKUK 1:2-4 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and con- tention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

What happens when the God who speaks goes silent? This is Ha- bakkuk's burning question, and he's not shy about demanding answers. His perpetual cry is: O Lord, how long? Evil surrounds him. God's people are on the cusp of exile for their sin. Violence and destruction are everywhere, justice is perverted, and the world as he knows it is about to collapse. Where is God? He's nowhere to be found and maintaining radio silence.

Sound familiar? Habakkuk was not the first (nor the last) to give voice to such angst. "Where are you, Lord?!" It's a cry that resonates deep in the heart of each one of the 8.3 billion residents of planet earth—whether we know it or not and whether we're brave enough to admit it or not.

Shusako Endo's novel, *Silence*, speaks poignantly to this reality. The story centers around Father Rodrigues, a Jesuit missionary sent to sixteenth-century Japan, where Christians are tortured and killed for their faith. In one climactic scene, Rodrigues has been caught by Japanese authorities and reflects on "the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish God remains silent." He even confesses how he resented the Lord's silence. But the key moment comes when he hears the words of Christ: "I was not silent. I suffered beside you" (Heb. 4:15).

God's silence is not the same as his abandonment. It is not a sign that he has distanced himself from us. In fact, it is in the moments when he feels furthest away that we experience the truth of Jesus' words most intimately: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). In other words, tears are a prerequisite for peace.

So, if you're having trouble dreaming of a White Christmas this year and instead find yourself drifting more toward the "Blue" end of the spectrum, you are in good company. Immanuel is still God with us, and he is God with you. God hasn't left you. He is near to the bro- ken-hearted. He has spoken before, and this Christmas, he speaks words of comfort once again, and they truly are words of good news and great joy (Luke 2:10).

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, when you seem silent and absent, use your Word to remind me that you are Immanuel; God with us. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 8 – DAY 10 — JOB 23:8–9 – SETH MOORMAN

JOB 23:8-9 Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.

Job is not an atheist. He believes God is at work. "On the left hand when he is working," he says. It's not that God isn't doing something, only that Job cannot see him. He searches forward and backward, left and right. Every direction ends in absence.

You, too, know this silence. There are seasons when prayer is not answered as you expect. There are hospital rooms where machines hum, and God feels hidden. There are graves that close, and the earth seems to swallow every promise. I have stood at one of those graves. I have asked questions into a sky that did not immediately speak back.

This deafening silence pierces the heart because it brings with it sin and death. It becomes an echo of exile and brings to fruition the ache of a world that cannot save itself. This silence is not sentimental, but the silence of sin and death. And yet Job keeps speaking.

His cry becomes the hopeful sound of faith, gifted in the abyss of sin itself.

Advent teaches that silence does not mean God is absent. It means you cannot summon him by your own will. You cannot force his voice. The famine of hearing is real, and you cannot fix it.

But in the fullness of time, God spoke.

Not as a whisper in your imagination. Not as an answer you engineered. In the fullness of time, the Word took on flesh and stepped into hospital rooms and graveyards. The God you could not perceive made himself seen. The God you could not hear made himself heard.

He cried out from a cross into the deepest silence of judgment. He entered the grave that otherwise swallows every promise. And then his voice thundered from the depths of the tomb with the rever- beration of resurrection that echoes into every silent space of your life, because the silence of death does not get the last word. Christ does.

You may not see him now. You may still ache. But he has spoken forgiveness over you, and he has spoken life in the midst of your grief. And the day is coming when the voice you strain to hear will call your name, and you will see him face to face.

PRAYER:

Lord, when we cannot perceive you, speak your living Word into our silence and sustain our faith until we see you face to face.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 8 – GROUP DISCUSSION

Day 4 — December 2 – Deuteronomy 8:3 — The Bread of Life

God humbled Israel and allowed them to hunger before providing manna. Why might God allow us to experience need, weakness, or circumstances beyond our control?

Jesus says that He is the Bread of Life and promises eternal life to those who receive Him. How does Jesus give us more than temporary relief from our needs?

Day 5 — December 3 – Psalm 33:6–9 — The Word That Creates and Sustains

Psalm 33 reminds us that God created the heavens simply by speaking. How does the power of God's creative Word give us confidence that His promises to us are trustworthy, even when our circumstances seem uncertain?

The devotion describes God's Word as bringing both "comfort and confrontation." How does God's Law expose our sin, and how does the Gospel give us hope through Jesus (the Word who entered His creation and declared, "It is finished")?

Day 6 — December 4 – Isaiah 45:18–19 — The God Who Speaks the Truth

The Israelites struggled to believe God's promise because their circumstances seemed to contradict it. When have you found it difficult to trust God's promises because of what you could see happening around you? What promises from Scripture can help sustain you?

Days 7–8 — December 5–6 – Psalm 22:1–2 and Psalm 88:13–18 — Praying in the Darkness

Both Psalm 22 and Psalm 88 give voice to deep suffering, doubt, and the feeling that God is far away. What do these psalms teach us about bringing our honest questions, grief, and pain to God in prayer?

Jesus took the words of Psalm 22 upon His own lips on the cross and entered fully into our suffering. How does knowing that Jesus suffered and was forsaken for us change the way we understand God's presence when we feel alone or abandoned?

Days 9–10 — December 7–8 – Habakkuk 1:2–4 and Job 23:8–9 — When God Seems Silent

Habakkuk asks, "How long?" and Job searches for God but cannot perceive Him. What is the difference between feeling that God is absent and knowing that He has abandoned us? How can God's promises in Christ sustain faith when we cannot see what He is doing?

The devotions remind us that God has spoken clearly through His Son and continues to speak through His Word and Sacraments. When you are struggling, grieving, or uncertain, how might you intentionally turn to God's promises, receive His gifts in worship, and encourage someone else with the hope of Christ?

Bringing the Devotions Together

What do the passages we read for the devotions tell us that God does for us?

What do these passages tell us about the character of God?

What do the passages lead you to want to pray about?

DECEMBER 9 – DAY 11 — AMOS 8:11–12 – AMY MANTRAVADI

AMOS 8:11-12 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord God, "when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it."

For hundreds of years, God sent his people prophets to declare his word of salvation. Through the prophets, he gave the law and proclaimed the gospel, pointing ahead to the coming Messiah. But the people of Israel did not believe. They killed the prophets and ignored their words, "from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah" (Matt. 23:35). So, God revealed the truth of their spiritual poverty through a famine of his words. For four hundred years, they went without new prophecy, panting like a deer for water. Revelation from God had laid the foundation of Israel's religion, but now they understood that religion was nothing without the continual life-giving power of the Word of God. They also knew God's revelation was not yet complete, for a messiah had not yet come. And thus, this silence would not be the end!

As God told the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes" (Mal. 4:5). This was John the Baptist, who would declare the words of God again, call the people to repentance, and prepare the way for the coming of the Word made flesh. Jesus Christ was the final prophet who fulfilled the law that Israel could not keep and established a New Covenant of grace upon grace. He was and is the Advent of God's eternal purpose. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

For the Israelites, the silence of God was not the final word. It was merely the time in the wilderness, the period of waiting for the coming salvation. This final revelation was Christ himself, the one made flesh, to whom all the prophets pointed. If you find yourself now in a famine of God's word, listen and hear: Christ has come and he will come again. And in his second Advent, not only the revelation, but the purposes of God will be complete.

PRAYER:

Lord, we praise you for the fullness of your revelation provided in Jesus Christ, the one who came to dwell with us! In times when you seem silent or distant, help us trust in the promises of your Word.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 10 – DAY 12 — LAMENTATIONS 3:25–28 – KELSI KLEMBARA

> *LAMENTATIONS 3:25-28 "The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him,"*

These verses come right after the beautiful proclamation of God's faithfulness in verses 22-24: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end," shouts the prophet Jeremiah. And yet before that, Jeremiah finds himself in the middle of lament, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord" (v. 18). So which is it, should the prophet have hope, or not?

Which is it for you, today? Perhaps you are afflicted. Perhaps the law has come to do its work on you and for good reason: you are a sinner and you have been acting as one. You have not loved God with your whole heart, and you have not trusted in his faithfulness. The season of Advent brings us to this realiza- tion first, but then reminds us that in God, hope is never extin- guished. Hope is born unexpectedly in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Hope grows from young boy to adult man — a Savior we desperately need and yet least expect. Hope goes to the cross to take on your laments, the lack of hope on your darkest days, and your rebellion against him, all so that you can say "Great is thy faithfulness…The Lord is good to those who wait for him" (Lam. 3:23, 25).

This is what it means to wait quietly and alone in silence: not that we can't speak our burdens and griefs aloud, but that we pin them to the hope of the cross. We wait so that God can continue to speak. It is good to wait in hope and trust that just as Hebrews 9:28 states "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, help me to wait on your goodness even when I've lost all hope. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 11 – DAY 13 — MALACHI 4:5–6 – CHAD BIRD

> MALACHI 4:5-6 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

In Greek legend, Cassandra was a princess of Troy. The god Apollo laid this curse upon her: she would always prophesy accurately, but no one would ever believe her. Mythology aside, I suspect some Cassandra-style grief was shared by the true prophets in Israel. With rare exceptions, they were disbelieved, mocked, and martyred. A "successful prophet" was like a square circle.

So when, through Malachi, God promised to send an Elijah-like prophet to prepare his way (3:1) and to turn the hearts of fathers to children and children to fathers, we can't help but wonder: "What will happen? Will hearts be turned? Will the preaching of this new Elijah be heard so that God does not 'come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction?'"

We don't need to wonder; we know. For the one who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" was John the Baptizer (Luke 1:17). He did indeed "give knowledge of salvation to [God's] people in the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77). An Advent prophet, John preached repentance to prepare hearts for the coming of the Messiah. He baptized many, including Jesus. As Jesus said, he is also the Elijah who came but "they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased" (Matt. 17:11-12), including beheading him. True to prophetic form, John was believed by some, rejected by many.

Still, John faithfully did what God called him to do. He was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (John 1:23). The mouthpiece of the Spirit to break the centuries-old prophetic silence. The preacher who extended his finger toward Jesus and proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Listen. Do you hear it? John's voice. It still speaks. He is in the vast prophetic choir, singing heaven's words into our ears: "Repent, con- fess, believe, be baptized, and find full forgiveness in the Lamb who took the decree of utter destruction into himself on the cross that we might be justified and free."

PRAYER:

Lamb of God, turn our hearts to you, open our ears, and fill us with your word.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 12 – DAY 14 — 1 KINGS 19:11–14 – DANIEL EMERY PRICE

1 KINGS 19:9-14 There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your proph- ets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

Elijah is feeling very alone when he takes refuge in this cave. As far as he can tell, everyone has forsaken God. He is not only physically alone, but also alone in the faith. This is when Jesus shows up. And I do mean actual Jesus: the word of the Lord, wrapped in flesh, speaking to his lonely prophet. Jesus asks Elijah what he is doing in this place, and the prophet honestly expresses his feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and betrayal. God then addresses Elijah's situation by teaching him where to find God.

We tend to look for God in the extraordinary. We look for him in the strength of a strong wind. In the unignorable power of an earthquake. Or the bright flames of a raging fire. But Elijah doesn't find God in any of these things. He finds God with his ear. In a low whisper. What could be more ordinary than a quiet word? Yet this is how God is found. He is discovered in the things he has said, the words he has spoken, and the promises he has made.

Elijah believes he is alone, but Jesus shows him that if you have the word of God, you are never alone. The same Jesus who found Elijah in a cave will enter the womb of a virgin and be born for the salvation of the world. We have the voice of this Savior

written down in Scripture. However alone we may feel, the same word that spoke to Elijah now speaks to us in those pages. We have the whisper of God in ink and paper.

PRAYER:

Father, thank you for finding me the same way you found Elijah and for speaking to me through your word. Amen.

NOTES :

DECEMBER 13 – DAY 15 — ISAIAH 52:6–7 – KELSI KLEMBARA

ISAIAH 52:6-7 "Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore, in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am." How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Perhaps, like me, you can think of a specific time when you've heard the gospel anew again (or even perhaps the moment you heard it for the first time). I'll never tire from this experience. While Christ's work stands objectively true no matter how we feel about it, there is something to be said about the reinvigoration of hearing and receiving the forgiveness of sins for a second, third, or thousandth time.

Such proclamations can come in response to your confession of a particular sin or it might come out of the blue, in a sideways type of way. Regardless, the good news always comes through the mouth of another, the lips of one with beautiful feet, who has been sent to proclaim God's good news to every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9).

The work of the preacher is to continually publish — make known — salvation through Jesus Christ. This doesn't happen once, but in all seasons. It happens at both the peaks and valleys of life. It happens in contrast to the messages and the propaganda and the popular word of our day and age.

And amidst the season of Advent, the preacher continues to stamp the good news of Christ who has come, is coming, and will come again into the ears of God's people. "Here I am," God tells us through the lowly arrival of a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. My son, King Jesus, has arrived and his kingdom now reigns. This is the message that carries us through the waiting, the uncertainty, the suffering that is often synonymous with life itself. It's the message that greets us on Christmas morning and through every proclamation of those who speak God's word. To the burdened and broken conscience of a sinner, there is no sweeter and lovelier news than that.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the beautiful feet of those with lowly lips who proclaim the forgiveness of sins on ac- count of our King, Jesus. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 14 – DAY 16 — ISAIAH 55:8–11 – SETH MOORMAN

ISAIAH 55:8-11 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Picture dry ground. Cracked soil. No growth. No life. Scripture says that apart from God's speaking, that is you. Left to yourself, you can- not produce faith, cannot heal your guilt, cannot raise your dead heart. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," says the Lord.

Then comes the promise. Rain and snow come down from heav- en and do not return without watering the earth, making it sprout, giving seed and bread. What comes down from above does what it was sent to do.

That is Advent.

Before Christ's arrival, the ground of this life is dry and split open. The cracks run deep. Then the precipitation of grace falls from heaven. It quenches what was dry. It covers the cracks. It brings rivulets of life where the stench of death had settled in. This ground does nothing to improve itself. The washing of regeneration comes to cleanse and to revive.

Jesus is the Word sent from the Father. In his Advent, he comes down in flesh to do the Father's will. He is born in humility. He bears your sin. He enters your death. He gives his life for your forgiveness. He rises in victory. Then he returns to the Father in glory. The heart of Isaiah's promise is that Jesus, our Word, does not return empty.

The Word returns with what he was sent to save. He returns with the redeemed. He returns with sinners justified, enemies reconciled, graves marked for resurrection. He returns with you, held in the nail-scarred hands that bought you, carrying you to unspeak- able joys with the Father.

So when Isaiah says the Word shall not return empty, you hear more than a principle. You hear your name inside that promise. Christ does not go back to the Father empty-handed. He goes back having accomplished his task, carrying in his mercy all

whom he has claimed. This is your Advent confidence. The One who came down for you will come again for you.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, living Word of the Father, keep us in your redeeming arms, and bring us with you in the day of your glory.

NOTES :

DECEMBER 15 – DAY 17 — ISAIAH 62:1–2 – AMY MANTRAVADI

ISAIAH 62:1-2 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

What is the righteousness of which God speaks—the righteousness which Israel will have? What could it be but the righteousness of God himself? "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). And what is the salvation of Israel—the salvation of which he speaks? It could be nothing other than the one whose name means salvation. "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The righteous- ness and the salvation of Israel is the promised one sent to redeem Israel: Jesus Christ himself. Now the Lord declares that in this one, glory will be revealed, and by this one, a new name will be given, for this is the Advent long promised.

In the Old Testament, the Lord had declared that those who were called, "Not my people," would be called "my people" (Hos. 1:10).

Those who had been given a bill of divorce would be called "married" (Isa. 50:1; 62:4). This is now fulfilled in the name God gives to all who believe. No longer are we called "faithless," "rebel," "sinner," or "worthless." We are called by the name of Christ himself, for we are children of God. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1). We who were not a people are now a people. Our daily struggle against sin does not change our status as children of God, for in him we are righteous. This is accomplished by the mouth of the Lord and the Word he sends forth: the Messiah promised to Israel.

We know that what God speaks through his promises, he performs (Rom. 4:21). Thus, what he achieved for us in his incarnation will lead to our final deliverance in his second coming. So we do not lose heart, but press on in the power of Christ, who pleads for us at the right hand of the Father and calls us his beloved.

PRAYER:

Lord, we are overwhelmed by the grace and love you have given us in the gift of your own name! You are a God who keeps his promises even as we await for you to arrive once again.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 15 – GROUP DISCUSSION

Day 9 — Amos 8:11–12 — The Famine of God's Word

The devotion describes Israel's spiritual famine after generations of rejecting God's prophets. It reminds us that life with God depends on continually receiving His Word. What are some ways we can become spiritually distracted or neglect God's Word in our lives?

Day 10 – Lamentations 3:25–28 — Waiting in Hope

Jeremiah speaks honestly about despair and suffering while also declaring that the Lord is good to those who wait for Him. The devotion reminds us that waiting does not mean pretending everything is fine; it means anchoring our grief in the hope of Christ. How does being reminded of what Jesus did for us on the cross help us hold on to hope when our circumstances do not change?

Day 11 – Malachi 4:5–6 — John the Baptist Prepares the Way

John the Baptist came preaching repentance and preparing people for Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. How does recognizing our sin help us appreciate the forgiveness Jesus offers?

Day 12 – 1 Kings 19:11–14 — Hearing God in the Quiet

Elijah expected to encounter God in powerful displays, but God spoke to him in a low whisper. The devotion reminds us that God comes to us through the promises of His Word, even when we feel alone. How does God's ordinary but powerful Word reassure us that He is present?

Day 13 – Isaiah 52:6–7 — The Beautiful Feet of Those Who Bring Good News

The devotion describes our calling to continually proclaim the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. Why do we need to hear the Gospel repeatedly, even when we already know that Jesus died and rose for us?

Day 14 – Isaiah 55:8–11 — God's Word Accomplishes His Purpose

Isaiah compares God's Word to rain and snow that water the earth and produce life. The devotion emphasizes that we cannot create faith or rescue ourselves from sin; God's Word accomplishes what He intends. What comfort do you find in knowing that God is the one who creates and sustains faith?

Day 15 – Isaiah 62:1–2 — Given a New Name

The devotion explains that through Jesus, God gives us His righteousness and calls us His children. Our identity is no longer defined by our sin, rebellion, or failures. How does your sin or the sin of others sometimes shape the way you see yourself?

Day 16 – The Promises of God — Living Between Christ's Two Advents

Several devotions remind us that Jesus has come, that He is present with us through His Word, and that He will come again to complete our salvation. How does the promise of Christ's return shape the way we face suffering, uncertainty, and the unfinished struggles of life?

Day 17 – Receiving God's Gifts and Sharing His Word

Throughout these devotions, God uses His Word to create faith, forgive sins, comfort the suffering, and bring people to Christ. He also sends ordinary people to proclaim this Good News. How can you make receiving God's Word a more intentional part of your daily life?

Closing Reflection

What do the passages we read for the devotions tell us that God does for us?

What do these passages tell us about the character of God?

What do the passages lead you to want to pray about?

DECEMBER 16 – DAY 18 — JEREMIAH 33:2–3 – LUKE KJOLHAUG

JEREMIAH 33:2-3 "Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it— the Lord is his name: Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."

Empty words and promises abound at Christmas time. Coca-Cola invites us to "taste joy," Macy's promises "holiday magic," and jewelers assure us that "every kiss begins with Kay." In other words, their product alone is the key which can unlock happiness. That's the false promise which poisons the eggnog.

We are used to empty words. In fact, we've come to expect them, mostly because we've been let down too many times to ignore. We expect politicians to break their grandiose promises. We expect marriage vows to fail—or at very least, we're unsurprised when they do. And, although everyone talks a big game about how wonder- ful and carefree this year's family Christmas gathering will be, the truth is that our seasonal family gatherings usually look less like *It's a Wonderful Life* and more like *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. In other words, expectations and reality rarely align. Hollow words and unkept promises are the norm.

Jeremiah knew this better than anyone. The Babylonians were pounding at the gates of Jerusalem, God's people were soon to be overrun and exiled, and his prophet had been imprisoned by the King of Judah for speaking the Word of the Lord. It seemed that Jeremiah was—in the words of today's youth—cooked. Except for one thing: God's Word was not done with Jeremiah. He had something else to speak to Israel and to us: "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (v. 3). The Hebrew word for "unsearchable" also means "unassailable." When God steps up to the mic, then, his words cannot be revoked or challenged. They never return void (Isa. 55:11). Why? Because this is the Lord, maker of Heaven and earth. Yahweh is his name, and Yahweh literally means "The Lord saves."

That's why he's here. He's got some saving to do. He's got a word to keep. He's got a promise to fulfill; a promise of forgiveness and salvation and eternal life for all who believe. His is a Word as unas- sailable as the manger, the old rugged Cross, and the empty tomb. Can you hear it?

PRAYER:

Gracious Heavenly Father, help me to trust that you never speak empty words or promises, and open my ears to hear and believe. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 17 – DAY 19 — ROMANS 10:16–18 – KELSI KLEMBARA

ROMANS 10:16-18 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world."

If we had our way, we would make salvation a matter of our hands, doing and working away, or of our heads, thinking and pondering, or even perhaps of our eyes, seeing and witnessing. Yet in Romans 10, Paul echoes the entirety of Scripture when he repeats that the only way to get to faith is through one's ears. How maddening for us! God chooses our ears as the way in which we receive faith in his son, Je- sus Christ, because they are the most passive part of our body: all our ears can do is receive. He wants all the credit when it comes to saving us. While our faith in him does certainly result in action: con- fession (Rom. 10:9), preaching (Rom. 10:15), and obedience (Rom. 10:16), we receive it only through the power of an effective Word which does what it says: justifying us in heart, mind, body, and soul.

What's more, this Word comes to us through the voices of other sinners. Sinners who are tasked with spreading the one Word of gospel to the ends of the earth. Not exactly the most logical or savvy deliv- ery system. And yet we know it's effective - for God's Word does not return void (Isa. 55:11). God's speech will enact his promise of faith when and where he pleases.

As you continue through this Advent season, busied by the to-dos of the end of another year, remember that your faith alone saves you. Festivities, decorations, and fellowship are all wonderful gifts this time of year, but none are required for your trust in the gospel. So sit still for a minute, make time to receive God's gifts within his community of believers, and let the Word fill your ears and your heart. There, you will find the promise of the manger, the sacrifice of the cross, and the hope of the resurrection handed over to you.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, quiet our hands and our minds during this busy season so that you can fill our ears with the promises of your Word. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 18 – DAY 20 — HEBREWS 1:1–2 – CHAD BIRD

HEBREWS 1:1-2 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

I grew up in the country, far from the dull roar of interstates and the nervous humming of streetlights. Visitors from the city who stepped onto our front porch when the stars were out would remark on the silence. They heard nothing. But not me. My ears, tuned to a ru- ral frequency, heard the music of cicadas in the trees and the dis- tant howling of coyotes in the hills yonder. The night was alive with sound. You just needed ears to hear.

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1). Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and many more. Their mouths did not belong to them but to God. He owned their lips and used them to fill temple courts and village streets with his Word. Israel was alive with the sound of the Lord, though many refused to listen. You just needed ears to hear.

What did they preach? Many warnings, many promises. But rich and diverse though their messages were, "God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets that his Christ would suffer" (Acts 3:18). "To him all the prophets bear witness" (Acts 10:43). If we think of the Old Testament as a long, starlit night, that night was alive with prophetic sound, echoing from the lush fields of Dan to the desert edge of Beersheba, "He's coming…he's coming…he's coming."

And then he came. "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1). In tomorrow's devotion, we will read of how the Word entered Mary's womb and became flesh. He was born, he grew up, and he preached. Oh, did he preach! He preaches repentance. He preaches peace to war-torn hearts. He preaches freedom to those enslaved by sin. Even on the cross, as he says to the thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). To the very end, he is preaching grace—the same grace he still preaches to us that we might live and delight in him.

PRAYER:

Jesus the Messiah, give us ears to hear you speak grace and mercy into our hearts.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 19 – DAY 21 — LUKE 1:26–33 – DANIEL EMERY PRICE

> *LUKE 1:26–33 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

It seems to me that Mary is a woman who knows what she is not. When Gabriel appears to her, she is troubled by his greeting. What is this title of "favored one" and why is it used to describe her? She is afraid. Surely this messenger from God has made a mistake. But Gabriel calms these fears with a word and a promise.

The word is: do not be afraid. These words (and other versions of them) will be the most frequently spoken words by the child that she is about to carry. Jesus will speak these words repeatedly to trembling sinners throughout his ministry. This is a gospel word. This is an Advent word. And this is most certainly a Christmas word. This word spoken to Mary is the word God speaks to every troubled soul when they encounter his grace. This word puts fear to flight and ushers in peace.

The promise is: you will bear a son. This is the promise the people of God had been waiting on for generations. The Son of David is coming! For so long, God had been silent, but now he has spoken. And the word he has spoken is "I keep my promises." Gabriel doesn't have the wrong address or person. The promise spoken to the humble future mother of God is a promise for all people. Salvation is coming! Redemption is coming! Christmas is coming! Jesus is on the way!

PRAYER:

Father, thank you for taking away my fears with your Word and promises. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 20 – DAY 22 — ISAIAH 42:1–3 – SETH MOORMAN

ISAIAH 42:1–3 Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

You might expect the Word who breaks the silence to arrive with a thunderclap. You might expect raised volume, public force, and un- mistakable spectacle. Instead, Isaiah gives you a Servant who "will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." The details here are important because they show the scope and shape of his saving work.

There is nothing theatrical about the Lord's chosen Servant. He does not need noise, intimidation, or displays of strength to accomplish his work. He comes humbly, steadily, and faithfully. Yet fallen hearts misread his gentleness and mistake it as weakness. In your sin, you still want God to act in ways that flatter your idea of strength and power. You want quick judgment on others and easier mercy for yourself. But God's justice does not follow your script.

But there is good news. The quietness of this Servant is not distant. It is mercy drawing near. He comes for people bruised by sin, bent by sorrow, and barely burning. He does not disregard the defeated. He does not discard the failing or the falling. He does not finish off those already collapsing under guilt and death.

In the quiet town of Bethlehem, this Servant takes on flesh and comes for you. At the cross, he bears the judgment sin deserves. In his resurrection, he brings forth justice in a way you never expect- ed. Rather than casting aside the broken, he enters their suffering, bears their sin, and raises them with himself.

So do not confuse gentleness or quiet with absence of power. This is the mighty mercy of God. The Word draws near quietly and saves completely.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, gentle and faithful Servant, draw near to us in our weakness and bring your saving justice to completion in us.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 21 – DAY 23 – COLOSSIANS 1:15–20 – AMY MANTRAVADI

> *COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

The Word created all things in the beginning. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). Likewise, the Word of God makes us new creations. It also brings into being a church, for in his Advent he took on a body that the Body of Christ might have life. The church of Jesus Christ is a creature of the Word of God, and it exists to proclaim that Word. In the corporate gathering, believers and unbelievers alike hear God's Word in law and gospel. Here, we receive the prom- ises of God through his most precious Word which is joined with the physical elements of water, bread, and wine. The church is not man's creation, but God's, the community in which we are discipled as we wait for Christ's return. In that gathering, we surrender our fears and failures to Christ, and receive his forgiveness in return. How often have I come to worship in desperate need! Always, the Lord provides for me through his word and sacrament as well as in my fellowship with other believers.

That is why we declare by faith that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic: not because we have accomplished it, but because God has declared it and brought it into being: "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). This is why we have confidence despite the church's failures, why we do not doubt our salvation, why we never fear that events will not turn out for our ultimate good. For the Word that created continues to create, the one who governed continues to govern, and in Christ all things hold together. As G.K. Chesterton once said: "Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew his way out of the grave."[4] Every week, we come before our God in

[4] G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), Project Gutenberg Australia, last updated August 2020, https:/ /gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100311h.html.

weakness and suffering, and each time he raises us from the dead. That is why we have faith in the church, for its guarantor is Christ.

PRAYER:

Lord, how grateful we are that you have created your church as one body, redeemed and washed in your water and word! As we live between your two Advents, use us to proclaim your Word and sustain us in the hope of your return.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 22 – DAY 24 — 2 CORINTHIANS 4:5–6 – DANIEL EMERY PRICE

> *2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-6 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of dark- ness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

One of the things I remember about growing up in the country was how dark the nights were. No streetlights or neighbor's kitchen lights in the distance. Just darkness all around you for what felt like forever. The silence of God is likened to this in Scripture. When God is silent, all is dark. The ears are the eyes of faith, and apart from a word from God, you cannot see.

Throughout Scripture, God's word flashes in the darkness, promis- ing a coming light. The people wait. The promise comes again. The people wait. And on Christmas morning, the light breaks through. All that God has spoken has pointed to this moment. A baby cries. The angels rejoice. The lowly draw near. Light is shining in the darkness.

This is the message Christians have been given. God has spoken, and his final word is Jesus. Jesus Christ is Lord, and he is the only light that has overcome the darkness. This light has taken up residency in our hearts. It has revealed the glory of God in the face of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. We rejoice over the reality that Advent comes to a close for us, but there is a world living in darkness still waiting for Christmas.

PRAYER:

Father, thank you for being the light in the darkness and help me proclaim it to others. Amen.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 22 – GROUP DISCUSSION

Day 18 – Jeremiah 33:2–3 — God Keeps His Promises

Jeremiah was surrounded by circumstances that made God's promises seem unlikely. The devotion reminds us that God's Word is not empty or unreliable.

Which promises in Scripture give you hope when circumstances seem to contradict them?

Day 19 – Romans 10:16–18 — Faith Comes Through Hearing

Paul teaches that faith comes through hearing the Word of Christ. The devotion points out that our ears receive God's gifts rather than earning them through our own efforts.

Why do you think we sometimes prefer to make faith about what we do, accomplish, or understand rather than receiving what God gives us?

God sends sinful, imperfect people to proclaim the Gospel to others. What might make you hesitant to speak about Jesus, and how does the promise that God's Word is effective help address that hesitation?

Day 20 – Hebrews 1:1–2 — Jesus Is God's Final and Full Word

God spoke through the prophets throughout the Old Testament, but now He has spoken to us through His Son.

How do the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament help us understand who Jesus is and why He came?

Day 21 – Luke 1:26–33 — God's Word Speaks to Our Fear

Mary was troubled and afraid when Gabriel announced God's favor and the coming birth of Jesus. Gabriel responded with God's Word: "Do not be afraid."

When fear, guilt, or uncertainty trouble you, what difference does it make to hear God's promises rather than simply being told to feel better or try harder?

Day 22 – Isaiah 42:1–3 — The Gentle Servant of God

Isaiah describes God's chosen Servant as one who will not break a bruised reed or extinguish a faintly burning wick. The devotion reminds us that Jesus draws near to the weak and broken rather than discarding them.

How does this picture of Jesus challenge the way we sometimes think about strength, success, or how God should deal with people?

Day 23 – Colossians 1:15–20 — Christ Creates and Sustains His Church

The devotion describes the Church as God's creation, brought into being and sustained by His Word.

How does this shape the way we respond to the Church's weaknesses, disappointments, and struggles?

Day 24 – 2 Corinthians 4:5–6 — Proclaiming the Light of Christ

Paul says that we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, not ourselves. The devotion reminds us that Jesus is the light who has overcome the darkness.

What might it look like in your life to point the people you know who are living in darkness, uncertainty, or hopelessness toward the light of Jesus?

Closing Reflection

What do the passages we read for the devotions tell us that God does for us?

What do these passages tell us about the character of God?

What do the passages lead you to want to pray about?

DECEMBER 23 – DAY 25 — MATTHEW 3:16–17 – CHAD BIRD

MATTHEW 3:16-17 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and be- hold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

I stood beside the river. Broken branches floated from upstream. The water was a dull brown. The opposite bank looked almost close enough for a high school long jumper to clear the distance. Honestly, it was a bit of a letdown. After all, this wasn't just any river; this was the Jordan River. In my childhood imagination, it had been bigger and better than this.

But then something clicked. Yes, yes, I thought, this is perfect after all. Why? In a mediocre river, in the middle of nowhere, on an average day, Jesus was baptized. Heaven's gates were thrown wide open. The Spirit of God winged his way down and rested on the Messiah. And down boomed the Father's voice, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17). And nothing has been the same ever since, for the Advent of the awaited one, the Word Incarnate, had arrived.

God did not say, "This is the man who'll show you how to be good." Rather, "This is my beloved Son." The Father has sent him and loves him. "With whom I am well pleased." All he does, the Father applauds and rejoices over. Jesus is exactly who the Father wants him to be.

Do you see what that means? Through baptism, we will forever be pleasing to the Father. The Word has drawn near to us, has entered the murky waters of our sinful world, and has burst out of them victorious. As we surface from our baptismal water, we find ourselves united to him. And because of him, we hear God's words of approval spoken over us.

It means that when we are baptized in ordinary water, wherever that might be, on an average day, those same words apply to us. In our baptism, the Father speaks to us, saying, "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased."

The voice from heaven said those words to you yesterday, today, and will forever, for in baptism "you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Hidden securely in the Incarnate Word, you are exactly who the Father wants you to be, his child in whom he is well pleased.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, all praise to you for baptizing me into Christ, calling me your beloved child with whom you are well pleased.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 24 – CHRISTMAS EVE — LUKE 2:10–14 – KELSI KLEMBARA

> *LUKE 2:10-14 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

Can you imagine this scene? We read right over it, but Luke 2 is a sight — and a sound — to behold. As usual, God's Word is the prima- ry transfer of information here: first, an angel notifies the shepherds of Jesus' birth, then a multitude of angels sings a song of praise, and finally the shepherds proclaim the good news to others after seeing Jesus for themselves (v. 17).

I'm profoundly struck by the biggest moment of sound, when a multitude of heavenly hosts fills the sky, as well as the eyes and ears of a humble, no-named group of shepherds outside of Bethlehem. There's no doubt it had to be overwhelmingly glorious.

Yet some might find this to be a concert without purpose. Why would God waste his time announcing the birth of the Savior of the world to nobodies tending a flock of sheep? Why not appear at the palace of Herod where God could stake his claim with all authority and power?

Against a backdrop of pastureland, God proclaims that no human being might boast in his presence, but instead those in Christ Jesus can boast only in him (1 Cor. 1:29,31). He takes the foolish, the weak, the lowly and transforms them into his glory and his glory alone.

The announcement of Jesus' birth is the continuation of God's up- side-down work to plant faith into the hearts of sinners. This work never looks like we expect, which doesn't lessen its glory, but in- stead increases it by coming to us in the most unexpected ways.

At his son's birth, God shamed the wise through the proclamation given by shepherds. At his son's resurrection, he delivered the news not to the mighty leaders but a few women. And now, God comes to you through the mouth of a sinner, through the waters of your baptism, and through the simple means of bread and

wine by which you receive his forgiveness. Unexpected? Yes. And yet a glorious sight and sound all the same.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for not letting us steal your glory but increasing it by coming to us through the lowly and yet faith-creating means of your word.

NOTES:

DECEMBER 25 – CHRISTMAS DAY — JOHN 1:1–5, 14 – LUKE KJOLHAUG

> *JOHN 1:1-5, 14 CHRISTMAS In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

In the beginning of God's story, there was no blank page. There was no blinking cursor on an empty computer screen. There was never nothing. Instead, there has always been an eternal Word; THE Word, in fact. And this tells us something important: God is never speechless.

With echoes of Eden in mind (c.f. Gen. 1:1), John reminds us that God is in the business of creating and re-creating, bringing beauty and order out of chaos, causing something new to spring forth (Isa. 43:19) from the deadness of our sin-darkened world and our sin-darkened hearts, where it is—in the words of C.S. Lewis, "always winter but never Christmas."[5] Ironically, the dark places turn out to be where God seems to do his best work, bringing life and light and salvation. He is most present precisely where he seems most absent; at the manger, in a muddy river, at the Cross.

And really, that's the funny thing about this Word (aka Jesus): He actually draws near to us. If verses 1-5 of John 1 provide a biographical sketch, perhaps lulling us to sleep with the impression that this Word acts at a safe distance, verse 14 is where John breaks the fourth wall. It's as if God bursts through the pages of his book to grab us personally by the heart: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us…" Eugene Peterson says the Word "moved into the neighborhood" (v. 14 MSG). God doesn't simply speak from the heights of heaven, far removed from the muck and mire of humanity and unaffected by our plight. Instead, Jesus was (and is) just as human as you and I, with skin fiber and bone marrow and blood cells and lung tissue and hair follicles. He was carried by Mary, touched by lepers, seen by blind men, and worshipped by crowds.

[5] C.S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 16.

He is Immanuel, God with us—not God apart from us. He refuses to let us suffer alone in silence. Instead he speaks, and the words of the Word are never empty, but full of grace and truth (v. 14).

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, thank you for moving into the neighborhood and filling my heart with your words of grace and truth. Amen.

NOTES: