Week 4: Love
Wonder, mystery and theological depth

Week 4 Prayer

God of love,
You are greater than our understanding and closer than our breath.
In the mystery of your coming, you have made yourself known — not in certainty, but in presence.
Help us to receive the gift of Christ with wonder, with humility, with love.
Amen.

Day 22

"Let all the earth keep silence before him!" Habakkuk 2:20

Dear Pastor,
I've always loved Christmas music, but I don't love the Advent hymns. "Let All Moral Flesh," especially, is so dark and depressing. I want "Go Tell It on the Mountain" to inspire us to movement.

Last week's organ postlude was so slow and sad, and I really want to leave church feeling uplifted.

Why does waiting matter? Can't we sing Christmas hymns sooner?

Our church doesn't add Christmas hymns until later. But my friend goes to the church in the next town over, and they sing Christmas music for all of December.

Sincerely,
Ready to Sing Already

Dear Ready to Sing Already,
I love church music too! It can create a mood or express sentiments that are hard to convey in words alone. There are many ways to program Advent and Christmas music, none of which are wrong or right.

Sometimes worship committees lean into a penitential feeling during Advent. Lent and Advent share the liturgical color of purple, and they can similarly share the theme of preparing for God to do something extraordinary. This preparation can include confessing sins, fasting and engaging in deep self-reflection. In Advent, we are preparing for Christ to be born anew in our hearts. For some of us, that rebirth means cleaning up what we hold in our heart to make room for what God has in store.

In other years, a worship committee might lean into the Advent themes of hope, joy, peace and love. These themes can lead to different music selections that may feel more uplifting, including traditional Christmas hymns sung during Advent.

Many churches also interpret Advent in their own way, so it makes sense that we sing different hymns. No one is right or wrong — just worshipping God in a unique way.

You could suggest that your pastor or the worship committee organize a hymn sing for the Sunday after Christmas — with your help, if you have the time and energy.

"Sing"cerely yours,
Pastor Karie

Day 23

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us." John 1:14

Dear Pastor,
I moved a lot as a kid, and my family were never really churchgoers. When I was in military service, I went to church occasionally with friends, and I read the Bible on my own. But I don't really understand all of the church year and what the symbols in the sanctuary mean.

I'm realizing that Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are actually different seasons. I figured this out mostly because we change the colors and accessories in the sanctuary. The Advent wreath candles in my church are purple, but I've been to churches where one candle is pink. Then on Christmas Eve, everything changes to white.

It's beautiful, but what does it all mean? How do these changes shape how we understand Jesus?

Sincerely,
Relearning the Calendar

Dear Relearning,
I confess I am a bit jealous. We lived in the same house my whole childhood, and I was always jealous of my friends who had lived other places. They always had mementos of different places they had called home: baseball pennants, school pictures, etc. Each told part of their story.

You can say the same about all the colors that mark the parts of the holiday season as well. Each has a story to tell. Purple reminds us that Advent is a season of humanity's longing for a sign of salvation. That season of expectation is like the blueish-purple of the night sky that waits for dawn. The pink candle is like a shooting star in that night sky. It represents hope amid our anticipation, reminding us that what we wait for is the fulfillment of God's promise — which is as sure as the sunrise. Then finally, on Christmas Eve, we change to white. Have you ever seen snow first thing in the morning? It is like a white blanket of perfect peace. For me, that is what the white at Christmas symbolizes: the perfect peace of Christ in the world.

The great thing about symbols is that they have a life of their own. The colors have traditional shared meanings in the church, but they can also have meanings for you. What do the colors say to you during the season? Perhaps the pink is less a shooting star than the first bloom in spring. Whatever they come to mean for you, I hope the colors and symbols of the season draw you in and remind you that Christmas is a promise of hope that unfolds before us year after year.

Peace,
Pastor Rob

Day 24

"There were shepherds living in the fields." Luke 2:8
"Magi from the east came." Matthew 2:1

Dear Pastor,
I've noticed that the Gospels tell the Christmas story in different ways. Matthew has wise men who follow a star; Luke talks about shepherds and angels. We combine figures from each into one scene in our Christmas pageant and in our Nativity displays.

I don't think it's a problem, but I'm trying to understand better what it means to blend the Gospel accounts. What are we communicating by blending these stories? Are we prioritizing the big picture over the details? Are we simplifying the story, or are we expressing something deeper by holding these perspectives together?

I've been rearranging my Nativity set at home and sitting with it each week to see if I feel differently about the story being communicated. I haven't had a big ah-ha moment yet.

Sincerely,
Paying Closer Attention

Dear Paying Closer Attention,
Of all the creche sets that my family sets out for the Christmas season, my favorite is possibly the smallest. You might not notice it in our living room if you don't know what to look for. It's only one piece, a single small statue, depicting the holy family crammed into a Peruvian intercity bus. It's not literal, of course. It's not meant to be literal. Nobody is making the case that the Gospels of Luke or Matthew include motorized vehicles. But just because it's not literal doesn't mean it doesn't contain truth. The craftspeople who conceived of this bus saw something true in the Christmas tale about modern migration and dislocation. They saw something of their own modern lives in this story from two thousand years ago, half a world away. So they decided to tell the story again, using the world they knew — this time in art.

They're not the first. Faithful Christians been adapting, rearranging and melding these Gospel Nativity stories for centuries. We've been splicing dialogue. We've been adding characters. In my church, the number of shepherds in the pageant varies wildly every year based not on any exegetical principle but solely on the number of willing children who are ready in costume. But this is precisely my point. The Christmas story was never just about the holy family, the shepherds and the magi. Jesus isn't born just for the people on the page. Jesus is born for everybody who reads the Good News, everybody who hears it, everybody who tells it — and when we tell it in our own words, when we adapt it for our own people, we're reminding every child of God that they have a part to play in the great cosmic pageant.

Yours,
Pastor Matt G.

Day 25

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." Psalm 24:1

Dear Pastor,
I've been thinking about traditions like Christmas trees and Chrismon trees.

Are we redeeming these traditions or simply adapting them? How do we discern what belongs in worship?

I realize we don't want Santa Claus on the sanctuary tree, but do all of the ornaments have to have religious meaning? Could we put up sparkly and colorful Christmas ornaments?

Sincerely,
Wondering About the Tree in the Sanctuary

Dear Wondering about the Tree in the Sanctuary,
Thank you for this question that shows real care for what happens in worship. Instead of redeeming or adapting decorations, I wonder if we can reframe this question. Psalm 24:1 reminds us that all creation belongs to God. And what a claim! The tree doesn't need our permission to belong to God; ornaments, Chrismons (symbols combining the words "Christ" and "monogram" and used as decorations) included, already belong to God. Our *Book of Order* echoes the psalm: "For time, space and matter belong to God," and worship is where we join this ongoing claim (W-1.020118).

And for Reformed people, if your sanctuary has only used Chrismons, that history doesn't bind you either. We are always being reformed by the Word of God! If the ornaments, in their sparkle and color, speak to the beauty of God's own creation, that is reason enough. Go for it!

Your question also made me notice something. No tree is ever decorated with just one ornament or one Chrismon. What makes a tree beautiful is clustering many of them together, each unique with its own shape and color, all under one tree. This sounds like a congregation to me! At baptism, we are all given unique gifts, and we all belong to God. And we don't do it alone! None of us is asked to be the whole tree or even the sole ornament. We bring our whole selves and gather under Christ.

So let the tree hold all of it, sparkly alongside Chrismons. This Advent, may your congregation notice the same thing about itself, that God is gathering a great many different gifts onto one tree and calling it very good.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Alex

Day 26

"In the beginning was the Word." John 1:1

Dear Pastor,
I've learned that Christmas traditions developed over time and may connect to earlier celebrations from other faiths, yet we use them in worship.

Does the origin of a tradition affect its meaning? Are we reshaping something into something new? What do we think about faith traditions that are borrowed from pagan rituals or other spiritual practices?

I'm thinking about how Christmas trees may have roots in Yule logs or pagan celebrations. I also read an article about how poinsettias were known by the Aztecs as *cuetlaxóchitl*. Is their use cultural appropriation? Does celebrating Jesus as the Light of the World have anything to do with the solstice?

Sincerely,
Trying to Understand What We've Inherited

Dear Inherited,
Certainly, all sorts of stories and traditions surround the signs and symbols of Christmas. And yes, many do originate in other traditions and early human cultures.

Like words, symbols rely on context. If you saw an apple sitting next to a Bible, you might think about creation and humanity in the garden of Eden. But what if the apple were sitting next to a book of fairy tales? Then you might be reminded of Sleeping Beauty. Or consider the bright star that heralds the birth of Christ. For the ancient Egyptians, that same bright star signaled the annual flooding of the Nile. Only with context can we really get the unique Christian meaning of shared symbols.

Some symbols at Christmas bring meaning into the Christmas story. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were odd gifts to bring a newborn, but they were just right for a king. Those symbols of royal birth, familiar across cultures, come into the story of Christ as a proclamation of his kingship. Of course, the meaning of kingship itself was redefined by Jesus' own ministry in the world!

Shared symbols can bring richness to our stories while reminding us that we live in a wondrously diverse world. You are right that we need to be mindful of appropriation and take great care in how we use symbols held in common with other traditions. The next time you see a poinsettia – that winter plant that was once a sign of the sun and warriors but now reminds us of the season of the Christ Child – why not give a little word of thanks to God that such a simple plant has brought meaning to people as diverse as the Aztecs and the Presbyterians!

Peace,
Pastor Rob

Day 27

"He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:17

Dear Pastor,
I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around Jesus' immortality. It's hard to think about someone eternal entering a particular time in history.

We say Jesus is eternal, yet we celebrate his birth. What was Jesus doing before he was born? How was he active in creation? And how did he stay connected with the Trinity while he was in a human body? To be human, did he have to give up some of that connection?

I know this may be a mystery, but I want to understand how to think about it.

Sincerely,
Trying to Understand the Mystery

Dear Trying,
Mystery is at the heart of faith, yet we humans do not always do well with mystery.

Consider the mystery of eternity. We do our living and dying on a temporal plane, so we believe eternity to be beyond our comprehension by definition. Even if we try to make sense of eternity, from our human perspective we find ourselves imagining eternity as time that has no end.

The doctrine of the Trinity invites us to consider eternity from the perspective of God, in whom all things – past, present and future – hold together. The late Frederick Buechner put it this way: "Eternity is not endless time or the opposite of time. It is the essence of time. If you spin a pinwheel fast enough, then all its colors blend into a single color – white – which is the essence of all the colors of the spectrum combined. If you spin time fast enough, then time-past, time-present, and time-to-come all blend into a single timelessness or eternity, which is the essence of all times combined."(Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*)

Yet Buechner's last sentence contradicts his first. God and eternity are the opposite of timelessness. Rather, God has all the time in the world (for us!). To borrow a movie title, God is "everything, everywhere, all at once!"

This is how God can be present at creation and still creating now; how Christ, the Word of God, can be present at creation yet also enter time as Jesus; and how the Spirit of God can brood over the deep in the beginning and, in the fullness of time, gather a disparate group of mortals to be Christ's church.

You see, I can't really explain eternity. I can only encounter Christ, who entered time to reveal eternity. Perhaps following Jesus is the best way to live with mystery.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Baron

Day 28

"[Nothing] . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God." Romans 8:39

Dear Pastor,
I'm struggling with my seasonal depression. Yes, I am seeing my therapist and taking care of myself. But I'm struggling to read, and I can't concentrate enough to do the Advent devotions this year. I need something quick that I can do when I feel overwhelmed.

I was hoping you might be able to give me one small passage or prayer that I can use throughout Advent. I keep coming back to something simple. Where is God in all of this? In the stress, the grief, the waiting, where is God actually present?

I want something real. Something that I can hold onto this season.

Sincerely,
Searching for Assurance

Dear Searching for Assurance,
When you are feeling overwhelmed I wonder if you might hold onto a breath prayer. Perhaps as you breathe in, say, "Angels announce," and then as you breathe out, say "Good News of great joy."

As you concentrate on your breathing and begin to experience the Good News of great joy the angels shared with the shepherds, I wonder if you might open your hands to receive as a gift a particular grace: the truth that you do not need to hold onto God. The gift of Advent and Christmas is that God comes down to hold onto us.

When I am overwhelmed and need to remember that I am embraced by God's love, I turn to the apostle Paul's declaration in the eighth chapter of Romans. He begins with one of the strongest words in Greek: *peitho*. It means trust, confidence, reliance, certainty. If one is certain of something, then nothing can undermine that faith. It is the rock upon which you build your life and the idea against which you judge everything else. Paul declares, "I am convinced that [nothing] . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God loves us and neither depression nor stress, not grief or waiting, can ever separate us from God's love. God comes down to hold onto us.

You are in my prayers, and I trust that a church that loves you is holding you in their prayers, too.

God bless you,
Pastor Matt R.