



OLD CAMBRIDGE BAPTIST CHURCH
A Progressive Peace and Justice Congregation



Advent Devotional 2022
Reading Scripture Through the Lens of
Race and Racial Justice

Preface

Dear OCBC,

Advent is often stripped of its proper role in the Christian liturgical cycle of the church – that way of keeping time that is out of sync with linear time, but that encircles us and draws us back into newness year after year. Advent is often treated as a prelude to Christmas, getting us far too quickly to the manger and leaving us bereft of Advent's best gifts.

Advent really isn't about Christmas at all. It's about waiting, hoping, anticipating, preparing for more than any singular event – even the incarnation of the Christ into human flesh. Advent has cosmic implications and eschatological overtones, pointing to the ways our lives are bound up in a cosmic story of the Divine reign coming – *always coming* – in a time to come that is *then*, and *now*, and *in the future* all at once. A cyclical, spiraling time.

Advent is about getting us ready for something that we can only dimly see and only partially imagine. That certainly happens at Christmas, filling us with warm feelings of a past affecting our present which we celebrate with great joy and resplendent song. But it happens beyond Christmas, too. And that means Advent has a role in provoking anticipation and longing and desire for something yet to be fulfilled. Advent is an experience of the subjunctive: where *what might be* takes precedence over *what is*, and we're caught up in the *possible* and the *potential* rather than the *already* and the *actual*.

So, Advent is an opportune time (*kairos*) for a devotional centered on racial justice. What some of you have written and all of us will read this Advent season is about something that we can only dimly see and only partially imagine – a life, a church, a society shaped by the realities of racial justice and a deep valuing of BIPOC lives. We can see it enough to know of its possibility, and yet know that we've only approximated that hoped-for, anticipated, longed-for reality that is still to come. Racial justice in our midst is still yet-to-be.

Justice, like Advent, is also cyclical and spiraling, and rarely ever linear. We get there gradually but are never quite there. We make important strides and experience the erosion of our work almost simultaneously. We know it enough to taste it and long for more, yet we are not yet filled to satisfaction with its goodness. So, we continue our longing and preparation and anticipation and striving. This is the call of justice, and it's the message of Advent.

As you move into this season with the words of this devotional written by so many OCBCers and friends of the congregation, I invite you into the experience with these words of scripture. While they are likely known to you because they're sung each season in Handel's *Messiah*, these words are *not* about Christmas. They're about the cosmic implications of Advent yet to be fulfilled in a time still to come and always coming: "The dominion of the world has become the dominion of our God and of God's Messiah, and this one will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15b, An Inclusive Version).

With Anticipation,
The Rev. Cody J. Sanders, Ph.D.

Introduction

Last year the OCBC Racial Justice Team surveyed the congregation about next steps in the church's racial justice journey. In addition to proposing action steps, many members affirmed the importance of linking racial justice work with spiritual practice.

This Advent Devotional is one response to that yearning. Modeled on a reflection booklet Pastor Cody initiated in 2016, and co-created by diverse members of the community, this Advent Devotional is a spiritual resource for the whole congregation. Maureen and Leslie carefully chose readings from the lectionary with translations from a variety of sources, then invited the congregation to volunteer to write a reflection. We were pleased that 23 people agreed to wrestle with an assigned Scripture reading and reflect on it through the lens of race. Contributors included younger and older members, newer and longer time members (and one "friend of OCBC"), people who are theologically trained and others who are new to the task.

We thank each person who contributed to this resource and encourage the congregation to use it throughout Advent as a tool for reflection and preparation.

Shalom from the Racial Justice Team: Leslie Hergert, Maureen Power, Devon Davidson, Meredith Thompson, and Nathan Wood-House

***Cover Art:** "Mary Praying" (2014) by Kimiko Sakai. From Art in the Christian Tradition, Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

November 28 Genesis 16: 7-13 (Gaffney)

By C.J. Fowler

Now the message of the ALL-SEEING GOD found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And the messenger said, "Hagar, slave girl of Sarai, from where have you come and where are you going?" And she said, "From my mistress Sarai am I fleeing." The messenger of the INSCRUTABLE GOD said to her, "Return to your mistress and subject yourself to her."

The messenger of the WELLSPRING OF LIFE said to Hagar, "Greatly will I multiply your seed, so they cannot be counted for multitude." Then the messenger of the FOUNT OF LIFE said to her,

"Look! You are pregnant and shall give birth to a son,
And you shall call him Ishmael (meaning God hears),
For the FAITHFUL ONE HAS HEARD OF YOUR ABUSE.
He shall be a wild ass of a man,
With his hand against everyone,
And everyone's hand against him;
And he shall live in the sight of all his kin."

So Hagar named the LIVING GOD who spoke to her: "You are El-ro'I"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing God?"

Meditation

Before we meet Hagar in the wilderness, she has undergone heartbreaking violence. Hagar was a slave to Abraham and Sarah, two figures who are valorized in the Christian canon. Abraham and Sarah's story is a familiar one, a key chapter in the ever-evolving narrative of God's relationship to Their chosen people. Revisiting them in the context of Hagar's story, I was troubled. Gone are Abraham the Loving Father of our tradition and Sarah the Faithful Mother blessed by God. In their place are Abraham and Sarah, slaveholders.

In the verses preceding Hagar's flight, we learn that when Sarah could not conceive, she "gave" Hagar to Abraham that he might have a son. After Hagar conceived, though, Sarah turned against her. Full of jealous wrath, Sarah wants to punish Hagar. Abraham tells her, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." (Gen. 16:6). Sarah, empowered by her husband, "dealt harshly with her" (16:6) and the treatment is so brutal that Hagar flees to the refuge of the wilderness.

In this violent prologue, we are reminded of the enticing dynamics of white-supremacist patriarchy. Abraham sits atop a pyramid of power that places him above both Sarah and Hagar. And it's notable that when Sarah experiences the negative repercussions of this system, she takes it out not on the man responsible (Abraham) but instead someone more vulnerable and less culpable (Hagar). In fact, she commits her violence with

Abraham's permission and encouragement. This biblical dynamic feels resonant with the ways that we see marginalization and harm play out in our world today. A world in which white femininity has been a key pillar in the maintenance of racial hierarchy from Jim Crow to Donald Trump. One where white LGB organizers historically pulled the ladder up behind them as they founded political/non-profit movements in the late 20th century. The racist, patriarchal system of power that we exist under wants those marginalized to fight amongst themselves. It entices those closest to the white, normative center to support the very mechanisms of their own subjugation. And in jarringly reflecting these dynamics back to us, our passage today challenges us to think about how we may have been complicit in the subjugations of others and ourselves. What would the story have looked like if, instead of hurting her, Sarah had loved Hagar, engaging in solidarity and care with her?

In this piece, I was struck too by the annunciation that God makes to Hagar about her son Ishmael. God's prediction for him is that he will be in the world with "his hand against everyone/ And everyone's hand against him." This position, one of antagonism with the world, is resonant with the position and possibilities that theologian Amaryah Shaye Armstrong assigns to blackness in her series of articles "Refusing to Reconcile" (which are linked [here](#) and [here](#)). Armstrong writes against racial reconciliation efforts that are fundamentally projects of inclusion into whiteness. Armstrong challenges projects that while appearing to address racism, function instead to erase the unique experiences and embodiments of blackness by including only those who can behave within white frameworks for existence. She writes that these projects of "reconciliation" treat blackness as, "a thing to be reformed and transformed until it can speak in the language that recognizes whiteness as the savior and the structure of the world's reason."

Armstrong leans into the position of antagonism and difference that white frameworks have assigned to blackness. In the refusal to reconcile, in the refusal to make oneself legible and palatable to whiteness, there is power. And not just for the individual, but also for the community that is made possible by such refusal—a community of solidarity in difference. She points towards a kind of being-*beside* across racial difference that would subvert white supremacy's efforts to perpetuate itself. This kind of social world would require, "a perseverance towards each other that refuses reconciliation precisely because reconciliation requires that the other is lost—swallowed up in unity beyond ourselves. But rather than being beyond ourselves, blackness conceives of togetherness and sociality as being beside ourselves and beside each other." In being *beside*, there is the possibility for a solidarity that does not require one to subsume the other. God's annunciation of Ishmael shows that the position of refusal, of antagonism towards an unjust world and the myriad ways that it seeks to perpetuate itself, is blessed even if it is born of heartbreaking violence.

Further Reading

Refusing to Reconcile: Against Racial Reconciliation;

<https://womenintheology.org/2014/01/19/refusing-to-reconcile-against-racial-reconciliation/>

Refusing to Reconcile, Pt. II: Spatiality, Fugitivity, and Blackness as Wilderness;

<https://womenintheology.org/2014/02/16/refusing-to-reconcile-part-2/>

Refusing to Reconcile, Pt. Three: The Best Man Holiday and the Besideness of Blackness;
<https://womenintheology.org/2014/03/28/refusing-to-reconcile-part-three-the-best-man-holiday-and-the-besideness-of-blackness/>

Prayer

Beloved Creator, Wellspring of Life, hear us as we begin our journey to Bethlehem. Bless us that this may be a season of reflection and anticipation in service of liberation. Attune our hearts and spiritual intentions towards the peace through justice that you long to see realized in creation. Grant us the humility and patience to always be working for the Kingdom, learning from the margins and forever engaging in sacred solidarity. In the name of your coming son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Question for Reflection

From what position do we approach our work of justice? How do our positionalities affect our ends and our means? What would being *beside each other* in difference instead of reconciling differences mean for your life?

November 29 Psalm 71: 4-11 (Gaffney)
By Elizabeth Hocking

My God, rescue me, from the hand of the wicked,
From the clutch of the cruel and the ruthless.
For you are my hope, Sovereign, WORTHY ONE,
My trust and my youth.
Upon you I have leaned from birth;
From my mother's belly you cut me.
You will I praise for all time.
As a portent have I served to man,
Yet you are my strong refuge.
My mouth is filled with your praise,
All the day, with your glory.
Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
When my strength is spent, do not forsake me.
For my enemies speak about me,
And those who watch my life take counsel together.
They say, "Pursue and seize them,
God has forsaken them,
For there is none to deliver."

Meditation

As I read this psalm, one with which I am largely unfamiliar, I am struck by the focus on stages of life, and I think how differently stages of life are coded when one is marginalized. When the Psalm speaks of being cut from a belly, I think of people in prisons, disproportionately people of color, placed in shackles while pregnant and/or giving birth.

When the Psalm speaks of trust and youth, I think of how young black children are more likely to be mistaken for older, and thus less protected by the presumption of childlike innocence.

When the Psalm speaks of old age, I think of discrimination in health care, and how our current system makes it too easy for us to consciously, or without even knowing it, treat the most vulnerable among our elders as not even deserving of honor and care, at all.

When the Psalm speaks about enemies, I think of how so many abuses overlap and heap upon each other, harms falsely "justified" as personal conflict or coincidence when race is heaped on top of gender, on top of disability, on top of refugee status, on top of... And I hear the psalmist crying out to God to **do something**.

Prayer

God, I join the psalmist and want you to **do something**. Yet, I know that the work of justice is not only in your hands but in ours. Help me know what I can do.

Question for Reflection

What do I do when it seems to me that God has forsaken someone?

November 30 Philippians 2:5 (Gaffney)
By Josh Gregory

Let the same mind be in you all that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be seized,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness;
then being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore, God has highly exalted Jesus
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every heavenly and earthly knee should bend,
along with those under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus is Savior,
to the glory of God the Sovereign.

Meditation

The language of scripture offers many opportunities for justifying and engendering terror, even when its intent would seem to be otherwise. Though Paul is urging the Philippians to be humble and united in Christ so that they may find a common purpose and a shared sense of community, enslavers in the antebellum United States utilized this exact rhetoric—that a follower of Jesus should not yearn for “equality [...] as something to be seized” and should instead seek to be “humble,” “obedient to the point of death,” literally like a “slave”—to vindicate the institution of slavery as being biblically sound, even ordained.

No doubt, then, the terrible duality of these words as they come to us through time is marked. However, perhaps we can begin to re-inherit our scripture anew precisely by *not* seeking to do away with the tension that exists between the text and the history of its own interpretation. Indeed, in this way, we would be humbling ourselves—as Paul here asks us to do—by remaining distressed, unsure about the legacy we are living into. Similarly, our community would be strengthened, as Paul wished for the Philippians’ to be, by our wrestling together with the legacy of these and other biblical passages in our own day and age.

Just as many have utilized Paul’s words to endorse evil, we are likewise liberated to “read back at” all those who wished—and still wish—to advance or simply ignore the subjugation of human beings along the intersecting lines of race and ethnicity. As Christ

followers and therefore allies to our Black siblings and all our siblings of color, we can boldly exult in Paul's universal vision and inclusive Christology, that, "at the name of Jesus *every* heavenly and earthly knee should bend." We shall not endeavor to say that difference can simply be annulled; on the contrary, we might say that it is these differences which bring about in us the recognition of God and the realization of the need for our own reconciliation in God.

Prayer

O God, I pray that you would make me a messenger of your Word, and that wherever your word is spoken, it would be spoken in order to bring about good, to bring about healing and the building up of others. Holy One, in this wondrous time of Advent in which you gifted us with Christ, born to an un-homed family, may you also humble me and reveal to me the ways that my assumptions—my assumptions about you, God, especially, and about Jesus and about your creation—cause me to level judgement against those who appear to be different than me or seem to have different views and different ways of being than I do. Lord, allow me to abide in difference, to seek it out, to be educated by it so that I may see you with greater truth and understanding. Amen.

Question for Reflection

Are there ways of recuperating the Bible from oppressive, entrenched forms of interpretation, and, if so, how can we ensure that these methods of revision and revisiting are conducted communally—that is, in such a way that will not simply re-inscribe our own personal biases but will allow us to be vulnerable and to actually interrogate our latent racism, together?

December 1 Luke 1:26 (Gaffney)
By Dana Drosdick

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town of Galilee, Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the name of the virgin was Mary. And the angel came to Mary and said, **“Rejoice, favored one! The Most High God is with you.”** Now she was troubled by the angel’s words and pondered what sort of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and be called the Son of the Most High, and the Sovereign God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his sovereignty there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have not known a man intimately?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit, She will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the one born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. And now, Elizabeth your kinswoman has even conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for she was called barren. **For nothing is impossible with God.** Then, Mary said, “Here am I the woman-slave of God; let it be with me according to your word. And the angel left her.

Meditation

While history has iconized Simon & Garfunkel’s “*Bridge Over Troubled Water*,” fewer remember the African American gospel group, The Swan Silvertones, that inspired Simon & Garfunkel’s famous hit in the first place.

In 1959, the Swan Silvertones added a new line to the famous African American spiritual *Oh Mary Don’t You Weep*.

“Oh Mary, don’t you weep. I’ll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in my name.”

It is in this notion of troubled (or deep) waters that we find Mary, an unwed woman of color, during her angelic encounter. She is not awed. She is not afraid. Instead, she is troubled ~ defined in the Greek translation as “stirred up or agitated, as in roiling water.”

Rather than bringing peace and calm, God stirs up agitation within Mary’s soul, calling her into a new responsibility far greater than she could have ever imagined.

Despite this troubled state, Mary chooses to actively participate in God’s redemptive work. She accepts this responsibility as her own saying, “Here am I, let it be.”

As stewards of justice, we also have this ability to be active participants when God stirs up agitation within our own souls. When we hear examples of a criminal justice system rooted in anti-Blackness, another racially charged mass shooting, or a new climate-driven disaster that disproportionately impacts minority communities we have two options: we can be

troubled and remain passive, or we can shift that troubled state into active participation in the kingdom work of God.

If we choose the latter, we enter into a new stage of justice work: the stage of trust. The work of justice is rarely easy, but - as the angel tells Mary - "nothing is impossible with God." We need only shift our troubled waters into trust and say, "Here am I, let it be."

Prayer

Holy Other,
May your thoughts become our thoughts,
Your words become our words,
Your love become our love,
Your ways become our ways,
Your heart become our heart,
Your freedom become our freedom,
Your justice become our justice,

Let us say "Here Am I" in response to your call.

Question for Reflection

What specific work of justice is God laying on your heart? How will you commit to this justice work as your active participation in the holy?

December 2 Psalm 124 (Psalter)
By Xiaobo Ke

Say it, Israel!
If the Lord had not been with us,
If the Lord had not been for us
When enemies rose against us,
they would have swallowed us
In their blazing anger,
and the raging waters
would have swept us away~~
rushing, surging water
thundering over us.

Blessed be the Lord
For saving our flesh from their teeth,
For tearing the trapper's net,
So we could flutter away like birds,
Our help is in the Lord
Creator of earth and sky.

Meditation

We worship to our lord, who protects us against our “enemies” and heals our sorrows when we encounter various adversaries. Sometimes the dangers are daunting, and pains seem unbearable, like the “blazing anger and raging waters”, and we feel overwhelmed. These enemies coalesce to a force that is so alienating, full of hatred, like a trapper's net that suffocates and imprisons us. To break out for freedom, we know only through God we could find peace and relief. The words in the Psalm are pleas from ancient Israelites who faced a long time of oppression and discrimination, and whose strong faith helped them preserve and find hope. This struggle is, however, not unique to Israelites. Many ethnic groups in the world share similar experiences because racial injustices have been rampant throughout human history. God is our ultimate salvation, where we find peace and love to be the powerful antidote against hatred. God teaches us to rise above those that see us as others and seek meanings of our common existence, helps us thrive despite our day-to-day challenges in a broken world. It is not easy to brush off the hurt, and we often feel defeated; it is a real struggle. What keeps us standing is that we believe in God, in the Kingdom that there will be no others, because God loves us equally as we are all children of the same God.

Prayer

We hold up those who are struggling with discrimination and oppressions. We pay reverence to the pains of the Native Americans; the African Americans; the historically colonized people in Africa, Latin American and Asia; the marginalized minority and religious groups in the world; the Muslim friends that are unfairly profiled; the LGBTQ

communities and women facing endangerment and belittlement from patriarchy. Lord, we ask for your protection and your grace. Help us find faith and hope. Help us to be racially mindful and learn to listen to others' pains and help each other heal.

Question for Reflection

Who are the enemies under different contexts? Could the oppressed be enemies to others simultaneously?

December 3 Isaiah 40: 1-5 (NSRV)
By Emily Wood-House

Comfort, O comfort my people,
Says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And cry to her
That she has served her term,
That her penalty is paid,
That she has received from the Lord's hand
Double for all her sins

Meditation

We are far removed from the history of this passage, but we can see ourselves both in the oppressor and the people longing for home. The privileges of whiteness often preclude us from seeing our need of rescue. Our perception of salvation is clouded by selfishness, but God's promises of comfort are true in history and today.

God granted the Israelites a way home when they broke the covenant relationship. God found them in their isolation and gave them peace. Yet, we know our payment for the sins of racism is not complete and never can be. Rescue is not ours to offer; neither does it feel close. God is ever present, even in the wilderness of our doubts; God's covenant faithfulness is true despite us.

Prayer

God, we need rescue. Rescue from ourselves. Rescue from the structures we created and perpetuate and inflict on ourselves and others.

This is our comfort, O God. Not in your longsuffering for our sin, but in the hope of your faithfulness despite ourselves. May we see ourselves in the Israelites, not as a chosen people, but as ones turned in a wilderness to humility, repentance, and hope. May we look for the ways in which we have not cared for those around us and instead brought destruction and death to our siblings. May we seek justice in love through actions of repair and restoration without recapitulating the harm that necessitates it. Amen.

Question for further reflection

Justice, mercy, and humility were required of the Israelites. Are these not required of us too? Have we not failed to uphold these in our lives and our communities?

Advent II December 4

December 5 Romans 8:18 (Gaffney)

By Doug Koch

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the daughters and sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the daughters and sons of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience.

Meditation and Questions for Reflection

Summary: Paul here sets the present in the context of a vastly better future, contrasting the current sufferings of Roman Christians (enumerated in vs35b: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword) with “the glory about to be revealed to (in) us.” What on earth is this “glory”? Various Biblical meanings of “glory” refer to the magnificence, the awe-ful experience of God’s Presence, a future manifestation un-veiled to or in us. Paul is aiming for a transformation of Christians’ awareness of their suffering. Hang on in hope. It’s gonna get better; it’s gonna be GREAT!!

Epistle (memo, really) to Paul: Uh, you really think so, Paul? I wonder. So in good rabbinic (perhaps Baptist) dialogic practice, I would like to respond!

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. I get the suffering part, Paul, big time. I almost can’t watch the news anymore. But it’s not only Christians participating in Christ’s continued sufferings in the world, it’s all of humanity. You discounting that suffering, Paul? We gotta be “saved” for our suffering to be meaningful? Just who are you comforting here, pal? I’m wondering, did the slavers read these verses to their “cargo?” Looks like your “glory” went dark for those voyaging the Middle Passage and their descendants. And this “glory”? You high on something? You “see” something I don’t? Revealed to or in? Your Greek ain’t clear to me!

for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the daughters and sons of God; I’ve been to a few demonstrations – civil rights, arrested, angry after Floyd’s murder. Nice community feel, not much revealed. And you really believe that creation is “craning its neck in anticipation” of this future unveiling of God’s Presence? After all we have done to the earth by our piles of plastics and mounds of methane cow dung? Can we drive our pollution mobiles on your “eager longing?”

for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope,... Yeah, I’m paying attention to the comma here, pal; my HDS Greek professor

taught me that trick – “*subjected it in hope that...*” But here you go off on the ecological tangent again. What’s “futile” about the creation, Paul – “aimless existence,” “purposelessness,” “living for ends not intended to by God”? Are you saying that God subjected the creation to futility because of us, our “sin?” How are we to repair that?

that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the daughters and sons of God. I think you are on to something here, buddy! God subjected creation to “unsatisfactoriness” (sounds Buddhist to me, Paul) to wake us up to our “unsatisfactoriness?” Human freedom is tied up with freeing the earth? Who said this, Paul?: none are free until all are free. The poor of the earth? Earth too?

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; Yeah, well, I suppose so, if we assume “common” knowledge of “Adam’s fall so sin we all.” And his kids had to compost the apples, just like me! But that’s a really cool birthing image of “groaning in labor pains” – you trying to get us to look beyond the suffering to the joy of the little ones? New beginnings? New heaven, new earth? I like that, Paul! I can relate to that, vicariously, with the joy of our new granddaughter, May Dahlia. Yeah, her parents even gave her an earth name!

and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Let me see if I got you on this, Paul. We are groaning too, even though we have a down payment toward this “glory” you talk about. We are all in this process together, the marchers, the war makers, the truth deniers, the 10 year old lad who exhorted the Climate Summit-iers to get to it. The redemption of our bodies? So many bodies, Paul. Too, too many. What can I do to be part of the redemptive arc you are outlining?

For in (by) hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes (waits) for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. That’s quite a mouthful, Paul. I do earnestly hope for the manifestation of God’s joyful and justice-celebrating Presence in this world. And in my life. But not just in the future! The yearning hurts sometimes. Most times. Especially when I remember those countless who have crossed over, unheard, silenced, abused. This is my Advent prayer, Paul, beginning, again and again. I do, with you, brother, continue to wait for the Lord, most times not too patiently, but I still sing for the Glory. Thanks for listening, man. I appreciate you!

Your Student and Fellow-Traveler on the Way, Douglas T.

Prayer

Grant us grace to wait eagerly for You, Holy One,
For we do not know how to wait as we could.
Sister Spirit, shore up our weakness,
And ratchet up your intercessions for this world!
Grant us grace to listen to all beings who suffer.
Bless our yearnings and actions for justice and for shalom,
With Jesus, we pray, for Your Glory!
Maranatha! Manifest! Come, now, please!!

December 6 Psalm 78 portions (Psalter)
By Audrey Entin

Listen my people,
mark each word.
I begin with a story,
I speak of mysteries, welling up from the ancient depths,
heard and known from our elders.

We must not hide
this story from our children
But tell the mighty works
And all the wonders of God.
The Lord gave precepts to Jacob,
instructions to Israel,
that the people before us
could teach their children.

Let future generations learn
and let them grow up
to teach their young
to trust in God,
Remembering great deeds,
cherishing the law.

Not like their ancestors stubborn, bitter, wavering,
Unfaithful to God.
They forgot all God had done,
Wonders revealed to them.

Meditation

When I began reading the Psalm 78 passage, I thought of African Americans and Indigenous people – of how their stories have been unacknowledged and degraded, in the wider American society and culture. And yet, so much “heard and known from our (their) elders” has remained alive, nourishing and empowering – not hidden from their children – despite the oppression and deadly forces they have faced.

As Kelly Brown Douglas writes in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, when enslaved African Americans heard Biblical stories and accounts of the “Christian Gospel” from their slave masters. rather than seeing the message their masters wanted them to see, they were able to see the true message of the Gospel. They understood that God was with them and wanted their true freedom. The “Exodus Story” became their story.

Those held in bondage understood that Jesus was on their side, and that he, being despised, rejected and crucified, was like they were. They believed that Jesus was with them in their daily lives and was lynched with them when they were lynched. They taught their young that God is a God of freedom, of human dignity and respect, and was actively on their side, inspiring and sustaining them.

The enslaved African Americans and their descendants believed that God acts in history through people – through “ordinary folks” like the thousands of African Americans who participated in 1950’s and 1960’S Civil Rights Struggle. They understood that God also acts powerfully through the many Moses-like leaders of the “parting of the waters” –, from Harriet Tubman and Ida B. Wells, to Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stacey Abrams, and so many more.

The enslaved and their descendants also saw the “wonder” and great deed of the Resurrection as calling them to trust, as Kelly Brown Douglas says, that the Resurrection was “God’s definitive victory over the crucifying powers of evil” in which “evil is defeated by a life-giving force.” This force gives life in the midst of life-defying circumstances, with the faith that ultimately God’s way will triumph, and empowers the living of lives of hope and transforming action.

Prayer

Holy one, we give thanks for thy love, and for the lives of freedom you desire for every person. As our nation continues to struggle with, and be divided by, the freedom and life-defying effects of White Supremacy and Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, upon which this country was founded and has been maintained, help us to trust in thy power to call forth and sustain small and great deeds of racial justice and transformation in us and our nation. Help us to let go of our wavering, our stubbornness, our bitterness, and our limited imaginations. Put fire in our souls. And may we not fail to teach our young of thy ways and deeds. Amen.

Question for reflection

What do you need to let go of, in order to trust God more and have an active fire in your soul to seek greater racial justice?

December 7 Romans 8:18 (Gaffney)
By Sue Stockard

I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the daughters and sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the daughters and sons of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Meditation

As you contemplate this passage from Romans, I invite you to listen to [Paul Robeson](#)¹ sing, "Let My People Go." It is written in the tradition of the Negro Spiritual: a song of resistance to enslavement; a song that voices the longing for freedom. Heard beside the verse from Romans, it sounds like a call and response.

From the Spiritual: "When Israel was in Egypt land...let my people go."

Paul's letter: "We ourselves groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."

The words of the Spiritual, "Thus spoke the Lord...Let my people go.'

The words of Paul in response, "Creation will be set free from its bondage and the daughters and sons of God will be freed."

In the Spiritual sung by Robeson, there is the longing for freedom from bondage and the hope that God's people will be set free. How could enslaved people, whether in Egypt or on this continent feel hope, seen or unseen? As a response, Paul's words, "The sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us." Elie Wiesel said, "Just as [one] cannot live without dreams, [one] cannot live without *hope*. If dreams reflect the past, *hope* summons the future." Hope is imagined then, but not seen. Hope for what is unseen, and the patience of generations, is also found in the Negro Spirituals. Consider "Balm in Gilead," "Deep River," "Roll, Jordan, Roll," "Steal Away to Jesus," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "This Train," "Wade in the Water" – just a few examples of hope for what is not seen but waited for in patience.

Prayer:

Holy One,

In this Advent time of waiting, sometimes with patience, often without, we long for justice for all your siblings. We pray that creation will be set free from its bondage to decay; and that we can be instruments of your peace. In all that we do, may we act out of love and kindness, committing ourselves to your will and your way. Amen

Question

How can we wait in patience for hope we do not see without losing our spirit of activism and sense of urgency?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3OjHlhLCDs>

December 8 1 Peter 3:10-12 (NSRV)
By Samantha Starbreaker Azyl

For those who desire life
and desire to see good days
Let them keep their tongues from evil
And their lips from speaking deceit;
Let them turn away from evil and do good;
Let them seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
And his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Meditation

Looking at the broader Church in 2022, it's not hard to understand Paul's choice (and the Psalmist David's choice, as this passage is a quotation from Psalm 34:12-16) to specify "for those who desire life and desire to see good days" at the opening of this passage. Lies about queer people, "critical race theory" panics, COVID denial, and a growing tide of white Christian nationalism all combine to give the impression that the modern Church at large is becoming something of an apocalypse cult.

If we're to avoid this, then, Paul and David offer some threefold advice for the Church, as applicable today as it was when it was written.

First, we're to keep our tongues from evil and our lips from speaking deceit. Note that here, the text doesn't say "keep their tongues from evil and turn their lips toward righteousness" or anything similar. Sometimes, we have answers, and our voices can meaningfully contribute toward the cause of justice, peace, and compassion. Other times, we *don't* have the answers, and our voices aren't the ones that need to be heard. In those times, we can keep our tongues from evil, our lips from speaking deceit, and we can *listen*.

Second, we're exhorted to turn away from evil and do good – in that order. The United States of America has a long and storied history of racism and genocide; in fact, the history of America is so deeply intertwined with the history of slavery, genocide, and systemic racism that the two cannot be meaningfully separated. And yet, when confronted with the weight of it, often the Church (the white Church, specifically) is seen standing as a force for the status quo. Countless preachers in this country have used racist dog whistles to ensure that their congregations uphold the institutions of white supremacy, from lies about President Obama's birthplace to denouncing Black Lives Matter from the pulpit. Countless more have chosen something equally damning: inaction. In order to do good, we must first turn away from evil – and we have a lot of evil to turn away from.

Third, Paul and David tell us to seek peace and pursue it. The latter is important, because it's quite easy to claim one seeks peace without ever actually doing anything to achieve it.

Pursuit, however, is a very active verb – and an ongoing one. Peace needs to be the goal we strive for and *actively run toward*.

How are we to do all these things? How can we keep our lips from deceit, turn away from evil, do good, and pursue peace? And how can we trust that any of this will succeed?

The answer's in the last verse: through prayer. If we are pursuing righteousness, God's eyes are upon us and the Holy One hears our prayers. Conversely, the Lord can always be trusted to side against those who do evil.

Prayer

Holy One, if there was ever a time Your wisdom was needed, it's now.

Your Church, meant to be a shining example for the world, is tarnished; its walls reverberate with the cries of hatemongers and liars. I ask that You keep these words of deceit from my lips, and evil from my tongue. Grant me, Lord, the wisdom to know when to speak and when stay quiet.

The ground I tread is stolen, Holy One, my nation's pride is built on the backs of the oppressed. I ask You today to not let me forget when I benefit from evil, and to have the courage to turn away from that evil in order to do good.

*I say to others and to myself that I seek Your peace, Your justice. Even taking the label "Christian" suggests that I mean to make Your goals my own. And as much as I want that to be true, O Lord, often it simply isn't, not in practice. Help me to **pursue**, not just to seek. Set me running and guide my steps toward Your kingdom.*

Question for Reflection

Where in my life am I accepting a harmful status quo? How does this sabotage my efforts to do good?

December 9 Psalm 21 (Psalms Now)
By Nancy Beams

O God,
In the grace and strength You grant daily,
 Your servant finds reason for celebration .
You have truly fulfilled my inmost longings,
You have responded to my deepest needs.

I asked for security,
 And you encompassed me with love.
I looked to you for life,
 And you granted me life everlasting.
I sought identity
 And You adopted me as your child.
Whatever is of value and worth in my life
 has come through your rich blessings.
My heart is glad in the realization
 of your eternal presence.
I know I will never lose your love.

I raise my voice in praise, O God,
 because no one can separate me from You
Although circumstances threaten me
 and my own obsessions entangle me,
 You will never let me go.
Your great power is sufficient to set me free
 from the things that hurt my soul.
I put my trust in You,
 You will not let them destroy me.
I find so many reasons for praising You, O God.

Meditation

I know that God has fulfilled all my needs by creating signs leading to my path of wholeness. Constantly there are his signs - a book that teaches me a lesson, a person that helps me get a job, a friend who is there for me at the right time. I have had some hardships and threatening situations, but God has continually been at my side. I am educated, have had good jobs, and have a good home and plenty to eat. I am grateful for his presence. As I grow older, I realize how lucky I am to be born in a class that is not discriminated against. I do believe that God is there for each and every person no matter their race, age, handicap, or sex. God is blind and sees the goodness in each one of us and sees us all as equals. God wants everyone to be safe, nourished, and secure. There are many though who still suffer and have had God's signs taken away from them and thus do not

flourish. They suffer because others consider them different and worthless and have prevented them from having a good education, good housing and nourishment; they have been made to feel “less than” and powerless. It sometimes is up to us to help God pass the word that everyone is equal - to help those discriminated against to feel free from danger, to have self-worth, and to feel not alone. We can spread God’s word through showing his kindness to one another, talking to one another, listening to one another, and helping one another. We need to love unconditionally just like God.

Prayer

I pray that I will take the time to listen to my friend. I pray that I will hear what my friend is saying. I pray that I will comfort my friend when needed. I pray that I will help my friend when s/he needs help. Mostly, I want to be kind, so my friend does not feel alone.

Question for Reflection

How can I expand my notions of who my friend is?

December 10 2 Peter 3: 8-13 (New Jerusalem Bible)
By Holly White

But there is one thing, my friends, that you must never forget: that with the Lord, a day can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises, as anyone else might be called slow; but he is being patient with you all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody being brought to change his ways. The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then with a roar the sky will vanish, the elements will catch fire and fall apart the earth and all that it contains will be burnt up.

Since everything is coming to an end like this, you should be living holy and saintly lives while you wait and long for the day of the God to come, when the sky will dissolve in flames and the elements melt in the heat.

What we are waiting for is what he promised: the new heavens and the new earth, the place where righteous will be at home. So then my friends, while you are waiting, do your best to live lives without spot or stain, so that he will find you at peace.

Meditation

It can be both comforting and terrifying to consider human time in light of the horizon of God-time. In the middle of the night, left sleepless by wordless anxiety or simply the fear of being tired, I don't know what may happen, right? I mean, it could all be blown away into dust in the middle of that same night. But there is also trust that it is not mine to worry about. I may cringe when the message of God's time is turned into a commodity for sale, like when "Worry less, God's got this" is embroidered on a pillow for sale. But there is something profoundly soothing to know that it is all much bigger than me and being cared for by an unfathomable awesome love that exceeds my own limited imagination.

So, which is it, fear or comfort from this passage? Maybe both? Maybe more? I mean, we are in God-time, not human time, so don't hold yourself to what you think is a Single Right Way. Letting oneself feel more than one way about anything is incredibly liberating. A quality of choice emerges in the liberation that the outcomes are not ours to determine, but the methods are and *there are always at least two ways to act*. Addressing the hidden ways we judge others based on historically, socially sedimented prejudices must happen now. That is our work. We have no time to waste in confronting our individual and collective shame at our subtle and overt acts of exclusion. The pace of the change? This will rely on a God-tiered transformation from combined effort, a tide turned through forces seen and unseen. We may be angry at the unjust deaths, the disparities that multiply around us. We can abide that feeling, too. We keep moving, keep challenging, held by the promise of God's ultimate reckoning, beyond any of our imaginations.

Friends, do your best. Trust in the way, work with peace in your hearts, knowing that we walk by faith, not by sight.

Prayer

God of time beyond time—In the middle of my worry, let your stillness live in me. Let your vast time expand me, help me to hold my mixed feelings.

Allow my hope to mingle with my grief,

my shame with my compassion,

my effort with my fear,

my anger with my calm.

Transform my anxiety about doing it right

with my longing to love as you love.

May I live into the faith you have given me.

Amen.

Question for Reflection

Where do you freeze in your fear of “Doing it Wrong” in the cases of addressing racism?

What happens to this fear when you let in the feeling that abiding love surrounds all of your best, most faithful effort?

Advent III December 11

December 12 Psalm 42: 4-6 (NRSV)

By Jesse Hergert

These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
How I went with the throng.
 And led them in procession
 To the house of God.
With glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
 A multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 My help and my God.

Meditation

Without diving into the historical context of the author, this passage is ambiguous to me. I can read these verses in two different ways: Maybe the author is downcast because they are separated from their faith community, which makes them feel separated from God, but maybe there was always something off about the loud worship of the throng they were a part of, and the author is separating themselves from *that*, and trying to find a way back to God.

I think about the white church and how easy it is for many people to loudly proclaim themselves “good Christians” while supporting structures of white supremacy, in the culture and in their own lives. You can sing and shout and lead others in a procession, all in the name of God, but if you aren’t working to tear down the structures of racism and oppression, your soul *should* be disquieted.

I appreciate a good joyful noise, but we know it must be rooted in justice to be truly Christ-like. You can’t just process *to* the house of God, you have to process back out and bring the work of Jesus out into the world, sitting with those who have been cast aside, breaking bread with those who have less, actively working for a better world.

When we are actually in a right relationship with God and our siblings and neighbors, then our souls will be quiet and we can sing true songs of thanksgiving.

Prayer

O God, sit with me when I am quiet, and when I am questioning. Walk with me when I am shouting and singing. Help me fight against what is easy, when it is wrong.

Question for Reflection

How do you find hope in God, even with so much reason not to in the world?

December 13 Psalm 14-15 (portions) (Psalms Now)
By Leslie F. Hergert

Our great God is forever searching for those
who live their lives for Him.

He is not looking for
verbal professions alone
but for active, living testimonies of faith.

Your child, O Lord, walks cautiously~
And in obedience to your precepts and principles.
He is open and honest before God and people.
She speaks and acts in love toward her neighbor.
He cannot condone that which is evil
and doesn't participate
In that which promotes injustice.
She listens to her sister's griefs
and complaints.
He seeks to lighten his brother's burden
And to share in his sorrow and pain.
She reaches out to heal rather than hurt,
to be kind and gentle to all who cross her path.

Those who demonstrate this loving relationship
with God and His human creatures
manifest participation in His kingdom.
They will never be separated from the family of God.

Meditation

This psalm reads like an instruction manual: "A Guide to How to Be a Good Person." In fact, every member of this church fits the description:

- *Speak and act in love—check*
- *Avoid promoting injustice—check*
- *Seek to lighten our friends' burdens—check*

So, how does this help us with racism? It doesn't really because racism is about more than niceness. Racism is built into our culture, our thinking, our worldview. We at OCBC have learned enough from recent years of preaching and study groups to know this is true. But because racism is implicit, built in, embedded, it is often difficult to see, and especially to see in ourselves and our own thinking and behavior. Because our communities are racially separated, most of us white people have limited interactions across races. When I worked, I had more cross-racial relationships than I do now. I go to a predominantly white church, live in a predominantly white neighborhood, have predominantly white friends. At work, I had the corrective of cross-racial discussions to confront my own limited thinking and be

able to address specific contextualized injustices. Now, I am often at a loss about how and where to address racism, and I may not even see the racism in my own interactions.

Prayer

O God, I know you are looking for “active living testimonies of faith.” Help me to explore more deeply where and how racialized thinking and assumptions affect and infect my actions. Help me to find ways out of the paralysis of over-thinking to be able to take action where I can and seek ways to bring healing in the part of the world I walk through.

Question for Reflection

What is my role in addressing racism in myself and the world I inhabit—my church, work, and community? How can I do better?

December 14 1 John 3:1 (Gaffney)
By Kate Murfitt

See what kind of love our Maker has given us, that we should be called children of God; and we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Beloved, now are we God's children and it has not yet been revealed what we will be. We do know that when God is revealed, we shall be like God, for we shall see God just as God is. And everyone who has this hope in God purifies themselves, just as God is pure.

Meditation

As I try to relate the verse above to race and racism, I am also reading the novel, "The Indigo Girl" by Natasha Boyd, based on the real story and letters of Eliza Lucas.

Eliza Lucas was left in charge of three plantations in South Carolina at the age of 16 when her father returned to Antigua to pursue his military career. Eliza was also left in charge of the slaves owned by her father. Eliza grew up in Antigua and was a childhood friend of slave Benoit Fortune. Eliza has a dream of bringing the indigo crop to South Carolina and Ben, having been sold to an indigo maker, could have been an asset to her plan for the crop in South Carolina.

Eliza realizes quickly that a childhood friend of a different class and color becomes a difficult relationship in adulthood. Eliza prayed often throughout her difficult years as a young woman trying to manage her father's properties, both human and more than human. She also taught her slaves to read using the ability to read the Bible as a legitimate reason for these lessons at a time when such lessons were against the law. She became known for her innovative ideas about slave education as well as for her successful plantation management and indigo cultivation in South Carolina.

It is obvious from Eliza's published letters that she cared about her slaves and realized that she was dependent on them for the work she faced to save her family's home and her future. She wrote:

*I am resolved to make a good mistress to my servants,
To treat them with humanity and good nature;
To give them sufficient and comfortable clothing and provisions,
And all things necessary for them.
To be careful and tender of them in their sickness.
To encourage them when they do well and pass over small faults.
Not to be tyrannical, peevish, or impatient towards them
But to make their lives as comfortable as I can.*

So help me, oh, My God! Amen

Prayer

Dear God, help us to understand how so many enslaved people were owned by others and were not considered “true children of God” by them. Help us to have the faith we read about that helped so many of those enslaved people maintain their own dignity and sense of worth, even through their suffering. Show us how to have compassion for all of God’s children and to care for each other with love and compassion.

Amen

Question for Reflection

After reading **1 John 3:1** and Eliza’s prayer, do you think that Eliza thought of herself and her slaves as equal “children of God”?

Is it enough for Eliza to think that making her slaves’ lives as “comfortable as she can” makes owning them acceptable?

.....And everyone who has this hope in God purifies themselves, just as God is pure.

December 15 Luke 1:46-56 (rendered by Ken Sehested)
By Audrey Nobles

My soul magnifies you, O Lord and my spirit rejoices in your Saving Presence.
Everything in me comes alive when you look in my direction.
No longer will I languish among the unnamed, the unknown, the unworthy.
Hereafter, for generations, when my name is spoken, all will know
It echoes the wonder of your Mercy.
Your power is sufficient to baffle the aims of the arrogant.
Imperial might trembles at the sound of your approach; but the prison yards and the
sweatshops and the slaughterhouses erupt with jubilation!
With your arrival, the bailout bounty will flow to the hourly wage earners; the stock
optioned executives will apply for food stamps.
In the land of lies and deceit, in the season of bankrupt promises and boardroom
corruption, the lair of every heir to every privilege and every power will be confounded by
the herald of your Promise.

Meditation

Mary's song comes after the angel Gabriel visits her and tells her she is pregnant and will soon give birth to a miracle. Instead of a flowery birth announcement, she visits Elizabeth and delivers a prophecy that the most unlikely of events are set to occur; the entire world order will soon be subverted with the arrival of Jesus. She does this with no hard evidence of what is yet to come.

In a time of such heavily consolidated power, where stock -optioned executives are profiting so massively from the human suffering in prison yard and sweatshops, a moment of critical mass where the scales tip in favor of the exploited feels out of grasp, statistically improbable.

Our prison and policing institutions are considered so "natural" by many that they cannot fathom a change and dismiss abolitionist alternatives. However, Angela Davis argues in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* that "it should be remembered that the ancestors of many of today's most ardent liberals could not have imagined life without slavery, life without lynching, or life without segregation" and that these systems of governance eventually transformed under pressure.

History tells us that social progress does not follow the laws of science. When we question the norm, we begin a spiritual journey of imagining different ways of being and caring for each other. Hope is believing that these outcomes are possible despite what the odds might be telling us.

Prayer

Oh, Holy One, we come to you in prayer, in wonder of your Mercy. We give thanks for the ways that your spirit is already at work among us, humbling the powerful and lifting up the

vulnerable. Still, we sense that there is much work to be done. We pray that you relieve us from the limits of our minds while we contemplate the questions that weigh on our hearts. Bring comfort and strength to those that are suffering and bring clarity to those who take advantage of others for their own individual gain. May you continue to make your home among us, inviting us to question and calling us to action so that we may be agents of change.

Question for Reflection

When you read this passage, is there a particular change you find yourself envisioning or hoping for God to bring to reality?

December 16 Psalm 80 (portions) Psalms Now
By Jean Chandler

O God, You are the Creator
and the Sustainer of Your church.
You have protected and prospered
Your faithful followers
throughout the stormy and tumultuous past.

Meditation

You sustained enslaved people all over the world for centuries, whether they be in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, or Africa. They suffered all manner of physical pain and humiliation at the hands of your more privileged children. Even after the formerly enslaved in this country were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, most continued to live in poverty and have had to struggle mightily for economic and civil rights. You, God, have been a very present help in trouble for thousands of your faithful followers.

Psalm 80 (continued)

Today we are in trouble.
Listen to our cries of consternation, O God.
We are confused and confounded.
We don't know where to turn,
In what direction to go.

Meditation

Yes, we are indeed in trouble~still. Our country is deeply divided between those who claim that racism is a thing of the past and that being color blind is the path to freedom and equality and those who feel sure that racism continues and that acknowledging our structural inequality and making reparations is the path to freedom and equality. The filming of the brutal death of George Floyd at the hands of the police let the whole world see what so many people of color continue to suffer.

Prayer

Give us new life and new vision
so we may advance your kingdom
in our disjointed world.
Renew your church, O God,
and revive Your servants
So the whole earth may know of Your love

Question for Reflection

How can we best do the work of anti-racism to advance God's kingdom on earth?

December 17 John 3:1-36 (Gaffney)

By Rev. Sandra Dorsainvil

See what kind of love has our Maker given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Beloved, now are we God's children and it has not yet been revealed what we will be. We do know that God when is revealed, we shall be like God, for we shall see God just as God is. And everyone who has this hope in God purifies themselves, just as God is pure.

Meditation

I invite readers to meditate on this poem I wrote earlier in 2022. May it be a way to go deeper into the liminal space of how knowing the other happens, when the neighbor does not look like you. What is knowing thyself in relation to thy neighbor made in the image of God?

WHO ARE YOU?

You come from the East with Arabian gifts in your pockets
You come from the West with cracked pebbles in your shoes
You come from the North with colorful mittens covering your hands
You come from the South with deep-rooted hymns in your spirit.
Who are you?

Are you the nomad of the Sahara Desert?
Are you the well digger for Jacob's new land?
Are you the lost child searching for a name?
Are you my siblings guiding me to the North Star?
Who are you?

You are the light of hope sent by Our Creator
You are the wind of truth bellowing through our hearts
You are the handkerchief of mercy holding forgiveness
You are Emmanuel offering love in our beloved cities.

Prayer

May your journeys be filled with curiosity inviting you to discover the beauty of stillness amid inquiries. May the Godly encounters help you discover grace, mercy, justice and love.

Question

How might you be a testimony for God's love in everyday living?

Advent IV December 18

December 19 Matthew 7:1-5

By Marj Coello

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Meditation

Even though I hate racism I am not free of it in my thoughts. I have caught myself thinking judgmental thoughts that run deep even though I consider myself "woke".

In particular, I recall tightening the hold on my purse when I was being approached by a young black man passing me on the sidewalk. Even I, a congregant of a progressive racism-fighting church, have prejudice and need God's help in ridding me of it.

Prayer

Dear God,

Please help me with this burden on my spirit and free me of racist attitudes and preconceptions. I will need your ongoing help with this problem as they can enter my mind at any time. Help me to see that any human being~ and in particular those of a different race—is treasured by you as your child. I thank you for the healing and discernment I have already received from you through the work of my church. I also ask for blessings for OCBC that it's anti-racism work continue to make an impact on my life and the lives of others.

In Jesus's name, Amen.

Question

Is it possible to be doing anti-racist work while having racist thoughts?

December 20 1 Samuel 2:1-3, 7-10 (Gaffney)
By Naro Pongen

Hannah prayed and she said:
“My heart exults in the HOLY ONE OF OLD;
My horn is lifted up in my God.
My mouth (opens) wide against my enemies,
For I will rejoice in my victory.
There is none holy like the MOST HIGH,
none beside you;
there is no rock like our God.
Speak proudly no more, multiplying pride,
nor let arrogance come from your mouth;
for the AGELESS GOD is a god of knowledge,
Any by God deeds are accounted.

...

The GRACIOUS ONE makes poor and makes rich;
brings low and also lifts up.
God raises the poor from the dust,
and lifts the needy from heaps of human waste,
to seat them with nobles and inherit a seat of honor.
For to the CREATOR belongs the pillars of the earth,
And on them God has set the world.
God will guard the feet of the faithful who belong to God,
While the wicked perish in shadow;
for it is not by might that one prevails.
The HOLY ONE OF SINAI!
Those who strive against God shall be shattered;
God thunders against them from heaven.
The FOUNT OF JUSTICE will judge the ends of the earth;
God will give strength to God's ruler,
And exalt the power of the anointed of God.

A Meditation on Hannah's Song

Here is a jubilant song of a woman who has experienced divine justice – a declaration that her dignity, her worth, her rightful place as a woman and wife has been restored. Our matriarch, our sister Hannah, was a woman who was persistent in her steadfast petition to God to fill the void perpetuated by unexamined societal norms. To us, Hannah illuminates her confidence in God's reversal of situations – from a life of barrenness to a life of fullness. She has tasted God's promise and faithfulness in the face of adversity because she trusted God to intervene. This song helps us to find insights to our own situations from a place of persistent hope.

Women, like Hannah, have always been at the center of struggle for justice; at the center of gathering community to participate in acts of liberation. In any case, women's experiences in justice making have always been 'double dynamic': a sense of hopelessness in the face of the "present" time and also confidence that there will be reversal of situations, for an alternate reality rooted in hope.

We may aspire to hope not because hope is a commonplace, we hope because despair will kill our spirit before it kills our body. Sometimes the authenticity of our joy may have to be measured by the crucible of our struggles. These past few years in particular have exemplified that humanity is in decay because we have failed to acknowledge our roles in creating discords in every level of ecosystem. Racism and sexism are two examples of the many manifestations of human's greed and abandonment of love for our neighbors. It is literally killing us. And yet! Let us not be discouraged nor despair! In our own journeys, Hannah helps us to realize that being persistently hopeful without losing sight of our conviction for justice may bring us to our own songs. She encourages us not to become too overwhelmed nor be complacent. Miraculous conception(s) can be a lesson for our own times for the birthing of hope even as the groaning world awaits the messiah to be born.

Prayer

God that offers assurance of hope even when things seem bleak, help us remember that your love and justice stretches much further than our imagination can traverse. Let us not be disheartened by the state of our current day, the bondages of our times, rather teach us to be faithful in our resolve to birth transformation within and without. Guard our being as we expectantly await the messiah to usher liberation to a world that needs healing and redemption. Amen.

Question for Reflection

How do you understand liberation in the work of salvation? What do you think of the famous words by Lilla Watson, a Murri social justice activist, that our liberation is bound together?

December 21 Titus 3:4 (Gaffney)
By Gene Thompson

When the graciousness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, God saved us through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God's mercy. This Spirit God poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by God's grace, we might become heirs according to hope of life eternal.

Meditation

In Titus 3:4, it turns out that we come into this world whole and secure in salvation, by the grace of the holy spirit. Our very existence, fueled by faith, creates the ground of all being. It is this foundation from which we may then take action, perform "good deeds," following the behavior and acts we honor in the path chosen by Jesus Christ. Not because we need to, but because we choose to. Nothing we do, no good deeds, define our goodness. We are worthy and sufficient from the start by means of mercy and grace. The holy spirit has done the heavy lifting. Beauty, wonder and boundless love are all around us for the taking. Will we choose to seize it?

Prayer

Holy spirit. Thank you for making us whole. Help us embrace your mercy and grace. Fill us with courage and bottomless gratitude so that we may live a truly Christian life, so that who we choose to be, and the works that we undertake, glorify your gifts of mercy, grace and loving kindness.

Question for Reflection

We need not be motivated by fear and guilt in an attempt to earn salvation. As recipients of sacred, unconditional gifts, and guided by the teachings of Jesus, we are free to focus on who we choose to be, and what we will do with our lives. Will we be content with what we are given? Bask in the holy spirit's assurance of salvation? Or will we follow the example provided by Jesus, take action, and work for the least of us? Will we commit to working for those who suffer inequities, poverty and oppression by engaging in radical love, by promoting peace rooted in justice?

December 22 Revelation 22 1-5 (NRSV)
By Nathan Wood-House

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship God; they will see God's face and God's name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever.

Meditation and Questions for Reflection

John returns his readers in this passage of Revelation to the Garden of Eden – a place and time in which God and humankind experienced the grace of life lived in the divine presence. God walked in the garden, talked with God's creatures, and God's creatures, the human and the more-than-human, experienced the goodness of unbroken relationships, a true and generous mutuality, and freedom from greed, shame, or grief. Or at least, this is likely the sense of the Garden story that John's readers may have had. We know, for instance, that there was no real, physical Garden; no "Adam and Eve;" no serpent; no fruit (definitely not an apple). Yet does this mean there is also no meaning? Certainly not! We know, at the least, too, that this story remained important to the Jewish and early Christian communities because we read it here in the canon of the New Testament. So, what is the story's purpose? To answer this, we might also ask ourselves how the Garden has been used and abused, before we try to determine what it is that John means in his representation of it in his vision of God's unveiling of eternity.

One rightfully associates the story of the Garden of Eden with, broadly, Western religious and Christian conceptions of creation, human being, and sin. It is also quite easy to trace in the early interpretations of this story the contours of heteropatriarchal misogyny, laying blame on Eve, then essentializing femaleness as subordinated and/or "disordered" unless paired with the male, a wound that we still feel today. Yet the Garden story, to the extent that it is a world-significant myth of origin ("creation story"), also, for many centuries, functioned for Christians as a literal explanation about the locus of human life and, as we pressed into the realms of science and reason, a constant guide to the no-less serious task of accounting for human presence in our past.

And yet, for many, especially Christians, the myth of creation served a much more insidious purpose. While some Christian theologians and leaders in the period of colonialism looked to the story of the flood and, particularly, Noah's sons as biblical, and thus authoritative, evidence for the origins of the world's proliferating "races," still others, in the U.S. South, looked to the creation story. Christian pro-slavery apologists, feeling the pressure of a growing, if not always abolitionist movement in the North, began to look both to nuances in science and to the biblical tradition to defend both chattel slavery and white supremacy. Some, for instance, suggested that Black people were, in fact, actually descendants of the serpent; still others suggested that Eve copulated with one of the

animals of the garden; still others made the odious suggestion that when the bible mentions the creation of the “beasts of the field,” the writers in fact meant the “lower races”.

It is, I hope, not necessary for me to say how horrifyingly offensive these etiologies of race are. Yet I often have to remind myself, my students, and others who care, that we still see them in narratives at work in our world. We see it when, for instance, a child is taunted in school as being like an animal; or when a police officer, in an encounter with a Black man, woman, or child, after things turn violent or even deadly, tell a jury that the person before them, made in the image of God, “looked demonic.” But what does this have to do with John’s revelation?

Let me suggest that the eschatological yearning that has, for two thousand years, animated the Church, for a place and time in which all of creation will be redeemed by the Creator, when all things are made new, when and where there will “be no more night,” (v.5a) must be held up against this world we have created and are still creating. But we look in the Advent season to the birth, the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus as the promise that God *will walk among us once again*, as he did in Palestine in the 1st century. John asks us to look to a time when fractured relationships, when hatred, and domination, when the deep guilt and shame we carry—perhaps, as white persons so intricately with structures of power that we feel helpless in its grasp—will be a burden no longer. A space where abundance and life and plenty and community bring us into the presence of God, who will become our “all in all.”

Prayer

God, remind us that the new heaven and new earth cannot be disconnected from the heavens and hells we create for one another and others. God, remind us that we may not be the ones to make all things new, but that we are charged as members of a Beloved Community by the one who walked among us to till our soil, plant our trees, even if we do not get to see them grow. Even so, God, you are good, all the time, at the beginning, at the beginning of the end, and even at the end of ends.

December 23 Psalm 85 (selections from Psalms Now)
By Maureen Power

O God, You indeed have been good to us.
You have prospered our land.
You have opened Your heart to us in love.
You have forgiven our sins
and adopted us as Your sons and daughters.

But our country is in turmoil.
We no longer have confidence in our leaders.
Some segments of society feel
disenfranchised and display their
displeasure in open revolt.
Our young people spill blood
In turf wars over drugs.
People are turning away from you
only to be ensnared
by false doctrines
and godless philosophies.

We know that you have not turned away from us.
You touch with joy and peace
The hearts that belong to You.
You stand ready to show your salvation
To all who will trust in You.
As we speak to you in faith,
You respond with loving concern.
You will give us what is good
and will prosper us
with gifts from Your hand.

Renew our faith, O God.
Forgive our many failures and infidelities.
May our land continue to be a place
Where we are free to love and serve You

Meditation

The psalmist tells us that God has opened God's heart to us in love and has forgiven our sins.

Yet as we survey the mess we are in, it is clear we just don't get that God's love encompasses all. Yes, as the psalmist notes, our land has prospered, but clearly not all have benefitted. 19.5% of Black people live below the poverty line compared to whites, and at

8.2%, Black infant mortality is 2.1 times that of whites. Black mothers are more likely than white mothers to receive late or no prenatal care. People of color live in impoverished neighborhoods, significantly impacted by environmental hazards. Across all measurements, it is evident that racial injustice in 2022 permeates our land.

Despite all the rampant injustice which has seeped into the very soul of our nation, God has not turned away from us and stands ready to show us “salvation.” The Holy One responds to us with “loving concern.” What is that salvation? How do we find it? How do we reach for it with all our being? How do we participate in it? How do we follow the star and humbly kneel to find our place in a new order of things? It is not easy; the way is oh so complicated. Yet as the psalmist says, God touches hearts with joy and peace for those who trust in God. Is it possible to find that joy and peace in a time so contorted and wracked with suffering? Is it possible, despite the chaos we are in, that the GPS we really need is God? Can we trust enough to move on, listening carefully to our Brothers and Sisters of color and pay attention to the ways our polices and laws disenfranchise them? And then ACT?

The psalmist reminds us that God loves and guides us. Are we able to let that awareness sink in? Clearly, we can’t undo hundreds of years of racial injustice by ourselves. Are we listening deeply to each other and to what people of color are saying? Can we work alongside each other and drop the attitude that we white people have the answers? Can we truly trust God to open the way for us to trod together on the path to justice?

May we humbly ask that God renew our faith, forgive our many failures, and show us the way. Then despite the fracturedness of our world, we will find our peace and joy as we yearn for and struggle together for justice.

Prayer

As together we continue to grope our way through the darkness of our divided land, shine your light on us Holy One. Help us begin to see and try to understand the pain and deep wounds of our Brothers and Sisters of color. May the scales fall from our eyes, so we see the depth of these inequities and hear the call to work for justice. Ignite in us Holy One, a fire that never dies away, so that we push for change on every level, in our own hearts, in our communities, in our country in turmoil, and in our wounded world. In this season as we are caught up in the wonder of Your Love and the gift of Your presence among us, help us remember that Your love enfolds us all and binds us to each other. Amen

Question for Reflection

How do you imagine racial justice unfolding in our community? How can we at OCBC be drawn into this search for newness and this struggle for its unfolding?