

Advent Theme for Week One: HOPE

Hope is a powerful emotion and quality. With it, human beings can endure difficult and seemingly impossible situations. Without it, the human soul withers.

The coming of Jesus Christ brought eternal Hope into a world filled with sadness, despair and death. His birth was the divine gift from our heavenly Father who knew that without his intervention, we would be without ultimate hope and lost. Jesus Christ was born to redeem us and restore us to right relationships—with God, with other people and with the creation. We can be filled with hope, because the Creator is restoring his goodness into his creatures.

Because of Jesus, we also are now free to enjoy and protect the blessings of creation and redemption. We have the *divine opportunity* to participate in God's restoration of the creation by practicing Creation-Justice—sometimes called “eco-justice”—which consists of doing no harm to creation, and also doing what is good and right.

In these next seven meditations, we will explore different aspects of Christmas Hope and its connection to God's goodness, the goodness of his creation, and the meaning of Jesus' coming into this world.

-  Exodus 3:13-22 = Christ Before Christmas
-  Acts 17:22-31 = Birthing a Living Temple
-  Psalm 136 = God's Love in Action
-  Psalm 23 = Shepherd Visitation
-  Matthew 6:24-33 = Earthly Minded
-  Genesis 14:1-24 = Jesus' Model: Melchizedek
-  Philemon = Transforming Human

Creation-Justice in Word, wonder and work

Meditation #2: The Christ Before Christmas

What does it say? –

STUDY: Exodus 3:13-22

GOLDEN TEXT: Exodus 3:14 and 15: *God said to Moses, “I AM who I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations.’”*

What does it mean?

The first Christmas was not the beginning of Christ. During his ministry, the Lord Jesus said that “before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58) He identified himself as the Lord who introduced himself and his name to Moses and then liberated the nation of Israel from slavery. The deep goodness of all creation is revealed in God’s name. The Hebrew base-word here is *ha-yah*, meaning “to breathe, to exist as life itself.” *Ha-yah* is a very natural word, since it is the very sound of breathing: We make the sound “*ha*” when we breathe in and “*yah*” when we breathe out. The “I AM who I AM” in Hebrew can also be translated “I breathe as I breathe.” What is more basic than breathing? At Christmas, the Lord became a living human baby who was destined to conquer death in his resurrection, *but he has always been the only LIVING God, the one Creator of life*. Only he gives enduring life and HOPE.

1. Biblical names are often intensely meaningful, especially the names God chooses for himself. Why, of all the names of God, did Jesus choose “I AM” to claim for him?
2. The name “I AM” is unique because it embraces no adjectives. It says that God is living being; God is *life, himself*, without limits. Can he become a human baby?
3. God is *life, himself*. Is this why there is always goodness in all he makes, since even to exist, *to be*, is to bear his name “I AM”? Can anything in God’s creation not be good at its very root—even if it becomes polluted or depleted?
4. When we look for the goodness of creation, could we start with its existence? Did it come from the “I AM”? What adjectives help describe creation’s splendor—“vibrant,” “beautiful,” “balanced”—even if it is also “damaged,” “neglected” and “polluted”?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Since Jesus represents the I AM in human form and is the ultimate essence of good—and the ultimate breath of life—is he always with us? Does he always enable us? Is he our HOPE?
6. Is caring for God’s creation an expression of our caring for Jesus himself, the I AM, the I BREATHE of creation? Could there be a better motivation for caring for creation?
7. How are we humans the images of the Lord, the I AM? Since God makes everything exist and we are his images, should not the protection of creation matter to all of us? Since God is the I BREATHE of all of life, in how many ways should we protect life?

Truth To Celebrate: *To celebrate Hope, we are called to honor the one God of Life, the one Living God who is life, the I AM (the I breathe) who transformed Moses.*

Advent-Action: *Make one of your favorite recipes for a meal or a dessert, and invite a neighbor who has never been in your home to enjoy this bit of the Living God’s creation.*

Meditation #3: Birthing a Living Temple

What does it say?

STUDY: Acts 17:22-31

GOLDEN TEXT: Acts 17:24 = *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.*

What does it mean?

Christmas celebrates an eternal truth: The Creator chooses organic temples over those that are human-made. This truth was especially shown in the body formed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. Jesus himself referred to his body as God's temple (John 2:18-22). That divine temple was his living body that some of the religious leaders wanted to destroy, and which would also rise victorious and transformed in three days. Similarly, the Holy Spirit also chooses to indwell the bodies of all committed believers as his temples. (I Corinthians 6:19-20 and Meditation #29)

1. Is it surprising that 'the Living God,' who is 'life himself,' chooses living temples (Deuteronomy 30:20; John 11:27 and 14:6)? What was the first place on earth that it was recorded his Spirit entered (Genesis 2:7)?
2. Would some people prefer the Lord to stay in temples made of stone or wood? Do some so-called "houses of worship" feel and smell like museums...or even mausoleums? Why?
3. Was the Lord's choice of living temples a problem for the philosophers the Apostle Paul was addressing in Athens in this Acts 17 report? Does the incarnation of the Lord God in the baby Jesus pose a belief problem for some people today? If so, how do they describe this problem?
4. Later in the same speech, why does the Apostle Paul announce the resurrection of Jesus, too? Is the baby Jesus, living Creator, not confined even by death? Can God's goodness be affirmed everywhere—both in life and in death?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is there any place on earth where we should not read the Bible out loud, pray in Jesus' name, sing hymns and praise songs, dance with Godly joy, and in other ways celebrate his living presence? Knowing he is present, are we moved to care more for his good earth?
6. Why is the Apostle Paul making this point about humans as living temples to the Greek philosophers? Is he inviting them to come out of the "boxes" of their own religions and mind-sets? How does God becoming flesh in the baby Jesus also shake us from our limiting perspectives?
7. The "God who made the world and everything in it" is obviously greater than any other "god." How does this truth give you hope? How should we honor the Creator in his creation?

Truth To Celebrate: *God is greater than we can ever imagine, and still closer than even our very own breath.*

Advent-Action: *Use ceiling fans to circulate warm air in the winter, so that heat is not wasted or lost due to high ceilings—at home, Church or work.*

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Meditation #4: God's Love in Action

What does it say? –

STUDY: Psalm 136

GOLDEN TEXT: Psalm 136:3-5 = *O give thanks to the LORD of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever, who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever; who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever.*

What does it mean?

Our Christmas HOPE is based upon the love of God in action—past, present and future. The steadfast love of the LORD was shown to us especially in the birth of Jesus Christ—as well as in his life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension. That steadfast love of our Creator is shown in so many ways in each of our lives—including 26 ways articulated in this splendid Psalm 136.

1. How does the birth of the Lord Jesus also demonstrate God's steadfast love? How does it show that the Creator's love endures forever?
2. How is the Creator the "LORD of lords"? Has he ever stopped being in charge of his world? The apostle John reveals Jesus as the Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14 and 19:16), and Paul states that everyone should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11). Does the Lord's birth give us HOPE? If so, in what ways?
3. When there are environmental problems, should the Lord Jesus just fix them himself? Why would he want us humans to be part of his solution? How does being part of his solution give us HOPE? What gives us more HOPE?
4. What kinds of wonders do you think the writer of Psalm 136 has in mind? How does the birth of the Lord Jesus rank as a great wonder? What gives you HOPE?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Many religions claim that their gods are the bosses of parts of the creation, or lords of spirituality. However, when we say that Jesus is "Lord of lords," how is that belief demonstrated in our behavior? Does it impact how we treat his creation?
6. What "great wonders" have you seen or experienced? Take time today to write a 1- to 2-page description of at least one of the Creator's wonders—whether an "ordinary" or an "exceptional" wonder. Does that divine wonder help give you HOPE? In what ways?
7. Borrow an astronomy book from the library. As you read it and examine the pictures, can you hum or sing *The Hallelujah Chorus*? On a clear evening take field glasses, opera glasses or a telescope to help you look into the heavens. Bring others to share in the experience. How does the greatness of the Lord and his creation strengthen your HOPE?

Truth To Celebrate: *Of all the wonders in creation, the most amazing is the fact that God was in Christ reconciling the world—including you and me—to himself.*

Advent-Action: *Take a walk down the street, or through a park or field, with others or by yourself. As you see and hear the everyday wonders of God's world, softly sing or hum a familiar Christmas carol—even repeat verses from Psalm 136, loudly or softly—and pray specific thanks for each created thing you see. Take some time. Let yourself (1) feel the splendor of God's presence, (2) express the joy of honoring and praising our Creator in the midst of his wonder-filled creation, and (3) let your heart grow in love of him and his world. [And if you are self-conscious about humming, singing, praying or quoting Scripture while you walk when others may be watching, just hold a cell phone to your ear!—but keep it turned off.]*

Meditation #5: Shepherd Visitation

What does it say? –

STUDY: Psalm 23

GOLDEN TEXT: Psalm 23: 2 and 3 = *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, and he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

What does it mean?

In the first Christmas, no wonder the angels asked the shepherds to greet the baby Jesus! One of the most memorable texts of the Bible mirrors all of life in the pond and pasture that the Good Shepherd provides. (See John 10:1-18.) The Creator's shepherding provision and protection is powerfully symbolized in Psalm 23 by still waters and green pastures. He loves us, provides for us, and is always with us, in life and in death.

1. Are our souls restored by the green of a lawn, park, or nature preserve? How does being near clean ponds, streams and oceans generally calm us? Has the Creator made us to need nature, especially healthy nature? Why?
2. Where do you go to experience natural restoration—a park, a forest, meditating on a beautiful landscape painting or photo?
3. Have you felt the Lord's presence as the Good Shepherd protecting and providing for you? What difference did it make? Try to describe your Good Shepherd experiences.
4. Urban people may not relate well to the 'shepherd' model. Who are some good urban 'shepherds'? Pastors (literally meaning 'shepherds')? Counselors? Public advocates? Probation officers? Do we need more people to represent Jesus in these caring roles?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is something missing when the pastures are not so green and the waters are not so good? How are the "pastures" in your life? Are people missing some restoration? What should we do to bring them HOPE? What have you done?
6. Whose responsibility is it to keep the pastures green and the waters calm? Is the Creator still our Good Shepherd? Can we be more responsible than dependent sheep?
7. Do city people need the restorative benefit of nature less than others? Or do they simply have to be more intentional in their nature meditations—and in their work to enjoy and protect the "pastures" and the "ponds"?

Truth to Celebrate: The One who makes all green things green also makes all things new, beginning especially with the first Christmas and the birth of the ultimate Good Shepherd.

Advent-Action: Consider buying a live tree this Christmas, decorate it for inside or outside your home, and after Christmas plant it in your yard, outside your Church or, with permission, at a nearby park or school. Even hold a dedication service with songs and prayers.

Meditation #6: Earthly Minded

What does it say?

STUDY: Matthew 6:24-33

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 6:26 = *Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

What does it mean?

Christmas contradicts the misguided “religious” people who pride themselves in not caring about the “mere” physical realities of everyday life. The rest of the world wisely sees them as perhaps “so heavenly minded” that they are of “little earthly good.” In contrast, what we see from *the first Christmas*, is that Jesus was so earthly minded that he makes us good for heaven. In this text, Jesus says that the mundane needs of daily life are so important that God himself attends to them—for animals and for us. *What a divine irony that the Lord of all creation was born in a shelter for animals!*

1. Why does Jesus discourage us from *worrying* about earthly matters? What do we lose when we worry? What do we gain when we trust the Creator?
2. Is it a mistake to plan ahead? Could it be wrong when we plant seeds to nourish and protect them for an abundant harvest? Does Jesus ever speak against wise planning, planting, hard work or smart work?
3. Does Jesus mean we should literally “look at the birds of the air”? Does merely thinking about their example help as much? Or does the act of actually watching the birds help calm our anxieties even more?
4. How did the Creator prepare for the Baby Jesus? At Christmastime we look forward to the next year. How does the Creator help us prepare for our upcoming needs and wants?

What are we going to do about it?

5. What are the best ways you have found for avoiding or handling anxiety? Do those methods always work for you? Are there special anxieties that you or others need to overcome this Christmastime? Does Jesus’s teaching help you cope with these anxieties?
6. Does it bother you that some birds and lilies have a difficult time surviving in some polluted and depleted environments? Have we significantly hurt the model patterns by which God cares for them?
7. In the often quoted Matthew 6:33, within this passage, we are told to “seek first the kingdom of God.” “Kingdom” literally means the king’s “authority”—the King’s domain. Does the Creator’s authority help reduce your anxiety? How are you seeking his authority also in caring for the creation?

Truth to Celebrate: *Because he cares for us, we can trust him and let go of worry—while we also embody his care for others around us—especially humans.*

Advent-Action: *Buy some of your food at a farmer’s market or a local food co-op. It saves transportation fuel and expense, and it is a little closer to the original way God provides food. Buy or make a little extra food to share with others, including bird seed for our feathered friends.*

Meditation #7: Jesus' Model: Melchizedek

What does it say? –

STUDY Genesis 14:1-24

GOLDEN TEXT: Genesis 14:19-20 = *Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.*

What does it mean?

At the first Christmas, Jesus was born into a Hebrew family, with a message and ministry for all people. This Gospel universality was there more than two thousand years before Jesus' birth, when there were exactly only two Hebrew people—Abram and Sarah—while Melchizedek and other people also served “God Most High.” After Abram's extraordinary military victory over Kedorlaomer and his allies and his rescuing his nephew Lot, the extraordinary king/priest Melchizedek met Abram on the way home. He brought Abram the first recorded communion, and Abram paid him the first recorded tithe. Whatever else Melchizedek said, only two dozen words were recorded, and they state a potent blessing. Keep in mind that the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* considers Melchizedek the key ancient model of Jesus (See Hebrews 6:16-7:28).

1. In one sentence Melchizedek strongly praises (blesses) both Abram and God. Whenever the goodness or greatness of God is evident in people, in his creation, is strong praise appropriate for *both* God and his creatures?
2. When we praise something that God created, who takes the credit? Who takes great pleasure in our enjoying his splendid creation?
3. Why is Abram himself praised, rather than his skillful victory over Kedorlaomer's much larger military forces? Is Abram more praiseworthy than his accomplishments?
4. What kind of relationship was necessary for Melchizedek to give this blessing? Why did he say that Abram was praised (blessed) by God Most High? How did he know?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Melchizedek's leadership did not depend upon biological lineage, but only upon divine authority (Hebrews 9). How is that authority exercised in his praising both the Creator and also his creatures? Can we qualify for that authority, too?
6. Would referring to God frequently as the “Creator”—as Melchizedek does twice in this very brief blessing—help focus our thoughts and actions on the goodness of all that the Creator has made?
7. This Christmas, what are some of the ways you could bless (praise) God's good creations—humans, animals, plants, and others—through your words and your works, your affirmations and your actions?

Truth to Celebrate: *God blesses and praises us even when we have done nothing worthy of praise, because he loves us primarily for who we are—his images.*

Advent-Action: *Bless the Creator's world by going around your neighborhood and picking up any trash or rubbish and putting it in proper containers.*

Mediation #8: Transforming Human

What does it say? –

STUDY: The whole brief letter to Philemon

GOLDEN TEXT: Philemon 15 and 16 = *Perhaps the reason he [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.*

What does it mean?

Christmas transforms everything: *If God could become a human, then all humanity is precious.* However, far too often we allow human institutions to define and limit what we see and how we feel. When those human institutions are as perverted as slavery, which continues even today in some places, those institutions can even insidiously help blind us from seeing gross injustices around us. Similarly, ecological injustices are hard to address when we neither recognize the wrongs, nor see what can be done to repair the evils. In this short letter, the Apostle Paul was especially skillful at asking the right questions to help open Philemon's eyes—to see the obvious injustices of the slavery he had endorsed and exploited and to experience Jesus' transformation of all relationships.

1. Crises often are the greatest opportunities to see God and one another anew. Did Philemon have to lose Onesimus, “his slave,” in order to see him in a correct light and, welcome him and treat him as “a dear brother”?
2. How could Philemon believe in Jesus and still have a slave? Is the Creator's light sometimes hidden by our own bad behavior and biases? (See Matthew 5:14-16)
3. Beginning at the first Christmas, was even Jesus rejected by most of the leaders, partly because of his poor socio-economic condition? Does the deep goodness of all God makes help pave the way for Philemon's personal transformations? And ours?
4. Should the Apostle Paul have used stronger words against slavery? Why or why not? Social change regarding slavery was painfully slow. *Must social change be as slow now with respect to our dangerous pollution and depletion of other people's environments?*

What are we going to do about it?

5. What are the justice issues concerning people's lives around you now? Was the Apostle Paul a good model for justice action when he told Philemon to treat Onesimus as a dear brother? How did Paul use subtle persuasion? Is this Jesus' model, too? Why is Christmastime a good time to renew justice action?
6. Transformation comes in the process of recognizing our shared relationship with the Lord. The slave is now the “brother in the Lord.” Will seeing other people as God's children, too, help us to care more about them and their environments?
7. Was the Apostle Paul shy about asking for social change, putting his valuable friendship with Philemon at stake for another child of God—in this case, Onesimus? What lessons can we learn about protecting other people, including their environments?

Truth to Celebrate: *God can do whatever he wants, but he chooses us as his children to join him in making the world a better place.*

Advent-Action: *Time most of your cooking and laundry tasks to when other people use less electricity: evenings and weekends. That way, the power companies will be less likely to expand their own energy production.*

