

“Praise Him, All You Shining Stars”
Galatians 4:4-7; Psalm 148:1-8
Christmas 1

Psalm 148:1-8

¹Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

²Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
⁸fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the fullness of time had come,
God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,
in order to redeem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as children.

And because you are children,
God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying,
“Abba! Father!”

So you are no longer a slave but a child,
and if a child then also an heir,
through God.

The Sermon

Nadia Bolz-Weber issued this prayer just before Christmas:

“Dear God,

“[Christmas is coming, and usually] that means shopping
and mid-week vespers
and holiday parties
and making travel plans for family
and watching on Sundays as children light Advent candles
inside our festively decorated churches,
and seeing the number on the Advent calendar grow each day.

“But this year we don’t get to have much of that.
This year we are isolated
and watching the number of infections and deaths grow each day.

“So preparing for Christmas is [...] an inside job this year,
but I can’t do it alone.
Alone I can only binge watch TV
and eat my increasing weight in cookies.
But I still have enough faith [to] believe
that with you all things are possible.

“So I’m asking for some help.

“Help me let go of every bit of resentment I have
about the things I have lost this year.

“Help me forgive myself for not doing this pandemic as well
as people on Instagram seem to have.

“Help me not judge everyone who is taking COVID less seriously
and more seriously than I am.

“Help me not close my heart to the suffering of others.

“Help me know when to reach out and be a lifeline to someone else.

“Help me know when to grab for the lifeline someone else is sending me.

“Come, Lord Jesus, be born again into this [holy mess] of a world
and break open all of our hurting, brittle, devastated hearts
like only a baby can do;
then [help us] get rid of the clutter and resentments and fears
and everything that keeps out the joy that,
despite everything we have lost,
is still all around us.

“I guess what I am saying is, we may need some help this year
with that whole ‘let every heart prepare him room’ thing. Amen.”ⁱ

Customarily, in the weeks before Easter each year, I refer at least once to Frederick Buechner’s series of reflective questions for Lent. A few years ago, an adult Sunday School class in a church I was pastoring helped to think through some similar questions for Advent. I offer you the fruit of that conversation for your own Christmas reflections.

If you could go back and speak to the person you were at the time of your earliest, formative memories of Christmastime, what would you want to say to that person?

In future years, when people think about you at Christmastime, what do you think they will they remember about you?

When Jesus comes again, and calls you to stand before him, for what things will you ask forgiveness? What things about you will you be happiest to tell him about?

If you could bring any gift to present to him when he comes, what would you bring?

If you could be given any gift at all this Christmas, but only that one thing, what would it be?

In the 12th century, Gueric of Igny (1070-1160) said,

“Again and again let us make our way to Bethlehem
and let us look with all earnestness upon
this Word which has been made flesh,
the immense God who has been made a little one.”ⁱⁱ

Around the same time, Hildegard von Bingen (d. 1179) was writing:

“His true incarnation
exceeds all the power of the human intellect,
incomprehensible
in the mystical greatness of God’s mysteries
and incalculable
in the might of his divine power.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Margaret Renkl wrote in the New York Times last week,

“Dec. 21 marks the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, the night when there are more minutes of darkness than on any other night of the year. Afterward, days will begin to lengthen, with more light than the day before...

“The sky will begin to brighten earlier in the morning, and the light will begin to linger longer in the evening. It will give us hope and help us to hold on.

“The day is coming when we will sit around tables together again and carelessly offer one another a taste of what’s on our plates.

- [We’ll] go to the movies again
- and read books among strangers in coffeehouses again
- and sing out loud at church services and concerts again.

- [We'll] tell jokes in the break room at work again
- and blow out the candles on our birthday cakes again.
- “We may even trust our government again,” she says,

by which I suppose she might also have said, we might even learn to be able to listen to each other again, and speak the truth again, without having to run everything through the filter of whether it suits our own desires and dispositions.

But “that’s the great promise of the solstice,” she wrote: “Like steadfast friends who see us through everything a cold world can throw our way, the solstice reminds us, every year, that light is coming. It tells us that darkness is never here to stay.”^{iv}

The early reformer John Wyclif (1324-1384) said in the 14th century:

“To them that will fight and criticize,
I say that this child who is born
is Prince of Peace and loves peace;
he condemns contrary people
who are contrary to peace.

For we study
how Christ came in the fullness of time
when he should,
and how he came in meekness,
as his birth teaches us,
and how he came in patience
from his birth to his death—

and we follow him in these three
because of the joy that we have in him.

For this joy, in this patience of Christ,
brings us to a joy that shall last forever.”^v

And so, a prayer for Christmas Day from our siblings in the Church of Scotland:

“Today, O God,
the soles of your feet
have touched the earth.

Today, the back street, the forgotten place
have been lit up with significance.
Today, the households of earth welcome the King of heaven.
For you have come among us,
you are one of us.
So may our songs rise to surround your throne
as our knees bend to salute your cradle.
Amen.”^{vi}

*Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.*

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
December 27, 2020

ⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Sunday Prayers December 20th, 2020” (The Corners [email] by Nadia Bolz-Weber)

ⁱⁱ Gueric of Igny went to Clairvaux, where Bernard encouraged him to take monastic vows, and eventually became the Abbot of the Cistercian monastery in Igny (c. 1140-60).

ⁱⁱⁱ In Hildegard, Scivias, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 434

^{iv} Margaret Renkl, “Looking for Light on the Longest Night of the Year” (New York Times, Dec. 20, 2020)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/20/opinion/winter-solstice.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

^v John Wyclif (1324-1384), in John D. Witvliet and David Vroege, eds., *Proclaiming the Christmas Gospel: Ancient Sermons and Hymns for Contemporary Christian Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 98

^{vi} “Christmas Day,” Church of Scotland (Common Order, 1994)