



Dear God,  
What's happening?

# DON'T BE AFRAID

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*Advent Reflections*

2024

Yours truly,  
Waiting

Miseon Choi  
David Clifford  
James Semmelroth Darnell  
Managerie Winston



# INTRODUCTION

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*The Christian Church has valued biblical reflection for almost two hundred years. The sacred text continues speaking to us, revealing new awareness and inspiration for our days.*

*It is worth noting when the gift of repetition appears in scripture. The purpose of repetition is emphasis and formation. On numerous occasions, we find in the Bible, “Do not be afraid.” Surely, there is no better time like the present to heed these words. If our minds are porous to God’s spirit, hopefully this reoccurring instruction will sink in.*

*God is still speaking. Thus, scripture offers fresh blooms from season to season. Steady your heart. Focus your thoughts. Be encouraged.*

*Our contributors have provided touching reflections. You have a worship litany, songs to enjoy, and a prayer to walk with you toward Christmas.*

*Thank you for taking time with the Disciples Home Missions 2024 Advent Resource. We pray it strengthens you, your family, study group, and church.*

*Rev. Monique Crain Spells*  
**Christian Education & Faith Formation**



# CALL TO WORSHIP

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## *We Can Believe*

**Leader:** Advent is here. More than a season, it is a holy expectation.

**Congregants:** We enter Advent knowing God is real.

**Leader:** Every day we face challenges, but we don't face them alone.

**Congregants:** We enter Advent knowing God is real.

**Leader:** Let us pause for a moment to remember a miracle in our life. (Pause)

**Congregants:** We enter Advent knowing God is real.

**Leader:** Like those who came before us and like Mary, we can ask of life "How can this be?" and we can also believe.

**Congregants:** We enter Advent with expectation.

**Leader:** With God, we have the ability to co-create new realities using all the tools we have been given. We can expect change. We can expect good. We can expect justice and love.

**ALL:** With all we have available, we can believe.

Written by: Monique Crain Spells

# GOOD NEWS ENCOUNTERS AT A DEAD END

Miseon Choi

*“On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.”- Luke 1:59-66*

## **Interest of Luke: the Last, the Lost, and the Least**

Luke assures us that “the events that have been fulfilled among us” (1:1) are “the certainty of the things” (1:4), and these things concern the Good News, unfolding the stories of witnesses as evidence. Luke (around AD 70) presents the accounts of the witnesses from the Gospel of Mark (around AD 60) and the Acts of the Apostles (around AD 60), and much of the stories he chooses are uniquely structured around pairs of women and men, a pattern that continues throughout the Gospel of Luke.

Particularly, theologian Ian Howard Marshall suggests that Luke 1-2 is not merely an introduction but a kind of ‘synopsis’ that encapsulates the broader story that will unfold in the Gospel of Luke. In other words, the birth narratives of John the Baptist through Elizabeth and of Jesus through Mary in Luke 1 convey a central message that runs throughout the Gospel of Luke: the Good News for the last, for the lost, and for the least.

## **Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Maria: People at a Dead End**

Zechariah was a priest, and along with his wife Elizabeth, they were described as righteous and blameless (1:6). However, despite their virtuous lives, they had no child. Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both advanced in years (1:7). In a society where having many descendants was considered a blessing from God, and essential to continuing the family line, their childlessness would have been seen as a sign of failure. This was likely a source of deep shame and humiliation for them throughout their lives (1:25).

Meanwhile, in the insignificant town of Nazareth in Galilee, another Annunciation unfolded. Mary, a young woman of no notable background, was told that she would conceive through the Holy Spirit (1:26-38). As a virgin, this news was shocking and troubling to her. For an engaged woman, the news of pregnancy would have been a scandal of the highest order, a disaster waiting to happen.



**Rev. Dr. Miseon Choi** is an ordained pastor in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She holds a Ph.D. in Practical Theology with a focus on Spiritual Formation and Religious Education from Claremont School of Theology. Dr. Choi strives to create a strong bridge between theology and action across various contexts, empowering individuals and communities to support and grow with one another, and to transform society and the world.

# GOOD NEWS ENCOUNTERS AT A DEAD END

*Miseon Choi*

## Good News Encountered at a Dead End

Although Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary had different social status and circumstances, they all faced what seemed to be the "end"—a hopeless and seemingly defeated point in their lives. Yet, at the very edge of life, where there seemed to be no way forward, they experienced something incredible: the beginning of the "Good News," rather than the "End." Through this "Good News," we come to meet John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the Lord, and Jesus Christ, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God within the Roman Empire. The "Good News" they encountered at the brink of despair became a source of renewal, not just for their own lives but for countless others as well.

However, the process of transforming that experience of "the Dead End" into the Good News was far from easy. Zechariah, despite being a priest and recognized as a righteous man before God, did not believe the angel's message about the birth of a child and was struck mute until the child was born.

On the other hand, his wife Elizabeth, and the young unknown virgin Mary both accepted the seemingly unbelievable news with "faith," embracing it as "Good News" despite their difficult circumstances. Elizabeth's barrenness must have been a source of ridicule and lifelong shame for many around her. Even while hiding herself for five months after conceiving, Elizabeth gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "The Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (1:25). What about Mary? Though she was engaged to Joseph, a man from the house of David, becoming pregnant while still a virgin would have been a scandal that was nearly impossible to bear. It could have been news signaling the "end" of her promising young life and thrust her into an inescapable crisis just before her marriage. Yet, with faith, she praised the Lord who "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (1:48).

Today, like Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary, we too often face moments of despair. In the midst of life's difficulties and hardships, there are times when we feel that we have reached the "End." However, these situations can become opportunities to encounter God's Good News. This is because God's attention is on those who are last, those who are lost, and the least of these.

Of course, as in the experiences of the three, the process of transforming that Good News into something truly "Good" for them was not easy. Therefore, it is equally important for us to examine whether we are prepared in both heart and life to receive the good news as truly "Good News." During this Advent season, as we await the coming of the Lord, may we seek God's will with humble and faithful hearts in our daily lives. I pray that we may have the faith to welcome an unexpected message at the end of the road as God's "Good News." In doing so, may our good news become a message of hope and courage to those around us who also find themselves at the end of their lives.



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# PRAYERS

## Psalm 77:II

“I will remember the  
deeds of the Lord,  
yes, I will remember  
your wonders of old.”  
Amen.

## Romans 15:I3

“May the God of hope  
fill us with all joy  
and peace in believing,  
so that by the power of  
the Holy Spirit we may  
abound in hope.”  
Amen.

## Revelation 22:20

“Come, Lord Jesus!”  
Amen.

# ECHOES OF ANGELS

*David Clifford*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” – Luke 2:8-12*

In this season of Advent—a time of expectation and hope—the familiar words of the angel to the shepherds resonate deeply: “Do not be afraid...” These words were spoken in a time of uncertainty, where fear was a common reality. The shepherds, marginalized and often overlooked, lived in an occupied land under Roman rule. There were whispers of rebellion and war in the streets. Yet it was to them, ordinary people on an ordinary night, that the extraordinary news of the Messiah’s birth was proclaimed.

Today, like the shepherds, we also live in a world filled with fear. This past year has brought continuous news of wars and natural disasters devastating communities. Conflicts in different parts of the world have torn families apart, displaced millions, and left scars that will take generations to heal. Fires, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes have swept through cities and villages, leaving behind a wake of destruction and grief.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of such immense suffering. How can we hear the words “Do not be afraid” when we see the pain, loss, and uncertainty in the world around us? And yet, this message remains as crucial today as it was that night in Bethlehem.

The angel’s proclamation was not a denial of fear, nor did it ignore the harsh realities of life. The shepherds had legitimate reasons to be afraid, both of the angel’s sudden appearance and the struggles in their world. But the angel’s message pointed to a deeper truth that transcended their immediate circumstances: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” The birth of Jesus, the Messiah, was the announcement of hope breaking into a broken world.

This hope is not a fragile, fleeting emotion, but a firm anchor in the middle of the storm. It is the assurance that God is with us—Emmanuel. Just as the shepherds were invited into the story of God’s redemptive plan, we are also invited to find courage in the presence of God amid the chaos of life. Jesus’ birth is a reminder that God is not distant from our suffering but comes close to it, entering into the messiness and pain of our world.



**Rev. David Clifford** serves as Senior Minister at First Christian Church in Henderson, KY where he lives with his wife and three children. A graduate of Transylvania University (BA in Religion) and Christian Theological Seminary (MDiv/MA in Mental Health Counseling), he is currently pursuing a DMin at Lexington Theological Seminary. His ministry focuses on fostering relationships that lead to transformational reconciliation into the unity of Christ. Rev. Clifford is active in numerous local and regional ministries.

# ECHOES OF ANGELS

*David Clifford*

When we witness wars and disasters today, we are tempted to believe that fear and destruction have the final word. Yet the angel's proclamation points us to a different reality: the final word belongs to the Prince of Peace, whose coming brings healing and restoration. While the powers of this world may seek to destroy and divide, the Kingdom of God is marked by peace, reconciliation, and justice.

In times of disaster, we have also seen the extraordinary resilience of communities. People come together to rebuild, to comfort one another, and to offer aid. In the aftermath of wars and natural disasters, hope can feel fragile, but it is often in these moments that we witness the presence of Christ through acts of love, solidarity, and compassion. These glimpses of hope are echoes of the angel's message all those years ago, reminding us that fear does not have to paralyze us. Instead, we are called to trust in the one who brings good news, even when the night seems darkest.

As we journey through this Advent season, may we reflect on how God's call to "not be afraid" speaks into our own fears. Whether we are burdened by the weight of global events or personal struggles, the promise of Jesus' birth offers a peace that surpasses understanding. In that small child "wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" we find the strength to face the uncertainties of our world with faith. We know that God is with us, walking alongside us in every moment.

Let us take heart from the message of the angel to the shepherds. In a world filled with fear, we are reminded that God's light shines brightest in the darkness. As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, may we be open to receiving the peace and joy that comes with the birth of our Savior, and may we, in turn, become bearers of that light to a broken world in need.

- 1) What fears do you carry with you during this Advent season? How might the angel's message, "Do not be afraid," speak into those specific fears?
- 2) How does the promise of Emmanuel—God with us—change your perspective on fear and uncertainty in the world today?
- 3) In the face of recent wars and natural disasters, where have you seen signs of hope or God's presence in the midst of suffering?
- 4) The angel brought "good news of great joy for all the people." How can we actively participate in sharing that good news with others, especially those who are hurting or afraid?
- 5) In what ways can you embody Christ's peace in your own community, particularly when fear or despair feels overwhelming?



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# SONGS OF SUPPORT

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Trust Me

by Richard Smallwood

My Soul Rejoices  
(Mary's Magnificat)

by Owen Alstott

God Rest Ye Merry  
Gentlemen

by Hozier

Oceans

by Bri Babineaux

O Come, O Come  
Emmanuel

by Maverick City Music

Soul's Anthem  
(It is Well)

by Tori Kelly

# ANSWERS UNSEEN

*James Semmelroth Darnell*

*“Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section’s turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” - Luke 1:8-17*

Someday, Zechariah will be known for his song of praise at the dedication of his son John, a prophet and precursor to the Messiah. Songs will be written about his song, including the great hymn, “Hail to the Lord’s Anointed” (Chalice Hymnal, #140). But today is not that day.

Zechariah, an Israelite priest, and his wife Elizabeth were no longer thinking about children. We don’t know how old they were, just that they were “getting on in years” and “barren.” Oh, that horrible word. Had it hung around Elizabeth’s neck like a millstone? Did she and Zechariah cry away days and nights as they attempted for years to become pregnant, and no child came? How did they respond as prayers for children seemed to go unanswered?

Whatever their response, God found them faithful. Zechariah went about his duties as a priest. He is chosen by lot for the sacred duty of offering incense in the sanctuary of this temple. It is there in this sacred act, that the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah.

Even in this most holy of places, Zechariah is not prepared for this encounter with the holy. His first reaction is fear. But Gabriel tells Zechariah, and us, to not be afraid – that his prayer is being answered. Our prayer is being answered even now. Gabriel tells Zechariah that he will indeed have a son, John. He will not just be any son, but he will be a holy man who will return many to faithfulness and prepare the way for the Messiah. God is not merely fulfilling Elizabeth and Zechariah’s prayers of many years and heartfelt tears, but God is using them to bring about the salvation of the world.

Like many of us would, and like Abraham and Sarah before him, Zechariah initially balks. Despite his and Elizabeth’s prayers, he now believes it is too late, physically impossible. Scripture tells us that Gabriel did not take too kindly to this, such that Gabriel struck Zechariah mute until the baby’s birth, because Zechariah did not believe. But maybe Zechariah, after his initial doubts, maybe, his only response could be muted awe. Faced with an answer to a prayer prayed for so long, and answered in such a way, maybe all he could finally offer was his awe.

The prophet Isaiah tells us, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” God is making a way with the prayers of your heart. God is using you already for the life of the world. So be not afraid. But wait in awe, for God is already at work, ready to reveal to you something beyond your wildest imagination.

1) What prayer do you have that has gone unanswered? 2) Where do you see good happening anyhow?



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# MORE THAN A BABY

*Managerrie Winston*

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." - Luke 2:25-35*

The holidays can be a mixed bag, right? There's the joy of the season, but for a lot of us, there's also a heaviness. Anxiety about the future, fear of what's happening in the world, or just the constant pressure to meet expectations that society puts on us. It's real, but the thing is, in the Bible, especially around the story of Jesus, there's this phrase that keeps coming up over and over again: "Do not be afraid."

So, let's talk about this story of Simeon. He is an old man who has been waiting, for what feels like forever, for God's promise to be fulfilled. He has lived through tough times—maybe even questioned whether his faith was going to be rewarded. Then Jesus shows up; but Jesus does not show up in a palace or in some high place of power. He shows up in the arms of two young, working-class parents who probably had more questions than answers themselves.

Simeon sees the baby Jesus and suddenly all his fears melt away. This man, who represents all of us waiting for justice, waiting for peace, waiting for things to get better, he gets it. Jesus is the answer, but not in the way people expected. Jesus did not come as a political figure or with the type of power we think changes the world. He came humbly, as a child, vulnerable, but also powerful in a new way—showing us that real change comes from love, not fear.

The thing about fear, it is used against us all the time—fear of the "other," fear of losing control, and fear of not measuring up. If we look around today, we see systems built on fear—racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. The world keeps telling us to be afraid of anyone who does not fit the mold or does not conform. But Advent, and really the whole story of Jesus, says the opposite: "Do Not Be Afraid."



**Rev. Managerrie Winston** serves as the Coordinator for Ministry with Youth and Young Adults at Disciples Home Missions. Prior to her work at DHM, she served as Associate Pastor for First Christian Church Houston. As a youth curriculum designer, she has created spaces of healing, empowerment, and transformation for those often pushed to the margins of society. Managerrie's journey is a reflection of her deep love for God, unwavering commitment to justice, and belief that no matter who you are or where you come from, you deserve a seat at the table. Rev. Winston holds a B.A. in Journalism from Texas Southern University and an MBA from Texas Women's University.

# MORE THAN A BABY

*Managerrie Winston*

Jesus did not enter a world that had it all together. He came into a mess. Simeon, standing there in the temple, holding this baby, knows that Jesus is not about religion—Jesus is about justice, radical love, and turning the system on its head. Simeon even says, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel."

In other words, Jesus came to disrupt the status quo, challenge oppression, lift up the lowly, and discomfort the powerful.

As we wait for Christmas, what would it look like for us to step out from fear? What if we applied the energy of Jesus to our own lives? What if we stopped being afraid to take a stand for what's right, love people authentically, and speak truth to power?

Advent is not just about waiting for a baby in a manger. It is about preparing ourselves for a revolution of love. It is about recognizing we don't have to wait for someone else to fix the world—we are empowered through Jesus to do the work now. Fear keeps us from fully living out that purpose.

So, let's get real. Are you afraid of failing, being judged, or standing up for what's right and being called "too much?" Let me remind you; Jesus was "too much" too. He did not fit into the boxes people had for him. He did not play by society's rules. He changed everything.

As we step into this Advent season, let's challenge ourselves to follow that example.

- 1) What systems in the world today make you feel afraid or small? How can you use your faith to challenge those systems?
- 2) Simeon waited a long time to see God's promise. How can you practice patience and trust in your life, especially in moments where it feels like things are not changing fast enough?
- 3) Jesus was a disruptor. What areas in your life need disruption, and how can you step into that work without fear?
- 4) We often fear what we don't understand or what is different. How can you cultivate love and curiosity over fear when it comes to people, cultures, or ideas you do not fully understand?



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# YOUR THOUGHTS

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