



## 1st Sunday of Advent, Year A

### Waiting With Revolutionary Patience

Advent hope demands an active waiting – a personal and public move toward God’s realm of justice.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44](#)

### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Advent has moved away from an individualistic "waiting" for a savior's return and more toward what people of faith are called to do in order to create the “kingdom” of God on earth for all creation. Advent is about active waiting and an active struggle to revolutionize our world. It may be a season in which LGBT and other oppressed people reveal to the church the kind of judgment and repentance that is required for such change.” -Christine Smith



“A revolutionary hope that looks to radically transform society is often diverted by religious institutions. People who are oppressed – whether because of sexuality, race, gender, nationality or class – are often taught to accept their own oppression in order to support such ‘hope-less’ institutions. So, readers, beware!” -Randall C. Bailey



“Sometimes reading the Bible faithfully means calling the text into question. While I affirm Paul’s naming of love as the heart of the matter, as a gay man I question the claim that ‘conduct becoming’ rules out desire. Pleasurable, sensuous lovemaking between equals is not only morally good; it can also deepen our passion for making justice, and there’s joy in celebrating that justice-love as fully compatible with God’s purposes.” -Marvin M. Ellison

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical year as a period of reflection and preparation for the birth of Christ. Traditionally, the themes of Advent are hope, love, joy and peace. The penitential nature of the season is addressed in the purple color of the candles and stoles.

At the heart of the Advent season is waiting, not for a savior to come and save us but for the actualization of a vision of a changed world. These passages are about promise and judgment, hope and repentance, and call us, above all, to visions of a different world. However, they differ in how they speak of political hopes and about personal salvation.



This Advent as you envision God’s transformed world, what continuing injustices come to your heart and mind? Where is your hope directed?

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**Isaiah 2:1-5** speaks to a universal vision of many people coming to worship the one God of Israel at the Temple in Israel, both to worship and learn (verses 1-3). The result would be a change in the nation from a war economy to a sustainable agricultural economy (verse 4).

**Psalm 122** is a hymn of Zion which talks about Jerusalem as the national capital where the economy is centered and justice is dispensed. The priestly powers in the Jerusalem temple are symbols of oppression and exclusion. The psalm leads us to ask, “Today, what would truly have to change in God’s house for LGBT people and our allies to finally ‘stream’ to it when it has often been the place of greatest judgment and condemnation in our lives?” Are the hopes of some LGBT people so connected to the benefits of the status quo that they close their eyes to the oppression of other LGBT people whose class and race lock them out of the privileges of the society? Authentic freedom cannot be purchased at the expense of others, and a comprehensive vision of justice must address not only heterosexism, but also classism, racism, sexism, ableism and other dynamics of oppression.

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Where have you caught a glimpse of the “kingdom of God” in the real lives of LGBT people? How do these glimpses reflect God’s good news for all God’s children – including all who are oppressed?

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**Romans 13:11-14** and **Matthew 24:36-44** shift the focus from dealing with a national agenda to the status of individuals. As a common technique, each passage sets up insider/outsider dynamics. The Romans passage invokes polarized opposites of light and darkness, of day and night (verse 12), with the dark side as the negative pole. Verse 13 has a too familiar ring: the diatribes often hurled unjustly against LGBT persons as debauched sinners.

While Romans draws the contrast between the “saved” versus the “unsaved,” Matthew speaks of those “taken up” and those “left behind.” There is a call to be watchful since we don’t know the hour. We also don’t know what differentiates those taken up and those left behind. We don’t even know if it is better to be “taken away” or to be “left behind.” This type of ambiguity often leads LGBT people second-guessing how to survive in a world, and in a religious climate, which often appears irrational and fraught with danger.

On the one hand, we could look at the admonitions in these passages as reminding LGBT and other oppressed people not to think they are immune from judgment because of their oppression – that theirs is the only true revelation from God. On the other hand, if we are not careful, the individual-focus of these passages could lead us to divert our attention away from the need to transform society to be more inclusive and just.

The seemingly arbitrary actions and focus on sex-negativity in Romans 13:13 and Matthew 24:38, as well as the heterosexist and classist assumptions about life and work in these passages, also raise questions about how these texts impact LGBT people and other oppressed groups.



In your experience of the church and society, who usually decides what behavior is “becoming,” to use Paul’s term? What behaviors usually identified as becoming are oppressive or repressive for LGBT people of faith? What is becoming behavior for us especially in this Advent season?

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Living on the losing side of in/outside dynamics should alert us to be wary of any power inequalities or justifications for social divisions, including religious warrants. In the midst of such dynamics, God often works through personal prayer in healing many LGBT people from a personal internalized oppression. We must, however, work for transformation of public systems of oppression which crush many and dehumanize all – especially in our churches and other religious institutions. When our love and work for justice is fully compatible with God’s

purposes we can experience the great joy promised by the Advent season.



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How is God calling you and your community to wait – personally and publicly/politically – during this Advent?

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy One, we are an Advent people,  
those who are called to struggle for  
a new and transformed world for all your creation.  
Help us to claim this Advent season as  
a renewed commitment to bring your realm into being  
on behalf of all those who are waiting and hoping for justice and  
liberation.  
Help us take on the mantle of courage as we face into all the places  
where we are complicit in the world's suffering,  
so that our true repentance might help turn our world around.  
Help us take on the mantle of justice making in this moment and time,  
for this is truly revolutionary patience.  
Amen.



# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 2nd Sunday of Advent, Year A

### The Peaceable Realm- God's Advent Challenge

The advent vision of a peaceable realm is not about just a lion and lamb together, but also about the equally almost unimaginable – human beings living justly and peacefully together.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#); [Psalm 72](#); [Romans 15:4-13](#); [Matthew 3:1-12](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“Isaiah’s vision of a world of peace and justice is amazing, but it’s questionable to rely on God as the exclusive agent of change or to embrace violence (slaying the wicked) as the means. LGBT and other marginalized people know all too well how ‘protecting goodness’ has been invoked to justify violence against us. We must embody the alternative we desire – an inclusive peace through comprehensive justice.” Marvin M. Ellison



“These Advent texts demand that we come face to face with the nature of repentance and judgment. Repentance for LGBT people requires holding each other accountable for the ways we turn on each other out of internalized oppression or for the ways we judge each other for not conforming enough to heterosexist norms. For our heterosexual allies, as well as those who speak against us, repentance and judgment will surely have to do with stopping all kinds of violence perpetrated against LGBT people and risking one's own safety to do so.”  
Christine Smith



“In creating a new transformative world, we must not adopt the ways of the oppressor both in the construction of this transformation nor in blaming our people for the oppression we are experiencing.” Randall C. Bailey

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

As with last week's readings, in this second week of Advent, the Hebrew Bible passages speak to national salvation for Judah and Israel and hopes for relief from oppression. The New Testament passages, on the other hand, speak to anti-Jewish sentiments, again stressing insider/outsider polarities.

While **Isaiah 11** and **Psalms 72** express the hopes for a nation in terms of redistribution of wealth and protecting the rights of all people, there are drawbacks to these portrayals. On the one hand they are patriarchal, putting entitled men in charge and expecting change from the top down. Another problem is the hope that God will “crush the oppressor” (Psalm 72:4) and “kill the wicked” (Isaiah 11:4). Thus, not only is violence the means of bringing about change, but God is the initiator of this violence.



How do we create a new world of justice for all without trying to destroy the enemy?

While Isaiah uses images of different animals living in harmony (the familiar lion-with-the-lamb peaceable kingdom) as a way of talking about the idealized hoped for world, human examples might better serve today in exemplifying this type of revolutionary change. What if the reign of God looks like a gay man and a Muslim heterosexual woman breaking bread together? Or a Missouri Synod Lutheran heterosexual pastor and a Latina lesbian building a house together for Habitat for Humanity? Or a transgender person finding help in selecting a new wardrobe by a neighbor who earlier had only glared and snickered? A promise of totally transforming the heterosexist, homophobic world we now experience is encouraging, especially because “structural enemies” will become enhancers of each other's well-being.



Describe an encounter between a GLBT person and a member of the heterosexual community that embodies a glimpse of God's peaceable reign.

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With the New Testament passages the problem is not oppressive force destroying the lives of the indigenous people, but rather the problem becomes the people themselves. In **Romans 15**, Paul interprets Isaiah as warrant for bringing in the Gentiles by way of rejecting God's own people. In **Matthew 3**, John the Baptist identifies his own people, the Pharisees and Sadducees, as the source of the problem, as opposed to the societal oppression pushed upon the colonized Jews by the Romans.

On the one hand one can look at John the Baptist for modeling how GLBT persons and others on the margins call for repentance and change, but are often persecuted and dismissed as cranks. Like John, LGBT folks can scare others, but we have a powerful and necessary message: The world is not as it should be, and change is possible.

On the other hand, one wonders whether John also models how LGBT people, among others, might be tempted to use threats against those they judge undesirable or dangerous. John's calling the unbaptized a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7) may sound like the privileged gay man complaining, "You dykes and drag queens are making it difficult for the rest of us," or a black preacher saying, "You hoodies and rappers are creating bad dynamics in the community," or the welfare rights organizer who adopts derogatory language about so-called welfare queens.

Holding each other accountable includes checking our internalized oppression as we struggle to create a world where oppression is no longer the norm and where even the oppressed no longer mete out "righteous" violence on those viewed as our "enemies."



This Advent, what is required of heterosexual people to become trusted allies of LGTB people and their justice movement? What is required of LGBT people to advance God's reign of justice?

### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Holy One, who comes to be with us  
in our struggles and our hopes,  
guide us, we pray, in living with integrity and joy.  
Empower us to resist the urge, inside us or around us, to create enemies.  
Deepen our hunger and thirst for right relationship  
with all peoples, ourselves included, and with the earth itself.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 3rd Sunday of Advent, Year A

### Impossible Possibilities

Advent is about a desert blooming, healing the suffering, the lowly lifted – a world transformed justly.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:47-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



“The hopes for a transformed world require confronting oppressive powers and emboldening those who are oppressed to struggle and not conform to the existing order.” Randall C. Bailey



“It is not just equal rights or ‘our share’ of the status quo that LGBT people want. Rather many of us are working hard for a transformed world for all who are oppressed and marginalized. It is time to really challenge our communities of faith to articulate and embody aspects of that transformation.” Christine Smith



“As a gay man with white-skin and economic privilege, I’m grateful for, and challenged by, the two-part biblical test for justice. First, ask how the least powerful are faring, and second, ask if the socially-privileged are willing to trade places with the marginalized.” Marvin M. Ellison

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

The theme of change is prevalent in **Isaiah 35:1-10** and **Matthew 11:7-10**. Both passages speak of the transformation of the able-challenged as those who cannot see or hear. The Isaiah passage also speaks of the transformation of the environment, a theme not adopted in the Gospel reading.

The admonition to “be strong, fear not” (Isaiah 35:4a) encourages one to hope that even the most difficult transformation, where deserts are changed into fertile land, is possible. That message is encouraging to LGBT people, who know on a daily basis that in a culture both fixated and fearful about sex, the world is neither safe nor hospitable. This is especially true for those who “flaunt” their difference, question conventional wisdom, or challenge social privileges constructed on the basis of wealth, whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality or Christian religious identity. By the same token the promise of return from exile, suggested in Isaiah 35, raises questions for LGBT people who have been exiled from churches and are left wondering whether return will ever happen and on whose terms.



When does it become necessary, for the sake of justice and the wholeness of the community, to stop being patient? What particular transformative action is possible for your faith community to embrace and advocate for this Advent season?

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The questions John’s disciples pose to Jesus in Matthew 11: 3 about whether he is the one hoped for suggest contrasting readings. One way to read Jesus’ response is to affirm that Christ is disclosed by the goodness we see in the lives of those who have been touched and healed by him. Accordingly, it would be wonderful to point out the ways LGBT folks have brought new life into every arena of society, including the church. In the similarities found in Isaiah 35 and Matthew 11, we see Jesus standing firmly within the justice tradition of the ancient prophets and adopting “the view from below,” asking whether impoverished and other oppressed people are empowered to live dignified and full lives.

On the other hand, there is a troubling aspect to Jesus’ response in Matthew 11: 4-6. The society in which Jesus lived labeled people who had physical challenges with negative labels and treated them as castaways, similar to the ways our society often treats LGBT people. Instead of Jesus challenging the society on the ways they treat the “other,” Jesus performs miracles that allow the other to fit into the society as “normal” in the eyes of the society. We might ask, if this is the best hope for LGBT and same gender loving people?

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Where are there signs of God's healing and action in the world around you? How is God's own presence known in the bodies and lives of those too often judged "not normal"?

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This sense of uneasiness is strengthened in **James 5:7-10** which stresses that the oppressed should suffer through and be patient for change. Against this "long suffering" theology, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" explicitly challenged local clergy who suggested that the Civil Rights Movement was going too fast. Similarly, the "in your face" advocacy for national AIDS/HIV research and healthcare by ACT UP demonstrated, time and again, that pressing for societal change is necessary for saving the lives of those crushed by oppression.

Similarly, the Song of Mary (or the Magnificat in **Luke 1:47-55**) which replaces the psalm reading for the day, presents an equally challenging model. One way of hearing Mary's song is as a song of liberation – where one who has for too long been overlooked and oppressed, the lowly, is chosen by God. The song declares God's radical reversal where the powerless bear within them the very powerful presence of God. In this hearing, LGBT are invited to join with all those who God lifts up for God's liberating good news.

In the song, however, one may also hear Mary's self deprecation as lowly and a slave (verse 48) and of the function of a woman's body to achieve a male objective. Mary's willingness to be used is extolled as the reason she will be praised. Notice also how the end of the song speaks of the descendants of Abraham, not of Sarah or Hagar. This interpretation encourages the oppressed to "cool it" for a while, to fit in, and let themselves be used; we hear here a cautionary warning about how a hoped-for transformation can backfire on LGBT people, racial groups or able-challenged individuals.

Both Mathew 11 and Luke's Song of Mary are rich, complex texts that ask us to go deeper as we seek to explore how they speak to our lives. Our authentic hope is for personal and societal transformation that will make life abundant for all and celebrate the varied gifts of all who come to the table. This Advent hope excites those of us on the fringes. Don't use us, rather engage and embrace us, and struggle with us to transform those institutions and practices which crush us. The hope for transformation yet to come can be empowering, so much so that even the absence of positive models provides an opportunity to create something new out of our pain and in hope for "impossible possibilities" where deserts do become fertile and life giving for all.



Following a time of prayer, what is God doing with you during this season of Advent?

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Most gracious God,  
be with us as together we seek to transform  
the systems which oppress so many.  
Strengthen our resistance not to conform to the status quo and  
encourage us to question our own change movements,  
their goals and means, and what it means to lead and follow  
faithfully.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 4th Sunday of Advent, Year A Is It Immanuel or Emmanuel?

For what do you pray this Advent? We desire God-with-us, but for what purposes?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"While the personal is political, I find it dangerous in this week's gospel that the political, so visible in the Hebrew Bible lesson, is reduced to only the personal and interpersonal. What would Advent hope look like if we were able to resist those reductions?" Angela Bauer-Levesque



"I keep wondering how Isaiah's 'Immanuel,' who is a sign of national liberation, gets shifted to Matthew's 'Emmanuel,' a sign for saving one from sin. This assures the reader that neither Joseph nor Mary engaged in sexual activity. I'm afraid this shows how a community can get lost in a morality play equating holiness with sexual abstinence rather than resisting national injustice." Randall C. Bailey



"Underneath the 'Gospel Truth' of the Good News, I see a wonderful liberating narrative for those of us with ears to hear and eyes to see." Caroline Redfearn

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

A traditional reading of today's Scriptures usually emphasizes continuity between **Isaiah 7:10-16** and Jesus' fulfillment of Isaiah in **Matthew 1:18-25**. A closer reading, however, points more to discontinuity than continuity. In our conversation, we saw how exploring this discontinuity remains good news for those who seek Jesus, the liberator of the oppressed. While at times shocking, we feel the possibilities for hope are increased by such readings.



What has been your prayers during this season of Advent? Do the prayers move beyond personal concerns to broader concerns for our world?

In this last Sunday of Advent we go to the main verse from the prophet Isaiah which the writer of **Matthew 18:23** uses as a proof text for the Virgin Birth Narrative. The text is found in **Isaiah 7:14**, which the New Revised Standard Version renders, "a young woman is with child". The writer of Matthew is using the Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14, which mentions, *hē parthenos*, the virgin, a mistranslation of the Hebrew *betula*, a woman of marriageable age. Intriguingly, in Isaiah 7-- in 735 BCE-- the woman is already pregnant. Immanuel, the child she is to bear, serves as a sign to the king of Judah that foreign invaders from the north will not defeat or colonize Jerusalem.

This view is complicated by **Psalms 80**, which speaks to the people in exile. Having been fed with the "bread of tears" (verse 5), now they ironically turn to God, who put them into exile in the first place, to save them. We wonder about the psychology -- perhaps a sadomasochistic leaning -- of one turning to the cause of anguish/bondage for relief.

In the New Testament, Emmanuel is not presented as a sign that the outside invaders, the Romans, will be driven out. Rather, Jesus is to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21b). Sin in this passage is depicted as sex outside of marriage (verse 18), which in that society was punishable with public disgrace (verse 19). For adultery, the punishment was stoning (Deuteronomy 22:24-26). On the other hand, virtue is seen in abstaining from sex (Matthew 1:25) even between married people, Joseph and Mary. The hope for liberation from outside invaders (Isaiah 7) is transformed into a story of non-engagement in sexual acts (Matthew 1). The hope that outside invaders will not be successful in their attempts to subjugate people gets lost by the time the Isaiah 7 story makes its way into the book of Matthew. In essence the emphasis has shifted from the sign of liberation to a paternity concern.

By the same token, Joseph's actions of sexual abstinence, which first seems to be a good thing, must not have been so affirming to Mary. This depiction of sexuality in the negative plagues all, whether same gender-loving or other. Such readings tend to feed a sense of shame around

issues of sexuality.

In **Romans 1:1-7**, we also recognize the distorted shift of emphasis from liberation to sexual sin. Paul claims to be a slave to Christ (verse 1) and equates holiness, not with fighting for liberation from Roman oppression, but in moving from flesh (verse 3) to the spirit (verse 4). Perhaps today, such a belief contributes to thinking that it is legitimate to shift HIV funding away from the distribution of condoms to an abstinence only policy.

We see the impact of these narrative transformations in the actions of Anglican Bishops from Nigeria and Kenya. These bishops are consecrating U.S. Episcopal priests to be bishops in African churches as a counterforce to the consecration of the gay priest, Bishop Gene Robinson. These new bishops are then to return to the U.S. to recruit others into the Anglican Churches of Kenya and Nigeria. Nurtured in a church culture that stresses sexuality as the key sign of “sin,” the actions of these Bishops runs counter to the vision of Immanuel as a symbol of hope, a sign of national and group liberation. We also see the switch from concern with rescuing the nation from forces of destruction to concentrating on issues of sexuality in ways which the Evangelical Right not only demonizes LGBT people involved in monogamous, committed relationships, but calls their hateful actions “Defense of Marriage.”



When have you seen instances when those who advocate justice have been silenced or diminished because of the way the public, media or the church has “sexualized” them?

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In spite of the disturbing shifts away from liberation in these texts, we also discovered there is at least one liberating gift for LGBT people in Matthew 1:20b and its portrayal of Mary becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We hear the passage speak of a female same-gender loving partnership, since in Hebrew the word *ruah*, Spirit, is a feminine form. The Greek version of Spirit, *pneuma*, is neuter in form, which furthers the claim of both Hebrew and Greek traditions that males were not involved at all in Jesus’ conception. This radical reading shakes up any traditional take on love-making between God and Mary. God is about something altogether new in creating Emmanuel, God with us.

The Virgin Birth Narrative might also be understood as obliterating the shame of those who have children and create families outside the traditional model. In this story, God enters the world as the child Jesus, born of a woman who is not married to the father. In this way God could be saying, “If you want to label such people negatively, you’ll have to use that label on Jesus.” One problem with this rendering, however, is that readers often get stuck with the sexualized images and miss or avoid the transgressive good news of such a reading.



What do you find comforting and challenging in reading the Virgin Birth story in a way that identifies the Spirit as feminine or lifts up an

alternative to heterosexual marriage as the only  
moral context for bearing God's children?

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The Good News comes through our renaming and reclaiming Jesus' birth as a sign of liberation. In naming this transformation from liberation to negating sexuality, and then pointing out its hetero-patriarchal underpinnings, we resist this reframing and push for empowerment – which brings hope.

During this Advent, let us reclaim the hope of God with us, Immanuel, who wants us to be free. This hope compels us to rid ourselves of internalized oppression and advocate the God of liberation.

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### Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Eternal Spirit, Lover of our souls and bodies,  
We thank you and praise you for your enduring love.  
May we cherish our own embodiment  
as we do yours – that fleshly-wrap housing the Spirit  
of infinitesimal power and grace.  
May we continue to honor the Temple within,  
and gratefully treat our body  
that reflects your very presence.  
In the name of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Christmas Eve & Day, Year A

### Christmas from the Margins

Christmas celebrates the incarnation of God in human form – showing us that God identifies with our lives.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 62:10-16](#); [Psalm 97](#); [Titus 3:4-7](#); [Luke 2 : \(1-7\), 8-20](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"Mary's contemplation of the events surrounding Jesus' birth reflects a deep wisdom that includes an understanding of his earth-bound call to liberation as well as a heaven-bound affirmation of God's greatness." Caroline Redfearn



"Let the shepherds, male and female, and the Marys and children of today fully realize the possibilities of the Christmas gospel!" Angela Bauer-Levesque



"How we approach these stories of royal power and birth in a manger can lead to our liberation and/or co-optation. How do we tell the difference?" Randall C. Bailey

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### What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

All oppressed people are invited into this story of the birth of Jesus through identifying with the child born into a poor family who experienced rejection and degradation. We are also invited in by the shepherds, who were at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in first century Judea. We are encouraged to enter the story with the song of the angels proclaiming peace and good will to all. We identify with these people as the outcasts who have been wrongly despised by society. Those who have experienced such ostracism today – either because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexualities or able-ism – enter this story by identifying with the Christ child, the Holy Family, and their first visitors.



When you read the Christmas story in Luke 2, what comfort, questions and challenges arise?

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The manger scene's emphasis on the oppressed and underclass stands in stark contrast to the royal theology of the ruling class presented in **Isaiah 62**, **Psalms 97**, and **Titus 3**. In all of these passages the emphasis remains on the powerful: the king in Jerusalem processing into the temple, God as king, and the rich who are heirs.

On the one hand, justice in the book of Isaiah refers to the distribution of resources in the society so that all can reach their potential. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in **Isaiah 62** and **Psalms 97**, address the concerns of the underclass and oppressed as they seek protection. The sense of these passages, however, is of insider/outsider – with the ones who follow this God being rewarded, while all others destroyed (Psalm 97:4-8).

**Psalms 97** was probably chosen because of its references to the cosmic order and proclamations, which resemble the singing of the angels in **Luke 2**. However, peace is not proclaimed in this psalm, especially for those who don't adhere to this God. The perspective of the psalm makes it difficult to live in peace in communities today which are comprised of people from many faiths. The perspective also raises concerns for those of us who have been named and treated as "outsiders." Although some LGBT people look to these texts as a pathway toward inclusion, others are cautious on whether there will be true acceptance for them.



Throughout your life, when have you felt like an outsider? What difference does being an outsider make in how you relate to other outsiders, and how you relate to God?

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In these passages, elitism and loss of human agency and responsibility are emphasized -- it is God who does everything. The role of humans in the drama of life is eclipsed by the top-down ideology. In **Luke 2:1-20**, humans observe, hear, ponder, travel, but do not seem to have the ability to affect their own lives. Even the claim in **Titus 3:4** that it is not our works or agency but God's mercy which impact our outcomes, works against humans taking responsibility for themselves. This is most important for people who are oppressed because of sexuality, class, gender and/or race. Partnership with God in addressing our problems is a more empowering

theological emphasis.

We view the portrayal of Mary, the one chosen to be the mother of the Christ child, as a positive inclusion of the perspective of women in the gospel. With Mary we see a woman pondering in her heart and exploring intellectually the events which are transpiring and which are to transpire in the life of her child. Through her pondering which is in line with Lady Wisdom in Proverbs and Sophia in the Greek traditions, we are asked to enter into the biblical story from the point of view of a woman. While last Sunday's reading from Matthew stressed the reaction of Joseph to the pregnancy, in Luke's gospel we gain an understanding of the birth story from Mary's perspective.

These texts in Luke, however, are still heavily male-dominated, with women pushed to the background. Mary, having allowed her body to be used to carry and deliver the Christ child, has nothing else to say or to do in the narrative. Where is Joseph's mother? All the other characters, even the angels, *hoi angeloi*, are male, which is surprising, since in the Hebrew Bible tradition, it is the women who rejoice with dance and song (Exodus 15; Judges 11; 1 Samuel 18).

While some could argue that women are included in the categories of the lives of God's faithful in Psalm 97:10 and the heirs in Titus 3:7, it is God and Jesus and the male saviors who affect all. There are no other female references in these passages. This becomes important because women are invited into the story because of Mary's prominence in the story. Thus, to ensure that we recognize the influence of women in the drama of life, we have to explore how they are presented in the text, especially as this relates to access to and exercise of power.

In similar manner, LGBT and other oppressed people are often called in the church to support the agenda through their offerings of time, talents, funds and service, but then get silenced. Although many welcoming congregations proudly claim women and LGBT people as pastors and lay leaders, many others silence their voices.

LGBT people of faith may rush to the manger, but they are not to identify themselves as shepherds. They may even clean the stable, but they are to be ashamed of their sexuality, race, gender, and class. They are to ponder it in their hearts, but not offer these parts of themselves as a resource to the church. They are to hope to be heirs, possibly in the afterlife, but now they are not to push the church to redefine justice and righteousness; to move sexuality out of the sin category. They are to sing in the choir, write the most exciting pop-gospel songs, entertain the crowds, but they are not to claim voice. In order for peace and good will for all to become viable, the church has to become the safe space for all – to advocate the rights of all and be the challenger of society when these rights and hopes are dashed.



In what ways does your congregation celebrate the gifts of LGBT people? When does it silence LGBT wisdom and gifts? What prayer or possible actions arise of reflecting on these questions?

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We can claim our own power through the power of the Christ child. Our Christmas hope is the transformation of the world - from one that builds up the powerful and crushes those at the bottom to a world where we claim our own voices in partnership with a God of peace and

justice.

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### **Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



God of our ancestors

As we sing your praises this Christmas:

Give us eyes to see that amidst the joy and celebration there is discrimination.

Give us courage to raise our voices when we see it and work for change.

Give us strength to rise up and claim our power from the margins.

Continue to challenge us, as we join the chorus of angels in protest and celebration.

In the name of the one whose birth we celebrate this day, Jesus.

Amen.

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# 1st Sunday after Christmas, Year A

## No More Killing of Innocents

The peace of Christmas demands courageous resistance and action against all forces and institutions that destroy God's children.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23](#)

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### Who's in the Conversation

*A conversation among the following scholars and pastors*



"I think the saving of Jesus from Herod while other children die is a shameful paradigm for the church today. Do we protect our 'christologies' and do nothing about those being oppressed and killed all around us?" Randall C. Bailey



"I don't hear the good news in the story of discriminate killing found in the gospel lesson this week – where one is saved at the expense of the many. The silence of the bystanders reminds me of so many of us today. I hope we learn to speak up and to stop looking in the wrong places for the good news for LGBT and other marginalized people." Angela Bauer-Levesque



"Commercialized Christmas leaves me spiritually unmoved. The interweaving of the season's cultural celebrations with the joy of Christ's birth dilutes the message of liberation and the transformative power of our Savior." Caroline Redfearn

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## What's Out in the Conversation

*A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages*

Honestly, this week's readings are disturbing to us. How did we move from Christmas and the celebration of the incarnation to the glorification of the death and killing of children?



What is your initial response from both your head and heart to Matthew 2:13-23, sometimes called “The Escape to Egypt” or “The Slaughter of the Innocents”?

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**Matthew 2:13-23** moves from a plan to have Jesus killed to the killing of other children in his stead. **Ephesians 3:1-12** moves to the doctrine of atonement and presents Jesus, not as a revolutionary leader and hope for the nation to be freed from oppression, but as a priest/lamb to be sacrificed and killed. It is such a strange contrast, that in the midst of these killings, the lectionary also presents us with two hymns of praise (**Isaiah 63:7-9** and **Psalms 148**) for what God has done. Yet, how do we sing “Praise God!” as the psalmist does in the midst of all this death?

Dreams play a key role in the Matthew lesson. Joseph is told in a dream to flee to Egypt (verse 13) and then in another dream to return with the family (verse 19). In the middle of these dreams we hear of the slaughter of innocent children as Herod seeks to destroy the new ruler who has been born.

To where can LGBT and other oppressed people flee as plans arise to kill them? Who protected LGBT people as the AIDS pandemic scorched the land? Who is the modern day Rachel who weeps for her children uncontrollably, now that the face of AIDS has shifted from gay white men to poor Black women? Who is refusing to be consoled? Or have we shifted into the “Praise God” choruses of Psalm 148 and Isaiah 63, while death is still around us? And what happened to the joy of Christmas?

What do we do with a portrayal of a God who warns some of coming disaster and not others? And what do we do with a “Holy Family” who flees without telling their neighbors? Is this the sign of those who can afford expensive medications and retroviral cocktails moving on and not caring about the healthcare of those who cannot afford medication.



Have there been times when you chose to be silent about oppression and wish that you had spoken out? How would you address the situation differently were it to reoccur?

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In the midst of the Christmas joy when God appears to us in human form, we have to struggle to see how we stop the senseless dying and increase the uncontrollable weeping. We have to shout at church actions – as the Windsor Report's claims within the Anglican and Episcopal tradition – that do not affirm God's holy work through LGBT people. We have to shout as the government shifts money away from prevention of AIDS/HIV to abstinence only policies. We have to

increase efforts to strengthen LGBT youth who come out and are thrown out of their families – so depression and suicide do not become their *modus operandi*. We have to advocate against local school board’s attempts to eliminate books on multidimensional families from curricula and libraries. We must weep and shout against wars where the most vulnerable of God’s children – LGBT or not – are sacrificed for national interest. We must become Rachel for our generation.

It is amazing that the male images in these readings (God protects *his* people in Isaiah 63:9 and Psalm 148:14; Joseph flees with the family in Matthew; and Christ dies in Hebrews 2:17-18) propose suffering as a way to life. The only role given to women in these passages is to praise along with the men (Psalm 148:12) and Rachel, who calls the community to consciousness around the horrors which are going on. The option of fleeing to save one’s self does not lead to community. It leads to senseless death. The option of singing praises in the midst of community trials seems to be a religious option that gets one to hide from connecting with others in struggle. The option of uncontrollable weeping, however, has the strands of resisting the oppression and calling the community to consciousness.

Our faith has to give us the strength to rise up against the Herods of our time and say, “You can’t have any more of our children for slaughter.” Our churches must be in solidarity with all who are oppressed and give them the space to wail. Together we must work to bring life where others plot death. Our songs have to be songs of protest which inspire people to see our common struggle against oppression. Those racial ethnic groups, siding with conservative groups to shut down LGBT and same-gender loving groups, have to check their *own* buying into racist stereotypes. Women’s voices must come to the fore beyond weeping and wailing to give equal direction to the struggles. We all have to move beyond running to save ourselves and join together to save all.

It is in these struggles for justice that we all find life, which keeps alive the hopes of Christmas.



For what in the world do you weep or wish you could weep? After reflecting on the lessons for today, what do you want to say to God? What are you compelled to do?

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**Prayerfully Out in Scripture**



God of all the world's children,  
Stop the killing of innocents.  
    Forgive our own failure to shelter your children from death.  
Give us the strength and courage  
    to weep for those who suffer and to resist all oppression  
    Give us a holy determination for saving the lives  
    of those who are deemed expendable.  
Empower us to boldly live the good news of Christmas.  
May joy come and we sing with all: "Peace on earth!"  
    In the name of Jesus, our Peace, Amen.

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