Celebrating the Light
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Elizabeth Dubin, Ph.D.
director of Aughinbaugh Gallery
lecturer of visual arts

Week Two: Light of Life
John 1:4–5
Dr. John Fea, Ph.D.
professor of history
chair of the history department

Week Three: Witness to the Light
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Dr. Jennifer Fisler, Ed.D.
professor of education
director of the Teacher Education Program
director of teaching and learning

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David Vater, Ph.D.
professor of engineering
director of the Collaboratory

Christmas Day: The Glory of the One and Only
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Don Opitz, Ph.D.
college pastor
professor of higher education

I am delighted to share with you one of our meaningful Messiah College traditions, our annual Advent devotional. I thank my colleagues who have written personal reflections centered on celebrating the Light of the World. It is my hope that these are an encouragement as you celebrate this Advent season.

This year’s devotional focuses on the inspiring opening verses of John 1. During a time of darkness and division around the world, we find comfort and hope in the light and love of Jesus Christ. We pray that no matter where God leads our students, they will remain a reflection of the light and love of our Savior.

As we prepare women and men to make a difference in the world, I ask for your support. Your annual financial gifts continue to be a deeply valued and vital way for us to keep a high quality, Christ-centered education within reach of all who wish to attend Messiah College. On behalf of the entire Messiah College community, thank you for your continued generosity.

Christmas blessings,

Kim S. Phipps
Messiah College president
To Ring with Light

The word made flesh pulls across the delicate space of the throat
the body longing in silence and awe toward the word that rings with light.
To dress the body with the words until limbs begin to float
the body no longer submerged, but buoyant, rises on the saltwater of sight.

   Ring the bells!

Sound floods in.

Here, words are wings, and letters flutter thin shaped sounded sight
pinning the soul to a single screw of flesh.
Like helium balloons, letters lift and glow while the body dangles
effortless and radiant: a colorful marionette ascending on strings,
a magnificent bird just leaving the ground,
a dancer suspended on film,
all rising amid a swirl of spoken letters.

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John 1:1–3

Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering
there is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.¹

The word as two parentheses of brilliant light (radiantia — radiantia).
To see each other in this light, our words singing bright through darkness.
To sing to light, to bring to life,
to sing the word made flesh in sounded sight:
Our voices shine in rings of endless light.

— Elizabeth Dubin, Ph.D. (ABD)
director of Aughinbaugh Gallery
lecturer of visual arts

¹ Passage from Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem.”
things. First, in verses 3-4, he tells us "what has come into being in him was life." Not everything God created, of course, is "living," but all things bear witness to a living God who intelligently designed it all. And this life—God's magnificent creation—provides an illuminating witness of God's glory. God is ever sustaining His Creation. The universe exists because God is in control. Indeed, as John puts it, "and the life was the light of all people."

Second, in verse 5, John reminds us of the effects of sin on human beings and the world in which they live. Sin brings darkness. Prior to the incarnation of Jesus Christ a light—a spark, if you will—always shined into this sinful world and the darkness never overcame it, but when the Word became flesh the Light of God's glory was fully displayed and it was indeed "full of grace and truth."

This Advent as we renew our sense of longing for the coming of the Messiah and remember His love for us, let's also remember that even before the incarnation God was bearing witness to Himself through the created order and was shining just enough light in the darkness to give us a glimpse of the glory that would come when His revelation in Jesus Christ became complete.

— John Fea, Ph.D.
professor of history
chair of the history department
Looking at the life of John the Baptist gives us an opportunity to think differently about the concept of Advent. Being an infant himself at the time, John would have been far too young to hold vigil for Christ’s birth. Decades later, though, John urged others to prepare for a different kind of Advent, the start of Jesus’ adult ministry. John’s connection to Advent is not that he calls us to remember the birth of the Christ child, but rather that he exhorts us to prepare for and behold the Lamb of God (John 1:36). He directs us not only to Christ’s birth and life but also to his sacrificial death and resurrection.

For the Jews, it had been hundreds of years of seeming silence from God. No doubt, many had lost their focus on who God was and why it mattered in their lives. They were living in darkness, but the Light was coming. John’s message of preparation was one from a compassionate God alerting the people that a bright light was about to appear. Like people moving from the shadows into full sunlight, they needed to shield their eyes and get ready. John’s small light would prepare their eyes for the much brighter light to come. John was God’s gift to prepare people’s hearts for Jesus and give them every opportunity to believe.

What amazes me about John the Baptist is that he stayed true to his call. He knew that Jesus’ arrival meant that his own status would diminish. John was not the light. His job was to point others to the Light. He had a critical role to play in fervently calling people to repentance and anticipation of Jesus while making sure that his little light didn’t distract from the true Light.

Henri Nouwen talks about the temptation we face to be spectacular, to seek applause and recognition. Despite several occasions where he could easily have claimed high status for himself among the Jewish leaders (John 1:19-27) and even his own followers (John 3:26-30), John resisted this temptation. He did not seek to be spectacular. He remained faithful to his call to point others to Jesus. Certainly, during his childhood and his time in the wilderness, God was gifting John to be part of God’s plan, to prepare the way for Jesus. John knew his role—what it was and what it wasn’t—and embraced it.

For us, the annual season of Advent is an opportunity to refocus ourselves. We shift our attention from our drive to be busy, spectacular or celebrated onto the Lamb of God and our small part in God’s greater story. During the Advent season, may we renew our commitment to John’s proclamation that Jesus must become greater and we must become less (John 3:30) as we direct our lives to point others to the one Light of the World.

—Jennifer Fisler, Ed.D. professor of education director of Teacher Education Program director of teaching and learning

John 1:6–8
After Tolkien’s hobbits, Frodo and Sam, destroy the ring of power that threatened their world, they lay down on the slopes of Mount Doom to die. When Sam opens his eyes again, the first thing he sees is his friend Gandalf, who was last seen falling into an abyss. “Well, Master Samwise,” Gandalf asks, “how do you feel?” Between bewilderment and joy, Sam says, “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?” (J.R.R. Tolkien, “Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King”).

Ever since the first man and woman exerted their will over God’s, sadness has marked our world. Paul says that all of creation was plunged into dark conflict with spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12). For sadness to come untrue would seem to require that time run backward. Impossible we say. Yet how much more astounding is the coming of the light of Christ into the world? Because of Jesus, the re-hallowing of people’s lives and all of creation has begun. Jesus declares that even now his Kingdom is breaking in upon the kingdoms of this world. Not only is sadness being undone, one day it will be impossible.

Yet, Jesus comes to us first at Christmas, as a child. He does not compel our entrance into Kingdom living, he invites us and shows the way. Paul says that Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant becoming human (Philippians 2:7). In a world used to things getting done by force, it is no wonder the world fails to recognize the Christ child (John 1:10). Yet to all who do believe, Jesus gives the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

Just as Christ entered the world, we are invited to new birth that sends us again into the world as new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Make no mistake; this call to new incarnational life with Christ is not a sentimental journey. C. S. Lewis likened it to “a cleft (that) has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside” (C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”). Like all citizenship, Kingdom citizenship is costly. To declare new citizenship is to suffer the loss of privileges in the old.

In the world, your life is hidden with Christ and will remain a puzzle to many who do not yet know him. When Christ appears, you also will appear (Colossians 3:3). Yet Paul says that all of creation waits for the children of God to be revealed so that creation might be liberated from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:19-21). Even now you are being restored for the work you were made for—to be God’s steward. Lost people and all of creation wait for you. Think on this, then go, be sent into the world with the light of Christ.

— David Vader, Ph.D.
professor of engineering
director of the Collaboratory
I remember a passage by poet-writer Annie Dillard in which she described the tree with light in it (it was not a Christmas tree). She tried to use words to describe something beautiful that she saw—and it was more than the beauty of sun-drenched nature. It was a beauty that entered her, and awakened her, and reminded her that such beauty comes from somewhere... from someone. David had a similar experience one night as he tended sheep under the heavens so full of stars (Psalm 8). He was reminded that God’s glory beams from stars and fills the creation, and that even he bears the glory of his maker.

Isn’t that what C. S. Lewis was getting at when he wrote that if we only saw one another as we truly are, we’d be tempted to bow down and worship?

Glory surrounds us, and it radiates from within us, and yet our eyes are accustomed to darkness. Throughout the Older Testament the Glory of the Lord blazed with the fire of Shekinah, yet it was difficult to behold. And now, at the start of the New Testament, a celestial glory appears in the heavens. Darkness was rent and a star-sign of hope beamed down. Angels appeared, and the eyes of those blessed shepherds, squinting in wonder, were filled with glory!

But John sets the glory of stars and angels aside to focus on another glory. This glory was embodied and sent, entering the twilight world with meekness and with tears. John wasn’t there, but he can’t take his eyes off this scene. Behold, The Glory! This is Son of the Father, full of grace and truth! This Son is the blazing hope of the world; this Glory is the flame of His Father. His grace and truth shall soon reveal the glory of trees and stars and saints of every age and tribe and nation.

“Come, adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King. Gloria in excelsis Deo!”

This Christmas day, Lord, open our eyes to the extent, the radiance and the living source of your Glory, and light us up!

— Don Opitz, Ph.D.
college pastor
professor of higher education

John 1:14
Hark the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim;
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King”

Christ by highest heav’n adored;
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time, behold Him come,
Offspring of a Virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th’ incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”

Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris’n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”

— Charles Wesley, 1739