

THE CHRISTIAN

A Publication for Disciples of Christ in Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and Beyond

INCARNATE

November 2024

PAGEANTS AND PRESENCE

*God-with-us
in Grace and Grief*
by Katherine Willis Pershey

THE INVISIBLE TANGIBLE
A Theology of Incarnation

PREACHING
PERSONIFIED
Listening for
The Embodied Spirit

“I’M HERE”
A Trauma Therapist
Reflects on Two
Powerful Words



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FEATURES



8 PAGEANTS AND PRESENCE

KATHERINE WILLIS PERSHEY
God-with-us in grace...and grief

5 MAKING THE INTANGIBLE TANGIBLE

VICKIE A WRIGHT
A theology of practicing Incarnation

11 "I'M HERE"

RYAN KUJA

12 PREACHING PERSONIFIED

MICHAEL KARUNAS
Lessons in listening from *The Proclamation Project*

REFLECTIONS

3 FROM THE EDITOR

APRIL MCCLURE STEWART

6 SACRED SEEING

JOBY BROWN

10 WHEN GOD KNOCKS ON THE DOOR

RICK HAMILTON

14 THE FIRST ADVENT IN PALESTINE

BOOK REVIEW
MARSHA FUNNEMAN

POETRY AND PRAYER

4 INCARNATION PRAYER

KERI ANDERSON

7 ON THIS BRIGHT ADVENT MORNING

TOM YANG

11 ADVENT LIGHTS

BETH RUPE

13 OAK TEACHING

CHARLOTTE LIGGETT

MORNING JOURNEY
ALEX RUTH

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FROM THE EDITOR



Marissa McClure, *Elora Eilis*, oil on canvas, 2013.

It was early, still dark on December 3, 2013, when the soft buzz of a text lit up my screen. “I’m praying for you and baby this morning,” my friend wrote. “Thanks!” I replied, adding that we’d soon see her heartbeat on the sonogram.

A pause. “I just want you to know that I love you and I’m here,” she wrote.

Eight hours later, I stood under the hot pulse of the shower, my whole body shaking with grief. The sonogram had revealed no heartbeat, no movement. Our fifth baby, a daughter, had died in utero at 26 weeks. I’d joined the sisterhood of one in four women who carry the silent weight of infant loss or miscarriage.

Somehow my friend had sensed it, long before the ultrasound. She’d awakened before dawn with a burden to pray and then offered herself to me in that generous grounding sentence: “I love you and I’m here.”

In that shower stall, all the theological training I’d gathered over years lay in pieces, its words tumbling into silence in the face of the rawness I felt. My grief was embodied, physical, filling the room with a language beyond words. I sobbed out a prayer without form or answers - simply there in the shadowed hollow of loss.

An image drifted to me. I remembered a passage from C.S. Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew*, where young Digory Kirke, feeling bereft and unworthy, stands before Aslan, the Christ character in the story. Digory has brought Evil into the new world of Narnia, but his heart is elsewhere, shattered by the knowledge that his mother is dying. He longs for her to be healed. He is broken, feeling small, afraid, unworthy, and uncertain. And then, he dares to lift his gaze.

*“Up till then he had been looking at the Lion’s great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.”*¹

“My son, my son,” Aslan said. “I know. I know.”

It was an image of Christ, weeping alongside me... Christ, absolutely present in my grief, filling the stillness with himself. It was a presence that didn’t try to explain away suffering but shared in it. He knew. He loved me and he loved my daughter. He was *there*. And that, somehow, was enough.

In this inaugural issue of this new format of *The Christian*, we explore the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation: the quiet, abiding comfort of a Christ who is *here*, who comes near, who understands the fragility of our days. These pages hold reflections from pastors, chaplains, laypersons, and friends from our communities in Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Each ponders what it means to proclaim God-with-us, to embrace Incarnation as the profound hope that it is, and to offer that hope, embodied, to one another.

I pray their reflections reach you in the spaces where words often fall short, echoing the simple but powerful assurance my friend offered: “I love you. I’m here.”

May they remind you of the Christ who stands close to our joy and our grief alike, who knows us, who loves us, who is here, and who, at the deepest places of our need, is enough.

April McClure Stewart is Director of Communications and Development for the Christian Church in Illinois and Wisconsin and Pastor of Mosaic Christian Church in Peoria, IL

INCARNATION PRAYER

by Keri Anderson

As we open our hearts and minds
to the possibility of incarnation,
we acknowledge the reality of God with us
in this present moment.

We welcome the God who has been known
by many names across time and space.

We welcome the God who suffers with their people,
Who chose to be born
as a Palestinian Jew living under occupation
Who was executed on Empire's cross
Who stumbled along the Trail of Tears
Who gasped in concentration camp gas chambers
Who holds anxiety and fear
with the family members of hostages
Who suffocates and starves with children
under the rubble in Gaza.

We welcome the God who speaks
to the human conscience,
Who whispered and shouted
in the dreams and waking thoughts
Of Pontius Pilot's wife
Of European Christians
who violently colonized the land we're living on
Of people who got rich off of owning other people
Of Hitler and his Nazis
Of Jewish settlers who claim a "promised land"
that is home to other people
Of UN representatives
Of every war-mongering government official
And of every citizen of Empire.

We welcome the God who intricately understands
the impact of intergenerational trauma
on the human psyche,
Who understands the reasons
why some people remain silent
in the face of genocide
while others are willing
to lay down their lives to stop it.

We welcome the God who inspires beauty and creativity
in movements of resistance,
Whose Spirit sweeps through college campuses
and city streets
and churches and mosques and synagogues
and the halls of Empire,
inspiring people to rise up—individually and collectively—
to give voice to God's voice,
to remind the world that incarnation
need not be a one-time event
that took place over 2000 years ago,

but an ongoing invitation
that is needed now
as much as ever—

an invitation
to become the hands and feet,
the heart and voice of a God who says,

"No more,"

Who says,

"Never again,"

Who says,

"A new world
is possible
if we are willing
to learn
and change
and risk
and resist
and dream
new dreams
together."

Amen.



Kally Latimore, *Christ in the Rubble*, acrylic on wood, 2024.²

Keri Anderson is a social worker and trauma-informed therapist living in western Massachusetts. She grew up attending Glen Oak Christian Church in Peoria, IL.

MAKING THE INTANGIBLE TANGIBLE

by Vickie A. Wright

The word incarnate has a depth that reaches beyond its religious roots. At its heart, to be incarnate means to embody, to give flesh to what is otherwise invisible, intangible, or abstract. In Christian theology, it speaks of God becoming human in Jesus Christ—God made flesh. Yet, the meaning of Incarnation stretches beyond this: it reveals a profound truth about how intangible qualities like love, justice, and mercy can become real, living forces in our world.

Incarnation is a concept that moves beyond the realm of ideas into a physical embodiment — a lived and felt reality. The incarnation of God in Jesus means God is not distant or abstract; instead, God enters into our world, embracing the limitations and the beauty of human life. This act of God becoming human is the ultimate expression of love—a closeness that brings the divine intimately near, joining in human vulnerability and joy. Incarnation suggests that to love fully, to bring about justice, to embody mercy, requires the willingness to engage, to be present, and to walk alongside others in their lives.

But this is not limited to theology. In our daily lives, we see incarnations of these qualities constantly. Love, by itself, is intangible—an idea, a feeling. Yet when someone cares for a sick relative, comforts a grieving friend, or speaks out for justice, love takes form; it becomes incarnate. In those moments, love is not an ideal but something we can see, touch, and feel. We might even say that through each act of kindness, we see the divine breaking into our ordinary world, just as God became flesh. This ability to make the invisible visible is what gives incarnation its power. It transforms ideas into experiences, beliefs into actions. When justice is sought, when compassion is shown, when generosity is extended, these qualities become something real, something we can recognize and share. They move from being distant ideals to tangible acts that impact lives.

Incarnation, then, invites us to think about how we can embody these values. What does it mean to incarnate justice in our communities, to bring compassion into our relationships, or to make kindness real in the lives of others? Just as God took on flesh to dwell among us, we too can give form to the principles we hold dear through our actions. Whether in a small act of kindness or in a bold movement for change, we have the ability to make love, mercy, and justice felt and known in the world around us.



And it needn't be monumental. The power of being incarnate often lies in simple acts—a smile, a helping hand, a word of encouragement. These gestures make the invisible visible, creating connections that go beyond words and reach into the heart of what it means to be human. Through such acts, we offer others a tangible experience of these values, allowing them to be seen and felt in direct and personal ways.

To be incarnate is to take what is abstract and make it real, to embody the invisible in ways that others can see, touch, and understand.



Earthrise, photographed by astronaut Bill Anders, Apollo 8, NASA, December 24, 1968.

SACRED SEEING

by Joby Brown

As a chaplain and a photographer, I am often drawn back to an image that captures, in a single frame, the paradox of our world—its immense beauty and its delicate fragility. It's the Apollo 8 photo *Earthrise*, taken by astronaut Bill Anders on Christmas Eve, 1968.

That iconic image—Earth rising over the barren horizon of the moon—stirs something deep within me. There are countless other images that also move me—sweeping landscapes, bustling city streets, or the quiet strength of hospital staff tending to the sick. Each photo holds its own story, some illuminated by joy, others shadowed by sorrow. Yet *Earthrise* stands apart; it offers us something more than beauty alone. It unveils a glimpse of the divine, dwelling within our world and present in each of our lives.

Bill Anders hadn't planned to photograph Earth that day. His focus was the moon's surface, and the camera was set accordingly. But as Apollo 8 circled the moon for the fourth time, a flash of light caught his eye, and he glanced up to see Earth hovering over the lunar horizon, like a fragile ornament in space. There's an audible gasp in the flight recording—this moment of discovery that took his breath away. For a few minutes, the crew members fumbled, eager to capture the scene, sounding more like a family on vacation than seasoned astronauts. "Did you get it?" they asked each other. "Is it color film?" "Is the camera set right?" Their clumsiness and awe were somehow inseparable, as if in that moment, they felt the wonder of touching something sacred. Earth...rising against a vast, silent sky...a fragile world cradled in dark, a reminder that divine presence dwells among us. Incarnate.

My work as a chaplain leads me to a kind of quiet witness to the sacred woven into each person's story. And like *Earthrise*, it's often in moments of unexpected awe, or even awkward imperfection, that I catch a glimpse of the divine. It's a presence that I see in the hospital rooms where I serve, in the stories people share from their bedsides, and in the quiet places I don't always expect to find it. Like the astronauts, I encounter these moments with a mix of reverence and imperfection, often stumbling in my attempts to make sense of them. And yet, somehow, there it is—the unmistakable nearness of God in our transitory world.

In Anders' reflection years later, he described the Earth as "a fragile Christmas ornament," hanging delicately in the vastness of space. He wondered why we would risk something so precious with bombs and violence, pollution and neglect.

In a way, *Earthrise* asks us to see not just the planet, but our shared humanity with fresh eyes. It is as if, in that moment, we are invited to step back from the immediacy of our own concerns and see ourselves as small yet deeply interconnected, our lives bound together by the mystery of existence.

As I photograph the world around me or listen to someone's story at their bedside, I am reminded of that same fragile beauty—the ways we hold hope and struggle, often clumsily, yet sincerely. *Earthrise* is a glimpse of how our lives, like our planet in space, are both small and astonishingly significant. Each story, like each photo, holds a bit of the divine, if only we pause to recognize it. And like the astronauts straining to capture that singular view of Earth, we too are called to seek out what is sacred and holy in our lives, even amidst the flaws and anxieties.

Perhaps that is the truest wonder of incarnation—that God entrusts us with this world and with each other, asking us to bear light and love, even in our fragile, imperfect attempts. And so, *Earthrise* remains a reminder: that in all our efforts, the divine is present, unfolding before us in ways both wondrous and unexplainable.

Rev. Joby Brown was ordained at First Christian Church of Hoopston, IL and is a Board Certified Chaplain with Ascension Wisconsin in Milwaukee, WI

ON THIS BRIGHT ADVENT MORNING

by Tom Yang

이 밝은 강림절 아침에
은총과 한없는 사랑의 주님,
저희는 이 아래 지상의 담장 안에 살고 있습니다,
하지만 주님은 날아넘을수 있는 날개를 주셨습니다,
자유의 바람이 부르는 그 너머로.
저희는 기다립니다, 작지만 위대한 오심을!
예수님, 사랑과 빛의 신비,
비천한 아래 세상 안으로의 성육신,
세상의 밤을 헤쳐 나가는 인도자.
주님, 저희의 눈과 마음을 열어, 보게 하시고,
순수하고 참된 지혜와
신령한 주님의 숨결을 허락하시사,
구원의 길을 주님과 함께 걸을 때,
성령의 거룩한 바람을 느끼게 하소서.
저희가 이 세상의 무거움으로 마음이 피곤해지고,
저희의 기억이 희미해질때라도
새로운 희망을 저희 안에 일깨워 주시고,
지친 저희의 발걸음을 다시 인도해 주옵소서.
이제, 이 밝은 대림절 아침에,
저희의 눈과 마음을 활짝 열고서,
주님의 손길을 갈망하오니,
주님의 사랑의 영으로 저희를 가깝게 이끄시사,
위로부터, 저희의 믿음이 자유로워지게 하여 주옵소서.
해방자, 인도자 되시는 존귀하신 예수님의 이름으로,
간구 하옵나이다. 아멘.

Lord of grace and boundless love,
We live within the walls of this earth below,
But You have given us wings to fly,
Beyond, where the winds of freedom call.

We await Your coming, small yet grand,
Of Jesus, mystery of love and light,
Incarnation into the lowly world below,
Guided through the night of the world.

Lord, open our hearts and eyes, to see,
And grant us pure and true wisdom,
And the breath of Your divine presence,
So we may feel the holy wind of Your Spirit,
As we walk with You on the path of salvation.

When our hearts grow weary with the weight of this world,
And our memories grow faint,
Wake up in us a new hope,
And guide our weary steps again.

Now, on this bright Advent morning,
With our hearts and eyes wide open,
We long for Your touch,
So draw us near with Your loving Spirit,
And from above, free our faith.

In the precious name of Jesus Christ,
Our liberator and guide,
We pray. Amen.

Rev. Tom Yang is Pastor for NAPAD Ministries for the Christian Church in Illinois & Wisconsin and is Pastor of Korean Christian Church in Springfield, IL.

PAGEANTS AND PRESENCE GOD-WITH-US IN GRACE & GRIEF

by Katherine Willis Pershey



Fifteen years ago I accepted my second pastoral call, to serve as an Associate Minister in a congregation in the suburban Chicago area. My portfolio of responsibilities included directing a pageant during the all-ages Christmas Eve services. I had no experience working with children and found the project overwhelming and the extant resources uninspiring.

That first year, I kept things very simple, scripting a pageant based on a Godly Play story. I narrated it myself; I figured just showing and telling the story was enough. People were there to see a clutch of church kids dressed as shepherds and angels with Mary in the middle, cradling a well-swaddled doll, and that is what they got.

That first year, Joseph was played by A., a girl in a costume beard. She also wore pipe cleaners on her glasses, curled up like antennae. It was her trademark look, such that it would have been odd to have an antennae-free Joseph.

The next year, I gave kids lines.

The year after that, I wrote the script.

Eventually, the first Joseph outgrew both the skit and the pipe cleaners and became my assistant director.

The year she died from a congenital heart defect, I wrote a new script in her honor. The archangels' lines were crafted to sound like her: smart and funny and a hint sarcastic. By that point, we had a dozen or so angels in each service. We kept the tinsel-lined choir robes in the closet that year, and all the angels dressed like a young A.: jeans, Converse sneakers, white tee shirts, and plastic glasses from Oriental Trading adorned with white pipe cleaners. (From that year on, my own feet were shod in black sequined Converse on Christmas Eve.)

Her family had given me their blessing, but their grief was too sharp to allow them to watch it that first year. They came last Christmas when I brought the script back after six years. It was our first post-pandemic pageant, and my last pageant at that church.

I used to joke that the absolute best moment of my entire year was when we sang *Go Tell it On the Mountain* as the closing song during the last pageant service. It meant I was as far as I could possibly be from having to direct another Christmas pageant. It was only funny because everyone knew how much I loved it.

When given the opportunity to write on the theme *Incarnate*, I thought I would reflect on how God loves us enough to step into the mess of our days, to step into a body of flesh and blood. On how God loves us enough to be born into a world in anguish. On how God loves us enough to risk having a body in a world that contains congenital heart defects and crosses.

Those things are true, and real, and worthy of contemplation. But I am six months into a new call in Wisconsin. This means I am six months out of that call in Illinois. I love where I am and discerned that it was indeed where I am called to be. But the grief is intense. I desperately miss the ways Christ was incarnate in that place and through those people, most especially when the children play-acted the incarnation on Christmas Eve. I already missed the girl who played Joseph in a beard and antennae, and now I miss the people who miss her.

There will be a pageant at my new church, but I will leave my Converse in the closet. They wouldn't make any sense here.

I'll return to the Table on Christmas Eve for the first time in fifteen years; Communion is a part of the tradition here. The first time I presided in the presence of the Nativity, I found it jarring to move from the manger to the Table, as if it were rude to talk about the tearing apart of Jesus's body and spilling of Jesus's blood while Mary was still pondering these things in her heart.

This year, I am desperate to break the bread. It is the only way the mystery of the incarnation makes any sense to me now.

Rev. Dr. Katherine Willis Pershey is an ordained Disciple who serves as Co-Pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton WI

WHEN GOD KNOCKS ON THE DOOR

by Rick Hamilton

It was an unusually cold Christmas Eve in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas, back in 1974. Ice covered the ground, power lines were down, and crews were working to restore a bit of Christmas magic. But the brave and adventurous members of First Christian Church gathered for the traditional 11:00 pm candlelight service, undeterred by the cold.

For me, it was “my year.” I had finally graduated through the ranks—from Sheep to Shepherd, from Wise Man to Joseph. This time, I was in the big spotlight. I was excited.

The service began, and all of the children were gathered in the Narthex to process in for the manger scene tableau. Naturally, as a member of the Holy Family, I was to enter last. As I waited for my turn, I heard a soft tapping on the outer door of the sanctuary.

Curious, I went to the door and opened it just a crack. I could see through the glass that the visitor was a stranger, a man in thick clothing, a tool belt around his waist, and a hard hat in hand. I glimpsed the flashing beacon of an electric line truck in the driveway. With the sanctuary mostly dark for the evening’s pageant, I was certain he was just checking if we had power.

As I spoke through the crack, the man asked, “What’s going on in there?”

I naively replied, “It’s our Christmas Eve Pageant. We do it every year, and this year, I’m Joseph! Everything’s fine—the lights are just out for the drama.”



The man outside managed an awkward “Okay then,” turning to walk back to his truck. I turned, too, readying myself for my big entrance. But at that moment, the voice of God spoke through Kim, who was playing Mary.

“Why didn’t you invite him in?”

It was just ten seconds of hesitation, but it sank in deeply. I spun back around to correct my mistake, but he was gone. I rushed outside to try to beckon him back, but there was nothing—no man, no lights, no truck. Only cold. And silence.

I was playing the man who welcomed God into his home and life, yet failed to welcome God into the “House of God.”

That night has stayed with me. God knocked, and I sent Him away more harshly than the innkeeper in our pageant. I missed my chance to be a welcoming presence. I failed.

Over the years, I’ve come to see how often God shows up in the flesh of the stranger—Incarnate, with skin and bones. Sometimes, God even knocks on the door. I’ve spent fifty years now trying to do a better job of opening that door. And sometimes, I get it right.

Rev. Richard E Hamilton is the Interim Regional Minister for the Christian Church in Illinois & Wisconsin and the Christian Church Michigan Region

I'M HERE

by Ryan Kuja

I was out surfing and a young guy, maybe 20 or so, was just inside of me by 10 yards or so. Suddenly he started yelling frantically "Hey! Hey! Help! Help me!" As I started paddling toward him he disappeared under water for a second and resurfaced with a frantic look of terror on his face.

"The leash wrapped around my legs!" he said to me as I got to him.

"I'm here. I got you," I said, knowing he was in sympathetic hyperarousal and his nervous system was dysregulated due to the perceived threat (being out in waves with the leash wrapped around both legs). In a few seconds his state shifted. The look on his face changed. The co-regulating process moved him from panic and survival physiology to a sense of being ok, that he wasn't in danger, it had passed.

A few years ago I was surfing on a fairly big day in Washington when I fell while taking off on a wave, and I heard my collar bone snap. Right up against a rock jetty in 6-8' surf, survival physiology kicked in, and I paddled with my one usable arm to the beach and collapsed in terror and exhaustion.

Another surfer came up to me, looked me in the eye, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm an EMT. I'm here. I'm going to stay with you. An ambulance is on its way."

I can feel the tears well up writing this as I remember that moment. My body was going into a state of mild shock from the injury, but his calm presence allowed my nervous system to settle. His presence was co-regulating, allowing my physiology to settle a bit in the midst of a highly distressing situation.

I likely would have developed prolonged survival physiology (trauma) if he hadn't been there. His attunement didn't save my life (I had already done that by paddling in with one arm,) but it saved me from the potential pitfalls of an overwhelmed nervous system that stays locked in survival mode.

I surfed the same spot a few months later, nervous I was going to be triggered. I wasn't, thanks to that random stranger. I've never had triggering symptoms related to this event, something that easily-- so easily-- could have robbed me of my deep love for surfing and the ocean.

"I'm here."

Some of the holiest words I've ever known.

Ryan Kuja is a licensed trauma therapist, spiritual director, coach, and writer. He lives and works in Holland, MI ³

ADVENT LIGHTS

by Beth Rupe

In the hush of winter
as nature waits
the Prophet's Candle
lights the darkness
As whispered words
and hushed lullabies
fill the air
in anticipation
of God's promises fulfilled

As twinkling stars
hang low
over Bethlehem's hills
The Bethlehem Candle
flickering
from the inn's windowsill
The humble
and righteous journey
begins
We move toward home--
the welcome of God's love

In quiet fields
shepherds watch
over their flocks
the Shepherd's Candle
shimmering bold and bright
As the heavenly messengers
sing "Gloria"
Filling hearts
with chords of hope
and peace

From above
the heavenly host
serenade creation
with anthems of joy
The Angel's Candle's
brilliant light
Each note and beam
proclaiming the good news
Immanuel - God with us
yesterday, today, forevermore

With hope and love
in joy and peace
our spirits soar
Advent's journey begun

Rev. Dr. Beth Rupe is the Coordinator for Disciples Women for the Christian Church in Illinois & Wisconsin and Pastor of First Christian Church in Henry, IL

PREACHING PERSONIFIED

by Michael Karunas

Since last winter, I've been part of a small preaching group with the Proclamation Project. Six Disciples preachers, each from different parts of the country, gather monthly on Zoom to discuss our experiences in the pulpit, share video sermons for feedback, and explore what it might mean to become better preachers. We read articles and reflections on this theme of "becoming better," and many of the ideas are familiar: pray more, listen carefully to our congregations, stay attuned to the world around us. But one suggestion caught me off guard, even after 26 years of preaching—listen to other preachers.

When I was starting out, I heard this advice often. Listening to experienced preachers, we were told, would help us find our own voices. I remember how true that felt—listening to others' cadences, watching how they moved through a biblical text, observing their use of illustrations, body language, and pacing. In those early years, I found myself experimenting, trying on different phrases and patterns, preaching without notes, even "borrowing" a few sermon illustrations. Like trying on new clothes, this process helped me find a fit that felt like my own.

Somewhere along the way, though, I forgot this. Perhaps it was a lack of time or opportunity; perhaps I just grew comfortable with my own approach. The routines of preaching took shape, patterns became habits, and I found myself leaning more on familiarity than on discovery. Preaching became not only a comfort zone but a place of settled rhythm, where the urgency of growth was replaced by the ease of habit.

But in our Proclamation Project group, the importance of listening to others came up again and again. So, in response, I took on a new practice in 2024: listening to one sermon a week from a different preacher. With so many congregations now posting online, options are endless, and each week I have the chance to glimpse into someone else's pulpit and be stirred by the Spirit's work in their unique setting.



It's already been a profoundly energizing practice. Every sermon I hear offers something unexpected—an insight I hadn't considered, a fresh approach to a well-loved text, or a different angle on our faith's deep mysteries. I am struck, time and again, by each preacher's passion and connection with their congregation. Though only their voices and faces are visible on my screen, the love they have for their people is evident, as is the love their people feel in return. It's humbling to see how differently the Spirit moves in each place, each preacher, each community. The Spirit's presence is as wide and varied as the voices it animates, drawing us beyond our personal comfort zones to discover new expressions of the divine.

As our two regions—the Christian Church in Illinois and Wisconsin (my home) and the Christian Church in Michigan (where I was ordained)—prepare to merge, I am inspired to imagine what this blending might bring. Each congregation, each preacher, holds its own traditions, familiar rituals, and unique ways of embodying faith. We know the comfort and connection of these practices. Yet, what new life might emerge if we commit to being curious? What if our churches made it a goal to "visit" one another's services, even online, sharing the experience together in place of a regular committee meeting? What if we allowed the creativity, intellect, and passion of our neighbors to awaken us to new possibilities?

I find myself wondering how the Spirit might move among us as we begin to merge our paths. Could this shared ministry open us to expressions of faith that we might never have considered alone?

As I listen to these preachers each week, I feel the Spirit stretching my own imagination and reminding me of the richness found in shared stories. It's a reminder that, just as the Spirit moves uniquely in each of us, it also calls us together, making room for each voice and expanding our view of what's possible.

In embracing this practice of listening, I am discovering again how sacred and humbling it is to witness the Spirit's work in others. And as our two regions prepare to come together, I pray we might approach this merging of our congregations with the same openness and curiosity, learning to see the Spirit at work in each other and welcoming one another as family members in a shared calling.

Rev. Michael Karunas is a member of the Proclamation Project's inaugural cohorts. He serves as Senior Pastor at Central Christian Church in Decatur, IL.



OAK TEACHING

by Charlotte Liggett

Your bark is rough and cold against my cheek;
Your long arms stretch to embrace me as I reach toward you;
Your tiny branches paint lacy patterns against the sky.
Deep beneath the snow lay your roots – buried in silence or death.
What do you know of life, dear oak, that I don't know?

You lose your beloved leaves every year - thus, a multitude of losses.
I have lost my beloved but once and know he will not return.
Are your tears the quiet snow flakes that fall and accumulate?
Are these God's tears falling on my face, trying like feathers to comfort?
What do you know of life, dear oak, that I don't know?

Every spring new life appears again on your branches;
The cycle of renewal, of reincarnation begins.
New sap, new leaves, new acorns - as if there had been no winter.
Does new life erase the painful memories or only soften them?
Does new life help you to forget or remember only the best?
Does new life bring you joy or only the quiet promise of spring?

Teach me – silent sentinel of oak –
What you know of life, that I do not.

Charlotte Liggett has lived in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and now lives in Nebraska. She is a Benedictine Oblate and a member of Eureka Christian Church in Eureka, IL.

MORNING JOURNEY

by Alex Ruth

In the crisp air of morning
adorned with hat, gloves, and coat
hiking boots tied firmly on excited feet
out the door
headed for adventure

Reaching the trail
the sound of lapping waves in the distance
soon cresting the hill
water beckons "Come and see. Come and see."
rhythmic reminder of Divine presence and call

Trudging across the sand
each step sinks and marks the path
boots surrounded by grains of sand
more numerous than the mind can fathom
each grain an echo of a memory

Progress is ever so slow
thighs and calves feeling the strain
lungs filling with oxygen
pounding heart pumping blood
nose and eyes watering in the wind

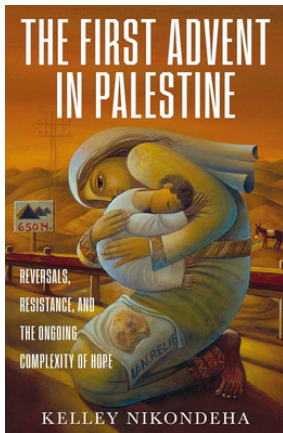
Empty shoreline
heart full of the presence of the divine
ears ringing with the echoes of creation
eyes searching for the spirit moving across the waters
skin and soul warmed by the morning sun

Returning home
wind sweeping the sand
erasing the evidence
cradling memories like an infant
indelible marks of the Divine

Sharing the story
friends and family
bear the image of God
beloved community
love enfleshed

Rev. Dr. Alex Ruth lives in Springfield, IL and is the Associate Regional Minister for Transformation in the Christian Church in Illinois & Wisconsin

REVIEW



Kelley Nikondeha's *First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope* offers readers a new lens through which to view the familiar story of Christ's birth. A liberation theologian and talented storyteller, Nikondeha weaves together history, scripture, and personal experience to bring readers into the reality of ancient Palestine, inviting us to see Advent in a fresh, and sometimes unsettling, light.

I didn't just read this book; I prayerfully decided to lead a study on it with my congregation, sharing my own thoughts alongside those of others in our group. Nikondeha's approach is rooted in the hard truths of Roman-occupied Judea, drawing on 1 and 2 Maccabees to set the scene of turmoil and oppression into which Jesus was born. Through her narrative, the Nativity comes alive in all its messiness and rawness, reminding us that God's entry into the world was anything but sanitized. For us, it transformed the familiar story, shifting our understanding of Advent from a cozy scene to a powerful story of resistance and divine presence.

First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope

by Kelley Nikondeha

Published by Broadleaf Books, 2022

Review by Marsha Funneman

Nikondeha's reflections on this first-century context are paired with stories from her travels to modern-day Palestine, drawing a line from the world of Mary and Joseph to today's Palestinians who continue to live amid conflict. This is a unique and sometimes challenging parallel, yet it speaks to the ongoing relevance of Advent as a story that calls us to recognize the oppressed and marginalized around us. Her words moved many in our group, reminding us that the Incarnation is not just a past event but a present reality that meets us in the struggles and suffering of today's world.

Not everyone in the study agreed with Nikondeha's interpretations. Her imaginative retelling of Mary and Joseph's world—including the oppression, violence, and hope of those under Roman rule—challenged some of our traditional perspectives on the story. Yet perhaps that is precisely what Advent calls us into—

a space where we are willing to see God in ways that shake up our comfort zones. One member of our group remarked, "Reading this didn't just help me understand Jesus' birth better; it changed how I see the people who are still suffering under oppression today."

For many in the study, this book was both illuminating and provocative. Nikondeha's portrayal of Advent wasn't just informative but a call to engagement, opening our minds to see Christ among us now as well as then. In this way, *The First Advent in Palestine* invites us not to remain on the sidelines but to become active participants in God's ongoing work of justice and peace, just as Mary and Joseph embodied courage and hope in their time.

In the end, *The First Advent in Palestine* is not a comfortable read, but it is a transformative one. It challenges us to hold Advent not as a distant memory but as an invitation to open our eyes and hearts to God's presence among us in a world still in need of healing.



Apartheid Wall, Bethlehem, 2011.

Photo by Beth Rupe.

Nikondeha's words reminded us that the spirit of Advent—of light breaking into darkness—is ongoing. For my congregation and me, it was a journey that reshaped how we view both the Christmas story and our own call to live out its message today.

Marsha Funneman is the Pastor of Parkway Christian Church in Springfield, IL.

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. ~ Hebrews 11:3

With your help, Disciples in Illinois & Wisconsin and Michigan are making God's love *visible*...

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and gatherings
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confronting historic wrongs,
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2024 CHRISTMAS OFFERING

December 16 & December 22, 2024

Your contribution to this Disciples Mission Fund Special Day Offering enables our
shared ministries in the emerging Region of Michigan, Illinois & Wisconsin.

100% of your giving supports our Regional work together.

THIS ISSUE'S SOURCES

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955).

² Kelly Latimore, *Christ in the Rubble*, Kelly Latimore Icons, 2020. Available at kellylatimoreicons.com.

³ Ryan Kuja, Instagram, @ryankuja, Sept. 9, 2021. Used with permission.

⁴ Graphic Arts Collection GA 2006.02638. Gift of the Mildred Andrews Fund in honor of Dr. William Milliken, from the collection of Joseph M. Erdelac. Accessed from Princeton Graphic Arts Collection.



William Sommer (1867-1949), *Landscape in Winter*, Detroit, MI, oil on pressboard. 1924.⁴

UPCOMING ISSUES

February 2025: *Witness*

Our February issue will feature articles, reviews, reflections, art, and photography by Black pastors, chaplains, laypeople, and friends from Michigan and Illinois & Wisconsin.

May 2025: *Haven*

In May, *The Christian* will uplift voices from NAPAD (North American Pacific/Asian Disciples) and immigrant communities, alongside those offering refuge in Open & Affirming congregations and ministries committed to the full inclusion of all in the church.

We welcome your submissions. Please email contributions to communications@cciwdisciples.org. Contributors must hold the rights to any material submitted.