

IMMANUEL

CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

Lessons and Carols Reflections
Advent 2021



Immanuel Friends and Family,

Music is so important to us here at Immanuel. It's a very big part of our life together in community. We have an incredible choir; professional section leaders and soloists; bell choirs; church bells; our extraordinary Director of Music, Dr Jane Tavernier; and occasional guests from the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic. Music here is a big deal, and it is nowhere more evident than in special services like Lessons and Carols.

For almost one hundred years the Festival of Lessons and Carols has captured the imaginations of millions and become an important Anglican tradition in preparing for, and celebrating, the birth of Christ.

These are among the reasons it was so heartbreaking last year, in the midst of our most heightened pandemic precautions, to be unable to invite people to this service. We were blessed with the means and technology to have and broadcast it, for which we are incredibly grateful, but it wasn't the same as gathering in person and letting scripture and music wash over us together.

There was, however, some consolation to be found in the complications of last year. In the virtual coffee hour after our broadcast service, several people expressed a yearning for more context, more reflection, on the many lessons. There seemed to be a hunger for more than a brief homily to explore the myriad scripture passages and familiar Advent readings from the Prophets.

This year, though we are blessed to once again gather in person, it seemed only appropriate to invite members of this community to offer just that exploration. Scripture itself is a collection of many voices responding to the love of God and the Hope for the healing of the world. Here are some such voices from among us, collected to reflect on the readings for today's service, in the spirit and tradition of the whole great cloud of witnesses before us.

You will not, probably, read all of this in one go. It is our hope you will move through it slowly. Reread the lessons. Hear the music again. Go back and watch the recording of Dr Hooke's homily. Let this offering be a part of your Advent reflection. Let the wisdom, musings, and hope of your church be part of your anticipation of the birth of Christ.

May God bless you and your family,
Rev Sam Sheridan, Associate Rector

Revelation 21: 1-6, 9 , 22-26

Frank Wade, Priest Associate

House Fires and Heroes

Meditations on Revelation 21

House Fires

Imagine you are sitting at home in the evening when a fire truck screams to a stop at your curb. A flurry of first responders throw ladders up against your home, break the windows and begin pouring water in every nook and cranny. I would imagine your reaction to this scenario would depend entirely on whether you thought your house was actually on fire. In the same vein, the image of “a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,” accompanied by the words “I am making all things new” will naturally rely on what we think of the old Jerusalem and whether we believe that “all things” really need replacing.

For our spiritual ancestors who first received the promises of Revelation 21 the answer would have been an unambiguous “Yes!” They were seriously at odds with the old order, the old Jerusalem. First century Christians had been banished from Judaism for the appalling and anti-scriptural decision to include Gentiles in their community. No longer a subset of the tolerated Jewish religion, they became easy prey for the bullying instincts of the Roman Empire. As Paul was told when he arrived in Rome, the only thing people knew about Christianity was that “everywhere it is spoken against” (Acts 28:22). The prospect of all things being made new was more than appealing. Their house was clearly on fire, and the arrival of the Divine Hook and Ladder would be very welcome.

However, when the text is moved two thousand years into the future and six thousand miles to the west, the perspective – and the interpretation – changes. We Christians of Immanuel Church on the Hill would never suggest that all things are as they should be. Some tidying up is undoubtedly called for, perhaps some downsizing, but surely “all things” do not need replaced! We are, by and large, happy, well-adjusted people—overlooking C.S. Lewis’s reminder that well-adjusted actually means ‘sufficiently compromised.’ Do we not rail against the legacy of slavery— even while wearing clothing made in South Asian sweatshops? Do we not champion equality— even while enjoying a disproportionate share of the world’s wealth? Do we not worry about climate change— even to the point of urging others to change their lifestyle? Why would God want to remake our world?

The old Jerusalem has perhaps become passé, out of fashion like a pince-nez or a bustle. But completely replaced? The good thrown out with the bad? It hardly seems necessary. Perhaps God is thinking of the new Jerusalem as an upgrade, essentially the same thing but better. But honest reflection requires us to wonder.

Heroes

In 1959, a pop group called The Coasters recorded “Along Came Jones.” It tells the story of a man watching Westerns on television and seeing the same pattern repeated over and over. There was grave peril for a poor woman named Sweet Sue who was always rescued by a hero named Jones. It was a clever knock on the prevailing theme of shows like Bonanza, Gunsmoke and Have Gun Will Travel. Probably without intending it, the song also provided the key to reading the Book of Revelation. In that mystical and mysterious text there is an underlying theme of peril and rescue. The wicked ways of the world, represented by dragons, beasts and the memorable Whore of Babylon, are the agents of peril. Rescue is firmly in the hands of God represented by the Lamb and the new Jerusalem proclaimed in our text. In the Book of Revelation, as in old TV westerns, we do not know exactly how the rescue will take place but need never doubt that the hero will win in the end.

The comparison of Scripture to mid-twentieth century pop culture hopefully illuminates an important point without trivializing it. We are fragile people in a dangerous world. Pandemics, addiction, floundering governments, hostile forces, and our individual and corporate contradictions are among the agents of our peril. We cannot save ourselves. We must rely on something beyond ourselves to rescue us. Our word for the hero is God.

A central premise of our faith is that all of life – good, bad and in between – is in God’s control and that ultimately what Julian of Norwich said is true: “All will be well . . . and all manner of things will be well.” The extent of God’s reach encompasses this life and the next— “a new heaven and new earth” in the words of our passage. We must and can rely on that as surely as Sweet Sue could rely on Jones.

Genesis 22: 15–18

Marylinn Wilson

As I began thinking about this passage in preparation for this reflection, I asked Rev Sam Sheridan for context. He told me:

“...we are focusing the [Lessons and Carols] narrative on the theology of Revelation 21 and God's promise to remake heaven and earth. Particularly, in the context of a continued global health crisis, there is cause to celebrate God's promise to redeem all of creation. In our present ailment it is a virus, and not the machinations of war (though those too persist in our world), which is the calamity taking up the most cultural, rhetorical, and spiritual space in our lives. We are not, as was the case in 1918, in so desperate need of remembering that it is human participation in evil and rebellion against God causing the world's suffering. We more surely need remember that in our own lives, but perhaps also as a community, it is appropriate to look to a different focus as we await the coming of the Lord. Perhaps it is appropriate to remember that the Christ we anxiously await has come already, and through Him all things are being made new. Perhaps this is a season, in particular, to remember that the Temple—which itself was a recreation and representation of the Garden of Eden—is so thoroughly remade that there is no such Temple in the New Jerusalem, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”

In this broad context, the Genesis 22 reading is God's promise to make a nation out of Abraham. God carves out a people for God's self rather than take on one of the already powerful peoples who existed. God chooses a barren nomadic family with relatively few resources and relatively few prospects (though we later learn there is some family back in Ur). God makes a people who will have a relationship with God that changes the world instead of God just intervening directly all the time. This text is one of the clearest where God says, okay this is how I am going to go about remaking heaven and the earth, by growing a relationship with this single family through whom all the world will eventually be redeemed. God says, essentially, I could have done this other ways but I have chosen to do it this way. You people will need to participate in what I am doing with the world. “

So I then reflected on what I should take away from this specific Genesis 22: 15-18 reading. Rev Sam had given me the larger theological context for the lesson, but what am I to understand about what it — the specifics of this specific scripture in that broader context — means to me. What does it mean I should do in my daily life?

¹⁵ The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸ and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

As I pondered this, I remembered that in the first appearance of the angel of the Lord in this well-known story, Abraham was directed to sacrifice his son Isaac. And I remembered that (though hard for me to understand, with my human sensibilities) the father Abraham was indeed willing to sacrifice his only son. How could any father do that? What are we to make of such a decision? I just can't see myself being willing to kill my child — is such unwillingness sinful and disobedient? Do we really have to be willing to literally kill our own children to be obedient? I'm certainly not comfortable with this story. But then, comfort isn't the point, is it!

In pondering this concept, I come up short if I take it literally. Perhaps it is not a literal killing, perhaps it is hyperbole to make a point. What if God were using this story as a way to remind the Jewish people for whom it was written that the greatest sacrifices, of the things that matter the most to us, demonstrate the depth of love, not just of a father Abraham for his son Isaac, or a son (Abraham) for his Father God, but Father God for his creation. A sacrificial, reciprocal love — agape. And that out of that love comes renewal. The story tells us that God's angel offered God's most extraordinary blessings as a result of that sacrificial love. The Jewish people who heard this story must have been truly amazed.

And of course, as we Christians are wont to do, I wonder if this story presaged Jesus. After all, God the Father gave his only Son as a sacrifice in a most extraordinary act of sacrificial love — again, agape. Is relating it to Jesus' sacrifice, to God's sacrifice in Jesus, carrying the story too far? I'd thought about sacrificial love, agape. Is there also a relationship between obedience and that love? What would that relationship be? Is there something about “withholding” or “not withholding” that we should focus on, even if it is not as extreme as withholding a willingness to wield a slaying knife? Could it be that obedience is about our not withholding our true selves from God? Could it be that if we give our all, our true selves, to God, then the heavens open to extra-ordinary blessings?

I find that each re-reading of scripture gives me a slightly different perspective because I'm in a slightly different place each time I read it or hear a sermon on it. This time hearing the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and God's subsequent promise to give extraordinary blessings and renewal leads me to re-think the relationship of obedience to blessings. As a human, I find I have a resistance to being fully obedient, that somehow total obedience will make me lose some control, lose "something." It is a kind of vulnerability which I resist, so I tend to hold something in reserve. But then when I re-read the passage this time, I realized the reading does not say we will not be blessed *at all* if we are not obedient. Rather it says that the "extraordinary blessings" come with obedience, obedience being in this case a willingness to sacrifice, to open ourselves fully to God, to not withhold "anything of great value" from God. Wow, that is extra-ordinary. What would it be like if I am able to move toward being just that little bit more obedient, more vulnerable? Something to ponder.....



Isaiah 40:1-11

Marty Christino

The whole world as you know it can change in a second. We've all heard that expression five hundred times. I did not really come to understand that as reality until we lost my 22-year-old cousin in a car accident last year. Yet what I have been finding scarier recently is the idea that the whole world changes slowly right in front of our eyes. Our biggest blessings do not simply appear in a second. We see glimpses of them, we work towards them, we almost give up on them, before we see them. That is true whether you are chasing a college degree or awaiting the birth of a child. Most relationships don't crumble in an instance, it's a slow painful process. Even when you get that horrible phone call and the world comes crashing down, I'd argue that the months and years of pain afterward take a lot more out of you than the news in that instance. The reality is that our lives are slow, pain feels drawn out, and it all feels uncontrollable. The good news in this passage is that God knows that. He knows we need comforting, He knows we need His kingdom, He knows that we do not know what to do, and He knows that only in Him will we be satisfied. I am a college student, and I will be the first to admit that I know nothing about how the world works (just ask my dad), but here is what I take from this passage.

First, God sends us comfort. Lately, for me, this has come in the form of friends that know your Thai food order by heart. Second, God gives us His word. It acts as a guide for what to do when you are lost, how to love each other, and a reminder that God's kingdom is much larger than your world. Third, it is okay to be lost. Just like Isaiah in this passage I often do not know how to approach God or what to say, most of the time my prayers sound like rants. Good thing God does not say how to cry out, simply to do so. Lastly, this passage reminds me that God is bigger. The passage talks about God's might, His arms, His reward, how He will carry us, and it says nothing about my last exam score, the football game my team lost, or even death. When we claim God as our savior, everything from the mundane thing that annoyed us this morning to the tragedy we experience does not define us anymore. Rather we are defined by a powerful God who sends comfort to his people.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Susan Parsons, Assistant Rector

This text from Jeremiah is set in a time of unimaginable devastation in ancient Israel. The city of Jerusalem has been destroyed and burned, the temple is in ruins, the king overthrown and her leading citizens dragged into exile. Into this chaos, the prophet Jeremiah speaks to Israel about what has been lost and their failure to keep the covenant with God as well as looks forward to a time when God will restore Israel and bring their agony to an end. He tells them of a new covenant God has established that promises restoration.

This new covenant, this new beginning with the people, will be written on their hearts, Jeremiah says, rather than on stones. People will know in their hearts, rather than through external rules, what they must do for all people, all life, to flourish. People will know what is just and true and good, deep inside them. And he points to a future time when all people will ‘know God,’ not in a theological or emotional way, but deep in our hearts. All people will know and act in ways that our lives are inextricably entwined with God.

While this prophecy is certainly comforting, it is hard to believe. The world seems to be rushing away from the glorious vision our Creator has for us. Many of us are, like ancient Israel, on a binge of self-indulgence. We know we don’t always act with justice, love, forgiveness, and mercy, yet we still find it hard to pause in the midst of the rush to listen to God, to allow ourselves the time to get to ‘know’ what God wants to create with us, how God wants to heal us. It is difficult to trust in God to bring us to a place of love and forgiveness. We struggle to believe that God’s covenant with us – to restore and renew and continue to work with us and to forgive us our iniquity – is vibrant and active. We too quickly become discouraged. We too quickly give up on God’s passion for us.

I believe that if we had Jeremiah with us today, his message to us would remain the same. He would certainly shout to us of our failings and he would remind us of God’s eternal patience, forgiveness, and love. Jeremiah would tell of God’s constant effort to make restorative covenants with us as individuals and with the world. God is still searching for ways to be the love of our life.

God is still writing on our hearts

Baruch 4:36–5:9

Julie Bruns

“For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies.” Humans have long made enemies of those who do not share their religion, culture, appearance, or geography. At some point, people from every generation and from every part of the world have been made to leave home because of greed, hatred, famine, and war. The last two centuries, alone, saw a million people forced to move from homes along the Yangtze River in China – to build a dam; and millions displaced during the partition of India to separate people of Muslim and Hindu faiths. The Nazis forced European Jews into cramped transport trains bound for death camps... Newer Americans forced Native Americans—Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole—to leave Florida, Georgia, North Carolina on foot along “The Trail of Tears” into exile in Oklahoma... Millions of Russians were forced into exile in Siberia during Stalin’s purges.... Millions of humans were enslaved and exiled from homes on the African continent to North and South America – a brutal ocean journey which for most, ended in miserable, dangerous work and early death. Another Trail of Tears is the thousand-mile stretch where during the 50 years before the Civil War, a million enslaved people were forcibly deported from Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama; many chained and forced to walk 20 miles a day in the heat of summer. Families were separated forever. The misery and pain and hopelessness of those exiled is too awful to contemplate.

The roads remain full of exiles in our century—our time. Fellow humans flee communities on fire from corruption, crime, violence, draught -- where the only hope for a child to survive is to flee north – or west or anywhere that seems safer – on foot across miles of mountains, deserts, and rivers – or across a sea in rickety boats that often capsize. Some have had safe passage in a C-5 cargo plane – but still – an exile – a stranger in a strange land. Baruch’s passage gives hope to exiles – all children of God – with assurance God knows them and remembers each of them. God’s children – from west to east – can take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, forever wear the robe of righteousness, with the promise God will show their splendor everywhere under heaven. God remembers each exile with joy and mercy and righteousness. Some of our brothers and sisters may have left their homes on foot, led away – or forced out; but God will bring them back, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. We await the birth of Jesus, who said the most important thing to do is love God with all our hearts and minds – and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Let us see ourselves in all exiles—let us strive to make level the ground so that everyone may walk safely in the glory of God. Let us act as we would hope others would toward us if we were exiles and needed help for ourselves and our children to survive and thrive.

Isaiah 11:1-9

Zoe Gildersleeve

In the beginning of this lesson we are told about a stump. This is meant to symbolize death, I believe. Something that can seem so final, despite the promise of Heaven. From the stump springs new life, a fruitful one at that. I believe this is God promising that from death he will bring new life. With this new life comes a new unimaginable world.

There is a promise of a new King. This King will be understanding, just, powerful and above all obedient to God. It portrays a world in which everyone who is in need is seen and respected, a world in which those who are so easily taken advantage of are given a chance, and those who are truly “wicked” are slain. Something that seems so straight-forward in thought yes so hard in execution is hard to implement in today's world where everything is so confusing. People take it upon themselves to place judgment on others when really it should be left to God.

The lesson goes on to paint a picture of a world which seems unimaginable to us today. In this transformed world creatures who normally are the hunters live together in peace with their prey. Not only existing in harmony but sharing and resting together. There is a promise of peace in the animal kingdom because the hunters no longer need to kill to survive. All of these creatures, dangerous or not being led by a small child nonetheless is inconceivable to us today. I couldn't imagine a parent letting their child anywhere near a lion, a bear or a snake without having horrible consequences.

The lesson closes out by telling us how God will bring the world together as one. The word and knowledge of the Lord will be spread through the whole world as the Lord will be sought out by everyone. Even those who were not Jewish would seek out the Lord in this new world. There will be no more war between those in disagreement, no more needless killing over religion, territory, political differences or anything else. Borders that were once obstacles are easily overcome so that all of those who have worshiped the Lord shall be able to gather in peace without anything to get in their way.

All of this to say that God promised us a new world of peace, justice, and consonance all to be led by a new King.

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Keith June

Okay, confession...I love to dance! In fact, one of my favorite songs is Whitney Houston's, "I just want to dance with somebody". I've heard that song played all over the world, at baseball games and football games and it always seems to make everyone happy!

Yes, I absolutely love to dance. There's nothing like cutting the old rug as they say.

Admittedly, some have argued I have "limited" dancing skills...Perish the thought! My niece says, I am the only person in my family born with no rhythm...zilch, none whatsoever! And given her rather blunt assessment of my dancing skills, I therefore take every opportunity to dance with her...in public! Go hard or go home! Forget any thoughts of embarrassment, my friends, the June has arrived! Regardless of how others rate my dancing skills, when I am on the dance floor, I feel I am like a member of the Temptations. (if you are unfamiliar with the Temptations, google them! As a sidenote, don't I bear a striking resemblance to David Ruffin...? Use your imagination...)

I love to dance because dancing is celebrating. This journey of life can be incredibly hard. As the passage from Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is a time and a season for everything under the sun. Indeed, there is a time for everything, a time to be born and a time to die. Our life's journey will see good times, bad times, sad times and hopefully some great times. And you may live all these experiences at the same time.

This time of COVID and racial reckoning has served as a stark reminder that there is a time for all things. This has very much been a time of fear, fear of a deadly disease, fear of trial, fear of loss, of loneliness and I daresay, fear of truth. And we have all experienced loss, my God have we experienced loss. Quite frankly, it has been at times hard to find things to celebrate, hard to find things for which to find happiness.

So this passage from Zephaniah is quite timely. The passage starts with the words, "Sing Daughter Zion, shout aloud, Israel, Be Glad and rejoice in your heart". Well, how about that! But the passage is not only about good times, it speaks of "taking away punishment" and "the Lord God turned back your enemy".

The passage speaks of a God very much with us, “The Lord God is with you, the Mighty warrior who saves”. The passage speaks of joy, of love, of protection, a God who forgives and a God of hope, “do not let your hands hang limp...”.

Indeed, Immanuel, God is with us. I’m also inspired when the passage speaks of God, “taking great delight in you.”

I think the passage tells us that despite our challenges, despite what may ail us, celebrate! I tell friends when you get a chance to celebrate, celebrate! Enjoy!

Christmas is a time to rejoice, a time to sing, a time to praise, a time of hope and love. I love seeing children open presents. I love seeing family and friends. It is a time to celebrate the coming of our savior.

But the very best part of Christmas is the spirit. The spirit of peace, of rebirth, of new beginnings, of hope, of love. Of knowing that God is with us.

Christmas is a joyous time, a time of celebration, a time of hope, of giving and of love.

As we enter the season of Advent, let us celebrate. Let us be bold in our faith, in our hopes and dreams for a better world. Let our hands not hang limp but let our hands be the hands to help build God’s kingdom here on earth.

Let us reflect on our many blessings, of health, of family, of love, friends, of our faith. Let us sing, and rejoice.

Let us, “be glad and rejoice with all your heart!”

Let us remember that God is with us. Let us not fear. Let us have hope.

And for goodness sake, let us dance!

Isaiah 65:17-25

Sam Sheridan

To ancient Israel, as with all their contemporaries, there were *thin* materials and places. There were simply some things where God's realm seemed to be able to break through into our mundane world.

For instance blood was considered holy in a way I think we would really only understand if we had to watch our food be killed in order for us to live. Animal sacrifices were less barbaric butchering and more honor and ceremony praising the life that comes from what we now call the food chain.

Smoke was holy as it carried a scent, an essence, to the heavens as nothing else could. Incense and burnt offerings signified importance, grandeur, a means of giving something back to a place we could not go and could scarcely imagine.

Mountains were holy places, belonging to both the earth and sky (sky is incidentally the word we translate 'heaven' when we think the Old Testament authors were being metaphysical). In a more boring Hebrew grammar essay I would demonstrate the Garden of Eden is presented as a mountain—a place God **and** humanity could be. Mountains were places few people could go, places almost no one lived. They belonged to God; closer to heaven than to earth.

We might not think of mountains like that. We may imagine tectonic plates smack into each other and billions of tons of rock has to go somewhere. But if we want to know what the authors of scripture were claiming about the universe we have to keep in mind that mountains, like blood or smoke, were *thin* and could just about withstand the presence of the Creator.

Isaiah says, *They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.* He sings of a new heaven and a new earth, and envisions it as a mountain. God is making this world into a new Eden, a new place that can be both earth and heaven. Isaiah's song longs for a future where God and humanity can live and be together, as was God's dream from the start. Isaiah waits, knowing that God will upend and reinvent the cosmos to be with us.

And the Disciples met Jesus, heard Him call, watched Him teach, broke bread with Him... and in Him they saw what Isaiah promised; God with us.

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WELCOME TO
Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill

An Episcopal Parish in the Diocese of Virginia

Whether you are just visiting or looking for a new spiritual home, we invite you to learn more about our community and our faith.



www.icoh.net

We worship in two Chapels:

Zabriskie Chapel, 3606 Seminary Road, Alexandria
(corner of Quaker Lane and Seminary Road)

Immanuel Chapel, 3737 Seminary Road, Alexandria
(on the campus of Virginia Theological Seminary)

Worship Times:

SUNDAYS

8:00 a.m., Holy Eucharist I, Zabriskie Chapel
10:30 a.m., Holy Eucharist II, Immanuel Chapel
1:00 p.m., Holy Eucharist II, Zabriskie Parish Hall

TUESDAYS

10:00 a.m., Morning Prayer, Zabriskie Chapel

WEDNESDAY

6:30 p.m., Rite II, Zabriskie Chapel

As well as other monthly services and activities;
check out our calendar online.