

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Third Sunday in Advent – Year B

RCL Readings – Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 (or Canticle 15); I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 126; I Thessalonians 5:12-28; John 1:19-28 (or John 3:22-30)

Seasonal Introduction. Advent is a time set aside for spiritual reflection and preparation regarding the coming of the Messiah. It's a time of renewed commitment to prayer, deeper reading of the Scriptures, and perhaps even some fasting—all in the context of getting ready. The question then is: what are we getting ready for?

Advent provides us a time to reflect and celebrate the first coming of the Messiah. In whatever way we choose to measure our lives, new beginnings are always opportunities to reflect, but they must also be a time to make plans—and for Advent, plans for how to live as we anticipate the Messiah's second coming. To comprehensively grasp and proclaim the Gospel, it is crucial that we embrace and affirm both of these significant events.

Common Theme. The third Sunday in advent resonates with themes of joy and gratitude, weaving a narrative that recognizes the power and judgment of God in the past and the anticipation of his restoration in the future with thanksgiving when that restoration is given! While we do not find ourselves in the position of Israel during the desolation in the time of Isaiah or Mary in the time of the Romans, this theme of joy coming out of restoration from ruin is as powerful as ever.

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Hebraic Context. John 1:1-18,¹ like the beginning of Genesis, gives a top-down history. When we turn to our reading in John 1:19-28 we change perspective as we approach John in the wilderness with the question, “‘Who are you?’ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

The Christ, the *Messiah*, is a Jewish doctrine that unfolds through numerous passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. Within this tapestry, the anticipation of a redeemer figure takes shape, bearing various roles—sometimes a ruling king and other times a humble servant. Acknowledging the apparent tension in these descriptions, Jewish exegetical tradition, particularly during the late 2nd Temple Period, envisioned the advent of two distinct redeemers:² Messiah ben Joseph (or sometimes Messiah ben Ephraim) and Messiah ben David.

¹The Gospel of John is traditionally separated from the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke as John's structure and presentation is different from the other three. For example there are no parables in John, nor a genealogy. But there are several long theologically rich discourses. This has led some scholars to claim John is more of a Greek gospel than a Hebraic one.

John opens with the proclamation that Jesus is the divine ‘Word’. The source for his profound statement, however, is not derived from Greek mythology but from the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah 48:12-16 begins with the Hebraically loaded word *Sh'ma*, a word that not only means ‘hear’ but is also one of the Biblical words for ‘obey’. The *Sh'ma* is the name for a discourse that goes from Deuteronomy 6:4-11:32 and the opening verses are prayed multiple times a day (the *Sh'ma*, along with thanks after dinner, see Deuteronomy 8:10, are considered the only two prayers commanded in the Tanakh).

Because *Sh'ma* is such a loaded word in the Scriptures, Jewish exegetes pay close attention whenever they read it. Isaiah then introduces a character called the ‘first and the last’ who fashions the heavens and the earth. Thus, we conclude that the ‘First and the Last’ is God. In verse 16 the ‘First and the Last’ says He has not spoken in secret. The word ‘to speak’ is *Davar* which is also the term for ‘word’ and, in early translations and interpretations, can be personified as the divine word of God. Thus, the word is also some ‘thing’—and remember, this is in the context of creation. The verse continues in which the First and the Last states that, from the beginning of time He was there and now the Lord God sends Him with His Spirit.

Here is the Hebraic tension; we had initially concluded that the ‘First and the Last’ was God as He was active in creation, yet we find the character being sent by God and thus cannot ‘be’ God! Concurrently we have the concept of the spoken word also being a ‘thing’. Hence John's opening of his gospel with ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God and ... through Him all things were made’. The Gospel of John is not sourced from Greek thought but rather from Isaiah 48 and the Hebrew Scriptures.

² The late second temple period saw the development of a vibrant discussion as to the role, nature and characteristics of the messiah. The Hebrew scriptures presented a suffering servant, a coming prophet like Moses, Elijah who had been taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and a davidic warrior king as several characters who would appear before the ‘Last Day’. This ambiguity facilitated the tradition of two messianic figures known as Messiah ben Joseph and Messiah ben David.

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Messiah ben Joseph was foreseen as the bringer of joy, salvation, good news, and healing,³ while Messiah ben David was to deliver justice, engage in divine wars, rescue Israel from her adversaries, and usher in an era of peace. This Hebraic understanding unveils a nuanced perspective on the Messiah's mission even as they considered the two, seemingly different, roles the Messiah would have. As Christians and believers, we find these attributes united in the person of the singular Messiah—Jesus Christ.⁴

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. According to the Gospel of Luke, following His temptation in the wilderness, Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth and started his teaching ministry on the Shabbat in the local Synagogue by quoting Isaiah 61:1-2. By the late 2nd Temple period the Jewish people had divided the five books of Moses, the Torah, into portions of Scripture to be publicly read on the Sabbath, Mondays and Thursdays. Sections from the prophets or sacred history (Samuel and Kings) were also apportioned to each Torah reading and this was called the Haftarah. In Luke 4, Jesus is given the Haftarah reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Interestingly, Jesus does not read the text 'correctly'. During His reading of Isaiah 61:1-2 Jesus both adds to the passage by including a line from Isaiah 58:6 and He stops before the phrase 'the day of vengeance'.⁵ While knowledge of the scriptures was notoriously lacking during the days of the Kings of Israel, by the time Jesus began His ministry the practice of "hearing" the word of the Lord had blossomed. People heard the Scriptures more than they read the Scriptures simply due to a lack of personal copies of the Scriptures. Many in the synagogue may have recognized the different passages Jesus was quoting from and been able to understand the message Jesus

³ According to Jewish tradition, Messiah ben Joseph would die while preaching the good news but his death would usher in the advent of Messiah ben David who would establish God's kingdom on earth. Tractate Sukkah 52a states, regarding Zechariah 12:12, "One said that this eulogy is for Messiah ben Joseph who was killed in the war of Gog from the land of Magog prior to the ultimate redemption with the coming of Messiah ben David..." and "According to the one who said that the lament is for Messiah ben Joseph who was killed, this would be the meaning of that which is written in that context: 'so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child'"

⁴ The English word Christ is derived from the Greek *Christos* which is the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew word *Mashiach* or Messiah. Christ is, of course, not a surname but a title and probably should be rendered grammatically correct with a preceding definitive article 'the'. Jesus the Christ. Jesus' surname, if such can be applied, would be "son of Joseph" or "son of David".

⁵ It should be noted that Jesus also skips the phrase, "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted". In doing so Jesus suggests that His mission does not include this aspect of the ministry. Jesus will confirm later in Matthew 10:34-36 that, despite the Messiah being known as the Prince of Peace, He has not come to bring peace but a sword. Accepting Jesus as the Messiah will inevitably tear families apart. Sons will be against fathers and mothers against their daughters. From a Hebraic perspective the question then becomes; if Jesus has not come to bind up the broken hearted, whose task is that? The conclusion is 'us'. The disciples of the Messiah are tasked with engaging with the suffering of others and to heal those whose hearts are truly broken. Some modern translations of the New Testament even try to reinsert the phrase back into Luke 4:18 citing manuscript transmission error in an effort to 'correct' the text.

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was teaching.⁶ Jesus skillfully blended the mission and ministry of the Messiah (which is Himself) as described in Isaiah 61:1-2 with the desire of God in Isaiah 58:6-8.

The prophecy of Isaiah 61 also contains the Hebraic tension of coming vengeance with renewed blessing and restoration. The comfort and restoration that the Lord will bring is described poetically as beauty for ashes and joy in place of mourning. For many cultures in antiquity mourning was symbolized with placing ashes on the head. Instead of ashes to embody mourning and sadness there will be a crown or head ornament⁷ that reflects beauty and joy. The tension remains however as the proclamations of hope and redemption also contain the pronouncement of justice and vengeance. Verse 8 reminds us that God loves justice. The Hebrew word here is *mishpat* מִשְׁפָּט which, indeed, means justice. We might have an understanding of what justice means to us—the righting of wrongs, punishment of wrongdoing, and perhaps even vengeance. God's justice includes rewards and an everlasting covenant (verse 8), with the knowledge of God spreading among the nations through the blessings given to Israel.⁸

⁶ One method of Jewish teaching at the time of Jesus included leaving sentences and phrases out of the reading and adding in others in. There were exegetical rules to follow, for example; to add a sentence from another part of scripture you had to find a similar phrase in the text you were studying and the text you wanted to include. In Isaiah 61 there is the phrase רָצוֹן לַיהוָה *ratzon l'adonai* (acceptable to the Lord). This phrase only occurs in Isaiah 61:2 and Isaiah 58:6 thus according to Jewish exegesis these verse are related and can be included with each other. רָצוֹן *ratzon* means 'Will' and comes from the verb 'to want', it denotes the thing that is 'most wanted' or the closest thing to the heart of God, which would obviously be His Will. רָצוֹן לַיהוָה *ratzon l'adonai* thus signifies 'this is the closest thing to the heart of God' with Isaiah 58:6 describing the nature of a true fast; to share food, take care of the weak, not neglect the needs of others etc.

⁷ What is this beautiful headdress? The word (פֶּאֶר) is only used 7 times and only in Exodus, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. In Isaiah the headdress is removed, along with all other finery, when the day of the Lord comes. Both here, in Isaiah 61, and in Ezekiel 24 the headdress is closely related to mourning—it seems like there was a custom to not wear the beautiful headdress when weeping and mourning. But the word is largely defined in Exodus 39:28 (echoed in Ezekiel 44:18). The priests were to wear a (פְּאֵרֵי הַמַּגְבֵּעַת) headdress turban (scholars can only speculate what the headdress or the turban looked like or even if they are different head coverings or the same head covering). On the turban of the high priest was the declaration Holy to the LORD. Where does our beauty and joy come from if not from our service to a holy God as God's holy people—and His service to us?

⁸ In Deuteronomy 32:4 Moses declares that all God's ways are justice. Many translations render the word *mishpat* מִשְׁפָּט as 'just' so that it reads better in English; 'all your way are just'. However, the actual word is justice. Moses is clearly proclaiming that everything that the Lord does is in some way, even if unknown at the time, a form of justice. His blessings, rewards, chastisements, punishments are all part of the actions of God in enacting justice.

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Psalm 126. With good news, such as seen in our readings today, comes joy. There is often a question of how God can command people to have joy?⁹ But we read in Isaiah 61:10, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD.” Why? Because “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”

Psalm 126¹⁰ echoes and affirms the reading from Isaiah 61 with an emphasis on joy. The Lord's redemptive work is shown—His blessing (restoring both the location, Zion, and those who lived in it) that brought such joy but also a renewed honouring of the Lord from among the nations who are witnesses to God's practical blessings. Within the broader scope of the Hebrew Scriptures, God's interactions with Israel always serves as a visible testimony to the nations. Israel's history—their moments of waywardness, divine correction, and eventual restoration—reveals the character of God. Whether in times of discipline or restoration, the nations bear witness to the justice, forgiveness, and mercy inherent in God's dealings with His people.

There are times for weeping, even as there are times for repentance. But God's mercy and restoration should bring great joy! Those times that God commands His people to have joy are inevitably linked to God's history—His continuous interaction—with His people. The psalm notes that the nations notice how God has worked in the history of the Jewish people and declares, ‘the Lord has done great things for them’. The parallel sentence then switches the ‘them’ to ‘us’.¹¹ The worshiper chanting the psalm now proclaims himself a part of the sacred history in

⁹ It is rare for God to command the emotions of people and demand how they feel. Usually we are commanded to laugh when others laugh and to mourn when others mourn, to join in with the suffering of others and not to change the way people feel. Yet there are several occasions where God does indeed take control of people's emotions. For example, during the festival of Sukkot (Tabernacles) in Deuteronomy 16:13-16 God commands His people to be joyful. On Rosh Hashanah, in Nehemiah 8:10, the people are told they must neither mourn nor weep, but have a party on God's holy day—for the joy of the LORD is their strength. Some of the Psalms likewise call on the worshiper to rejoice such as Psalm 32:11.

¹⁰ Psalm 126 is within the Psalms of Ascent, a collection of songs and prayers that start with the superscription *shir l'maalot* שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת. They include Psalms 120-134 and it is traditionally accepted that they were sung by pilgrims and worshippers as they journeyed to Jerusalem during the three major pilgrim festivals of Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles).

¹¹The psalms are also a great source for prophecy and many psalms are used as proof texts in the New Testament for the life, work and messiahship of Jesus. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, teaching them that everything was written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms... (Luke 24:44). This is particularly evident in the Epistle of Hebrews where the Psalms are quoted as a major source for the messiahship of Jesus. Interestingly, the entire Psalm is written in the plural form except the last verse which switches the verbs to masculine singular. Grammatical changes, such as this, always elicits the question, ‘why?’. (Exodus 19:1-2 is an excellent illustration of a grammatical change that is picked up on by early Jewish scholars, including Luke in Acts 2:1)

The last verse speaks of an individual who ‘goes out and comes back’. Who is this person, why is he weeping and where does he go that he returns in joy? In the context of the advent season, where we

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which God has been working in and for His people. The past becomes in some way, part of the present.

Canticle 15. The early church incorporated the Jewish practice of singing Scripture. This was extremely helpful for a community that did not have personal copies of the Scriptures to memorize large sections of the Bible. The word Canticle in Latin simply means 'little song'. In the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Scriptures, the Song of Songs is called *Canticum Canticorum*. A canticle is thus a song or chant that is used in many traditional Christian liturgies. The words of the canticle come directly from the Biblical text (other than the Psalms) and may include what we call the apocrypha. Canticles are thus, by definition, very Biblical. Canticle 15 is called the song of Mary or the *Magnificat* and the words are quoted directly from the Gospel of Luke. In this song Mary, who is really the first disciple of Jesus as she is the first person to say yes to God in relation to Jesus, expresses her pure joy at the privilege to serve God in this way. The Canticle gets its name the *Magnificat* from the first line of the song in Latin; "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum,*" or "My soul magnifies the Lord". Chanting and singing Scripture was, and still is, an excellent way to memorize Scripture.

I Thessalonians 5:16-24. As Paul gives his final instructions to the Thessalonians, again we see the connecting Advent theme of joy (verse 16). This joy is not primarily dependent on circumstances, but rests upon what Jesus has done, is doing and will do. Paul is clear that God will complete His redemptive work (verse 24) and this future sense of completion and faithfulness is entwined with the hope of the (second) coming of Jesus (verse 23).

John 1:6-8, 19-28. John 1:6-18 continues to look at the broad-stroke reasons for what has happened before going into the details starting in verse 19. John was sent by God to be a witness.¹² The true light (note the Hebraic Perspective below) was coming to the world and the Word, that is God, would become flesh.¹³

contemplate the birth of Jesus all the while looking with expectation as His return, this could be an allusion of the two advents of the Messiah. 'He who goes out weeping', describing the traumatic events during His first advent, 'will return with shouts of joy' could be linked to His second advent.

¹² John was a witness, quite literally, a *martyr* (μαρτυριαν) according to John 1:7. The original use of *martyr* in the LXX revolved around the testimonies of God, whether the Ark of the Covenant (μαρτυρια) or the 21 times it is used in Psalm 119. By 4th Maccabees 6, the modern use of the term *martyr* is shown to be developing (and would continue to develop through the 2nd and 3rd century CE) as Eleazar was tortured and killed for his beliefs and yet was still a witness—a testimony—of godly thinking [and living].

Nonetheless, it isn't death that makes one a martyr, but the keeping of God's testimony, His statutes, (just as God Himself has always done) before all who will open their eyes to see.

¹³ It is commonly argued that Judaism never anticipated a divine redeemer, this is actually incorrect. The theology of the late 2nd Temple period was not homogeneous in any sense, there were a variety of conflicting opinions on nearly all issues. One such opinion of the Dead Sea Community at Qumran concerning the coming redeemer is recorded in 11Q13 or the Melchizedek document. In the fragmentary

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Our passage picks up in verse 19 as John is fulfilling his work as the herald of the Messiah. Interestingly, John does not identify himself as the forerunner Elijah, who was prophesied to herald the Messiah in Malachi 4:3. (Perhaps John believed that the literal Elijah would precede the Messiah, as that is the plain reading of the prophet Malachi. However, Jesus later confirms that John was the latter Elijah in Matthew 11:14.) Nonetheless, as the voice preparing the way in the wilderness, John was still obedient to God's calling and was baptizing people in the wilderness. John is assisted in this task by his own disciples who, apparently, continue the ministry and mission of John long after his execution (Acts 19:1-4). The task of preparing for the Messiah was not beholden to only one man, as important as he might be. The Jewish leaders and scholars at this time expected a number of persons to be associated with the coming of the Messiah,¹⁴ hence the question to John whether he was the Elijah or the prophet (like Moses – see Deuteronomy 18:15 and Deuteronomy 34:10-12). These questions are then taken further by some Pharisees (verse 24) and leads to John the Baptist teaching about the purpose of his baptism ministry.¹⁵

Hebraic Perspective. John comes to testify concerning the Light! Light and darkness were important symbols in Jewish thought and their Biblical properties are unlike anything we usually associate with when we think of light and dark. Light was the first thing spoken into being during the Creation Week. When we see the word 'light' in the Scriptures we should not think of the light that comes from the sun, reflected by the moon or from some other device in our homes. In Jewish tradition the physical light that is produced from those items is not the same light that is being described or spoken into being by God. God's light has both physical *and* spiritual properties. For example the light of the sun cannot distinguish between good and evil.¹⁶ The sun spreads its light on both the righteous and the unrighteous. But the light produced by God at Creation is much different. The first thing that God did with the light was move it—He separated light from darkness. Once light was moved, all that remained was darkness. Note that God does not create darkness, he creates light. Once He moves the light then there is only darkness, but that was not something created by God. Using the motifs of light and darkness the Dead Sea community divided the world into two camps, the sons of light and the sons of darkness. Paul

manuscript the messianic redeemer is named Melchizedek and at the end of the scroll Melchizedek is revealed to be '*Elohim*' or God.

¹⁴ Elijah was clearly to precede the Messiah but there was an expectation of others who would also precede the Messiah. A suffering servant (who may be Messiah ben Joseph), a high priest that was not corrupt, a Davidic warrior king (who may be Messiah ben David) and a prophet like Moses would all appear before the Last Day. Which prophet like Moses would appear? In the Apocryphal texts, various prophets reappeared to participate in the redemptive activities of Biblical heroes. Habakuk visits Daniel while he is in the lion's den in the Septuagint version of Daniel 14:33-36 and Jeremiah visits Judah Maccabee to equip him with a golden sword to fight the Greeks in 2 Maccabees 15:16.

¹⁵ See First Sunday of Advent's discussion on baptism and the mikvah during the late 2nd Temple period.

¹⁶ The sun and the moon as motifs for light and darkness paired with good and evil appear in many 2nd Temple period Jewish literature such as 2 Esdras and 2 Baruch.

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also notes this separation in 2 Corinthians 14-17 when he asks rhetorically what fellowship has light with darkness.¹⁷ The prophet Isaiah used this image when he declared that the lands living in darkness would see a great light. Often the psalms pair light and salvation together in revealing that the 'Lord is my light and my salvation' (Psalm 27). John uses the metaphor of light to describe the Messiah, thus introducing Him as Lord and Saviour.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 65:17-25. In these few verses Isaiah presents a huge picture, a picture which covers the whole spectrum of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Throughout Isaiah there is an emphasis on the 'new things' that the Lord is doing and will do. Isaiah 42:9 says that God will declare 'new things' and here in Isaiah 65:17 we hear of the promise of new heavens and a new earth. This promise has direct links to the declaration in Revelation 21:4-5 where Jesus says He is making 'everything new'.¹⁸

Following on from this renewed creation, there is a focus on the city of Jerusalem and the life of blessing experienced within the city.¹⁹ As we can see Jerusalem has been renewed, not destroyed and replaced by something 'entirely new'. This work of renewing creation 'reorders' the world in which the wolf now befriends the lamb.²⁰ Things that once were in opposition to each other have become reconciled. This gives the prophet reason for gladness and joy as even the Lord 'Himself' rejoices (verse 19). Not only has death been defeated but all of creation has been restored to its original function and purpose.

¹⁷ It's possible that when Jesus references the 'sons of light' in John 12:36 and in Luke 16:8 He is engaging in a polemic against the Dead Sea community at Qumran. The people at Qumran considered themselves to be the sons of light and refused to associate with others whom they termed the sons of darkness.

¹⁸ In the hebraic perspective, a new heaven and a new earth does not denote destruction of the previous heaven or earth. Rather the adjective 'new' is in the sense of 'renewed'. This is reflected in Paul when he says that even creation groans for its redemption ... not its destruction. The Hebraic expectation is for the old to be made new (renewed) and not cast aside.

¹⁹ In Hebraic perspective the life of blessing awarded to Jerusalem would then spill over to the whole world. In Jewish thought what affects the individual will inevitably affect the whole community, a little leaven will eventually leaven the whole dough. A tradition arose then that prayers for individuals should be extended to the community. For example in the blessing called 'grace after meals' you thank God for the food you have just consumed and thank the lord for the food He provides everyone else, even if they can't be bothered to return thanks for the food they consumed. When praying for healing, say for a broken leg, you would extend the prayer to include all people who have broken legs. Thus the reference in verse 25 in which only 'my holy mountain' is the place where all things are reconciled is probably best understood as having universal application. That is, reconciliation between God and Zion will spill over from God's holy mountain in Jerusalem to the whole world.

²⁰ Both Isaiah 11 and 65 speak of the wolf laying down with the lamb. Either through abbreviation or mixing metaphors, this is commonly misquoted as the lion laying down with the lamb.

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In reiteration then when Isaiah (and other prophets) point towards the new creation; what is being described is never 'other worldly' or 'overtly spiritual',²¹ but rather the prophets see creation itself as being restored and renewed to its original purpose. This is the very point Paul makes so eloquently in Romans 8:21 that, 'creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God'. The Biblical response to the prophetic images of the new creation should be joy and gladness and not fear and trembling.

John 3:22-30. The location of Aenon (which sounds very close to the Hebrew word 'springs' and explains the phrase, 'much water' which would have been needed for baptisms) is unknown. In his writings, Eusebius the historian placed Aenon near Beit Shean, which is a city south of the Galilee, while the Madaba Map in Jordan located it lower down near Jericho. In either case John and Jesus have separated since Jesus' baptism but both continue to minister and baptize. Jesus appears to be in the Galilee region of the Jordan at this time and is becoming popular. John's humble response to hearing reports of the burgeoning ministry of his cousin is a life lesson for us all. John says, 'A person can receive only what is given them from heaven'. John's attitude is that everything, including his own ministry, is a gift from God and has to be received with gratefulness and joy. John reminds his disciples that he himself is only the forerunner of the Messiah and that his role was now to decrease, that is become less visible and Jesus becomes more prominent.

Further reading.

²¹ Gnostic beliefs were prominent in the first centuries. This prompted the early church leadership to start the Creed with, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven *and earth*, and *of all things visible* and invisible." But gnostic beliefs can creep into our own lives as well when we forget that God made the earth and all that is in it. How can light or stars or water be good? He made it good and it will be renewed—made good again. Too often, Christians love the spiritual but are practical atheists when it comes to the mundane.