

The Mysteries of Christmas

Many MILLENNIA, Many MYSTERIES,
ONE MESSIAH

A devotion booklet produced by Martin Luther College

The coming of Jesus has always been shrouded in mystery. In his first coming, as a baby in Bethlehem, thousands of years of mysterious promises were resolved and realized—and not always in ways God's people expected. His second coming—at the End of All Things—is also shrouded in mystery. No one even knows the day or hour he'll reappear.

We hope you enjoy these 25 Advent meditations that look back on the mysteries of the Messiah's first coming and look ahead to the mysteries of his second.

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The **Jystery**OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. Isaiah 64:4

The Lord is the one and only God: "This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6). The gods of the enemies of God's Old Testament people were only idols of "gold or silver or stone" crafted "by human design and skill" (Acts 17:29), lifeless images that personified the forces of nature in a futile attempt to make sense of life. "See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion" (Isaiah 41:29).

What Isaiah writes in the verse we are considering today includes that foundational truth that the true God is the only God there is; there are no other gods. Isaiah builds on that foundation with the thought that God alone "acts on behalf of those who wait for him." He is the only God who exists, and he is unlike any god of a religion with human origins because he intervenes for those who believe in him.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about "God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our

glory before time began" (1 Corinthians 2:7). He then echoed what Isaiah wrote to reflect on that mystery: "'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived'—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Revealed to us by God's Spirit is the mystery of the gospel. As a result, we do not cower before an angry god who demands sacrifices and good deeds out of us to atone for our sins. Instead, we bow in amazement before the God who acts in love and mercy.

He acted 2,000 years ago when the Son took on our flesh to live a perfect life in our place and die on a cross to pay the wages of our sin. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, and his resurrection demonstrates that the sin of the world has been taken away. That mystery is divine!

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, prepare a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart, made clean and new, a quiet chamber kept for you. Amen. [CW 331:13]

The Mystery OF GOD'S LOVE

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. . . . Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people. Isaiah 64:6,9

We have just entered the final month of the year. And with another calendar year drawing to a close, we have an opportunity to reflect on what has passed. What are the events that come to mind as you think back? No doubt there were some fun times, gatherings with family, achievements at work, making new friends. But as you think about it, some negative events might come to mind too.

In fact, it probably is easier to reflect on our failings than our accomplishments. And that's because, as Isaiah reminds us, everyone has been corrupted by sin. All our best attempts to do as God wills are filthy. Every act by our sinful nature is an act against our perfect God. Because of who we are by birth, we are filthy before God.

But Isaiah reminds us about the mystery of God's love—that through the gift of his Son Jesus, he has removed our sin.

We cry out to a God who hears us: "Don't remember our sins." And how much better

this is than God simply forgetting our sin. The omniscient God, who knows all things, chooses *not to remember* our failings.

One thing he does remember, though, is who we are. We are his people. He made us so in our baptism. Just as the Savior born in Bethlehem is God's own Son, we too are part of God's own family.

It is not because of who we are by birth, but because of what God has made us, that now we are his people. We have been washed clean in God's sight. The same grace, mercy, and love that led him to send his Son into this world of sin to free us from it is with us each day. That is the depth of the mystery of God's love.

Dear Father in heaven, we praise you for the displays of love that you have lavished upon this world. Through the work of Christ, you do not see us as filthy. Rather, you see us as clothed with Jesus' righteousness. Amen.

OF CHRIST'S SECOND COMING

Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:7-8

Throughout history, numerous groups have predicted the second coming of Christ—only to be proven wrong when the date passed by without incident. Such predictions began early among Christians: three theologians long ago predicted it would be 500 A.D. Currently, some are saying Jesus will return on April 8, 2024, the day of a solar eclipse scheduled to darken much of North America. We'll see.

When will Jesus return? Perhaps a better question is, "Is this the big question of the Bible?" It is not. Jesus has already told us that no one will ever know. Sure, we can read the "signs of the times" and conclude, "It has to be soon!" But then again, Christians of every age have said that.

St. Paul never obsessed over the date of Jesus' return. Rather, Paul lived and worked as if Jesus were coming back *today*, and by the Holy Spirit he encouraged both the Corinthians and us to trust in Christ and live according to God's will, eagerly looking for Jesus' return.

Like Paul, we need not trouble ourselves with the mystery of Jesus' *second* coming. Why not? Because of another wonderful mystery: how Jesus *already comes to us to make us ready to meet him.*

He comes quietly through the simple waters of baptism to forgive our sins and give us his Holy Spirit. He comes quietly through bread and wine to increase our faith, hope, and love. He comes by his Spirit through his Word, the Bible, where he teaches us to put our trust in him. At the same time the Spirit gives God's people spiritual gifts so we can live in a sin-sick world, serving everyone we know and meet in genuine Christian love.

In the quiet confidence of Christian faith, we know that our powerful and merciful God "will keep [us] firm to the end, so that [we] will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus is coming soon, that's for sure. But he also comes to us today, to make us ready to meet him, whenever that may be.

Dear Lord Jesus, your saints are waiting patiently! Come, Mighty Judge, and set us free from every evil. Amen.

The **Jystery**OF THE MIND OF GOD

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives. Colossians 1:9

Perhaps you have experienced joy at unwrapping a present, followed by disappointment as you read "Batteries not included" on the box. The package is incomplete. You have this wonderful new item, but it won't work unless you do more.

Some early Christians had a similar, but wrong, impression about the gospel. They thought that additional special or secret knowledge was required—beyond the clear teaching of the Bible. In other words, "Believe in Jesus, but also do more."

We know the Bible is complete. In its pages we learn about our state as sinners, our need for a Savior, and the salvation God provided through the work of Jesus. No additional work or knowledge is required for us to be saved. It is already finished. God's will for us is that we would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and that we would then engage in Christian living, loving the Lord our God and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

In response to that simple but powerful message of God's grace, we want to learn more by being in the Word at every opportunity. We gladly study the Bible to grow in our faith and understanding of God's will, and we do so knowing that the message is complete.

In his Word, God both encourages us to pray for wisdom and promises to grant that request. We also have the example to pray for each other as we study the Scriptures and grow in understanding.

What a joy it is to know that there is nothing left to do, no secret to uncover. Everything we need for salvation has already been given to us. The package that arrived on the first Christmas was complete, and fully powered for our salvation.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of full and free salvation. Thank you for your Word, which proclaims this message and is powerful to save. Increase in us the desire to study your Word and generously grant us wisdom and understanding through your Spirit. Amen.

A Mystery EVEN FOR JESUS

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Mark 13:32

In these words of our Savior, we encounter one of the most mind-bending phrases in all of Scripture: "nor the Son."

Jesus had just been instructing his disciples about the signs of the end times (wars, natural disasters, persecution), so that they might be prepared. And then, as if anticipating their natural follow-up question—"When will you return to judge the world?"—Jesus says that only the Father has that knowledge. No person knows, no angel knows . . . "nor the Son."

What a mystery! How can the Son, who is true God and whom the church confesses to be coequal with the Father, not know about the precise date and time of the world's end?

Christian theologians over the centuries have devoted much time and attention to explaining this difficult passage. Though no short devotion can plumb the doctrinal depths contained in these words, we can give a basic summary: This statement of Jesus does *not* indicate that the Son is inferior to the Father. As Christ said to his disciples, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Rather, the second person of the Triune God, by taking on a human nature, did not always make

full use of his divine attributes. Put another way, the incarnate Son of God *chose* to forego aspects of his power as God, including knowledge about the end of the world.

In this profound theological truth, there are two key lessons:

First, we can marvel at our Savior's humility on our behalf. Though "in very nature God, [he] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage" (Philippians 2:6). The Son, though fully God, submitted to his Father's will by taking on human flesh, by refraining from certain uses of his divine power and knowledge, and by suffering and dying for the sins of the world.

Second, when contemplating Christ's return, we can focus on what is most important. If Jesus himself did not need to know the day or hour, neither do we. Instead, our Lord asks us to be prepared: by hearing God's Word, by partaking in the Sacrament, and by living "holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God" (2 Peter 3:11-12).

Dearest Jesus, we praise you for the mystery of the incarnation through which you accomplished our salvation. Prepare us for your return through your means of grace. Amen.

Ready for the **Jystery's**REVEAL

Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. Mark 13:33-36

Ever since the first day of creation, there has been night and day. There has been time. God in his wisdom gave us a way to tell when day was coming (sunrise) or was about to go (sunset). He even gave us the sun, moon, and stars to help us further understand times and seasons.

Because of that, we are acutely aware of time. We are aware of when things start and when they end. When a woman becomes pregnant, the doctors give her a due date. When a person starts a job, they are told when a shift begins and ends. Most party invitations tell you at least when to come, and some even tell you when the party will be over. Throughout our lives we are constantly aware of the time. More to our point, we are aware of when something is going to end.

In Mark 13 we are encouraged not to be so concerned about when the party will end. It might last longer—one more karaoke! When the shift is over, a last-minute order might need to be filled. Though the due date is set, the baby could be early or late.

We are encouraged to be vigilant, staying in his Word. We are to do the work that God has called us to do, which he has prepared for us to do, during our shift. We are blessed to enjoy the party until God calls us home, according to his will.

And Jesus was the long-awaited baby that God sent when the time had fully come. He promised to return, and it will be on God's time.

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending our Savior at the right time. Through your Spirit keep us strong in our faith and trust in you. Lord, help us to stay watchful, patiently waiting for your return. Amen.



The REDEMPTION Lystery

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. Isaiah 40:1-2

What could be more devastating than the Fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.? God allowed his own worship center to be wiped off the face of the earth. On this city and in its temple, the King of the universe had placed his holy name and most revealed his magnificent heart.

When those walls came down and smoke billowed out, people surely thought, "So it's over? It's really done?"

Isaiah had prophesied the event. As a people far from God, they had it coming.

I imagine in the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem, the few, the broken-hearted believers—the true Israel within Israel—opening the scroll of Isaiah. "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.

A single Hebrew letter turns the word "people" to "*my* people." An astonishing thing. He claimed them for himself. He would redeem them. He would buy them back.

The words above include "three deep breaths" that preview Isaiah 40-66. This pain would not last forever. Their debt would be paid.

All they had lost would be restored beyond imagining.

How can such things be? You know.

Simeon haunted the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem some six centuries later, an old soul waiting for "the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). One day Comfort filled his arms. Holding the Christ Child, he prophesied the piercing of Mary's soul.

When Jesus died in agony and shame, his friends surely thought, "So it's over? So it's really done?" If only they, so devastated, had the grace to lean on Jesus' promise and wait in hope for Sunday morning. "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19).

"Comfort my people" is the sacred impulse, the grand imperative, the new, mysterious thing released in the world by the rising of its Redeemer. He is making all things new. He has revealed our God to his very heart.

In classrooms and sanctuaries, nursing homes and funeral homes, at our supper tables and at the bedsides of our children: "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.

Holy Spirit, break our hearts over the evil within us that there might be true comfort. Heal us in the deepest place by the fact of our redemption through our living Lord Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Mysterious PREPARATIONS

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Isaiah 40:3

Seven hundred years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah the prophet penned these words. He wrote in a time when a nation's vital signs—its laws and armies, courts and borders, taxes and tolls, pride and prestige—were tied tightly to its leader, often a king. Everything good (or bad) about a nation was an extension of its king.

Consider the challenge of this job in an age when communication often moved no faster than a man could run. Ordinary people seldom roamed far from the villages that had borne them and the property that fed them. On map and in mind, the king could seem remote from his subjects. He needed to see firsthand the land he ruled and—probably as important—to be seen up close by his people. A king needed to travel about his realm.

That was no casual walkabout. Advance men hurried ahead to herald the king's coming. They prompted the locals to prepare in big ways, one of which was to smooth the king's route to a royal standard. His subjects honored their king by leveling hills and filling valleys. They turned twisted, buckled paths into straight, flat highways.

By the Holy Spirit's inspiration, Isaiah evoked such images to prophesy preparation for the coming of the world's Savior. The focus here is on the advance man, the herald. All four gospels record John the Baptizer as the fulfillment of Isaiah's words. This identification was not a retrospective insight reached long after the Baptizer's death. In real time John himself was keenly aware of his role. Isaiah's words were John's credentials: "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (John 1:23).

So John's whole ministry was road construction season; he made highways to hearts. His tools were few, but they were power tools, words forged and wielded by the Spirit's strength. John preached repentance; he called sinners sinners. With God's law he flattened mountains of pretend piety and buried valleys of vain self-regard. Souls were made ready to hear this herald shout the Good News, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John opened a straight road for his King and Savior, a highway for our God.

Holy Spirit, use your Word to make my heart a smooth and straight highway to receive my Savior King. Amen.

The Mystery OF TIME

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:8-9

An Advent calendar is a great opportunity to learn about the mysteries of God, time, and numbers. As we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, we pull open the 25 or so flaps on the calendar, one each day. God reveals his gifts through time and numbers.

What would a Second Advent calendar look like, as we wait for Jesus to come again? Well, there would be 730,000 tabs and counting. Each morning for 2,000 years, people have opened the day wondering, "Is it today? . . . Will it happen today? . . . How long before the promise is fulfilled?"

The wife says, "How long before my husband finally notices?" The father says, "How many more days do I have to put up with this job?" The child says, "How many more days before I get to open my presents?" The scoffer says, "How many more flaps until they realize it just ain't gonna happen?" (This last example was the prompt for this passage in Peter's letter; some were saying Jesus would never come again.)

Lord, 730,000 is a lot of flaps. Why so many?

The last sentence of the Bible passage above tells us about God's sense of time and its purpose. He is not slow, but patient, giving everyone time to repent and be saved.

Tomorrow morning when you pull open the 730,001st tab, behind it will be the name of the next person God wants to have a new mind, a new heart, a new life.

How can that happen? God's wonderful sense of numbers tells us: for an infinity of sins, Jesus suffered one horrible black day on the cross. For an eternity of bright mornings, there is one empty tomb. One righteous act is a thousand perfect years. For a thousand questions, there is a one-Word answer.

Ah, I'm a child again. I look forward to opening my presents: tab #730,002, #730,003 . . .

Dear Lord, may we open each day seeing your patience and purpose. A thousand years is not too long for your grace, and a single day is not too short. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:4

Malachi's prophecy contains this message: "'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty" (3:1).

Believers took God's pronouncement at face value—it will be obvious, they thought, when the "messenger of the covenant," the Lord himself, comes to earth as God has promised. There will be some advance notice.

The prophet heightened anticipation by adding the word "suddenly" in the mix. That news was great! But . . . how long would they need to wait? And how clear would it be that the Lord had arrived?

In some of his final words, Malachi added another clue from God: "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes" (4:5). I'm not sure that anyone at Malachi's time sensed that they would have to wait about 400 years before "the Elijah" would come.

During the time of Emperor Tiberius, the mystery was revealed: John the Baptist was the "messenger" and the "Elijah" about whom Malachi prophesied. He was the "voice" who fulfilled the message of Isaiah (40:3).

John pointed to his earthly relative, Jesus from Nazareth, as the very "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus returned the favor and confirmed that John was "the Elijah" whose call to repentance had God's authority behind it (Matthew 11:10-19).

Because centuries had passed since the time of the prophets, some sort of public announcement that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's divine plan seemed right and relevant. Not everyone perceived that the Messiah from heaven would appear as a humble and ordinary human being, or that the King's mighty power would be exercised through words, not weapons.

John's prophetic mission was very similar to that of the Old Testament prophets before him: spiritual renewal. That is how the prophets speak to us still today. They hold up the signs that say, "Stop sinning . . . stop walking the wrong way!" They guide us in the way of righteousness: "Jesus forgives. . . . Follow him!" By the washing of water, John made God's divine intentions clear. Jesus was our brother indeed, on a heavenly mission to rescue and purify us from all sin.

Dear Lord, keep us patient as we wait for you. Amen.



A *Lystery:*FREEDOM FOR THE CAPTIVES

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. Isaiah 61:1

Article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention, designed to safeguard prisoners of war, underscores the demand for humane treatment. POWs must "at all times be humanely treated." They "must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence and intimidation," and "measures of reprisal against POWs are prohibited."

You and I were once prisoners of war. We were imprisoned by our sinful natures, with us since conception, urging us to sin and then convincing us we are unforgivable and unlovable, especially by a righteous God who demands perfection.

And yet the prophet Isaiah shares with us in today's reading the promise of "freedom for the captives and release . . . for the prisoners." This is not just a release from Babylon (Israel's captors at this time in history). The prophet here speaks of freedom from sin, from spiritual death, and from the power of the devil.

Jesus Christ, God's Son, promised in the Old Testament, promised through the

ages, came and won freedom for us and for the whole world. This is good news worth proclaiming to those who may still be seeking a "release from darkness."

Jesus is our Article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention. He treats us not as our sins deserve, but offers instead the full and free forgiveness won by his death on the cross. Those who believe in this once-for-all sacrifice are at all times protected from the violence and intimidation of the devil and his evil angels. There can be no reprisal from God either. He treats believers in accordance with how he sees them: through the lens of the guiltless Son he sent to save us.

In Christ, there is no mystery. We are free from spiritual death. We are released from the darkness of sin. We are no longer prisoners of the devil. To God be the glory!

Lord God, protector and preserver, we acknowledge we are imprisoned by sin. We thank you for the freedom from captivity afforded us through Jesus. Now, according to your will, grant us an unwavering faith in Jesus and the privilege of sharing his message of liberation and redemption. Amen.

A *ystery:* THE BINDING OF THE BROKEN-HEARTED

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. Isaiah 61:1

People are often wrong about what will provide authentic hope and healing.

In ancient Rome, the suggested remedy for rabies was to apply raw beef and drink hog's fat. Third-century doctors treated malaria with a paper bib featuring the magic word "Abracadabra." Not so long ago, doctors recommended cigarettes for asthma relief.

In today's reading, Isaiah describes Israel as an ailing nation. In sin, they refused to allow their loving Creator to guide their lives. As a result, the whole community was like a patient covered in wounds and festering sores. From the outside, foreign invaders bruised and battered their borders. On the inside, open rebellion against God and his will led to stony, broken hearts.

We share sin's symptoms with God's people from 3,000 years ago. We too stumble through this world covered with spiritual open sores. Loneliness. Anxiety. Envy. Indifference. Doubt. Rebellion. Like Isaiah's hearers, we reject God's guidance as outdated or irrelevant. Like them, we often devour mankind's fickle prescriptions for contentment and peace. Divorced from

Scriptural truth, these earthly therapies are empty. We so easily discard heaven-sent medicine and try to mend broken hearts with lard and tobacco.

When they refused the Lord's instructions, Israel earned defeat by foreign invaders. For generations, most of God's people were hostages in a faraway land. Because of our sins, we each deserve a more permanent penalty. Hell. Eternity apart from God. A fatal, inescapable, broken heart. This would be the just punishment for our willful disobedience.

But in Chapter 61, Isaiah promises one absolute antidote: Jesus Christ. What does the prophet mean when he says the Son of God is coming to bind our broken hearts? Fully divine and fully human, Jesus alone bandages our spiritual sores. His holy life and undeserved death on the cross repair the damage this world cannot. Only his perfect innocence provides the everlasting comfort we require. His sacrifice brings genuine healing to the helpless. His Easter triumph over the grave cures us completely and invites us into heaven forever. These miracles are the blessed mystery that we welcome anew each Advent.

Your cross, O Christ, is my sole source of spiritual health. Take me there to recognize my weakness. Let me leave filled with the strength you won for me. Amen.

A CROWN OF ASHES, A CROWN OF BEAUTY

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me... [to] provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Isaiah 61:1a, 3

Remember when you drew the manger scene in school or Sunday school? What did you put over the heads of the Baby Jesus, the angels, and maybe even over Mary and Joseph? It was a circle, sort of tipped on its side, called a halo.

Halo comes from Greek for threshing floor: a circular, slightly sloping area kept very clean, around which slaves or oxen walked to thresh grain. Halo eventually came to mean a divine, bright disk.

Today Isaiah proclaims that Jesus exchanges the Satan-serving horns I've worn since conception with such a halo. "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me [Jesus] . . . to proclaim good news to the poor [like me] . . . [to] provide for those who grieve in Zion [like me]: to bestow on [me] a [halo] instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

Ashes on my head signify mourning over my sinful state, sorrow over the glory of God that I've despised and discarded, unworthiness as I fall terrified before Yahweh Almighty. Yet because of his great love and compassion for me, Jesus wraps me in his perfect life, which he lived in my place. When Yahweh looks at me, he doesn't see my ungrateful heart, lustful lingering, and feigned obedience. Instead, his courtroom gavel resounds with the exact opposite of what I deserve to hear: "Sinless! Perfect! Acquitted!"—in Jesus, through Jesus, because of Jesus.

Halos in your manger scene artwork reminded you that Jesus and angels are holy. "But how can Isaiah tell me I'm wearing a halo," you wonder, "when clearly, I'm not holy?" That's Isaiah's Christmas message. In fact, Scripture's central message is *justification*—Jesus places his halo on us—joy instead of sorrow, victory instead of defeat, God for us and God with us, right now and forever.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for [me], so that in him [I] might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Christ, our Lord and Savior dear, bless us and be near us.
Grant us now a glad new year.
Amen, Jesus, hear us. [CW 332:4]

AMystery:

RIGHTEOUSNESS SPRINGS FORTH

For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. Isaiah 61:11

During the season of Advent, the landscape in southern Minnesota, where Martin Luther College is located, looks dead. It's frozen hard, and the plants are barren and brown. But in April or May, a miracle occurs that can be described but not fully explained. Farmers take dry, hard corn seeds and put them in the warming soil. Within days a green haze covers the black field. In a few weeks the plants are robust, and by midsummer they reach eight to ten feet, with each ear containing up to 800 new seeds. From previously barren soil, a bountiful harvest springs forth.

The prophet Isaiah used the mystery of a seed to illustrate the miracle of God's grace to the people of Judah. He explained that their hearts were dead in sin and unbelief. They had turned their backs on God, their worship was mindless ritual, and there was no justice in the land. Yet, from out of these sinful people, God would send a righteous Savior who would take away the sins of the whole world. This prophecy of righteousness for all nations was fulfilled about 700 years later through the sinless life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus.

Isaiah's prophecy also speaks to us today as God cultivates righteousness in our hearts and lives. Like the people Isaiah served, we too are dead in sin and unbelief (Ephesians 2:1) with hearts of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). But God plants the gospel of Jesus in our hearts through baptism and his Word. In a miraculous moment that we can describe but not fully understand, God gives us Jesus' righteousness and plants his love in our hearts. In turn, we share God's love with others in our daily lives. God's name is praised whenever and wherever these miracles happen.

Christmas is the celebration of God sending his sinless Son so that righteousness and praise can spring forth in all who put their trust in him. May our Advent meditations in God's Word reap an abundant harvest of righteousness in our hearts and lives.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your perfect Son to be our righteous Savior. Plant your Word deep in our hearts so that it bears an abundant harvest of love and righteousness that brings praise and honor to your name. Amen.

A Mystery: THE PROPHETS WAIT

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. 1 Peter 1:10-11

What was it like to be an inspired prophet of God? Moved by the Holy Spirit, you preach good news of what's coming: the grace God intended for his people—the salvation of their souls. But even *you* don't fully grasp all the details of your message! Only God fully grasps what he revealed to you and through you. You won't fully understand until the Word—your word, God's Word—is fulfilled.

And so you wait. But you also search—intently and with great care. You attend to every word the Spirit of Christ in you has spoken. You search for any hints or clues that might shed light on what exactly is coming. When will it be? How will it look?

Isn't this amazing? Even as God's mouthpieces, the prophets didn't fully understand every detail of their messages. And so they searched—intently and with great care.

How does this inform *our* approach to Holy Scripture? Do we engage in the prophets' inspired words not only with our ears, but also with our minds and our hearts? Do we grasp this good news God gives us in his grace?

True, not all the details are easy to understand, especially those foretelling future events. But the core is there and it's clear. The Spirit of Christ in his prophets predicted "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." That core is crucial. It assures me that my gracious God has saved my soul. The sufferings of Christ saved me from my sin. His following glories are therefore also mine. This is crucial for me to grasp whenever I suffer.

Peter writes this for Christians like me who "now for a little while . . . may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6). He reminds me that whatever I suffer now cannot change my blessed status or my eternal destiny. Thanks be to Jesus!

Dear Father, tune me in to your prophets' words. In their words let me more fully grasp my salvation in Christ—the mysterious and marvelous gift of your grace. Amen.

A *Jystery:* EVEN THE ANGELS WAIT

Even angels long to look into these things. 1 Peter 1:12b

Who are the angels? They are not Clarence from *It's a Wonderful Life*. Angels are supernaturally strong. One angel of God destroyed an army of 185,000 men in one night. They appear at almost every major event in Bible history. And most importantly, they were created to glorify God by serving. And yet, as powerful and knowledgeable as angels are, they are presented more like children, standing in wonder at what God is doing.

If they were not perfect, it might have seemed all backward to the angels in heaven. They lived to serve Jesus. You would have thought they might be a little perturbed about trading the choir loft in heaven for the dung-filled air of Bethlehem's field. Yet they cried out their praise with so much excitement that the sky ripped open! And there, together with Mary and Joseph, was Jesus, the only one to ever trade heaven for earth. "How wonderful!" they thought. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!" they exclaimed. "What will he do next?" they wondered. Or as the apostle Peter put it, "Even angels long to look into these things."

As the mystery of God's plan of salvation was unfolding, the angels longed to know what came next. At each step they attended Jesus, from the cradle all the way to the cross, where the 12 legions Jesus could have called in the Garden of Gethsemane could only stand idle, the Father's hand holding them back. How wonderful!

Think about this. The angels longed to look into God's plan for humanity. And they did not even need the salvation they longed to look into! Friends, how much more will we! We are the beneficiaries of this wonderful mystery. Stand in awe with the angels at what he has done. He entered into history to save you. This Advent, imitate the childlike wonder of the angels as God reveals the mystery of your salvation in the cradle of Bethlehem.

O Jesus Christ, your manger is my paradise at which I am reclining For there, O Lord, we find the Word made flesh for us your grace is brightly shining." [CW 342:1]

O Jesus, work in me the wonder of the angels at your gift to me this Christmas season. Let each day be another day that I marvel at your grace. Amen.

A Justery: THE FATHOMLESS FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. 1 Thessalonians 5:24

Benjamin Franklin observed, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." The apostle Paul points to something even more certain. He reminds us that God keeps all of his promises. If he says that he will do something, he will do it. He is absolutely faithful.

Paul highlights God's faithfulness in our lesson for today. After describing the future glory of those who have died in Christ (4:13-18), he alerts us to the coming Day of Judgment and urges us to be ready (5:1-11). To prepare for that day, he encourages us to support one another and to remain faithful to God's Word (5:12-23). He then promises, "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (5:24). In other words, you are ready for that day through faith in Jesus. God has promised to keep you in that faith until then. God always keeps his promises (5:23-24).

We cannot fathom such faithfulness. It stands in stark contrast to our faithlessness. We daily grumble and complain about what God gives us. We frequently rebel against what he wants for us. We repeatedly fail to fear, love, and trust in him above all things. For this reason, we cannot grasp why God remains devoted to us.

Nevertheless, we have the assurance that "the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." Whatever God has promised us, he will do it. Are you troubled about your sins? He promises that, through the cleansing blood of Christ, he will "forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Are you burdened with guilt, pain, or trouble? He promises, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Are you facing an uncertain future? He promises to hear our prayers (Matthew 7:7) and work for our good in all things (Romans 8:28).

Indeed, while we still live in this world, we can expect difficult things like death and taxes. But because of our crucified and risen Lord, we also can count on God's good promises. "For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations" (Psalm 100:5).

Lord God, we praise you for keeping all your good promises. May your faithful love keep us devoted to you until your return. Amen. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, 24

I'm typically skeptical about ordering things from eBay. Is it really going to be what's pictured? I've gotten burned before. Just recently, I steered my daughter away from ordering a pair of expensive Nike shoes. But she insisted that we still order them. She argued that there's an Authenticity Guarantee when you buy these shoes. We don't pay unless they're deemed real. It means that before we pay, the eBay seller sends the shoes to the sneaker authentication facility. Upon arrival, the "sneaker-head" experts verify and certify that the shoes are really authentic.

Are you this "eBay-meticulous" in your life? We reside in a world that's filled with a constant stream of information that proclaims itself truthful. From information on our devices to our conversations with people, do we immediately believe information, or do we test it first? Truthfully, I find myself more often consuming the things I see and hear rather than testing them according to the truths in God's Word.

In our reading, the apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, reminds us to "test them all" according to God's Word instead of accepting cheap and false alternatives. As we journey through Advent today, the world preaches many false ideas about the child lying in that manger. So what is the authentic truth? How do I guarantee it? God's holy, inerrant Word is the only place to accurately authenticate truth. God's given us the tools in his Word to compare, verify, and certify fact as opposed to fiction. When we do this, God says he will "sanctify you through and through," and keep you "blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

My daughter never got her eBay shoes. The seller sent them to the sneaker authentication facility. They failed. They were fakes. Later, she purchased another pair straight from Nike. Those were authentic. However, fake or real, the authenticity of her new shoes can't assure her of eternal life. Without authentic faith in God's prophecies, we can't stroll into heaven. Keep authenticating what you hear this Christmastime about that Christ Child to assure that you are enjoying the truth of that baby born for the forgiveness of all of your sins.

Lord, help me to test everything this Christmas according to what you have revealed to me in your holy Word. Amen. He [John] himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. . . . The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:8, 29

Still looking for that perfect Christmas gift? Wouldn't it be great if you could find that one gift that would be perfect for everyone on your list? Well, God did, and it's the one gift that's perfect for everyone. What is that gift? It's a lamb.

Standing on the banks of the Jordan River in ancient Israel, John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

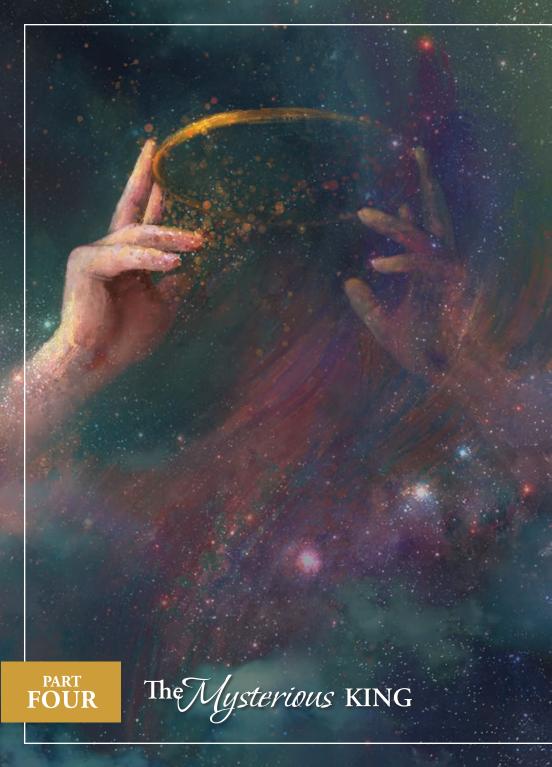
Now, why would John call Jesus—the one who was God's Son and who became also a true human being on that first Christmas Eve—a lamb? The Old Testament solves this mystery for us. God had designated that lambs, innocent male lambs, be used as sacrifices. The many lambs that were sacrificed pointed to Jesus, the sinless male, who was going to sacrifice himself on the cross to pay for the sins of the world. Seven hundred years before it happened, Isaiah prophesied, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity

of us all. He . . . was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:6-7).

That truth about Jesus shines like a bright Christmas light in this sin-darkened world. The light of that truth enables us to see that because of Jesus' sacrifice, we have freedom from sin's guilt and power, the assurance of God's blessing in this life, and the guarantee of a place in heaven when this life is over. What a blessing it is that God in grace had John the Baptist's testimony about that light recorded for us in his Holy Word.

When it comes to spiritual Christmas shopping, we don't have to shop around. God in grace has given us the perfect gift: Jesus, his Lamb, our Savior. It's the one gift that's perfect for you and me and everyone else. Don't hesitate to regift it as the opportunity presents itself.

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us that perfect Christmas gift, your Son, and for revealing to us that he is also your Lamb who has taken away the sin of the world. Amen.



DAVID'S Mystery

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. 2 Samuel 7:12

Imagine if God had given this promise to George Washington: "You will have a descendant who will be the president of the United States forever." Such a promise would be baffling, and its fulfillment would be a mystery—something obscure and arousing curiosity. But anyone who trusted God's promises would keep track of George Washington's descendants, watching to see how the strange promise would be fulfilled.

This is exactly what happened with King David. About 1,000 B.C., God told David that he would have a descendant who would take over his kingdom and rule forever. Part of this prophecy found fulfillment in Solomon—David's son who succeeded him and built the temple in Jerusalem. But Solomon didn't rule forever. So it was evident that the prophecy ultimately had to refer to someone greater—to the coming Messiah. "David" or the "Son of David" became a messianic title among God's Old Testament people.

Still, the fulfillment was a mystery. When and how would it happen? For several centuries, David did have descendants who ruled on the throne in Jerusalem, but all of them died.

After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., no descendant of David ever ruled as a king in Jerusalem again.

Finally it all fell into place when Jesus was born and carried out his saving work. Both genealogies of Jesus in the New Testament trace the human ancestry of Jesus back to David (Matthew 1 and Luke 3). Yet Jesus rules forever as the eternal Son of God. Significantly, Jesus is called the "Son of David" 17 times in the New Testament, indicating that he is the fulfillment of 2 Samuel 7.

As New Testament Christians, we know the specifics about this Son of David and his kingdom. We don't deserve to be in his kingdom because we are unworthy sinners. But Jesus suffered for our sins on the cross. He rose and ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he promises to bring us for an eternity of blessedness. We are in this kingdom by God's grace through faith.

Lord God, thank you for raising up an offspring of King David just as you promised, and for bringing us into the splendid, eternal kingdom of our Savior Jesus. Draw us closer to him in this blessed season. Amen.

A FAMILY Mystery

I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. 2 Samuel 7:14

Emperors and kings of old and modern-day royals in many nations concern themselves with questions of succession. Who will be the heir to the throne? Who will keep the dynasty alive? Who will carry on the family legacy?

Early in his reign over Israel, the famous King David may have been mulling over these very same questions. It was then that the Lord came to the prophet Nathan in a vision and told him to share a message with the king. The message was a covenant, or promise, that God was making to David concerning his line of succession: "I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands."

David's immediate successor, his son Solomon, would indeed follow in his father's footsteps, leading the nation of Israel, expanding their power, and building an amazing temple to the Lord. Though David's family would eventually lose their grip on the throne, his royal bloodline would continue for 1,000 years, all the way to a young peasant woman named Mary, who would give birth to another Son of David, Jesus.

When we hear God's promise to David concerning his heir, "I will be his father, and he will be my son," we can be certain that he is referring not only to Solomon, but also to the Son whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

God promised that "when he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands," but Jesus never sinned. Instead, our Savior Jesus would exchange his life of perfection for our lives of sin, taking all the punishment David, Solomon, and we deserve by enduring the floggings inflicted by human hands and dying a painful but innocent death on the cross. His ensuing resurrection Easter Sunday confirms his status as the King of all creation and ruler over sin, death, and the power of hell.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the awesome and mysterious way you kept your promises to David that our Savior, your Son Jesus, would be his descendant. Forgive us for our selfish worrying and help us to focus on the amazing way that life plays out just the way you design. Amen.

A KINGDOM Mystery

He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 2 Samuel 7:13

You can visit a website that animates the history of Europe for the past 2,400 years (visualcapitalist.com/2400-years-of-european-history/). The site depicts the changes in Europe and Eurasia in one-year increments, starting from 400 B.C.—and there is an enormous amount of change! Geography, borders, invasions, tribes, names, languages . . . so much change. Watching this animation makes one thing perfectly clear: the kingdoms of this world never endure.

David sat in his newly constructed palace full of the finest and best. He looked around at his cedar-paneled walls, and he started to think: Here he was, living in his beautiful palace, but Yahweh proclaimed his name from a wind-blown tent. Surely, he, King David, would build a house, a temple, for the Lord!

But the Lord neither needed nor wanted building help from David. David would not build a house for the Lord; rather, the Lord would build David's house. The Lord promised to raise up one of David's descendants who would build a house for the proclamation of the Lord's saving name. This descendant would inherit an eternal throne, and the Lord would establish his kingdom forever.

The kingdom of God is not a territory. It's not an outward organization with various departments and offices and bureaus. It's not a realm with castles and borders. Rather, it is a rule. It is activity. It is all that our Savior God does for our salvation and life. It is the Lord ruling in our hearts and lives through the gospel.

And God's kingly rule will endure forever. The Son of David whom God sent to this world was born to be mankind's substitute, to become The Sinner on behalf of all sinners, to endure the punishment of sin in our place, to die for sin once and for everyone. He accomplished this great redemption, and then God raised him from the dead as proof that God has forgiven us. God raised Jesus to forever life to share that forever life with us. Unlike the kingdoms of this world, God's rule in our hearts and lives never ends. And that means his love for us, his kindness to us, and his joy in us—and ours in him—will never end.

Rule my heart and life, dear Lord, so that I find strength in your forgiveness now and joy in your eternal life in heaven. Amen.

A Mystery HIDDEN, NOW REVEALED

... the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. Colossians 1:26

It feels good to know, doesn't it? If you are among a group of friends or coworkers, and everyone is wondering about something, it feels good to be the one in the know. As everyone fixes their eyes on you in silence, just waiting to hear what you have to tell them, you smile to yourself and relish the opportunity to share the news. It feels good to be the one in the know.

God has made known to you the greatest news of all. This mystery that we've seen the Lord weave throughout human history and testify to throughout the ages through apostles, prophets, and evangelists in the pages of Scripture—this mystery the Lord has chosen to reveal to you.

Doesn't it feel good? Doesn't it fill you with joy? God wanted you to know the fullness of the good news the prophets wrote about but longed to understand as you do.

God was revealing it to you when water washed over your head and one of his servants spoke familiar words: "I baptize you . . ." God was revealing it to you when moms, dads, and Sunday school teachers read to you about the Savior's birth in a manger, his

death on a cross, his resurrection on the third day. God continues to reveal it to you as he comes to you in his spoken Word and in his sacrament, means of grace that create and strengthen faith in your Savior Jesus.

In the coming days, you will hear the good news of great joy once again. In the city of David, a child has been born. You know the mystery. You know who this child is. He is Christ the Lord, who takes away sin and opens the path of life.

Doesn't it feel good to know, and isn't it a joy and privilege to share it, especially when so many in the world still need to hear it? To you, the Lord's people, he has disclosed the mystery of the good news so that you can give to others the reason for the hope that you have. Relish the opportunities God gives you to do that during this precious time of year and always.

Dear Lord, grant to me the joy of knowing your salvation and sharing it with the world. Through your people, make known the mystery of your love in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

The **Jystery** FOR ALL THE WORLD

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. Romans 16:25–27

I once served as a pastor in a community that had a large Hispanic population. I spent some time knocking on doors in that neighborhood and inviting them to our church. During that time I became friends with a Hispanic man, and several times he accompanied me on my door-to-door visits as a translator.

One day I expressed my frustration to him that none of the people we contacted ever attended services at our church. He said to me, "Pastor, you have to understand that it will be very difficult for a Hispanic person to have the courage to walk into an all-white church. You are going to have to take the gospel to them first before they will come to you!"

He spoke those words many years ago, but I have often thought of them.

Paul said, "The message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith."

It is easy for us to say, "We want all people to be saved!" But we don't always fully comprehend the effort it takes for us to proclaim this "mystery," that is, to proclaim the message of Christ's birth to people who may be different from us.

Tonight you will worship the newborn child and rejoice that he died for you, to wash away your sin. On your way home from Christmas Eve worship, you will drive past many homes and neighborhoods.

Pray that Jesus uses you so that this mystery might be revealed to them as well!

Jesus, forgive me for the times I have failed to feel compassion for those who might be different than me. Give me courage so that through me this marvelous mystery of Christ's birth and forgiveness might be revealed to them. Amen. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. Luke 1:32

As Gabriel appears to Mary, so begins the fulfillment of all that the mystery of his grace planned from eternity. And a less likely setting for such a world-changing revelation of God's salvation mystery could hardly be imagined!

God's mighty angel Gabriel appears to a poor, unknown virgin. Yes, it's true, she's a descendant of Israel's great King David, but every glimmer of kingly glory is long gone. In fact, as the impending birth is announced, no male heir from David's line will have any part in the child's conception and birth.

And when the angel announces this child would be given David's throne, an understandable response would have been: "What throne?" There hadn't been a Davidic king leading Israel in 400 years. The sinfulness of David's line—and all Israel with it—seemed to have forfeited Israel's glory and made it nothing but a distant memory.

But that's precisely the point of God's saving mystery! There in Nazareth, God's doing what he does so well: bringing something wonderful out of nothing. The child to be born of this humble virgin would "be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

The eternal Son of God was entering David's fallen line. Within the body of this humble descendant of David, he who is eternally David's Lord would become also David's Son!

And consistent with God's gracious salvation mystery, which brings something wonderful out of nothing, whom has this Son of David and Son of the Most High come to help? He hasn't come to help those who've distinguished themselves before God. (They don't exist anyway!) No, he comes for those who have no glory in themselves before God. He comes for those like you and me who have no rightful claim on his love and mercy, and yet, through this child of Mary, his forgiving grace gives us those very things.

On this Christmas Day, thank God for this mystery of David's Lord and David's Son revealed to Mary. Then thank God that he's revealed this mystery to you!

We praise you, Jesus, at your birth; clothed in flesh you came to earth. The virgin bears a sinless boy, and all the angels sing for joy. Alleluia! [CW 359:1]

Notes about the Artwork FROM THE ARTIST



The Mysteries of Christmas

This cover image amalgamates parts from all the illustrations. As C. S. Lewis encouraged his readers to turn the page and go "further up and further in," I've designed this image to be ambiguous, inviting the viewer to discover more.

The right hand (with a nail mark in the wrist) makes a gesture of benediction, and the left hand (without a nail mark) appears to move to connect with the right hand. Both hands hold the open celestial space at the threshold of some inexplicable entity. In my mind, the hands hint at the dual-natured person of Christ; the star-birth/blackhole-death bewilders at the sublime power of the Father; and the molecular starscape fascinates at the ethereal potency of the Spirit.



Mysteries in the Mind of God

For this concept, I'm picturing my own hand reaching toward a bright light, seeking answers. I created this light from both the birth/death of a star and an all-consuming black hole, envisioning the mind of God as an inexpressible paradox.

The Artwork



The Mystery of the Messiah's Messenger

Molecular clouds begin forming shapes of hands, implying a gesture of offering directly to you. Stars congeal, coming toward you in Greek letterforms ($\lambda \acute{o} \gamma o \varsigma$), the original language in which the gospels were written. This is what I imagine when I recall the apostle John's first words to us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). That Jesus of Nazareth is himself the one and only Eternal God is the message that another John—the Baptist, the Messiah's messenger—was called to share.



The Good News Mystery

My springboard for this image was a chorus in Handel's Messiah: "Let us break their bonds asunder"—a reference to Psalm 2, where people "plot in vain . . . against the Lord." I'm conflating that bondage with the Lord's exoneration in Psalm 102: "From heaven the Lord looked upon the earth . . . to release those condemned to death." In my mind, there is no better news than to be pardoned from one's resistance against God, to be released from one's self-inflicted shackles, to be freed from death.

The Artwork



The Mysterious King

In this image we see ethereal hands, with wrists wounded, pierced, lightly lifting a golden circlet. Is it Christ crowning himself, or is it a crown for you? I picture it as both, for "in Christ [we] are all children of God through faith" (Galatians 3:26) and "Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

A note about the Artist

Charis J. Carmichael Braun grew up at "the College" in New Ulm: Her father taught physics at D/MLC, and her mother modeled courage and selflessness. Charis's parents encouraged her to be curious and creative, to marvel at the indefatigable wonders of God's creation. Charis studied art, theatre, and graphic design at Bethany Lutheran College, and then earned her MFA at the New York Academy of Art, where she learned artistic anatomy and historic techniques within a contemporary framework.

Feverishly striving to balance work and life, Charis manages visual communications at Edward Hopper House Museum & Study Center, is coordinating an interior "refresh" for her church, serves on the leadership team for the Alumni Association of the New York Academy of Art, and has taught art history as an adjunct professor at Bethany Lutheran College, Minnesota, and Farmingdale State College, New York. With her husband, Charis lives and works on Long Island, where they attend Grace of God Lutheran Church in Dix Hills, New York.

The artist can be reached at CjCarmichaelBraun@gmail.com.



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