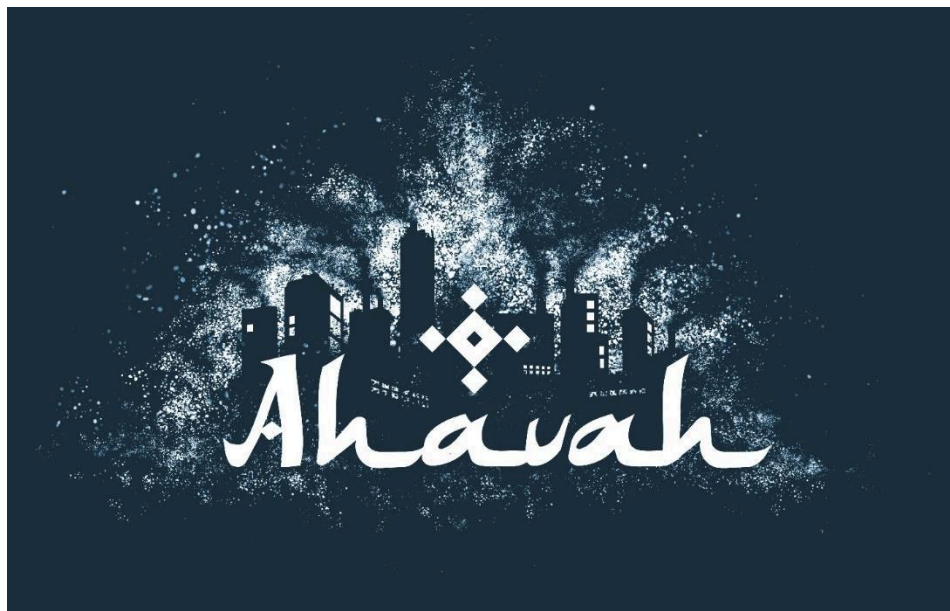




**A
Study
For Advent**

Author's Note

Morley van Yperen is the Theologian in Residence with Ekklesia Contemporary Ballet. Over the past fifteen years Morley, along with every member of her family, have participated in *Ahavah* as dancers, choreographer, costume designer, stage crew, or backstage support. For Morley and her family, *Ahavah* is more than an annual Christmas performance. It has been a formative practice that has shaped the way the van Yperen family has come to understand the birth of Jesus as well as their own personal discipleship. In fact, it has been Morley's experience with *Ahavah*, as well as many of Ekklesia's other productions, that inspired her to pursue a Master of Arts in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. There she combined a robust study of theology, culture, and biblical study to develop a theology of dance so that she might share her firm conviction that dance can be a significant formational practice for those who engage with God and God's love for the world. It is Morley's hope that this Advent study will open the depths of the theological and imaginative riches that can be found in *Ahavah* for all who make it a part of their Advent observance.

Each year as the dancers begin the rehearsal process for *Ahavah*, they also gather for weekly devotional studies to build a theological and practical understanding of the scenes and themes they will be embodying in this year's show. These devotions are led by the artistic director, Elisa Schroth, Morley, and an alumna of the show and this year's stage manager, Erica West. Erica's work with ongoing productions of *Ahavah* is a testimony to the formative nature of the show. She brings to the show the richness

of her experience growing up dancing with Ekklesia as well as her own journey as a young adult. Elements of the devotional studies on various scenes written by all three, Elisa, Erica, and Morley, are included in this study as well.

The scriptures from the lectionary form the backbone of the study. The artistic and theological staff of Ekklesia strongly believe that danced works, such as *Ahavah*, should benefit the Church's devotional practices as well as provide beauty. By following the appointed readings for Advent this study will connect the experience of *Ahavah* with the liturgy of the Church and allow each to be enhanced by one another.

One final note about this study is the decision to use the word "noticing" for the discussion question sections. It is important to recognize that we live in and experience the world with our minds and bodies. Culturally, we are very familiar with discussions and mental understanding. We are, however, less practiced in listening to what our bodies might know and how they respond to the world around us. Dance, in particular, encompasses large amounts of body language, and we can move beyond its entertainment value and glean the wisdom that it might open to us if we pay attention to, not only what we think about it, but also to what we notice happening in our bodies and emotions as well as what we notice in the dancers and perhaps even, to the rest of the audience. So, we are eager for you to discuss, yes. But we hope that you also notice with every part of your being.

"Lord Jesus,

Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do and seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

Amen. - *Henri J.M. Nouwen*

The Darkness of Waiting and the Need for a Glimpse of Light

The First Sunday of Advent



Ahava opens to a frenetic scene. The music is punctuated with the sounds of gears and the whistles of pent-up steam calling workers to the conveyor belt of production urged on by the loud calls and commands of a factory owner standing higher up and removed from the busy movement of the workers. The dancers are all dressed in identical gray shifts and their movements are robotic and syncopated. The one spot of color in the scene are the bookcases full of wonderful books, but even these shelves are emptied to be refilled with boxes full of product – products that can be sold and consumed.

Noticing:

What did you notice as you watched that first scene?

How did it make you feel?

What did the scene bring to your mind?

Choreographer's Notes for The Factory:

“I think the factory is the right emblem of the way that humanity has become less human and more mechanized. We are like machines.

Human Resources is a common term - people are referred to as resources. But that is not what we were created for. We were originally created in Gods image. Our humanity is so much more than what we make and what we can produce. When we consider the words of Jesus, we are reminded that he told us not to store up goods, but to live in the moment, in life affirming relationships with God and with others.” – Elisa Schroth

From the Lessons: The First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering,

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Advent is a season of preparation. Instead of rushing right into the light and festivity of Christmas, the practice of observing Advent slows us down so that we might more fully receive the gift of the light of the birth of Christ. The altars in our sanctuaries are covered in purple – the same color that is used during Lent. Advent is a season not only to prepare our sanctuaries and homes, but our own selves so that we too can make room for the Christ child to make a home in us. To prepare well, we must slow down and consider what might be moving both in us and in the world in a frenetic way- much like the opening factory scene. Before we can receive the gift of light, we must take the time to notice the darkness, to contemplate it – to peer into it.

The development of Ahavah this year, was greatly influenced by Walter Wink’s work *Engaging The Powers*. Wink suggested that manifestations of power always have an inner and an outer aspect – a visible outer form and an inner driving force. Wink offered that these powers must be named and then unmasked by revealing the dynamics by which they oppress. It is then that they may be engaged, not to destroy them, but to call them back to their higher, God- given calling.

Noticing:

What powers can you name in Ahavah?

What powers can you name at work in the world?

What powers can you name at work in yourself?

From the Lessons:

Isaiah 64:1-9

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence--
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil--*

*to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*

*When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your
presence.*

*From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,*

*no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.*

*You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.*

*But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.*

*We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.*

*We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.*

*There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;*

*for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.*

*Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*

*Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

After centering the audience in the midst of the deep darkness, Ahavah then takes us into the story of how humanity became God's people. The curtain opens once again, this time onto the mystery of the creation, of a garden full of creatures – which include the man and the woman. This scene is of a place full of light, and the Creator is present dancing alongside of the creation.



Noticing:
What
happened in
the garden?
Temptation?

Disobedience? Other ideas?

Here is what one Old Testament scholar thinks might have happened. “Eden,” translated from the Hebrew, means “delight.” Even here in this garden with its ideal conditions - plenty of food, warm clear days, cool nights to walk around with each other and God – there is still some sort of temptation.

What do you think the serpent has introduced into the discussion about the garden, about God, about God's relationship with what God has made?

In essence, the man and the woman began to notice what was being withheld from them, and this became compounded by the sense of what they couldn't have, and they began to notice what they didn't have. They began to wonder what else God was

withholding from them. They began to feel dissatisfied. They began to feel that they were lacking something, and the fear of scarcity took hold of them. And so, they take and consume more and more instead of being satisfied with all that they *can* have.

What happens from here? Blame and accusations are hurled at one another, the soil is cursed, and relationships become broken. Violence and murder ensued and, as we are all too familiar, has become a regular part of life in this world.

From the Lessons:

Psalm 80:4-7, 16-17

- 4 O LORD God of hosts, *
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?*
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; *
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.*
- 6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.*
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be
saved.*
- 16 Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, *
the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.*
- 17 And so will we never turn away from you; *
give us life, that we may call upon your Name.*

As the dancers of Ekklesia prepare a ballet they spend time listening to voices of those who have engaged the powers that the company's work may be addressing. Howard Thurman is one of those voices. Thurman was the grandson of slaves and became the Dean of the chapel at Boston University in 1953. It was there that he met Martin Luther King Jr. and became a mentor to him in

nonviolent resistance in the face of the racial and economic oppression so prevalent in the US. Thurman wrote a book that King read and kept with him while he was leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott and shaping the nonviolent civil rights movement. In this book, called *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman writes to people who are truly living in scarcity – of material resources, but also of the respect and honor of simply being a human. These are who the disinherited are. These are the people that truly have been withheld from. Time after time, it is the struggle over these basic human needs so often do lead to outbreaks of violence. To these disinherited, Thurman writes that there are three hounds that will chase them to violence – fear, deception, and hate. And he tells them that Jesus was born into a very similar darkness – he was poor, he was hated, and he was living in a land controlled by others – the Romans. Below is one of Thurman’s well-known meditations written in 1953 in another of his books, *Meditations of the Heart*:

“Life Goes On”

During these turbulent times we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on.

This we are apt to forget.

The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms;

the purpose of life outlasts our purposes;

the process of life cushions our processes.

The mass attack of disillusion and despair;

distilled out of the collapse of hope,

has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral.

There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility.

This is the great deception.

By it whole peoples have gone down to oblivion

without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the commonplace.

Let us not be deceived.

It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces

by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained.

Birds still sing;

*the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields,
and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed.*

There is no need to fear evil.

*There is every need to understand what it does,
how it operates in the world,
what it draws upon to sustain itself.*

*We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil.
Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not
destruction of the body,*

the reduction to rubble of cities;

the real target of evil

*is to corrupt the spirit of man and to give his soul the contagion of
inner disintegration.*

When this happens,

there is nothing left,

the very citadel of man is captured and laid waste.

*Therefore the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to
move from without to within.*

This would be to be overcome by evil.

To drink in the beauty that is within reach,

to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness,

*to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God
in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the
human mind—*

this is as always the ultimate answer to the great deception.

Noticing:

How do you see the power of scarcity at work around you?

Are you aware of a fear of scarcity inside of you?

**How does Rev Thurman suggest we engage this power in order
to call us back to our higher, God-given calling?**

Ahavah begins right here, on the border between the original intention of the beauty of God's creation and the deep darkness that surrounds all of us in the world today. As we follow

the main character of the ballet, “Hope,” together we are straining our eyes in the darkness for a glimpse of that first light from the original garden creation. Together we hope, and together, during this Advent season we will prepare our hearts to receive the gift of light – God with us.

From the Lessons:

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 (a benediction)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The Cry for a Glimpse of Light

The Second Sunday of Advent



The Powers That Be

For many, one of the most impressionable scenes of Ahavah comes near the end of the show. Throughout the ballet we have watched the power struggle between the Prince of Fear and God's desire to have relationship with all of the creation. Now, in this scene, called "The Powers That Be," it is as if these powers have reached an apex. The Prince of Fear appears to be fully animating the political and religious aspects of the story and has unleashed the full force of its power against the ways and person of

Jesus. Yet, even here, in the midst of the chaotic and hysterical force of fear, Jesus chooses another path. Accompanied by the presence of God, Jesus does not fight back, but freely offers himself. Jesus' offer of his life is more than a sacrificial offering to quench the appetite of "the powers that be." His cries resound with the cries of God and all of God's creation for the promised hope.

Noticing:

How did this scene make you feel?

Though we haven't discussed any of the angelic scenes yet, what differences did you notice in the energy between those angelic scenes and this one?

What stood out to you most as you experienced this scene?

From the Lessons: The Second Sunday of Advent

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and

dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.



One of the remarkable aspects of *Ahavah* is that, along with the incarnate son, Jesus, the creator God is also a dancing character and, because of this, God, too, must embody a response to the beauty and joy of creating as well as the lamentation over the way fear mars what God has lovingly created. The scene “Division of Sin” follows the broken harmony of the newly created Garden of Eden after the man and woman allow fear and greed to move them to take and take more than they need. God dances with curling and twisting movements of agony and longing, reverberations from a heart that is ‘churning’ (this is a reference to Hosea 11:8 which describes the deep emotional response of God to his people), refusing to give up on humanity, while we watch silhouettes of

people turn on one another and destroy the beautiful creation in order to build cities and factories that will belch smoke and turn people into cogs in the gears of mechanized production.

Noticing:

How had you imagined God's response to the fall of humanity before watching this scene?

What did watching God's lament feel like?

What has been your experience with lament?

From the Lessons:

Isaiah 40:1-9

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

*that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,*

*that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;*

*the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

*A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*

"A voice cries out.... Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"

In Ahavah, we first meet the people of the cities of Judah during the scene "Two Sides." In this scene, "the powers that be" have placed a literal line down the center of the stage, and this line happens to cross over a well. Throughout the history of the world, towns can only arise where there is an ample source of water and there are many stories in the scriptures that describe conflicts over wells (Genesis 26 is an example of this struggle over resources and power between two people groups in the land). In our world today there are so many conflicts, it can often feel like there is no way out and no right answer. Our hearts break over the suffering as we see countries and families ripped apart, resources wasted or withheld, and overall lack of compassion for humanity. In these

conflicts with “two sides”, our hearts must break for both sides or we will lose our ability to see or hear our neighbors.

Noticing:

What feelings or emotions drive these conflicts to make them intractable?

How can we practice seeing and hearing the cries of the other side?

How might we join God’s lament over such conflicts?

From the Lessons:

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

*1 You have been gracious to your land, O LORD, *
you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.*

*2 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people *
and blotted out all their sins.*

*8 I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, *
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people
and to those who turn their hearts to him.*

*9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, *
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

*10 Mercy and truth have met together; *
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

*11 Truth shall spring up from the earth, *
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.*

*12 The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, *
and our land will yield its increase.*

*13 Righteousness shall go before him, *
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.*

Amid this larger story of conflict and the powers that be, we meet two individuals simply going about their lives, falling in love, and making plans. To the 4th C bishop, Gregory of Nyssa, Mary is much like Moses of the Old Testament who turned aside to notice the burning bush and listen to the voice crying out from that strange anomaly. The bush that Moses noticed was burning with the presence of God because God himself had heard the cry of the Hebrews suffering from enslavement in Egypt. Moses'



willingness to turn aside and take off his shoes in the presence of that bush took his life on a completely different trajectory. The same is true of Mary and Joseph. Gregory of Nyssa equates Mary with the burning bush because she becomes full of God's presence but is not herself consumed. Instead, she becomes "Theotokos," the God-bearer, becoming a vessel for the Incarnation of Christ. She responds to the cry of God's lament by turning aside to respond to a very different source of power.¹ In a similar way, the main character of *Ahavah*, Hope, has also turned aside. Instead of the drowning pulse of the factory and the never ceasing demands of mind-numbing production, she has begun to listen to a stirring for something else and this has caused her to step out of line and allow herself to be moved by her own cry... or perhaps she is beginning to be stirred by the great cries all around her?

Noticing:

How did Mary and Joseph each have to turn aside to respond to God?

What are the cries that you are hearing?

¹ This paragraph relies heavily on insight gained from reading Ellen F. Davis' book, *Getting Involved with God* (Cowley, 2001) in which she describes Gregory of Nyssa connecting the revelation of Moses and the burning bush to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

How might we turn aside to notice what God is doing?

From the Lessons:

Mark 1:1-3 (a benediction)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”*

The Dream of a Glimpse

The Third Sunday of Advent

So far, in our Advent study, we have taken the time to peer into the darkness that has so deeply affected the world in which we live. From the darkness we have heard a cry. Like Hope, this may be a cry from deep within ourselves, or a cry from the world. It might even be a cry of God's, or God's fallen creation. As we have the way we have responded as we watched *Ahavah*, we have also noticed the "powers that be" and how they have interacted as the story is being told with dance. We have considered how these powers might be operating in our world and within our own selves and we have wondered together how we might turn aside to hear and respond to the cry for a glimpse of the light of God. This is a cry for hope, for healing, for restoration, for love. It could be that once we have begun to turn aside from the frenetic path that fear tries to keep us on, we begin to dream the dream of God. This is the journey of the young woman that we follow throughout the ballet of *Ahavah*. Her name is "Hope," and as we move with her from her desire for something more than the dehumanizing work in the factory, to the wonder that carries her into the story of God's joy over and care for all that God had made, we join her as she discovers a new way of being in the world.

In a book titled *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink describes the myth that is behind most of the stories told throughout the history of the world. This is the storyline that tells us that change, hope, or victory can only come through a struggle that entails redemptive violence. In essence this myth states that it is only the use of violence that ultimately saves. Wink describes a system in which powers compete for domination because of the fall from God's original creation. However, into this system, says Wink, Jesus is born. And it is here that Jesus challenges the powers "right where (they) affect men and women... in the everyday push and pull of relating to the institutions that shaped their times."² Our character, Hope, has caught a glimmer of something new and she begins to dream of a different way of being in the world. In this week's discussion we will consider some of the other characters in *Ahavah*

² Wink, Walter, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millenium*, New York: Galilee Doubleday (1998), 63.

who step out in a new direction towards a dream of a glimpse of light and love of God. Perhaps we might consider Advent as a season of invitation for us to join in this dream as well.

From The Lessons: The Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;*

*all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

Noticing:

I have heard that when we read the scriptures, we should practice reading them backwards and forwards – the Bible is in conversation with itself. What other portions of the scriptures come to mind as you read this passage from Isaiah?

Kingdom of God

This is a fast-moving scene in the ballet. Much happens - from Jesus growing up, to gathering and teaching his disciples, to his confrontations with the “powers that be.”

According to the scriptures, Jesus was only his disciples short three and yet he instilled in them



to the Jesus with for a years, enough and

taught enough publicly to alter the status quo and anger those who held positions of power. His teaching was radical then and it continues to challenge all of those who have turned aside with a desire to follow them.

Noticing:

What stands out to you the most in these series of vignettes of Jesus teaching his disciples?

How did you react or feel when Jesus flipped the table and benches?

How do Jesus' teachings counteract the culture of today?

Which of his teachings challenge you? Why?

From the Lessons:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Magi

Choreographer's Notes:

One of the most interesting aspects of the Advent story is that not that many people saw it. A handful of shepherds, and

later, magi from distant lands. There was no Instagram story, no “Bethlehem Times” to report on it. Mary and Joseph entered Bethlehem in disgrace, shamed and shunned by both family and faith. Meanwhile the scribes, kings, religious leaders - none of them had any idea what had just taken place that Christmas night. Shepherds, unworthy of being counted in the census, were the ones that the angels sang to. And it was the pagan Magi from the East that discover the star, read the signs, and make the long journey to bear gifts for the newborn king. The Magi are significant to the story of *Ahavah* because they help us understand that this seemingly insignificant event of another baby being born should have the attention of all kings. Though their practices of astrology may have been foreign to some, King Herod certainly took it very seriously. So seriously that he committed the mass murder of the innocents to protect his claim to power. Symbolic of all of us, the “three wise men” traveled long distances from their native religions and countries to fittingly bow down before such an unknown Holy King. One thing I wanted to draw attention to in retelling this story with dance is that the Magi followed the advice they received in a dream not to go back and tell Herod where Jesus was. I wonder how long it took King Herod to realize the Wise Men were not coming back. I can only imagine how furious he might have been to be disobeyed by these travelers from a distant land. The Magi rejected the story of the myth of redemptive violence and followed the dream instead.

Obedience is defined as “submitting to the authority of another” or “to comply with the command, direction, or request of a person or a law.” But the question of obedience is rarely just a black and white, yes or no question. To “obey or not obey” is never asked in a vacuum.

Noticing:

What did the music and choreography in this scene evoke for you?

There are always consequences in our choice to obey any of the many different authorities present in our lives. How do we discern what the right choice is?

Once we discern the right choice how do we find the courage to do what is right?

From The Lessons:

John 1:6-8,19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Our character, Hope, Jesus' disciples, John the Baptist, and the Magi all recognized this dream as one worth giving their lives to. It's worth wondering if those that John was speaking to truly recognized Jesus. At one point, even John wondered if Jesus was the fulfillment of the dream that John himself had given his life to. The work of the Spirit may not always make sense. Pursuing the dream of the realm of God may be like noticing something odd about the stars, so odd that you would leave everything to travel

into strange countries to find a king born in a remote, out of the way place. It may mean that to take it seriously one might have to disobey the powers that be to worship and protect this strange work of God. Though Jesus' teachings challenge and confuse how to move in the world, those who dream of a different form of power than that which pushes and pulls us towards violence and domination continue to step towards the dream that God is growing inside of them.

Martin Luther King Jr. was one who let this dream move him. We know him most for his speech, "I have a dream." But long before he stood before those crowds in Washington DC, King had chosen to hear that cry in the darkness and dream God's dream instead of responding to the push and pull of the powers that be. In 1956, he spoke to a congregation of African Americans weary from maintaining months of civil disobedience during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods.... If you succumb to the temptation of using violence... unborn generations will be the recipient of a long and desolate night of bitterness... let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him... Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself.... I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, "God is love." He who loves is a participant in the being of God.³

Noticing:

How does the glimpse from the gospel story begin to become light in our lives today?

³ King, Martin Luther, Jr. "The Most Durable Power," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. James M. Washington, HarperOne: New York, 1986, 10-11

**In *Ahavah* Jesus taught his followers new steps to dance. Martin Luther King Jr. showed those he led in the Civil Rights movement new steps as well. What are some of the steps that we must practice?
In what ways are you sensing God's dream taking shape in your life?**

From the Lessons:

Psalm 126

- 1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.*
- 2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.*
- 3 Then they said among the nations, *
"The LORD has done great things for them."*
- 4 The LORD has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.*
- 5 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.*
- 6 Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.*
- 7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.*

The Glimpse

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

It is almost Christmas. This year the fourth Sunday of Advent falls on Christmas Eve. We are fully immersed in the celebration of the birth of the light of the world. Though we find ourselves in a world touched too easily by hate and war, we will once again light our Christmas candles and watch the gently growing light dispel the darkness of night. Through this regular practice will catch a glimpse of what God's love might look like walking around in the world through us. This is what incarnation is. It begins with the birth of the baby Jesus and then it emanates out into the world through each person who has turned aside to look at the glimpse of the way, the truth and the life Jesus showed to us. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of hope because he was God's love in flesh and the life he lived in that flesh was the beginning of a glimpse of restoration. Engaging in what we experience through the ballet, *Ahava*, provides the opportunity to imagine the story of this restoration in a new and unfamiliar way. By following the character of Hope as she steps into the story of the Bible, we are offered another way to understand the gift of the incarnation.

The Old Testament lesson is often read to establish the connection of Jesus to the house of David and the little town of Bethlehem. It can also illuminate the desire that God has to dwell in the midst the people that God created and loves. This house that God will make for David and his family is also a picture of this dream of restoration.

From the Lessons: The Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

When the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Noticing:

How does reading this passage of scripture affect you?

What cries and dreams do you notice?

Ahavah puts Christmas in the context of the whole Biblical story. Through the dynamic choreography and staging we have experienced the beauty of the creation and the fellowship present at the beginning. And we watched how fear and greed opened a door for domination and violence to separate us from one another and from the Creator. As we have taken time during the season of Advent, we have felt the darkness. This is not hard. Even Nathan's words to David in 2 Samuel reverberate to us with the dark reality of what is happening in that ancient land of Israel today. The cry of God is clear here, "The Lord will make you a house." The dream of God is that humanity might have rest from the powers that be and be planted. But we know the story of David and his family. We know the story of the world we live in. *Ahavah* can help form our imaginations to discover new ways to experience the story of the hope of God with us. We have heard the cry, we have turned aside, and we have allowed the dream to grow in us. And now we fully anticipate the celebration of the birth of this baby on Christmas.

From the Lessons:

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of

his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

The Birth



Noticing:

How did this scene make you feel?

What did you notice? About the angels, about the holy family, about the powers present?

If you really think about it, the idea of God being born as a vulnerable human baby is a rather precarious way to introduce the light and love of the Creator into the world. What response did you have to the way this scene ended?

Mary had turned aside and had let the dream of God inhabit her very self. She had let her own body be the home of God so that God in Christ could enter into the world. Could Mary have had a full understanding of how her own soul's cry expressed in the Magnificat would come to pass through the fragile infant she held in her arms?

From the Lessons:

The Song of Mary Magnificat

Luke 1:46-55

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is
his Name.*

*He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.*

*He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

*He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,*

*The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

Of course, before the fullness of Mary's prophetic words could come to pass that tiny baby had to grow up and it was up to Mary to keep him healthy and safe. She had to nurture the dream of the incarnation. In

Ahavah, Hope watches as Jesus moves through the stages of growth and into a man. She watches as the mother who nurtured him becomes his disciple. She watches as Jesus begins to embody and teach his movements and all while *Ahavah* shows



the us how the presence of the incarnation might alter the expected order. While the Bishop of Durham, NT Wright suggested that at times "Incarnation is a nuisance because it implies that God wants to make his presence felt around the place, and he may well want to do so especially where people are trying to run things their own way and making a mess of it."⁴

Throughout *Ahavah*, we watch with Hope as she discovers how Jesus lives as the Incarnation. And we watch with her as he dies and is buried. For Hope, this is not a story that fits neatly into the world that she knows. What she has observed as Jesus has taught a new dance and angered the powers that be, as he offered his own life and accepted death instead of following the story line of the ever-present myth of



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violence as redemption has not offered her simple answers or dramatically delivered her out of the production line of the factory. The glimpse that Hope is given doesn't take her back to the initial paradise of that first ideal garden. It creates in her –perhaps in each of us– the imagination for a new humanity right where she exists.

Noticing:

What did you notice about her bewilderment and her search?

In what ways could you identify with Hope?

What has she discovered?

What have you discovered?

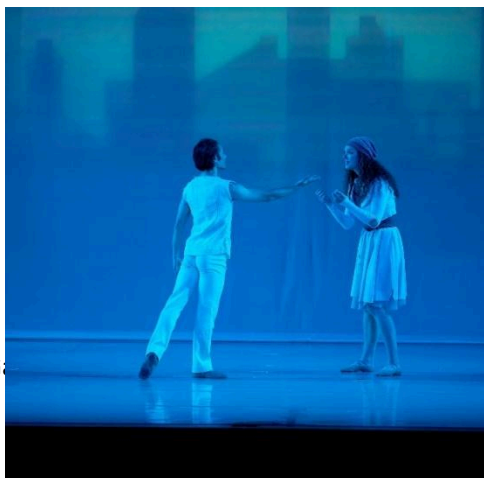
Walter Wink's answer to the domination of the powers that be is the clear revelation given through the incarnation of the life of

Jesus. "He gave it (the glimpse – my words) profound programmatic shape in his teaching of nonviolence. In his Beatitudes, in his extraordinary concern for the outcast and marginalized... Jesus brought to fruition the prophetic longing for the "kingdom of God" – an expression we might paraphrase as "God's domination free order."⁵



Noticing:

How does Hope reenter the factory at the end of the show?



⁵ Wink, Walter, *The Powers That Be* (G

How do we participate in this in our own lives?

From the Lessons: Christmas Day

The Gospel

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

We get to be a part of the incarnation when we get a glimpse of the light and hope and restoration that is Jesus and allow that to take shape in us. This is what the writer of the Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” longed for.

After ministering to African American troops during the Civil War, Rev. Philip Brooks penned these words:⁶

*How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of
sin,
where meek souls will
receive him, still
the dear Christ enters
in.*

*O holy Child of
Bethlehem,
descend to us, we
pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!*



Be born in us today!

From the Lessons:

⁶ Mires, Charles, *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/o-little-town-of-bethlehem/#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20best%2Dknown,by%20church%20organist%20Lewis%20H.>

Romans 16:25-27 (a benediction)

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith-- to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

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