

The Grapevine

A PUBLICATION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF OKEMOS

From Pastor Lisa Schrott

Advent and Christmas 2023: A Weary World Rejoices

*O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining.
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining;
Til He appears and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

Written by Placide Cappeau in French
English translation by John Sullivan Dwight

O Holy Night is a beloved Christmas hymn. Its haunting melody is accompanied by words that reflect the complexity of the season. We acknowledge that the Christmas season is often an emotionally-charged time when we feel many things deeply—sometimes all at once. Our worship theme from Advent through Epiphany, **A Weary World Rejoices**, reflects the full scope of human emotions: isolation, fear, disbelief, as well as connection, trust, and joy that are found in the scriptures we share this time of the year.

Using material from *A Sanctified Art*, we will find rhythms for rejoicing, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, because our joy is rooted in the truth that we belong to God. We will acknowledge that justice and joy belong together. And that sometimes our joy is an act of resistance. We will seek a “thrill of hope” in our hurting world.

In worship, our liturgy and sermons will hold space for our weariness and our joy. We will light candles of hope, peace, love and joy. We will create art together in our Advent Workshop on December 3. Our children will journey to Bethlehem. Sunday Adult Education will highlight Old Testament prophesy and the *visio divina* practice using art. Advent devotionals will encourage us to deepen our relationships with God and each other. I will lead a three-week Bible study that further explores Old Testament scriptures as we welcome Immanuel – God made flesh. The Service of Lessons and Carols will lift our souls with soaring music and scripture. **Cont. on page 2**



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* For the most up-to-date listing of happenings around PCO, please visit the website calendar at <https://okemospres.org/calendar/>

* A reminder as we head into winter—If Okemos Public Schools are closed due to inclement weather, the PCO building will be closed as well. On a Sunday morning, we will notify through email and/or social media if worship will be online only.

We will acknowledge the difficult emotions that can accompany this season with a Longest Night Service in the Chapel on **Wednesday, December 20**. We will be led in worship by children and youth at our Family Advent and Christmas Eve Service at **10:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 24**. We will celebrate the birth of Christ with candlelight and communion at **8:00 p.m. Christmas Eve**. And we are all invited to the joy of community, with a Christmas dinner sponsored by Parish Life on Christmas Day (*more info on page 4*).

There is room for all this holiday season - if you are feeling weary; if you are seeking hope; if you are feeling loved and if you are not, we welcome you on this Advent journey to meet the Christ child, God's act of love made flesh. Invite a friend to join us on this journey.

Pastor Lisa

Save These Dates for Advent & Christmas Activities

Saturday, December 2

Book Discussion & Retreat

9:00 a.m.

(More information on page 3)

**Sunday, December 3—First Sunday of Advent
Intergenerational Art Project following Worship**

11:15 a.m.

(More information on page 3)

Saturday, December 9

Alternative Christmas Market

9:00 a.m.—2:00 p.m.

(More information on page 3)

Friday, December 15

11th Annual Evening of Lessons and Carols

(Fundraiser for Advent House)

7:00 p.m.

Wednesday, December 20

Longest Night Service in the Chapel

7:00 p.m.

Sunday, December 24

4th Sunday of Advent & Christmas Eve

10:00 a.m. - Worship Service Led by PCO Youth

8:00 p.m.—Candlelight Communion Service

Monday, December 25

Christmas Day Dinner hosted by Parish Life

2:00 p.m.

(More information on page 4)

Advent Resources

Calendars

Activities to deepen your relationship with God, your families and the community are featured in separate Advent calendars for Children and Families and for Youth and Adults. Hard copies of the calendars are available at church and an electronic version can be linked through the e-announcements.

Devotionals

**Advent in Plain Sight
by Jill Duffield.**

Having the eyes to see and the ears to hear the holy in the middle of daily demands and anxiety-provoking times takes an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. Our Advent devotional will orient us to everyday things we encounter as we go about our day. As we connect them to Scripture, we become more aware of Immanuel, God with us.

We will distribute the devotionals each week during Advent – electronically through the e-announcements and as hard copies on Sundays. Two copies of the devotional book are also available in the church library.

Advent Bible Study

Led by Pastor Lisa

Using material from the *Advent in Plain Sight* devotional as well as traditional Advent texts from the prophets, we will explore Old Testament scriptures that inform our welcome of Immanuel – God made flesh. Choose from an in person option and a Zoom option: **Fridays December 1, 8, and 17 in person** at 10 am OR **Sundays December 3, 10, and 17** at 7 pm *via Zoom* # 892 1526 1143.

Week 1: Advent is a “liminal space,” positioned on the threshold between what is and what will be. How is the concept of a Messiah revealed to us through Old Testament scriptures?

Week 2: Joy and despair coexist in the Advent season. How do the Psalms and prophets offer us hope that, while real and valid, our tears will not last forever, but be wiped away by the very hand of God?

Week 3: We celebrate the humble birth of Christ each year. How do Old Testament scriptures help us embrace vulnerability and dependence as part of our life of faith?

Book Discussion & Retreat

The Mens' Group is hosting a book discussion and retreat at the Church on **Saturday, December 2** from **9:30 a.m. until 12 noon**. The book is Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ by Debie Thomas and we will focus on three chapters: "A House Divided," "What the Body Knows," and "Salty."

We would like to invite **ANYONE** (not just men) who is interested in joining us to come. We will have breakfast rolls and coffee available and will meet in Fellowship Hall to discuss the book.

Books are available at Schuler's book store on the book group reading table if you would like to purchase one. For more information about the book, please read Ron Dorr's review on page 9.

Inter-generational Advent Workshop

December 3, 2023 after worship

Fellowship Hall

All ages welcome!

Join us as we explore our Advent theme "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?" and the theme's symbol. Together we will create a banner for the sanctuary and learn from one another what makes us weary, where we find joy, how the two are woven together and where God is revealed in the midst.



What's Happening with Youth Group

December 3: Cookie Baking for Alternative Gift Market

December 9: Cocoa and Cookie Sale at Alternative Gift Market
Proceeds to benefit Advent House

December 10: NO youth group

December 17: Christmas Party at Pastor Lisa's
Bring a wrapped, homemade ornament to exchange.

December 24: Lead worship, 10:00 a.m.

COMING IN 2024

Jan 12-14: Winter Senior High Retreat with Holt Presbyterian

Jan 26-28: Senior High Ski Retreat

Alternative Christmas Market Returns

PCO will again be hosting The Alternative Christmas Market on **Saturday December 9 from 10a.m. until 2:00 p.m.** in the fellowship hall. Please join us for a fun time supporting those in need, enjoying good food and fellowship. If you need a unique Christmas gift, this is the place to come.

This event will be bigger than last year with four new vendors joining us. The following organizations, representing local and international artisans will be there:

The Mayan Women's Cooperative
Esperanza en Acción (Nicaragua artisans)
Cass Community Services
Nyaka Orphanage(Uganda)
Hmong Crafts(Laos)
Haitian Artisans for Peace International
Better Way Designs (anti trafficking)
Viva Fair Trade
Grace Hilyard (Ukraine)
Simbolei Academy (Kenya)
Solar Circle
Sak Saum for Freedom (anti trafficking)
Community in Schools, Michigan will be supported by the PCO Knitters group

Bread Bites will again be serving delicious Middle Eastern foods. Egg rolls will be for sale from Hmong crafts to support veterans from Laos from the Vietnam war (SGU of Michigan).

There will be tables for a few of our favorite organizations to support such as Advent House, Edgewood Village, The Global Institute of Lansing and UKirk.

Please come and shop and enjoy the fun!

Thank you in advance, to all who have volunteered and worked hard to make this year's Alternative Christmas Market a success.

Jayne Zuhlke

Saint Vincent Giving Tree to Benefit Refugees

Help us make Christmas more special for our newest neighbors in the Greater Lansing area! The Presbyterian Church of Okemos will be participating in the Giving Tree program for refugee families through St. Vincent's Catholic Charities. Please note that this year we are collecting unwrapped gifts for families rather than gift cards. Look for the Giving Tree in the sanctuary. Take an ornament from tree and follow the instructions. Place your gifts and the ornament under the tree by **Monday, December 11**.



Christmas Day Dinner at PCO

Unsure of Christmas dinner plans? Want to get together with friends and leave most of the cooking to someone else? Consider joining your PCO family!

We will meet in Fellowship Hall on Christmas Day at 2:00 p.m. for a delicious meal. Christmas ham will be provided. Everyone is asked to bring a dish to share, perhaps a favorite recipe or a traditional food from your family. Fun will be had, including board games for those who care to stay after the meal.

Please sign up near the kiosk in Fellowship Hall or contact Shirley Rumminger at *srumminger@yahoo.com* (standard email setup).

Uncovering the Past

Did you know? There is a Labyrinth at PCO!

Where, you ask? Under the trees in the traffic circle by the playground

Who built it? Associate Pastor Timothy Chon and a confirmation class

When was it built? Sometime between 2006-2009. Pastor Timothy doesn't remember which year - do you?

Wait, what is a labyrinth anyway? A labyrinth is a meandering path, often unicursal, with a singular path leading to a center. Unlike a maze, you cannot get lost in a labyrinth.

Why do we have one? Because it is a tool for spiritual reflection and transformation that can be used by all ages.

How do I know what to do? Instructions are available on the welcome table, along with printed finger labyrinths.

Want to know more? Visit <https://labyrinthociety.org/about-labyrinths> where you can search for labyrinths all over the world - there are many in Michigan!



Church members of all ages are welcome to use the labyrinth, which was recently uncovered by PCO youth.

Stewardship Reminders

Thank you to everyone who has returned their pledge cards and Time and Talent sheets for 2024. Your commitment to PCO is greatly appreciated! If you have not yet returned your materials for the coming year, please continue to prayerfully consider what God has done for you and how you might best serve Him with gratitude for the past, present and future.

Thank you for the gifts given to PCO in 2023. If you have not yet fulfilled your estimated giving for 2023 but are still able and plan to do so, please send your gift in before December 31. Year end statements are expected to go out in January.



Why I Attend Bible Study

"It's only about head knowledge."

This comment or something very similar about bible study was recently heard at an after-church discussion event.

As a life-long Bible Study geek I asked the Thursday morning Bible Study group to respond to this comment, asking them why they attend so faithfully. Some have been in the group at least as long as I have, and some others are newer. Here are several of the responses.

Bible Study inspires my faith.

It is heart and soul knowledge.

It grows my faith.

Helps me examine myself and discuss my thoughts with others.

It is our main source of understanding our faith, as reformers have long discussed (sola scriptura as Luther and Calvin would put it).

I enjoy hearing some of the historical setting that the passage was written in, which helps me understand what is being said. Then during our discussion,

I appreciate other's interpretations, which helps me with my understanding of the verses, as well as how I can apply the message to my life today in our time.

So, what do we actually do? At the moment we are studying the gospel of Luke and we will go onto Acts after that. We watch a video by a scholar (in this case New Testament Oxford professor, N. T. Wright), have fun trying to get the follow-up quiz questions correct, then discuss some of the topics brought up by the passages in the chapter, and how they apply to our lives.

We sometimes show what T-shirts we are wearing with their different logos or pictures to represent a place or event from which we have a story to tell, and we close with a time of sharing and a prayer.

Anyone can join in at any time, or at least on **Thursday mornings at 9:30 a.m.** on Zoom at <https://msu.zoom.us/j/5147440526>. You will receive head knowledge, growth in faith and fellowship. For me it is an important part of my faith journey. That is why I attend.

Zora Todd

P.S. Pastor Lisa also periodically runs Bible studies which are not only helpful but inspiring, and no T-shirt discussion expected!



Adult Christian Education & Fellowship

Password for Zoom meetings unless otherwise noted is 48864. *Days and times subject to change. Please watch Friday e-Announcements for changes.*

SUNDAYS

Adult Education—Weekly, **11:30 a.m.** in person & on Zoom 434 304 558 (*check the Sunday bulletin for topics. Enjoy a time of fellowship after worship when no adult ed is scheduled*)

Writing Life's Stories — 1st Sundays, **2:00 p.m.**, Zoom 848 6124 7191— **next meeting is December 3rd.**

Birthday Cake Sunday—3rd Sundays following worship unless otherwise noted. This month will be on **December 17th.**

Women's Connection— *on hiatus in December*

MONDAYS

Women's Dinner Out— 1st Mondays. Next gathering is **Monday, December 4** at 5:30 p.m. Coral Gables Restaurant, 2838 E. Grand River Ave., East Lansing.

Retirees — *On hiatus in December.* The next meeting is Monday, January 22, 2024 at noon on Zoom

TUESDAYS

Men's Group — Weekly, 8:00 a.m. Zoom 813 7514 8286. **Hybrid** (*In-person and on Zoom*) 1st Tuesdays - *this month Tuesday, December 5th.*

PCO Crafts Ministry— 1st Tuesdays at 6:00 p.m., Board Room-**next meeting is December 5th**

WEDNESDAYS

Conversation & Contemplation—Weekly, 10:00 a.m. Zoom 905-709-104 (*This group will meet on Dec. 6 & 13th, take 3 weeks off, then resume meeting on Jan. 10*)

Caregiver Support Group - 2nd Wednesday **December 13th** due to holidays. 5:00 p.m. on Zoom 517 329 2320; password is **hello**

THURSDAYS

Bible Study — Weekly, 9:30 a.m. Zoom <https://msu.zoom.us/j/5147440526>

Deadline for the January Grapevine is Tuesday, December 21st.

Women's Dinner Out

Our next Women's Dinner Out is scheduled for **Monday, December 4, at 5:30 p.m.** at Coral Gables Restaurant, 2838 E. Grand River Ave., East Lansing. If you will be attending, please notify Candy Boldrey by Sunday, December 3. Her email address is *cbold67 at gmail dot com* (standard email set-up) and phone number is (859) 421-0014.

Birthday Cake Sunday

We don't forget our members' and friends' birthdays during the Holiday season.

We will celebrate December birthdays on **Sunday, December 17**. If you celebrate your birthday in December, please check the birthday list posted on the kiosk in Fellowship hall and add your name by Sunday, December 10 if it is not already there.



PCO Library News

In November, we added 16 new books to the library shelves!

The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth by Beth Allison Barr

"Historian Beth Allison Barr shows that 'biblical womanhood' isn't biblical, but arose from a series of clearly definable historical moments. She presents a better way forward for the contemporary church." (from the publisher)

Poems of 2022: Year Seven: A Year of Gratitude by Eunice Elaine Richards Creswell

"My story is now yours / as yours is mine. / May we treat each other gently." (from the front cover)

Both books are displayed with the other new books, and are available for borrowing.

The rest of the new titles are especially for middle school readers, and include seven graphic novels. This exciting new collection is displayed on the shelf labeled "youth," but some of the books will be of interest to readers of all ages.

We are pleased to report that we have subscribed to ***Horizons***, an award-winning magazine devoted to the mission and purpose of Presbyterian women. Look for copies on the periodicals shelf soon.

As Advent begins, look for a special display of reading materials on the round table in the library. Both Pastor Lisa and Rebecca are lending items from their personal libraries to enhance this collection. This is your opportunity to sign out and borrow books to enrich your advent season.

As always, we encourage our PCO members and friends to visit the library, take a look at the collection, and take a book home!

Kathi Cook

Coming in 2024

CABIN FEVER

After a four-year hiatus, **Cabin Fever** is coming back! In case you're a new member, Cabin Fever is a time for members and friends to share their skills and knowledge. After the worship service on **Sunday, January 21, 2024**, there will be two class sessions, held one after the other, with a lunch served in between. Each session will have about 4 or 5 class offerings for you to choose from.

January may seem like a long way away but there are a lot of holidays between now and then! Cabin Fever takes a bit of organizing so it's best if we start lining up our Cabin Fever class offerings **now**. In the past, we have offered everything from art classes to academic lectures, interpersonal relations to exercise, genealogy and much, much more. Classes are 55 minutes long.

Do you have an idea for a class to teach or skill to share? If so, please let Jerri Gillett know and we'll see how it fits into the lineup. Jerri can be contacted by phone (351-3816 landline), email: *gillett at msu dot edu* (standard email setup) or in person.

Cabin Fever has been a popular event and Parish Life is looking forward to offering it again!



COLLECTIONS—PAJAMAS & COATS

With colder temperatures coming please consider donating to Lansing families who are in need. The weeks **from January 8-25** we will be collecting new pajamas for the Judson Love Clothing Center. Sizes 4 Toddler to Adult, for both girls and boys, are needed. A labeled bin will be found in the coat room at PCO.



As you find used coats that you no longer need, please bring them to the church and they will be given to the Cristo Rey Community Center. You will find a table in the coatroom at PCO, labeled "Coats for Cristo Rey" where you may leave them.

Thank you for sharing your love and helping those in need during the cold winter months. If you have any questions feel free to call Jayne Zuhlke at (734) 474-2853.

Thanksgiving Basket Update

Thanks to your generous support, twenty-three \$75 Meijer Food Cards were given to local families as part of Meridian Cares 2023 **Feed Our Neighbors** Thanksgiving initiative.

As in years past, PCO's Mission Committee partnered with Meridian Township to provide Thanksgiving food assistance to Edgewood Village, Haslett and Okemos residents.

Meridian Cares focuses its annual efforts on providing food, housing, and other critical support services to local residents in need.

Thank you for helping to make this Thanksgiving Holiday a special one for so many of our neighbors.

Becky Gillespie
Mission Committee



Serving at Advent House in 2024

The Mission Committee is deeply grateful to all the members of our congregation who, during 2023, helped prepare and serve eight meals at Advent House. Through your generosity, we served more than 600 people who otherwise might have gone without a meal. Director Susan Cancro and the staff of Advent House thank you for your kindness and continuing support!

We have been asked to serve six meals in 2024. Each meal is served at 3:30 p.m. on Saturday at the North Westminster Presbyterian Church on the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd, and Oakland Ave. Groups can come together, purchase food, prepare it at home or in the church kitchen, and serve at 3:30 p.m. Staff are at Advent House to help clean up following the meal.

At this time the following dates are open : February 17, June 15, August 17, October 19, November 16, and December 21.

We hope that groups and committees will sign up for these dates. When your group has agreed upon a date please let either Ellen Hoekstra—[ellenlhoekstra at gmail dot com](mailto:ellenlhoekstra@gmail.com) or Bill Given—[givenc at msu dot edu](mailto:givenc@msu.edu) (standard email setup) know so that we can reserve the date with Advent House.

The Mission Committee

Public Policy Report By Ellen Hoekstra

Combining local and international news, an Okemos resident, Ody Norkin, has raised funds for and delivered four ambulances and medical supplies to war-torn areas in Ukraine. Norkin, whose Ukrainian grandparents died during the Holocaust, is the founder and owner of the Michigan Flyer.

In state news:

The Michigan Legislature has passed a three-bill package to expand protection of domestic violence victims. Currently, state law prohibits ownership and possession of firearms for perpetrators sentenced to felonies. These bicameral bills offer the same protections from perpetrators convicted of domestic violence related misdemeanors. The 8-year period when the perpetrator is barred from owning/purchasing a firearm does not begin until after that individual is no longer incarcerated, has met the terms of probation or parole, and has paid any fines associated with the case. The Firearm Safety Task Force has suggested inviting EVE (End Violent Encounters) to PCO to talk about this legislation, which the Governor will most likely sign.

The Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) are partnering to promote "Good Housing = Good Health" by addressing factors impacting residents' health. The Ingham County Health Department is one of 18 local health departments participating in this initiative.

MDHHS reminds us to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning, including ascertaining that fuel-burning devices and carbon monoxide detectors are operating properly.

MDHHS has launched an opioid settlement website showing how settlement funds support programs and resources. Michigan has recorded 6,600 overdose reversals since the 2020 launch of Michigan's Narcan Direct Portal, which provides this medication at no cost to community groups.

The legislature has passed legislation allowing state regulators to override local decisions prohibiting larger solar arrays and wind farms.

The legislature finalized a package of bills giving utilities a 2040 deadline to draw electric power from state approved clean sources.

Before adjourning until next year, the legislature approved a package of juvenile justice bills, including eliminating most court fines and fees for youth and their families. Mandatory crime victim payments and restitution remain. Other states have made similar changes.

Green Team Update—Saving Resources & Money

PCO RECYCLED PAPER PRODUCTS

The Green Team is always looking for environmentally friendly options for PCO as it relates to paper products. We can preserve Earth's precious resources and save money at the same time. We do this with the **toilet paper** used in our restrooms. Here is the cost comparison of our prior (Angel Soft) and current (Ever Spring) products:

Angel Soft	80 rolls/450 sheets/roll – 36,000 sheets total	Total Cost = \$82.19
Ever Spring	24 rolls/300 sheets/roll - 7,200 sheets/ total	<i>(Per Package Cost = \$13.39)</i>
	(5) Ever Spring packages = 36,000 sheets/total	Total Cost = \$66.95



The biggest issue of which to be aware with toilet paper products relates to the impact on climate change through deforestation. Approximately 18% of all deforestation is due to the manufacturing of toilet paper. Ever Spring is a brand created and sold through Target and has achieved a top “A” ranking among recycled product from the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC). By comparison Angel Soft fell into the lowest ranked category on the NRDC sustainability scorecard. If you would like to compare more products and rankings, visit the church web site at <https://www.okemospres.org/nrdc-tp-scorecard/>

DISHWASHER PLANS/VOLUNTEER PLANNING

Our goal is to reduce our consumption of disposable goods. Our plan is to use our washable plates as much as possible as the compostable ones still cost money and take energy to produce. There is energy in washing our dishes, but it is less than the alternative.

We appreciate all those that have stepped up to wash dishes when needed. We've decided a consistent schedule would make it easier for everyone. Hence, we thank **Wayne Scott, Dave Rumminger, Nancy Kanistanaux and Gary VanKempen** for volunteering to wash Sunday dishes on a regular basis. We still need people that could substitute when they aren't available. Please let Dorinda VanKempen at 517-388-1625 know if you are willing to be on a sub list for dishwashing.

Cybersecurity Reminders Heading into the New Year

In the past year, 'phishing' attacks have led to hacking at organizations large and small. Strong passwords are still our best defense against hacking, but our better human nature, including a desire to help or a desire to resolve issues quickly, often remains the weakest link in online security. Scammers are calling, emailing or texting potential victims impersonating employees of legitimate businesses, financial institutions and government agencies. Below are some common tactics used by hackers to steal your information.

- A tech support 'company representative' informs you of false computer issues and requests access to your computer to 'fix' the problem.
- 'Representatives' from government agencies such as the IRS or the Social Security Administration contact you and insist you take some action immediately.
- Use of falsified Caller IDs make you believe these contacts are legitimate.
- Urgent requests for payment via cryptocurrency, gift cards, or money transfers.

Here are some tips to prevent getting scammed.

- Remember that legitimate companies and government agencies (**AND YOUR PASTOR**) will **never** ask for payment or donations in the form of cryptocurrency, gift cards or money transfers.
- You are not required to and should never provide **any** personal or financial information to **anyone** who contacts you via unsolicited email, phone or text messages.
- Remain cautious of callers using high-pressure, "ACT NOW!" tactics to get you to comply.
- Feel free to hang up the phone or delete any suspicious messages. Then contact the company or agency directly, using the contact information listed on their official website.
- **Always** keep your software and antivirus programs up to date.

If you have received any unsolicited phone calls, texts or emails matching the descriptions above, **do not respond**. Instead, visit <https://cisa.gov>, which is the Federal Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, and <https://mi.gov/agcomplaints>, which is the State Attorney General's office (phone # 877-765-8388 or 517-335-7622). These agencies will direct you how to file complaints and give more information about protecting yourself and others.

BOOK NOOK

By Ron Dorr

Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ by Debie Thomas

The publisher's ad for *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories* is enticing. "He was a disrupter and a peacemaker, a rebel and a rabbi. His friends were the riffraff, and his enemies the religious elite. He was the wounded man who healed the sick, the homeless man who fed the hungry, the convicted criminal who released the captives, and the dead man who conquered the grave. The stories he told were scandalous, and the stories he lived changed the world.

"To reflect on the Jesus of the Gospels is to reflect on paradox, mystery, wonder, and messiness. It is to find God in the shadows, the tensions, and the ambiguities of life on earth as it is. These essays on the stories of Jesus are invitations to faith in all its complexity and untidiness. The Jesus who emerges here is not the sanitized Christ of piety and platitude, but the Christ of complicated joys and transcendent sorrows. The Christ who weeps, wonders, loses, learns, and seeks. These are the stories of the Incarnate God who finds and loves us in the messiness of our lives."

The richest "Encounters," part I of the book, come in the longest chapters, "The God Bearer" and "Tempted." The essay about Mary, the mother of Jesus, is organized like many other essays in the book. First, Thomas sets the scene, provides the context, or provides a personal narrative that leads to the theme in the chapter. Then she explicates the Biblical text. Next, she interprets the meaning for her, offers insights different from customary ones, or imagines new possibilities. Finally, she applies the meaning to readers' lives. Several shorter chapters in Part I stand out: "A House Divided," "What the Body Knows," and "But What Do You Think?"

In the first story in Part II, "Wonders," Thomas provides a detailed analysis of one day in the life of Christ, in which he "makes home sacred," heals, liberates, commissions, and prays. "How we spend our days," according to Annie Dillard, "is how we spend our lives." How do we spend our days and lives? In this story, as well as others such as "The Question that Hurts" and "When Jesus Weeps," Thomas may make readers squirm.

Christianity is "full of paradoxes," Thomas begins one of the chapters in "Teachings," the third part of her book. "Here are some of the paradoxes: . . . God is One and God is Three. Jesus is divine and Jesus is human. Creation is good and creation is broken. To give is to receive. To die is to live. To pardon is to be pardoned. To be weak is to be strong. To serve is to reign. We're saved by grace, and faith without works is dead. We are in the world, but we are not of the world. The kingdom of God is coming, and the kingdom of God is within us."

Those words come from page 140 in the chapter, "Let Them Grow Together." That essay deals with Jesus's response to wheat and weeds growing together. Thomas takes seriously the problem of evil: "Our response to evil must include both acknowledgment and restraint." Other examples of paradoxes that Thomas explicates are "Bear Witness," "The Blessing and the Bite," "Go and Do Likewise," "When You Pray," and "On Fairness." "Salty," too, gives us the doubleness of salt and the need for restraint. This third part of the book, I believe, is Thomas's strongest one. "Paradox doesn't always feel life-giving. We like simple, black-and-white clarity in our lives," but "God gifts us with rich and rigorous contradiction."

Thomas's briefest treatment comes in part IV, "Mysteries." Only nine chapters appear here, compared with 12 in "Wonders," 13 in "Teachings," and 16 in "Encounters." These final chapters do not contain as much of the pithy, feisty, imaginative, and persuasive thinking that characterizes much of the book. The best example, however, is "Father, Forgive Them," which is encounter, wonder, teaching, and mystery all wrapped into one.

On Saturday morning, December 2, the men's group is holding a retreat at our church. We will focus on Debi Thomas's "Introduction" and three chapters: "A House Divided," "What the Body Knows," and "Salty." Join us if you can.



Author Debie Thomas

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