

Watch

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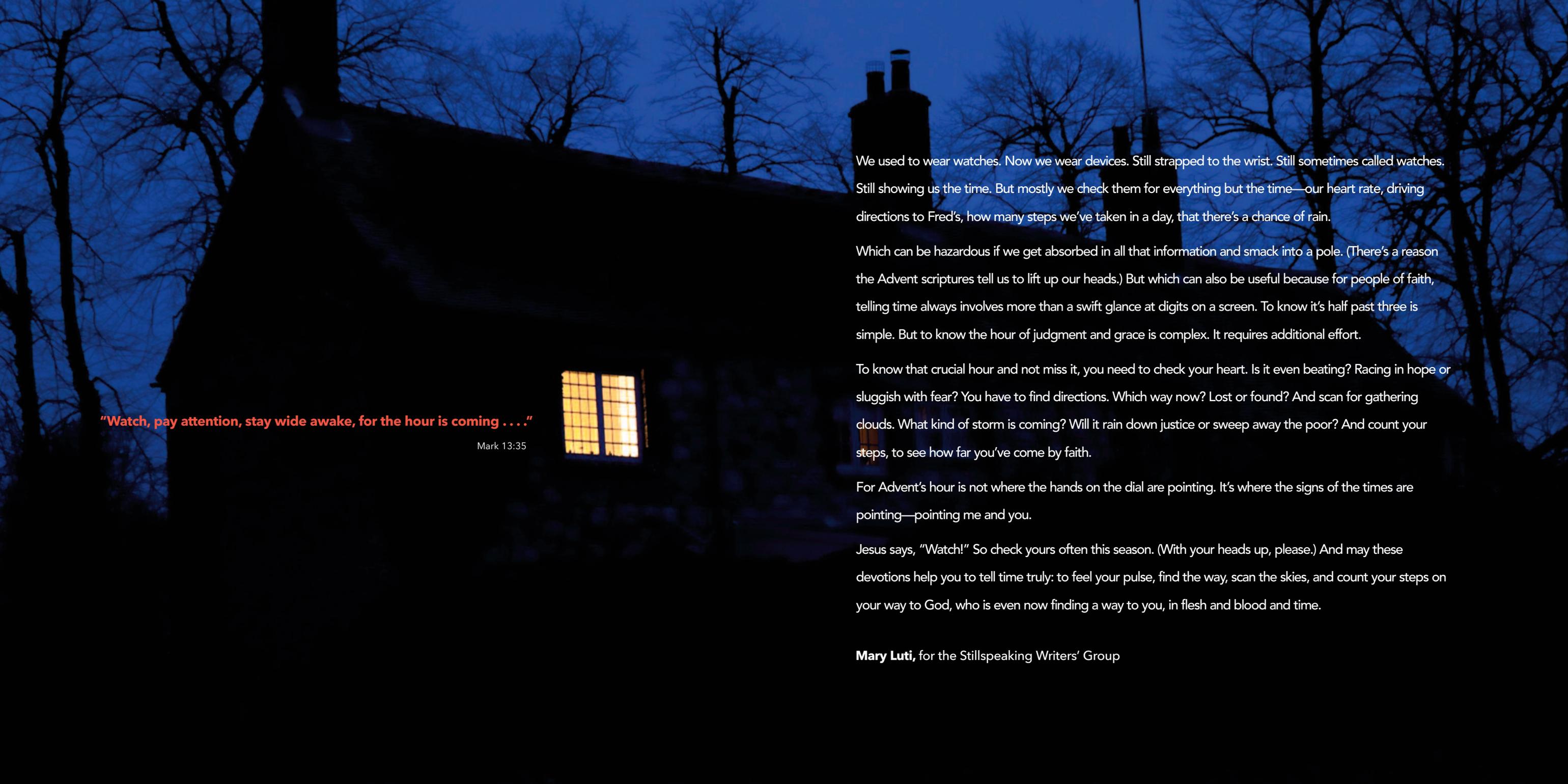
T H E S T I L L S P E A K I N G W R I T E R S ' G R O U P

Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places).

The Stillspeaking Writers' Group is composed of United Church of Christ ministers and authors who collaborate on a variety of resources for people in the church, outside the church, and not so sure about the church. Their motto: "Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places)." Read more about the writers on page 31.

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"Watch, pay attention, stay wide awake, for the hour is coming"

Mark 13:35

We used to wear watches. Now we wear devices. Still strapped to the wrist. Still sometimes called watches. Still showing us the time. But mostly we check them for everything but the time—our heart rate, driving directions to Fred's, how many steps we've taken in a day, that there's a chance of rain.

Which can be hazardous if we get absorbed in all that information and smack into a pole. (There's a reason the Advent scriptures tell us to lift up our heads.) But which can also be useful because for people of faith, telling time always involves more than a swift glance at digits on a screen. To know it's half past three is simple. But to know the hour of judgment and grace is complex. It requires additional effort.

To know that crucial hour and not miss it, you need to check your heart. Is it even beating? Racing in hope or sluggish with fear? You have to find directions. Which way now? Lost or found? And scan for gathering clouds. What kind of storm is coming? Will it rain down justice or sweep away the poor? And count your steps, to see how far you've come by faith.

For Advent's hour is not where the hands on the dial are pointing. It's where the signs of the times are pointing—pointing me and you.

Jesus says, "Watch!" So check yours often this season. (With your heads up, please.) And may these devotions help you to tell time truly: to feel your pulse, find the way, scan the skies, and count your steps on your way to God, who is even now finding a way to you, in flesh and blood and time.

Mary Luti, for the Stillspeaking Writers' Group

Sunday, December 3

Undivided ATTENTION

Vince Amlin

“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... or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.” Mark 13:35

My daughter is two-and-a-half and still not talking much. To ease her frustration we've taught her signs for words like “milk” and “clean up,” and she's created her own signs for the things she really wants, like “music” and “animal crackers.”

Nonverbal communication is more demanding than speech. I can't passively listen to her while focusing on something else. And she knows it.

When she has something to say and my head is turned away from her in conversation with someone else or (too often) in communion with my iPhone, she places her hand on my cheek and steers my face toward hers until she knows she has my undivided attention.

Speak Lord, your servant is watching.

God's Beloved Community, too, requires our focus. We've been given work to do in this interim time—the work of justice and peace—and it won't accept less than our all.

Advent is a season for having our gaze gently but firmly redirected. A time to abandon all the shiny distractions that have turned our heads. A call to give our undivided attention to the one who is arriving any minute now, the one who has something vitally important to communicate to us, the one who will not be ignored.

Monday, December 4

What a Comeback!

Kenneth L. Samuel

“In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of all - the most important place on earth. People from many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord... There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths.’” Micah 4:1-2

Last July, after being diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer, Senator John McCain came back to the Capitol to take part in the crucial health care vote. In his return speech, McCain said to his senatorial colleagues: “I hope we can again rely on humility, on our need to cooperate, on our dependence on each other.”

McCain's speech didn't offer the Senate body anything it hadn't heard before, but it struck a chord with the senators, and indeed with Americans. It reminded us of what we already know, but what we are often prone to put aside in the pursuit of our partisan rivalries. It reminded us that mutual respect and a willingness to compromise are central to our processes of democracy.

After seasons of futile wrangling and bitter polarization, bi-partisan unity and social civility again captured the imagination of the American populace.

Lord, prepare us for the appreciation of your Coming.

Similarly, the message of Advent is not new. It's been around for a long time. Love so intense and so determined, that it became flesh. Incarnate love . . . that would sacrifice itself to make its appeal to a humanity in crisis.

This is an old message . . . that never gets old. Its relevancy may be obscured, but never erased.

For all of us who chafe at the commercialization of Christmas and the diminishment of the Gospel . . . Take heart.

The message of Advent is making a comeback. In times like these, it has to.

Tuesday, December 5

Start Early

Matt Fitzgerald

“Why do you cry loudly? Have you no king?” Micah 4:9

A member of my church lost her husband to brain cancer two years ago. He died way too young. It's been a rough go, but she got up off the mat, felt her feet beneath her, found her sparkling self again. Then she was diagnosed with lymphoma.

When I saw her in the hospital she told me something I've heard from others. Her husband came back to her. She heard him speaking. This happens more than you might think. I've dreamed of my dead father for decades, heard his voice in silent moments.

Her husband didn't waste words. “You worry all the time. About the girls. About work. About the future. It stands out because there is no worry here. You'll see. When you're with God you won't have to worry. So why worry now? Don't wait to get here. Start early.”

Dear God, thank you for coming to us in Jesus and calling us back to you.

Like much good advice, it might be impossible to follow. It is hard to live in paradise down here on earth, especially when you're facing chemo. And yet, she found deep comfort in his words. So did I. We have much to be anxious about, but we know how the story ends. We know how our story ends. It ends in a beautiful beginning, a realm where all tears are dried and mourning is no more. You can wait until the moment that you die to let that truth change you, or you can start early. Why not start early? It may not erase all your fear, but it won't hurt to try.

Wednesday, December 6

Expect The Unexpected!

Richard L. Floyd

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” Luke 21:34-36

Many of the scripture readings for Advent are full of such warnings and dire forebodings.

They tell of people unprepared for God, like the tenants surprised by the sudden appearance of their landlord; like the sleepy bridesmaids waiting with their empty oil-lamps for the bridegroom to come.

In Lauren Winner's graceful little book, *Girl Meets God*, she says about Advent, “The waiting is meant to be a little anxious. I picture Jane Austen heroines. They never are quite sure that their intended will come.”

While we wait and watch, Advent admonishes us to be clear-headed and sharp-eyed. We are advised to keep our

heads up. Don't fall down an open manhole because you are worrying about the Dow Jones!

And what about this dread day that could come at us like a trap? Is it a special day, a certain day, the last Day, or perhaps just any day?

Whenever that coming day, we are warned against getting weighed down by the troubles of the world, told to travel with light hearts, and to expect the unexpected. After all, whenever the living God is involved, anything might happen!

Keep us alert and alive, O God, that we may be prepared for your coming. We pray in the name of Jesus, whose yoke is easy and burden is light.

Thursday, December 7

The Fearful Listener

Marchaé Grair

“I will listen to what God the Lord says; she promises peace to her people, her faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.” Psalm 85:8

I’m a great listener.

At least that’s what I’m told.

If a friend or family member needs a comforter, I’m there. Advice? Even better. Then I can tell them the latest wisdom I heard on NPR.

I’m not a great listener, however, when it comes to listening to myself.

When my body is tired, I work past midnight. When it’s time to chase another dream, I come up with one hundred reasons why reaching my last goal was good enough.

Lately, I’m trying to find rare moments where I can have an inner dialogue debrief.

In fact, as I write this devotion, I’m sitting in a quiet car, waiting for a friend in a parking lot because I realize I’ve been running from silence (and writing this devotion) all week.

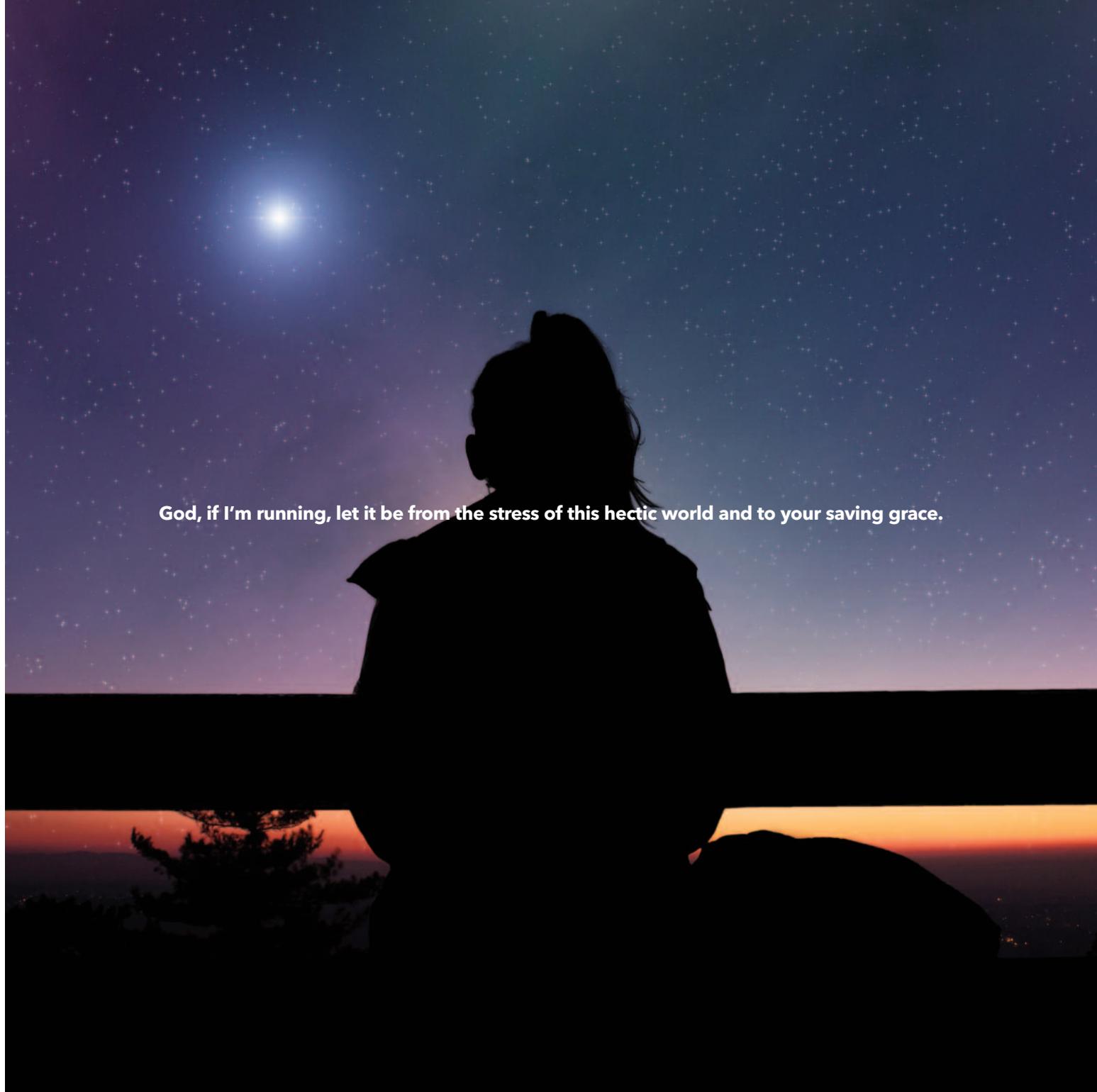
Usually when we’re running, we’re running from a fear and not to a solution.

I don’t like listening because I don’t like the chance that my subconscious, or the Holy Spirit, will speak clearly and tell me I need to do something I don’t feel ready to do.

What if God says go and I want to stay? What if God says to end that habit I didn’t even realize was bad?

I’m afraid to know what I don’t know—especially because the God I worship is so revolutionary in the quiet.

Perhaps it’s time to turn to God and turn off the NPR—there might be a blessing in the quiet I didn’t know I needed.



God, if I’m running, let it be from the stress of this hectic world and to your saving grace.

Friday, December 8

Scattered by Persecution

Donna Schaper

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled to Antioch.” Acts 11:19

One persecution is a lot like another. Somebody with power hurts somebody without power. They may behead or bully or ridicule or rape. They may tear or torment. They may hate simplistic alliteration especially when it could go on forever.

That is persecution’s worst feature: it goes on forever. Once you are beaten up on the street as a gay teenager, you look at streets a different way. Once raped, you look at sex a different way. Once beaten up, you find that you can’t really stay in good enough shape.

Persecution scatters us. We stop trusting authority or shibboleths or naive people. We are also scattered internally. We lose parts of our old self and can’t imagine the wholeness we may have once briefly known. Our lost parts scatter all around, like beads off a broken necklace, rolling, stranded on the floor.

Help us learn to watch forward, Spirit, and to anticipate goodness, no matter how much our beads long for their lost string.

We go on guard. We go on watch. We watch out.

Watching in the Advent sense is a bit different. It is more an alertness for the good than the watching out for the awful.

What amazes about the God/human incarnate one, who comes stealthy like a welcome if unanticipated pregnancy, lies here. The baby was soon persecuted. He also continued to watch with hopeful anticipation rather than hopeless fear. He watched for instead of watching out.

Jesus understands that God finally has all the power. He watches forwards not backwards. He knows the end of the story right from the beginning, as a babe.

Saturday, December 9

Nearby

Quinn G. Caldwell

“I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.”

Ezekiel 36:24

Almost 500 years ago today, a man named Juan Diego was walking on a hill just outside a young Mexico City, when he was stopped by the apparition of a young woman. She was, she told him, the mother of God, the Virgin Mary. All the stories of this God he’d heard to that point had been on the lips of the Spanish-speaking newcomers, by whom he had been baptized a few years previously, so he was shocked to hear her tell him this in his own native language. He wasn’t shocked, however, when the Spanish bishop didn’t believe him. The bishop asked him to ask for a sign, and she obliged: she told Juan Diego to gather flowers from the top of the hill, where no flowers would normally have grown. When he got there, he found it covered with Spanish roses not native to Mexico. He picked them, she arranged them in his cloak, and when he brought the bundle to the bishop and opened it, the flowers fell out, leaving behind one of

the most important religious images the world has ever known: the Virgin of Guadalupe.

God promises to take us from the nations and bring us into our own land. But that can only happen if God visits us in our nation, in our home, first. This is the miracle we wait for at Advent: God does not wait in a far place for us to come to God. God comes close, to the place where we are. And when God shows up, God comes not speaking the language of the Conquerors, but with our own native language on God’s lips.

If you’re looking for God, look to the stars and to ancient texts, yes, but also look nearby: the hill just outside of town, the barn out back, the other room. God’s plan is to establish you in glory . . . but God will meet you where you are, first.

O God, come to me here, in this regular old place. Bring to me the scent of flowers from far lands, and impress your image on my heart.

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