



## **“Voices of Advent”**

**By Professor Matthew L. Skinner**

### **Session 3: The Voices of Mary, Zechariah, and the Gospel of John (December 14, 2025)**

#### **Introduction**

- When was a time you caught yourself sounding like your parents or another important adult from your past?
- What are possible advantages of relying on “old scripts” when trying to process and communicate new experiences and insights? What are possible disadvantages?

***“The authors who wrote the Gospels could have composed stories to depict the coming of Jesus as something entirely unprecedented or even the work of a new or different deity...As the Gospels talk about God and the arrival of Jesus as a manifestation of God’s intentions, they remind us that nothing is entirely new.” – Skinner***

Today we explore how the Advent voices of Mary, Zechariah, and the Gospel of John follow “old scripts” and echo “older voices” as they bear witness to God’s activity in Jesus’s birth; and how these older scripts and voices can help us discover something new.

## Opening Prayer

*Eternal God, throughout the ages you have summoned faithful voices to proclaim your power, prophesy about your truth, sing your goodness, and marvel at your love. We thank you for the great chorus of believers who have spoken and sung your praise, and ask that, by your Spirit, you would strengthen us in this study to raise our voices with theirs, joining the festal shout they raise to your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

## Session 3 Video – “The Voices of Mary, Zechariah, and the Gospel of John”

- Which of Skinner’s statements most interested, intrigued, surprised, or confused you? Why?
- What questions does this video segment raise for you?

## “The Annunciation”

### Scripture Focus – Luke 1:26-38

- Skinner points out “Christian tradition remembers this scene as “the Annunciation.”” If you were giving this story a title, what would you call it?
- Miraculous announcements of unlikely pregnancies occur more than once in the story of God and God’s people. Let’s read Genesis 18:1-15, Judges 13:2-23; and 1 Samuel 1:1-18. What connections can you make between these birth announcements and the announcement of Jesus’s birth?
- How does Gabriel reference God’s past with the people in his message to Mary? What do these connections tell us about God and the people?

- How is Mary's response to Gabriel in verse 34 like and/or unlike Zechariah's response to Gabriel in Luk 1:18? Skinner amusingly speculates that Gabriel may have made Zechariah mute "to avoid a prolonged argument with him" – what do you think?
- Skinner writes, "Focusing on Mary's consent to God's plan for Jesus's birth is essential." Do you think Mary could have said "no" to this message? What do you imagine would have happened if she had? Why is it "especially important" to note and appreciate Mary's consent in our landscape today?
- "The story of Jesus's birth remains a story of divine initiative, but Mary's consent reminds us that human contributions also play a part." Why does God choose to invite and involve human contributions in accomplishing God's will?
- How does or how could Mary's consent to God's will inspire or inform your own decisions to say "yes" to what God asks of you?

### **"Mary's Prophetic Praise"**

#### **Scripture Focus – Luke 1:46b – 55 (The *Magnificat*)**

- What word or image in Mary's speech most captures your attention or imagination? Why?
- Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10. How are Hannah's and Mary's prayers alike and unlike? What significance do you find in these similarities and differences?

- Skinner reminds us, “The song is about God, not a political party or a list of economic policies we might want to ascribe to God.” What makes confusing or conflating God with human political, economic, and social aims a persistent temptation? How can and do we guard against it?
- How does listening to other people’s experiences of an assertions about God, both past and present, help us clarify and correct our own?

## **“Zechariah’s Prophetic Praise”**

### **Scripture Focus – Luke 1:68-79 (The *Benedictus*)**

- What word or image in Zechariah’s speech most captures your attention or imagination? Why?
- “Zechariah, very much a product of his Jewish identity and upbringing, draws on old insights he has been taught to give an account of a new development.” How does this message connect to God’s past history with his people? What do these connections tell us about God and the people?
- How does Zechariah’s song reinforce the relationship between Zechariah’s son, John the Baptist, and Jesus?
- Zechariah’s song pictures movement toward “peace” (vs. 79), but as Skinner notes, “Jesus must go through strife to get there.” Why can the way of peace for Christians never be separate from the way to the cross?

## **“The Prologue to John’s Gospel”**

### **Scripture Focus – John 1:1-18**

- What word or image in John’s Prologue most captures your attention or imagination? Why?
- What does John’s Prologue say about God’s Word (Greek *logos*)? How is the claim that God speaks central to Scripture and to both Jewish and Christian faith today?
- How does John’s Prologue both identify Jesus with and distinguish Jesus from God? How closely do you identify or distinguish between Jesus and God? Why?
- In verse 14, “John doesn’t say the Word became *human*, but *flesh*?” What’s the difference, and why does it matter?
- Skinner says the word translated “heart” in verse 18 is better translated “breast”, and conveys “intimacy and vulnerability.” Why are these qualities important in understanding God and Jesus’s relationship? Jesus later declares that He aims to make the same kind of intimacy with God possible for the rest of us. How much intimacy and vulnerability with God do you experience?

### **Closing**

Skinner writes, “The three voices we’ve lingered over...offer us more poetry and precision...they are full of arresting images, wordplay, and imagination...Advent offers a particularly appropriate time for us to expand our imagination...Maybe we find ourselves inspired to compose new poems in response.”

**Closing Prayer (drawn from the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”)**

O come, O key of David, come  
And open wide our heavenly home.  
Make safe for us the heavenward road  
And bar the way to death’s abode.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O wisdom from on high,  
Who ordered all things mightily;  
To us the path of knowledge show  
And teach us in its way to go.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to you, O Israel.

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**“Voices of Advent”**

**Session 4: The Voices of Angels and Prophets**

**Sunday, December 21    4:00 PM**

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