Patterns of Divine Possibility

An Advent Search

Written by Teri McDowell Ott

Sample

THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

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Introduction

In Abraham Verghese's 2023 novel *The Covenant of Water*, the main character, 12-year-old Mariamma, is preparing to meet her husband by an arranged marriage in India. She prepares to leave her childhood home and all its familiar comforts by recalling the words of her deceased father: "Faith is to know the pattern is there, even when none is visible."

Faith is to trust a pattern exists, to search for God's handiwork in the myriad designs of life. Too often we limit God's range, boxing our Creator into designs of our culture's making, denying the more of divinity. In his 2020 book *Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm*, Kazu Haga writes:

> If we look back to any of our Indigenous worldviews, we understand that things are rarely, if ever, black and white. Our world is nuanced, and most things exist on a spectrum. Yet in a society that is oftentimes dominated by an Abrahamic worldview that pits "good" against "evil," we are unable to see nuance.

Haga's reference to the Abrahamic worldview, which includes our Christian tradition, piqued my curiosity and inspired this devotion. The seasons of Advent and Christmas highlight the binary pattern of light vs. dark. On Christmas Eve we read, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). This beautiful passage gives us hope as Christ, our light, illumines our lives and helps us to see in the dark.

But such binaries have also been used (and abused) to substantiate sin, with darkness representing evil, and light representing pure good. People have interpreted this light/dark binary to substantiate false claims of the White race as superior over darker-skinned and Black people. But race is a social construct, and the shades of our skin beautifully diverse. When I select foundation to match my complexion, my color choices include warm ivory, cool sand and golden almond. Rhianna's Fenty line goes beyond "tan" and "deep" to specify foundations with pink, olive, bronze and golden undertones. If the beauty industry can evolve to embrace the full spectrum of skin color, certainly we can.

This devotion explores a full spectrum of patterns: narrative patterns of Scripture, fractals (repeated patterns) with the natural world, and the myriad ways life can be organized and ordered beyond either/or binaries. We will consider the perspectives of people who live on society's margins, people who have wisdom to share because their very existence counters mainstream patterns, as well as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people. Like a quizzical dog, we will perk our ears and cock our heads to engage God's world and our faith anew.

For each Sunday in this devotion, I explore the narrative patterns that emerge from and thread through the four *Revised Common Lectionary* texts. Each Saturday invites you to discern the patterns in a piece of art through the spiritual practice of *visio divina*. The remaining days are a swirling scattershot of reflections on observed patterns of God's world.

In writing this devotion series, I have found myself increasingly open and attentive to the existence of patterns I hadn't recognized before. I concluded this series curious and eager to discover more. As we walk together this Advent, I pray this devotion gifts you with the same openness and curiosity to discover the *more* of our Creator, the patterns of divine possibility.

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First Sunday of Advent
December 1

The In-Between Time of Advent

Reflection: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Before civil rights protestors marched, they gathered in churches to sing hymns and spirituals about the future God desired for them. This clear vision of promise strengthened them to non-violently endure water hoses, attack dogs and the beatings of police batons. Of these marches, Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1968, "We just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing 'Over my head I see freedom in the air.'"

The lectionary texts for the first Sunday of Advent lift our eyes to the horizon, to the promised future of and for God's world, each text a piece of a larger, unseen tessellation.

"The days are surely coming," declares Jeremiah, for God to fulfill the promise to redeem and restore the houses of Israel and Judah. This promise will manifest through a branch of David's lineage, someone whose reign will be characterized by "justice and righteousness" and lead God's people to "live in safety."

Until this manifestation, the psalmist says, we must wait, trusting in God as teacher and leader in the way of steadfast love and faithfulness. Waiting is difficult, though — the psalmist prays for God's help in this "in between," "not yet" time.

Waiting doesn't mean doing nothing, though. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul celebrates the joy of their relationship and encourages them to build upon that love with one another. Paul prays that the church will increase its love to prepare for Christ's coming.

"The kingdom of God is near," Jesus tells us through the Gospel of Luke. Near in time — he's coming soon! Be on guard! Be alert! But also near in location — God is among us, within our lives, our hearts, our communities. Pay attention to the signs of God at work among and within us, so we will recognize Christ when he appears on the horizon.

The goal of Advent is clear: Christ is coming, and we need to prepare ourselves for his disruptive, world-changing arrival. A better understanding and clearer picture of what Christ is bringing, the kind of world he will create among us, will help us prepare and strengthen us for the present work.

> Prayer: Soon and very soon we are going to see our King! Christ is coming! Savior God, help us to prepare our hearts, our homes, our communities and world. Help us keep our eyes on the hoped-for horizon so we can be strengthened for the work today. Amen.

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Thursday of the First Week of Advent
December 5

Fractals of Conflict

In *Healing Resistance*, Haga relates the patterns of fractals to the patterns of conflict.

> *I believe that the laws that govern conflict and harm are fractal in nature. Whether we are talking about intrapersonal conflict within our own hearts; interpersonal conflict between two people; or large-scale global conflicts between nations; the principles, practices, and strategies that guide the transformation of conflict are the same at every scale.*

According to Haga, the work of healing ultimately transforms conflict. Practitioners of nonviolence are often heard saying, "Hurt people hurt people." But as Haga writes, "Healed people heal people." This is true of personal relationships as well as large-scale global conflicts.

In a recent disagreement with an acquaintance on social media, I reacted with anger — at the person, the words they'd chosen and the way they treated me. It wasn't until I sat and meditated on the heat of my still-boiling anger that I recognized the hurt and woundedness as its core. Anger was the arrow I shot. But pain was my loaded bow.

Consider a conflict in your life. Meditate on this conflict, honestly considering what might be the underlying pain or wounds at its root. Scale up this conflict pattern to your community. What community wounds have manifested in conflict? Scale up to a global conflict, such as the war in Israel and Palestine. What human pain, if transformed into healing, could possibly pave a path to peace?

> Prayer: Prince of Peace, we are a wounded and wounding people. We hurt and we hurt others. Help us to recognize and acknowledge pain so we can work toward healing. Amen.

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Friday of the First Week of Advent
December 6

Watershed Land Patterns

In the 2016 essay collection *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, contributor Ched Myers writes about the importance of watersheds to ecological survival. Water's journey can be traced through the land's topography. From its original source, draining from peaks and ridges along a waterway or stream, to its end point in a pond, lake or ocean, water shapes and maps our land. "A watershed," writes Myers, "is the area covered in water's journey . . . a unique mix of habitats that influence each other, including forests, wetlands, fields and meadows, rivers and lakes, farms and towns. All human life is watershed-placed."

Wherever humans reside – urban, suburban, rural – our lives and our communities are patterned by watersheds.

Myers laments the growth of urban and industrial areas designed to accommodate traffic patterns, housing tracts and political borders. These patterns render nature and nature's design secondary or altogether invisible, stressing and stretching our relationship to land and water, bringing us to the brink of ecological and social collapse. Myers, a Christian activist and educator, advocates for a return to the "art, science, and theology of 'biomimicry.' We have lost our way as creatures of God's biosphere, and only the map that is woven into Creation can lead us home. And that map is defined by watersheds."

Myers implores us to consider new questions that take seriously the patterns of Creation. How might our politics change if boundaries were determined by nature rather than legislature? How might our city's development change if we honored our relationship with nature and nature's patterns? How might our international relations change if we understood ourselves as patterned and bound together by water and land?

> Prayer: Holy God, Creator of land, water and nature's bounty, open our hearts and minds to the ecological patterns you prepared for us. Help us follow your waterways to the new and abundant life you desire for us and all Creation. Amen.

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Saturday of the First Week of Advent
December 7

Visio Divina

Visio divina (sacred seeing) is an ancient form of Christian prayer where we dwell on an image in contemplative silence, listening to see what God may reveal. This holy week, as we contemplate the life, death, humanity and divinity of Christ, we invite you to reflect on this work from Hannah Garrity that engages the Incarnation.

Prompts:

- Prepare yourself for prayer — perhaps by reading Scripture or through deep, centering breaths.
- Dwell on the image: what are your eyes first drawn to? Linger there. Then take in the whole image.
- What does this image evoke in you?
- What patterns emerge?
- What thoughts or messages arise?
- Respond to your *visio divina* experience with the following prayer or your own.

Prayer: Divine Artist, you pattern our lives with meaning and purpose. Thank you for art that points the way to new vision and new understanding. May this sacred practice inform our living and guide us closer to you. Amen.

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