

Sunday, March 10, 2013: Joshua 5:9-12

by [Anne H. K. Apple](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue

The television show *Parenthood* begins each episode with a snippet of a Dylan melody and the lyrics, “May God bless and keep you. . . . May you always do for others, and let others do for you.” Blessings are like blankets of covering and shields of hope. God works through us to extend blessings to those who need them so that when life happens—with its swirling of good and bad events, happiness and sadness—God can bind together members of a community.

Under Joshua’s leadership, the children of Israel were being prepared to occupy the land flowing with milk and honey. They learned practices of obedience and faithful living before God—like crossing the Jordan River and placing 12 stones down and marking the place, Gilgal, as holy. They learned what it meant when the entire community submitted to the pain of circumcision and took time for healing. Both events led them to the celebration of the Passover and the hearing and holding of a particular blessing, “Your disgrace is being rolled away.” In that holy place, with practices enacted, manna was no longer needed. There was provision enough in the bounty of the land around them.

The church needs to hear the same messages. “Our shame is taken away” and “where you are there is enough.” Its people need to hear: “You are free from shame. You are free from fear.” Jesus Christ urges us on to live in a new creation, and because of his love we are freed and forgiven, redeemed and reconciled.

One day while making hospital visits, I walked into the room of a parishioner and noticed that a prayer shawl that was almost always spread across his bed was missing; on that day it was draped across his wife’s lap. For 60 years these two people had awakened beside one another. They knew one another’s movements and needs. Now this faithful couple was arriving together at the end of the husband’s life. And she needed the comfort of the shawl.

I sat down and listened with the woman as her husband went in and out of consciousness. As she talked, I heard her searching for patterns that might show her how to put down “12 stones” and mark this place in their lives as holy. God’s beauty

and blessing was revealed: as her fingers played with the yarn of the prayer shawl, she was swaddling herself in the prayers of the people. She knew she couldn't do this by herself and was summoning her church community to be with her.

As the first Sunday in Advent began last year, our congregation needed extra blessings in order to keep up with unexpected crises. Later I joked that we could have named the season *Ad-Lent*. It seemed that each day brought a crisis, a challenge or an unpredictable path to navigate.

Our first crisis came at the end of the early service that Sunday, when a member experienced a strokelike incident. An ambulance and fire truck became the *ex officio* greeting committee. Then just as that member was rolled out on a stretcher a text message came through from another member. "Mom died this morning. It was unexpected."

The second service brought more surprises. After the tolling of the bells and the procession of the choir, we were ready to move to the lighting of the first candle in the Advent wreath. But there was a long pause and then, as if the electricity had failed, everything stopped. Worship leaders exchanged glances and fake smiles until finally, like liturgical ventriloquists, we whispered to each other, "Go. It's your turn." "No it's not. It's yours." We sank into the awkward arrival of imperfection.

After worship there was some breathing space in the intensity of the morning until a choir member motioned frantically to a side door. "Someone's out there in distress!" she said. I raised my eyebrows in disbelief and threw up my hands. "OK. I'll check it out."

I walked down the hallway and looked out the door. One of our associate pastors and a church member were with a man who was on the ground in an alcove. I needed to copy some materials for a meeting so I found my husband and said, "Margaret's out there. She has the situation in control, but will you check anyway and see if she needs your help?"

I was rushing from the office to get to the meeting when my husband returned. He reached for my elbow to slow me down. "Anne, the church has been made a crime scene." A homeless man named Tom had died of natural causes on a threshold of the church. Right there, right on our doorstep—our particular body of Christ in urban Memphis faced the arrival of the mystery of God. We asked ourselves: What does it mean for our Advent that crime scene investigators moved about with yellow tape

because a homeless man had died in our doorway? What did it mean that news reporters unpacked their cameras in front of the church just as we'd lighted that first candle of Advent?

There is a story to tell at such moments, and that story is a story of blessing. Jesus Christ is the light of the world in every step and arrival. In our daily lives, our stories sometimes turn into shadowed wilderness and unexpected detours. God's blessing is that each turn and every shadow can be navigated with a living God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Christ we are brought into a new land where there is enough, where we are enough, where God's power is made perfect in our weakness.