

Preparing Room

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An Advent Companion

Russell J. Levenson Jr.



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*Dedicated to those Mothers who have generously served as
God Bearers to me;
My Grandmother, Kathryn Brackin*

*Dear mothers who mentored me during my teen years,
Alice Jeter Kieran, Sherry Gray Thompson,
and Phyllis Walton*

*My wonderful Jewish Aunt, Johanna Levenson Fitzpatrick
My spiritual Mother and Dear Friend, Ann Claypool Beard*

My Mother-in-Law, Evelyn Boehms Norton

My Mother, Lynne Whitney Levenson

My Daughter, Evie

And Laura,

My bride, and the love and joy of my life

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Preface: In the Beginning

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

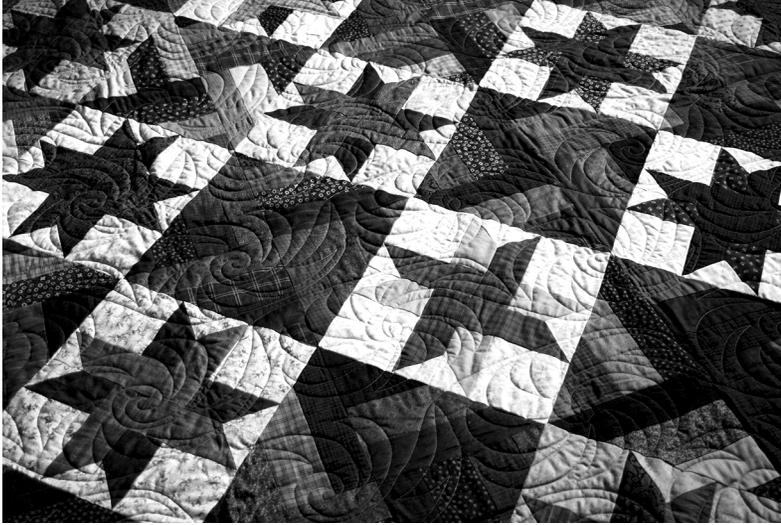
—John 1:1–5

Every story has a beginning. For those of us who walk within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story begins, well, in the beginning! Unlike some families, I can only trace my lineage back a few generations. My bloodline is an amalgamation of cultures that came together through the gifts of love and marriage. Looking at my family tree, one would find Scottish-Irish, English, Russian, and Native American (Creek); my religious lineage is both Christian and Jewish. I have spent a great deal of time with the patriarchs and matriarchs of my family seeking “the beginning” of my family’s story, attempting to deal with the places and people from whence I came.

When the story of our faith flips from the Hebrew scripture to the gospels, we are more formally introduced to a new person in the Trinity: Jesus. I suggest formally because as the scripture above suggests, He was with God even in the beginning. A quick read of Genesis and we see that when God created humankind, God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”¹ Note the plural; God was not in it alone.

1 Genesis 1:26.

Advent is the season where we turn once again to the beginning of the Christian story as it centers on Jesus. The term “Advent” actually means “coming.” The Advent season is the time we turn to the coming of God in the flesh in the Christ Child.



My grandmother and her mother were makers of quilts. I have inherited several of them from both. I remember as a child, coming into my great-grandmother’s kitchen and seeing a quilt frame suspended from the ceiling. She was a host of what was then known as a quilting party. Several women would gather at her home, each bringing various pieces of cloth of different shades and textures. By using the frame and working together, they produced a beautiful quilt that served as a source of comfort and warmth.

The pieces of the beginning of the Christian story come together not from one set of hands, but many—combining different shades and textures. In the gospels, Mark makes no mention of the events leading up to and surrounding the birth of Jesus. John, for the most part, points back to Genesis. The birth narratives come to us from Matthew and Luke.

It may help you to know that Matthew was concerned that his readers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish prophecies of the coming Messiah. He makes more references and uses more

quotes from the Hebrew Bible than any other New Testament writer. Luke, tradition tells us, was not only a physician but also very keen on history. Getting the details correct, like any historian, was very important to him.

In the pages that follow, I hope to offer several gifts. First are the scriptures key to telling the story, which will come primarily from Matthew and Luke. I will also make allusions and references to other scriptures, all of which will offer the background for the second gift.

Once you have had a chance to reflect prayerfully on the scripture, I will offer a brief meditation. My hope is that the meditation will help you step deeper into the Advent story to see how it may, in fact, have some kind of practical and personal implication in your own life.

I will then offer a third gift: a suggestion under the heading that shares the title of this book, *Preparing Room*. Sometime between his birth in 1674 and death in 1748, the great hymnist Isaac Watts penned:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come
let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room²

Ah, how full the modern heart is today. There are so many ways to cram it full with e-mail, text messages, faxes, television, and satellite radio. Filling it even more are our worries and frets, bills and debts, health and hopes; need I go on? In hearts so full, it is sometimes difficult to place yet one more thing, thought, or feeling. Thus, each chapter will offer a reflection or suggestion on how we may prepare just a bit more room for the King.

Finally, I will share a fourth gift—a prayer from our Judeo-Christian tradition or one from my own pen.

This four-part compilation is designed to carry us through the season of Advent, beginning with the first Sunday of Advent and ending with Christmas Day. Since the Advent season varies in

2 *The Hymnal* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1982), 100.

length from year to year, I have not set a corresponding day for each offering. Start as you enter the Advent season and track it along so that you end around the time of Christmas Day.

One more thing—an important piece of our quilt. Part of this work came together while I was on a study leave in London, so you will find some references to life on the other side of the pond. I got back home on a transatlantic flight. I know absolutely nothing about the mechanics of, or the techniques it takes to fly, an airliner. Once I board, I buckle my belt and say my prayers (which I always do), then I put my trust in the pilots to get me to my destination. Once we are in the air, I do not have to know the specifics about pitch and roll, rudder and wing to enjoy the ride.

There are parts of the Advent/Christmas story that may tend to get us sidetracked a bit. The modern mind may find it hard to grasp the miraculous pieces of the quilt we find in the immaculate conception, the virgin birth, the angels, signs, stars, shepherds, and magi. But if we, as passengers, spend too much time focusing on how the jetliner works, we may never simply enjoy the ride.

Do not get me wrong; there is a time to study the how. I have to trust the one flying does know how! But to get to settle into the ride, my mind and heart needs to let the pilot control the direction, so I can just enjoy the flight. May I encourage you to do the same as we move ahead? There is certainly a time for inquiry and critique of the story, but my offering here is to simply let the story speak to us. Accept it and go along for the ride, at least for this season.

And now, my friend, I invite you to open your heart, to make room for the God of us all. Let us begin, at the beginning!

—RJT+

Generators and Generations

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of

Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

—Matthew 1:1–17

For nearly a third of my adult life, I have lived on or near the Gulf Coast, which has its blessings and curses. On the curse side comes a little word with which few of us want familiarity: *hurricane*. I have seen and lived through my fair share. On more than one occasion, the furious winds left in their wake long power outages, made easier by an obnoxiously loud gasoline-powered generator. I did not like everything about the generator, but it kept the important things in my home going: the refrigerator, a small air conditioner, and a small radio or television to maintain contact with the outside world, at times for up to half a month. Over the years the generator has traveled with us and become part of every hurricane story we have ever told in my household.

Matthew opens our story with a genealogy of Jesus¹—the generator of the story of Jesus. It is part of what keeps the story running and it generates the pieces that will follow. You can trace Jesus all the way back to Abraham, the adopted father of Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. Now who would not be happy to claim Abraham as their “great, great, great, grandfather”? My own family name (Levenson) finds its roots in my great-grandfather, a Jew who immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s to escape the pogroms of Russia, a soon-to-be Communist nation. Levenson literally means “son of Levi,” the ancient tribe of Israel

1 Luke 3:23–38; Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Chronicles 3:10–17.

given the priestly responsibility for the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple. It did not take long for me to get what we in my home call “the big head.”

One of the things that really strengthens my allegiance to the story, as it is told in Holy Scripture, is its down and dirty honesty. In Jesus’s family tree we find a prostitute named Rahab.² A snippet later, up pops King David.³ Although much good can be said about David, he also wore the name adulterer and murderer.⁴ Next comes wise King Solomon, who had more wives than most men my age have hairs on our heads. How honest though, is it not? All of these and more generate the coming of the Christ Child.

I have known many people over the years who take great pride in their lineage. I recently attended a party where a toast was given noting that their first family members came to the America on the *Mayflower*. Most would see that as something in which to have personal pride. However, it is possible to make a *religion*, perhaps even an *obsession* of sorts, about one’s elders—the name, the heritage, the race—instead of seeing it as a small part of the epic story of the human family.

Perhaps more division, harm, violence, and war has been the fruit of such obsession than any other poisoned fruit of the human spirit. I recently read an article in an Irish newspaper about the lingering tensions between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. I grew up in the South where the color of one’s skin and—in my case—hints of a name that bore Semitic roots were sources of blatant bigotry and prejudice, and continue to be in some circles.

Matthew’s honesty about Jesus’s generations gives us an opportunity to remember that the human beings that stepped out of the primordial dust and mud were the ancient grandparents of us all.⁵

2 Matthew 1:5; Joshua 2:6; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25.

3 Matthew 1:6–7.

4 2 Samuel 12.

5 Interestingly, both the basic theories of evolution and creation share this belief that humankind came into being via the pathway of mud and air, earth and time. The pure evolutionist’s *Big Bang* would be my God’s breath; Genesis 2:7.

They were, like it or not, our generators. Perhaps this is why, when the Apostles began preaching the Gospel of Christ, they placed great emphasis on breaking down barriers of division. Paul wrote, “You are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26–28).

How good of Matthew to include *everyone* in Jesus’s family tree—even the black sheep. Perhaps it was one way of saying that it did not matter who Jesus’s people were; the more important point was what the story was all about. It was generated as far back as Abraham and now, embracing it all, the curtain was about to be raised on the most important chapter.

— *Preparing Room* —

Spend some time being boldly honest about your own family tree. Are there skeletons hidden, black sheep you wish were not pasturing in your family’s name? What generates your family’s history and the generations before you? Does your own allegiance to your family, your race, your lifestyle, your faith cause you to lock others out of your world? Is there a chamber in your heart which needs to be swept clean of bigotry or prejudice so that it can make room for the love God wants you to shower on others?

A Prayer

Almighty God,
As you breathed your Spirit into the dust of
the earth to give your children birth,
Breathe on me now . . .
Make eyes that are blind to the pain others see,
Make ears that hear no cry for help to hear,
Make a heart that may build walls around
the compassion you call out of us,
Crumble into pieces, and pour out your love
upon all you send our way.
*Amen.*⁶

6 Prayers without a citation are written by the author.

Trash and Treasure

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

—Luke 1:1–4

In my business, it is not unusual to encounter the well-known fundraising technique known as the garage sale. The church usually issues an open invitation for folks to open their attics and garages and unload the huge amalgamation of clothes, toys, yard implements, framed photos, and the like. I have been part of the sorting parties that take place prior to the big sale, and one of the tasks is properly pricing the items. Some prices are designed to draw customers in, while others are set just to keep them from running the other direction. Some of what lands in the hands of the volunteer salesperson is trash, some is treasure.

Luke is concerned with separating things as well: fact from fiction, truth from myth. He tells his reader that he knows lots of

other people are out there trying to put the story right.⁷ “Many have undertaken,” he writes. I would venture to say that getting the Advent/Christmas story *right* may be difficult for many a modern mind for two reasons.

The first is the multitude of versions we now have available to us as post-millennial adults. Movies, books, television, and music all have their own versions of the story. Charles Schultz tells it well in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* when he pulls Linus on the stage to tell everyone a basic piece of the story, not through his own eyes, but through the lens of Luke’s “orderly account.”

We have dressed the whole story up, something which I intend, for reasons that will become obvious, to undress a bit. We have visions of a hallowed and halo-wearing Mary in a gentle and beautiful setting, with animals looking on almost knowingly, surrounded by shepherds and three wise men—all on the same night. As we will see, the story did not quite play out that way. Part of Luke’s work is to set the record straight. May I suggest you let him do that for us.

The second reason it can be difficult to get the Advent/Christmas story right may be the competing voices out there. The Church has traditionally seen the season of Advent as a time in which Christians prepare for the coming of the Christ Child. The emphasis is on longing, expectation, and hope; it is also preparation that acknowledges human sin, doubt, and the darkness of the world that makes it difficult for the Christ Child to make his way into our lives.

Given the modern take on the weeks leading up to Christmas, it may seem almost silly to find room for the real story. The Church may be whispering an invitation to personal preparation, but the world is downright screaming its invitations to sales, last-minute shopping, hysteria over the right present for the right person,

7 The reader goes by the name Theophilus, which literally translated means “one who loves God.” Some scholars have suggested Luke was writing to a specific person, while others suggest he was offering a kind of general address to all those who are lovers of God. In either case, the exact recipient of the letter, whether individual or group, does not diminish the impact of Luke’s intent.

beautiful Christmas cards laden with photos of the year gone by, packages, trees, bows, decorations, stress, exhaustion, and a sense of failure if it all does not come out exactly the way we had pictured it.

Compiling Luke and the other gospel accounts helps us with both of these challenges. We can let that orderly story help each of us put our lives in order. We can see his word as an invitation to put the brakes on those things that may not be as important as we once thought and instead hold fast to those things of infinite value. For Luke, and those of us preparing for Christmas, the thing of value is the real story with its real purpose: to draw us ever more deeply into a relationship with God in Christ.

Each day may seem a bit like the call for a garage sale. Our job, with God's help, is to take the time to look around and determine what is trash worth pitching away and what is treasure worth keeping, at any costs.

— *Preparing Room* —

Open your heart to pieces of the Advent and Christmas story that may be different than those you have always held in your mind's eye. Today, set aside time to begin sorting through the trash and treasures of these days. What could be tossed that would make a bit more room for God? What could be held just a bit more closely to open your heart even more?

A Prayer

God, in your almighty power you have so ordered that world that, left without the scourge of human sin and selfishness, all creation would glorify you.

Give me time and space this day to simply think on you and all of your gifts to your children.

Help me to discern those places of wasted energy and time, and have the courage to let them go, and give me the same gift to embrace more fully the precious jewels you have entrusted to my care.

That, having cast aside the trash and held fast to the treasure, I may indeed do as I am intended to do: glorify you.

Amen.