Changing to Stay the Same
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Meditations on the Faithful Witness of the Institute for Christian Studies

Robert Sweetman

Edited by Allyson Carr and Ronald A. Kuipers

with a foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff
The pages that follow are an extraordinary collection of letters, fifty-two of them, arranged according to the church year. They were originally addressed to readers of a newsletter sent out by the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto to its supporters. Each letter is a meditation prefaced by a scriptural passage that illuminates, and is illuminated by, the meditation, and each concludes with a request for prayers for the flourishing of the institution and its members. Robert Sweetman, the author, is a senior faculty member at ICS; he is, by profession, a medieval historian and a historian of philosophy.

One thing extraordinary about the letters is that they are — well, like fireworks. Each begins from something in the life of ICS, or in Sweetman's own life and work, that he has been mulling over: the theme of joy in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the ever-fragile but nonetheless enduring existence of ICS, the intertwining of change and continuity in life, the concept of religion employed in a graduate student's dissertation, and so forth. One gets the impression
that anything whatsoever that happens to or around him is a potential topic for one of Sweetman's meditations. What then invariably happens is that, from the relatively humble and commonplace observation with which the meditation begins, there bursts forth some wonderfully rich observations that illuminate the scene and surprise us in the way that fireworks do.

One thing that makes these observations rich is the way in which Sweetman employs — always gracefully, never heavy-handedly — the results of his scholarship to illuminate the topic. What also makes them rich is that they reflect a deep and warm Christian sensibility, shaped by Scripture, to the events and experiences of everyday life: joy, fear, living on the edge with hope, tradition, and much more besides. The meditations are brief; but the wisdom they contain is abundant.

Pervading the meditations is the vision of Christian learning that has guided ICS over the forty-five years of its existence. It's an inspiring vision: risk-taking rather than risk-averse, welcoming rather than protective, generous to all. Here is what Sweetman says in one place: Christian learning "moves ever forward toward provisional results that open up new inquiries leading in turn to further provisional results, world without end. In such an enterprise there remains an open-endedness in which risk can reside. We are not the Makers and Masters of the Universe. We cannot control the progress of scholarly research or of higher level learning. We enter into such an enterprise in good faith trusting in the community of Christian scholars (if there is one available) and
ultimately the Holy Spirit to correct and keep us at work in search of God-honouring results provisional though they be” (43). Wise words indeed!

And about the combativeness that characterizes so many Christians, scholars included, he says: “It is at this point that I remember Jesus’s story about the wheat and the tares. He counsels us to leave the tares be, lest we pull up the wheat in myopic weeding frenzy. Could it be our mopping too must show a similar restraint? Could it be that authentic Christian witness begins not with a competitive posture, teeth bared, spoiling for a fight, but in a posture of solidarity? It must be authentic Christian witness, of course.... But might there not be an authentic witness that proceeds from a deep solidarity with those whom one addresses?” (47).

I am grateful that these letters have been collected together and will now enjoy wider circulation. I had not previously read any of them; indeed, I had not known of them. Many others will be grateful as well. The collection is to be treasured, read slowly, savored.

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF
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These are the "letters for the president" that Senior Member Bob Sweetman wrote over a period of seven years. They were each "incidental" in nature—dealing with the daily life and happenings of this fragile-but-resilient little institution. And yet Bob's words deal with the larger themes that we all experience in life: change, fear, hope, loss, grief, wonder, joy. Moreover, his reflections see those experiences as part of a redeemed life as a whole, one that struggles to live faithfully in response to God's call and the circumstances in which one finds oneself. Though they started out as simply opening thoughts to ICS' news and prayer letter, they grew into something much deeper and richer: a window on one person's, and one institution's, attempt to live life faithfully, as a disciple of Christ.

Journeying with Bob, and with the ICS, as both he and the ICS are hit with the knowledge of creaturely frailty and limitations—fighting cancer on Bob's part and various economic and other difficulties on the part of the ICS—we can see the shape of a life that always strives to live in service. When
we received requests to publish the letters in a collection, we thought about just bringing them together chronologically and editing them that way; but as we re-read them, soaked in their themes, and noticed how they journeyed throughout the cycles of the year, we decided it would be more fitting to organize them as devotions fitting into the various seasons of the liturgical calendar. Each letter is an invitation to prayer, and a meditation on life in its many complexities. They give a little slice of community life here at the ICS, as well as Bob’s particular life in service to Christ.

As mentioned above, the letters have been re-organized around themes that flow from the seasons of the liturgical calendar: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Ordinary Time One, Lent, Easter, Ordinary Time Two. (The original chronological order in which the letters were written can be found listed in an appendix at the back). We have also given each letter a biblical verse as an epigraph—a bit of Scripture that speaks to the themes the letter raises. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the Bible is not meant to be read, or heard, in merely bite-sized pieces, and so there is always a danger in plucking a verse or two out of its context and setting it in a new one. Nevertheless, with the deep conviction that Scripture speaks to us even today amidst our modern lives, we have looked for those passages that shed light on similar issues to those Bob addresses, and which call to mind the contexts from which those passages arose.

In one of the very first of these letters, Bob writes:

"ICS is blessed with the support of people across Canada,"
the United States, and elsewhere. And that means that for many of you, your support, in whatever form, is offered to us from afar. You are our partners, or better, members of the ICS community, but it must be hard to feel that membership when the distances are far and a central focus of ICS’s mission is aimed at the world of ideas and post-graduate study you may acknowledge is important but not share. That’s why we assemble this prayer letter for you each month. We need and want your prayers, and in the process we want to let you know about the lives and work of those who live and study at ICS. We hope it gives you a better idea of who is here carrying on this mission, whether as staff, senior members, junior members or the volunteers on our governing boards. Sometimes what we have to report is wonderful, like academic work finished, and done well. Sometimes our stories are tragic, serious illness and the like. But all our stories are, we trust, worthy of prayer, and are windows onto the internal life of ICS as it struggles to be an academic witness to the faith that unites us and the Lord in whom we have faith. We send you our prayer concerns but also our deepest best wishes for you in your life and work.”

That is still the wish we have — for ourselves, and for you.

ALLYSON CARR

Toronto, 2014
Advent (Four Weeks)

Advent is a time of waiting and preparing for the coming of the Christ-child; a time of newness, of looking forward with hope, and of trying to make space to welcome (again) Christ into hearts. In terms of using the liturgical calendar as a way to experience various forms of spiritual disciplines, Advent also stands in a place of “not yet understanding,” of “not yet knowing,” of mystery. Of course we “know” that Christmas is coming. We know that we will celebrate the birth of Christ, and we already have the stories of his life. We know the adult before meeting the baby. The gift that Advent brings us, however, is a chance to practice, to some extent, “not knowing”—to practice a sense of hope and wonder, and fitful, even nervous, preparation for the birth of a long-awaited child. It is a time to prepare ourselves for a new year, where, when we start out by standing in a place of “not knowing” and mystery, we open ourselves to learning more about the Word we hear. In opening ourselves to really contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation, Advent becomes a time of listening and discovery along with its preparations of joy and wonder.
Week One (Advent)

Isaiah 9:2 “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.”

December means Advent and Christmas, a time of waiting followed by a time of feasting in the old Christian calendar. Some of the stories that follow involve waiting, whether filled with anxiety or growing excitement. Others really deserve a toast in honour of accomplishment and bright prospects for the future. And that is the funny thing about life in a community—waiting and feasting, anxiety and the delicious prickle of hopeful anticipation, they are all jumbled together. The pessimist can feel in his rights in saying that there are dark moments even in the brightest of days. But the optimist is equally within her rights to insist that it takes only a small light to transform darkness into light, however dim, by which to see. I tend toward the former; I am working to practice the latter. But the mixture of joy and sadness that calls out for your prayers just means at its most basic that the ICS community is alive, and that means the bearer of all the precious ambiguity that Life gives to life here between the “yes” and the “but” this side of Christ’s Ascension, this side of the Eschaton. Read about a few of our joys and sadness, and, please, it would be one of our joys if you joined us in our prayers. Our best wishes go out to you in your waiting and feasting this December.
I spent a good part of my adolescence carefully tending a fantasy life inspired by the fiction of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. By the time I turned twenty I had read the Lord of the Rings so many times that I wondered whether one could become a Middle Earth addict (not just a nerd). What always struck me about my fantasy heroes was their surface ordinariness. They were, at the start and in their way, “just like” me. Yet they had these depths that opened up in the course of the story, depths that revealed capacities for love and suffering I could barely imagine but was deeply moved by, again and again. The effect was always the same: a furrowed brow and dissatisfaction. I did not have such hidden depths, such uncanny capacities. Or at any rate I had no access to such depths or capacities, for I did not live in such extreme circumstances. My life was, by comparison, painted in pastels; it lacked both the bright, clean colours of personal greatness and the indigo swirl of corruption. In short, it and I did not measure up to Frodo, Lucy, or Dr. Ransom.

Now I am old enough to realize that the world of the fantasy hero is really your and my world, surface dwellers though we be. It takes the hero’s hidden depths and capacities in all of us (stubbornly or involuntarily) ordinary souls to love spouses, nurture children, negotiate bureaucracy, serve voluntary organizations, follow one’s vocation, drive safely, stay true to friends, in short, to persevere through the lab-
yrinth of day-to-day living. At least it does if we are to live up to all that is asked of us. And still it often feels as if we have no access to the needed depths and capacities even if we grudgingly admit we do live lives of appropriately extreme circumstances: full of bright, clean colours and swirling indigo. How many times doesn’t it happen that when you are put in the driver’s seat you realize that you don’t know how to get to ‘there’ from ‘here’, that you lack seemingly some depth of imagination or hidden capacity to know? I admit how well that describes my life at present, and—surprise, surprise—I find my brow still furrows.

But here is the mystery: we ordinary and inadequate souls, we are the ones who are called, installed in office, and asked to respond to present need. Of course, we aren’t exactly left to our own devices. It turns out that we too can count on hidden depths and great capacities for love and suffering if only we remember the names we use for them, Providence and Grace. We, in all our frailty, marked as we are by furrowed brows, are those whom God has called to act on his behalf: here too in and through ICS in and for God’s world. We may not be fantasy heroes but we have been chosen. Some teach, some learn, some administer and order; all can and do pray. And these acts, when graced, why, they can change the world. There is a name for that too, Incarnation. Not a bad thing to remember in the month of December. Be invited to pray with us again this month, you heroes of ICS.
Week Three (Advent)

1st Corinthians 12: 4 “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit”

In the mid-1980s the world of medieval studies was graced with one of those books that change the way “we” think about the persons and societies medievalists study and write about. That book was Caroline Walker Bynum’s Holy Feast and Holy Fast. In it, she tried to look at, identify the characteristics proper to, and interpret the explosion of women’s religious writing (and male writing about religious women) that took place in the Middle Ages between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. The key to understanding this writing and interest lay in the experience of embodiment in its relationship to the life of the spirit—by which one ought to think something like the totality of our life when it is ordered toward and directed as gift at God. For male spiritual writers, body was, on the whole, something to accept on its own beginning level but to transcend in the course of spiritual living and doing. This was not true for the women spiritual writers of the later Middle Ages, however. Embodiment was not to be transcended but rather taken up into the life of the spirit; bodily living was to be or become the life of the spirit when bodily life was lived before the face of God. This is too simple a story, but maybe you get the point. Women were imaginatively associated with body, men with soul; women with humanity, men with divinity, and so on and so forth. These contrasts made up a kind of cultural koine
of the sexes. So it makes sense that women would see embodiment as a central spiritual resource rather than ever and again an impediment to spiritual progress toward God. After all, on some deep cultural and imaginative level, in thinking about the spiritual worth of embodiment they were thinking about the spiritual worth and path of women.

In the course of Bynum’s study it became apparent to her that really to see the human body as a medieval woman or man did, one had to emerge from the imaginative expectations of our own world, from the metaphors for body that we gravitate toward because we live after Darwin on the one hand and Freud on the other. That is, one had to stop according central weight and meaning to our bodies as a complex nexus of psycho-sexual drives and recapture an older sensibility that we in our post-Darwinian and Freudian selves find hard not to interpret as body hating, perhaps as an expression of the thanatos or death principle driving human behaviour. What we need to be able to reimagine is body as the place in which two profound processes exist and interact: the process of generation and corruption. For certain purposes one can emphasize the one side—corruption—and inveigle against embodiment as the source of corruption in every sense of the word. Augustine once called humans in their embodied existence nothing but a mass of corruption (*massa corruptionis*) and then, so that we’d get the point no matter how dim we were, he went on to explain what he meant. He meant we are nothing but a pile of turds (*massa stercorum*). But, one should not forget that where there is corruption there is ever generation as well, again, in every sense of the word. So em-
bodiment was a mixed bag—site of death and decay but also of life and indeed new life. It is the generative power of bodiment that had later medieval religious women thinking and imagining their lives before God.

Again where there is generation and regeneration there is also corruption. It does not take much to bring a human body low. I have had a rather vivid reminder of that fact in the last week. Prostate surgery will do that. There are worse surgical fates, but that only makes me shudder and adjust my catheter nervously. The point is that medieval Christians understood our embodied existence as a perfect manifestation of the ambiguity that marks out fallen and yet graced existence. Things can always go one of two general directions. And out of that, certain talented women constructed a very helpful spiritual exercise. In the mess of our bodily lives, its indignities, its frailties, there is a mighty power of regeneration afoot. Sensitize one’s fingers to touch, one’s tongues to taste, one’s noses to smell, one’s ears to hear, and one’s eyes to see. Over there, just to the left of your fear and anxiety, just to the right of your sense of physical and spiritual malaise, your sense of betrayal because you too, privileged soul that you are, have been given to suffer—there, don’t you see it, a glorious new shoot from Jesse’s stump. Smell the tang of new growth even in the context of rot.

As I pace the floor of my house as part of my cooperation with my body’s powers of generation and know that I hurt nonetheless; as I struggle to manage the far messier parts of postoperative care, I hang on to the knowledge that right where there is stink and rot, there are the powers of new
life—a babe of Bethlehem offering hope and new growth, or even better, the growth of the New itself. And it is not just individual bodies that need to remember the internal source of hope and newness even in the very heart of the abyss. Communal bodies need to remember as well. That’s us at ICS: one small and fragile communal body. As a body we are frightfully weak, despite the magnificence of our donors, and yet the power of generation coexists even where the anxieties are greatest. I pray it is so, this December, and in the spirit of Advent and Christmas, I invite all you who care about ICS to join me in that prayer too.

Week Four (Advent)

Luke 1:34 “Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’”

I began academic life as an historian of religion and of religious culture. I specialized in thirteenth century religion and in particular the so-called “begging” orders, the Dominicans chief among them. I have focussed an indefensible amount of time on a particular Dominican, Thomas of Cantimpré (1199-c. 1260), and his rollicking practice as storyteller. His works come in two kinds: 1) collections of materials gathered with preaching and penance in mind, and 2) saint’s lives. His preacher-oriented “Book of Bees” (Bonum universale de apibus) has delighted me for nearly thirty years. What a pot-
Advent

pourri of tales from what a vast scramble of sources! I doubt it would provide a modern preacher much that he or she could use but summer camps would have ghost stories aplenty to add to their usual repertoires.

The Protestant in me has always been curious about Thomas of Cantimpré's saint's lives. They raise questions about sanctity. What is a saint? What is a vita (a life)? What is the writer of a saint's vita trying to do? How does he or she go about her work? How is the result like and not like a biography or some other modern genre of writing? There is a lot I could write about and have albeit in scholarly locations that are hardly vacation spots for the average curious intellectual traveller. Let me just pick out one chain of features that might be of interest or perhaps even delight.

Hagiographers (writers of saint's lives) were not writing biographies as we think of the term. Oh, it is true that in the twelfth-century there were hagiographers of real literary and psychological depth who wrote "humanistic" vitae that presented the saint as at one and the same time a human person such as one might meet on a nearby street or hear tell of in the stories emanating from the courts of society's high ones, kings and bishops, or from the outlandish and deserted regions separating human communities from each other, hermits or wandering preachers. But this "humanistic" style was a passing fad; most vitae made no pretence of capturing the human individuality of the saint. What hagiographers were interested in were what one can call "saintly situations": acts and events that were in and of themselves spiritually spectacular. Such acts and events called attention to themselves;
they contrasted with ordinary expectations. They bespoke
the presence of something amazing, that a heavenly Circus
had arrived beyond our most expansive ken, right there, do
you see it, just beyond eyesight. They marked a person in
ways the community had noticed. They marked a person
as discomfitting, bringing one face to face with something
both terrible and sublime, the presence of God, active and
caring, and ever so other than our ordinary experience and
expectations surrounding divinity and its ways in the world.
A vita recorded this spectacle-stratum of a saint’s living, re­
miniding or informing the reader that around this woman or
man, around these deeds and events, the pungent aroma of
the Spirit wafts, a Spirit whose intentions for us humans are
ever more than we can fathom, cracking open this world so
that we catch a sniff of the next in what is already present
unperceived in our ordinary perceptions of what is to be seen,
heard, smelled, tasted or touched.

And stories like these, over-the-top and disturbing, col­
clected around saints. There were always far too many to be
included within a single and coherent vita; a hagiographer
had to choose. A Dominican like Thomas of Cantimpré chose
in terms of two criteria. Stories were to be divided between
two groups: 1) stories that shocked and awed the hearer, leav­
ing her gobsmacked by wonder, and 2) stories that sparked
a sense of longing, that put one in touch with what-might­
have-been, with what-might-still-be, with an existence more
exalted if only one’s living were more thickly graced, if only
one worked to be more available, if only one aspired to receive
and bless such divine outpouring, if only (and this is really
the only thing—the rest just followed) the Spirit would in its wisdom deign to pour out. The wonderful is connected to the resulting desire, but is also distinct. There are things one would harm oneself to long for. Hagiographers often seem to embrace the modern television warning: This is the work of a trained professional; please do not try this at home. In addition, there are wonders one simply must learn to long for, for one’s personal and one’s community’s spiritual good. The hagiographer reflects on all this and writes to help the community of faith learn the difference, learn to live in the active and incarnate presence of God right here and now, and to cope well with the resulting wonder and desire.

And here is the point at last: things of amazing wonder and the desire to live up to the example of such spectacular Presence—they are the stuff of Jesus’ life as well, or so they were to medieval readers of the Gospels. The Gospels too are filled with situations that bespeak the in-breaking of the divine into our daily existence, that bespeak a presence that discomfits and disrupts our expectations, that brings us close enough to the breath of the Spirit that we inhale its wonder and long to be graced by its movement in our lives. The Gospels as medievals like Thomas of Cantimpré read them placed the attentive and devout reader in such a spot that she could not but long to be worthy, to conform herself to the presence of their protagonist, the Christ, in her life. And that applied not just to persons; it applied to communities too. At the advent of Advent 2012, I ask you to consider this prayer: May the ICS and its community be gobsmacked by the presence of the Christ of the Gospels, discomfiting its expectations and
inspiring an ever renewable and renewed desire to conform itself in all its works to the intimate presence of the Christ. May ICS incarnate the Incarnate One, embracing his presence with all the trust of a young first-time mother struggling to do right even in the muck of a Bethlehem stable. That will be my prayer this month. I invite you to join me as and if you will.
Christmas (2 weeks)

Christmas is a time of feasting and celebrating new life. The Incarnation—and moreover God’s choice to appear, not in the body of a strong and powerful person, but as a vulnerable baby born to a young mother unable to find anywhere better than a stable for her time of hard labour—is truly an amazing story. And this little baby not only is new life, but also brings new life. In much of the Northern Hemisphere, December is a month of cold and dark, where it looks as though light and life have fled the scene. Celebrating Jesus’ birth is a reminder of the love God holds for the world, and of the hope and joy such love brings. As we come together with friends and family during this season, we remember this joy and hope, and the love from which it is born.
Week Five (Christmas season)

**John 1:5** "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

There is something about the whiteness of snow that enlivens a winter landscape. Warmer unenlightened by snow illumines a dreary landscape of dark browns, greens and greys. And this latter vista is what faces the eyes these days in Toronto. Somehow the winters of Western Europe have come to be doled out to Central Canada, and vice versa (or at least that was so in the last couple of years). It is as if some quartermaster within the angelic hosts got the orders mixed up. Old World observations take on new meaning. Cold and dreary, as the old Christmas song would have it—that pretty well sums it up.

The world we humans have made can seem that way too. It takes a certain eye to see the grace enlightening the grey. It takes a certain set of hands to knead mercy into the dough of daily living. It takes a certain heart to warm, by warming to the liquid ambiguity of our cultural, political, and religious world balanced between life-giving flow and death-dealing ice. May we all be given just such eyes to see, such hands to knead, such hearts to glow in this coming year. May we work for a world more open, less suspicious; more generous and less self-serving; for a world more righteous and infinitely less self-righteous. May we all find ways of seeing this frail and fragmented world with the eyes of our Saviour as a realm so unspeakably precious that he abandoned his place in glory to
become frail and riven, just like us. May we live as best we may out of that impossible vision and in the hope that in doing so, we are exalted; that in our exaltation all are lifted up.

**Week Six (Christmas season)**

Isaiah 61:1, quoted by Jesus, Luke 4:18: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor."

Close to the heart of the Christian religion lies paradox. In a way that ought not to surprise, for it is very difficult to know how and where exactly paradox and mystery differ. Certainly there is something mysterious about paradox. And the Christian religion, like all religion perhaps, marks out our human response to the Mystery that conditions our living, our breathing, our very being, a response that depends upon that Mystery for its every success.

You know you are in the presence of something paradoxical when you realize that opposites which we ordinarily think of as mutually exclusive turn out to belong, indeed to lay claim to the very same “place” at the very same “time.” Old and new are perhaps appropriate to illustrate what I mean. Old and new are opposites. When we try to think of them together it is as if they work against each other. There is a kind
of mental repulsion that keeps “the new” apart from “the old.” When something is new it is not old, and vice versa of course. Bring God and God’s revelation into the picture however and something odd happens. Old and new belong together. Creation is divine revelation. And Creation is old, billions of years old it seems. None of us go back to the beginning. Narratively but also scientifically we can only hypothesize on the basis of what we know or think we know because of observations being made right now or at least right now in comparison to the beginning beyond our ken that we are trying to investigate or imagine. Creation is old; God’s revelation is old beyond count and tells us of its age time and again. Scripture is by comparison new and indeed reveals something new about God’s revelation: Christ, God-with-us, who came to make all things new. This newness is illustrated in the Good News of Scripture and in its works right here, right now, in our hearts and lives. God’s revelation is old and new. It is both at the same time. There is something paradoxical about God’s revelation, come to think of it. And God’s revelation is the occasion for Christian religion. It only stands to reason there is something paradoxical about it too.

I can get at this last point in terms of another pair of terms: continuity and discontinuity. The story of Christian religion, of our human response to God’s revelation, is a story that is at one and the same time continuous and discontinuous. There is a deep continuity that goes all the way back to the beginning; it is ancient of days, like the Creator in the Psalmist’s description. There is a meaning that gives shape to the world of creatures, a meaning that is rooted in God’s original invi-
Christmas
tation to be. That original invitation has never passed on. It continues to hold. We can see this holding both in what stays the same and what changes in our world. In the Reformational tradition we have often spoken of that enduring continuity as Creation Law or Order. It is deep, moving below the surface of things, like tree sap in the heart of northern winter. There is continuity here that suffuses all that goes into creaturely existence establishing health and the basis for health throughout all our days and places. Such continuity finds its level in all our storytelling as a choir’s drone is essential if not often attended to in the presence of the cantor’s musical pyrotechnics. But that is not all, sadly. There is not just the patient unfolding of the implications of all God’s original “Let there be . . .”s. There is also catastrophe in the air.

Our whole world bears the abysmal discontinuity of sin, original promise blighted. Our access to original meaning is made difficult. It has been driven deep into the thews of our world, deep below the reach of our foreshortened vision, our poorly engineered attention’s span. If original promise and blessing remain the first and deepest word we can utter in our response to God’s revelation, we no longer see and know of what we speak, not clearly, not without ambiguity and the hesitancy around or blind bellicosity with each other that follows in ambiguity’s wake. And that too halleluia is not the end of the story. There is redemption afoot, opening up possibilities like a Spirit hovering over the void. And this redemption dynamic is incarnate. It inserts its God-dynamism into flesh and earth, water and air, with the willfulness of flame, going where it lists while we huff and puff in our awed
efforts to keep up and keep track of all that is made new in its light. Redemption brings to the surface original blessings buried deep as the best kept secrets within every iota of creaturely existence, but it also redeems discontinuity itself until it too speaks of blessing so that from now on continuity and discontinuity belong together in the mystery of a redeemed creation inclining in hope toward consummation. This is the paradox of Christian existence. Such existence suggests at one and the same time a continuity deep within a plot riddled with discontinuity, and the presence of discontinuity deep within a long continuous narration. In this, stories of Christian existence mirror ever so well the paradox of God's revelation itself. And it means that our stories have a complexity native to and ineradicable in them. The old and the new will be ever and simultaneously present. Continuities will be enabled by every discontinuity, and vice versa. We Christians will only remain the same by changing, and constitutive of any change will also be a subterranean remaining-the-same. Every conversion will at one and the same time reaffirm an original goodness, just as every affirmation of an original goodness will demand future conversion.

The paradox of Christian existence is a good thing to remember heading into a new year. It is my prayer that ICS will find ways of being ever more the very best of its original promise in its becoming ever-new. I invite you all to join me in that prayer this month.

Epiphany has traditionally been the celebration of several different things: the visit of the Magi, Jesus' baptism, and Jesus' first miracle at the wedding in Cana. In North America,
we tend to focus on the visit of the Magi for this celebration, marking the other two events in different ways. Reflecting on the Magi’s visit and the gifts they brought the baby Jesus is a way to think through the new kind of kingship the Christ child represented—a king so mighty that his birth is heralded by a star in the heavens, but so humble that he can be found in a stable manger. Paradox and mystery indeed! As with Christmas, Epiphany is a time to celebrate the mystery of this Incarnation, when God took on human form, and it is also a time to emulate the journey of the Magi who seek the Christ. Unlike Christmas, however, Epiphany has a more somber side to it. Where Christmas is a celebration of hope and new life, the Magi’s story cannot be told without its ending, where Mary and Joseph must take the baby Jesus and flee Herod, whose fear of this new king is the cause of the deaths of many young children. After the warm glow of Christmas cheer and the wonder of the birth of Christ, Epiphany sets us right back in the muck of this world, where life can get far dirtier than anything we could find in a stable, and fear drives the powers of this world. And yet, still, the Incarnation is here, the manifestation of God’s love over which the Bethlehem star shone.
Week Seven (Epiphany)

Revelation 21:5 “And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”

There is something about the ancient world in which Jesus lived that had little or no room for the new. At least that was so of the world as most ancient people thought and wrote about it. What is, has always been; it is just simply given and will ever be the same. That might be a way of saying this in the language of the overwhelming majority of ancient Greek philosophers of Jesus’ day. Most ancient Jews, of course, spoke a different language. They knew in their bones that things could change. After all, once they were slaves in Egypt, and then they were freed. That pattern had repeated itself in their Babylonian exile and return to Judea by fiat of the righteous Persian Cyrus, again later in their relationship with the Seleucid rulers of Syria and Mesopotamia and establishment of a Hellenistic kingdom of their own under the Maccabees. Even among the Jews then there was a sense that “the pattern,” set way back in the past, would repeat itself ever and anew. There is a sense that for Jews too what-is is part of what has been and will ever be the same. Into this world, Jesus came and said that he came to make all things new. I think of many of the distinctive contributions of Christian thinkers to the thought traditions of the West as resulting from thinking about things in the light afforded by this pithy Jesus-claim. Christian meditation on newness and how to think about the newness Jesus promises has branched out in all cultural
directions over the last two millennia and woven itself deeply into the warp and woof of modern Western expectations of the world. We Christians have not always or even often been unanimous in our thinking and expecting, but we do think about and expect Jesus’ promised “new.” And the beginning of January is as good a time as any to let the awareness of the new come to the surface. We are already in the habit of doing so; we make resolutions, we try and clear our heads, to pretend that somehow January 1 means we start over and anything is possible (roll the wheel of fortune). New Year’s expectations can be silly but they can also serve a useful purpose. Bringing the promise of newness to the fore keeps us supple as we seek to discern and respond to our Lord’s calling, a calling consistent with his promise to make all things new. May we at ICS be supple in our acts of discernment over the next twelve months both in our working and in our praying. We invite all who read this to join us in that praying. May we together be supple discerners *ad gloriæ Dei.*