It is 1982 in the United Kingdom. Margaret Thatcher is Prime Minister. A war is being waged in the Falkland Islands. Unemployment is skyrocketing. People's lives are being impacted in ways big and small. And so a regular bloke by the name of Michael Fagan, a house painter and decorator, no less, resolves to do something about it.

You see, for months and months, Michael has searched for odd jobs. He has become a regular in every place of assistance he can find. His wife has left him, taking their four children with her.

Things are becoming dire. Michael decides to write to his member of Parliament. Perhaps they don't realize what is happening in the trenches, in the real world. No response. So Michael writes to the Prime Minister. Perhaps she has no idea what the government's policies have accomplished. Nothing. He becomes more and more desperate with every bleak, waking hour. And so, he hatches a plan. Sort of.

One summer night finds Michael on a bus, as dusk descends, trying to get home. He spies Buckingham Palace and opts to get off and walk a bit. He approaches the huge, wrought iron and gilded gates. He looks between the bars at the massive stone building. He works his way around them, until, spur of the moment, he quickly scales them, drops to the other side, and heads towards the palace, under the cover of, now, darkness.

Somehow, Michael makes his way past distracted policemen to a drain pipe, and then, shimmies up. He finds an unlocked window, climbs inside, and, crazily enough, makes his way from room to room. He finds a bottle of wine, opens it, and drinks half. He eats some cheese and crackers. He stumbles upon the throne room, where he sits for a bit. Then, the Queen's office, and then, the Queen's bedroom. Her royal highness is not there. The Queen is out of town. So, Michael leaves.

A month later, early in the morning, Michael tries again. This time, Queen Elizabeth is home. In bed. Which Michael discovers when he makes his way to her room once more.

Now, as shocking as this all sounds, it is a true story. One which I had completely forgotten about until watching it creatively retold during the latest season of the Netflix show, "The Crown." In real life, Queen Elizabeth tries to contact the palace police twice—to no avail—so she quickly leaves the room to summon security. In the show, however, the writers wonder what might have happened if the Queen had stayed. So they imagine a conversation between the two after Michael Fagan wakes her up and sits down at the foot of her bed.

It may not seem evident at first, but this story is so very fitting for the liturgical season in which we now find ourselves: Advent—the Latin translation of the Greek *parousia*, the Second Coming. When history is completed and God's intention for us is fulfilled.

We often think of Advent as a period of getting ready for Christmas, for Jesus' entry into our world. A month or so when we put up decorations, make lists, buy gifts, begin to bake. But Advent is much more cosmic in its scope, its meaning. It is the story of Jesus

as the achievement of the divine purpose worked out through the birth, life, and death of the Son of God. It is the incarnation, the embodying, of God, the heralding of the second coming of Christ at the end of time. And it is a counting backwards, over the course of four weeks, when the meaning shifts from expecting the consummation of history to preparing for the nativity of Christ.

To do so, we will cover the future reign of the King, by the present teaching of the prophet, toward the past birth of a baby. And, in the process, the advent of the Christ child and the advent of the Messiah, the Anointed One, will intertwine. Four Advent themes will help us on our journey: hope, peace, joy, love.

This week, we begin with hope. What the people of Israel count on when they seek righteousness, justice, and redemption at the hands of the coming Messiah. A powerful King who will restore God's reign here on earth, swooping in on a great stallion, sword in hand, as conquering hero.

And yet, that is not what Jesus teaches. Instead, Jesus proclaims the Messiah will be born in humility, ministering to the least and the lost, giving up his life for the salvation of all. Only at the end of time will the Son of Man return with great power and glory. But that time has not yet been accomplished. In the meantime, we are to live as though the end is near, for no one knows exactly when the Christ will return in triumph. And we must watch for it lest we miss the whole thing—even as we dwell in the presence of the Comforter who dwells among us.

Our reading from Isaiah echoes these same notes, when the prophet calls upon God to get down here and make things better. Our God who resides in the heavens—powerfully tearing them open to enter our world, where, just by standing near, mountains quake and nations tremble. Our God who remains here, close to us—tenderly crafting us into his vessels: holding us steadily and shaping us intentionally, as a potter does with clay.

For Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us." Still. A movement, a truth, which is the basis of God's eternal bond, God's covenantal love, with us.

It all sounds swell. But what does this mean for our everyday, normal lives—especially in a time as bleak and angry and painful as this? What does it matter?

There is a Christmas special I watch every year, if I can manage it. It is called, "The Little Drummer Boy," a stop motion animated tale originally televised in 1968. Based on the song we all know and love, the story revolves around Aaron, an angry little boy whose parents were killed by bandits. All Aaron has left is his drum, his camel, his donkey, and his lamb. And so he makes his way in the world, surviving by his wits, eking out a bit of happiness while playing his drum for his animals.

Until, one day, when a traveling band of performers happens by, forcing Aaron and his animals to join them. He is a joyless entertainer; his musical gift is not enough to satisfy

the audience. They are run out of town, right into the path of three kings, following a star. The magi are in need of a camel, so the ringleader of the band compels Aaron to give up his so they may sell it to them. Aaron, his donkey, and his lamb run after the kings, following his camel in hopes of reclaiming it.

After awhile, Aaron and his animals arrive in Bethlehem, in the midst of shepherds walking en masse to who knows where, guided by who knows what. And then, more disaster. Without giving away the entire story—because it is so tender and you ought to watch it—a desperate situation arises. Aaron thinks, if I can only get to the wise men, they will know what to do. Aaron searches and searches until he finds them by a stable, with the star overhead, shepherds and onlookers all around.

With high and desperate hope, Aaron approaches the kings. He watches them offer gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to a mother and father and little baby. He turns to one of the magi, and shares his problem, frantic for the wise men to help. The king explains that there are limits to what he can do, but then he says to Aaron: “There is a King among kings who would save your little friend. It is not necessary that you understand. Go to him. Go, look upon the new-born king.”

Without questioning the magi, Aaron makes his way right up to the manger and offers his own gift: he plays his drum for the baby. And, in the process, healing occurs. Both in Aaron’s need, and in Aaron’s very own self. His hatred and anger dissipate. Aaron is transformed and restored. The king speaks again: “Your gift, little drummer boy, given out of the simple desperation of a pure love, is the one favored above all.”

Jesus, the Son of Man, the Anointed King sent by the Father to save a desperate people from their desperate brokenness, honors the gift of our very vulnerable selves, our hopeful need, by reaching out and redeeming us, first.

Much like the show, “The Crown,” reveals when it depicts the inspired conversation between Michael and Queen Elizabeth. Once she gathers her wits, the Queen asks Michael what he wants. Is it money? Michael retorts, no! I don’t want money. I just want to talk to you. To tell you what is happening in our country. Because, either you don’t know, or you don’t care. The Queen replies, now, hold on. I care very much about this country.

Michael responds, well, it’s time, then, that you heard from someone normal, who can tell you what’s really going on so you can do something about it. Because I have gone through the chain of command and no one is listening. So I have come to you, the head of state. You are my last resort.

Queen Elizabeth, in her great wisdom, asks, well, what would you like me to do? Michael replies, save us all.

With nothing left to lose, Michael Fagan gets off the bus, hops the fence, and makes his way to see the Queen in his hopeful and daring quest to find some help. Honoring his

courage and the risk he has taken, the Queen sits down across from this perfect stranger, invites him to share his story, and listens.

With no one else to turn to, the little drummer boy, Aaron, pushes his way through the multitude surrounding the baby Jesus and offers him the only present he has. Honoring his promising belief, burgeoning faith, and deepening need, Jesus, widening the sky to enter our earth, receives Aaron's heartfelt gift, and answers his most fervent prayer.

This is what it means to have hope. This is what it means to believe in and receive God's covenantal love, a bond established by God with God's creation, which we cannot break. Which we are to live into, with God, with one another. An amazing truth that we forget, all the time, because we stop paying attention.

Brennan Manning reminds us of that when he writes in his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*: "We should be astonished at the goodness of God, stunned that He should bother to call us by name, our mouths wide open at His love, bewildered that at this very moment we are standing on holy ground."

The holy ground that quakes at the mere presence of God. The holy ground that Michael encounters when he sits at the foot of a bed of a human monarch, one who chooses to live into her calling as a shepherd of God's people. The holy ground that Aaron discovers when he stumbles upon a stable, with a manger holding a baby, born to change the world, born to change him.

And the holy ground that exists all around us, every moment of every day, because the Son of Man remains here in our midst, actively at work in our world, in ourselves, along with the Comforter he sent to accompany us, forever.

From ages past, no ear has heard and no eye has seen the like of what we have been given. But, my friends, we have. And we do. Every single day. May we remember the covenant God has established with us. May we honor it. May we seek to live into it. And may we dwell in hope. For Jesus is "With Us God." Always. Amen.