

# ADVENT 2021

A VISUAL DEVOTIONAL

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ITHEMBA TOWER — R1 + COLLECTIVE

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The logo consists of the letters 'KB' in a white, serif font, centered within a dark blue square. The square is set against a dark red background that occupies the bottom half of the page. The letters are bold and have a classic, slightly ornate feel.

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# Instructions

## General Instructions

- Resources for the Devotional: The IThemba Tower Devotional (This PDF)
- [The IThemba Tower – Blog Post](#) (for the Reading sections explained below)

Advent 2021 consists of 5 total works of art. 1 each for the four Sundays in Advent and a final work to be delivered to your inbox on Christmas Morning. The Blog Post will be reproduced here for your convenience and following the blog post will be a devotional. This week it is in three parts. You can work that into your week however you like – either taking it in an all-in-one sitting or spreading it out during the week.

The works for each week are as follows:

Week 1 – We Light Amsterdam (an art installation)

Week 2 - The Slave Ship, J. M. W. Turner

Week 3 - IThemba Tower, Johannesburg (an art installation)

Week 4 - Nativity at Night, Geertgen tot Sint Jans

Christmas Morning - A Meat Stall with the Holy Family Giving Alms, Pieter Aertsen

These works are far from traditional and nudge us to think about Advent and our ongoing celebration of the incarnation in new and fresh ways. The theme of the series is Light out of Darkness. Glad you are joining me for this journey.

## Part 1 Messages of Hope

Advent is a message of hope.

Jesus brings a message of hope that all are welcome, all are seen, all are loved. Breaking with the message of the Old Testament and the story of Israel as God's chosen people, the New Testament ushers in a story of hope for uniting every tongue, and nation into one family.

Today we are going to explore the iThemba Tower, a street art installation in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Read the Blogpost, here in the following pages:

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# The IThemba Tower



## IThemba Means Hope

The iThemba tower, is a permanent public art installation that symbolizes the collective hopes of the residents of Troyeville in Johannesburg, South Africa. The tower is over 65 feet high and is made of over 7,000 plastic bottles on a redundant communications tower.

Bringing attention to the informal waste collectors of Johannesburg, and the problems associated with single use plastics, the project has grown and morphed into a hopeful spire filled with the hopes and dreams of a community for a better, cleaner future.

IThemba comes for the isiZulu language and means trust and hope and the name sums up the purpose of this piece.

## The Origins of IThemba's Hope.

The artist, r1 ("r1" is the name of the artist as listed on his website) connected with one of Johannesburg's informal waste collectors, Isaac Thomas, to create a piece of street art. The Informal waste collectors consist of individuals who spend their days roaming the city, collecting bottles. The stories of some of these informal waste collectors can be found on the iThemba vimeo site and are worth a listen. You can check them out [here](#).



R1 is a street artist who uses found materials to create public art that encourages engagement between the diverse people within the community. He happened to meet Thomas, who lived near the communication tower, under a tree next to the local highway.

The artist, r1, said, when asked about why he wanted to do this project with Thomas. "I wanted Thomas to be able to give a new connotation to the junk he collects, and to his life, which it represents. I wanted him to be proud of it."

Originally, the work of art was just the plastic bottles going up the base of a communications tower that was no longer being used. Once part of the tower was covered, there was a push to cover the entire tower with bottles and an expanded project was under way.

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## IThemba's Message of Hope Spreads

As the scope of the installation grew, so did the people and organizations that contributed. Local residents, school children, business, and the informal waste collectors collaborated to create a tower that combined light, messages, and bottles. Multiple themes emerged as the tower grew and took shape.

## Hope for the Informal Waste Collectors



Thomas' story is uniquely his own, while simultaneously being echoed throughout the large metropolis of Johannesburg. In his case, this included homelessness, but this is not true of all of the waste collectors. His days are long and the pay is minimal. By participating in this piece of art, the collectors were able to tell their stories, and to explain the important role they play in the city.

In short, the project humanized their stories, recognized their contributions, and gave back the dignity that many had felt stripped of. R1 believes the project breaks down existing boundaries within the community and inspires people to work together to create something beautiful. By the end, artists, grassroots community members, and business would join forces and address the problem of plastic recycling in Johannesburg.

## Hope for the Earth

Single use plastics are the most prevalent form of pollution on the planet, and this is especially true in disadvantaged communities. One bottle can take 500-750 years to break down in a landfill. 250,000 bottles are dumped every hour in South Africa. (2.5 million plastic bottles are thrown away every hour in the U.S.) The sheer mass of trash is staggering and very little of it gets recycled.

The work of the informal waste collectors diverts 16-24 tons of plastic annually from the landfills in Johannesburg. This saves the country 48 million dollars' worth of landfill space each year, while also saving the environment the added burden of unrecycled material. It is estimated that 46% of plastic bottles are recycled in South Africa, compared to 31% in Europe. This is largely due to the work of these men and women.

"Every city has a beauty and I believe there's something special about the streets of Johannesburg. Every night informal waste collectors clean the streets and so we never really fully see how much litter fills our gutters," r1 said.

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## Hope and Education Come Together



So, when the decision was made to cover the entire tower, the message of the tower was taken into the local school.

The school decided to begin a campaign to educate students on the problems of plastic waste and to empower them to make a difference. Students learned about the excesses of single use plastics, the effects on the earth, and the role recycling can play. The Informal Waste Collectors came and shared their stories and answered questions.

### Messages of Hope

Then, the students wrote out a message of hope that was tied with a ribbon and placed in a plastic bottle. This began the process of filling the tower with the collective hopes and dreams of the community. More people were encouraged to write out messages, and as these missives arrived, they were added to bottles. Today, each bottle in the tower contains a note from an individual in the larger community, and those single wishes unite with the others to transform an old, unused communications tower into a beacon of hope.

### Lighting up Hope

Of course, in order to be a beacon, light was needed. The project collaborated with Bushveld Labs, a design and engineering consultancy company to assist with the LED light installation. Now the tower shines its light across the neighborhood, bright against the night sky.

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## Messages need Messengers



*“Between 10 and 5”* is an agency in South Africa that works to connect creative talent with brands and the larger community. They publicized the project and invited people to join in by contributing funding and writing their own messages of hope. As funds and messages came in the tower of hope grew.

What started with one artist and one informal waste collector, expanded to include other waste collectors, then a school, then the community of Troyeville, and finally the country of South Africa. This is the very heart of art, to speak a message that spreads, creates conversation, and in some cases brings about change, both in individuals and the larger community.

## The Garden Provides an Area to Nurture Hope

The iThemba Tower is located in the Spaza Art Gallery, which is a community art garden in the center of Troyeville. Troyeville is an often-overlooked community in a disadvantaged area of Johannesburg. The Spaza garden was created as a space for creatives to work, collaborate, share and sell their creations. Now Troyeville and the iThemba Tower bring visibility and unity to an ignored neighborhood.

## Artist as harbinger of Hope

I’ve mentioned the artist [r1](#) as the initiator and visionary behind this tower. “The essence of his work is to develop site-specific art pieces in public spaces, to create visual conversations with residents and the general public.” ([r1r1r1.net](#))

I encourage you to [learn more about his art](#) and the interplay between street art and the public which can help break down boundaries and create united communities of diverse individuals.

## A Message to Take Forward

The problem of plastic is one I have struggled with for years. I’ve struggled with how I can personally address issues of poverty or be an ally to those who are marginalized. This communication tower reminds me that often a start is a conversation. Hope can be found when we listen to one another. When we listen to other’s stories, we give them a validated space. This is particularly important to those who are living on the edges. When we listen, we recognize our common humanity

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and that we all have hopes for our futures. When we listen, we acknowledge that we all call the earth home and that caring for it and each other is our common responsibility.

## Hope, the iThemba Tower, and Advent

I've included the iThemba tower in an Advent Devotional that I've written for the 2021 season.

Christ's arrival brought about religious changes that some were not ready for, frankly that many are not ready for today. His message was one of radical inclusion, of traveling to the edges of society, and of offering hope to the hopeless. In the book of Genesis, the first in the Bible, we are told that God created man in his own image. In Jesus we find a man who modeled for us what it means to see God's image in each and every person, to recognize their inherent worth and to love them without conditions.

If you would like to explore another work of art that delves into the topic of the image of God, you can head to my post on [Harry Watrous' The Drop Sinister](#).

(devotional continued on next page)

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# The Devotional for The IThemba Tower

## Part 2 Hope for the Earth

In Genesis we see that God created the earth and called it good, then he commanded that we, humans created in His image, care for the earth. We know instinctively that God's creation is good. When we stand in an unspoiled forest, or on a beautiful beach we are awed by the beauty of the world God has given us.

In Revelation we see that God's desire is to restore, not just humankind, but the earth.

In the Psalms we are repeatedly taught that the earth itself declares the glory of God. Humankind may be created in his image, but the earth is also a part of his creation, and as such it reflects and declares his glory.

Over and over, throughout scripture, we see that God values his creation, all of it. Yet, somewhere along the way, the Western Church has distanced itself from movements that were about caring for the earth. Somewhere along the way, the Church in America began to see the efforts to preserve and restore the creation as being anti-Christian. We've lost our way. We need to return to the work of caring for the home God gave us.

A simple way to begin to care for the earth is to evaluate our use of single use plastics. Plastic has a purpose and has improved our lives in many ways, but we have become irresponsible in our use. We are trashing the world for a few moments of convenience.

In my head I see God arriving on earth much like I see parents returning to a much loved home that their teenage children have trashed with a raging party. Bottles and cans strewn about, furniture scratched, the family pet missing.

So, this Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus coming to the earth, perhaps we should consider preparing our earth for God's arrival. This can be as simple as carrying a water bottle with us, picking up some trash when we visit a park, or remembering to take reusable bags to the grocery store.

During Advent we can reframe these simple things as acts of devotion to a God who created this amazing world for us to inhabit.

## Part 3 Hope for the Humanity

When we view the story of Advent through the lens of the cross, we are reminded of the sacrifice Jesus made to restore humankind. We are created in God's image, all of us. White or brown, rich or poor, able-bodied or disabled, each of us bears the stamp of God's image on us.

In last week's devotion we talked about fellow humans being viewed as mere 'goods' to use or dispose of at our whim. In some ways, this week's story is not that different.

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The informal trash collectors of Johannesburg, there are nearly 90,000 of them, are a marginalized group. They live on the edges of society, getting by scavenging through trash.

As I read up on the Ithemba Tower, there was one statement that I know will stay with me. The trash collectors wrote out their hopes on slips of paper to be added to the bottles of the tower. One of these messages stated, "I want to be seen as human." That was this man's hope and dream. It broke my heart.

When we see a homeless person, do we see a person? Do we recognize God's image in them? If not, why not? These are questions I think we should wrestle with during advent.

Christ left glory, left heaven, to live among us. Are we willing to do the same? To leave, even for a short time, our comfortable homes and walk with those who are different from us, those who need to know that we see God in them?

I think I often overcomplicate this. The artist who created today's work of art demonstrates that making a difference is often much simpler than we think. I am not discounting the real changes that need to be made in our society to care for those on the edges, but I also don't want to discount the real changes that can be made by just acknowledging and listening to people's stories.

r1 gave the trash pickers a voice, told their stories, and elevated their work. He gave them dignity. He saw them as human.

There are so many people we pass each day who feel they are less. Perhaps it's that homeless person on the corner, but it could also be the elderly person who feels they are no longer useful, no longer valued. It could be a frightened, pregnant teen (like Mary) who wonders who will help. It could be a recent immigrant who is struggling to understand our language and systems. It could be a foster child who has been shuffled through an uncaring system.

All around us there are people who, in big and small ways, are made to feel less. They do not feel they bear the image of God.

This advent, as we contemplate Jesus giving up glory to live among us, we need to seek out those on the edges and engage. Perhaps that just means acknowledging them instead of quickly passing by. Perhaps it means listening to their story and validating their experience.

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