

Advent 2020

A Calendar of Devotions

Prepare

*To the members & friends of Covenant Presbyterian Church
From your pastor, elders & staff*



A Calendar of Devotions

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Dear Friends:

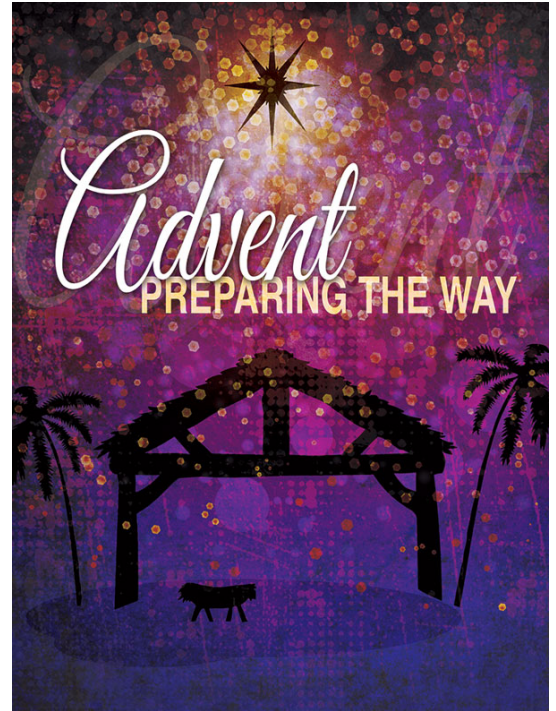
Yet, somehow, it's Christmas.

Yes, Christmas is once again on its way in, and 2020 is on its way out.

For most of us, the year 2020 can't go away fast enough. It has been a year of so many challenges for us all. Lives interrupted in huge ways by an invisible enemy as small as we can imagine. Social ills we would wish to keep invisible erupting across the land. 2020 has laid bare our personal fragility and that of our culture, our economy, our nation, our church...

And it looks like Christmas this year will be celebrated under the same cloud of uncertainty and conflicting values we have been dealing with for so these many months. But we will celebrate. We will celebrate the fact that the Living God came to rescue us, and He did it by dwelling among us as one of us. He came and shared in our fragility. It was a real little baby the shepherds found in that real little town of Bethlehem. Jesus Christ came and enabled us to transcend our fragility with Him and in Him—to live eternally rather than dying forever, to find resilient hope and joy in each day that is beautifully and utterly independent of our earthly circumstances—by our faith and trust in Him.

Years ago I wrote a Christmas song for the new pastor at our Southern California church. He and his family were adjusting to the new SoCal culture so different from their previous mid-western community. I called it “California Christmas”...



There is no snow outside. It's over 70 degrees. The Christmas carolers sit inside. They're watching MTV... There hasn't been a pageant at the school since '82, the year our manger scene was banned by the ACLU... And yet, somehow, it's Christmas.

“Merry Christmas” is a greeting you must only choose to send to family and close friends, those you know you won't offend... And if those folks are clear across the country, never fear, the tinsel TV specials will supply your Xmas cheer... And yet, somehow, it's Christmas.

Oh, deck the malls with plastic holly. Fa-la-la, I think. “What Child Is This?” done Musak style ‘mid trees of everpink... But underneath this glitter, hype, commercial falderol, there lies a baby, Jesus, who came to save us all... And so, somehow, it's Christmas.

Welcome, friends, to our 2020 Calendar of Advent Devotions.

As always, this collection of Scripture readings, devotional thoughts and prayers is divided into three sections: 1) An initial overview of the entire Christmas Story—First Advent & Second Advent (The promised return of Christ), 2) Old Testament promises concerning Israel's coming Messiah, and 3) New Testament narratives concerning the birth of this promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the miracle son of Mary, and The Eternal Son of God.

May this Calendar of Devotions remind you that 2020, like every other year, has come to us by the sovereign will of God who is always working out His good purposes. May it serve as His tool helping us all to prepare well as we look beyond the ubiquitous glitter and beyond the daunting challenges and faithfully, steadfastly, joyously conclude that yet, somehow, it's Christmas.

Pastor Jay Hull, Advent 2020

DECEMBER 1

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son ...

Text: Galatians 4:1-7



I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Reflection:

Christmas time. As always, it is hard to believe it's here. I start thinking of it in August and people say I'm nuts as it is much too early to think about it, but I say, close your eyes, and count to ten, for that is how quickly Christmas will be upon us. I am not too far off, for I do believe this year I saw Christmas start popping up in stores for sure in October, but maybe even in September as well. And that is pretty close to August if you ask me.

Christmas preparation is something most people don't want to think about yet because there are so many things to do to prepare. For those with large families, it means many gifts to acquire and meals to plan. It means getting out all the decorations and putting them up. There is something so different about this time of year. For the most part, people seem to be kinder. Often we are more generous at this time. For the homeless man perched at the end of the freeway ramp, this is the time when his pockets become full. But why? Why the greater amount of generosity? Why the influx of people into the churches at Christmas?

It is true that Christmas services have the highest attendance. Whether the world acknowledges it or not, Christmas is not just a “Happy Holiday.” It is a day adopted by the early church, the darkest time of the year in terms of daylight, and it marks the time when the shortened days turn the corner and more light begins to fill the hours as the journey toward Spring begins. Even if it isn't the exact time of year Christ was born, it is fitting because Jesus is the light of the world.

The Old Testament, the Prophets, all of history has been pointing to this time; referred to as the “*fullness of time!*” Doesn't that strike you? Doesn't that just get you

that all along, through every trial, through every hardship and through every historical moment in time, God had never forsaken you, me, or Israel, and that Christmas marked the day when Heaven made an infinite withdrawal from its eternal bank and spent it all on a gift? Christmas marks the greatest gift of all time! God gave His Son! God wrapped in human flesh, born of a woman, dependent on the care of parents, and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

The plan all along, was to give His one and only Son, to redeem and adopt us as sons and daughters, so that we become heirs in a kingdom where the God who gets a bad rap as a task master or as one whose rules have to be followed in order to be deemed worthy, is actually the One who invites us to run into His presence crying, “Abba! Father!” Abba is the Aramaic equivalent of “Daddy!” It is an expression of personal intimacy. “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! It was your love all along! It was your plan from the beginning! It was always you! You are our hero! You are our Mighty One!”

In the fullness of time, at just the right time, God sent forth his Son. God sent forth His Son after the law. The true task master had done its job to show humanity how imperfect we are. The merciless law will always judge our sin. God sent forth His Son when, religiously, Israel forsook its systemic idolatry after the Babylonian captivity; when synagogues existed as places of worship. He sent forth His Son after Ezra had completed the Old Testament; when a common language of Greek was established in the known world; when Rome had instituted the “Pax Romana (Roman Peace),” and had built an incredible system of roads for its military might but that would also be used by those going out to share a mighty message of glorious good news. God’s timing!



Motivated by Love; Love Himself was born in a manger! The one who never sinned and did everything in obedience and humility, Jesus, offered Himself in our place. and this also was a part of this plan... so that we, you and I, who were under the law and condemned by it, might receive adoption as sons and daughters (adoption being a carefully thought out way to legally acquire an immediate next of kin)... so that we, you and I, would receive God’s Spirit into our hearts, know God personally and intimately as Abba, and become heirs through and with Christ! That is just mind-blowing. Knowing and affirming these things, I have never felt so loved.

Response:

There are no adequate words: There is only faithful response.

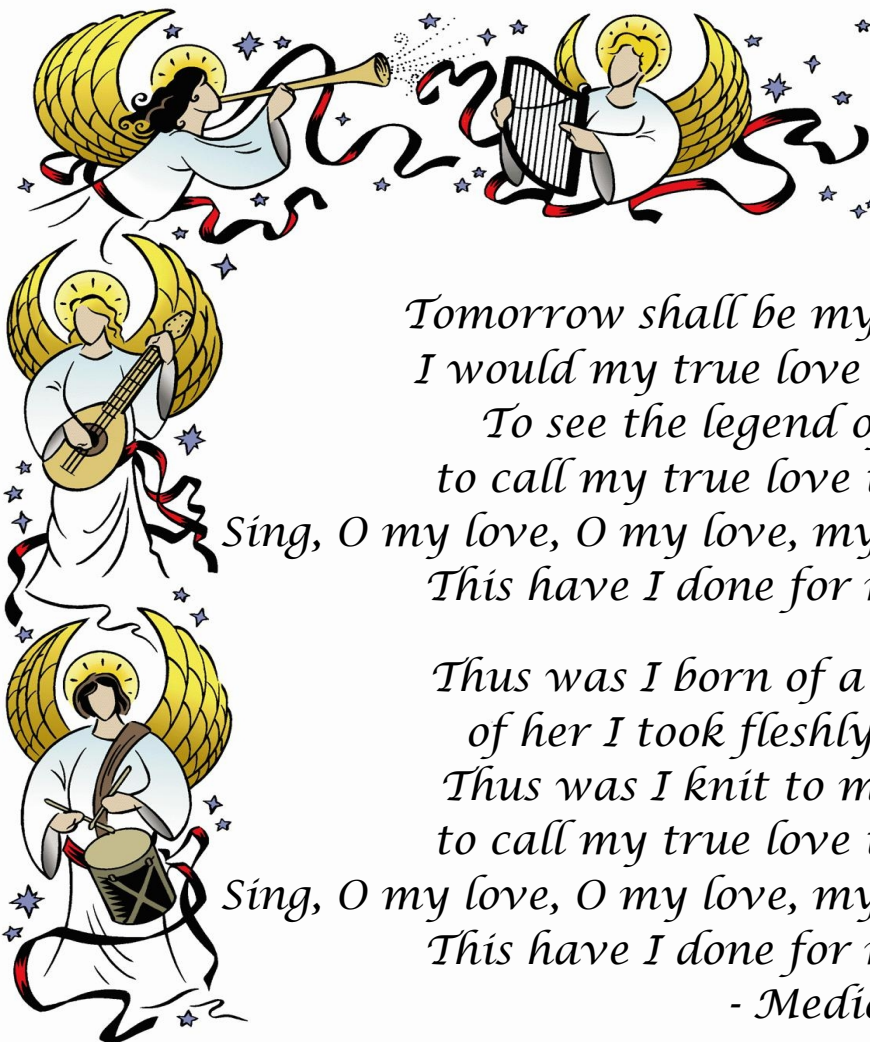
So how do we respond? With what words? With what action? How will we use the lives that we have been given to respond and show our gratitude? How do I reconcile God's perfect timing with the things I deem unpleasant in my life? How would I describe my relationship with God? Personal and intimate? Distant and cordial? How do I keep the sacredness of God's giving at the forefront of my mind so that I may be more like Him?

During the next four weeks, I encourage you to let your mind be filled with thoughts of history, even your own history. God is redemptively present throughout all of it.

Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, there really are no words to express or describe what I know in my spirit. You are the most incredible Father ever, and no gift compares to Your giving. Thank You, and thank You! Help me to reflect and remember what this season represents—Your love in action in the Person of Jesus Christ born to us—and help my life reflect this and share You with others in ways that help them, too, to be amazed at a love like this. Amen.

- Cindy Duncan



*Tomorrow shall be my dancing day,
I would my true love did so chance
To see the legend of my play,
to call my true love to my dance.*

*Sing, O my love, O my love, my love, my love, my love,
This have I done for my true love.*

*Thus was I born of a Virgin pure,
of her I took fleshly substance.
Thus was I knit to man's nature,
to call my true love to my dance.*

*Sing, O my love, O my love, my love, my love, my love,
This have I done for my true love.*

- Medieval English Carol

DECEMBER 2

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect...



Text: Matthew 24:3-5, 23-27, 36-44

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray...

²³ Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man....

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Reflection:

These verses tell us the end of the age will come when Christ returns, and no one but the Father knows when that will be. However, Christ’s coming will be as plainly obvious as the sun rising. As we do not know when this will happen, so we must always be ready. I believe the best way to be ready at all times for an important moment in the future that will come without warning is to do now what I should be doing then. Concerned about Christ’s promised return? Good! Now is the time, then, for me, for us, to love God and each other. Now is the time to pray every day for the people you

love, to tell them and show them that you love them. Now is the time, every day, to talk to God and learn from His Word. Now is the time to trust Jesus to be our good Lord and Savior, to live in the assurance by faith that He knows our needs for today and tomorrow better than we know them.

Response:

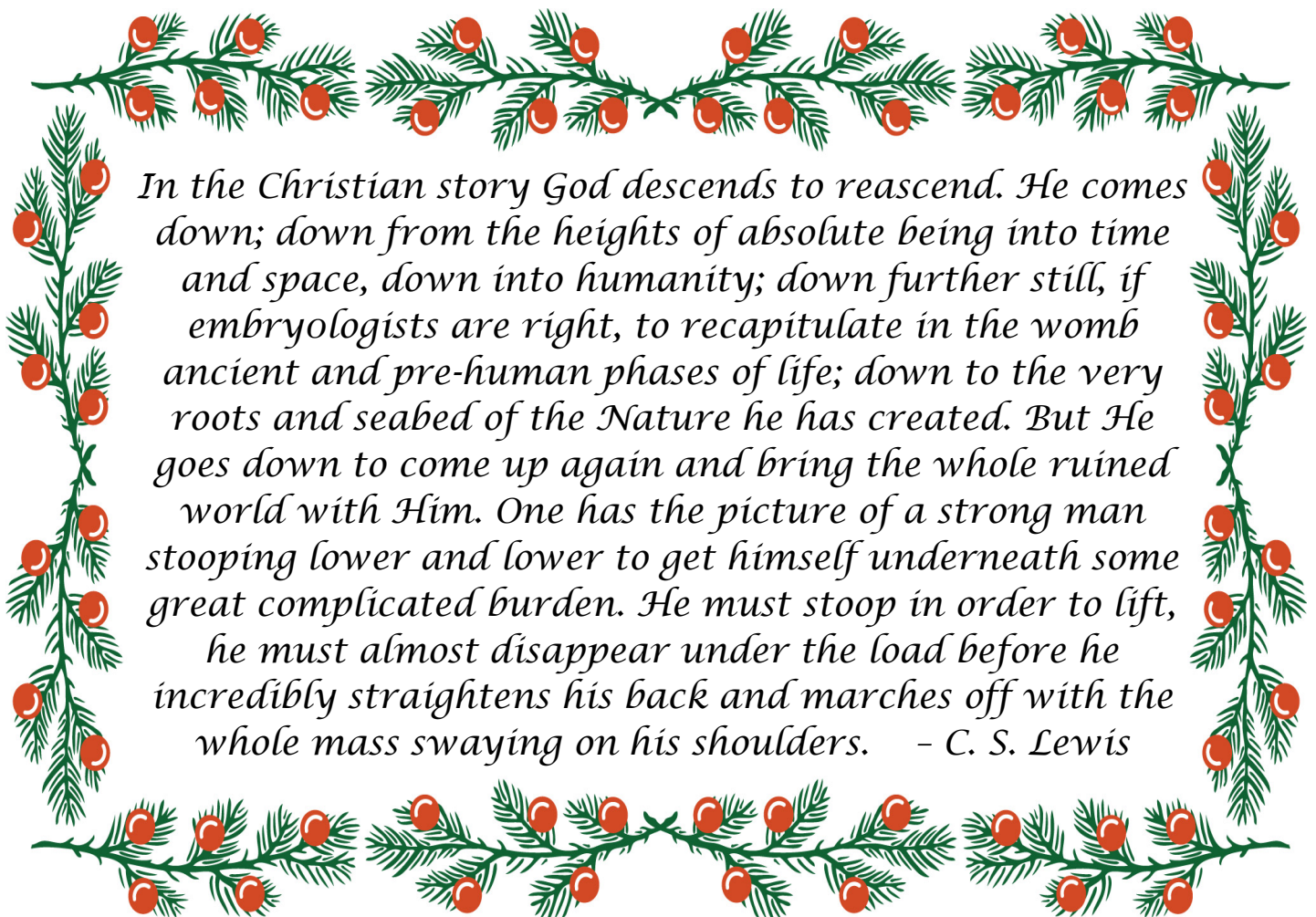
Focusing on today is enough for us! As we focus on today, we are living in the hope promised to us in Christ that this age will come to a proper conclusion and He will come again. One day “today” will be the day we hear “Come, my friends, into the house of my Father.”

Prayer:

Dear Lord,

Thank You for this day and thank You for the people You have put in my life. Thank You for Your Word. You work all things for good, and Your ways are beyond ours. Show us ways to be ready for You that are wise during this time of pandemic. Strengthen our faith and watch over all the people we love. Amen.

- Dave Berry



DECEMBER 3

*And he who was seated on the throne said,
"Behold, I am making all things new."*

Text: Revelation 21:1-7



Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." **6** And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. **7** The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Reflection:

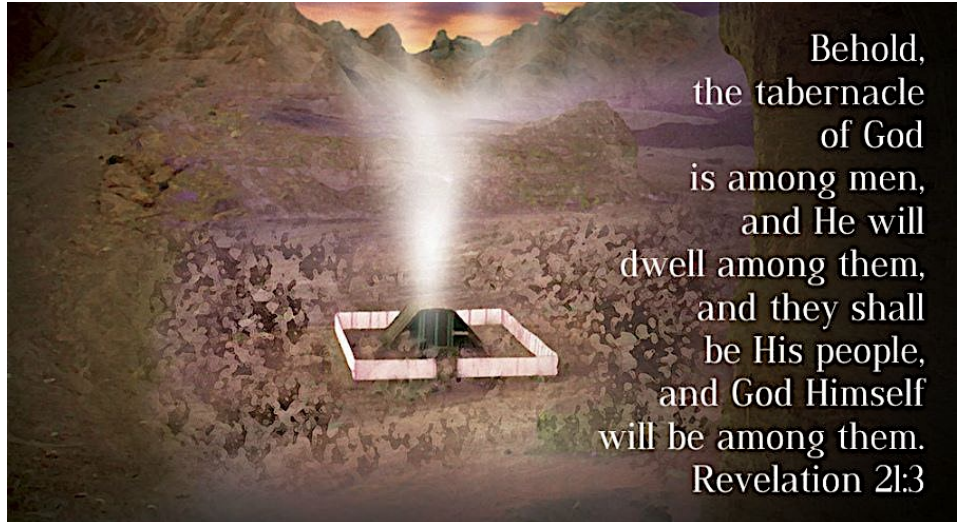
One of my favorite songs to sing during the Advent season is *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. In that song we sing of the awesomeness of God, His power to ransom His people, His victory over the grave, His dispersal of gloom, & His freeing us from tyranny and misery. The chorus is a pleasing and an emotive call to action - "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel!" But why do we rejoice? I will get back to the song in a moment.

As a child my aunt would quote Revelation 21:4-5 whenever she felt sad or frustrated with the things happening around her. Verses 4 and 5 are burned into my memory and always bring a smile to my face whenever I hear them. Those passages provided her a reason to rejoice! She rejoiced in the promise of a new heaven and new earth where death, sorrow, pain, and crying are gone (v.4). She rejoiced that God would make all things new (v.5). For my aunt, these passages were cosmic declarations - world shattering, definitive statements of who God is and what he has and will accomplish. Yet, just one verse, the most important reason to rejoice, was glossed over by my aunt.

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God." (v.3).

It was during one of our Bible studies that my aunt realized this oversight. She was so focused on the benefits of the new heaven and new earth she never really stopped to consider the reason – the why behind the former things passing away (v.4). Look at your Bible, see what your heading says for Revelation 21:1-7. Here are some examples from various English translations: “The New Jerusalem” – NLT... “The New Heaven and the New Earth” – ESV, NASB, NIV, NET... “All Things Made New” – NKJV... “The New Creation” – CSB

These headings, while helpful, missed a huge characteristic of this new heaven and new earth. *God dwelling among us!* My aunt stopped dead in her tracks. It was through this realization that my aunt with tears in her eyes said, or rather yelled, “How did I



miss it? It's because *God is with us!*” How can sorrow, crying, pain, or death exist where He is? How can we be in a state of pain, sorrow, sadness, & even in death if He is with us and we with Him? It cannot. It is hard for me not to tear up whenever I read or hear Revelation 21:1-7. My aunt had a moment of clarity that was emotional because she felt terrible for missing it. She never missed it from that point on.

So back to one of my favorite songs *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. At Christmas that same year after my aunt had her moment, we sang this song at Church during Christmas and my heart stopped. One word – Emmanuel – and all those thoughts came rushing back. Whenever I sing this song, I am reminded of Revelation 21:1-7, my aunt, and the reason for the chorus – *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel* (God with us). Advent is a time that we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, of Emmanuel – God with us. His earthly presence and ministry brought hope to a weary world. In Revelation 21:3, God again promises that He will dwell with us, and because He dwells with us, death, sorrow, pain, and crying will be no more. May you always remember why we rejoice during the Advent season – God with us!

Response:

We rejoice in the fact that God chose to act. He chose to dwell among His people, to be a part of our human experience, to gather His people to Himself, and ransom us from the captivity of sin – bringing us into at-one-ment with God (Romans 5:11). Because of the person and work of Christ we strive daily to live *coram Deo* – in the presence, authority, and glory of God. This Advent season, Rejoice! Rejoice that God

chose us that we may one day fully live coram Deo. I look forward to experiencing all that the new heaven and new earth brings but more importantly to rejoice in the reason for those benefits – God and Him dwelling among us. Merry Christmas, Covenant Presbyterian Church!

Prayer:

Our Father and Our God, Your word says that we should rejoice in You, always. You have given us every reason to do that. Though we see through a glass, darkly, one day we will be face to face with You, in Your presence, where You promise to dwell with Your people. Help us to learn to rejoice, to rejoice in Your Son, who dwelt among us and paid the price for our sins. Help us to rejoice in Your mercy and grace. Help us to rejoice that You will make all things new and give to us freely the water of life. Amen.

- Preston Yoshioka



DECEMBER 4

I will put enmity between you & the woman, & between your offspring & her offspring; he shall bruise your head, & you shall bruise his heel...

Text: Genesis 3:8-15



⁸ And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰ And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” ¹¹ He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹² The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” ¹³ Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

¹⁴ The Lord God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Reflection:

In the beginning God made everything good. One of the few commandments given to mankind (Adam & Eve) was not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Before knowing what an excuse even was (none were required prior to the Fall of mankind), Adam blamed Eve for feeding him the forbidden fruit, and Eve in turn blamed the serpent (Satan) for deceiving her. Sin's first episode of corruption was performed with gusto by God's people who failed to follow His commandments.

Obviously disappointed by mankind's weakness, nevertheless, God prepared the plan to allow mankind to be redeemed through belief in Christ although some suffering would be experienced due to our disobedience. We continue to fail miserably (sin)



because of our inability constantly to follow God's teachings and commandments. How often do we perform an action that we know is disappointing to our Lord?! For whatever reason (mostly for presumed pleasure or benefit), we conduct ourselves in ways that we probably know are not the way God wants us to behave. Are we really any different than Adam & Eve? It is hard to believe that God could exist & be so forgiving & loving that He did something about our transgressions that allows us to repent and follow His Son back into His presence through unearned Grace.

Response:

We realize that what Jesus asks of us is to believe, spread the good news, repent, and attempt to quit sinning (actually follow His teaching). His sacrifice (death on the cross) provides for our undeserved forgiveness (grace) and allow us to glorify God and be in His presence. Let us also be warned that failure to follow God's plan has its consequences (ask a snake how his day is going). Much of the misery we experience in our day to day living is brought on by our failure to follow Christ's teachings, yet we continue to do things which are not in line with Him and so not in our best interest. We so often only turn to God as a last resort when we realize how futile our own efforts are in achieving a desired outcome. Christ has given us the opportunity to be forgiven for our failures by simply following His teachings and believing in Him.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please give me the power to strengthen the weak, help the needy, positively encourage the misdirected, and forgive my offenders as Jesus did for me. Please help me avoid temptation and lead others to the path You, Jesus, have laid out for us. Remind me that there are severe consequences for failing to follow Your plan and that I will create my own form of misery if I try to depend upon myself instead of You, Jesus, for salvation. Let me be truly repentant and realize I can't earn my way into heaven. "Glory to God in the highest"! I ask this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

- Brent Ford

DECEMBER 5

God will provide for himself the lamb ...

Text: Genesis 22:1-19



After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

¹⁵ And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

Reflection:

What is the most important thing to you in this world? Most people who have children would say that their children are their most important worldly “possession,”

though parents know that they can't really possess their children, even if they tried.

Abraham was a parent, and he had a particularly precious child in Isaac, because Isaac was not born in the ordinary course of events, but miraculously, after Abraham and his wife Sarah had waited on God's promise of a child for a very long time (at least in human terms).

Perhaps because Abraham had received Isaac by God's miraculous grace, Abraham also knew that Isaac was not his to possess. Abraham knew he would never have had Isaac in the first place without God's grace. So maybe this is why Abraham seems to have been able to immediately obey God when God asked Abraham to take Isaac and give him back to God. This is a very advanced spiritual ability, to be able to release to

God precious things that God has given to us, and Abraham was not always this spiritually mature. It took him many decades of life with God to be able to obey God so readily after being asked for such an extreme sacrifice.

Speaking of extreme sacrifice, God can ask us for anything or require of us anything. There is nothing "off limits" in terms of what God might ask us to do. We cannot hold back even our most precious possessions or relationships from God. God asked Abraham to literally sacrifice his son, Isaac, and



Caravaggio – The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1603

so we cannot be surprised if God asks us to make sacrifices that seem extreme to us. We cannot own our children, but God does own us, if we have given our lives to Him (and even if we have not).

This can be a terrifying relationship, unless we know God's character. God can require anything from us, and did ask the unthinkable from Abraham. Yet Abraham does not seem terrified. If anything, he seems too confident. But he is not too confident – he is appropriately confident in God's character because over his many decades of faith, Abraham has gotten to know God.

Having gotten to know God through many trials, many seasons of life, many downs and ups, Abraham knows God's character. He doesn't know exactly what God will do, but he knows the type of God he has followed all these years, and Abraham knows that God is a God who provides. If something needs to be provided, God has not required Abraham to provide it. If God had required Abraham and Sarah to provide Isaac in

the first place, there would be no Isaac. But there is an Isaac, born of Sarah very late in her and Abraham's lives, and so Abraham has learned that God is the one who makes possible what may seem impossible. And so Abraham knows that even if God has seemed to ask something hard of him - even something humanly impossible - God will provide whatever is necessary. Abraham is so confident of this that he can reassure Isaac that God will provide the sacrifice so that Isaac does not ultimately have to be killed. Hebrews 11:9 tells us that Abraham even assumed God could raise Isaac from the dead if necessary (presumably after Abraham sacrificed him!).

And yet even Abraham, despite his advanced and correct faith, did not see the full extent of God's grace and promise. Yes, God provided a ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac, which was a great relief to all involved, including readers to this day. But God was actually foreshadowing what He Himself would do for all of humanity through his Son, Jesus. Though God did not require Abraham to go through with the sacrifice of Isaac, God the Father did send his Son to be a sacrifice in place of all of humanity, so that humanity would not have to die, but could live forever through the indestructible life of Jesus Christ, who was the ultimate sacrifice provided by God, sparing poor sinners, who could never provide for their own salvation, from having to bear the ultimate cost ourselves.

God spared not only Abraham and Isaac, but all of us when He provided Himself in our place, coming in the form of a baby, eventually to die on a cross, an act of grace that dwarfs what He did for Abraham and Isaac, great as that was.

Abraham confidently obeyed God because he knew what God was like: that God provides. It took Abraham a long time to know God this well, but God was faithful over the course of his life to bring Abraham to such a point of breath-taking obedience. God has provided even more greatly for you and me, and so let us rejoice in, believe

confidently in, seek to obey, and glorify our God who provides, more than we could ask for or imagine.

Response:

Here is a question to ask ourselves: Is God asking me to sacrifice anything to him today?

Prayer:

Help us, God, to trust and obey You, and rejoice in the knowledge of Your gracious provision. - Kenneth Ching



Gaspere Vismara, Sacrifice of Isaac, ca. 1650

DECEMBER 6

A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel....

Text: Genesis 49:10-12; Numbers 24:15-17



¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. ¹¹ Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. ¹² His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

And he took up his discourse and said,

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, ¹⁶ the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: ¹⁷ I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

Reflection:

I think it is pretty safe to say that neither of today's passages jump immediately to mind when thinking of Bible verses related to Advent & Christmas. I do not remember seeing either passage on a Christmas card. To find their relevance to Advent, we need to jump all the way to the days immediately following Easter and the resurrection!

Remember what happened when the disciples on the road to Emmaus met the resurrected Jesus and continued their walk with him? (Luke 24:13-27 ff) Verse 27 tells us “*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*” “In all the scriptures” means that today's two passages were likely among those scriptures Jesus explained to the two travelers. These passages point to Jesus' identity as coming King.

In Genesis 49, Jacob gives his final blessing to each of his sons. When he comes to Judah, the ancestor of Jesus, the blessing reflects the royal status of Jesus as the One whom eventually all peoples and tribes will acknowledge as Lord of all. The scepter and the royal staff relate to Jesus' role as ruler. Further, Jacob's blessing alludes to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem where the disciples were told to find the foal Jesus would triumphantly ride to enter Jerusalem lauded by the people as their king. (Matthew 21:1-5) The images of blood and wine and robes evoke the Easter story where it is revealed

that Jesus' incarnation was not as a conquering political ruler, but as a sacrificial servant king.

The Numbers 24 passage reinforces these aspects of Jesus' identity. This time the message comes as part of a series of oracles. Balaam's explanation of his prophecy acknowledges that this vision is set in the far future when a ruler from Jacob's line will crush his enemies and take his place as ruler of Israel. Here again we see the scepter imagery. Also mentioned is a star coming out of Jacob, evoking both the Christmas star followed by the wise men, and Jesus' identification of himself in Revelation as "the root and the descendant of David, the bright & morning star." (Revelation 22:16)

As we examine these passages, far from being unrelated to Christmas, we see clues to the roots of Jesus' identity and the reasons for His advent. That Jesus came as the servant king and will return as the triumphant king is not something concocted by his first century followers. It is attested repeatedly throughout scripture. The interconnectedness of scripture affirms and grounds our faith.

Response:

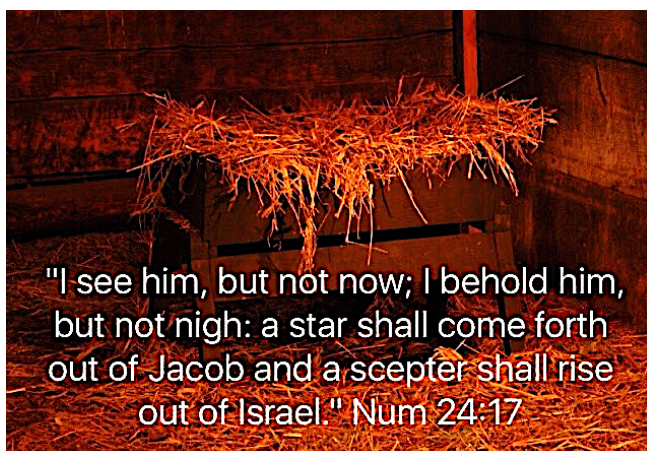
It is amazing to contemplate that the Christmas story began centuries before Jesus birth. His birth is not merely a date isolated in history but is the pivot point of history. As we retell and celebrate the events of the Christmas

story, we celebrate the breadth and depth of God's plan for redemption. Glimpses of that plan appear throughout the Original Testament in historical narrative, prophecy, and poetry. The more closely we examine these passages, the greater our understanding will be of the reasons for Jesus' coming. How blessed were those Emmaus road travelers to have Jesus give this insight to them in person!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, as we move through this Advent season of 2020, we are aware of how current events will impact our celebrations. Many things will not match our expectations based on our past experiences of Christmastime. Help us rise above our preconceptions and remember that You are as active today as You have been throughout history. Your plan for Jesus to be acknowledged as ruler of all peoples, tribes and tongues is not deterred by events in our days. Thank You for the assurance of Your providence as we see Your plan woven throughout time in the scriptures. As we contemplate the amazing moment of the incarnation of the babe in the manger, help us see You at work from the beginning of time through to the culmination of history. May the breadth and depth of Your love for us carry us through this season and into a new year. Amen.

- Janet Goodman



DECEMBER 7

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...

Text: Deuteronomy 18:15-18

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶ just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’¹⁷ And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken.’¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

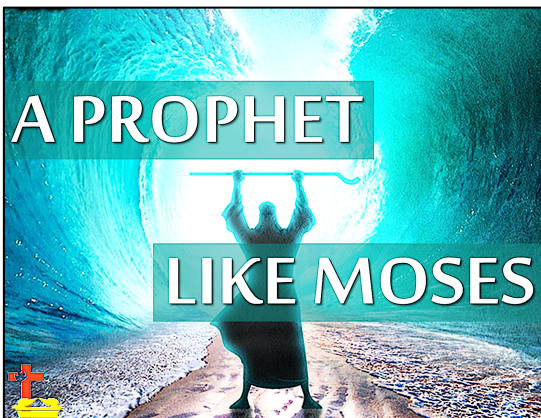


Reflection:

Eternal Prophet

When I was young there was a phrase used to convince us that what one said was true. It was, “Straight from the horse's mouth.” To be believed, a prophet must have credibility. Just how is that credibility established? His words are proven true over time. There are basically two types of true prophets. This is how I learned to differentiate between them. God directly instructs one to speak His truth to the people unaltered. That one who does so is a Prophet with a capital “P.” The other type reads God's word from scripture and/or expounds upon it as truthfully as humanly possible. That one is a prophet with a lower case “p.” Either way, the hearers must choose to believe the speaker and the source. YHWH God, the source of True Love, sent Moses, known to the Jews to be their greatest Prophet, to redeem them from Egypt and unto Himself.

In today's passage, Moses speaks of the LORD raising up a Prophet like me (Moses) that you will listen to, because you do not want to hear the voice of the LORD. Moses' credibility was constantly being challenged. The people would believe, then doubt, fear,



repeat... Hmmm, just like me. Being God's Prophet, or prophet, is a tough job. Pray for your pastor, elders and fellow Christians. They all need it.

Let's put Moses' words from Deuteronomy 18:15-18 into their broader context. When Moses heard God's Word from the burning bush he said, *“But behold, they will not believe me or listen to and obey my voice; for they will say, The LORD has not appeared to you.”* (Exodus 4:1 AMPC) After Moses

spoke to Pharaoh the first time, the straw for making bricks was taken away from the Hebrew slaves, yet their tally of bricks had to remain the same. Then he heard them say, *“The Lord look upon you and judge, because you have made us a rotten stench to be detested by Pharaoh and his servants and have put a sword in their hand to slay us.”* (Exodus 5:21 AMPC) The Prophet Moses was not a popular guy... even to his own people, yet YHWH tells Moses in Exodus 7:1, *“Behold I will make you as God to Pharaoh to declare My will and purpose to him; and Aaron your (older) brother shall be your prophet.”* (AMPC) God told Moses that Pharaoh's heart would be hardened. Neither the Prophet Moses, or the prophet Aaron had an easy job, from a human perspective.

In Exodus 19, YHWH intends to speak to His people directly, so they are to be set apart, washed and stay outside the boundary placed around the foot of the mountain. *“Then Moses brought the people from the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.”* (verse 17 AMPC) Moses goes up the mountain a second time to hear YHWH's Word while the people listen below.

While Moses receives the Ten Commandments, YHWH speaks against making and worshiping false gods and that He will be, *“visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing mercy and steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep my commandments.”* (Exodus 20: 5b-6 AMPC) After Moses receives YHWH's WORD, *“the people perceived the thunderings and the lightings and the smoking mountain, and as [they] looked they trembled with fear and fell back and stood afar off. And they said to Moses, ‘You speak to us and we will listen, but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’ And Moses said to the people, ‘Fear not; for God has come to prove you, so that the [reverent] fear of Him may be before you, that you may not sin.’”* Yep, straight from the Horse's mouth! ... But they, and we, still sin.

There is a key word in Exodus 20:6, it is the Hebrew word, *hesed*: God's covenant, loyal, faithful, everlasting, compassionate, mercy, grace and love (especially when offered to a weaker party). God tells His chosen people standing at the

foot of the mountain, *“But showing mercy and steadfast love (hesed) to...those who love me...”* This *hesed* spoken of 250 times in the Old Testament is embodied in the incarnate Son of YHWH, The Greatest Prophet, Christ Jesus, The Eternal WORD made flesh. The *HESED* made flesh. The 'Horse's Mouth,' so to speak.



Every word that every true Prophet has spoken has come from The Living Word Himself. He is The One who erases sin, doubt and fear and gives true Love and Redemption (*Hesed*) to all who believe. This is the Prophet who Moses was speaking of in Deuteronomy 18:15-18, because that Greatest Prophet, the Eternal Prophet, was putting the very words of truth into Moses' mouth. He breathes loving, merciful, compassionate, gracious redemption into the souls of His chosen ones. Jesus IS The Prophet, Priest and King!

Response:

Where are You today? The world sends its mixed messages and feeble solutions of secular-humanism, which sound great to some on the surface, but are misleading and against Christ and God's Word. Where do *they* get their credibility? Themselves? Their Cause? Trust in Christ alone and live for Him. Meditate upon His Word. He is The Eternal Prophet who came and speaks Truth to us and was crucified for it, The Eternal Priest who willingly sacrificed Himself for us, and The Eternal King who reigns over us in *Hesed* Love. There is therefore no need to doubt or fear! Love and Redemption have come to the earth through Christ Jesus, God's Son, who makes us to hear His words and Rejoice!

Prayer:

Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, You have sent Your Word of Truth to the world: Christ Jesus, born of a woman, born to redeem us. Give us the faith to trust Your Word and the courage to live for You daily, come what may. The world around us is going its own way; the wrong way. Jesus, You, the Unique and Eternal Prophet, have the only true words of life. May we listen to You and live only for You, being a testimony of You to a lost world. In the Name of Your Eternal Prophet and Son, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, Amen.

- Gerry Dunlap



*He so loved us that, for our sake,
He was made man in time,
Although through him all times were made.
He was made man, who made man.
He was created of a mother whom he created.
He was carried by hands that he formed.
He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the Word,
Without whom all human eloquence is mute.*

- St. Augustine

DECEMBER 8

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ...

Text: II Samuel 7:8-17



⁸ Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. ⁹ And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.’ ” ¹⁷ In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.



King David

Reflection:

As I read and re-read these verses on Election Night (having decided to wait until morning for the results... followed by relief or depression), that still, small voice is saying to me, “*So what part of I’VE GOT THIS don’t you get!? I was, before there even was a “here.” I made “here,” put you in it, and gave it to you. All along the way I have cared for you and loved you according to My Plan.*”

Today’s verses contain the 6th of 7 major Covenants God offered for “us” in the Old Testament (Noah, Abraham 1, Abraham 2, Israel, Phineas, David, Israel). That said, one could argue that the actual first Covenant was the creation of Adam, Eve, and a

world for them to inhabit and manage. One could argue until the end of time, the specific meaning, interpretation, and intent of each one of these, but the overriding message is “I AM”.

Response:

Thankfully there has been one final Covenant, the perfect and all- encompassing One: in, through and because of Jesus the Christ.

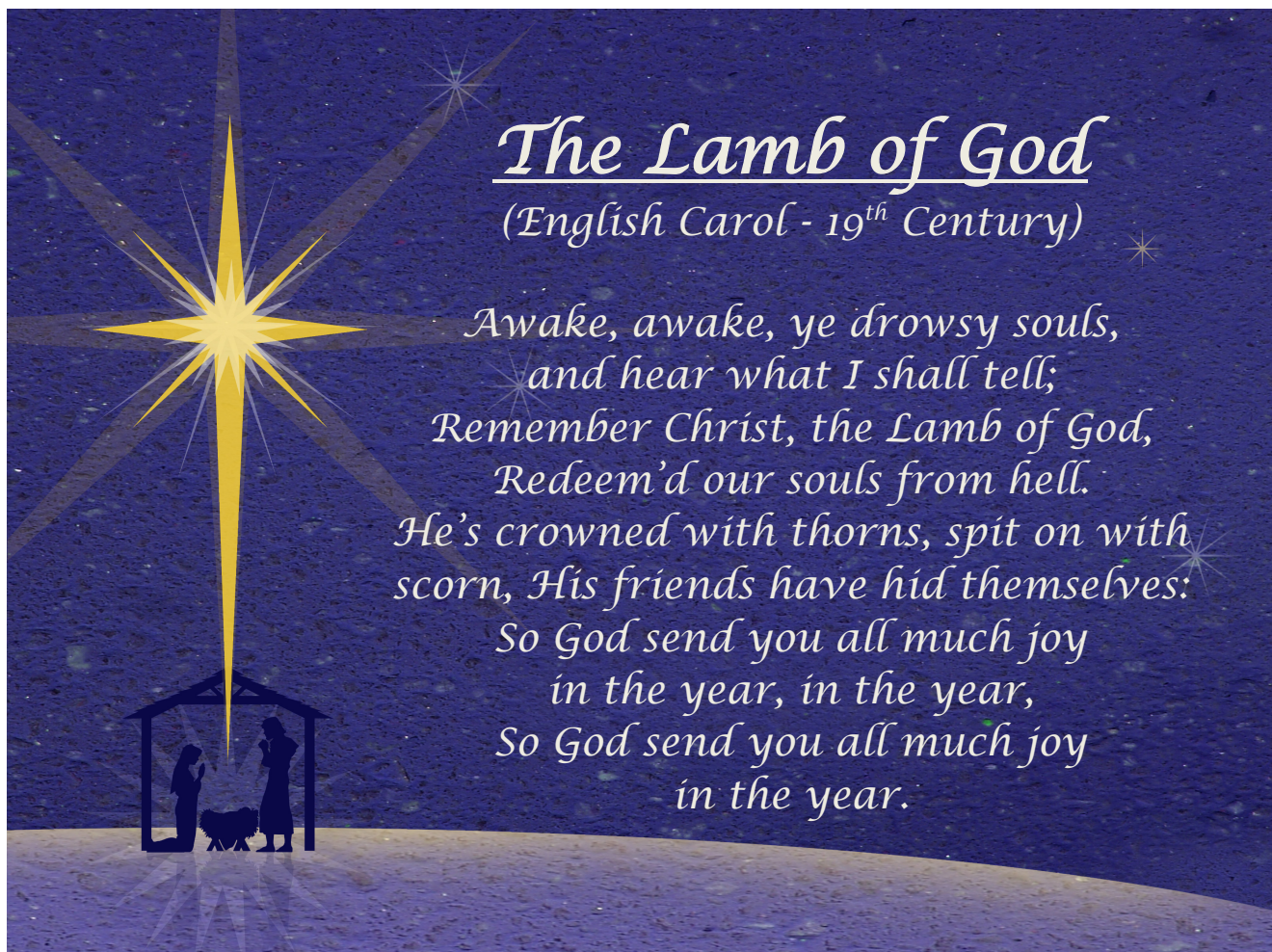
Prayer:

Dear Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit – why is it so hard for us to let You be God? If Your creation isn’t enough to make us “see,” Your Word has laid out for us all the ins and outs, the ups and downs, the here/not there. All the interventions are laid out and recorded. We’re on the ultimate luxury liner, with a guaranteed ETA, and the Captain is no other than I AM.

In this Advent Season of preparation, would You help us listen to You when we’re making our To Do lists and planning out our Calendars? Help us to think through why “doing this,” “putting this there”, or “buying that” will bring **GLORY TO YOUR NAME!** Remind us that when I AM is in charge, there can be no worry, anxiety, or frustration – only **PEACE** and **JOY!**

In our Holy Savior’s Name we pray... Amen and Amen.

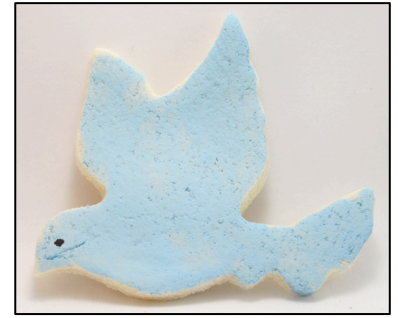
- Dan Carne



DECEMBER 9

*And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace....*

Text: Isaiah 9:2-7



The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Reflection:

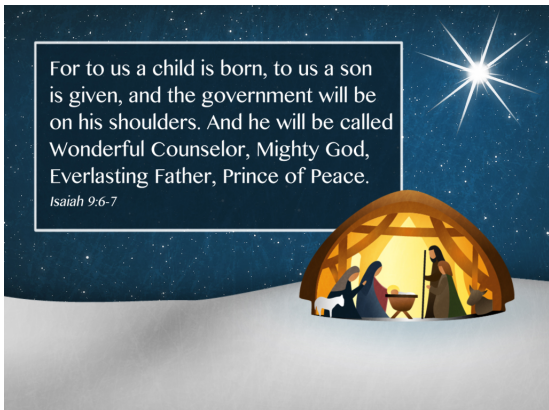
I know it shouldn't surprise me that the Bible is still relevant, but sometimes I read verses & have to remind myself that they weren't just written for today. Sadly, "*people walking in darkness*" & "*living in a land of deep darkness*" are descriptions that sound very present-day. And if ever there was a year that we need to remember that of the greatness of Jesus' "*government & peace there will be no end*," 2020 is that year.

Christ was born to be a "*great light*" and came to "*enlarge the nation and increase their joy*." The government will be on HIS shoulders... "*of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end*." Sometime between the time I write this and the time you read it, our country will have chosen our next president. I rejoice and find peace in the knowing that no matter what happens in our country, God is in control and Christ will "*reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it with justice and righteousness*." Jesus wasn't born to become our president. But he was called by many other names that speak of His surpassing authority including Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Response:

Look again at names given to Jesus in verse 6. What other names can you add to

this list from other places in Scripture? I encourage you to write these names out and put them somewhere that you can see them all season long (and beyond). May this serve as a reminder of who is in control, now & always.



Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank You for sending Jesus to be born as a baby who would be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Thank You that the government is on His shoulders and not ours or anyone that we know or elect. Amen.

- Vickie Musni

DECEMBER 10

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10



There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

² And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

⁶ The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.

⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Reflection:

The first verse of this passage refers to the genealogy of Jesus. Jesse was David's father and is mentioned in Matthew 1:5-6 and in Luke 3:32 where Jesus' genealogy is cited. Jesus was descended from King David, who "*became greater and greater for the Lord, the God of hosts was with him*" (2 Samuel 5:10). And like David this shoot from the stump of Jesse would bear fruit.

This branch is described as having the Spirit of the Lord resting on him: the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, knowledge and fear of the Lord. He shall judge with righteousness, not just physical evidence, the poor and meek. The wicked He shall kill. We can look at the Gospels and see evidence of Jesus doing just this. He healed, showed mercy, forgave, and loved His people. He even died so the wicked on the earth could be saved. (I believe I am counted with the wicked, but because Jesus took my wickedness upon himself on the cross, my wickedness is put to death. He killed it.)

The rest of this passage looks to a time when all will be right with the world. Peace between animals that normally would eat each other. No fear for the little child of poisonous snakes or wild beasts. There will be no destruction on the holy mountain. Where He rests will be glorious. When Jesus comes again this is what life will look like.

Can you imagine? Peace, joy, every being having full knowledge of the Lord over the whole earth. Life does not look like that now. There are so many worries abounding: Covid 19, racial tension, even the weather... But in the midst of all of our worries, we also have this promise of the earth to come; peace, joy, no fear.

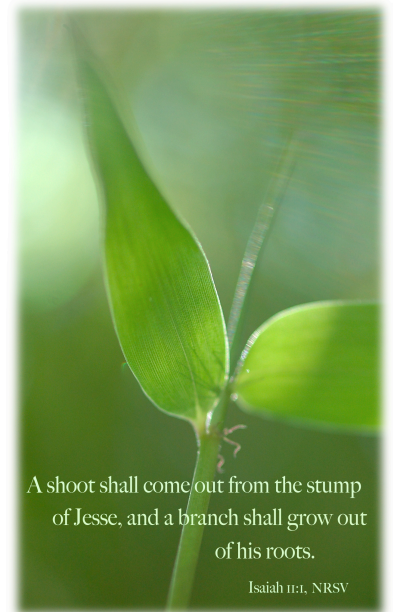
Response:

There are many verses in the Bible that tell us not to worry. I think we just want to be in control of all of our circumstances and all of the outcomes, and we worry about it all. If we could, just for this season, put aside worry and trust that the Lord knows what He is doing, we might see a glimpse of the world that is to come. Peace, shalom, all is right with me and around me, because I trust the Lord, our Father, Jesus His Son and the Holy Spirit that dwells with me. The more of us that live this way and show this way to one another, the more the whole world will see what is to come.

Prayer:

Father God, Jesus the Christ, and Holy Spirit, I pray that You indwell us and show us Your peace. I pray that we set aside the worry and focus on the peace You have for each one of us. Help us to see a world where Jesus' resting place is glorious. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

- Joanne Dickson



DECEMBER 11

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel...



Text: Micah 5:2-4

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

Reflection:

The book of Micah is filled with messages of both caution and hope. He prophesied of peace and destruction. He denounced, he warned, and then he spoke of a royal deliverer. In chapter 5, verse 2, he described a village “*too little to be among the clans of Judah.*” This village was Bethlehem.

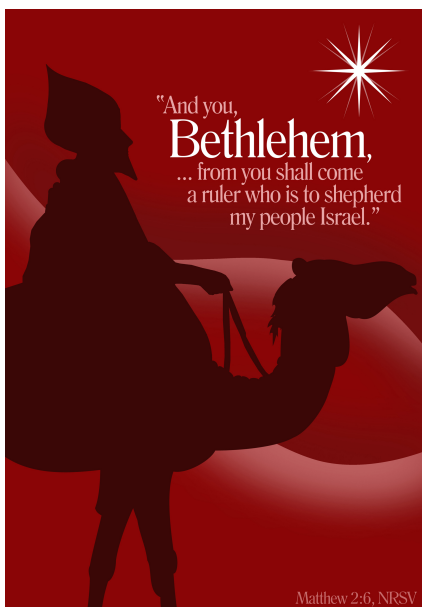
Bethlehem was truly one of the smallest clans. “Little clans” can even be translated to “insignificant” or “least.” Other places in the Bible, the term is even used to describe one who is younger or lesser in power and status. Can you think of any other stories from God’s Word that focus in on a “lesser” being chosen for something mighty? I think of Jacob, receiving the birthright and blessing from his father Isaac. I think of Joseph, the youngest who ends up exalted over his brothers. I think of David,

overlooked while his brothers walk before Samuel, then called from his position in the pasture to stand before the King! The most unlikely, small, and insignificant are exalted.

Micah calls us to look closely at Bethlehem and see God’s faithfulness in surprising ways—to look where we might not have expected to and see with Him beyond the smallness!

Response:

This Advent season, may we dwell upon the truth that great things can come from the small, the insignificant, the lesser. May we recognize that God can and will use—and is using—us in our smallness and insignificance. May we

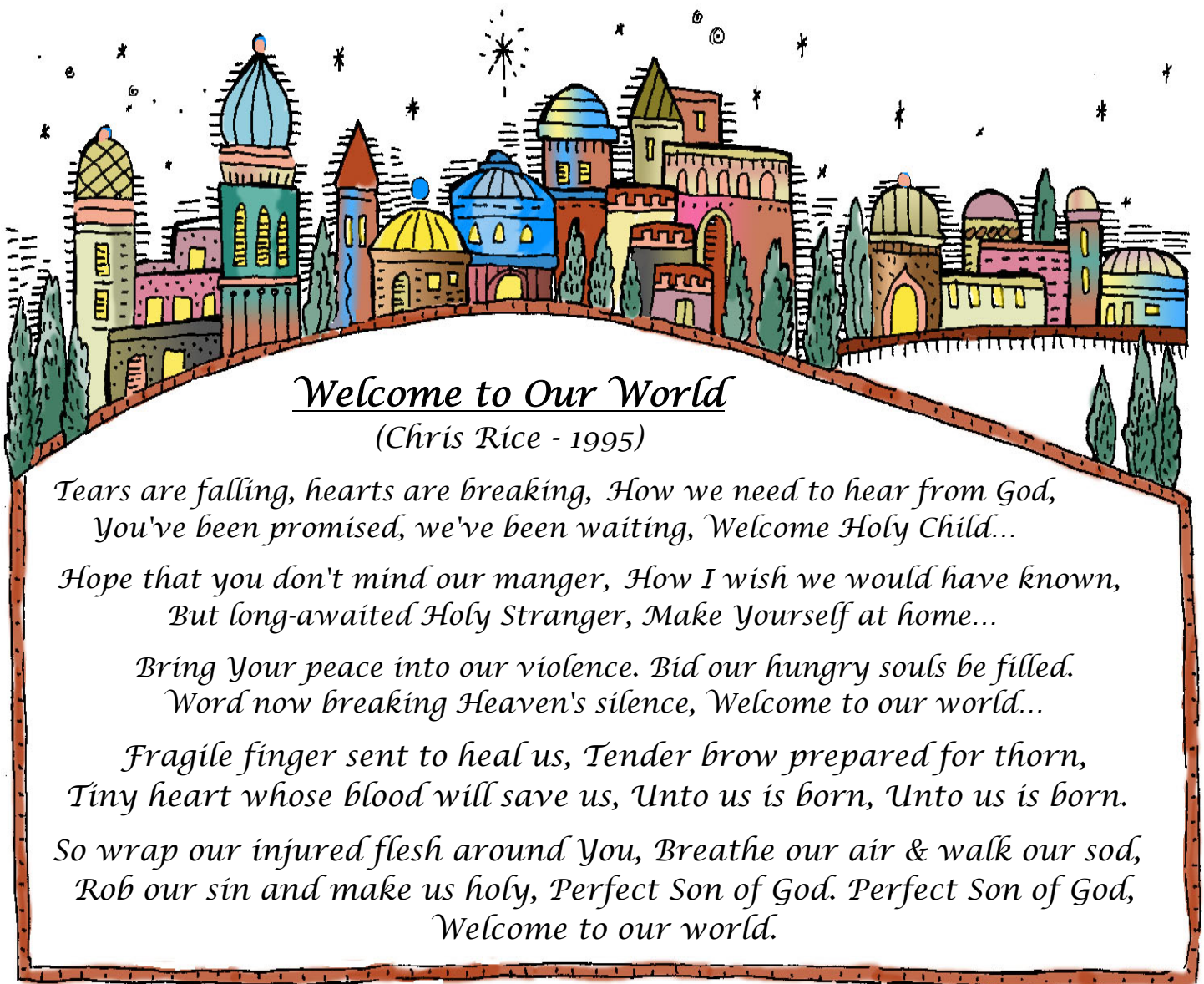


reflect upon how the current pandemic has also taught us not only how to see the small things, but how to savor them, how to appreciate them, and how to be thankful for them!

But how can God specifically use us during this season of Advent? What can we do for Him this season to reveal His faithfulness to others? What must we let go of this season so that we can be willing and available to be used by Him—even and especially in our smallness? Maybe we start with a few more words from the book of Micah... *“He has told you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8)

Prayer:

Gracious Father, we thank and praise You today for our smallness, and Your incredible greatness. Thank You for creating us to do mighty things in Your strength, with Your power, and by Your grace. Open our eyes to see the ways in which we can serve You this Advent season. In Your great name we pray, Amen. - Kathy Ludwig



DECEMBER 12

In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD...

Text: Isaiah 40:1-8



Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

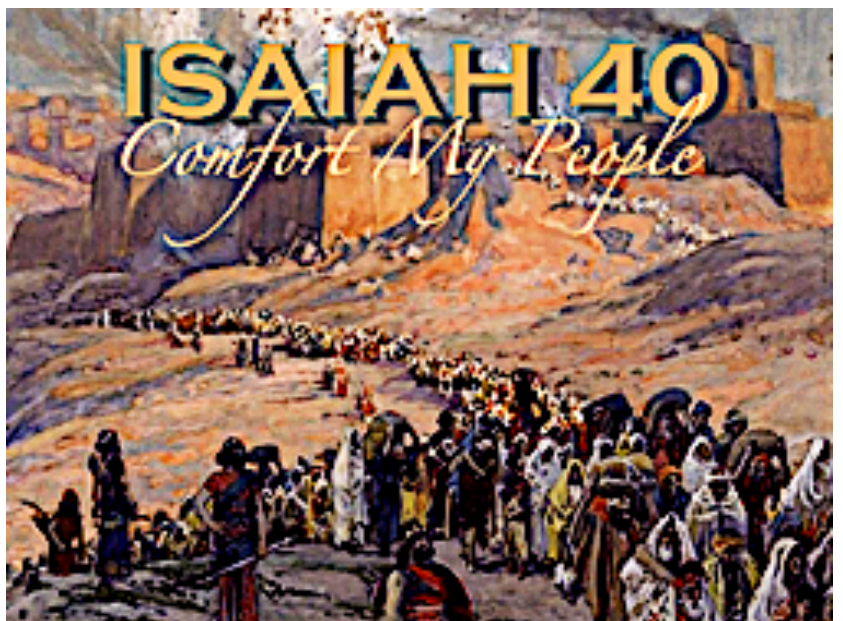
⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Reflection:

Much written in previous chapters of Isaiah dealt with the disobedience of God's covenant people. They had abandoned God and did what was right in their own sight. Judgement from God would bring the decimation of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem. However, in chapter 40 there begins a change in the tone of Isaiah. The loving kindness of the Lord remains. Grace and mercy will be displayed. Those 70 years of captivity were harsh, a full measure of chastisement as extreme as a double portion, full of sorrow and woe.

Psalm 137 relates this distress, *"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'"*

The Jewish captives indeed needed comfort and restoration and by extension this, too, remains the plight of all mankind. The warfare or hardship which God sent is



ended with a pardon! God gives a twice repeated, *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”*

The Lord did send a voice—that of John the Baptist, the “Elijah” of the New Testament—to herald repentance and prepare the way for the Messiah. The picture of a highway passing directly through the desert with the low places filled and the mountains cut down may be easier for us to envision with the freeways of today which are built by teams of men with powerful machinery. Yet the King of kings does not come along a precarious track meandering through the mountains or around them. God bulldozes an unimpeded roadway through any obstacles of this sin-bound world. God alone can make a rough and difficult way truly smooth and straight. The Lord speaks the enduring truth not as a mere mortal who fades and withers quickly as a flower or grass. The word of God will stand forever. Comfort will and has come through Christ for all people who believe in Him. One day *“every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.”*

Response:

Handel’s Messiah uses a good portion of this passage, with the first soloist singing the words, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” (Yes, I did start listening to the piece to find where Isaiah 40 is used.)

Then also the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. *What is your only comfort in life and in death?* Answer: *That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

Sadly, many in this world experience a lack of true comfort and joy. They are captives to sin and fix their hope on other things rather than seeking Christ who alone is mighty to save. We come to Jesus and live.



Prayer:

Praise You, Father in heaven. How amazing Your love is. How wonderful that Jesus was sent as a babe and then sacrificially died for all my sins. Thank You for Your marvelous mercy and abundant grace. Send Your Spirit to work in the lives of those who have turned from You to a pathway that leads to despair. Lord, You alone are my comforter, shield and defender. Amen.

- Douglas Heidema

DECEMBER 13

Behold, the Lord God comes with might...

Text: Isaiah 40:9-11

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.



Reflection:

Through these verses, someone is telling someone else to announce the coming of the Lord, to prepare the way for when God will come to his people to bring deliverance and salvation. The Jews in exile must have understood this to be salvation from their captivity and their return to the promised land. But we can read this in the context of Jesus' coming as well. Go up to a high mountain and announce the good news. Lift up the voice, without fear and with strength.

I imagine some would doubt doing the wisdom of doing this while the nation was being held captive. We might feel the same today. But the prophet is told to announce it as certain. *Behold your God! The Lord God will come with might and his arm rules for him.* He will come with power to defeat his people's enemies. He doesn't need anyone else; his strength is enough.

Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense with him. The God who is coming will win over his enemies. There is no question about it as no one can stand before him. Whether it is Satan, or our sins or death itself. And as when the conquering nation would take the spoils of war for themselves, so we will receive a reward we don't deserve, a recompense for a battle we never fought. We will receive the benefit of his victory.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. The infinite and incomprehensible God, the conquering and undefeatable warrior turns to us as a gentle and loving shepherd. There is nothing we should fear while being in his arms.

Finish reading the chapter. This is one that brings back memories from my life every time I read its verses. I see myself reading it as a child and feel the same sense of how small I am. Compared to God we humans seem (are indeed) microscopic. It's like

those videos you find on the internet of the size comparison of us with our planet, our planet with our sun, our sun with the next star, etc. Pretty soon we lose the perspective of real size. If our brains can't fully comprehend the size of not even the biggest objects in the universe how can they fully understand God? How much greater is the God who created them? It brings peace to my heart knowing that my salvation depends entirely on the One that can win the battle I can't win. He has the power I will never have against sin and death. And I know I can keep walking on this earth knowing he alone holds me in his arms.

The promise we read today was fulfilled. Not just for the Israelites that eventually returned home, but for all humanity, God came. It was certain back then in Isaiah's day, and the prophet said so. God took the form of a man and lived among us. Everyone saw him with their own eyes. He accomplished the salvation we all desperately needed. He is alive today and his Second Coming is as certain as the first one.

Response:

My response to these things? Awe. We all ought to be amazed at how great our God is. We are awestruck when we begin to understand that there is nothing and no one that can



He will feed his
flock like a
shepherd;
he will gather
the lambs
in his arms,
and carry them
in his bosom,
and gently lead
the mother sheep.

Isaiah 40:11

stand before Him. With so much happening this year, this passage also brings hope and peace to my heart. Let us praise him. Oh come, let us adore Him! Let us trust that He can and will deliver us from any hardship in life, even death. May God help us remember that everything that exists, visible or invisible, from the greatest celestial objects to the smallest viruses bows down to Him.

Prayer:

Lord we need the peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace that only Your Son Jesus Christ could have brought us. You initiated this peace, not us. You came to us in the form of a man. You won the battle alone. We praise and thank You for no one else could have accomplished this. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

- Samuel Dueñas

DECEMBER 14

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor...*

Text: Isaiah 61:1-3

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.



Reflection:

Merry Christmas! It's merry Christmas because Christmas is about good news. Jesus came to die for our sins and to give us eternal life. This is great news. It should go viral like a new BTS music video or be contagious like Covid-19 (for those of you who don't know BTS). YouTube videos go viral because people click "like." Most people love Christmas season, the most wonderful time of the year, but do people like the Good News, the Gospel? The way so many people celebrate Christmas, it is like they are eating hamburgers without the meat patty. They are just happy with sesame seeds on the buns. How can this be? For the people who don't know sin is real and that sin results in death, forgiveness and resurrection mean nothing. For the people who don't know that they are the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives and the prisoners, the Good News doesn't go viral. But enough about the people who don't feel the need...

The prophet Isaiah says that God's Spirit is upon him and has anointed him so that he will bring good news to the poor...

How about us?

In order for the Good News of Jesus to go viral, the person spreading the Good News must be sold on it and show their conviction. People are not buying it, in part, because they are not convinced by the reviews. However, the real problem is that the people who have accepted the Good News of Jesus too often don't even bother to write a review. We can analyze why in many ways, but the bottom line is that it's not important enough or impressive enough for us to share. Of course, we Christians want to deny this, but it seems to me that's what it comes down to. And it's not impressive enough because we don't see the depth of poorness, brokenness, captivity and shame that is

our plight because of sin. Like peeling an onion that makes us cry with every layer we remover, we have to acknowledge the depth of our sins—Not to feel guilty, but to see the depth of God’s forgiveness and love for us.

Pastor Jay enlightened us with Jonah’s idolatry and self-righteousness in some recent Sunday morning messages. Until that point, perhaps for most of us, the Book of Jonah was about how Jonah refused to obey God, the whale and the repentance of the people of Nineveh. It’s hard to see the real sin and the source of the sin that is at the heart of this book, even though spotting many sins in others is something we tend to be good at. And it’s very hard and near impossible for us to find our own real sins and idols, just like it was for Jonah, unless someone helps us. There is a Korean saying, “Monks cannot shave their own head.” Thankfully, Jesus went up to heaven so that the Holy Spirit could come down and be with us. In reality we only know the surface and often



don’t realize the root of our problems. There are hidden sins and idols in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is groaning for us and working to renew us. Unfortunately, we interact with the Holy Spirit the way some people use the expensive iPhones like a flip phone. The truth is that we don’t even realize that we have the iPhone.

The Holy Spirit is with us and is encouraging us to spread the Good News.

However, it’s not just for other people whom we think need it. It’s for us. It’s especially for me. Just like what we see happening between God and Jonah... God used Jonah to share the good news to the people of Nineveh. God saved them, but the real person God wanted to save was Jonah. God was working to make his salvation firmer. This is the same Spirit Isaiah was talking about. I believe the Holy Spirit is working within us so that we can work out our salvation with fear and trembling. He speaks to us through people around us and our life situations, even through movies and songs and sometimes even directly. He points out our sins so that we would stand in awe before Him and before the height and depth of the salvation He gives us. He gives us the Gospel so that we might tremble at His amazing love.

Response:

We Presbyterians want to be right theologically. We like things to be neat and clean and comfortable. Thus we tend to shy away from interacting with the Holy Spirit. I believe this tendency is related to our natural human bent toward self-righteousness. I don't think God worries so much about us misunderstanding Him. We misunderstood Him so much that He sent Jesus and then the Holy Spirit.

Interact with him by asking Him what he wants us to get from the annoying Republicans or Democrats, or from anything else. If we make mistakes, we can be confident that God will help us eventually to figure out what we need to understand. It will be a hindrance to our growth and understanding if we are always just trying not to make a mistake. The more dangerous thing is the self-righteousness that makes me think I must be right. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit makes us realize that we are poor and miserable sinners so that we may truly realize the meaning of liberty. When we can tell the difference between the ashes and the beautiful headdress, we will be called oaks of righteousness and make the Good News viral and bring glory to God.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, during this Christmas season, help us to know that Your Holy Spirit is upon us. Help us learn to interact with You, Holy Spirit. Please share the Good News again with us and in a deeper way so that we would share and be the Good News to our neighbors and to this world. Lord, we know this is a slow and hard process, but help us not to grow weary. Keep before us the truth that in due time, we will reap a harvest if we do not give up because You, Holy Spirit, never give up on us. Amen.

- Tim Kwon



DECEMBER 15

With the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man...

Text: Daniel 7:13-14

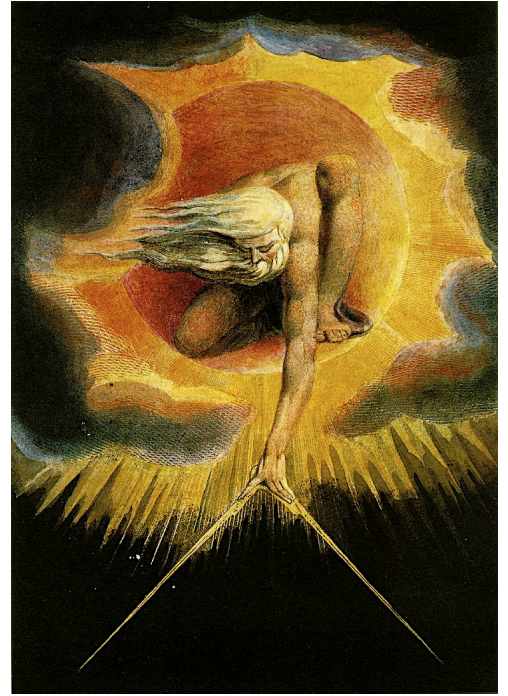
"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."



Reflection:

The “Son of Man,” a title that Christ used in reference to himself throughout the new testament, is who Daniel had seen in a vision of the night. Coming on the clouds, the Messiah would be presented before the throne of God, the Ancient of Days himself. The Messiah was given an everlasting dominion over his own kingdom, so that all of its people may serve him and receive his salvation.

The coming of Christ was a picture made very clear to Daniel in his vision, just as another image was made clear to us in the year 2020. The curtain has been lifted on a culture that depends heavily on its own power, and its need for Christ’s salvation has never been clearer. Amidst the lockdowns, protests and political quarrels, a truth has been shown to us: we cannot rely on ourselves. Without the mercy bestowed upon us by Christ, life, in and of itself, would be abysmal. Without Christ, who do we turn to for comfort and guidance? Would we not begin to idolize our political figureheads? Would we not depend on their sovereignty to provide relief and safety? Thankfully, as Daniel states, Christ was given eternal dominion over all of his kingdom, a kingdom that shall never perish! Through the grace of Jesus Christ, we are a people redeemed by His blood! Praise and glory be to God, for our Savior has already come! In a manner consistent with the vision that Daniel experienced in the night, the Messiah has already arrived. And, when we find ourselves in a time like 2020, or maybe even in our own Lion’s Den, we must remember that the Son of Man was sent and has already come to save the world.



William Blake, The Ancient of Days, 1794

Response:

In the midst of our battle to find who is right and who is wrong about each of the crises we are currently facing, I encourage us all to remember the greatest gift God ever gave to man, Jesus Christ. Our Lord and Savior, born to face the evil of the world, to save those who sinned against Him. How can we share his name? How can we share his love to a world that is begging for it? And, how can we better recognize God’s redeeming grace in the midst of our own current tribulations?

Prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, & lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24)

- Justin Luevano

DECEMBER 16

*Behold, I send my messenger, & he will prepare the way before me.
And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; & the
messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming...*

Text: Malachi 2:17-3:10



You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

³ “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵ “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

⁶ “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ ⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. ¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need...”

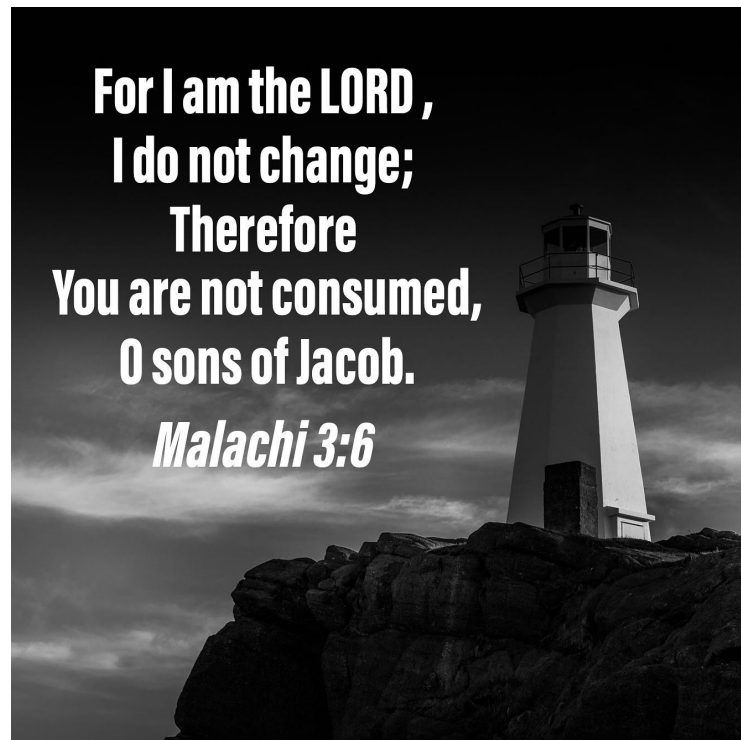
Reflection:

Generally, it is believed that Malachi was written around 433-424 BC, a time when God’s people had returned from exile to Jerusalem, but they were discouraged because the glories prophesied by Isaiah had not materialized.

Malachi’s prophecy begins with the Lord announcing that he has grown weary of his people’s cynical complaints. They say, “*Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.*” And they ask, “*Where is the God of Justice?*” (2:17)

Although Malachi denounces the spiritual decadence (intermarriage with pagans, withholding of tithes, and criticism of God Himself), he is more concerned with their cynical attitude than the actions themselves. The people have apparently come to take God's promises of future blessing for granted, but Malachi sets them straight. *"Behold, he is coming...but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver."* (3:1-3]

There are several messianic prophecies in Malachi. Verse 3:1 tells of the Messiah being preceded by a forerunner, a "messenger" who will prepare the way. The fulfillment of this prophecy is recounted in Matthew (11:10-11), Mark (1:2-4), and Luke (7:27-28) as they relate Jesus' comments about John the Baptist as this messenger who has prepared the way for Him.



Malachi's prophecy closes out the Old Testament. After him, God remained silent for four centuries. But through the warnings and exhortations of His many Old Testament prophets, He left behind clear guidance on living an obedient life and preparing for the One who was to come.

Response:

Christians today should take Malachi's message to heart - We must not be selfish, calculating, and shortsighted. Our faith must be properly motivated. Malachi speaks to us Christians concerning our own spiritual apathy. It is

easy to become complacent and to fall away if times get tough or if we lose sight of God's overall plan. But in the end, God sees our heart, so there is no point in fooling ourselves. We do not get right with God by merely going through the motions. Yes, we should do good works, but those works must flow from a heart that is in a proper relationship with God.

Prayer:

Father in heaven, thank You for using Malachi to remind me of my need continually to work toward a better relationship with You. In this season of Your Son Jesus, help me redouble my efforts to improve my relationship with You. Amen.

- Bill Myers

DECEMBER 17

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes...

Text: Malachi 4:1-6



“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ²But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

Reflection:

These words of Malachi, the last words in the entire Old Testament, are spoken to God’s people during a time of religious compromise and complacency. They had been released from exile, but were only half-heartedly worshipping, and they were upset that they weren’t in a better position relative to those around them. Malachi is reminding God’s people about the seriousness

of God’s judgment, the need to fear God and follow His law, and the stark difference in outcomes for those who follow God versus those who choose wickedness. The judgment is described as a refining fire, burning away wickedness.

If I’m being honest, biblical descriptions of judgment make me uncomfortable—they sound terrifying, and I prefer to dwell on the passages about love and mercy and forgiveness. My resistance to thinking about judgment shows that I’m failing to remember some of the basics of the Christian faith:



1. Sin separates us from God - God is perfectly holy, and any and all sins cause complete separation from Him. Any and all sins need to be judged before we can have reconciliation with God.
2. Sin deeply messes up the world - The crimes that we see on the news every night, the difficulties in relationships, the ugliness in ourselves... all of it is caused by sin. All of us are much worse off because of it, and all of us long for escape from the brokenness of the world and in ourselves that results from sin. We wouldn't actually want to live in an eternity without judgment, where sin & injustice could just run rampant & continue to make everything worse & worse.
3. Sin points us to our need for a Savior - We need judgment to exist in order to be reconciled with God, and so that all the wrongs in the world can be made right - but none of us can just stop sinning on our own. This passage points to arrogance as one of the qualities that will be cause for judgment (v.1). Do you know how many days pass without me having a prideful thought or action, without pride being a root cause for most of my sins? Zero. Even when I see that pride has terrible consequences like separating me from God and making me miserable, I cannot stop being prideful on my own. I need something outside myself to save me.

And here is where the good news of Christmas comes in! In v.2, Malachi prophesies the coming of the Savior, saying, *“the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.”* This points us to Jesus, who will bring hope and healing to those who follow Him. God loves us so much that He sent the Savior we all need to escape judgment. This Savior will face the judgment that we deserve, so that evil and injustice do not go unpunished, and so that we can be reconciled with God. This passage foretells the great hope we receive at Christmas!

Response:

This passage reminds God's people, then and now, that God should be feared and God's law should be followed. There will be serious judgment for sinners. Does this make you feel uncomfortable?

The good news of Christmas is this: God knew that we couldn't save ourselves from our sin. God loves us so much that He sent His Son, prophesied in this passage, to live the perfect life that we could not live and to face the scary judgment in our place. Through Christ Jesus, we can experience hope, healing, light, life, and reunification with a Holy God. Beyond simply making us all feel more comfortable, what does this make you want to do for God?

Prayer:

My suggested prayer is a verse of praise from “Hark the Herald, Angels Sing”, inspired in part by Malachi 4:



Agnolo di Bronzino, Adoration of the Shepherds (1540)

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in his wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"*
- Erin Ching

DECEMBER 18

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah...

Text: Luke 1:5-25

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for



your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."



James Tissot, Zechariah in the Temple, 1890

Reflection:

Proverbs 13:12 says, "*Hope deferred makes the heart sick.*" Zechariah and Elizabeth surely hoped for years for a child, and by the time God sent Gabriel with the news that they would have a son, Elizabeth remembered her reproach among people and Zechariah couldn't believe it would happen. They were not alone in this hopeless heartache of childlessness. Sarah and Abraham waited almost a lifetime for Isaac and laughed when they were told they would have a son. Hannah waited year after year while her husband's other wife had baby after baby until God finally blessed her with Samuel.

Psalm 37 says, "*Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart... Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him.*" Psalm 40:1 says, "*I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry.*" God's ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His times are not our times. He gives us examples like Zechariah and Elizabeth to encourage us to keep praying, hoping, and trusting even when we don't see any answers, the problem is not fixed, & our hearts, like theirs, lean toward

despair & unbelief. It can be hard to say, “I know, His thoughts are higher than mine, His ways are better than mine, and His time is more right than mine.” The heart wants what it wants, & waiting still hurts. Our hearts want to be delighted in a myriad of ways, but God wants us to delight in *Him*. He is our best Lover, our best Father, our best Provider, our best Savior.

When Zechariah was finally able to say, “His name is John,” he was also saying “God has been gracious,” the meaning of the name John. When it seems that “*My tears have been my food day and night*” (Psalm 42:3) remember that “*Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy*” (Psalm 126:5). God hears, and He is gracious.

Response:

Waiting is a pain. Who wants to spend 40 minutes on a phone tree, 2 hours to see a doctor, or 4 hours at the DMV? In a very active lifestyle, time is precious and waiting is a waste. Being impatient, however, reminds me of Verruca (whose name literally means “warts”), the spoiled-rotten girl in “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” who says, “But I want it NOW!” May God deliver me from that attitude!

Patience is a virtue. It is a fruit of the Spirit. Love is kind and *patient*. We are told to “*Be patient to all men*” (Eph. 5:14). Covid 2020 has been a year of waiting for many things--toilet paper, haircuts, delayed shipping, cancelled events, non-Covid medical procedures, weddings, funerals... Missionaries are stuck here or on the field because of border closings and flight restrictions. Zoom meetings are no longer a novelty. We love to complain, but God is giving us a lesson in what our *real* priorities are, in how much we *really* trust Him, and in finding that supernatural patience that allows us to show love to our (sometimes cranky) neighbors. God bless you with an abundance of patience as we wait this out. Wait. Patiently. For Him!

Prayer:

Lord God, help us to focus on the blessings we have and be thankful. Forgive our impatience, especially over trivial matters. May Your sovereignty be our reality as we depend on You and You alone to sustain us in hard times. Send us forth as Your servants to rejoice with them that rejoice and weep with them that weep, bringing strength and comfort to the afflicted in Jesus’ name.

“Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night;
waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.”
In Jesus name, Amen. - Dianne Billharz



DECEMBER 19

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word"...

Text: Luke 1:26-38



In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Reflection:

I don't like surprises. I'm not talking about the little things I encounter daily that interrupt the schedule I planned for the day. I mean things that interrupt my life in ways I can't control. Every day I have a set of self-imposed goals to meet. Sometimes I get a surprise, & the goals that I have turn out not to be those of my own making but those belonging to God. If God interrupts my life, do I interrupt His? Of course not.

In this passage from Luke we see Mary being surprised in a life-altering way. What an understatement! The history of the entire world is about to take a new direction. She gets an unexpected visit from the angel Gabriel. His name means "God is my strength." Gabriel is active throughout the Bible and is sometimes called the Guardian Angel of Israel. If God has a special message, some earthshaking surprise, it makes sense that Gabriel is the messenger.

When Gabriel first confronts Mary, she is startled and confused. He tells her not to be afraid because she has found favor with God. He reveals the reason for his visit and the disruption to her life that is to come. Any plans she may have had for her life, for example her impending marriage to Joseph, her status in her village, and the hopes she



Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato, Mary (1675)

might have dreamed of for a normal family, are abruptly halted. Gabriel has not come to her to negotiate on behalf of God. He authoritatively tells her what is to be. He finishes his speech by declaring *“nothing will be impossible with God.”* Mary responds *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”*

Why would Mary be so accepting of what the angel has to say? I believe it is because the Holy Spirit is involved. It is the Holy Spirit who will cause these strange events to take place in her life. It is a mistake for us to think that it isn't until Pentecost that the Holy Spirit becomes active. We see He is present all throughout the gospels if we look for Him.

God often surprises us in ways that disrupt any plans we may have. Sometimes we rebel which results in sin. Often others see Him at work in our lives while we are blind to His presence. Just as God was active in Mary's life through the Holy Spirit, we should look to see how He is active in ours. When our plans are disrupted perhaps we might consider that God is giving us a delightful surprise. It may not seem that way at first, but consider what an unmarried pregnant girl from two thousand years ago means to your life today. God has His plans and His schedule. God is good and nothing is impossible with Him.

Gabriel's name means “God is my strength.” That is a thought of which all of us should be mindful. When surprises interrupt our lives we can remember Mary's words and say *“I am the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word.”*

Response:

This Christmas will be different for a lot of people. Because of the pandemic our usual plans are disrupted. It seems like an unpleasant surprise for us. However, we remember that God is good and nothing is impossible with Him. The world may be in disarray but we celebrate our Savior who overcomes the world and blesses us with His Holy Spirit to see us through this life and into the next.

Prayer:

Almighty God, we thank You that You have surprises and plans for us. Please bless us with Your Spirit and be our strength in witnessing to the world of Your goodness. With You all things are possible and You are good. In The Savior's name, Amen.

- Chris Rhodes

DECEMBER 20

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?...

Text: Luke 1:39-45



In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Reflection:

From earlier verses in Luke 1 we know that the Angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she would be the mother of Jesus even though she was a virgin. Her baby would be her Son and God would be His Father. Gabriel also told her that her much older relative Elizabeth was six months pregnant, though she was past the age of having children. He told her that with God nothing is impossible. Mary voiced her complete acceptance of this strange plan for her life. The Scriptures say that Mary then left Nazareth and went to visit Elizabeth. When Mary greeted Elizabeth the six-month-old baby in her womb leaped with joy and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth knew Mary was pregnant with the baby who was “her Lord”, and somehow the baby in her womb also knew!

Meditating on this text about Mary and Elizabeth makes me want to know more. I visited the church in Ein Karem near Jerusalem which by tradition was built on the location of the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. We could not go into the church that day but walked the neighborhood around it. Mary traveled approximately 65 miles from Nazareth, a four to seven day walk, to visit Elizabeth. Most believe she was a very young woman, perhaps a teenager. Did her mother or father accompany her on such a long journey?

Why did Gabriel tell Mary about Elizabeth’s pregnancy? Did God want Mary to go to Elizabeth? Is that why Mary felt compelled to take that arduous journey to visit Elizabeth? Did she understand that it was a miracle that Elizabeth was pregnant, and she knew her pregnancy was also miraculous? Did she want to share her joy with

Elizabeth? Did Mary and Elizabeth have a very close relationship before all this? Maybe Elizabeth was a mentor to Mary?

How did Elizabeth know that Mary was the mother of her Lord? Zechariah, despite not being able to speak, made Elizabeth understand that the baby in her womb would be named John and that he had a special destiny to *prepare the way of the Lord*. But was it when Mary walked into the house and she felt this Holy Spirit induced overwhelming joy that she knew that her baby John would prepare the way for Mary's baby Jesus, the Lord of the universe?

Was Elizabeth talking about herself or about Mary or about both of them when she said, *"Blessed is she who has believed that the LORD would fulfill his promises to her!"*?

Response:

I believe these two women, one very young and one very old, are brought together by God to share the joy of being with child. Mary and Elizabeth shared a bond in their complete faith in God. We are meant to share our sorrows and our joys, always with God being at the center of our relationships.



Mary & Elizabeth from The Nativity Story

Both pregnancies were amazing miracles. Elizabeth's was a totally unexpected answer to years of longing and prayer. Mary's was a complete and utter surprise in the most unlikely circumstances. Both women were with child, and these two babies were God's plan from before the beginning of time. I believe that is true still today. No baby is an accident or a mistake. We know that God is sovereign, and He is good. Whatever happens in our lives God has ordained or allowed it.

Why these two women? Their hearts were in tune with God and His purposes for their lives and the lives of their babies. That is what God wants from us and for us. Whatever He puts in our lives we can know that His love is eternal and that He is working in our lives for His eternal purposes.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father - In this time of celebrating the advent of Jesus, Your Son, into our broken and sinful world, help us to remember that You are always compassionate and gracious. You know our hearts and how much we need Jesus. Help us to see Your purposes for our lives and to seek Your presence in our families, friendships, and church fellowships. Enable us to love one another because You are love.

- Kay Blakely

DECEMBER 21

My soul magnifies the Lord...

Text: Luke 1:46-56



And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Reflection:

Mary, after being visited by the angel and receiving the news that she would give birth to the Son of God, journeys to pay a visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also celebrating and anticipating a miraculous birth of her own. Upon their greeting, Mary responds with a beautiful song of praise to the Lord.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant...”

She recognizes God’s magnificence and her position as a humble servant. What God has done and is doing for her is **GREAT**. He is **HOLY**. His actions are everlasting and this event is **THE** event for us **ALL**. This child, inside Mary’s womb, is special. She speaks of what he has done and what was promised to Abraham and his offspring. She was chosen to carry the fulfillment of all the prophecies and bring this child into the world so that he could **SAVE** the **WORLD**. This is a heartfelt outpouring of praise!

Response:

Two women at different stages in life are coming together to celebrate joyous events—welcoming new life into the world and into their families. To me, the unique circumstances by which these babies come into the world are what makes it all the more significant that they are sharing some time together. Births are celebrated, births are considered miracles, and the miracles of these two births in particular are well beyond our earthly comprehension of what a miracle is. The birth of Jesus is why we

are in the Christmas spirit, a time filled with anticipation and excitement. A perfect time to follow Mary's example and magnify the Lord!



*And Mary said: "My
soul glorifies the Lord and
my spirit rejoices in God
my Savior ..."*

LUKE 1:46-47, NIV

Are we singing a song of praise to God this Advent season? We are celebrating the birth of Jesus in 2020—the year of many shadows, but all overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This year has been hard! As of the writing of this devotional, our church family is not worshiping inside the building. I miss that. I miss singing with the choir. I miss seeing smiling faces.

Yet, good news. There is the Living God, one constant and omniscient presence offering a praiseworthy present to beat all presents!

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

This gift is wrapped up in swaddling clothes, a baby whose mother sang a song from her heart.

Can we sing this song of praise every day of our life? On the days when we receive bad news, when we are sick, when we are struggling? I want to sing an outpouring of my praise to the living God who holds me in his hands and helps me on those days when the shadows seem to overtake me. I am assured that the light has won already. "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, You alone are to be praised! You are the giver of life and the creator of all things great and small. How awesome are You and how truly blessed are we. I pray thanks for the freedom to praise You every day and, especially as we are about to celebrate the birth of Your Son this Christmas, I just open my heart out in gratitude for Your presence in my life. Amen!

- Jennifer Oliver

Mary was not chosen because of any human merit, not even for being, as she undoubtedly was, deeply devout, nor even for her humility or any other virtue, but entirely and uniquely because it is God's gracious will to love, to choose, to make great what is lowly, unremarkable, considered to be of little value. Mary the tough, devout, ordinary working man's wife, living in her Old Testament faith and hoping in her Redeemer, becomes the mother of God.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

DECEMBER 22

His name is John...

Text: Luke 1:57-80



Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” ⁶¹ And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

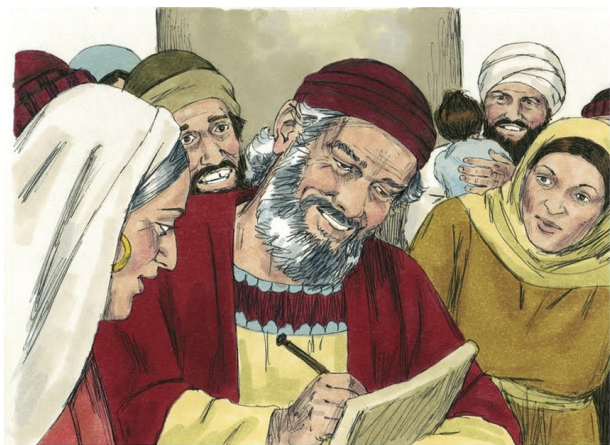
⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us

from on high ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.



Anonymous, The Nativity of John the Baptist



HIS NAME WILL BE JOHN

Reflection:

In this passage I can't help but notice the role of the neighbors and relatives. This story wouldn't be the same if they weren't there. The neighbors and relatives are essentially the audience to Elizabeth and Zachariah's life.

We have all had the privilege to be the audience to family, friends and neighbors. For me usually I just passively watch the lives around me, not in a creepy way, but in a way that

reminds me that I am not experiencing this life alone. We are the audience to the comedy of marriage and family, as well as the tragedy of illness and death. Now on the flip side I know that I have my audience as well. We all do. There will always be friends, relatives and neighbors watching us live our lives.

Now you may ask "Where is the Church in this analysis?" I believe that the Church is not a part of the audience, not a passive observer, but the role of the Church is different. The Church is a fan! There is a big difference between a fan and audience member. A fan cheers when their team does well and mourns when their team does poorly. We are the church and it's our job as the church not to be passive audience members to our friends and family but fans cheering them on!

Elizabeth and Zachariah were simply living their life for all to see, and what their audience saw was God. And God was not just watching either: God was playing a part. The Church celebrates with Elizabeth and Zachariah because their life shines a light on God.

Response:

Is God merely part of the audience or a participant in your life? Is He playing a major role? What are your friends and neighbors seeing as they watch your life? Are you simply watching others in your church or cheering them on?

Prayer:

God, You are not just an audience member in my life but the STAR! Thank You for sending Your Son to die for me. Thank You for having a plan for my life that includes a whole church of fans.

- Ryan Ludwig



DECEMBER 23

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins...

Text: Matthew 1:18-25



Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name ‘Immanuel’” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Reflection:

The first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel is so full of rich detail, it is perhaps comprehensible that one of the most astounding, profound and eternally significant statements in all of scripture is often passed over in the crowded and colorful narrative. But the author helps us out with his first “Behold!” He’s telegraphing, “HEY, pay attention! This is momentous and major! GOD IS WITH US!”

Immanuel Foretold

The name "Immanuel"* occurs only three times in the Bible, but the great truth of its meaning - "GOD WITH US" - saturates the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.

There was once a time when the Lord walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve. But their fellowship was broken when sin entered the world, causing separation and death. Cast out, man suddenly was in dire need of a champion, Someone who would sacrifice everything to restore his lost intimacy with his Creator. The story of mankind



Philippe de Champaigne, The Dream of St. Joseph, 1642

became a yearning for God... a hope that Love would again meet with them face to face.

Through centuries of Old Testament history, this distance was emphasized in God's interactions with men. He spoke from a burning bush, shook the foundations of Sinai and denied Moses a face to face encounter. He manifested as a tower of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night to lead His wandering people. He spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, to a succession of kings through prophets and priests, and to Daniel in dreams and visions.

Can you imagine any of these people -- who longed for the promised Messiah -- finally meeting the Immanuel who broke into the world in an astonishing way one starry night in Bethlehem? Can you imagine their exceedingly great joy? At last! All could now behold the One the Apostle John called the Word. Immanuel who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" had arrived! The glorious one and only Son had appeared as prophesied! (John 1:1,14).

Though He came in an improbable way -- announced by angels, born of a virgin, attended by shepherds, heralded by the host of heaven -- on that singular night in eternity, a tiny baby in a manger was at the same time fully God and fully human. 700 years before this night, God gave the Prophet Isaiah this promise (quoted by Matthew at its fulfillment): *"the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call Him IMMANUEL"* (Isaiah 7:14).

Reflecting on "God With Us" as our hearts sing "O come, O come, Immanuel!", let us consider some further thoughts on what it means that God came AS one of us, to live AMONG us:

Amazement: Remember those men of faith who were once forbidden to look upon him? Pastor Timothy Keller imagines their frustration at our oblivious lack of awe: "Moses would cry out, "Do you realize what this means? This is the very thing I was denied! This means that through Jesus Christ you can meet God. You can know him personally and without terror. He can come into your life. Do you realize what's going on?! Where's your joy? Where's your amazement? This should be the driving force of your life!" (from "The Hidden Christmas")

Assurance: Theologian Warren Wiersbe writes "What a tremendous assurance - "I am with you always!" He is with us through His Spirit, in His Word, by His providential care, and with His divine presence. This is the promise that has encouraged and enabled messengers of Christ down through the years."

Amid: English Bishop J C Ryle writes that Immanuel promises to be "with us daily to pardon and forgive; with us daily to sanctify and strengthen; with us daily to defend and keep; with us daily to lead and to guide; with us in sorrow, and with us in joy; with us in sickness, and with us in health; with us in life, and with us in death; with us in time, and with us in eternity."

Abide: Charles Spurgeon, said in his 1875 sermon “God With Us,” “Wonderfully true is this fact: when you and I come to the closing scene of life we will find that Immanuel, “God with us” has been there. He felt the pangs and throes of death. We will be raised in His likeness, and the first sight our opening eyes will see is the incarnate Lamb of God, God with us. We will see Him as Man and as God, and throughout all eternity. He will maintain the most intimate relationship with us. As long as ages roll, He will be ‘God with us.’ Both His human and divine life will last forever, and so will our life.”

Accessible: In his 1994 sermon “Looking at the Face of Jesus,” Pastor John MacArthur said, “All Christians living in the new covenant time have the veil off.... We all have full access to God’s glory revealed in the face of Jesus Christ... All we need to know about God; all we need to know about His beauty; all we need to know about His character; all we need to know about His love and His loyalty; all we need to know about His mercy, and His grace, and His power, and His care for His own; all we need to know about His ability to supply all we could ever need; all of that is demonstrated in Christ.”

Always: Truly, can anything separate us from our Immanuel? Paul veritably shouted “NO!” in his transcendent hymn of assurance at the end of Romans 8:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verses 35-39).

Response:

Responding to Immanuel

Have you experienced Immanuel — God being with you in a personal, maybe in a “blooming way,” in your life? Is Immanuel more than a name in a Christmas carol? Have you looked into His eyes and seen the love He has for you? Have you accepted His free gifts of forgiveness and restoration? In his devotion on Immanuel (quoted above) Timothy Keller offers his counsel to help us draw closer to the God “who moved heaven and earth to get near us”!

Here are his suggestions:

Communicate with Jesus regularly, candidly and lovingly. That means not simply “saying your prayers” but having a prayer life that leads to real communion with God, a sense of His presence in your heart and life. Consider Psalms 27, 63, 84, 131 to see this kind of prayer.

Nurture a deep acquaintance with Jesus by immersing yourself in His Word - the Bible. "Read it, understand it, and meditate on it. Consider Psalms 1 and 119 to see how to have the Bible become a vital force in your life.

Keller suggests once you have committed to these "individual" means of grace, you consider "more communal means, such as worship and prayer, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the other resources available in the gathered church, the people of God (Hebrews 10: 22- 25)."

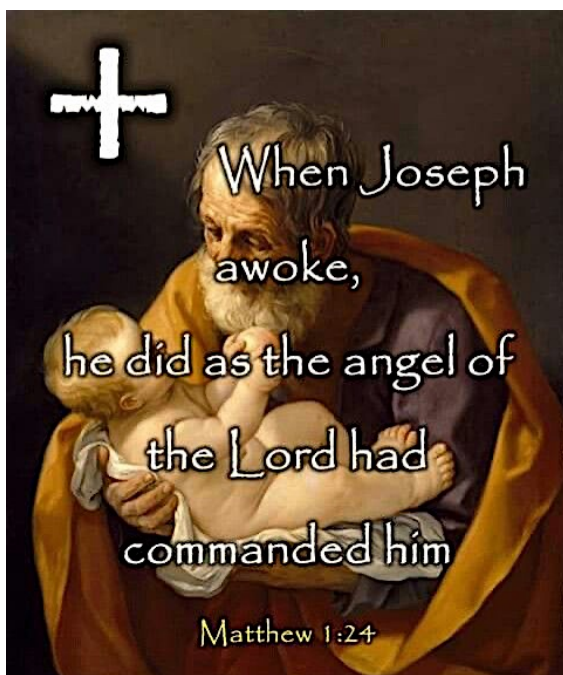
There are times in all our lives when we benefit from extra encouragement, instruction, and reinforcement to grow in Christ. The church that publishes this devotional guide has a deep commitment to see people of all ages mature in the knowledge of God's character, a commitment to His plans and in the peace of His promises revealed in the Bible and embodied in Jesus Christ.

The desire to know and follow God calls us to work together to help each other grow, learn, obey God and serve others in a variety of ways. We invite you to join us in this adventure of drawing closer to Immanuel. So please reach out... you will find a welcoming fellowship waiting to "come alongside" and support you in your faith journey.

Prayer:

Let us consider Charles Spurgeon's "Immanuel Prayer" today:

"Blessed Immanuel, we gladly obey You! In You our darkness ends and from the shadow of death we rise to the Light of life. It is salvation to be obedient to You. May God the Holy Spirit take of the things of Christ and show them unto us, and then we shall all cry- "Go worship at Immanuel's feet! See in His face what wonders meet! Earth is too narrow to express; His worth, His grace, His righteousness." to which we add "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Amen.



O holy child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray;

Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels,

The great glad tidings tell;

Oh come to us, abide with us,

Our Lord Emmanuel! (Phillips Brooks)

* Immanuel with an "I" is a transliteration of the original Hebrew word composed of 'Immanu (with us) and El (God), while Emmanuel with an "E" is a transliteration of the Greek "Emmanouel."

- Patti Hemsley

DECEMBER 24

Glory to God in the highest...

Text: Luke 2:1-20



In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflection:

Have you ever been surprised? Maybe a surprise gathering of friends to celebrate your birthday, a special gift that took your breath away, a visitor at your door whose sudden nearness made you cry, an unexpected baby who joyfully unravels all your plans...

On the night that Jesus was born there were many surprises... The animals expected to share neither their barn nor their feeding trough. The shepherds were surprised, "sore afraid" surprised, at the angel's sudden appearance and announcement of The Birth. Their visit to Bethlehem was not on their shepherding agenda for the day, the

week, the year, their lifetime. Nothing in Mary's fifteen or so years of life experience prepared her for the history-re-making surprise pregnancy that ended that night with the healthiest birth the world has ever seen. This was definitely a night to celebrate, then and now. It was a surprise birthday party like none before or after with unexpected visitors, special gifts to come, a newborn guest of infinite honor, and a shocking location for the greatest gift ever to be delivered. Surprise! God's Son sent to earth, born of a woman, come to live among us and to die for us.



Jacopo Tintoretto, Adoration of the Shepherds, 1580

Of all the songs we have shared over the years in our Covenant Nativity Tableaus, I think my favorite is one called “Mary, Did You Know?” Written by Mark Lowry, it is a musical and poetic exploration of that mysterious image of Mary holding God in her arms as she “*treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*” I am moved every time these words come to my mind. And I too then begin to “treasure up all these things and ponder them” in my heart...

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?

This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you. Mary, did you know?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to the blind man?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would calm a storm with His hand?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?

And when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God? Mary, did you know?

The blind will see, the deaf will hear; the dead will live again! The lame will leap, the dumb will speak the praises of the Lamb! Praise the Lamb!

Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your baby boy was heaven's perfect Lamb?

And the sleeping Child you're holding is the Great I AM! Mary, did you know?...

Response:

1) Think about the surprises you have experienced in your life. Can you see ways that God used these experiences to shape your life & maybe draw you toward Him?

2) What is a favorite Christmas Song that specially speaks to your heart? Take a moment and recite the words to yourself again. What does it tell you about Jesus and about yourself?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I am so grateful for the gift of Christmas. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to share Your life with us. Thank You, Holy Spirit, for that special night 2,000 years ago so full of surprises, a night, a life and a gift worth singing about! You truly are the Giver of surprisingly good gifts. Thank You. Thank You. Amen.

- Denell Hull

IMMANUEL

by Paul Thigpen

*He said a Guest was coming, so we swept the temple bare,
compiled our sacrifice reports and memorized each prayer.*

*But while we tidied up the altar, dusted off the pews,
a sound came from the city streets to smash our stained-glass views:*

*No hymn or mighty chorus but an Infant's startled cry
and the simple, homely comfort of a mother's lullaby.*

Immanuel!

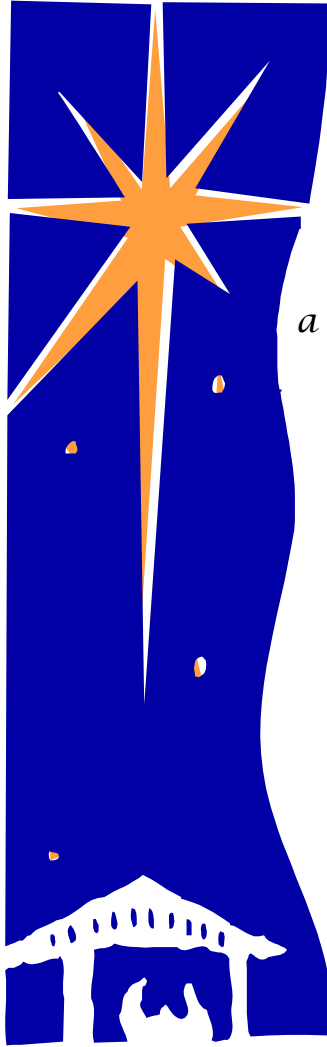
*A priest, we could anticipate; a prophet, we might tolerate;
philosopher, evaluate; a prince, we could applaud.*

*But who had thought to see the day
when Potter climbed inside His clay,
when Monarch in a manger lay, when Heaven walked the sod?*

Immanuel!

*You send us running home again to wash our windows clean,
to sweep our floors and open doors, to break the tired routine.*

*You drive us to the streets and squares to glimpse you passing by.
You beckon us to follow there—and wait for our reply.*



DECEMBER 25

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

Text: John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made



that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

Reflection:

In this grand prologue to his Gospel, John sets the stage for his monumental presentation of the identity and meaning of Jesus by linking His coming to both the story of Creation and the story of Redemption carried out through God’s chosen people, the Jews.

“In the beginning...” The link to Genesis 1 is unmistakable. John tells us that when God spoke all things into existence, Jesus, “the Word,” was with Him and was the agent through whom the world was made. As God spoke all creation into existence, “in the beginning,” now God brings New Creation into existence by speaking His life into the womb of a Palestinian teenager named Mary.

“He came to his own...” As Israel was called and constituted to be God’s agent of rescue to the world, now Jesus will become Israel embodied in the person of its Messiah and fulfill its mission. He will be the agent of full and final salvation.

As the Son of Man, Jesus is the perfect representative for God’s people and for people in general. As God the Son, Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of God’s promise to dwell with His people. He is Immanuel, God with us. And Jesus is both of these things—The Son of Man and God the Son, perfectly human and perfectly God—at one and the same time.

“The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” There is the beyond-us crux of the matter concerning the identity of that Bethlehem baby. The mystery. How can

something or someone be with something or someone else and also actually be that something or someone else? If I am “Me,” then I cannot be “with Me.” If I am “with You,” then I cannot also be “You.” And then we meet the Eternal Father and His Eternal Son and Their Eternal Spirit, and we realize that we have ventured far beyond the city limits of that mighty metropolis called “Humanwisdomville.” And still we are well within the boundaries of the state called “Truth.”

This Christmas, in a year of so many challenges and such deep-seated division between people, and in light of John’s inspired revelation of Jesus, I think back to another inspired revelation, that of Isaiah and what he said about the King who was to come, the Light who would dawn on a dark and lost world, the One who would bring a Kingdom of irrepressible righteousness and indisputable justice (see December 9). Certainly Isaiah did not have in mind what John, 750 years later, knew to be true—a Triune God, One who could be “One” (“I AM”) and “Three” (“I am with”) simultaneously. And yet we see, in the light of John’s further insights, that God was beginning to unveil the mystery even back in Isaiah’s time...

Who would this Coming King be?... *A Child to be born... A Son to be given... the Prince of Peace.... The Wonderful Counselor... the Mighty God... the Everlasting Father...* Was this simply Hebrew hyperbole meaning this King would be very great indeed? Maybe that is the way Isaiah and his contemporaries would understand it, but God seems to have meant more. Much more. This King truly would be not only a real, special *Child* but also the *Everlasting Father & Mighty God!* How could this be? *“The Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

Response:

As part of our gift to you and yours through this devotional booklet, I am including a song I have written for you to enjoy at Christmas time. It is an expression of Isaiah’s words, and it is called “Wonderful.” I invite you to read it, play it, hum it. (Whatever you can do) and to think about how Jesus Christ is our, is your, *Wonderful Counselor* (knowing and telling nothing but the truth), *Mighty God* (possessing all necessary power for achieving His good purposes), *Everlasting Father* (caring deeply and eternally for His people) and *Prince of Peace* (bringing a righteous rule). I believe this exercise will be particularly beneficial in a year like 2020.

Prayer:

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for Christmas! Thank You for coming to dwell among us. Thank You for not only giving us the truth but also giving us Your life. Thank You for dying so we would be able to live. Thank You for rising from death to reveal Yourself as the One whom death could not hold and Your followers as those given “the right to become children of God” and so to share Your life forever. Amen. - Jay Hull

Wonderful

(Isaiah 9:2, 6-7)

Jay Hull

$\text{♩} = 90$

Voice

The peo - ple walk - ing in the
For to us a child is born, a son is
Of his go - vern - ment and peace there will be no

Piano

4

dark - ness have seen a great light; those
gi - ven, To us a son is giv'n, and
end He will reign on Da - vid's throne and -

Pno.

7

li - ving in the land, the land of the
the go - vern - ment - - will be on his
o - ver his king - dom, e - sta - bli - shing, up -

Pno.

for the people of CPC... Advent 2005

10

sha - dow, the sha - dow of death, on
 shoul - ders, to us a child is born, and
 hol - ding jus - tice and righ - teous - ness from

Pno.

13 Repeat 1st time only

them a light has dawned. Won - derful
 his name will be called...
 that time on, for - e - ver.

Pno.

Reo. *

16

Coun - se - lor

Pno.

Reo. - 2 - * Reo.

19

Migh - ty God, The

Pno.

19

* Ped *

22

E - ver - las - ting Fa - ther, Won - derful

Pno.

22

Ped

25

Coun - se-lor, Migh - ty God,

Pno.

25

* Ped *

28

The E - ver - las - ting

28

Pno.

31

Prince of Peace, Prince of Peace.

31

Pno.

34

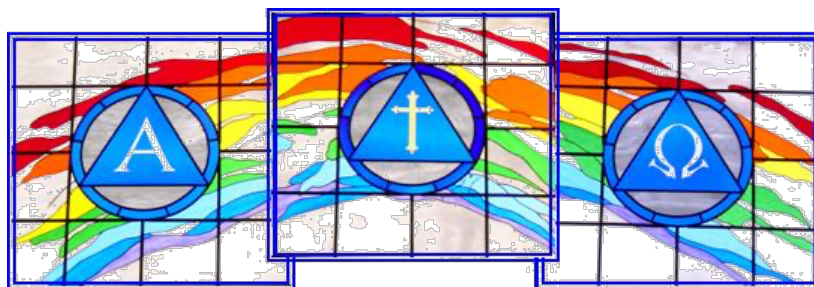
D.C. al Fine

Won - der - ful!

34

D.C. al Fine

Pno.



Covenant Presbyterian Church
6695 Mae Anne Avenue
Reno, NV 89523
Phone: 775-746-8118
Fax: 775-746-8195
www.covenant-reno.org