

ADVENT 2024

A CALENDAR OF DEVOTIONS



TO THE MEMBERS & FRIENDS OF COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
FROM YOUR PASTOR, ELDERS & STAFF

A Calendar of Devotions

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Dear Friends:

Everybody recognizes that we have problems that need overcoming—hunger, ignorance, disease, pollution, oppression, greed, crime... So, people are always trying to save the world. And we often do this by trying to get big and apply various kinds of force to change the way people think, speak and behave. We make big schools, big TV networks, big ad campaigns, big political movements, big armies to help people think right—like we think—and conform to the ways we know are best. We don't ask often enough if our ideas and ways are truly right or best or how things are going to look when we prevail. We're too busy saving the world.

When God Almighty intervened in history to save the world, He got small. No army. No media empire. No University of God. No top-down instruction, coercion or manipulation to make the world a better place (and we may rightly presume that God actually knows what is truly right and best). Instead there was a Baby. This was such a strange way to save the world.

Welcome to the 2024 edition of Covenant's Calendar of Devotions for Advent. In these daily Scripture readings and reflections written by our staff, elders and other gifted and inspired members of our church family, we are going to explore once again God's strange and absolutely effective way of saving the world. As you read with us through this Christmas Season about the lengthy divine preparation, the amazing real-life implementation and the world-changing and person-changing reality of God's coming to earth to rescue and restore, we hope you are inspired and moved toward a deeper and more vital relationship with the God who, out of love for His people, wrapped Himself in human flesh to live, die and rise to save.

God knows what we truly need to overcome—sin and death. So, Jesus arrived in Bethlehem to overcome for us, to show us what real health, real wholeness and real love look like and to move us from death to life, one at a time, through faith in Him. Christmas is a great time for exercising this gift of faith by recognizing and receiving, remembering and rejoicing in, the gift that is Jesus, God the Son, the Life, the Truth, and the Strange Way by which the world was saved.

May the discipline of daily reading and reflecting on the grand story of how our God accomplished His good will to redeem His people from sin and death—by strangely getting small—prove to be a great blessing to you this Christmas.

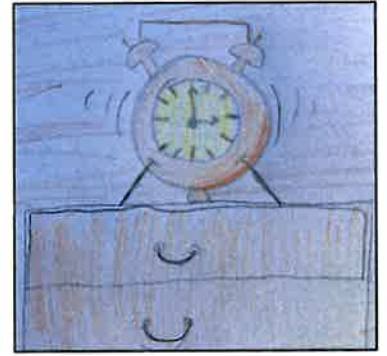


Pastor Jay Hull for Covenant Presbyterian Church, Advent 2024

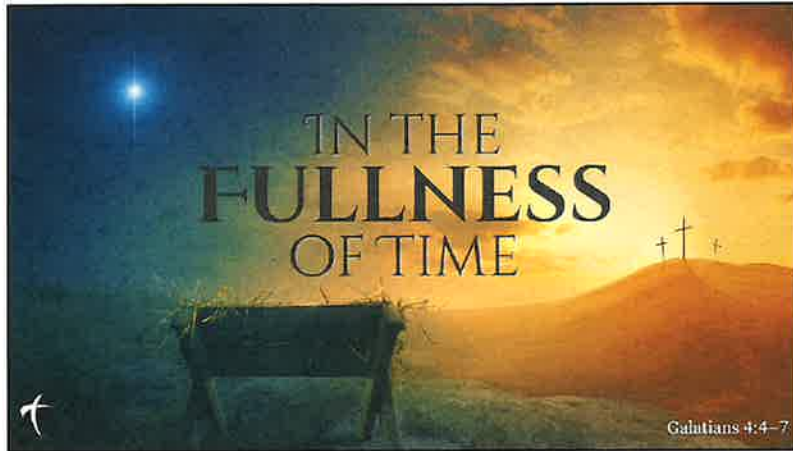
DECEMBER 1

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:

As a result of the fall, humankind separated itself spiritually from The Father. We were like orphans in need of adoption. Verse 1 tells us that “a child, is no different from a slave.” Similarly, humanity was a slave, a slave to sin. Fortunately, our Father did not give up on us. He placed upon us “managers and guardians” (Gal. 4:2) to help guide us in the right direction. This was the role of the Law that God gave to Moses for his people to follow. However, the Law would never be enough to correct our nature. As slaves to sin, we continuously did as sin demanded. We were in need of redemption.

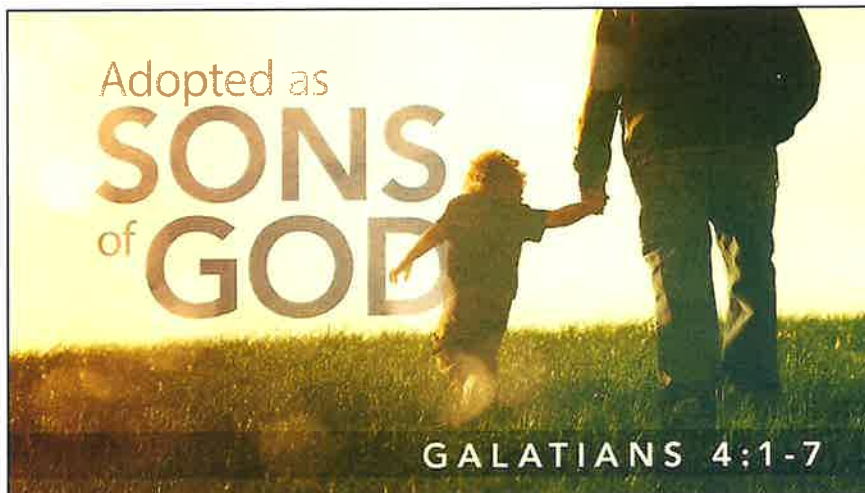
To the ancient Hebrews, the word *kapar*, a verb translated as *to redeem*, had a specific meaning. To redeem someone would mean to pay the price for a life that was forfeit. Whether the offender were to be facing slavery or death, the redeemer would pay a price for the offender’s freedom, releasing them. In the case of humanity’s slavery to sin, which could only result in death, God would send his Son. In verses 4 and 5, Paul says “God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4-5). Only He could fulfill the law, and thus, only He could redeem us. This is the significance of Christmas morning. It marked the arrival of the Redeemer, sent by the Father to free humanity from its slavery to sin.

In freeing us from our sin, God our Father made us His adopted children. Paul says, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal.

4:6). No longer do we answer to or live under the “managers and guardians” but answer directly to the Father. No longer are we slaves, but sons. Paul took this even further saying, “and if a son, then an heir through God” (Gal. 4:7). In the ancient world, the eldest son was the heir and it was his duty to distribute the inheritance to the other siblings accordingly. This is the role of Christ Jesus; He is the firstborn of all creation and the image into which we are to be transformed.

Response:

I was adopted when I was 12 years old. I did nothing to earn or merit this adoption. It was my parents who did all the work. They are the ones who filed all the paperwork. They are the ones who found me in the foster



homes and pulled me out. And they are the ones who paid all the court fees. They did it out of love, and, as a result, my whole life was changed. No longer was I a lost foster kid belonging to no one other than the state of Nevada. I was a Schlatter. I was loved, and when I cried out “Mom! Dad!” someone answered. It was amazing, but I have to tell you that it was quite the change for me. I had to learn what it meant to be a Schlatter.

I tell you this because this is the reality we face as Christians. While our faith in Christ seals our place as the adopted children of God, we are not responsible for our redemption. We didn’t work harder, nor did we put in the hours. We didn’t earn it, nor do we deserve it. Our place as the children of God is simply a manifestation of the grace and love of the Father. Yet, here we stand, saved and wearing a new title, “Christian.” And just like I had to learn what it meant to be a Schlatter, we have to learn what it means to be a Christian. Just as I learned from my parents, we learn from our Father. Fortunately, He gave us a model on Christmas day over 2000 years ago. Jesus showed us perfectly what it looked like to be the obedient Son of the Father. With the help of His Spirit, we can follow in His footsteps, not to glorify us, but to glorify The Father.

Prayer:

Gracious Father! Thank You for your presence in our lives. Thank You for sending Your Son to rescue us from our slavery to sin. Thank You for adopting us into Your household, giving us the privilege of calling ourselves Your children and calling You Father. Lord, we ask that You work in our hearts that we may follow the example of Your Son, that our actions may be pleasing in Your sight. In Jesus name, Amen.

- Chris Schlatter

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:

This seems like an odd reading for Christmas; Matthew is telling us about Jesus’ future second coming and it appears near the end of Matthew’s gospel, not at the beginning as part of the birth narrative.

We call December the Christmas season but properly it is the Advent season. It is not just about the birth of Christ. Advent has three purposes. The first is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. The second is the coming of Christ into the heart of the believer. Last and certainly not least is looking forward to the Second Coming. Among the traditional ways to observe Advent is the practice of praying through a devotional guide such as this.

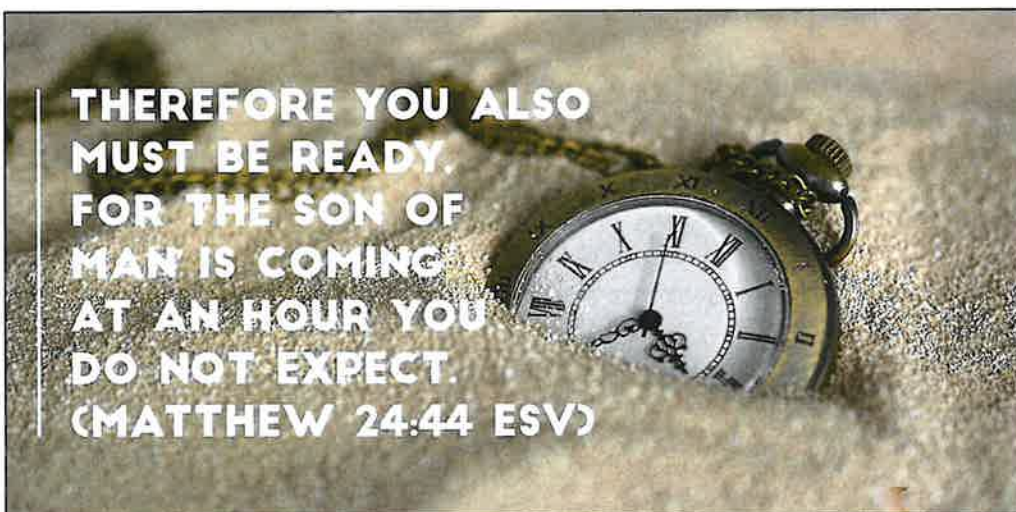
Jesus' birth was not a big deal as seen by the world when it occurred. It got very little recognition with a few exceptions such as the Magi, shepherds, King Herod, and Anna the prophetess. As an adult, Jesus preached and performed miracles. In this way He revealed His true identity and invited people into His eternal Kingdom. At the end of His life on earth He left His followers with the expectation of His return. In these verses in Matthew Jesus is telling His followers about His second coming.

Jesus' first coming was very modest and humble. He gained prominence in His adult ministry which resulted in His rejection and crucifixion. We see in this chapter of Matthew that when He returns everyone will know. But as we wait expectantly we are warned that there will be false claims concerning His return. There will be people claiming to be the Messiah and many events that will be interpreted as pointing to His long-awaited return. We are not to be fooled lest our hearts be taken in a direction away from His glory.

As we await the glorious return of Jesus, it is good for us to celebrate Christmas and all the holy things associated with the commemoration. We should be inspired to renew our faith and to be salt and light telling people the real story and the truth of what to expect concerning His return.

Response:

Several years ago a friend and I drove around Reno one evening looking at Christmas lights. Afterwards we went out for dessert and discussed what we had seen and their meaning. We talked about Santa, Mickey Mouse, sleigh rides, and many other pleasant topics. Then I said "Let me tell you what this is really about." I took a



chance and was amazed at the result. This Advent Season take the time with someone to move their secular celebration into the truth of their new Advent celebration.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we are grateful for the life we have and the life that is to come through You and You alone. Help our love for You to shine forth so that others may glorify You and enjoy all the blessings that You so generously give us, not only in this life but in the life that is yet to come.

To your glory, Amen.

- Chris Rhodes

DECEMBER 3

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

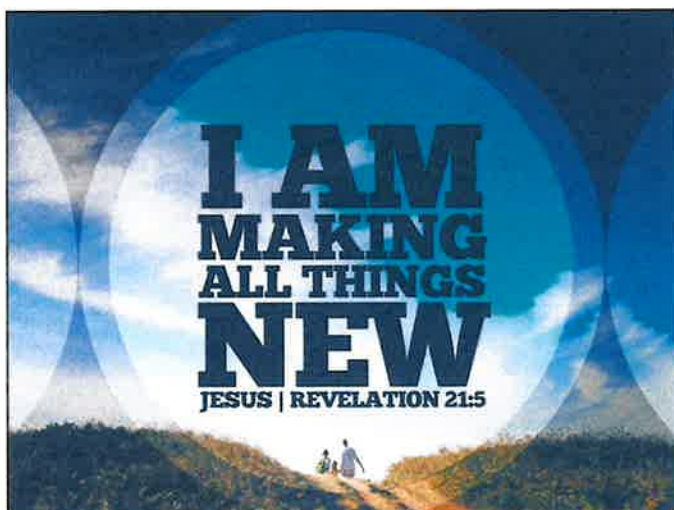
Text: Revelation 21:1-7



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. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And 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. ⁴He 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.”

⁵And 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.”

⁶And 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. ⁷The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”



Reflection:

All things new and perfect. Imagine an existence without sin, where God Almighty has wiped away every tear. In our present state, it is difficult. I wanted to paint a picture

for us... the reality of what God’s kingdom might be like... No more political ads, no arguments with your spouse, no cares about your children’s future, no paying bills, no chores, no disease, no sad news, no worries about tomorrow. This of course is a picture of Heaven and is our future once we believe in the Good News and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Do you remember the first time you placed your trust in Jesus, the first time you named Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Did you not experience life in a whole new way, was not everything made new? This reality of Jesus’s kingdom on earth is available here and now. We may not be able to escape all the worries of this life but having the peace you experience with being in relationship with Jesus Christ brings the present reality of His assurances.

Response:

As we look forward to celebrating Christmas and the joy of the season, remember what God's promises are. The current world and our own personal lives are chaotic and in disarray, but I believe God's message here is to give us a glimpse of the kingdom to come, so that we will be steadfast and courageous to go forward and spread his love to the people He puts in our path.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You for not leaving us to wonder about our future. Bless all the Christians in the world and give them strength to conduct the work You have given. Make all things new and give all Your chosen people encouragement today to be loving toward the people around them even when it is difficult. Bless our families, our church, our community, nation, and the world. Amen.

- Patrick McNeely

*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.

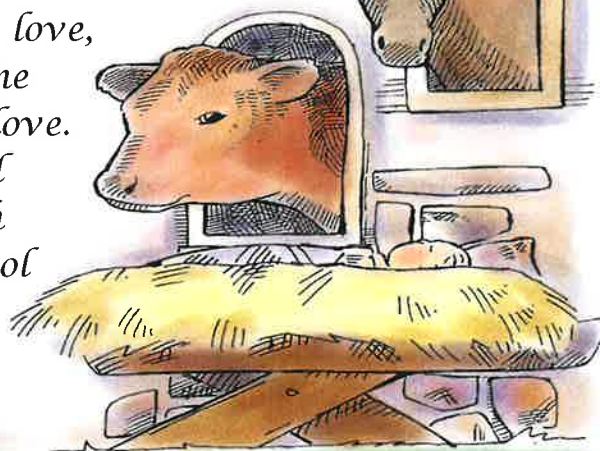
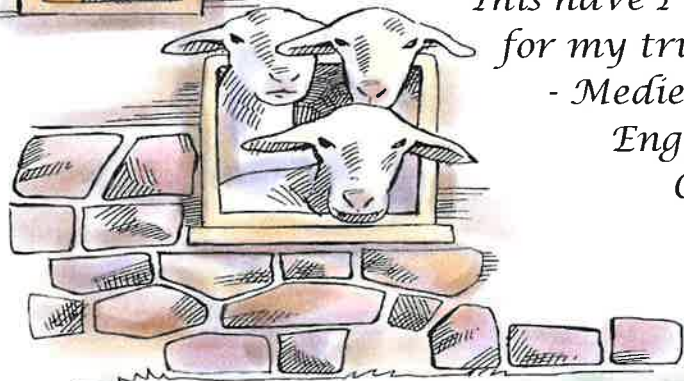
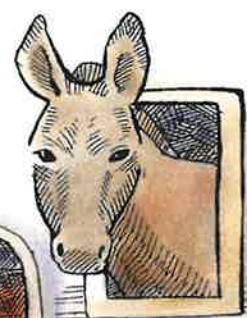
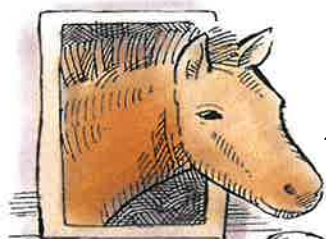
*Thus was I knit to man's nature,
to call my true love to my dance.*

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

*In a manger laid and wrapped I was
So very poor. This was my chance.
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass
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 4

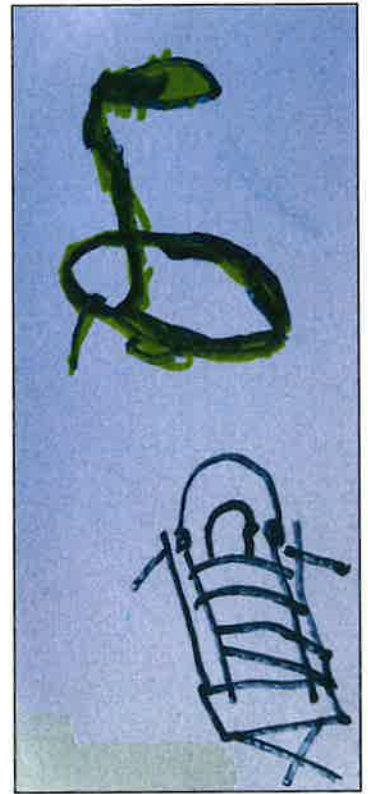
I will put enmity between you & the woman... he shall bruise your head, & you shall bruise his heel...

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 & her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."



Reflection:

The Big News this year here in America was that we held another national election. The Good News, every year and everywhere, is that God knows us, God loves us and Jesus was born to save.

One competitor in our recent presidential contest famously proclaimed, "Fight, fight, fight!" From the other contender we heard, finally, "I will never give up the fight." Everyone seems to understand that we are in a war, a Great War. Our politicians and their teams, though, don't seem to understand or appreciate what this Great War is really all about. They don't seem to know who the real enemy is. So, they don't seem to fight very productively. They end up winning the wrong battles. In the broad scheme of things and in light of our real foes, their fighting tends to be quite ineffective, maybe even counterproductive. The Good News, though, is that our God does know who our real enemies are, He understands what the Great War is all about, and He has fought for us and won.

Genesis 3, the sad epilogue to the true story of God's Creation, helps us to see that there is a War and that it has been going on for a very long time. We also see here the earliest foreshadowing of a coming champion who will be bitten hard by the forces of darkness but then succeed in crushing His evil adversaries.

I asked my friend Gavin Doyle to share his gifts with us and paint a picture of this heaven-vs.-earth conflict suggested in the first book of our Bible and depicted more



graphically in the Bible's last book. In Revelation 12 (verse 4) we read of a great red dragon who *"stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it."* This is a dramatic picture of Mary and Baby Jesus, and we recall that the monstrous attempt by worldly power, in the person of fearsome and fearful king Herod, to kill Him is part of our true Christmas story. In Gavin's depiction, "The Strange War," we see the serpent, the same one that Adam and Eve encountered and were deceived by, slithering around the manger, beneath the notice of mother Mary and father Joseph. The War is on. Jesus has arrived to fight in His strange way. And He will win for us and to His eternal glory. Baby Jesus will escape the clutches of evil. He will grow into the perfect Son of Man. Eventually He will give Himself back into those clutches and be crucified.

So here in Genesis 3, throughout God's Word, and dramatically in Revelation 12, the War is revealed and the battle rages... The real enemy is identified: Satan, anti-God

and self-destructive behavior we call sin, resulting death... God is redeeming... Jesus is coming and arrives... Satan is accusing and striking... Roman and religious rulers will “fight, fight, fight” on the wrong side of things... The Son of God will be defeated, tortured, crucified, dead and buried... And this will turn



"...and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne..."

Revelation 12:4-5



out to be the final fulfillment of God’s plan of redemption. This will prove to be the master stroke that leads to Jesus’ Resurrection and brings Him ultimate victory... Satan crushed... The Great War is won... Our world just needs to come to terms with this accomplishment that is now not just a strong hope but a permanent reality...

And we who are chosen and choosing to serve the Living God and His life-giving purposes, must keep growing not only in our trust in our Savior’s victory already accomplished but also in our desire and skill in following Him in His *Way* of victory as beautifully expressed by Michael F. Bird and N.T. Wright in The New Testament in Its World (p.258):

Jesus had declared that the way to the kingdom was the way of peace, the way of love, the way of the cross. Fighting the battle with the enemy’s weapons meant that one had already lost it in principle and would soon lose it, and lose terribly, in practice. Jesus determined that it was his task and role, his vocation as Israel’s representative, to ‘lose’ the battle on Israel’s behalf. This would be the means of Israel’s becoming the light, not just of the nation but of the whole world. He would thereby do for Israel what Israel could not do for itself. He would fulfill Israel’s vocation that it should be the servant-people, the light of the world.

So, we do things like make Advent Devotional Booklets simply to share the story of Jesus, to help us all see Him and see that He has won, and to encourage us all to follow Him and His winning Way of Love, of giving ourselves away, of sacrificing for the sake of others. We do this not because Jesus needs our help to win (He has already taken care of that!), but because this is the right way, the best way, the blest way, to live... And this is the way to help others see the true nature of the Great War we are in, the high call to the effective strategy of radical love like Jesus, and the eternal victory that is already ours as we “never give up the fight” for His sake and to His glory.

Response:

Look again at “The Strange War” by Gavin M. Doyle (previous page), and think about both the conflicts that threaten our world and tear at our lives and the fact that

God came to us in Jesus to share our sorrows and to secure our ultimate victory. How does the entry of that miracle child into our world and into our War change your perspective on things? How does the strange way that Baby was able to prevail against the strong and ancient serpent inform us concerning the way we can best live and make a positive and lasting impact for others? What is one step you will take during this Christmas Season to “fight, fight, fight” with God, His way, and for His good purposes?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You that You were willing to have your “heel bruised” for us that You might “crush the head” of our real enemy once and for all. Help us to know and to share the Good News of Your life, love, truth, death and resurrection and the world-changing reality of the victory You have achieved in the Great War of this and every age. Make our Christmas festivities this year a celebration of our freedom, our value, our security and our life in You. - Jay Hull



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.” ²He 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.” ³So 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. ⁴On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵Then 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.” ⁶And 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. ⁷And 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 heaven¹⁶ 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.



Rembrandt van Rijn – The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1635

Reflection: I think we can be pretty certain that if God said to you or me, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, -(fill in the blank)-and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you,” our anxiety and confusion would be huge.

Would our response be similar to that of Abraham?

What is missing from this narrative is any recorded responses or emotions Abraham experienced. Even if Abraham thought it to be a sort of test, certainly he might find that rather contrary to the Lord’s normal commands. Remember a few chapters earlier when God revealed to Abraham what was going to happen to Sodom and Gomorrah? Abraham was very vocal as he cautiously asked if the Lord would spare the place for the sake of a number of righteous people.

It would seem that a command to sacrifice his son would certainly cause Abraham to say something.

The other thing that we can't know is the amount of time in between Sodom and Gomorrah and the command to go sacrifice his son. Isaac was born after Sodom and Gomorrah and now a young man so at least 18 years or so (my best guess) must have gone by and who really knows how much time before that. During that time, Abraham's relationship and knowledge of God had probably grown immensely as Abraham was so dependent on God. Maybe he had matured in such a fashion that he really did trust God to the point of near-perfect obedience.

It was physically impossible on their own for Sarah and Abraham to conceive their son, and the promise of Isaac was delivered supernaturally to Abraham. Remember that Sarah got in trouble for laughing about the statement that she would bear a child.

It says in Hebrews 11:19 that "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death."

The Bible says that Abraham reasoned with himself, but I don't suspect he got there very easily. It was probably many a long sleepless night.

Something else strikes me in regard to Abraham's obedience. Abraham was very familiar with God's voice. He had history with God, and like many of the old saints, he didn't have to know how God would provide, *but simply that He would provide*. If God said it, He would do it.

Response: The life of a Christian is a supernatural life. It's a life that cannot be explained by any worldly wisdom. Advent is our time to reflect; to reflect on the promises, the character and the nature of God. He had promised the hope of the Messiah and He came. He came not as many thought He would come, but in a way that is higher than our ways. Supernatural ways. He sent His one and only Son as our substitute and sent Him not as a man but as a baby, vulnerable and helpless, depending on God's provisions. We have the Word of God and the Holy Spirit to help us understand what is written and we have the Holy Spirit so that we can experience God Himself. Let the Holy Spirit, God Himself strengthen the truth of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection in our hearts. Let Him help us to prepare.

Prayer: Lord God, help me to make room in my cluttered heart for more of You. Remind me of the things I have forgotten or that I failed to write down. Make my thoughts a memorial to Your faithfulness so that in the end, I too can stand on the promise that You will provide. Bless this season of Advent!

- Cindy Duncan



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

¹⁰The 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.

¹¹Binding 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. ¹²His 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: If you had to pick two words to summarize these three verses in Genesis 49, what would they be?

“Comfort” & “reassurance” would be mine. These few verses offer comfort and reassurance that God is in charge. In its



Zachary Rowe - Magi & Shepherds, 2024

simplest analysis, isn't that what God has always promised (and provided!)?

I AM in charge... and some day “the One whom all nations will honor” will (did!) arrive on the scene on that first Christmas day!

God is in charge of donkeys. God is even in charge of the words which come out of the mouths of false prophets:

“I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” - Numbers 24:17

...and sometimes out of the mouth of a bystander: “Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews?” - Matthew 2:2

...but most often from one of His own: “In love a throne will be established, in faithfulness a man will sit on it.” - Isaiah 16:5

Response: Unless you have succumbed to the commercialization of Christmas (who hasn't!?) and let “to dos” and “have tos” and “this is the way I always do it,” control your Advent Season, is there a better word for this time of year than JOY!?! My wife Bev showed me a short video the other day of a litter of Dalmatian



puppies in a box all climbing on top of each other. Because of their markings, their movement, and the confined space it was difficult to understand what you were even looking at! But once the word “puppies” was interjected, a big smile came across my face and for some reason, the thought occurred to me - “This is what JOY! looks like!” Today’s Scriptures provide some Biblical context for JOY. Although they don’t come right out and say it, the Promise is there and if we will just wait for it - JOY will be the end result! In this first week of Advent, I hope you still have time to place the JOY “filter” over your thoughts and actions during the next few weeks.

Prayer: Dear God our Father, Jesus our Lord and Savior, Holy Spirit our comforter THANK YOU for giving us this place that we might know, experience, and love You. May we share the promises You have given us with everyone we meet over these next



few weeks, even if it’s just a “Merry Christmas!” and a smile. May the reassurance You have spoken of in Your Word be alive in us. And in the final analysis, may we know that “Well done, good and faithful servant” is not about what I’ve done, but about who I am and Whose I am.

In Your all-gracious, perfect, and loving Name.... Amen. - Dan Carne

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— ¹⁶just 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:

Prayer for understanding: Father, as I consider your Word, please give me understanding of the way You would have this apply to my life today and in the future. Please renew and deepen its application to my life day after day. Amen.

The Bringer of the Covenant will be a Man who experienced our nature.

The Context of our Passage - In Exodus 19 the Children of Israel have just come out of Egypt and camped at the base of Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai). God calls Moses up the mountain and tells Moses that HE will make (actually, renew) a covenant (a promissory pact) with Israel, that they will be a nation through whom God will save His People. God speaks to Moses from a dense cloud and with a loud voice so that all can hear. God tells Moses to have the people purify themselves in preparation to receiving the covenant. And God tells Moses that Israel’s part of the pact is that they are to keep God’s Law. Having first put forth the promise, God will then proceed, in Exodus 20 through 32, to promulgate (lay down) the Law to Moses.

When God calls Moses up the mountain to receive the law, the mountain is covered by roiling smoke and trembling violently. As God gave the summary of the Law (the Ten Commandments) there was thunder and lightning, and very great trumpet blasts. The people were filled with fear, so they asked Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. Moses said, “Do not be afraid, God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

In our passage from Duet.18:16-18, God says: ¹⁶For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.” ¹⁷The Lord said to me: “What they say is good. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet (a

deliverer/mediator of the Covenant) like you (like Moses) from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.”

God is promising that the Bringer of the Covenant (both the promise and the law portions) will be gentle and able to speak to us as a fellow human, with understanding, compassion, and love. And we know that Jesus was greater than Moses because he paid for our transgressions of the Covenant. Jesus lived the life we should be living but fail to. And Jesus died the punishing death that we deserve, but to which we are no longer sentenced.

This is the Hope of Christmas.

Glory to the Name of Jesus.

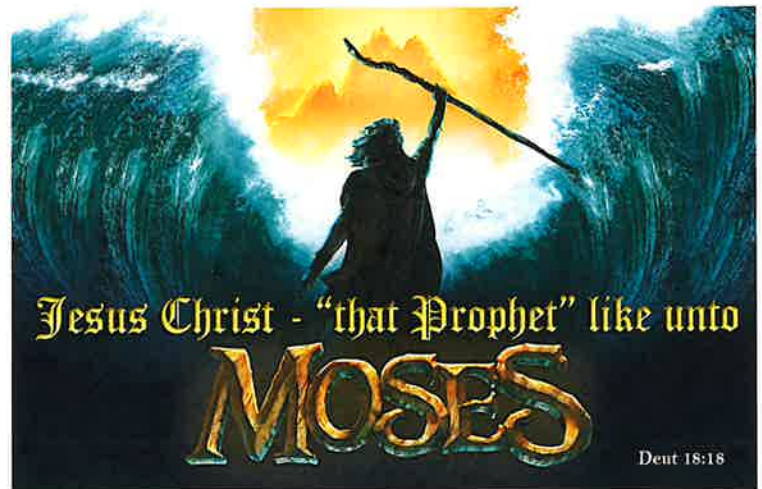
Response:

Recite the prayer below and then use it to prompt your own personal prayer of repentance and thanksgiving.

Prayer:

Father God and Christ our Savior, YOU made us for Yourself. You know our nature, You know that we fail. You are displaying righteousness requirements and endless forgiving mercy in Your sacrifice for us. We thank You for Your forgiveness and for the gift of Faith to follow You in all of our actions. In Jesus Name, Amen.

- Tim Ball



Are these sayings we banter about concerning Christmas and the Christ Child mere figures of speech, or beautiful pious legends? It is not a figure of speech. It is what we have said: that it is God, the Lord and Creator of all things, who becomes so small here, comes to us in a little corner of the world, unremarkable and hidden away, and wants to meet us and be among us as a helpless, defenseless child—not as a game or to charm us, because we find this so touching, but to show us where and who God really is.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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



⁸Now, 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.

Reflection:

King David’s desire to honor Almighty God led to one of the most significant covenant promises in the Old Testament, one that established the Davidic dynasty and the coming of the Messiah, the Savior. This One would be a Servant and a King like David and would one day sit on His throne forever.

It was a rare time of peace in David’s kingdom. Almost as soon as the youth left the flocks of his father Jesse’s fields, he was thrown into a life marked by conflict and warfare. But David, now a great king who lived in a fine palace in Jerusalem, longed to demonstrate his love for the Lord by building a distinguished House for Him.

Generations before David’s plans began to form, God had commanded His people to build for Him a portable “home”, a tabernacle that housed the Ark of the Covenant. It would accompany them after they left Egypt and moved into the Promised Land of Israel. But now David wants his God to have a “proper” dwelling.

So one day David called for Nathan, his pastor and prophet, and told him he wanted to build for the Lord a lasting, magnificent home. Nathan eagerly agreed with his king's plan - until God spoke and the "Davidic Covenant" was born.

In His message to David in today's passage, there are two main points: God needs no house to dwell in for He has set His Presence in the midst of His people, the people HE chose and is shaping for Himself. The second is the promise that the seed and throne of David shall endure forever.

While David was visualizing an impressive building, God told him of the "house" He would build through David's lineage. He reminded David of His steadfast presence and of all He had accomplished in his own life and in the lives of His people. One day there would be a temple -- but David would not build God's house.

Verses 12-14 contain promises that would be literally fulfilled by David's son Solomon. But then there is mention of "a Son," a foreshadowing of One to come, a Messiah, the only Son of God who would be of David's dynasty - yet fully God.

In this passage we learn five things disclosed about Jesus, this Coming King:

- **Jesus is King.** He will be exalted above all, the ultimate Judge and the One before whom all will bow. He will sit on the throne with full authority over all creation. (See Philippians 2:9-11 and Matthew 25:31)
- **Jesus is the Son of God.** The promise that "he shall be to me a son" finds its fulfillment in the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, the 2nd person of the Trinity.
- **Jesus carried our sin.** Despite vs. 14 being somewhat obscure, multiple Old Testament writers alluded to a Suffering Servant who would take the punishment for his people (see Isaiah 53:5). Even Jesus' disciples expected a conquering king rather than an atoning savior who was flogged by men before He was crucified. 2nd Corinthians 5:21 says Jesus *became* sin for us, even though He had never sinned. Hebrews 9 and 10 detail how Jesus secured forgiveness for us by pouring out His own blood to pay for our sins.
- **Jesus is building a house for God.** Solomon did build for God a physical house, but Jesus is building for God a spiritual house. 1st Peter 2:5 tells us that believers are living stones being built into a spiritual house to serve as a holy priesthood before the Lord. (See also Ephesians 2:22.)
- **Jesus shall reign forever.** Even the greatest of human kings die. But Jesus Christ conquered death. God promised He would occupy His throne forever (v. 13).

Yes, Jesus - variously called in Scripture Son of David, Son of Man and Son of God - was the complete fulfillment of all God's promises and all His covenants. At the chronicling of His birth, His human ancestry was traced back to David by Gospel writers Luke and Matthew. But He was more, SO much more! Within Him dwelt the very essence of God. His attributes could fill volumes: He is Light, Love, Just, Faithful

and True, “Holy and Righteous altogether” (Psalm 145:17). The full revelation of His Kingdom may remain in the future, but we can be altogether assured it is coming. Just

as God fulfilled his promises to David, he will fulfill His promises to us.

2 Samuel 7:12-13 KJV

And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom.

He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.



Response:

Open your Bible to 2 Samuel 7 and go “further in” by reading vs 18-29. Consider how David responds to the words and promises of his Lord. Far from being chastened after God rejected his plan to build for Him a permanent “house,” David responds by hurrying to kneel before the ark. There, he poured out his heart to his Lord in deep worship.

In this “prose psalm”, we hear echoes of his humble words in Psalm 8:4 as he speaks to God with wonder and reverence. “What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?”

We also see David’s joy as he extols God’s greatness and His commitment to His people. But even David, with limited understanding of God’s sweeping plan for mankind through the advent of Jesus, could not have realized all He would do in the coming eons. Did he have any inkling that one day a Man from his own lineage would walk the earth performing miracles and proclaiming God’s Kingdom was at hand? (See Luke 4:17-21) Nonetheless, through the Spirit, David proclaimed what he DID know,

“LORD Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant... Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your covenant is trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant. Now be pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever in your sight; for you, Sovereign LORD, have spoken, and with your blessing the house of your servant will be blessed forever.” (2 Samuel 7:27-29)

Prayer:

Lord God, Trustworthy and True, how often we have “good ideas”! Help us submit them and all our thoughts and plans to You and seek the designs and destinies YOU have for us. Help us to be Your humble servants as we are filled with and led by the Holy Spirit. Call us to kneel before Your throne with reverence and joy. And give us voice to extol Your virtues among all who do not yet know You. Yes, help us to speak boldly and to act in Your will. And may we always look with anticipation to an eternity dwelling with You in Your perfect, holy House.

- Patti Hemsley

[Thanks to Rylie Fine, Crosswalk.com Apr 2021, “How Does 2 Sam 7 Point to Jesus?” John MacArthur, “2 Samuel: David’s Heart Revealed” & K. Mathison, Ligonier, “2 Samuel”]

DECEMBER 9

And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor...

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.

³You 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.

⁴For 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. ⁵For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult & every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶For 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.

⁷Of 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: Verse two speaks of the grim reality of Israel's lot as to why and how (albeit analogously in verses 3 - 5) Messiah's advent for the most part was received at the time and subsequently. The Savior lived His human life in a rough and what we might call third-world context. This country has had a very tranquil domestic existence (the American Civil War and crime excepted), so we lack

the experience to empathize/relate. It is more usual to conform Jesus to our notions of who we want Him to be rather than who the Bible says He is! To me, verse six is fear-inspiring truth and verse seven follows as a result.

Response: Try as we might, we can't really know what Jesus left and what He entered or experienced to obtain our salvation in a manner acceptable to God the Father. All we can do is to thank and obey Him as the Spirit guides and inspires us!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to be responsive to Your Spirit's efforts to show us Your Son as You know and see Him. Obedience to You is our reasonable service. In His name we pray. Amen.

- John Hirvela

DECEMBER 10

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

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10



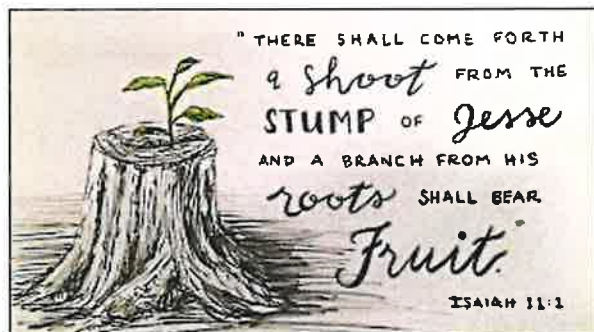
There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ² And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

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:

Over the years I have been living the quote, "jack of all trades, master of none." My wife and I wanted to raise our children in this vein so that our children would be "well-rounded." It's a difficult task in our culture today. Young athletes are encouraged to focus only on one sport all year round. Teachers, at times, believe that their subject is



more important than others and pile on the homework. Bosses want total loyalty to the company. And at times even the church can express the notion that a parishioner is not showing up enough.

Now, this quote has evolved over time. Primarily it was meant as a compliment for someone who can do many things. However, the quote changed from being a positive attribute to being a negative attribute when it added "master of none." This is where I live; where, sure I can do many things, but unfortunately I am not a master of anything.

Which brings us to this passage. For me this passage reminds me of the Trinity; our God being the Master of all trades: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Isaiah identifies that there are four spirits that will be present with the coming Messiah: *The spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.* First is the *spirit of the Lord*, which recognizes the overall Spirit encompassing the triune God. This spirit comes from God blessing this transference of power from David to Jesus. The second *spirit of wisdom and understanding* is a shout-out to Solomon and his request for wisdom over power and wealth but then is granted all three. The third spirit is *of counsel and might* recognizing that this spirit whispers the will of the Lord to the recipient and provides the strength of God. And the fourth spirit, *of knowledge and fear of the Lord*, is to reset the pride of the bearer and remind that the power belongs to God.

The Spirit of the Lord is truly the master of all trades! And we can rest knowing that we are not.

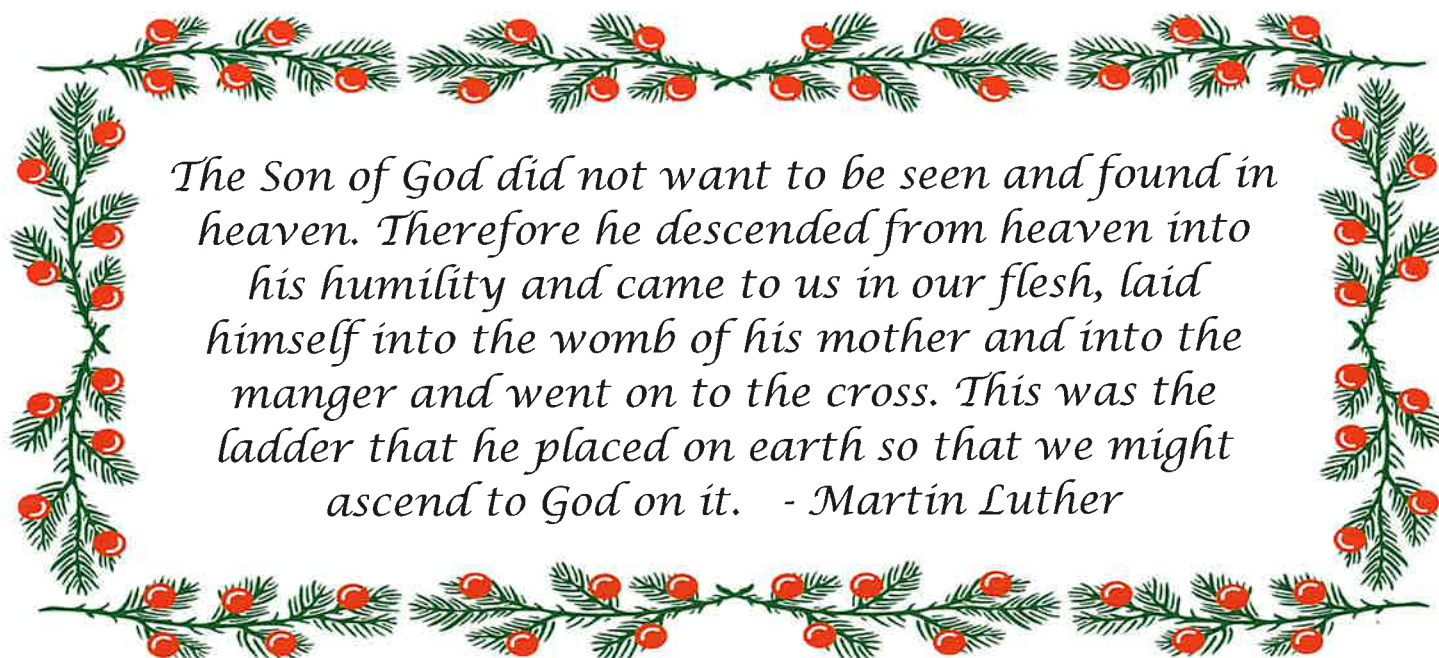
Response:

Is there an area of life where you are experiencing frustration because you seem unable to “master” things as well as you would like or as well as you think you should? Perhaps you could pray for God to give you a better perspective on these things, to give you some additional strength and ability, or simply to be the “Master” for you in this area of challenge.

Prayer:

God thank You for reminding us that You are God, but more importantly, that we are not. Amen.

- Ryan Ludwig



The Son of God did not want to be seen and found in heaven. Therefore he descended from heaven into his humility and came to us in our flesh, laid himself into the womb of his mother and into the manger and went on to the cross. This was the ladder that he placed on earth so that we might ascend to God on it. - Martin Luther

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: Micah is one of the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. He prophesied from about 740 to about 698 BC, and he was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Micah was warning both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah of God’s wrath because of their idolatry and evil practices. Throughout the seven chapters of Micah we read of the corruption and dishonesty of the kings and of the false prophets and of the people who were all living in rebellion against God’s laws and precepts. Much of Micah is difficult to read. These words from God to Micah are about judgment, destruction, guilt, punishment, weeping, mourning.

But in our passage today, Micah 5:2-4, we read the beautiful words from God to His people about His plan for deliverance. Micah 5:2-4 are words of hope and promise. The Jewish people in the time of the birth of Jesus knew these verses from Micah. They knew they were about the Messiah and that Micah had prophesied that Messiah would come from Bethlehem, a small and insignificant village about six miles south of Jerusalem. In Matthew 2:1-6 when the Magi come seeking the “king of the Jews” the chief priests and teachers of the Law tell them the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. The Magi traveled on to Bethlehem.

According to one commentary I read, verse 3 is saying that “*God will not fully vindicate and exalt His people until the virgin mother shall have brought forth her Son; and until Judah and Israel, and all true sons of Abraham among their brethren the Gentiles, be converted to Christianity.*” Verse 4 continues with words of hope and assurance of God’s promise of a Savior that will change everything. Christ had humble

beginnings born in a small village. Looking forward even more: At His second coming He will care for His people. They will live securely in Him. God, His Father and our Father, will be His strength. His name will be above all names.

And all praise, all praise, To the name above all names, that's Jesus

Jesus You reign. You reign. You are the name, You're the name above all names..

Response: I think we should remember from the prophet Micah that God reveals Himself as a holy and righteous God who punishes sin. He is a patient and forgiving God who keeps His promises. God chose a small humble town as the birthplace for the Savior of the world. Jesus, the Son of God, lived in humble and perfect obedience

to His Father though He is the Name above all names. He came from the majesty of heaven to be our Savior and reconcile us to God. What does God want from us? In Micah 6:8 we have our answer:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you



Hannah Hull – Bethlehem, 2024

but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Prayer: Oh dear Father God, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, throughout the history of mankind since our first parents rebelled against You, we have followed their way of sin. We had no hope of reconciliation with You. But You provided the way through Jesus the Christ born in the humble town of Bethlehem. Thank You for Your Word where we can take comfort in knowing that Your plan of salvation has always been. We thank You for the baby born in a manger whom we celebrate this Christmas season and all year long. Amen.

- Kay Blakely

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:

Perhaps I've noticed this before, but I had forgotten that these two well-known passages ("voice crying in the wilderness" and "the grass withers and the flower fades") are part of the same larger passage. But I know I've have never paid attention to how they connect.

Verse 3 is a traditional Christmas passage, being part of the Messianic Prophecies. This verse is the prophecy of John the Baptist who inaugurates the earthly Ministry of Jesus. But if you take a step back and study this passage as a whole, you see not only an isolated reference to the start of His Ministry, but also that it is pointing us directly to Christ. The entire gospel is tightly wrapped up in these eight verses, namely that our sins are paid for by the word of the Lord, and the word of the Lord endures forever.

The Story of Redemption in eight verses:

Verses 1-3: The prior chapters of Isaiah are a pronouncement of the sins and transgressions of Israel and the upcoming punishment. And that would still be their reality. But in Chapter 40 Isaiah launches into the Messianic theme of his book. He begins by telling Israel the good news "that her sin has been paid for." It's done. Likewise, for us, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8 (NIV)]. "It is finished." [John 19:30 (NIV)].

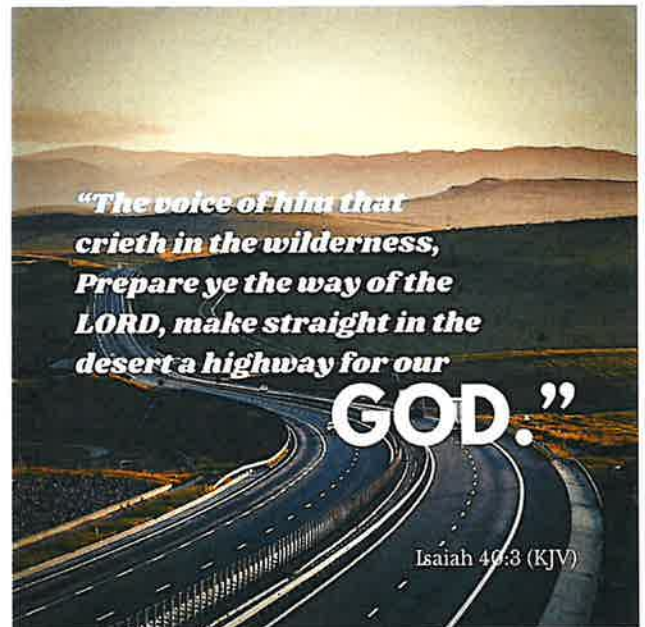
Verses 3-5: Next is the call, "a voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.'" This verse opened Jesus's earthly ministry, and it opens His

ministry in our own lives. John the Baptist was the incarnation of this prophecy. Jesus and John both confirm that he is the voice crying in the wilderness. When asked by the Pharisees who he was, “John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way for the Lord.”’” [John 1:23 (NIV)]. Jesus confirms this. “This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”” [Matthew 11:10 (NIV)]. So, what is this call? What does this messenger call out to tell us? That Jesus “is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.” [John 1:33-34 (NIV)].

Verse 6: What is our response to this call? That is the exact question that Isaiah asked, “And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’” The answer is to first recognize our frailty and faithlessness. “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.” We are indeed weak, sinful, and unfaithful. The voice of one calling in the wilderness clearly tells us the proper response. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance... But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” [Matthew 3:8,11 (NIV)]. John later implores, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” [John 1:29 (NIV)], also declaring that Jesus is the Son and that “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.” [John 3:36 (NIV)]. And this nicely segues into the final verses in this passage.

Verses 7-8: This verse often is quoted in the context of the endurance of Scripture. Using verses 7 and 8 from Isaiah, Peter explains it this way, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’” [1 Peter 1:23-25 (NIV)]. In Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21, he explains that a man must be “born again” to enter the kingdom of God (aka “eternal life” [John 3:34 (NIV)]), i.e. be “born of the Spirit.” [John 3:5 (NIV)]. And John tells us that Jesus “is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” [John 1:34 (NIV)]. And as we saw above, we are “born again... through the living and enduring word of God,” which according to John 1:1 is Jesus. **Jesus is the Word of Isaiah 4:8!**

So, the essence of Isaiah 40:1-8 is that our sins were paid for by Jesus, and John the Baptist announces this eternal Jesus, by whom we are born again. And in declaring this,



Isaiah 40:1-8 joins John the Baptist (the voice crying in the wilderness) to the Christ (the Word) hundreds of years before that first Christmas morning in a deeper way than what we traditionally attribute to this passage and succinctly shares the gospel, the “good news”: that our sins have already been paid for through the Word of God, which endures forever (the foundation of our assurance). Isaiah tells us that we are saved by the Word of God (i.e. Jesus).

Response:

What is our response? We need only to look at the response to that question as posed by Isaiah: “What shall I cry?” I start with the recognition of my own frailty, transience, and insufficiency. “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” [James 4:14 (NIV)]. Then believe in the infallibility and intransience of God’s Word, not just of the Scriptures, but of Christ Himself. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” [John 1:1 (NIV)]. And in that infallibility and intransience is sufficiency. “My grace is sufficient for you.” [2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)]. He alone is sufficient to pay for my sin. And it has been paid for. And, my friend, the only proper response to that... is worship.

Prayer:

God Almighty, El Shaddai, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - three in one, Elohim. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship You. But You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. You will not desert me. [Nehemiah 9:6,17 (NIV)] Thank You for coming to this Earth to pay a debt I could not. Thank You for calling to me when I was in the wilderness and saving me. May my focus be on this gift this Christmas season. Amen.

- Steve Patton



*You wanted to be God, although you were human, and so you were lost.
He wanted to be human, although he was God,
so that he could look for what was lost.
Your human pride struck you down with such force
that only the humility of God could make you rise up again.*

- St. Augustine (5th century AD)

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. ¹¹He 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:

Imagine if today an intrepid mountain climber and his camera crew trekked to the 14,505 foot summit of Mount Whitney to broadcast to the world the most amazing words it would ever hear. Buffeted by winds, helicopters circling overhead, the reporter shouts, “Behold your God is coming with might.” These were the words that the ancient heralds

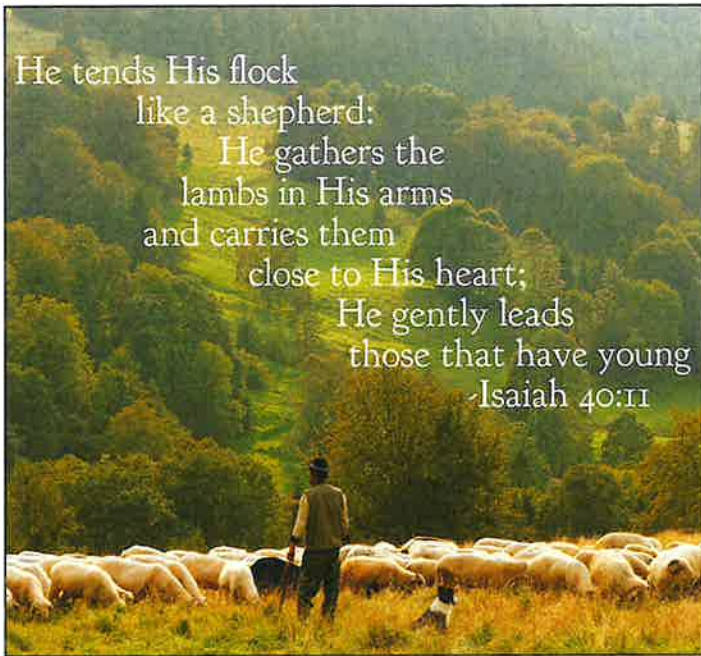
were told to proclaim. Isaiah’s exuberant image foreshadows the magnitude of the great event to come: God’s Messiah was coming to gather his people to himself.

But the first announcement that Messiah had entered his world was given—not from a mountaintop—but over a hillside to humble shepherds keeping night watch over their sheep. Rightly called “herald angels” in a beloved Christmas carol, this mighty host gave glory to God and announced a coming peace on earth. The angels’ message to the dazed shepherds was “Good tidings of great joy that would be for all people” since a Savior, who was Christ [the Messiah], the Lord, had been born that very day in Bethlehem, the city of David. The amazed shepherds rushed to Bethlehem, and when they saw the strange sight of a baby lying in manger (of all places) just as the angels had said, they believed and told everyone they could this good news.

Isaiah’s messianic prophecy not only heralded the might of the coming God, his power and majesty, but of his purpose in coming to earth. “He will tend his flock like



a shepherd, gathering the lambs in his arms.” Jesus, who taught that he was the Good Shepherd, commissioned his disciples, notably Peter, to “feed my lambs” which has been one of the Church’s callings ever since. Peter’s calling, our calling.



Response:

How loudly and joyfully do we share the good news that our Savior has entered this world to gather and lead his flock like a shepherd? Let us reflect and act more intentionally to gather and feed this flock that our Lord so lovingly carries in his bosom. May we, like the shepherds who heard the good news from the angelic host, believe and rush out to share this wonderful news.

Prayer:

Dear Lord God,

Thank You that You have entered our world as the mighty Ruling One.

I am so grateful that You not only came as powerful God, but as Jesus, the loving shepherd whose mission was to seek and to save those who were lost. Now that I have been found by You, help me to be faithful to proclaim this good news and to feed Your lambs. Amen.

- Debbie Barackman

*And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children’s hearts are glad,
And Christmas morning bells say ‘Come!’
Even to shining ones who dwell
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.*

*And is it true? And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in the stained-glass window’s hue,
A Baby in an ox’s stall?
- from Christmas by Sir John Betjeman
(1906-1984)*



DECEMBER 14

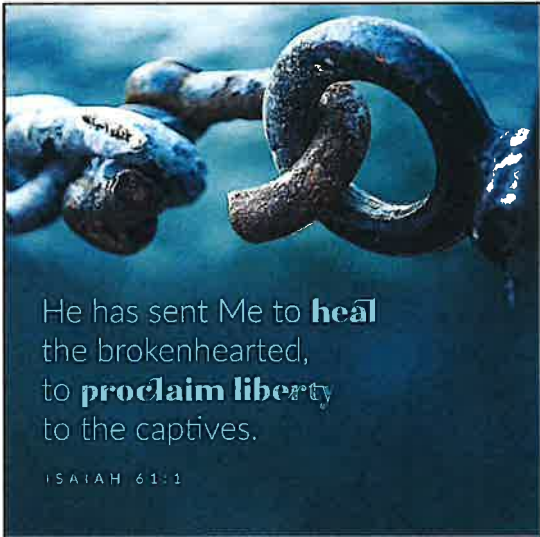
*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor...*

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: Hope. What if everything could still somehow turn around?



He has sent Me to **heal**
the brokenhearted,
to **proclaim liberty**
to the captives.

ISAIAH 61:1

That's the promise of this passage. An anointed one who would make all things new.

I've always been grateful that the church calendar celebrates the birth of Christ in December. As days grow darker and colder, it's a powerful reminder that, in the darkest circumstance, God intervenes. We remember all that Jesus did in his time on earth: healing the sick, confronting injustice, redeeming sinners, seeking out those who were oppressed or forgotten—bringing hope.

Amid the flurry of excitement, trees and cookies and gift shopping, this year I'm especially aware of friends and loved ones for whom the Christmas season is more of a reminder of loss than a cause for celebration. In the brokenness that marks my own life and family, I'm grateful that Jesus is still anointed to bring hope, just as he was that first Christmas. I'm thankful that whatever our circumstance, Jesus is still the one who makes all things new.

Response: What hope does Jesus have to offer you or a friend this Christmas season? Write a letter to yourself or to a loved one, with an encouragement of the hope Jesus brings.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank You for the hope that You bring. Thank You that no matter my circumstances, You are able to intervene. Help me set my hope on You and keep my eyes on You, even when life feels dark. Amen.

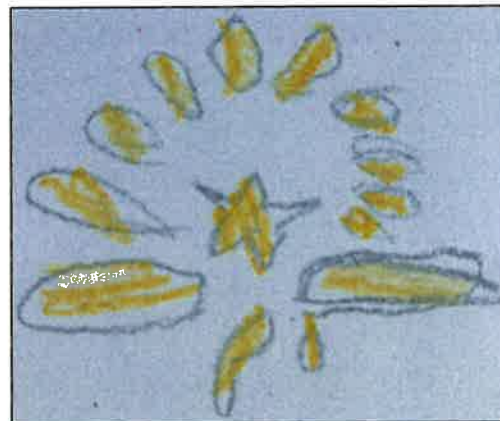
- Jewel Potter

DECEMBER 15

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

Text: Daniel 7:13-14

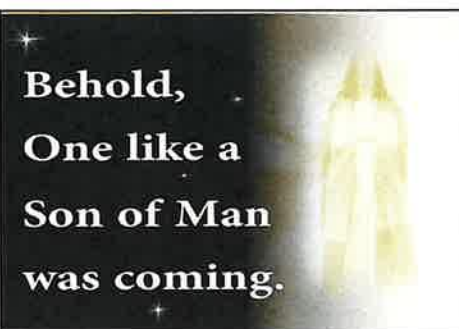
“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an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



Reflection:

Compared to the work of the great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, the book of Daniel is relatively short but it does pack a punch. It is unique in Biblical literature in that it was written in two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. The Aramaic section contains a remarkable statement written in the first person by Emperor Nebuchadnezzar. It tells how he came to acknowledge the existence and power of the one true God and to worship him. What a tragedy for the Babylonians that he could not pass on this wisdom to his son and successor as Babylon fell soon after to the Medes & Persians. Alongside the story of Daniel and his friends in the Court of Nebuchadnezzar, and later the Medo-Persian Court, is interwoven Daniel's Visions and Prophecy.

Part of the resonance for me in Daniel is the College story. I remember being in the school library as students studied the University prospectuses, delving into them to see that the courses outlined matched their requirements. I took the opposite tack, determining the location and then finding a course I was happy to pursue. Having grown up in a Welsh backwater I could not wait to experience life in a city and so chose Edinburgh the capital city of Scotland, a country I had never even visited. If I thought I was taking a leap it was nothing compared to Daniel and his friends. Babylon was a spectacular city vastly different from anything a young man from Judah would have seen. It was the largest city in the world at the time dwarfing Daniel's capital city

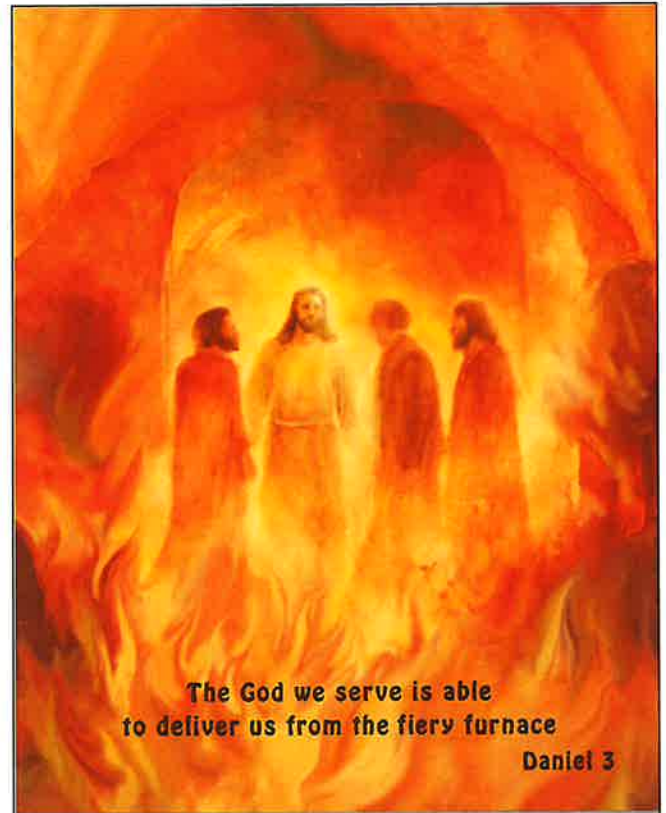


Jerusalem. Daniel and his friends must have been struck by the elegance of the architecture and the advanced state to which learning had been brought.

As part of his policy for dealing with conquered nations, Nebuchadnezzar took the best of their young men to Babylon in order to have them trained to serve in his

administration. Daniel and his friends were judged to be suitable material for that training and so they were taken from their families and culture and transported to a strange and unfamiliar land many miles away. New language, new customs, new political system, new laws, new education system and new beliefs, it must have been overwhelming. How did they come to terms with it?

One way would have been to ‘go along to get along’ by melding into the local culture and reap the earthly rewards of being the crème de la crème of Babylonian society. The story of Daniel provides inspiration as we see him staying true to his roots—his life firmly rooted in the worship of Yahweh. Even as pressure to conform to the local customs increased, Daniel stood resolute even to the point of death. God had other plans for Daniel and his friends, and they were saved from the fiery furnace. To Nebuchadnezzar it was utterly unnerving, particularly the presence of the mysterious fourth figure that had been seen in the fire - a figure that seemed to Nebuchadnezzar to resemble a son of the gods. He had issued a challenge to the heavens “ *What god shall deliver you out of my hands?*” How horrifying to discover there was a God in the heavens who could do precisely that - a God to whom Nebuchadnezzar’s threats meant nothing.



I spent half of my career trying to forecast the movement of financial assets, known as quantitative investment. It involved building complex statistical forecasting models that employed vast quantities of data crunched on superfast computers. I really empathized with the king’s advisors who were expected to supply answers with no data! In the world of finance, you are a hero if you are right 55% of the time. What are we to make of the extraordinary accuracy of Daniels visions, all done with no data? Some scholars have tried to provide an earthly or naturalistic answer by suggesting that Daniel was written after the fact. Personally, I think they miss the essence of divine revelation. Daniel’s visions were not data-driven: they were *God-given!* Our omniscient God exists outside of our time and space. To him the past, present and future are all known. God can and does intervene in human affairs, one manifestation of this is divine revelation to the Prophets.

Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man conveys a powerful message of hope. The beasts of power, however invincible they think they are, will not reign forever. A perfect

human, the Son of Man will come with all authority finally to take over from the beasts and rule in perfect justice. The law of the jungle or “might is right” will cease for good. This holds out real and glorious hope to a despairing society.

Unlike Daniel, we are later in time and know who the Son of Man is. Long after the time of Daniel He came to earth taking on human form as a newborn baby, carrying



forward God’s plan of redemption. He is, of course, none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

Response:

In an age of relativism, it can be easy to despair. The story of Daniel and his friends is one of showing the strength and conviction to be prepared, often at great risk, to swim against society’s tide & give unequivocal, courageous public expression to what they believed. Hopefully they may inspire us to put our own heads above the parapet for our faith.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father as You were with Daniel, be with our young people in higher education as

they walk the tightrope between being in the world but not of this world. You sent Jesus into the world to shepherd us back to the light. May He walk alongside us as we journey home to You. Amen.

- Steve Marsh

Hannah Hull – Nativity, 2023

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...*

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:

We all wrestle with the difficult age-old questions, “Why do the wicked prosper?” and “Why do the righteous suffer?” It is especially hard when you have done right and you get penalized, while the guy who did wrong got ahead. If there is a God of justice in heaven, why doesn’t He do something about all the injustice in the world?

Many of the Jewish people in Malachi’s day were struggling with this problem. They were under the thumb of the Medo-Persian Empire, which opposed Israel’s God and yet was prosperous. Their disappointment with God as they saw the trials of His people



William Brassy Hole, The Child Jesus Presented in the Temple, 1905

and the prosperity of the wicked had led many of the Jews to think that morals do not matter. They thought, “There’s no correlation between obedience to God and blessing in this life, so we may as well live for all the good times and good things we can get.”

The prophets had predicted a glorious future for Israel. But here they were, back in the land for over 100 years after their captivity, and things were not all that glorious. Israel was still under foreign domination. The rebuilt temple was a disappointment to many, as it didn’t compare to the former glory of Solomon’s temple. Because of these disappointments with God’s promises, many were voicing their skepticism and even daring to question if a God of justice existed. Some even mocked God, saying that He delights in evil people and calls them good!

Response:

I hope that you’ve never *said* such things, but you may have *thought* such things. Maybe you’re struggling with these issues now. Even if you have not verbalized these thoughts, God knows about them. Malachi says that such words weary the Lord! We need to check our thoughts when they run in this direction.

Malachi states that God’s answer to the problem of evil is to send His Messiah to judge the earth (3:1-6). God has a plan to right every wrong and punish all evildoers. In this Advent Season, let us prepare our hearts for the coming Messiah and trust in God’s word.

Prayer:

Dear Lord,
Forgive me when I doubt Your goodness and Your plan for everlasting justice. Help me to see beyond my current

earthly circumstances and trust Your eternal plan. In Jesus Christ I pray, Amen.

- Kathy Persons



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. ² But 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. ³ And 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. ⁶ And 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:

The book of Malachi was written at a time when God’s people were still being unfaithful... even after returning from exile, seeing their temple rebuilt, and finding some sense of order restored. The priests were fed up with God’s high standards, unchanging commandments and inflexible statues. They were sacrificing blemished animals among other things. Their worship had become insincere. We read God’s harsh words towards Israel, especially towards the religious leadership, throughout the whole book of Malachi. We believe this was the last prophetic book written in the Old Testament. After this there would be 400 years of silence from God. They would be continuously controlled by foreign empires, the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. This might explain the people’s mindset when Jesus arrived marked by their unwillingness to believe.

It is clear to us now that John the Baptist fulfills this prophecy from Malachi. The disciples wrote all these things after the resurrection; after they had finally understood, by revelation of the Holy Spirit, all that had happened. First an angel of the Lord confirmed the prophecy to Zechariah, John’s father. (See Luke 1.) Later the Lord Jesus Himself confirmed it. (See Matthew 11, 17 and Mark 9.) We can tell that the Jews at that time were aware of Malachi’s prophecy. The disciples told Jesus that the scribes

and teachers of the law were saying that Elijah must come first, I assume while arguing with the disciples about who Jesus really was. When Jesus asked His disciples who the people said he was, some of them, common people, thought he was Elijah. Clearly, they were expecting Elijah first, before they would even consider Jesus being the Messiah. And as with Jesus, the Jews did not recognize John the Baptist as the

messenger. Both suffered at the hands of the people and their rulers. Just like Elijah and many other prophets suffered at the hands of the Israelites throughout their history.

Many believe that Malachi's prophecy regarding Elijah will also be fulfilled in the second



Malachi 4:5-6

⁵Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord:
⁶And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, And the heart of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

coming of our Lord, when the final judgement will be pronounced, when all things will be restored. What a great and dreadful day that will be.

Response:

This Advent Season pour your heart in praise and worship to the One who moved history to accomplish your salvation. Surrender your life to Him to be your Lord. Make a commitment to focus on the main reason to celebrate—Not that our human traditions are wrong, but that our Lord far surpasses all of them.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, when You died on that cross the Holy and Just Father pronounced judgement for all the sins I have ever committed. The sentence was death. You took upon Yourself the penalty. It should have been me, but You took my place. What a great and dreadful day that was. I can only say thank You. I praise You and expectantly hope for Your second coming. In the powerful name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

- Samuel Dueñas

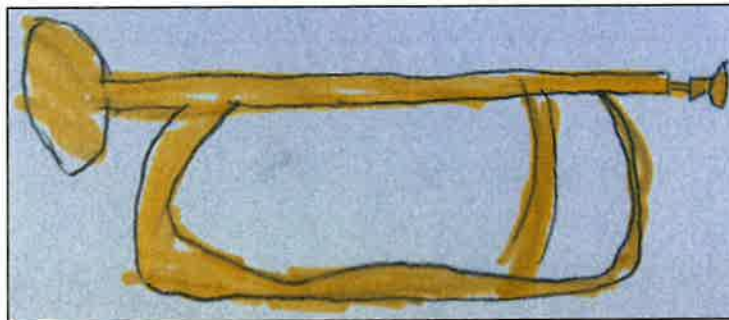


*Christmas began in the heart of God.
It is complete only when it reaches the heart of man.*

- Vance Havner

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.”

Reflection: King Herod the Great is mentioned to give the historical setting of the event: a time not unlike our own, in which ordinary personal concerns are entangled with untoward social and political trends. Zechariah, the focus of the story, was a proper

godly priest, just going about normal duties in the established forms of worship; not expecting anything out of the ordinary as he performed the offering of incense in a sacred portion of the temple. He was just as modern and unexceptional in his time as we are in our time.

So, he was understandably astonished and taken by surprise when an angel of the Lord popped up alongside the altar of incense and out of the blue began to deliver a completely unexpected message. As usual in such angelic messages, the preamble to it



James Tissot - The Vision of Zacharias, 1890

was God's loving command, "Do not be afraid." The archangel Gabriel identified himself, then went straight to the heart of the message, saying that Zechariah's wife would soon bear a child of great importance in God's plan for His people.

Zechariah objected to the possibility of such a pregnancy in view of his own advanced age and his wife's presumed infertility. What led him to imagine that he had license to challenge the angel's statement? Unfazed, the angel Gabriel imposed a fit penalty upon Zechariah, severe, yet within the bounds of love, declaring that Zechariah would remain unable to speak until after the birth was accomplished. He would do no mouthing off until after fulfillment of the angel's prophecy was completed.

Response: Notwithstanding that Gabriel's message was of cosmic importance in the history of Israel and of God's plan for humanity, let's consider Zechariah's response to it. There's a reason why it's there.

It's for our instruction: that we might not contradict God's word, but to be counseled by it. Blessing may be found in obedience to God's word leading to salvation of souls. And if an angel or God's written word attempts to communicate to us, let's just listen up & be advised, without any back-talk.

For it is written, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8). And ". . . my word will not return unto me void . . ." (55:11)

But the birth of John the Baptizer was only a side issue, not a really big deal. The really big deal was the impending birth of Jesus, the Christ. His advent was the real deal, the First Advent, coming into the world that was His own creation by being squeezed through a birth canal just like most of the rest of us. But the really, really big

deal will be His next Advent, when He will come in clouds of glory as the King of Creation, to rule the world's nations with a rod of iron; maybe very soon on a human time scale, maybe in our time.

In the present interregnum, between Christ's advents, the Adversary of our souls "walketh about seeking whom he may devour, and the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." (1 Peter 5:8 and Romans 8:22). This world is in disorder, spiritual and material.

Prayer: In light of the above, our prayer must often be a fervent wish for Christ's imminent Second Advent, coming to complete His act of creation and set everything right.

After the six days of creation, in which He never broke sweat, and was only the work of His fingertips, the result was declared to be very good. But since then They have been working on creation of the new heavens and the new earth, as Jesus said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." (John 5:17). Just imagine how good that new version will be! Well worth waiting for.

So, our prayer is, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22:20) And He said, "Surely I come quickly." Amen and amen. - David MacDonald



How shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of Days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger And He who cannot be touched, who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness.

For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit, that He may save me.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back.

- John Chrysostom (4th-century A.D.)

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:

God Chose Mary, who was both a young teenager and poor, characteristics that to the people of the day, would have made her seem "unusable" by God for any major task, let alone being selected to be Mother of Baby Jesus.

The angel Gabriel (30) said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (34) And Mary said to Gabriel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Gabriel's response was that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that the Power of the Most High would overshadow her. Gabriel stressed to Mary that she had found favor with God and that her submission was part of God's plan to bring about individual Salvation to all Mankind.

We must also remember that the prophet Daniel had the angel Gabriel appear before him more than 500 years earlier regarding similar important messages from

God. It is extremely important for us to simply remember Mary's response in verse 38: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And, the angel departed from her.

Response:

Think of three things that you have heard and believe that God has said about you... like "You are loved" or "I don't want you to give your devotion to any other gods" or "You are my light to the world"...



Leonardo da Vinci, The Annunciation (1472)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How would things be different if you said to God, and meant it: *Let it be to me according to Your word* (instead of according to the word of others around me, or according to the whisperings of evil, or according to my own ideas...)?

Prayer:

Dear God, help me never to forget the reason for Christmas, the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He came ultimately to die for our sins and then rise from the dead so that all believers can spend eternity with Him. Help us never to stop sharing this amazing miracle with unbelievers each day of our lives that they too may know Him, His light, His Love and have Eternal Life with Him. In Christ's name we pray.

- Larry Stockert



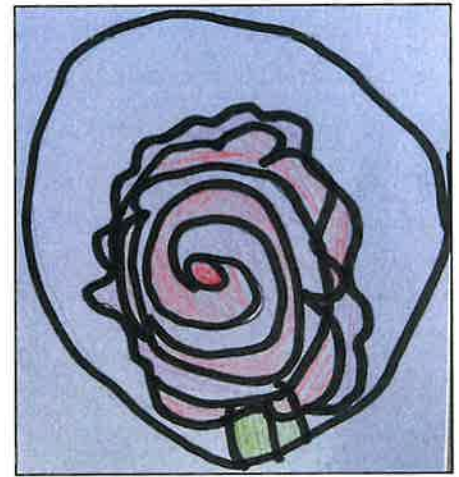
Christmas is the day that holds all time together.

- Alexander Smith

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: The season of Advent is a time of preparation for celebrating the Incarnation. The theme of preparation is evident from the opening verses of Luke’s Gospel. His “orderly account” of Jesus’ ministry starts not with Jesus’ birth, but with events surrounding John the Baptist’s birth, whose call was to “prepare the way for the Lord.” John’s birth was prepared for by the Lord’s selection of John’s parents, a priest and his godly wife, and announced by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel’s astounding announcement to Zechariah was not just that he and Elizabeth would be parents in their old age, but that their son would be great in the sight of the Lord, as he prepared people to receive God.

That was literally unbelievable news, but there is more. The same angel appears to Zechariah & Elizabeth’s young cousin Mary, telling her about their impending parenthood and adds something even more astounding. Mary, while remaining a virgin, will also become pregnant - by the Holy Spirit! Her son will be given the throne of David and have an everlasting kingdom. Mary’s humble submission to this news demonstrates God’s preparation in selecting Mary, who Gabriel confirms is favored by God.

The angelic news that she would become a mother outside of marriage put Mary in conflict and danger with her culture’s norms. So, she deliberately makes her way to her cousin’s home, likely not only to seek a safe place but to confirm Gabriel’s news about Elizabeth. Today’s passage focuses on Elizabeth’s reaction to Mary’s visit.

Immediately, Gabriel’s promise that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit “from his mother’s womb” is confirmed as the baby “leaps” inside Elizabeth. The impact of this confirmation of God’s preparation is underscored by the fact that Elizabeth

exclaimed *loudly*. At six months pregnant, she would have already felt the baby stir, but this was different. The Holy Spirit in Elizabeth prompts her confirmation that Mary was indeed blessed by the Lord.

Elizabeth humbly wonders who she is to be visited by Mary. She does not refer to Mary as her younger cousin but calls her “the mother of my Lord.” Elizabeth’s humility prefigures her yet to be born son John’s reaction when approached for baptism by Jesus the Christ, “*I need to be baptized by you, do you come to me?*” (Matthew 3:14) John’s preparation to “prepare the way of the Lord” began with God’s preparing John to be born into a godly and humble family.

This theme of preparation recurs throughout Scripture:

For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for prosperity and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

Nothing happens outside of God’s provision.

Response: We see in this passage that part of God’s provision is placing us in community with others. Elizabeth’s words strengthen Mary’s faith by calling her blessed and confirming that God’s word proclaimed in Gabriel’s amazing announcement was indeed true. Elizabeth saw what was happening in Mary’s life and commended Mary’s faith in God’s promises. It is important to encourage one another as we see how God is moving in others’ lives as He prepares us for what He has called us to do. On this theme, commentator Matthew Henry notes:

Those that have experienced the performance of God’s promises themselves should encourage others to hope that he will be as good as his word to them also.

In reflecting on this passage, we can know that God has prepared each step of our journey and seek to encourage others by assuring them of God’s providence. And when we see others being faithful to God, let us commend their faith.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, as we move through Advent, open our eyes to see how to follow you each day. Let us remember that you promise to be always with us. And let us be encouragers to others, reflecting the assurance we have that you go before us in all things, preparing each step of our journey. Amen.

- Janet Goodman



**Mariotto Albertinelli,
The Visitation (1503)**

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.”

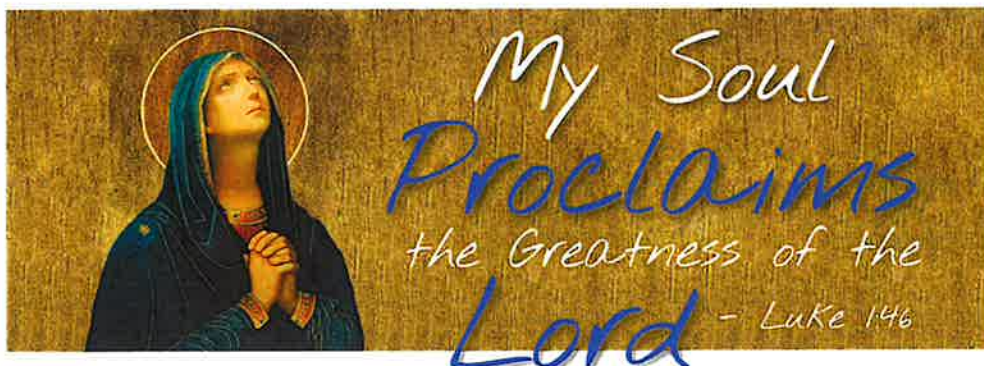
⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Reflection: Spontaneous Worship

Has anything ever caught you by surprise and you just blurt out, “Praise Jesus! Thank You LORD!” or... some glorious thing to that effect. My dear wife Janet does this all the time... Recently I've been doing it more and more.

In yesterday's devotional John the Baptist, while in Elizabeth's womb leapt into worship when his unborn Savior came near in Mary's womb. Now in today's passage, Mary does it! She leaps into worship! They are all participating in spontaneous worship... no building, no pastor, no choir, no praise band required! Just Holy Spirit prompted worship!

Rather than waxing theological, or parsing Luke's record of Mary's spontaneous worship time, I want to encourage each of us, including myself, to prepare our hearts every day to be in spontaneous worship before YHWH God. That's right! Plan to be spontaneous!



We should be preparing our hearts and lives. That is to pare, or cut away in a manner of speaking, the dross, the unnecessary, all the mundane distractions with the intent of jumping

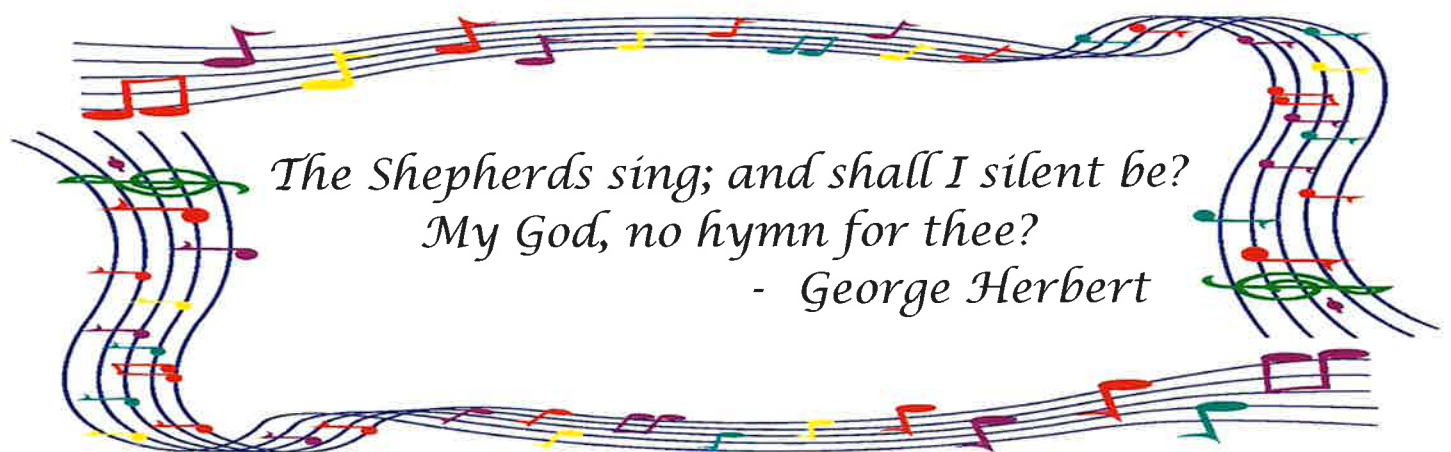
into worship of our gracious, Almighty God instantly, just because He deserves it. Even when we're hurting... This can be done either internally, in heart and mind, or externally, involving every fiber of our being. It does not require anything but a true motive to worship at any time. However, we must train, or prepare ourselves daily to make worshipful use of the time God provides. I think of this as something in addition to a regular daily devotional or prayer time. It's spontaneous! One of the things that has helped me, is to save prayers and Scripture in my smartphone book app. This way when I am moved to worship Him, I can add to it and extend it with these references I have collected. [Please don't consult your references, raise your hands, or close your eyes while driving ;).]

Seeking and making opportunities to worship our God and Savior spontaneously will better prepare us to worship Him more fully when we gather together on Sunday. We will be doubly blessed and find more joy than we can imagine as God's Holy Spirit quickens us to offer up true worship at any time, day or night. If I wake up in the wee hours, I worshipfully talk to Him. He must have wanted me to worship Him in that moment... Imagine falling back to sleep in a prayer of adoration...

Response: Read Mary's song of praise again and experience the adoration and other facets of her offering to God, as she recounts His faithfulness. HE IS WORTHY of ALL our praise! Let each of us develop the habit of continually looking for reasons (and there are plenty) to offer praise, thanks, adoration, and enumerating His perfect attributes before Him whenever it strikes us. Let us joyously recite His Word back to Him. After all, you are not doing it alone. His Holy Spirit is with you. He has promised to be with you forever! WOW! THANK YOU, JESUS!

Prayer: Father God, Christ Jesus, Holy Spirit, Bless the LORD O my soul, and ALL that is within me bless HIS Holy Name! Bless the LORD O my soul and recount all of HIS benefits! Thank You LORD for making me an instrument to worship and glorify You, and You alone, in any moment of any day! For YOU ALONE ARE WORTHY! Keep me in tune with Your Holy Spirit! In Jesus' Holy Name and for His sake, Amen.

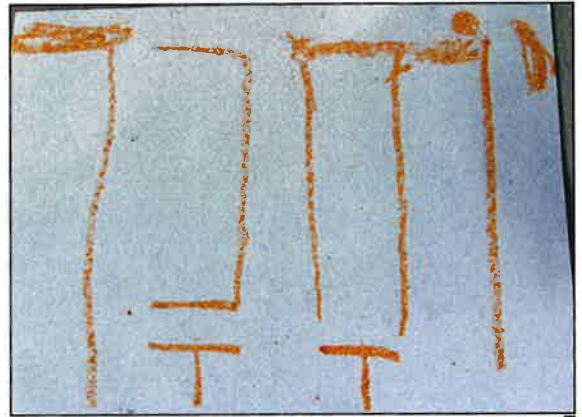
- Gerry Dunlap



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,

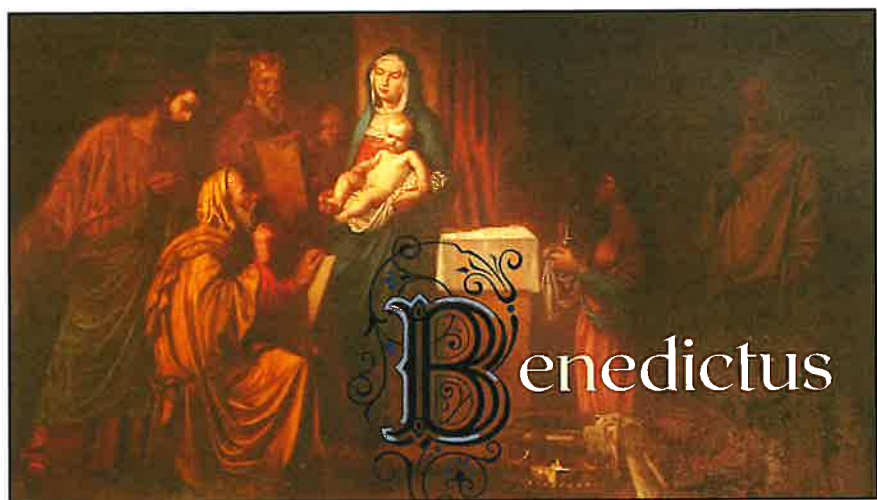
⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate 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.

Reflection: Zechariah’s prophecy is called the “Benedictus,” the Latin word for “blessed” (literally “good speech”). After being mute for nine months, Zechariah’s miraculously restored speech must have seemed amazingly good, but he doesn’t thank God for that. No, he offers a prayer of blessing in the style of an Old Testament priest, which he was. He thanks the Lord God of *Israel* and recounts events from their history: God’s oath to Abraham, His covenant with David, and His words through the prophets promising mercy. He looks



forward to redemption, forgiveness, salvation and deliverance. There is a hint in Zechariah’s references to “the hand of our enemies,” “all who hate us” and being able to “serve God without fear” that he expects to be delivered from the Romans. God had delivered Israel from Egypt and from Babylon; it was a common expectation at the time that the Messiah would deliver politically and militarily. But the Benedictus ends, not with a battle but a sunrise – light from on high ushering in a new day where darkness and death are diminished and ultimately defeated. The “Way of Peace” is promised and generally misunderstood—Not political or military peace but peace with God; peace in the heart where the light of Christ shines 24/7; peace that can answer, “Nothing, we are more than conquerors” when asked, “Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” Not the “old wisdom”- “Be good and do good and good things will come to you” but the “new way of faith”- “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, redeemed, forgiven, and have eternal life.” The Light of the World was about to rise and shine.



Response: Using Zechariah’s pattern, try writing your own Benedictus:

Blessed be the Lord God of _____, for He has 1) _____
 2) _____ and 3) _____.

He has promised _____ that we should _____.

We should remember that He has said _____ so that we should
 _____ and _____.

You shall serve the Lord by 1) _____ 2) _____ and
 3) _____.

Then we will be blessed with _____ and _____ and God
 will _____.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for all the ways You bring Your plans to pass that bring glory to You and benefit to us. We remember events from the past, like John the Baptist being miraculously born to prepare the way for Jesus. We thank You for all the babies born this year who will grow up to love You, serve You in many ways, and proclaim the good news of Your kingdom to the lost. Thank You for the believers and churches that will encourage and support them. Help us to recognize the opportunities You give us and to do our part in building Your everlasting kingdom that will never pass away. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

- Dianne Billharz

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.



Gaetano Gandolfi, Joseph's Dream, c. 1790

Reflection:

All I can say is what a passage! It's the Christmas story and shows just how incredible the story truly is. It starts with Mary “found to be with child by the Holy Spirit”. What an amazing statement that is only believed by faith, and if it's not it becomes a very large stumbling block for nonbelievers. But ask yourself this: how else could Jesus be fully God and fully man? It was such a miracle that God had to send an Angel of the Lord to convince Joseph not to send Mary away or as sometimes was the custom, to have her stoned for her apparent sinful behavior. How strong Joseph had to be to carry out God's plan with friends and family wondering how this could have happened (for they did not have the help of God's

angels). And if that wasn't enough for these two young Jews, the Angel gave them the name to call the baby, Jesus, for He would save His people from their sins. The little baby that they were going to raise was "God with us" and was going to be the Savior of the world. Wow is all I can say. I wonder what they said?

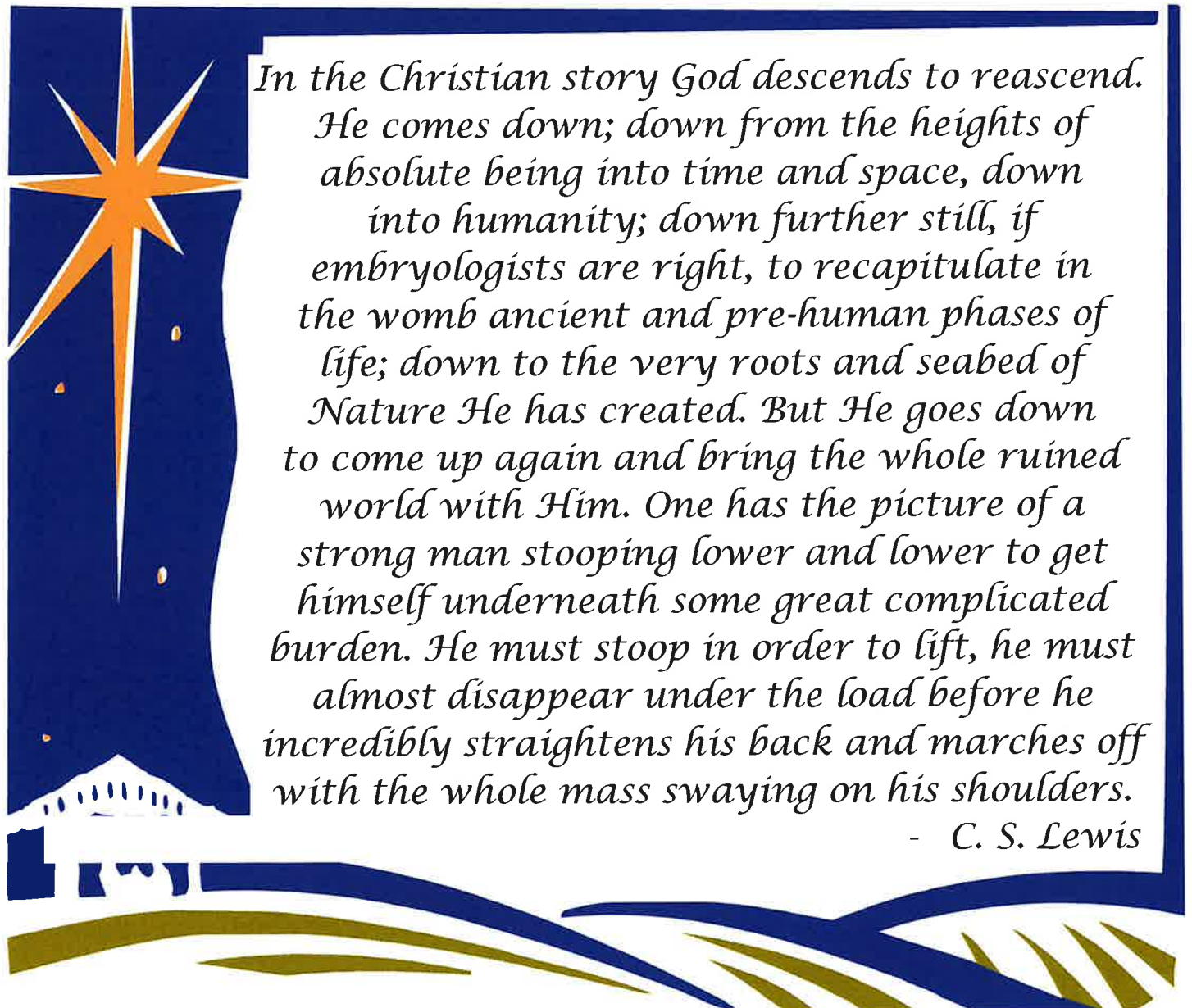
Response:

Keep reading in the days ahead in this devotional book. May God help us to pause during this very busy season to reflect on what actually happened leading up to Christ's birth. We've heard the story so many times that we can lose the awesome, miraculous events that took place at the first Christmas.

Prayer:

Thank You Lord for reminding us of things that are of such great importance to us and to all of Your world. Thank You for Christmas!

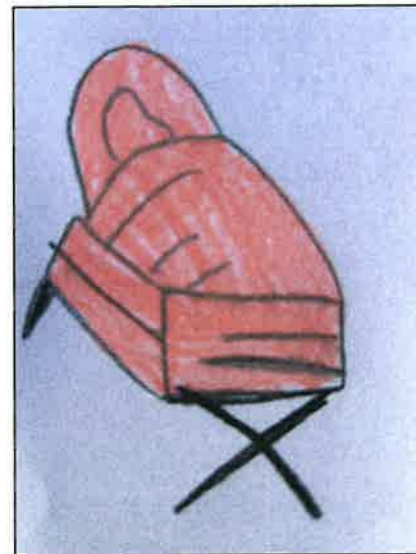
- Gerry Allen



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:

I find it difficult to comprehend how hard it must have been for Mary and Joseph to travel by the methods common at the time while pregnant with a baby (Jesus). Even small commutes would have been difficult let alone travel from Judea to Bethlehem. Being as poor as their little family was (no funds for a nice room to deliver the baby) can you imagine the difficulty to bring a life into this world by yourself (no



medical assistance) while in a barn with only a manger to rest the Newborn in. God's plan to make Jesus's birth common was certainly not what most of us would have expected for the arrival of our Savior! The joy experienced by the couple upon the arrival of Jesus and by the multitude of individuals traveling to see the prophecy come true must have been a huge blessing. I don't find it unusual to see that God's plan for world events are far different than those we would have predicted.

Response:

Knowing that we are all saved by the grace of our Lord by simply following and believing in Him is a shocker! How so much love could be freely given to a corrupt and broken people is difficult to comprehend. We are so used to thinking we deserve certain un-earned benefits that realization of what was given to us should make us all be even more appreciative and grateful for the love our Lord has for each of us. Giving as much Glory to our Creator as possible is the least we should do considering what He have given us. I would also think it should motivate us to be much more like Him (and maybe a little less like ourselves). To follow His command to spread the Good News is also a relatively easy thing to accomplish, so more individuals have the



Thomas Buchanan Read - The Angel Appears Before the Shepherds, 1870

opportunity to know His love. You never know what little seed planting could take hold and bring another soul to our Lord!

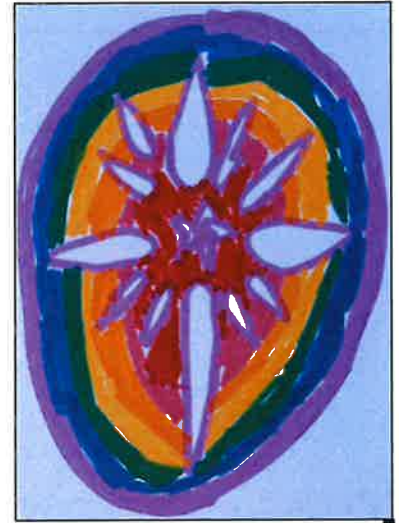
Prayer:
Thank You Lord for coming into this world to offer us eternal life as we simply believe in You. Please increase my desire to love You enough to follow Your teaching to the best of my abilities and reject the paths that You find displeasing. All Glory is to be given to You, and please help me to see Jesus more clearly, follow Him more nearly, and love Him more dearly. Amen.

- Brent Ford

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:

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but the Word is infinitely more meaningful than any image. The metaphor, Word, for Jesus’s Incarnation (taking on flesh) implies that he came for a greater purpose than simply to be gazed upon, adored, and worshipped. Just as we use words to communicate our thoughts and plans to others, Jesus came with a message from God for mankind, the Gospel. This *good news* is clearly stated in John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*”

Son, but far beyond any human sense. John makes it clear that Jesus was not only coexistent with God the Father *from the beginning*, but also that he was the person of the Trinity most actively involved in Creation. Therefore, Jesus, also being sinless, was uniquely qualified to become the Son of Man (as he often referred to himself) in order

to carry out the Father's will and plan to redeem his creation and to save those who accept Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross as payment-in-full for the penalty of their sins.

Light is another powerful metaphor used by John. Light gives illumination, enlightenment, and comprehension. Nothing more fully shows the darkness of men's minds, than when the Light appeared, there needed to be a witness (another John, 'the Baptist') to call attention to it. However, to all who see his true Light and believe, he freely gives salvation.

All that we receive from Christ is summarized in this one word, *grace*—unmerited favor. Not only salvation, but also the good will of God towards us and the good work of God in us. The Law of God is holy, just, and good; and we should make the proper use of it. But we cannot derive from it pardon, righteousness, or strength. As no mercy comes from God to sinners but through Jesus Christ, no one can come to the Father

but by him. No one can know God, except as he is made known in the only begotten and beloved Son, Jesus.

Response:

In the hubbub of this Christmas day and season, let's take time to reflect on the fact that Jesus came to earth, became flesh, and dwelt among us. Reflect not only on these amazing facts of history, but also on the divine purpose, and on what our response has been to this *good news*. Today is the day of the greatest gift ever—salvation. Repent, accept it, and believe in Jesus. Merry Christmas!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You so much for providing this greatest gift through your willing obedience to the Father, taking on human form, and dying an excruciating death for our sins, You who knew no sin. Amen. - Phil Barackman



Guido Reni – Adoration of the Shepherds, 1640

Jenny's Carol

(God's Beautiful Song)

1. *The Christmas Star once shone so bright.
In Bethlehem it split the night
With guiding rays from heav'n above,
And touched the earth with radiant love.*

*Its light revealed, in cattle stall,
The Source of light, the Source of all.
O see the Babe, Th'eternal King,
And hear His mother softly sing:*

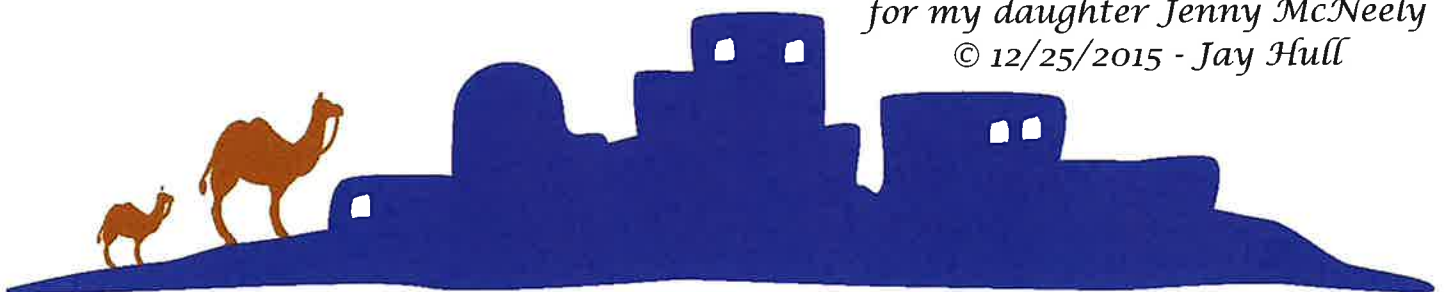
*Chorus 1: We will rock you, rock you, rock you.
We will rock you, rock you, rock you.
For you, watching all night long,
You are for us God's beautiful song, The Song.*

2. *The Christmas Star still shines above
And guides the wise to life and love,
To manger bed, to mighty cross,
To empty tomb, to evil's loss.*

*Its light revealing still today
Lord Jesus Christ, the Truth, the Way,
Once born to save. Now all is done,
So earth and heav'n can sing as one:*

*Chorus 2: God our Rock, You, Rock, You, Rock, You.
Solid Rock, You, Rock, You, Rock, You.
Hear the praise of heaven's throng.
We are joining God's beautiful song, The Song.*

*for my daughter Jenny McNeely
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