



Advent
Mary Joseph baby
Devotional
2022-2023
FPC Columbia, In

Cover Art by: Maddux Campbell

The following devotional book was written by members of our congregation. Many thanks to all that participated.

The word "advent" comes from the Latin "adventus" meaning "arrival" or "coming," particularly of something having great importance. Advent is a period of spiritual preparation, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, in which we make ourselves ready for the coming, or birth of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Celebrating Advent involves a season of prayer, fasting, and repentance, followed by anticipation, hope, and joy. We celebrate Advent not only by thanking God for Christ's first coming to Earth as a baby, but also for his presence among us today through the Holy Spirit, and in preparation and anticipation of his final coming at the end of time.

In the Advent Season, there is always a lot of movement, a lot of hustle and bustle, traveling, shopping, parties, and events. We invite you to slow down during this season, take a few moments during each day to remember the true reason for the season.

The Christian Education Committee



Happy New Year!

Did you know that the First Sunday of Advent is also the first Sunday of the church's liturgical calendar? It's true! We begin our Advent journey at the end of November and mark the start of a new liturgical year. While many of us may feel as though we're just slogging it out to finish this crazy year and "get through" the holidays, Jesus' invitation in this season is to refreshment and reorientation through waiting and expectation.

So as we make this trek through Advent towards Christmas, we will intentionally spend time in Scripture each day. The readings for this series come from the lectionary (a set of daily readings Christians have followed for centuries). We'll dip into the prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels, the epistles, and everything in between as we lean into this time of expectation and hope. May your Advent be filled with rich insights from the Word that draws you closer to the Master and prepare you to welcome Jesus to be born again into your hearts and lives.

First Sunday in Advent, November 27 Matthew 24:36-44

The Necessity for Watchfulness

³⁶ "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,^[a] but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day^[b] your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner 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.

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Our first reading this Advent season is not an easy, warm and fuzzy Christmas passage. It is a difficult one that can feel confusing and even scary. There are many different ways to parse out this Scripture, but in the interest of brevity and simplicity, I'd like to focus in on that final verse, "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

What does it look like to be ready for Christ's arrival? I like this idea from the eccentric Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber,

"I suggested that maybe we should start making Advent lists— they'd be like Christmas lists, but instead of listing things we want Santa to bring us, we could write down things we want Christ to break in and take from us. In the hopes he could pickpocket the stupid junk in our houses, or abscond with our self-loathing or resentment ... maybe break in in the middle of the night and take off with our compulsive eating or our love of money. That's how God works sometimes. Not through the things we are prepared for but through the things we don't expect."

Like a thief in the night, Christ often surprises us by showing up in unexpected places. This Advent, may we be watchful and expectant. May we refuse to relegate our Savior to a few Sundays and a sweet Christmas Eve service, but rather, may we invite him into every holy, hectic, high-stress moment of the season and watch his transformative power at work.

Lord God, we long for your presence among us and within us this Advent. Break into our hearts, our lives, our families, our church, that we might receive anew the gift of your love embodied in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Sarah Bird Kneff

Monday, November 28

Scripture: Psalm 124

¹If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us ³then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; ⁴then the flood would have swept us away; the torrent would have gone over us; ⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. ⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the hunters; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. ⁸Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

If the Lord Had Not Been On My Side

In Psalm 124, David starts out “if the Lord had not been on our side” and speaks in hindsight of escapes from the warring anger of an enemy, as well as a torrential flood. In my personal life, I can also look back at times to see how God was with me.

In my childhood, if the Lord had not been with me, maybe through an angel holding my bike steady, I could have easily wrecked my bike on the very steep, well-paved hill a few miles from home. I loved to fly down it, wind whipping my hair, feet off the pedals seemingly ready in my

immature brain to take flight. No such thing as helmets in my day. I didn't know anyone who lived on that street. How would word have gotten to my parents that I was either dead or in the hospital? None of that was even a thought, just the fun of that steep hill.

In my teen years, God was with me more through the exasperated efforts of my older sister trying to keep her headstrong younger sister in check. In my mid-twenties, I prayed for God to help me and didn't think God heard my prayers. Most everything in my life was falling down around me, infertility, a failing marriage, my father's heart attack and open-heart surgery, divorce. My spirit was depressed. I graduated college with

honors, but couldn't find a job because of high inflation and job freezes. I lost weight from stress, fear, and moving from one place to another; I moved 11 times in 1979. The last move was a 14-hour drive from my hometown in North Alabama to Houston, TX.

I didn't enter my mind that I was actually living in the grace of God. I was home-sick and too full of senseless pride to ask for help. If God hadn't been on my side, I can see now, I could have starved to death or gotten caught up in the dangers of a homeless existence. Instead, my sister talked me into moving to Houston with her and her husband.

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I found work that taught me good administrative skills. Later, I moved further outside of the big town. Too much concrete for my small-town mind. I lived in a mobile home in the yard of an elderly couple. Sweet, protective people drenched in their Czech/German traditions of Rosenberg, TX. I felt safe and cared for. My sister and brother-in-law had two daughters while we lived out there. I made friends. Two of my cousins from Michigan moved to Houston, too, and both married two of my new friends. I had family. Still, I longed to go back home to North Alabama. God made that happen in a whirlwind that's too much to describe. Then my sister's family moved back, too.

Another time that I can fully see...now...of God's presence in my life was just after my father's suicide. I mean *just after*. We didn't have Facebook in 1998, so I don't know how the word traveled. The grapevine, I guess. Friends and family showed up right after the coroner left Mom's house. One woman was someone we hadn't seen in years, just stopping by, the next-door neighbor, and my aunt. They waited with us as we tried to breath. Food came the next day; fried pies, I think. Maybe a day later, a good friend who was also an Episcopal priest ministered to us in so many kind ways that helped us years after in our shock and grief. And so many people showed up at Dad's funeral to describe what a lovely man he was. I believe I felt God was crying along with us.

I have been a slow learner to look for the care of God in my life. I am older now though and know it a little faster. Still, it's usually in hindsight. The immediate feelings of God being at my side comes with the gift of faith. I am so grateful for this gift. I've felt it especially when I had knee surgeries, and when my husband had heart surgery. Our church supported us with so much love and attention. This year, we had a stressful change when my sister fell ill, and my 97-year-old mother came to live with my husband and me. Adjustments are hard, but I so appreciate my nightly prayers, alone and staring up at the ceiling, laying out my fears and vulnerabilities to God, knowing things will even out. And, too, knowing the prayers of others have held us close.

Looking back in hindsight, I can understand David's words in Psalm 124: "praise be to the Lord.... We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare."

Dear God

Maker of Heaven and Earth, maker of me, thank You so much for Your loving care and direction in my life. I feel a lot of times in my life I have walked blind to Your presence at my side. Thank You for shepherding me as I've walked through my many fears and brokenness. Thank You for loving me through angels and other people when I didn't love myself or think I was good enough to be loved. Thank You for helping me to see You more clearly in the rearview mirror of my life.

Karen Phillips

Tuesday, November 29
Scripture: Hebrews 11:32-40

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two^[a] they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect'

Do you feel the world is going to heck in a handbasket? Do you wonder why you should do good, when the bad guys seem to be winning? That is where faith comes in. One does good because that is the Christian thing to do. As Christians, we don't live for today; we live for the day we will be united with Christ. So when the world gets you down and you consider taking the easy way, think "would I like it if someone did that to me?" That is what my mom used to ask me when I did something wrong.

Living true to your faith doesn't mean that you will always have an easy life. Moses left a life of comfort in the palace and became a fugitive. Abel offered his best to God and was killed by his brother. Joseph went to check on his brothers and was sold into slavery. What others think about you does not matter; it is what you know in your heart.

How do you not get discouraged?

Remember the Serenity Prayer—Change the things you can; Accept the things you cannot; And, most importantly, Know the difference. Limit your intake of negative news and social media. Give of yourself to others. Count your blessings. Develop friendships with those who will hold you accountable while affirming your actions.

Dear Lord, Help me to keep my eyes on You and to do Your will despite all that goes on around me. Amen

Ellen Ludwig

Wednesday, November 30

Scripture: Psalm 124

¹If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us ³then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; ⁴then the flood would have swept us away; the torrent would have gone over us; ⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. ⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the hunters; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. ⁸Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 124, a song of Thanksgiving for Israel's deliverance from some major peril, recognizes that our help comes from the Lord who made Heaven and earth. (Psalm 124:8).

In a series of metaphors, dangers that the Lord helped the Israelites escape from are described like battle scenes or snares for wild animals. In our modern daily lives, we can get entangled in many traps and temptations that can threaten our well being. It's only through God's grace and mercy that we are freed from these dark places.

In the cherished old hymn "Amazing Grace" the author writes:

"Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come, 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

He enables us to know love, joy and true happiness by keeping us on the right path. It is because God is "on our side" that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ to save the world. (John 3:16). He is truly the source of all our blessings.

Dear Lord,

Thank you for your abundant grace. I know that I don't deserve the goodness and mercy that you have showered on me. Your watchful eyes have kept me from straying from the path you've set before me and for that I am eternally grateful.

Help me to stay in touch with you regularly and listen to your wisdom instead of my own uncertain thoughts. Thank you for your love and guidance. Amen.

Dorothy Duncan

Thursday, December 1
Scripture: Acts 12:21-29

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. ²² The people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a mortal!" ²³ And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. ²⁴ But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. ²⁵ Then after completing their mission Barnabas and Saul returned to^[a] Jerusalem and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark.

I chose the scripture from Acts simply because it reminds me of the First Presbyterian Church and the hardships we have had in the past, without a full time Pastor. However, Acts 12:24-25 tells us that nothing stops the progress of church. Neither tyrants or famine hinders the proclamation of the gospel. Souls were still being added to the church.

At this time, both Antioch and Jerusalem served as centers of the church, but focus shifts to Antioch, which emerges as the center of missionary activity. Barnabas, Saul, John, and Mark bring a spiritually strong congregation at Antioch which prepares them for their next step of faith-as we know as Paul's first missionary journey.

Psalm 86:12

I will praise You, O Lord my God with all my heart, and I will glorify Your name forevermore.

Lynne Hendrickson

Friday, December 2

Acts 13:16-25

19 O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. 20 Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any longer, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. 21 And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." 22 Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like impure things; you will say to them, "Away with you!" 23 He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures, 24 and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage that has been winnowed with shovel and fork. 25 On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. 26 Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the LORD binds up the injuries of his people and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

The Old Testament contains many accounts of God's people crying out for help. Even though their troubles were often self-inflicted due to their failure to follow God; He was still eager to come to their aid the moment he heard their cry.

Earlier in the chapter of Isaiah, God stated how His people had gone to Egypt for help without asking Him if that was the right thing to do and described them a children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord. Today's reading focuses on the hope that Advent brings to those that wait on the Lord. In verse 19, We read words of consolation for the people of Zion, who are God's people and are unsettled by their current situation. It tells us that even though we may go through trying times God hears us and he is with us. He does not promise us a life free from adversity or pain but, His promise to us is this, if we keep our eyes on Him and live our lives in the way that He has taught us, He will bring us healing, wholeness, freedom and peace.

Heavenly Father, I praise and thank You for Your faithfulness, even when I am faithless. Help us this Advent season to discern what you are telling us, to hear what you would have us do rather than what we choose to do. Amen.

Susie Baxter

Monday, December 3
Isaiah 40:1-11

40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: "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 Then 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 out!" And I said,^[a] "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers; the flower fades, [[when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers; the flower fades,]]^[b] but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news;^[c] lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news;^[d] lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.

Who can read this passage without hearing the beautiful, moving music of the Messiah in their heads? Although Handel wrote the music to the Messiah, it was Charles Jennens who arranged the Scripture texts that were the lyrics or libretto. Jennens combined Old and New Testament texts to present the entire Christian message in a single piece. When finished, he took it to his friend, the great composer, George Handel. Handel spent three weeks shut in his flat composing the music that made the words come alive turning them into the masterpiece we enjoy to this day.

Isaiah tells us to "Prepare the way of the Lord". As we prepare our hearts during Advent, may we be inspired by the beautiful music and scripture of the Season as we await the birth of his only Son, Jesus Christ.

Holy God,

Thank you for these words from Isaiah. Help us as we prepare our hearts for your coming. We thank you for all of the good gifts you have given us. May our lives reflect the love you have shown us through the greatest gift of all, your son, Jesus Christ.

Jean Mac Ball

Sunday, December 4
Matthew 3:1-12

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, **2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."^[a] **3** This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" **4** Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, **6** and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. **7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his ^[b] baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, **9** and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. **10** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. **11** "I baptize you with^[c] water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with^[d] the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

In today's scripture, Matt 3: 1-12, Matthew has much to say about John the Baptist and his journey that sets the way for the coming of Jesus, who is eventually baptized by John.

There is much for reflection by us in this scripture. As for me, I sometimes struggle to maintain my Christian humility. On another note, I share a reflection from a movie, "The Bishop's Wife". Cary Grant plays an angel, David Niven, the bishop, and Loretta Young, his wife. As the plot moves on Grant writes a sermon for the bishop's Christmas Eve sermon entitled, "The Empty Stocking". It is an account of how we approach the giving of gifts but somehow forget to "fill" Jesus' stocking. It is very good food for thought.

Don Piggins

Monday, December 5, 2022
1 Thessalonians 4: 1-12 (KJV)

4 Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. 2 For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: 4 That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; 5 Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: 6 That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. 7 For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. 8 He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. 9 But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. 10 And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; 11 And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; 12 That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing.

Is anybody else a little tired? Ever found yourself wondering, “why am I the one doing everything?”

Well Paul’s letter in Thessalonians does not supply the answer we may think we want. Acknowledgement, yes, but praise is a bit lacking.

Paul’s letter is a reminder that we have learned from Jesus and the Gospels how to please God and to do the Will of God. We do, because we can. Verses 11 and 12 tell us: “... **aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your own hands.... so that you may command the respect of others, and be dependent on nobody.**” (Note in some translations “others” is replaced with “outsiders”).

The life of a Christian is simple enough really. Just all encompassing. There is no holiday. The sun comes up and we start again.

“... please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more.”

Dear Lord:

Give us the strength of body and mind to live as you have taught us, to do good to one another, rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances. Amen

Ed Lancaster

Tuesday, December 6
Romans 15:14-21

¹⁴ I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. ¹⁵ Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷ In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. ¹⁸ For I will not be so bold as to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit,^[a] so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, ²¹ but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand."

This scripture begins with Paul's strong confidence that the Roman Christians are full of God's goodness and knowledge. Now in great understanding of these teachings and the grace God has given them, they are now able to collaborate with others to spread the good news of Christ.

Paul knows the importance of spreading the gospel of Christ to the unreached regions of the Gentiles. With the power of the Holy Spirit and Christ's miraculous signs delivering financial strength to Jerusalem, he knows his work of preaching the gospel of Christ can be accomplished.

As we enter this Advent season, let us be like the Roman Christians-full of goodness and knowledge about God and His grace to us in Jesus Christ.

Lord, our Father, thank you for each and every day...we are truly blessed to have Your Son's gift for our eternal life. We pray for those in this world to find your love and knowledge for grace. As we experience all the changes in the world's craziness, we are blessed to have you with us. Please be with those in great need that struggle with all life's demands. In Jesus name, Amen.

Andy Crichton

Wednesday, December 7
Genesis 15:1-18

15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." **2** But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"^[a] **3** And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." **4** But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." **5** He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." **6** And he believed the LORD, and the LORD ^[b] reckoned it to him as righteousness. **7** Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." **8** But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" **9** He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." **10** He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other, but he did not cut the birds in two. **11** And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. **12** As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. **13** Then the LORD^[c] said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years, **14** but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. **15** As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. **16** And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." **17** When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. **18** On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates."

Have you ever doubted, or questioned, God? I am sorry to say that I have, especially when some devastating life event happens to me or someone that I love, or sometimes just when I'm disappointed about how something in my life has occurred, or not occurred.

Continued...

In verse 2 of today's scripture, Abram questions God due to his disappointment that he doesn't have an heir. Here's a great man, who will become the father of many nations, that had obeyed God when directed in Genesis 12 to leave his country and his family to go to a land that the Lord would show him, where he would be blessed and become a great nation. What faith did that take! Today's scripture comes after Abram had defeated four great kings and rescued his nephew Lot and many others that had been taken captive from Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram even refused the spoils of this battle after giving such an oath to God.

After Abram questioned God about his heirs, God took him outside, told him to look up, and that he would have as many offspring as the stars in the sky. Abram, again, believed the Lord, as he had when he left his home years earlier, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Do you think that Abram felt that he deserved what God was promising? I know that I deserve condemnation for my actions, inactions, and sins against others and God, but we are promised grace. But Abram was 'credited' for his belief, his faith, not for any of his actions, however great or noble. We are told in Hebrews 11:1 that "*faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*"

God further tells Abram in verse 13 of today's scripture of 400 years of captivity of his people. Abram probably didn't realize that, until after the exodus of his descendants from Egypt led by Moses, the promise of God to be a great nation would not come to fruition. We are reminded during this Advent season that we should wait patiently on the birth of our Savior. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22 that patience, as well as faithfulness, are "*fruits of the Spirit.*" Patience is hard. Too often, I want it now. Abram was not going to see the great nation that God had promised, but, in the covenant with Abram in verse 15 of today's scripture, Abram is promised that he will go to his ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. This is a wonderful blessing and reminds me of a comforting promise from Paul in I Corinthians 2:9 that, "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.*"

Can we be only slightly as faithful and obedient as Abram? Can we be patient with God and expect His promised blessings in His time, not ours? Advent reminds us of these traits as we wait on the most important promised blessing from our Father, the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Dear gracious Heavenly Father, help us, today, to be obedient to Your Word. Give us faith, today, to believe Your promises and patience to wait on Your many blessings that will surely come in Your time. Thank You for your most precious blessing, Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thursday, December 8

Ruth 1:6-18

6 Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 10 They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, 13 would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. 15 So she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" 18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth is my favorite story in the bible. To me, It shows how tragedy can turn to acts of kindness which then lead to great moments in history. In this passage, Naomi is encouraging her daughters-in-law to return to their homelands where life would be much easier for them and maybe they could start over. Ruth chooses not to go back but instead stays with her destitute mother-in-law. I often wonder why she made that choice. Was it out of duty? Was it out of pity? Did she feel called by God to stay? She knew life with Naomi would be hard, but she stayed anyway. She didn't take the easy way out, she did what she thought was right. She stayed to help Naomi and great things happened.

Continued...

I think about Joseph of Nazareth in this way as well. It would have been easier for Joseph to leave Mary after having found out she was pregnant before he married her. He didn't leave; he stayed and helped raise our Lord and Savior and great things happened.

We often have hard decisions to make in life. Some can be difficult, leaving us with an uncertain path. This story reminds us that the right decision is not always the easiest. We are encouraged to be brave and chose the more difficult path. You never know when it could lead to great things.

Dawn Taylor

Friday, December 9
2 Peter 3:11-18

¹¹ Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening^[g] the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and destroyed and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist^[b] to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.^[c]

Continued...

In this reading, the author, Simon Peter (though disputed by some because of the difference in writing style between 1st and 2nd Peter) lays out the essence of how we are to act on earth while awaiting the second coming of Christ. Heaven, for Christians, is not a destination, but a present motivation to live for God now - in this day. ***¹¹Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?*** This is a rhetorical question, in which he describes the wrath that will destroy earth and heaven. ***¹³But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*** He is speaking not as a materialist, for all things here on earth are temporal. Live your life as if today is the day of Christ's return. ***¹⁴Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*** He admonishes us to be "heavenly minded" in our relationships here on earth, be it as a parent, a teacher, a friend, or even a stranger. Be diligent to live without spot or blemish and beware of those who twist God's truth spoken in the bible to spread their own self-serving agendas. ***¹⁵And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.*** He finishes with a caution to be wary of earthly prizes which earn you nothing in heaven, but to live in the grace of our Lord. ***¹⁷You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.***

A favorite quote of mine from Saint Teresa of Ávila – "Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are His body. Christ has no body now on earth, but yours."

Craig Lorch

Saturday, December 10

Luke 3:1-18

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' 7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." 15 As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, [a] 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with [b] the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

In this season, and always, may we remember how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus through the hearts of the people. They would then receive the message of the Kingdom of God. This includes showing kindness and grace. Treating others with respect and dignity, not being a self promoter, and twisting God's word to fit our own .

All of these we hear often, but they are good reminders not to be swept aside, but kept ever present in our hearts. Let the Holy Spirit dwell within and guide you in glory to God through Christ our Savior.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, it's me.....

Jennie Harlan



Art by: McKay Perry

Sunday, December 11
Third Sunday of Advent
Psalm 146:5-10

5 They will recount the glorious[a] splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works I will meditate.6 They will proclaim the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.8 The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.9 The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you.

As you awaken in the morning, put your faith in God.

When you go to bed each night, remember He is your hope.

Throughout the day, reflect on these verses, "He is the maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them." He remains faithful forever.

We have to learn to trust Him and praise Him, especially when He brings us into overwhelming situations that are beyond our ability or control. So, stay strong and courageous and remember what a gift life is to those of us who remain on the course.

God's in charge, ALWAYS!

"Praise the LORD, O my soul!"

Lord, remind us to pray continuously, to forever be thankful for our blessings and when the days get tough, remember, You are there right beside us holding our hand.

Argie Satterwhite

Monday, December 12

Act 5: 12 - 16

12 Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13 None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, 15 so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. 16 A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

Many years ago we traveled to Alabama to attend a funeral. My sister-in-law's mother Muriel had lived her adult life somewhere else, but had requested her service and burial to be in her childhood community of Monroeville. Many others also set aside travel days to honor her life.

While planning her funeral, her daughters were denied service at a prominent church in the life of their family. As an adult, Muriel was a Unitarian. That particular church branded her an outsider, a non-Christian.

In contrast, a local church next to the cemetery was open-hearted enough not only to conduct her service in their sanctuary, but also to prepare and serve an exquisite lunch to all road weary friends and family before they made the journey back home.

As in the scripture, this church community showed up like the apostles. They chose the business of healing strangers in grief with unfettered acts of care.

Christ was born in all our hearts through their attention, reawakening the faithfulness of the Advent season.

Roben Mounger

Tuesday, December 13
Ezekiel 47:1-12

47 Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there water was flowing from below the entryway of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east), and the water was flowing down from below the south side of the temple, south of the altar. **2** Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east,^[a] and the water was trickling out on the south side.**3** Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. **4** Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was up to the waist. **5** Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. **6** He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?" Then he led me back along the bank of the river. **7** As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. **8** He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. **9** Wherever the river goes,^[b] every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh, and everything will live where the river goes. **10** People will stand fishing beside the sea^[c] from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. **11** But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. **12** On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing."

The Garden Spot of the World"

Growing up we always found our way to the water. Bigby Creek was our favorite, whether it was standing on the frozen creek at the Mayfield's that time the temperature went way below zero, making mudslides at the Holloway's or Riding/walking our bikes from the Hampshire Pike bridge all the way to Duck River. And the Creek was our teacher showing us crayfish, snails, minnows, even water snakes. We learned the plants that lived in the fields, the plants that lived on the banks, and even in the water where more than once someone slipped on a mossy rock and fell into the water. Sometimes we would slip off to go down to where the creek emptied into the river. With a few casts you could always catch fish which we released right back into the water. It was God's magnificent creation, and we loved it.

Ezekiel was a priest and a prophet who speaks for God from both perspectives. Our passage for today has the guide return to show Ezekiel a stream flowing out from beneath the temple, past the altar, and out the east gate. The guide takes measurements with a cord at intervals and leads Ezekiel across each time. The water is ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep, and finally too deep to cross. Then, they retrace their steps noting that "every living creature that swarms will live, many fish will be there... everything will live where the river goes. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing."

In Advent we are waiting for a Savior who promises us living water. In your lives remember "everything will live where the river goes" with fruit for food and leaves for healing.

Benediction: Jude 24-25

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Rev. Steve Thomas

Wednesday, December 14
Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him, and there was a man with a skin disease who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing. Be made clean!" Immediately his skin disease was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." When he came to the other side, to the region of the Gadarenes, two men possessed by demons came out of the tombs and met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. The demons begged him, "If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." And he said to them, "Go!" So they came out and entered the swine, and suddenly, the whole herd stampeded down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the water. The swineherds ran off, and, going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the men possessed by demons. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him they begged him to leave their region.

"He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases."

As Christmas approaches, I find myself wondering about my role as a Christian. I'm only one person. I'm not a minister. I'm not a doctor. My abilities are limited. But the dictionary defines ministry as not necessarily doing professional duties but rather "bringing aid and comfort. "And as Christians we are taught by Jesus' examples. Without being asked he healed the sick; touched the unclean; and helped those possessed by demons. But most importantly he died on the cross to save us from our sins.

So, what can I do?

I can't heal the sick, but I can comfort and pray for them in their time of need. I can't help those possessed by the demons of life, but I can show more compassion for troubled minds. I can't take away all the sins of the world that Jesus died for, but I can show my thankfulness by the way I live my own life. And I can go into the season of Advent knowing that the mercy and grace of Jesus is my gift.

Dear Lord,

At this time of year, I thank you that Christmas is drawing near, the time when we celebrate your coming into the world ... born as a baby in a dirty smelly shed, ignored and despised by most, and welcomed and worshipped by a few. Lord, help me to take time to prepare myself for your coming. Take away all the things that get in the way of simply focusing on you. Abide in me each day as I await your coming. Lord, even during all the shopping, the countdown and final days before Christmas, help me not forget the fact that it really is all about you. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Debbie Sherman

Thursday, December 15
Psalms 80:1-7

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! ³ Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. ⁴ O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. ⁶ You make us the scorn^[a] of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. ⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80 uses a continuous reframe to “Restore us, O God Almighty, let your face shine, that we may be saved.” Verse 7 is a promise to us all that God will never forsake those who seek him. Despite our daily hardships, we know that God will provide for our financial, physical, and spiritual needs. However, when we often want God, he doesn't seem to respond (or at least the way we prefer). Often when we wish to be left alone, we cannot seem to get away from him. Why does this happen? God knows what is best for us, what we need every moment of our lives. He knows when we are going astray and reminds us. He knows when we get proud and humbles us. He knows when we are weak and strengthens us. He knows when we are foolish and gives us wisdom. Jesus said we cannot see the wind but it is all around us. We cannot see God or his Spirit working in us but he will never forsake us. As our Heavenly Father, God wants to provide for us. Let us remember this advent season, the greatest proof of this is the gift of his son Jesus Christ who died on the cross to save us from our sins.

Heavenly Father, Lord God of all creation, I am so thankful that you always know what is best for me and that you care enough to remind me. Keep me from ever doubting you, even when I don't see your answers or your working in my life. I need you every hour of every day to give me wisdom and strength. Help me see the opportunities to help others and to serve you. I want to overflow with your love and compassion, so I can show others Jesus living in me. Be with your people, wherever they are and protect them. I pray in the name of Jesus.

Lorie Fisher

Friday, December 16
Galatians 4:1-7

4 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than those who are enslaved, though they are the owners of all the property, 2 but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. 3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental principles [a] of the world. 4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our[b] hearts, crying, "Abba![c] Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.[d]

By sending Jesus to be born on this earth God made each of us a part of his kingdom. So, as we await the celebration of His birth always remember God's gift to all of us.

I pray that this season of love and celebration brings much joy to each of you.

Martha Kelley



Art by: Crozier Jones

Saturday, December 17
John 3:31-36

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified[a] this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath.

"The One Who Comes From Above"

The gospel of John begins with a magisterial flourish in chapter one. Basic Christian theological tenets are laid out; disciples are called. Then in chapter two Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding; and cleanses the temple.

Then in chapter three Jesus has his first private conversation with a potential convert, Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a well-respected leader of the synagogue. Think of him as an Elder in our church. He comes at night likely out of fear of being seen with Jesus. But Jesus "was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (Jn 1:4b-5) So Jesus is ready for whatever comes.

He and Nicodemus get involved in a theological discussion about being born from above (or being born anew). This subject is still hotly debated. And we are not told what happened with Nicodemus, but he does show up at the crucifixion. It's best to construe our verses as a narrator's summary of the story thus far. Here are the Advent points made in John 3:31-36:

The one who comes from above is above all. The one from heaven is above all. Jesus makes his testimony about God and salvation, yet there are those who resist his message. If you accept his message, you have certified that God is true. God sends Jesus who speaks God's word. Jesus gives the spirit without measure; not a tablespoon or a cup, but the Spirit by the super tanker load. Enough grace mercy and love to fill all our spiritual tanks.

BUT, remember if you believe you have eternal life; and if you disobey Jesus, you endure God's wrath.

God, all these scary scriptures in Advent make us wonder about the well being of loved ones and of humanity. Remind us that not all people will respond favorably to Jesus. Also help us to remember and give thanks for Jesus, whose words and life remind us of the salvation offered to us. We pray in the name of the one who comes in the name of the Lord, Jesus the Christ. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

Sunday, December 18
Fourth Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 7:10-16

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” 12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” 13 Then Isaiah[a] said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.[b] 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

The Israelites are in a dark time of great waiting, wanting answers. The Lord allows Ahaz to ask anything he wants, but he refuses, putting his faith in God knowing God will look out for his children.

Isaiah tells his people not to continually ask God for help, and that He will give them a sign in the form of a son named Immanuel. This child will know how to lead his people and choose good over evil. Isaiah further tells them two kings, whom they fear, will be no longer by the time this all happens.

Ahaz practiced patience, and Isaiah is telling his people to do that also. Isaiah is also telling them in time a child will be born who will deliver them.

But this will happen in God’s time, not theirs. The lesson for us is to be patient, keep the faith, and God will deliver!

Jim Ross

Monday, December 19
Galatians 4:8-20

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. 9 Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental principles?[a] How can you want to be enslaved to them again? 10 You are observing special days and months and seasons and years. 11 I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted. 12 Brothers and sisters, I beg you: become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. 13 You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; 14 though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. 15 What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17 They make much of you but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. 18 It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times and not only when I am present with you. 19 My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, 20 I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

The world today is such a complex place. There are so many fun things to do, so many distractions. It is easy to get caught up in all that is expected from us, as well as all the activities we pursue to release us from the stress of day-to-day life. Sadly, this can leave little time and energy for important and nourishing activities such as prayer, scripture reading, and worship.

Even scarier is the concept that we can pursue “wholesome” activities, but with unwholesome reasons. Because of the sin in our nature, we need to examine our hearts and be aware of what motivates our actions. Do we do things for self-glory or the Glory of God?

Paul questioned the Galatians’ return to actions of their former state as pagans, while reminding them of the joy they felt when they received the Gospel.

Heavenly Father, help us to bring you joy through our actions and our heart’s intent.

Tony Khim

Tuesday, December 20
Genesis 21:1-21

21 The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." ⁷ And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." ⁸ The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. ¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Like Abraham and Sarah, I have asked God for something and grown weary in waiting. How easy is it to devise a backup plan; just in case God takes too long. Plan B always has consequences that we don't foresee. God, however, is always merciful and goes before us to make GRACE abound. Isaac (the promise) and Ishmael (the flesh plan B) had something in common...they were both seeds of Abraham. Because Abraham pleased God, provision was guaranteed in spite of the failure to wait on the Lord.

Thank you for loving us completely and unconditionally . Too often we go our own way, thinking that we can make things happen in our timing, creating consequences that hurt others.

Wednesday, December 21
Matthew 1:1-17

1 An account[a] of the genealogy[b] of Jesus the Messiah,[c] the son of David, the son of Abraham.2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David.And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph,[d] 8 and Asaph[e] the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos,[f] and Amos[g] the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.[h]17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah,[i] fourteen generations.

YES! This is the chapter that everyone skips! It is the one with all the “begots”. **But don’t skip it today.** You may possibly see yourself there---in the family of God. As you read, you will see in this list that the forebears of Jesus were not perfect! Indeed, they were colorful characters; promiscuous men and women, liars, bullies, thieves, adulterers, and murderers. This Scripture makes us think twice about our inclusion in the family of God; and the inclusion of others whom we might judge to be unworthy! If these characters are listed in the Holy Scripture as being in the “family”, then we can too!

*God our Father, Thank you for this Scripture; the genealogy of Jesus Christ! As we read this long list of people’s names (many we can barely pronounce and most we don’t even really remember from the Old Testament), we do see names we recognize easily! Names like Abraham and Isaac, Rahab, Boaz and Ruth, King David, “the wife of Uriah” (because Bathsheba was too awful to even name), and then Joseph, the father of Jesus. All of these people are members of the “household” of our Messiah! They required healing and courage. They abused power. They murdered and were incestuous and adulterous. They veered off the path of ‘keeping Covenant’. But---**Your Holy redemption absolves the sins of this lineage as it absolves our most despicable sins, faults and frailties.** Thank you for forgiveness and including us in the family! Amen.*

Thursday, December 22

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary[a] said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; 50 indeed, 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 imagination of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

"Mary's Radical Advent Carol"

So, you think because it is December 22nd that we can all just relax? Relax and just roll into Christmas with sweet Baby Jesus and Gentle Mary, meek and mild. Well, the Advent Bible passages are not finished with us quite yet. In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and informs her that God has found favor with her, and that she will bear a son named Jesus. This Jesus is foretold to be Son of God and will establish an everlasting kingdom.

After this, we find our scripture for today where Mary sings a hymn of praise to God (traditionally called the Magnificat). Her song does indeed mightily praise the Lord for looking "with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Vs.48, and for doing "great things for me." Vs.49

But also, hear and feel Mary's cry that could have been on the lips of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt or Babylon.

The Lord "has shown strength with his arm; has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; Has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; Has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Vss.51-53) Mary's song sounded the initial, clear, trumpet call that the event of the Christ's advent was to be a world transforming, universe shaking event. Mary's song announces, Christ has come to challenge the structures of sin, death, and oppression. Christ has come in the strength of the Lord to do what the Lord has always done: lift up the lowly, free the enslaved, feed the hungry, give justice to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

Dear God, help us to pause this day and consider Mary's song to you. Remind us that the Mother of Jesus shares her wisdom and passion with us who love Jesus, here in the dark of winter, and just before we celebrate the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. For it is in His name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Steve Thomas

Friday, December 23
Galatians 3:6-14

6 Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” 7 so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would reckon as righteous the gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the gentiles shall be blessed in you.” 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. 10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” 11 Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for “the one who is righteous will live by faith.”^[a] 12 But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law ^[b] will live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— 14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul chastises the Galatian community because of their sudden change from their faith to legal observances. He reminds them that their acceptance of the Spirit had not been through the works of the Law but through their faith, citing the faith of Abraham. The Law has no power to bless, only to curse. Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. Our faith, like Abraham's, has made the Law unnecessary. We often return to legalism in our lives by trying to be “moral” people, keeping rules, taking pride in our good deeds, even counting the stars in our crowns!

Because of Christ, with gratitude to God, we are set free from the Law. At this Christmas time, we receive and celebrate Christ's precious gift of Grace with open hearts and minds.

Lord, may we understand more fully your Grace, once again relinquishing our human tendency to justify ourselves. Amen

Lee Brown

Saturday, December 24

Luke 2:1-20

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.^[a]

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[b] the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[c] praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"^[d] **15** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. **17** When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, **19** and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

HE CAME!

No one likes to wait for things they want or need. Though waiting may be good...it's also hard. But we all spend a lot of time waiting - in lines, in traffic, for someone to text you back, for your turn or your time, in the doctor's office. Ugh, the waiting room at the doctor's office!

Continued...

We wait for things - to get a cell phone, to stay up late, to get to high school, to start dating, to start driving, to go to college, to get a job, to make money, to get married, for things to settle down, to fall asleep (if you're an insomniac), for a trip, etc.

In the last book of the Old Testament the prophet Malachi says, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty." (3:1) "He's Coming!" are the final words from God to His people for some 400 years. His people were left to wait. How easy it would have been to lose hope...to be filled with doubt...to give up...to stop believing that God was ever really going to show up again. And then...

God, after 400 years of silence, didn't just speak again. He put on flesh and came in the form of a baby. Though He looks anything but a king, in this moment, the King has Returned.

This silent, holy miracle that breaks into the night. Because just like we don't like to wait for things we want...He couldn't wait any longer to be with us.

I watch a lot of Disney with my girls. There is a scene in the Lion King I love. It's when Rafiki finally realizes who Simba is - the heir to the throne that everyone thought had long ago died. Simba is the lion pride's only hope - the one who can redeem and restore. When Simba finally decides it is time to return and reclaim his kingship... under the cover of night with no one else around ...Rafiki quietly laughs and says, "The King has returned." No one would know how true that statement was until later.

It would be years before people would begin to learn the truth about Jesus and who He was.

We spend a lot of our life waiting – looking forward to things that have not yet come, to what is about to be, might be, or hopefully will be. We spend most of our lives trying to make things happen for ourselves and for the people we love. But life isn't about what you give or know or achieve. It's not about your mistakes or your failures. Life isn't defined by whom you love. Rather, it is defined by the God who loves you. The birth of Jesus is God's way of saying he can't wait any longer to be with us, now and forever.

Lord Jesus, thank you that the wait is over. May we not miss it, avoid it, ignore it, or become numb to it. Instead draw the truth of your love and the lengths you would go for us down deep. Help us live a life that reflects your love to the people around us and draw them to you.

Alissa Perry

Sunday, December 25
Luke 2:8-20, KJV

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.¹³ And 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, good will toward men.¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Luke 2: ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

In a nutshell, verse 10's tidings of great joy are what Christmas is all about. Even when it inconveniently falls on Sunday. The last time that happened was 2016; the next will be 2033. No matter. In the now, here we are again, juggling pots and pans—really big ones—for an out-of-control menu, wrapping last minute gifts, worried about travelers arriving safely. Or in a place too quiet, with no need to juggle or wrap or worry.

The scriptures paint a bigger picture, a panoramic of all people: nationalities, languages, customs, ages young and old, in spacious mansions and crowded refugee camps. Christians everywhere once again are blessed to hear and acknowledge the great good news. Be it Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, may our song ever be, and our lives reflect: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all.

Continued...

So this thirteen-year-old in Columbia, Tennessee, is walking home with her bratty little brother who keeps tripping over his shepherd outfit. Hers is too short. She wouldn't be wearing the stupid thing if her mom hadn't bribed her. A shepherd in tonight's Christmas pageant got sick. If she would fill in, it would count as two days off the time she's grounded. She held out for three days if she didn't scowl.

Her face muscles are sore; not used to smiling. But three days it is! Ought to ask for four, now that Mom's been called to work a night shift and she's left walking Junior home in the dark with just her cell phone light that needs charging and...

Junior scrunches close to her "What's that light round us, Sis?"
"Don't know. Let's run for it." They can't move. A voice says:

Fear not: for...

No choice but to be fake it. "Who says I'm afraid?"
"You're shaking," says Junior.

Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which...

"See any sheep? These are costumes!"
"I'm telling Mom you interrupted."

...behold, I bring you...

"Hey, we're not shepherds. And this century doesn't even talk like that."

...behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

"I said we're not shepherds! It was just a pageant!"

For unto YOU...

The light fades.

"Now what?" asks Junior.



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