

Restoring Your



WONDER

St. Paul's Anglican, Advent Devotional

2022

Restoring Your Wonder

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Published by St. Paul's Anglican Church

Introduction

“The world will never starve for want of wonders, but only for want of wonder.”

—G.K. Chesterton

When was the last time you were overcome by wonder? It may be difficult to answer in the hustle and bustle of the world in which we live? There are so many things that can distract us. More than ever living in a very loud world—God’s people need help with their sense of direction when we have lost our wonder. That’s truer in Advent more than any other time because the world around us becomes nothing more than a funhouse full of disorienting mirrors, noises, and flashing lights.

When the shepherds found the babe lying in a manger “they saw it, and made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered (Luke 2:17-18).” They wondered. The birth of Jesus is the wonder of all wonders, but does it awaken something deep within us? Does the first advent of the Son of God clothing himself in human flesh awaken a wonder which is beyond comprehension or explanation? Or has Advent become nothing more than nostalgia, consumerism, anxiety, and stress?

The purpose of this devotional is to help us all cultivate a life of wonder. We have to intentionally choose to enter into a daily life that throws off distractions and habits that dull our spiritual senses. This Advent don’t be content with earth-bound treasures. Choose to open your heart to the wonder of the Incarnation. Choose to open your mind, your eyes, your thoughts, to Jesus Christ entering our world to emancipate us from the slavery of sin and death.

Our prayer is that through these twenty-eight devotions you would be indeed wowed by what God has done.

Using the Devotional

The devotional is broken down into four weeks, with each week having its own direction. The aim for each week finds its meaning from the Advent wreath that will be an integral part of celebrating Advent and using the devotion.

Week 1	<i>Wonder of Hope For the Broken-Hearted</i>
Week 2	<i>Wonder of Peace For the Faithful</i>
Week 3	<i>Wonder of Joy For the World</i>
Week 4	<i>Wonder of Love For the Lost</i>

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath, especially the candles, can take on many different meanings, but for our purposes we are using hope, peace, joy, and love to mark out the themes for each week of Advent.

The Advent wreath has been in use for centuries in the Christian church. The concept of the wreath originated among German Lutherans in the 16th century. The practice would eventually spread to England and beyond.

The many different materials of the wreath are rich with symbolism. Some are obvious and others more obtuse.

- The wreath is circular, representing God’s infinite love.
- The base is constructed from:
 - Evergreens, representing the hope of eternal life brought by Jesus Christ.
 - Holly, representing the crown of thorns
 - Boxwood and Fir, representing signs of everlasting quality of God
 - Straw, representing the nativity of our Lord
 - Pomanders (apples studded with cloves), represent original sin, death, and burial of Jesus.
 - Orange peels, representing the bitter gall of the Crucifixion.
 - English Ivy & Heather, represent our shared communion with other Anglicans throughout the world.
 - Grapevine & wheat, represent symbols of Holy Eucharist.
 - Pine cones & pomegranates, represent the resurrection
- The base construction along with the four candles of each week of Advent surround the Christ Candle in the center, representing the light of the world.

A Word to Parents

Advent is an opportunity for us to pause and reflect on the birth of Jesus. That’s especially true for families because of the pace of life. Our prayer is that before the calendar gets too full, set aside each Sunday to come together. To help toward that end, we have provided Sunday’s in the devotional to gather the family. It includes the lighting of the Advent wreath, the devotion of the day, and evening prayer. Everything is there to make it simple and easy to gather and worship as a family. Use what you

want, but above all spend time together. Cultivating a life of wonder is not solely for you, but for your family as well.

Week 1

Wonder of Hope For the Broken-Hearted

Sunday, November 27

Lighting of the 1st Advent Candle

The first candle, which is purple, symbolizes hope. Have one member of the family light the first candle.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. **Amen.**

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:6-7

What's In a Name?

Everyone has one. Sometimes they're different and unique. Sometimes they're common and normal. Sometimes there is one and sometimes there are two, but each one represents you. Your name. Your name gives you significance and importance—even identity. When caught speeding the first thing law enforcement ask for is your identification, registration, and proof of insurance. Your identification—who you are and what your name is.

The significance and importance of a name was particularly true through the Bible. It almost always reflected experience and expressed character. Jacob for example means “supplanter”. It fits well, because if you

remember he not once but twice deprived his brother of his rights as the firstborn son (Gen. 27:36).

You might ask, “What really is in a name?”. Shakespeare’s famous tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* made this question famous. They fall in love before learning they bear the names of rival families. Romeo remember is a Montague and Juliet a Capulet. Juliet, willing to deny name for the sake of love cries out to her Romeo to deny his father and refuse his name. And then asks, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” Conclusion? Despite Juliet’s unrealistic romantic hope there is something in a name. Names are important, and no Old Testament prophet had more to say about who the promised Messiah would be than Isaiah. The character, identity, and names of this coming Messiah is most clearly stated in Isaiah 9:6:

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

You see four hope-filled characteristics—names given to this future Messiah, our Jesus. Now before you soak in each one of these names, just ponder and wonder for a minute. These descriptive names are what Jesus is for you—in and through the manger. Those tiny hands and tiny feet are beholding to Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Our finite minds can’t even begin to grasp the full truth that’s here, but our hearts no doubt are leaping with joy in who He was, is, and forever will be for us. Jesus is our:

Wonderful Counselor—Jesus is the one who counsels us in the ways of God. And all the wisdom and knowledge He imparts to us is absolutely wonderful! The question is: are you seeking His wisdom and knowledge? Are you asking? Colossians 2:3 tells us that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” It is in and through our Wonderful Counselor that we find the answers to life’s questions.

Mighty God—Jesus is God in the flesh. In the days and weeks ahead let this truth sink in. God took on human flesh and dwelt among us. If we want to know God we need to look no further than Jesus. He is not some impersonal force. He is not distant. He is not uninterested. This one to come was God himself, “Mighty God”.

Everlasting Father—Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 22:13). Jesus is the one who opens the doorway to Eternal life. He is the way, the truth, the life—no one gets eternal life except by Him (John 14:6).

Prince of Peace—Jesus is the peace giver. When we come to Jesus as our Savior it is this peace we gain. Peace with God. Peace that only He can give (John 14:27). Therefore is your heart troubled? Are you carrying anxieties and fears? Remember, Jesus is your “Prince of Peace”.

As you begin this season of Advent, treasure these names given to our Lord. What’s in a name? As you have seen through Isaiah 9:6, much more than we can know or imagine.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen.

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;
And grant us your salvation.
O Lord, guide those who govern us;
And lead us in the way of justice and truth.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
And let your people sing with joy.
O Lord, save your people;
And bless your inheritance.
Give peace in our time, O Lord;
And defend us by your mighty power.
Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

O God, you manifest in your servants the signs of your presence: Send forth upon us the Spirit of love, that in companionship with one another your abounding grace may increase among us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, November 28

Scripture Reading: John 1:14

God Is Now Here

An atheist and a Christian were engaged in an intense public debate. On the blackboard behind the podium the atheist printed in large capital letters, "GOD IS NOWHERE." When the Christian rose to offer his rebuttal, he rubbed out the W at the beginning of where and added that letter to the preceding word no. Then the statement read, "GOD IS NOW HERE."¹

Christmas comes each year to draw people in from the cold. Like tiny frightened sparrows, shivering in the winter cold, many live their lives on the barren branches of heartbreak, disappointment, and loneliness, lost in thoughts of shame, self-pity, guilt, or failure. For many, Christmas is the loneliest or most depressing time of the year. Families of those in prison—prisoners themselves, the aged, the hospitalized, the dying, men and women in the military, adults still haunted by frightening memories of their childhood. Recently widowed men and women. For most, Christmas can become little more than a selfish, greedy, unsatisfying experience. Why? Why is this so?

Reasons vary, but one glaring truth that many don't find is that God is now here. The season becomes so familiar—after all it's just another Christmas. Nostalgia paralyzes us with happy personal associations so much that the babe in the manger becomes an after thought. And yet, in grace and truth, our Lord reminds us year after year to reflect again and again upon the great mystery of the Word made flesh.

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.

John 1:14

Think on this! The might of God moved in a human arm, a foot, toes, and fingers. The love of God was now beating in a human heart. The wisdom of

¹ Vernon Grounds, Radical Commitment. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 7.

God now spoke from human lips. The mercy of God reached forth from human hands.

Think on this! God made His dwelling among us. Literally He “pitched a tent” here with us. Eugene Petersen in *The Message* paraphrases this verse, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood”.

Think on this! Jesus gave us a visible manifestation of God’s presence and power. He healed the lame and the blind, calmed the raging sea, and raised the dead. John reveals that when He turned water to wine at Cana in Galilee, He “manifested his glory . . . and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:11).

Think on this! Jesus identifies with your pain and He offers grace. Are you lonely? He felt it. Have you been rejected? He felt it. Lost a loved one? He felt it. Mental or physical abuse? He felt it. Jesus knows, understands, and has felt your pain. He offers His grace. He offers the one gift this Christmas you can’t live without.

God is now here!

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, November 29

Scripture Reading: Zechariah 9:9

Stable the High Horse

It's as if we can't help it. Our eyes in tandem with our brains almost automatically do it when we look at someone or see someone for the first time. It may have to do with the way they are dressed. It may have to do with the color of their skin. It may have to do with the way they talk. They may use, "y'all's" rather than, "you guys." We all do it or have done it whether consciously or unconsciously. We label or make preconceived judgements on other people. It gives us a sense of relief in responsibility. Pigeonholing and putting others in categories creates distance and gives us an out to be involved.

I can't help but think this happened here in Zechariah 9:9.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

There had to be a great amount of rejoicing. Peace and prosperity was coming again to Zion. There was now going to be retribution on Israel's enemies. Judah and Israel were going to be restored. A king was coming! Bringing righteousness and salvation. Riding into Jerusalem as a conquering hero to take his throne, on his trusty steed. No wait—humble and mounted on a donkey?

Jesus came as a King of Peace. The kingly image of Jesus portrayed in Revelation 19 would have been closer to what the Jews anticipated, even desired. Fortunately for them and us Jesus' first advent was far different.

Horses were majestic animals (still are) and was the choice of a king. They were a symbol of power and majesty. The Jews wanted a conquering king, one who would push and conquer Rome and the establishment. The prophesy above shows us that the Messiah would come on a donkey, which communicates the exact opposite. He came not to wage war. He came not

to judge the nations. He came, as we will see from Luke 2, to bring peace between sinful people and a Holy God. He came in utter humility.

He was all about inclusion, not exclusion. I love what Max Lucado says,

Racism couldn't keep him from the Samaritan woman, demons couldn't keep him from the demoniac. His Facebook page included the likes of Zacchaeus the Ponzi-meister, Matthew the IRS agent, and some floozy he met at Simon's house. Jesus spent thirty-three years walking in the mess of this world . . . when the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!²

Our prayer this Advent should be that some of His humility rubs off on us. Advent is a call to change the way we look at people. Advent is a call to lose all labels we put on people. That may start with those closest to us. Be a peace-maker; clothe yourself with mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Col. 3:12).

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

² Max Lucado, *Outlive Your Life*, Thomas Nelson, pg. 147-148.

Wednesday, November 30

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14

Here After Christmas

I certainly don't know what kind of home you grew up in, but in mine on December 26th, the Christmas tree was gone! Gone! I mean the tree was gone, decorations gone, lights gone—all of it gone! It was as if someone came and sucked up all the Christmas spirit that was in the house in one fail swoop. It wasn't until I was older that I lobbied for an extended period of time to celebrate the most wonderful time of the year.

Cartoonist Kin Hubbard once said, "Next to a circus, there's nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit."³ So true isn't it?

On the one hand, the Christmas season comes a bit earlier every year. Take Michael Hiltzik's 2016 column in the Los Angeles Times entitled: We Know Christmas comes earlier every year, but this is ridiculous. Micheal was flabbergasted when to his surprise the onset of the Christmas season was here "by the appearance of an enormous red bow draped" atop an outlet mall not far from downtown Los Angeles. He said, "So I had to consult my calendar when, driving past the Citadel's crenellated mock-Assyrian walls the other day, I found the self-proclaimed 'world's biggest bow' already in place. Month of October, check. Halloween still two weeks off, check. Outdoor temperature, 80 degrees . . . but Christmas? I don't think so."⁴

On the other hand, once it comes it's hasta la vista. My prayer for us this Advent is this truth: the one thing that sets Jesus apart for us as opposed to Christmas to the world, is that He's not here today and gone tomorrow.

Which brings us to the words of the prophet Isaiah,

³ Kin Hubbard Quotes. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2022. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/kin_hubbard_132492, accessed October 12, 2022.

⁴ Michael Hiltzik, Column: We know Christmas comes earlier every year, but this is ridiculous, Los Angeles Times, October 18, 2016.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Isaiah 7:10-14

These words were spoken about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The kingdom that King Saul, King David, and King Solomon knew was now in shambles. A civil war was brewing and Jerusalem was under attack, and the Lord speaks to Ahaz and says, “I will give you a sign.” In the Hebrew literally, a signal, a mark. In our modern times it was like a road sign. And, road signs are important because while driving they are communicating something that is coming down the road.

So what was the sign? A virgin will bear a son. Quite a sign, right? A virgin will bear a son? When a virgin begins to show signs of bearing a baby that is some kind of sign. That’s a miraculous sign. Wonder at this: there has only been one person who’s ever been born without any contribution of a male, and that is Jesus Christ. God gave us a sign. God gave us a Son.

Finally, we see that God gave us a Savior. His name shall be called what? Immanuel. Wonder at this: Immanuel means—God with us. This baby is God with us. Immanuel is a title. It’s not a formal name. It designates what position this child has past, present, and future. The truth is that God is and always has been with us. That’s why Ahaz should of taken great comfort when thinking about his nations plight against all the countries to the north.

And, that’s why you and I should take great comfort now. You are never alone. Rest tonight knowing that He is with us, in us, loves us, and will never leave us. The holidays can be so lonely for so many. The holidays can be a trigger for grief and pain. For many all is not well. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit be a Wonderful Counselor of peace, rest in Christ who carries burdens, calms storms, and is the great Shepherd. But, most importantly Christ is Immanuel—God with us. He’s here after Christmas.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that, guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Thursday, December 1

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-18

Jesus Is the Reason For All Seasons

Are you tired yet? If not, there is still time. After all it's only the first of December. This two month stretch, from November 1st to December 31st, is nothing short of a marathon sprint. The busyness never seems to cease and is like a roll of toilet paper—the closer to the end it gets the faster it goes.

There are parties, fellowships, children's programs, and more parties and fellowships. And of course, this doesn't even include the traveling, shopping, baking, decorating, and planning for all of the parties, fellowships, and programs. Did I happen to ask if you were tired yet?

Let's be honest. The Advent season along with the twelve days of Christmas can be the most wonderful time of the year. But, for many it can be nothing short of exhausting. Unfortunately, what happens is our Lord often gets the short end of the stick.

They are helpful reminders for all of us including those who claim to be Christ-followers. I'm sure you've seen them? You know those yard signs that are poignant and often are a punch to the gut for those of us scurrying around all over the place. *Jesus is the reason for the season!* We find it on yard signs, decorations, and Christmas cards. But what makes this saying so much more than a holiday cliché?

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Colossians 1:15-18

Let me introduce you to one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. Paul's words there in verse eighteen, "that he might be preeminent", sums up what I want my life to be about.

The question is what does preeminence mean? Merriam-Webster gives it one word: Superiority. It is the quality or state of being superior. So here's the next question. Do our lives *now* proclaim his preeminence? Do we proclaim Christ's preeminence in our celebrating of Advent? Do we proclaim his preeminence in our twelve days of Christmas? Do we proclaim his preeminence over our families, work, parenting, school, our time, our money, our sexuality, our ambitions, our very life—in all seasons of life.

When Christ is preeminent in my life what tends to happen is the pace of life takes a backseat. We get far more intentional about what really matters in life when He is first. Relationships, marriages, children, work & play—all of it will be affected when Jesus is first.

So, as we now turn into the month of December let us remember—He is the reason for the season! Not only this season, but all seasons of life. Jesus be superior and first in our lives.

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Friday, December 2

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4

Never Winter & Always Christmas

I love the 2005 film, *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. If you remember, little Lucy Pevensie was hiding in the wardrobe in the spare room when to her surprise she finds herself in Narnia. To use Mr. Tumnus' description of Narnia, it is "everything from the lamppost, all the way to Castle Cair Paravel on the Eastern Ocean, every stick and stone you see, every icicle is Narnia."

Narnia is a winter wonderland, but not to Tumnus who mentions to Lucy that it is dreadful. Lucy shocked, counters with, "Winter's not all bad. After all there's ice skating and snow ball fights, and best of all Christmas!" But, what Lucy learns is not in Narnia. It is always winter, never Christmas.

Spoiler alert! As the story progresses something happens that changes things—in fact everything. I should say rather someone happens that changes everything. The great lion Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, enters into Narnia himself and when he does the once dreadful icy winter of Narnia begins to thaw and grow warm once again. In other words, all of Narnia changes for the better once Aslan breaks into their world.

It is a parallel picture of what we find here in Hebrews 1:1-4.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

The Author of all creation, the glory of God, the exact imprint, enters into this dark world that's dead in its own icy wickedness.

Between the prophets of old and John the Baptist there was some four hundred years. Ponder that. For four centuries there was this wintry silence. Always winter, never Christmas. But what happens? Everything changed. The birth of Jesus, the coming of Christmas, ushered in a way of change for every cold and darkened human heart. As Paul says, “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2).”

He has purified us of our sins (Heb. 1:3). This gives us hope that change is not only possible, but attainable. We don't have to live enslaved to sin. We don't have to use our tongues to slander others. We don't have to manufacture righteousness in our own strength. The glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature, broke into our world through Jesus Christ the babe in the manger. And in so doing, through faith, has warmed our cold hearts to glow in Him and for Him through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters it is never winter, always Christmas!

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 3

Scripture Reading: Micah 5:1-5

Christmas Promises

In their book, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson relate the words of Lyman Coleman as he reflected on the death of his beloved wife, Margaret:

The most painful decision of my life was asking God to take her home. She had been suffering from repeated brain seizures and her body was wasted. I whispered in her ear: "Honey, I love you. I love you. Jesus wants you to come home. We are going to be all right. We give you permission to let go." She closed her eyes and fell asleep....

As I write this letter, I realize I am without my editor. My greatest critic. My teammate. Soulmate. Prayermate. Partner in everything. We traveled the roads less traveled together in hard times and good times. Honey, I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I will keep the light on for the kids. I will be there for friends. And one day, we are going to join you. All of us. Because Jesus promised it. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."⁵

Because Jesus promised it. Many people make promises. Some keep them, and some don't. But, when it comes to our Lord the one thing that we always need to remember is that He is a promise keeper. The second thing to remember (that we often forget) is that sometimes His promises aren't always in the way or the timing you and I might think.

Today remember this: One promise from God will often lead to more promises. Case in point—Jesus. God promised a Savior that we celebrate at Christmas, but His coming lead us to a myriad of more Christmas promises from God.

Look with me:

⁵ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Zondervan, 2001), p. 61

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. 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. 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. 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. And he shall be their peace. When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men;

Micah 5:1-5

Israel is under attack and the promise of God is to restore her. But the beauty of this passage is the promises felt thousands of years later in the promise of a Messiah. He comes from one of the smallest towns among the clan—Bethlehem. He is not an aristocrat. He has humble roots. And notice that this promise of a Messiah actually leads to even more promises. See them?

Jesus is your Good Shepherd. He guides us. He protects us. He feeds us. Better yet still, He has saved us.

In Jesus we dwell secure. How often fear cripples us in our insecurities. We might not be struck with fear of physical attacks here in sleepy Summerville. But what about the fear of finances. What about the fear of physical ailments. Our young people deal every day with anxieties and insecurities on how their peers perceive them. Listen to the promise again: “They shall dwell secure.” Why? Because Jesus will be “great to the ends of the earth.” His greatness secures you.

Jesus is your peace. I don’t know about you, but I long for world peace. Peace between Russia and Ukraine, between North Korea and South Korea, between China and Taiwan, between Israel and Iran. Peace between nations, and political peace. It’s hard to fathom that world isn’t it. But, more than that the promise here is peace with God. To have and hold this peace that surpasses all understanding is possible in and through Jesus. As we leave this week that was all about HOPE, we now head into our second week of Advent that will be all about PEACE.

For those who wander God has provided a shepherd. For those who are insecure God has provided security. For those who are warring God has provided peace.

Remember these Christmas promises!

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Week 2

Wonder of Peace For the Faithful

Sunday, December 4

Lighting of the 2nd Advent Candle

The second candle, which is also purple, symbolizes peace. Have one member of the family light last week's candle and the second candle.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: John 18:33-38

Why Did Jesus Come Into the World?

Every year Christmas poses a question to the world—namely, why did Jesus come? If you stopped twenty people on the streets of Summerville and asked them, “Why did Jesus come into the world?” Most if not all would reply: to save us from our sins, or to show us how to be a good person. In one sense Jesus did come to save us from our sins. He told Zacchaeus, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He also came to reveal what righteousness looks like. Back to the initial question—I’m certainly not a gambling man, but I would bet that most, if not all, would not say the words of Jesus in John 18,

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate

answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

John 18:33-38

Do you see it? Jesus said, “For this purpose I was *born* and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth (v. 37).” This incredible statement gives us two practical implications and one powerful exhortation.

Implication #1—Christmas means there is truth. Jesus came to bear witness to the truth. There is truth that shapes and defines our world. Truth that brings about wonder and amazement. It is the truth, not a truth for me and different truth for you. But the truth for all of us. It is unchanging and absolute. If you say that, and most importantly believe that, most people today will view you as a bigot, intolerant, arrogant, or misguided. The danger is this: the biblical message of Christmas in America today not only runs into the obstacle that Christ has been taken out of Christmas, but also the deeper problem that truth has been taken out of reality.

Implication #2—Christmas means that Jesus came to bear witness to the truth. This is the real wonder of Christmas—that we read the pages of Scripture and are wowed again and again. The witness of Jesus’ work and his words are there for all to see—bearing witness to truth again and again. Perhaps this year you and your family will read the Christmas story with fresh eyes and listening ears and a humble heart. I know you’ve heard it a hundred times, but feel the wonder afresh this year.

Exhortation—this Christmas doesn’t need more humans like Pilate, therefore don’t be like Pilate. You may know a Pilate. Pilate was the epitome of the uncommitted. He’s the camp that doesn’t say truth is relative nor in the camp that says truth is absolute. Jesus was born two-thousand years ago into this world. The question for individuals like Pilate is, what are you going to do with him? There is no fence riding allowed. You have to do something with Jesus. Either He was the Son of God, or in the words of C.S. Lewis, “a lunatic and liar.” Which is it?

My prayer this Christmas is that you know Jesus and know He is the truth.
After all, know the truth and the truth will set you free.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen.

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;
And grant us your salvation.
O Lord, guide those who govern us;
And lead us in the way of justice and truth.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
And let your people sing with joy.
O Lord, save your people;
And bless your inheritance.
Give peace in our time, O Lord;
And defend us by your mighty power.
Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. **Amen.**

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 5

Scripture Reading: Romans 5:8-11

Christmas Reconciliation

Often times when we peer into the manger at Christmas we often forget the cross. It is true that Advent is about the first and second coming of Jesus into our world. But, the cross is the prism through which the light of the incarnation is refracted. In the cross, the incarnation finds its beauty & complexity.⁶ As we learned yesterday, Jesus was born to bear witness to the truth. We are reminded today that he was also born to save sinners—that the journey to the manger is also the journey to the cross.

but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:8-11

Reconciliation theologically speaking, involves change in our relationship with God (you're going to get a heavy dose of it this week). It always assumes a breakdown in the relationship—one of hostility or fragmentation.

Marriages often endure periods of reconciliation. We hurt and wound each other. There are moments of deep betrayal of love and trust. There are moments of self-oriented denial of the way any healthy relationship is meant to operate. We ask each other for forgiveness, there are tears and deep sorrow. We are gracious with one another and forgive each other. Our relationship is restored—it is reconciled.

⁶ Jonathan Ketcham, Director of Youth Ministries, editor on this resource.

But, there is still something that is missing. We can certainly forgive each other and be reconciled, but we can't change each other. Your forgiveness can never ensure that I would do the same thing again. This is what is glorious about Romans 5 and the reconciliation that we find in and through Christ our Savior. Not only does the cross of Christ bring about forgiveness and reconciliation, but it also changes us. I am forgiven. I have found peace with God. And, through Jesus I now am changed to love more deeply, to see others the way He sees others, to serve, and to give. This is Christmas reconciliation!

As we saw on the first day of Advent—Jesus is truly the Prince of Peace! He was born to restore us. He was born to bear God's hostility toward us that while we were yet sinners He died for us.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 6

Scripture Reading: John 14:27

Finding True Peace

Junior Seau was the well-known passionate, leader, and superstar for the NFL's San Diego Chargers. In his 13-year pro football career, Seau made the Pro Bowl twelve times, was selected to the NFL 1990's All-Decade Team, and became a member of the 2015 class of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Sadly, before that happened, at the age of 43, Seau took his own life.

In an interview with Sports Illustrated, his former teammate and friend, Rodney Harrison, explains that in Seau's last days he was desperately searching for peace. Harrison said:

He would tell me that the only time he truly felt at peace was when he was with his children or in the surf. He would say, "When I'm on those waves, it's the greatest feeling. I have no worries, no stress, no problems. I just forget about everything." Junior was always searching for peace.⁷

Always searching for peace. It is the great search of all the human race isn't it? It isn't just the rich or the famous who are looking for peace—we are all lumped into that category. Unfortunately, for most they search for it in all the wrong places. Whether it be money, power, fame, love, a person, a thing, sex, drugs, alcohol—it's a vain search that only finds one more empty than when the search began.

Jesus said,

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

John 14:27

⁷ Jim Trotter, "Why?", Sports Illustrated (5-14-12).

Our world needs peace. Humans need peace. It doesn't take long to see that turmoil is in us, around us, and beyond us, dominating the fallen world. We need peace. Jesus gives us the answer. Peace I give to you . . . not as the world gives do I give to you.

The peace of Christ is unique because of the source. It only comes from Jesus. It is a supernatural peace. It is a complete peace. It is a content peace. It is fulfilling, satisfying, and a blessing. Jesus takes the scattered puzzle pieces of our lives and puts them in order. The result is peace.

The peace of Christ is unique in its transcendence. According to Jesus it is not found in the human realm. It transcends all that the world offers of superficial and temporary peace.

Know this—the Lord's peace is available, but there is always appropriation. We must go to the source. We must seek in His mighty name. We must always be pointing others to the true source of peace. The peace of Christ doesn't come magically. His peace is appropriated when we seek Him and find Him.

I don't know Junior's full story, but I pray that someone pointed him to the true source of peace in this life. Jesus is true peace!

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Wednesday, December 7

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Stay Awake—Be Sober

I will never forget the amount of preparation that went into the coming of my firstborn child. We looked at cribs, crib mattresses, blankets, sheets, pillows, bumper pads, rocking chairs, nursery gliders, baby swings, baby bouncers, toys, soft toys, stacking toys, push-pull toys, rattles, books, burp cloths, bottles, changing tables, changing pads, did I say diapers, diapers and more diapers, washcloths, wipes, and more wipes. Well, you get the picture. Here's the idea: there is a tremendous amount of time and energy and resources that go into the preparation of a child.

Don't get me wrong I am not saying it's not that big of a deal. It's a huge deal! There is no greater sound on the earth than to hear your baby girl's or baby boy's first cry out of the womb. It will make a grown man weep. That child changes everything about life. I can remember driving home from the hospital—you drive differently when you have that bundle of joy in the car with you. It is the most delicate and precious package in your life and you're going to drive like it.

Now, here's the connection with 1 Thessalonians 5. Paul is saying Jesus is coming back, therefore live like it. Just as you prepare for a precious child to invade your life you ought to be doing a daily inventory in preparation for Jesus' return.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let

us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Jesus said to his disciples, “Of that day and of that hour no man knows, not even the Son of Man.” Paul is essentially repeating that right here. “You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” What’s the point of that? The point is: unpredictability. If you knew the thief was coming it would be vain for the thief to try and break into your home. The point is this — the Lord’s return is inevitable but it’s unpredictable.

The day of the Lord is coming, and as Christ’s disciples we ought to live like it. We live bright eyed and bushy tailed. It is a watchfulness in which you are living life anticipating the return of Christ.

Unfortunately, for many of us, pervasive, day in and day out brokenness has turned our youthful boast that “nothing is impossible with God” into a weary “nothing is ever going to change.” Christmas is a reminder again that change is not only possible, but surely is coming! Jesus’s empty tomb stands as a solid, immovable witness that brokenness is beaten. With the God of hope running the world, the risen Christ at his right hand, and the mighty Spirit living inside you, no brokenness can stand forever. One day, our hope will reach its fulfillment in the coming of the Son and the dawning of eternity, and he will speak the final word that exiles brokenness from the earth.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that, guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Thursday, December 8

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:19-20

The Fullness of God Dwelled

I am captivated by so much of Colossians chapter one. Perhaps, because of the pervasive indifference toward Jesus Christ that we see in our society. The name of Jesus is all too often a cussword, a casual throw away, an exclamation of frustration or anger, or at times something far worse. It should grieve us and move us when the most powerful, most beautiful, most loving, most truthful person in the universe, indeed, the very creator of this universe, could be treated with such ugly contempt.

Read and let these words fall on you afresh today,

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:19-20

Don't be misled by the word "dwell". Paul is not suggesting that there was a man named Jesus in whom deity or divinity resided. Deity didn't dwell in Jesus the way the Holy Spirit dwells in you and me. The "Word became flesh" (John 1:14 see Monday, November 28th). The divine and the human united in the one person of Jesus Christ. He alone is God, which sets Him apart from Buddha, Mohammed, and any other religious leader or sage.

Then we see that word again, "reconcile." "Through him to reconcile to himself all things." Our sin has put us in an adversarial position with respect to our Creator. The only power that can bring peace, the only means by which we can be reconciled and redeemed and forgiven and relate to God as Father and Friend is "by the blood of his (Christ's) cross" (v. 20).

Do not look to your presence in church services as your hope for reconciliation. Do not look to the money you place in the offering plate as they pass by as a way to overcome enmity between you and your Creator.

Do not look to your achievements in helping to improve the community of Summerville or the company for which you work. Do not look to the people in your family or parish, as if you can slip into heaven on their spiritual coattails. Do not depend, rely, trust, or place your hopes in anything other than “the blood of his cross.”

This Christmas look to Jesus—for in him all the fullness of God dwelled!

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Friday, December 9

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:13-16

Once Far Off—Now Brought Near

There is hardly a book in the Bible that isn't weighted with the concern of sin and its effects. It begins "with sin crouching at Cain's door and stretches all the way to the Lord knocking at the Laodiceans' closed door in Revelation."⁸ We see it over and over again through the Old Testament and the prophets, "but their hearts are far from me."

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6

Even Jesus himself felt Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. The crowds that yelled crucify him! The countless exhortations in the Epistles about heresies, hypocrisy, and lovelessness suggest that sin was tearing against these congregations.

It's no wonder we read, "you who once were far off", in verse thirteen of our reading today. Sin creates distance. We were far off. We were without Christ. Without a heavenly citizenship, without a covenant relationship, without God's promises, without access to the throne of grace, and without hope in the world. Most importantly, again we see, we were not reconciled to God and had no peace.

Which is why the first two words of Ephesians 2:13 are so beautiful,

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place

⁸ Lee Eclov, "Lost Sheep: 'It Still Bothers Me Every Day'", Christianity Today Article.

of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Ephesians 2:13-16

But now, through the blood of Christ all restrictions, all barriers, have been removed. “You who were once far off have been brought near.” We who were once dead are now made alive. We who were once lost sheep have now been found and brought near. We who were perishing and enslaved to sin are now rescued. We who were once sick with terminal sinfulness have been washed clean in the blood of Jesus. Sinners made saints. Condemned now free. Once in darkness now brought into the light. We who had no peace have now found Him who is Peace.

This Christmas remember that God not only came to us, but in coming brought us who were far off near to Him.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 10

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:7-11

Climbing Down the Ladder

If you want to taste and see what humility is, one needs not look any farther than the birth of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Look and see,

but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:7-11

In his best-selling book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey contrasts the humility that characterized Jesus' royal visit to planet earth with the prestigious image associated with world rulers today:

In London, looking toward the auditorium's royal box where the queen and her family sat, I caught glimpses of the...way rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a trumpet fanfare and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry.

Queen Elizabeth II had recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid-leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars.

In meek contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him.⁹

In a world where status means a whole lot—we learn from Jesus that life is more about descending the ladder than ascending it. We grow up in a culture that molds us to climb the ladder—get to the highest point. It's a desire to be looked up to, to be catered to, it is the me-first mentality of the world.

We're reminded here in Philippians 2 that Jesus is the example of what it means to descend the ladder. And, don't forget why He descended—for you and for me. To not only be with us, but to bring us near. He didn't come as a king into his own creation. He didn't birth himself into the ruling Roman class. He didn't choose a mother or father that would give him a head start in society. He made himself nothing. Be in wonder at this: the God who spoke the universe into existence got hungry, tired, felt pain, cried, and knelt on a floor to wash dirty feet.

When thinking and pondering at the amazing fact that Jesus became like us the words of Saint Athanasius has always helped me, "He became what we are that he might make us what He is."

Let us be like Jesus, glorifying Him in humiliation.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

⁹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995)

Week 3

Wonder of Joy For the World

Sunday, December 11

Lighting of the 3rd Advent Candle

The third candle, which is rose colored, symbolizes joy. Have one member of the family light the last two weeks candles and the third candle.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: Psalm 16:11

Are You a Pathfinder?

I have been in church all my life. I have to admit those who love Jesus haven't always been upbeat and joyful let alone thankful, but the ones who have stuck out to me (especially at a young age) were living displays of hope in Christ. Someone once said (I have no idea who), "We must be heavenly minded if we are to be of any earthly good." I deem that to be true. You see this in David here in Psalm 16. He prays and we see where the walls of his securities lie,

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 16:11

Whether you know this or not—you are a pathfinder, a trail master if you will. You like David as God’s child know the God-given path of life. You like David know where to find the fullness of joy. You like David know where to find pleasures forevermore. The practical question is this, are you pointing others down this trailhead—this path? Are you blazing the trail for those behind you? Are you a pathfinder? Know this: you are, intentionally or not, there are younger eyes that are watching your every move.

Moms your children are watching how you live. They are studying your every action and reaction. Dads your children are watching you especially at church (at least I hope you're in church) in respect to how you worship. Whether you're attentive or bored out of your mind. Grandparents, your grandchildren are glued to how you're living out your golden years. Is grandad patient or cranky? You are always teaching something to those that are watching your life.

“Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:20-21). Our treasure is in heaven. He was born in a lowly manger to a virgin named Mary. His name is Jesus. He is our Lord. And in Him is all the fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

As we crank up a new week it is all about J-O-Y. This is day fifteen of Advent. Do you feel it yet? I pray that you do. After all you're a pathfinder—God has made known to us the path of life!

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen.

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;
And grant us your salvation.
O Lord, guide those who govern us;
And lead us in the way of justice and truth.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
And let your people sing with joy.
O Lord, save your people;
And bless your inheritance.
Give peace in our time, O Lord;
And defend us by your mighty power.
Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

O Lord Jesus Christ, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found a people acceptable in your sight; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

O God and Father of all, whom the whole heavens adore: Let the whole earth also worship you, all nations obey you, all tongues confess and bless you, and men, women, and children everywhere love you and serve you in peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 12

Scripture Reading: John 16:22

No One Can Take Your Joy

Frankly, I hate to drive. I loathe it. I would if I could, fly everywhere. I hate to drive, but there was also something else that made the fateful drive on Wednesday, May 30th, 2007 even worse. Earlier that morning I received a call from my older brother that my dad's passing was imminent. Therefore we packed as a family and began the brutal trudge back to Illinois from Kansas. It was brutal. I was filled with sorrow pondering the fact that I was about to lose my father. It was also brutal because it was all I could think about as I drove for six and half hours.

While driving two things happened that changed my life forever. I literally had to say goodbye to my father over a cell phone, and an hour later I would learn that he slipped from this world into eternity. I was shattered. Sorrowful was an understatement.

When I come to John chapter sixteen I can't help but think that Jesus is explaining the same kind of emotions that will overtake His disciples.

Look and see,

Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

John 16:19-22

Jesus has constantly reminded his disciples of his departure (Jn. 14:3-4, 18-19, 25), and in verse sixteen of John he brings it up again. His departure

and its distress for the disciples has been a constant theme in the Upper Room. So as that night draws to a close, in the last couple of hours, our Lord has a burden in His heart. He has told them everything they need to know, but they can't process it. They are engulfed in confusion and sorrow.

However, Jesus' main thrust is not only his leaving them once he has been crucified, but reminding them that he will see them again (v. 22). His leaving would bring great sorrow, but his return to them would turn that sorrow to joy.

Joy isn't the immediate outcome in all circumstances is it? We know this to be true about life. Life is filled with many trials and tribulations. Losing loved ones brings great sorrow. However, Jesus teaches us that joy is an inevitable outcome when you concentrate on him. Joy is the goal; joy is the objective. It's not that one event gives you grief and another event gives you joy. It is that the very event that brought the grief will be the very event that brings the joy. Jesus uses the parable of pregnancy to illustrate this truth. Eventually, I knew that my sorrow at the passing of my father would turn to joy in knowing that I would one day see him again. And what day that will be—cause it will not only be my loved ones I will see, but my Savior.

Take this with you today—one day you will see Jesus! Not only that, but no one can take Jesus from you. He is yours and you are His. No matter what the temporal circumstances, the eternal circumstances never change. No one can take your joy!

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 13

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-9

The Greatest Journey

Did you hear about the three runners who ran across the Sahara Desert? Three ultra-endurance athletes did what most would consider insane. They ran the equivalent of two marathons a day for 111 days to become the first modern runners to cross the Sahara Desert's grueling 4,000 miles. In less than four months, they ran across the world's largest desert, and through six countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, and finally Egypt. Throughout the run, the runners were stricken with tendinitis, severe diarrhea, cramping and knee injuries all the while running through the intense heat and wind often without a paved road in sight.¹⁰

While this would qualify for one of the craziest journeys, it doesn't come close to the greatest journey. That journey was penned by the disciple we know as John,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

John 1:1-9

John wants to make sure that we realize that Mary's child, the Man of Galilee, who walks with, eats with, and talks with real flesh and blood humans is none other than the Maker of the Universe. Yep, the one who wept deeply at his friend's grave. Yep, the one who was thirsty so he asked a Samaritan woman for a drink. Who was also the one who held the keys to life and death. Who was also the one who in the beginning made the first

¹⁰ Associated Press, 3 Endure 4,000-Mile Run Across Sahara, CBS News, February 20, 2007.

hydrogen and oxygen atoms and determined that two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen made water. I mean really? Are you seeing and hearing this? Does this not blow your mind and make you wonder in amazement? According to Google there are an estimated 100 billion stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way. And, if that doesn't really blow your mind, our galaxy is just one of billions in the universe. John says, the logos, the Word, Jesus Christ hung them. "All things were made through him" (v. 3). The energy produced by our sun—He made it.

Let me really wow you. When Caesar Augustus thought he ruled the world, the One who spoke all galaxies and their stars into existence lay speechless in a cattle trough. When Quirinius was the governor of Syria, this Creator entrusted himself to a teenage girl named Mary. When Herod the Great was wielding his so called power, God the Creator and Ruler of the world needed a mother to feed him and cloth him.

In case you're not really wowed yet. The Creator and Ruler of the world stepped into your world to give you life. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (v. 4). This journey was not just a journey to see what life on earth was like. This journey was a story to be told about the unbelievable depth of the love of God for you and me. God so loved the world that He became like us—a human. In the stable on Christmas Eve, God forever wedded himself to our humanity. And, in so doing made a way for us to taste the bread of life, to know the way, the truth, and the life. And to hear him say "follow me."

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Wednesday, December 14

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 1:6-9

A Life of Painful Joy

Author Bob Reccord endured the pain of a severe cervical spinal injury. He recounts that, “The pain was so excruciating, the hospital staff couldn’t even get me into the MRI until they had significantly sedated me.” The MRI results showed significant damage, therefore surgery was inevitable. He had lost 80 percent of the strength in his left arm. Three fingers on his left hand had totally lost feeling. Bob was in so much pain he was popping prescribed narcotics like candy and lying on bags of ice. Sleep, what little there was, only came sitting in a reclining chair.

Bob goes on to say,

About halfway through that experience, I found myself sitting on the screened-in porch behind our home. The day was cold and blustery, but I was committed to being outside, just for a change of scenery. Suddenly a bird landed on the railing and began to sing. On that cold, rainy day, I couldn't believe any creature had a reason to sing. I wanted to shoot that bird! But he continued to warble, and I had no choice but to listen.

The next day found me on the porch again, but this time the atmosphere was bright, sunny, and warm. As I sat, being tempted to feel sorry for myself, suddenly the bird (at least it looked like the same one) returned. And he was singing again! Where was that shotgun?

Then an amazing truth hit me head on: the bird sang in the cold rain as well as the sunny warmth. His song was not altered by outward circumstances, but it was held constant by an internal condition. It was as though God quietly said to me, "You've got the same choice, Bob. You will either let external circumstances mold your attitude, or

your attitude will rise above the external circumstances. You choose!"¹¹

You choose. It may sound easier said than done. We know who God is. We are anchored in His love, His salvation, His plan for our lives.

And yet, so often, our joy seems to be pulled out of reach—especially when we look around at our world today. The news is simply depressing. Rampant crime, mass shootings, wars and rumors of war, moral collapse, and the list goes on and on. In our own lives there is the recurrence of cancer, unfaithful friends, and personal sins that we can't seem to shake loose. It begs the question doesn't it, "Can I be happy in this world?"

Peter's words help us,

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:6-9

Notice Peter says, "In this you rejoice", and "Rejoice with joy." He is referring back to reason for great joy in the life of the believer. There is an inheritance and there's an inheritor—God is keeping both! We have joy because of the great future God promises us and his unswerving commitment to keep it for us and us for it.

Our God is not one who sits twiddling his thumbs vainly promising joy to believers crushed with sadness. Christmas reminds us again and again. He entered into our world and endured the greatest of all sorrows, so that in our sorrows, we may "rejoice, though now for a little while."

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that,

¹¹ Bob Reccord, *Forged by Fire: How God Shapes Those He Loves* (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN, 2000), p. 112

guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Thursday, December 15

Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:12

The Joy of Our Salvation

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Psalm 51:12

It is a fascinating phrase, “and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

I would like to think that I am not dependent upon anything or anyone. But the brutal facts of life tell us humans something far different. The doctrine of creation confronts us with this reality, that we are neither physically or spiritually self-sustaining. We were created to be dependent. It is a universal indicator of our humanity.

Yet we don't like this reality. Which is why it is the legacy of our fallenness going all the way back to the garden. There were two lies that were purported by the serpent. One, was the lie of autonomy, which tells me that I am an independent human being with the right to invest how I choose. Sounds very American doesn't it? The second, was the lie of self-sufficiency, which declares that I have everything I need within myself to be what I am supposed to be and do. In fact these lies continue to be purported to us daily.

David, the writer of this Psalm, knows better. He has seen what these lies will birth. Through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah he has seen what happens when you opt for independence. He has seen the fruit of building his own little kingdom and stepping out of God's boundaries.

It's rather perplexing because as you read this Psalm you would think that it would read much differently. I would think David would pray and cry out and ask God for sexual restraint? After all that's how it all started with sex, leading to deceit, leading to murder. Why isn't he praying for more men

like Nathan to hold him accountable? Or praying for protected eyes and sex-free thoughts?

Here in lies the application of the Psalm. *David knew that sexual sin was a symptom, not the disease.* Humans give away to sexual sins because they don't have the fullness of joy and gladness in Christ. In moments of sin, our spirits are not steadfast and firm and established. We waver. We are enticed, and give way because God does not have first place in our hearts and minds as he should.

David knew this about himself, and is showing us, by the way he prays, what the real need is for those who are sinful and fallen. Being a follower of Christ means being broken and contrite. We may never say, "I don't need God", but our actions and decisions at times may betray us.

Paul Tripp says,

When we turn from our own way and recognize our inability to live this way, we begin to seek the full range of resources that God has promised us in his Son. Grace is for the willing and we only become willing when we confess not only the gravity of our sin, but our inability to deliver ourselves from it. Then our willingness opens to us all the sustenance of heart that can only be found in the Son.¹²

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

¹² Paul David Tripp, *Whiter Than Snow* (Crossway, 2008)

Friday, December 16

Scripture Reading: Psalm 118:24

A Great Day Indeed

December 25th rolls around once a year, and thereafter I am counting down the days until it comes again. I love Christmas that much. There is no greater anticipation than Christmas. The chance to decorate, the food, opening presents, the music, the movies. Still to this day I intentionally live into each second of that day hoping it will not pass by too fast.

The Psalmist said,

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Psalm 118:24

He had to have Christmas Day in mind. Although, I am very mindful that Christmas is not for others like it is for me. In fact the season of Advent—the holidays can be very painful days. These days can be filled with the painful memories, earth-bound anxieties, and endless amounts of doing and going. The fact is that it's hard to rejoice in these days let alone be glad in them. And whether it's Christmas Day or any other day—we all have those days when the sky is going to fall. Right? I know I do. Sometimes it seems like when it rains it pours.

I love what Pam Curry wrote that makes this so relatable,

Every night my 6-year-old, Julie, and I thank God for one thing about the day. One evening Julie was breaking out in chicken pox, I had the flu, and my husband was out of town. As I tucked Julie into bed, she said, "Mommy, I can't think of anything to thank God for today. It was a horrible day." We thought for a while more and she finally said, "I know. We can thank him that the day is over."

So we did. "Thank you, Lord, for the gift of life. No matter how difficult it is, we take comfort knowing you are there to help us make it through horrible days."¹³

The psalmist can help us with two views in mind when he says, "this is the day."

First, he is proclaiming this day—present day. We ought to give thanks and rejoice in this day for God's blessings, past, present, and future. And as the psalmist sings, they invite others into thanksgiving. No delay—if God's love "endures forever" (which it does) then we are to offer praise in the now. Today—now.

Secondly, there is a sense that we are to praise God upon receiving deliverance. The Lord is constantly making the day, and the psalmist knows a day of deliverance is not a question. It is inevitable, and thus God deserves the praise. Both then and now.¹⁴

It is a conscious and intentional recognition of God's love being ever constant. God's love is an unyielding presence, and should remind us that no matter what we face, God is always with us and for us. And the more we commit to remembering His love, the less influence the enemy will have over our lives. Instead, we will be able to live rejoicing in deliverance, and being happy with the day the Lord has made. Always.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

¹³ Pamela Curry, San Rafael, CA, Today's Christian Woman, "Heart to Heart."

¹⁴ Aaron D'Anthony Brown, Why Christians Should Rejoice in the Day the Lord Has Made, Crosswalk.com, February 25, 2021.

Saturday, December 17

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4

Christ Is Enough

What is it that really gets your heart pounding? In other words, when it comes down to it what one thing or one person sets your feet to dancing? There are many things that win our hearts in and over our love for Christ. After all, we are hard-wired as worshippers. Whether it be sporting events (like football in the South), the ocean, the mountains, food, our spouses embrace, or that of a child's embrace—all of these things are a means to worship. We are amazed and stand in awe of such things.

But the means to the end of worship is always Christ. In the secret of your heart, how does Jesus stand up to your other loves? None of the things listed above are immoral by nature—in fact they can be things that launch us into full out worship of Christ. Or they may be things that steal our affection and draw us further away from our Maker. The question for us is always, does the things in our lives, our talents, our relationships, do they bow to Christ? Paul would write in Philippians chapter three,

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Philippians 3:7–8

Paul knew what it was like to have much and knew what it was like to have everything ripped away. In spite of it all the surpassing worth of his relationship with Christ could neither be measured or eclipsed.

I don't know about you, but I want that for my life daily. I want to see everything in my life through the lens of the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ! My marriage, my children, the beautiful fall colors (that my eyes have seen this day), the mountains that wow me, the power of the ocean, this parish, the food that my tastebuds deem so delightful, and last but not least Christmas & Advent. All of it! All of it as a springboard to worshipping Jesus more and more. That God forbid it all be taken away I could still say, Christ is enough! Therefore I say with Paul,

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

Philippians 4:4

In this final week of Advent let your heart spring forth with much rejoicing. Now, because Jesus is our life, our life is for Jesus. Allow others to see this fruit in you that they may come out of the darkness and into His glorious light.

I pray that you have been moved by the knowledge of God's promises, Words, and truth so much that it truly has been a week of joy & praise. After all Christ is enough!

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Week 4

Wonder of Love For the Lost

Sunday, December 18

Lighting of the 4th Advent Candle

The four candle, which is purple, symbolizes love. Have one member of the family light the last three weeks candles and the fourth candle.

This week it is all about L-O-V-E that we have received from the hands of God through Jesus in the manger.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess

their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 1:15-17

He Came to Save Sinners

It is one of the clearest and articulated sentences pertaining to the Creator of the Universe coming into the world,

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

1 Timothy 1:15

It is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance isn't it? Yet, millions of people every year go on about their lives as if Jesus didn't mean anything to

Christmas. And, they don't because most do not see themselves as sinners, but good by nature. Christ Jesus coming into the world to save sinners will typically get a, "must not be talking about me", response. This is the real predicament of many around us. After all who needs a Savior, when you deem yourself not needing to be saved in the first place.

It doesn't go without noticing that every human struggles with hardship, disappointments, and pain. Not only that but we live in a world where disease, sickness, and death are ever present. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). And, these are just the outward expression of human predicament, for underneath our situation are hearts that are darkened and hard and sinful. Jesus came into our world to give us new hearts. A new heart and a new spirit in us—removing from us our hearts of stone and giving us hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

And, what about us to whom Jesus has changed? Are we now to go around to those who don't know Jesus and stick out our chests a little farther? No. Our words are those of the apostles, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." I am the foremost of sinners. On our hearts there should be empathy and love and humility. Knowing that I am a sinner like other sinners. That salvation in Jesus did not come from being better than anyone but from the finished work of Christ. And because I know me better than I know others, it is true, acknowledged or not, that I am the worst sinner I know.

Allow this to percolate. May this truth allow you to carry yourself differently, to see others differently, and love others like Jesus loves others. May it soften your words this week. May it change how you see other fellow humans.

Jesus came into my world to save me a sinner, of whom I am the foremost.
Thank you Jesus!

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen.

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;
And grant us your salvation.
O Lord, guide those who govern us;
And lead us in the way of justice and truth.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
And let your people sing with joy.
O Lord, save your people;
And bless your inheritance.
Give peace in our time, O Lord;
And defend us by your mighty power.
Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and as we are sorely hindered by our sins from running the race that is set before us, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

O God, you manifest in your servants the signs of your presence: Send forth upon us the Spirit of love, that in companionship with one another your

abounding grace may increase among us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 19

Scripture Reading: Titus 3:4-7

Amazing Grace

An old tale speaks of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven's gates. The angel said, "Here's how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I will give a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to a hundred points, you get in."

"Okay," the man said, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

Gabriel replied, "That's wonderful. That's worth three points."

"Three points?" said the man incredulously. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific!" said Gabriel, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point?" said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. "Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said the angel.

"TWO POINTS!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God."

"Come on in," said Gabriel.¹⁵

This is essentially what Titus is telling us,

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, *he saved us, not because of works done by us in*

¹⁵ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness By Grace* (Crossway Books, 2001), pp. 22-23

righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

God our Savior appeared and saved us by his mercy not our righteous deeds. How often we look to the quality of our faith instead of the object of our faith. We can quickly get into this mode of always ascertaining whether I am doing the right things. Not only that, but am I doing the right things and trying to accomplish them in my own strength.

You and I will celebrate in six short days Jesus coming into our world. He came to save us, and he did this because he is merciful and gracious. Not because you are a good person. Not because of the family you came from. Not because of where you live, or who you know, or because of anything you have accomplished or will accomplish.

Christmas and the Cross marry to bring amazing grace to you and me. It's amazing grace because God, in his infinite goodness, treats us far better than we deserve. And, in his infinite goodness, he has washed us, renewed us, given us the Holy Spirit—simply poured out on us His riches through Jesus Christ our Savior. You have been made right by his grace—His amazing grace!

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 20

Scripture Reading: Galatians 4:3-7

Christmas Emancipation

In the last days of the Civil War, the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia, fell to the Union army. Abraham Lincoln insisted on visiting the city. Even though no one knew he was coming, slaves recognized him immediately and thronged around him. He had liberated them by the Emancipation Proclamation, and now Lincoln's army had set them free. According to Admiral David Porter, an eyewitness, Lincoln spoke to the throng around him:

"My poor friends, you are free—free as air. You can cast off the name of slave and trample upon it Liberty is your birthright."¹⁶

But Lincoln also warned them not to abuse their freedom. "Let the world see that you merit [your freedom]," Lincoln said, "Don't let your joy carry you into excesses. Learn the laws and obey them."

That is very much the message that we find in Galatians chapter four,

In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 4:3-7

Christmas is about Jesus coming to redeem, to buy back, to emancipate those that were enslaved to sin. It was as if Jesus came into our world and

¹⁶ James L. Swanson, *Bloody Crimes* (William Morrow, 2010), p.46

went into a slave market to purchase us, but instead of making us his slave, he made us a son or a daughter.

And yet, once emancipated and bought we call him, "Father"! Now see the distinction that Paul is making. It would be one thing for God to say I'm a son, it's something else for me to say, yes, and I know I'm a son. But when He gives me the Spirit, the Spirit comes into my heart and causes me to cry Abba, Father, daddy, poppa, father, and pulls me back into intimacy with God and I experience that son-ship. My own heart cries, God, you're my Father. God, I feel intimate with you in person. That's the word "Abba." The Spirit witnesses to us that we are sons and daughters of God (Romans 8).

This is the meaning of the coming of Christ, God's gracious act to save by grace those who are under the bondage of law. So a Son was promised who would make many sons, a Son of God to make many sons of God. Charles Wesley's carol that we sing says it, "Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth." That's paradise regained. That's the Christmas message.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Wednesday, December 21

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Nothing Is Impossible With God

As one who has spent his whole life in church, I know the importance of church announcements. They are indeed precious and a needed commodity in the life-blood of a local parish. But, words and the order of the words, may indeed communicate and say something entirely different. For instance, here are a few announcements that have actually made it into actual church bulletins:

“Announcement to the Moms Who Care ladies group: There will be no Moms Who Care this week.”

“The sermon this morning: ‘Contemporary Issues #3—Euthanasia.’ The closing song: ‘Take My Life’”.

“The Associate Minister unveiled the church’s new tithing campaign slogan last Sunday: ‘I Upped My Pledge—Up Yours’”.

“After the sermon: A moment of silence for prayer and medication.”

And in true Advent form there is this one:

“The pastor will light his candle from the altar candles. The ushers will light their candle from the pastor’s candle. The ushers will turn and light each worshipper in the first pew.”

Words matter, don’t they? Announcements can go very wrong. But today, just a few days before Christmas, we read the greatest announcement that the world has ever received.

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

Luke 1:30-31

There is no better Good News than what was proclaimed by the angel Gabriel to Mary that day. For some four hundred years, from the prophets until Gabriel's word to Mary, there was no word from God. No prophecies—nothing just silence. Then, as if out of nowhere comes an angel to a young girl from a lowly family in a no where land to announce the greatest news ever heard by human ears. His message is Jesus Christ, Savior.

Mary saw that no matter who she was, God could use her. God isn't as interested in your ability as He is in your availability. She was young. She was poor. She is from Nazareth—yea that nothing town. Remember when Nathanael learned that Jesus was from Nazareth? His reply, was “can anything good come out of Nazareth” (John 1:46).

The eyes of the world take one look at this young girl and thinks no way! She's young—strike one, she's poor—strike two, she's from Nazareth—strike three! But God looks at Mary and says yes way!

Mary saw that no matter what problems she faced, the Lord is with her. “And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’(v. 28)”. This was the most important thing she needed to hear. It would change her.

Most importantly, Mary saw that whatever God promises, he can do it. “For with God nothing will be impossible! (v. 37)”. God had been preparing the world for this impossibility for thousands of years. Mary didn't understand it, but she also didn't doubt it. She didn't know how a virgin birth could even happen, but believed it. She believed that no matter what God promised, he can do it!

Is there anything in your life that is too impossible for God? What is it that He can't do? Reflect on this mighty work of breaking into our world. Reflect on his promises that he keeps. Reflect on his mighty deeds of raising the dead, making the blind to see, making the lame to walk, calming the storm. Know like Mary, He can do it!

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that, guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Thursday, December 22

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:46-55

The Abiding Marks of Undeserved Grace

There have been over history some unusual births. In the summer of 2021 a South African mother gave birth to ten children, seven boys, and three girls. It had reportedly broke the record of an American woman who had eight. And then there have been children that have been born that are of unusual size. I discovered that the largest child that we have on record, in the Guinness Book of World Records, was born over a century ago in Canada. You ready for the weight? Twenty-two pounds.

The Bible has its own repertoire of unusual births. Isaac would be one of them, born to Sarah. The Bible talks about "the deadness of Sarah's womb," beyond her ability naturally to conceive. Hannah, infertile, gave birth to the prophet Samuel; an unusual birth. Unusual, all of them, but not unique any of them, not singularly. But now we come to the announcement of a singular momentous birth that doesn't compare to anything in history and here's why: all the births that I talked about, a human dad was involved in conception. He was still involved. Only this birth, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, has that unique position of being unlike any other births—singularly spectacular.

As we saw yesterday, there has never been better Good News proclaimed than what the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary that day. She sees clearly a most remarkable thing about God: He is about to change the course of all human history; the most important three decades in all of time are about to begin. And where is God? Occupying himself with two obscure, humble women—one old and barren, one young and a virgin. And Mary is so moved by this vision of God, the lover of the lowly, that she breaks out in song—a song that has come to be known as the Magnificat. So-named in Latin thousands of years ago because the first word of the song is "magnify." It is the original work of an unmarried teenage peasant girl who just found out she is pregnant, a girl we know as Mary. Now, most young unwed girls don't burst into song when they hear news like that. But there was something about Mary that made all the difference.

She had all the marks of undeserved grace, and you see this in her beloved song to the Lord.

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.”

Luke 1:46-50

Notice her self-description as she praises God: *She calls Him God my Savior in the opening line of her song (v. 47)*. Only sinners need a Savior. Mary sees herself, not as the offspring of an immaculate conception, where she was born without a sin nature, but as a sinner like all the rest of us in need of rescue.

She sings of God looking on the humble condition of His slave (v. 47). Literally, she sees her littleness, both in the world's eyes and in God's. Her words tell us that Mary felt totally unworthy to be chosen of God, just another poor girl among thousands who live poor lives in the backwater towns of a captive nation.

She sees God's actions toward her as evidence of His mercy (v. 50). She sings that His mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear Him. That's Mary's poetic way of saying, "God, you didn't give me what I deserve. Instead, You showed me mercy, withholding what I had coming, just as You do for all who fear You."

What we really see here is something wonderful and true about God: He loves the underdog, the disqualified, and the unimpressive. Mary stands before the Lord just like we do—needy, flawed, with nothing to merit His favor, nothing to earn but judgment. She is amazed at a God who knows her so well and chooses her anyway.

So am I. Here's a gift you won't find under any tree this season—the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ, who has come for you. I wonder if you can join Mary's song today? Don't miss out on this privilege. Today, this morning fix your gaze on the King of Glory; Mary's baby, God the Son, the crucified, risen, reigning Christ is for you. He's for you. And in Him alone, Mary's joy is for you. The greatest treasure you can find, the greatest gift you will receive this Christmas is Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Friday, December 23

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:67-79

Even Through Silence, God Is At Work

In our noisy world finding silence can be a difficult thing. With the rapid transformation of mobile phone technology the urge to text, check texts, email, talk, interact with social media, and play are constant before us. When in a group praying, and there's 30 seconds of silence, too many it feels like an eternity.

We don't like silence, do we? Solitude and silence have become foreign to the Christian Church in the west.

Zechariah knew a thing or two about silence. Zechariah and his wife were going to have a baby—John—and that baby was the very one that Malachi promised would come—a powerful, influential prophet who would be like Elijah. He dressed like Elijah. He called people to repentance like Elijah.

Despite Zechariah's awareness that God was at work, the news that he and his wife were going to have a baby at their age was pretty heavy. Which is why you can't really blame him for asking in so many words in Luke 1:18, "are you sure about this? I'm an old man, and my wife isn't exactly young either." In response to Zechariah, the angel said,

I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. 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.

Luke 1:19-20

Wouldn't you have loved to have heard Elizabeth when he got home? What was God doing with Zechariah? Was this punishment? Not exactly. Yes, he was skeptical, but can you blame him? He opted for logic. And logic says old people don't have babies. So what was God doing in him? In the silence, God was preparing Zechariah for Christmas. It was a nine month boot camp of silence. Has God ever tried to get your attention this way?

Has He ever broken into your life, answered prayers, and yet, you still doubt Him? God breaking into our lives, only to have us miss it? Often, we like Zechariah, opt for logic. Perhaps coincidence or just an anomaly.

Zechariah would get another chance. Elizabeth bore a son and everyone assumed and even insisted that they name him after his father. This is where Zechariah's nine month boot camp of silence pays off. He asks for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John (Luke 1:63)." And, at that moment, Zechariah's mouth unleashed unadulterated joy—inexplicable joy and blessing to God. It was nine months of deep Spirit-filled soul-searching in the form of a song.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Luke 1:68-79

Zechariah sang a song of faith giving us several pictures symbolizing the salvation we have in Jesus Christ. There is the purchase from slavery (v. 68), the deliverance from danger (v. 74), forgiveness of debt (v. 77), the dawning of a new day (vv. 78-79), and salvation (vv. 69, 71, 77).

Even in apparent silence, God is preparing you and me for Christmas. He's not preparing us for the holiday of Christmas, but for the reality of Christmas—God is with us.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant

that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 24, Christmas Eve

Lighting of the Christ Candle

The final candle, which is white, symbolizes Christ the light of the world. Have one member of the family light the four advent candles and the Christ candle.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Good News of Great Joy

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And 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. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When 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.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20

I had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land back in 2012. One of the places we visited while there was the spot (they believe) where the angels visited the shepherds that fateful night of Christmas to greet them with good news of great joy. If you ever go to the Holy Land you have to go to the Shepherds’s Field and Grotto. As I surveyed the grounds and went into the grotto I couldn’t help but be overwhelmed at the magnitude of what happened on those very grounds one fateful night. What made it even more momentous was one of our pastors (while in the Grotto) breaking out into, “Angels We Have Heard On High.” To my surprise it wasn’t just those in our party that were singing, but every tourist from all over the world broke out in song and praise and worship. Even now, I am moved with tears of joy thinking about that moment.

The first to hear of the good news were shepherds. These were men who herded livestock for a living, who were at the bottom of the social structure. Their work was dirty and dangerous. So note, that the angels did not bring the wonderful message of Christ’s birth to those who had influence. They did not appear to the wealthy or to the political or religious leaders. Instead they came to the least significant, least respected, least likely people in the community. The angels came to bring good news to all people, but started at the bottom. I love what Max Lucado says, God announced the birth to shepherds because they were men, “who didn’t have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb. Men who didn’t know enough to tell God that angels don’t sing to sheep and that Messiahs aren’t found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough.”¹⁷

God is looking for people who won't tell him what he can't do—who won't put him in little religious boxes. The shepherds took God at face value. When they heard the news, they embraced it with a simple childlike faith. Luke says they "hurried off" to see the child. Sometimes we miss the miracle because we analyze it to death.

¹⁷ Max Lucado, In the Manger: 25 Inspirational Selections for Advent.

What about the message? The angel's message was succinct and simple: good news of great joy. "Good news" there in the original language is where we get our word "evangelism". It could be translated "gospel" or the Christmas vernacular, "glad tidings."

Don't forget, "great joy!" Not just joy, but great joy. Mega joy! It is the feeling you get when something you've been waiting for and wanting, comes to pass. It's the reunion of an old friend you haven't seen in years. It's the birth of a child. It's being sentenced to death and being pardoned at the last minute. What do you feel? What would you feel? Mega joy!

That's really the idea of Christmas isn't it? It's what this night and the next twelve nights are all about. Mega joy! It is knowing with your mind and feeling with your heart that the announcement to the shepherds was an announcement for you. It's for you. It's for your spouse, your family, your children, your neighbors. Good news of great joy is yours if you have received the gift.

What is the gift? Take a look. Peer into the manger. I pray that the last twenty-seven days you've gotten to know Him, see Him, feel Him more than you perhaps ever have.

His name is Jesus. He is great and is called the Son of the Most High. The Lord has given him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. He came into our world to die for your sins, he was buried, and rose victoriously from the grave and the grip of death. He lives, Christ Jesus lives today.

Receive this good news, and gain great joy. Merry Christmas!

Prayer for the Day

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. **Amen.**

Biblically Minded - Christ Centered - Holy Spirit Driven

Have you lost the Wonder of Christmas?

Four weeks every year comes one of the profound seasons of the church calendar, Advent. It's a season that reminds us of God's faithfulness. God promised and meticulously planned the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ. That he would be veiled in flesh, born of a young virgin named Mary.

Advent is an annual rhythm that busy Christians need. We are in desperate need of reorientation, a sense of direction. That's truer now than any time of the year, because of all of the distractions and busyness. Therefore, come and marvel again at what marvelous things God has done. Joy arises from our great salvation. Peace has come as a gift of great price to God.

Rooted in the past yet relevant today: St. Paul's sows the Good News of Jesus for all people, cultivates servant leaders, and grows neighborly communities.