

The background of the entire page is a dark blue night scene. In the foreground, there are several simple, rectangular huts or tents made of light-colored material, possibly cloth or mud-brick, with small, glowing orange windows. In the middle ground, a larger town or city is visible, with several buildings of varying heights and shapes, some with glowing windows. In the background, a large, dark mountain range stretches across the horizon under a deep blue sky. A few small white stars are scattered in the sky. A prominent white starburst graphic, resembling a stylized star or a snowflake, is located in the upper right quadrant of the page.

Emmanuel
God with Us, In Us,
and Through Us

Trinity Advent Devotions 2017

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First Sunday in Advent

December 3 - Isaiah 64:1-9

It only takes a few moments of reading a passage like this one to remind us that the Advent season is something more than “have yourself a merry little Christmas” and “Santa Claus is coming to town” time. Advent, in like fashion to Lent, is a time of preparation. We await the coming of Christ - the God-man who will cleanse us from our sins and make us worthy of forgiveness in the eyes of a God who is almighty, all powerful, mysterious, and holy. It is this God - who can seem so remote and inaccessible - that Isaiah is longing to see come down. And this is the same God we celebrate coming down to us in human form.

As much as our culture makes it so easy to jump quickly into Christmas once December 1st comes around, this season of Advent is a time of preparation and of anticipation. We prepare our hearts to receive this almighty, all-powerful, and mysterious God in the vulnerable human form. Are you ready to see God made real to you in this season? Are you ready, in the words of Isaiah, to be the clay as our strong potter God molds you into a cherished vessel used to pour God’s love out to all the world? As you enter this season of Advent, may you never lose the sense of anticipation and wonder at the fact that in Christ, God is coming down to turn the world upside down. This Advent, prepare yourself to receive and to follow Him into the world no matter where He takes you. For, as Isaiah reminds us, we are ALL God’s people.

- Andrew Tatum

December 4 - Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

- Psalm 80:3

Asaph’s psalm was a prayer to God to save and restore His people Israel, who, at the time, were in captivity in Assyria because of their sins. Like the people of Israel, we too are prone to sin and to stray from God.

At this time of Advent, may we turn our hearts and minds to the One God sent to save and restore us, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, we are saved from the captivity of our sins and restored to the right relationship with God that was broken because of our sin.

May we take seriously the responsibility and privilege we have of sharing Jesus’ love with others, so they can see the Presence of Christ in us.

- Susan Burnette

December 5 - 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace is the unmerited, undeserved and unexpected generosity of God. Into a dark and unsettling world God sent grace. God sent love in the form of a servant –His son, Jesus Christ. As God looked down on creation, God was filled with compassion and concern. It was into this setting that God decided to place a little baby. This child became a small extension of God’s amazing grace. This grace allows us salvation and fellowship with the Creator. This grace provides peace. This grace is love.

We can be thankful during this waiting season of Advent. We can be thankful for the promise of grace and love revealed in the form of a child placed in a manger. A child to bring us true peace.

What do I want for Christmas?

What do I want for Christmas?

I want to kneel in Bethlehem,
the air thick with alleluias,
the angels singing
that God is born among us.

In the light of the Star,
I want to see them come,
the wise ones and the humble.

I want to see them come
bearing whatever they treasure
to lay at the feet
of him who gives life.

What do I want for Christmas?

To see in that stable
the world kneeling in thanks
for a promise kept:
new life.

For in his nativity
we find ours.

Ann Weems

*Pray: Be thankful for the gift of grace in Christ Jesus.
Be welcoming of fellowship with believers and our Lord.
Be open to kneeling on your knees before the manger, accepting God’s wonderful grace, and asking for peace.*

- Karen Eickhoff

December 6 - Mark 13:24-27

Get ready for Christmas, Get ready for Him.

“19 days and counting, how can I begin to get it all done? The shopping, the decorating, the wrapping, the parties and this house is a wreck!”

Sound familiar?

Lord, help to clear the path of distractions from this Advent season. Open our eyes and our hearts to the yet to be fulfilled promise, the promise of the second coming of Jesus Christ.

He has come and He will come again. Give us the hearts that look for His coming daily. Help us to live a life continually seeking His presence.

Take time to focus on Jesus this season. He is the Light.

- Enjoy a candle lit dinner with your family
- Take a hot bath by candlelight
- Sit in a dark room with only the glow of lights on your Christmas tree burning
- Take an evening stroll with your family by flashlight

Be still and feel His presence. He is the “Light of the World.”

- Lisa Paula

December 7 - Isaiah 11:1-10

In this time of Advent, we often look back into the Old Testament and reflect on the prophecies that foretold the coming of the King as we prepare for his arrival at Christmas. We read the ancient words the Israelites would have also held dear as we wait alongside them for the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah 11:1-10 is one such prophecy that foretells a leader who is unlike any earthly leader known to the Israelites and who brings forth a kingdom that is a stark contrast to all earthly kingdoms. This passage describes a King who is wise and understanding, who not only makes good decisions for His people, but has the might to carry them out. He is powerful but also faithful, righteous, and just. He cares for all of His people and judges them fairly not dismissing the least of these as unhelpful to His purposes or unworthy in His sight. Above all, He has a knowledge and fear of the Lord that guides everything He does. This leader is King Jesus.

In the Israelites' time, as in our time, a leader like this was a huge contrast to the leaders of the earth; and thus, His kingdom would be vastly different as well. After describing this leader, Isaiah goes on to describe the new kingdom this root of Jesse will establish. It is one of peace and harmony, where the weak and strong lay together without one taking advantage of the other. It is a place where prey and predator, exploiter and victim, eat together and where the vulnerable are immune to danger. There is no harm or destruction. Everyone is cared for. All people rally towards this new King. And all of this is made possible by the filling of Earth with the knowledge of the Lord that the King brings.

December 8 - Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

This is more than just a prophecy describing the majesty and wonder of Jesus and the work He does. It provides a vision of what the Kingdom of God should look like. It gives us an image of God's desire for His creation. We, as Christians, are kingdom bringers on this Earth. We are called to share the knowledge of the Lord, the gospel, that we have received, to all nations and the very ends of the Earth. We are invited to work alongside Jesus, at the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to help make the vision of this new kind of kingdom in Isaiah 11 a reality on this earth. We are instructed to share the gospel, to promote peace, to give voice to the exploited, to love justice, and to desire harmony among all Creation. I would encourage us all to use this Advent, this time of preparation, to reflect on the prophecy God has given us in Isaiah 11 of the One who is to come and whose coming we celebrate at Christmas. Give thanks that He is a King unlike any earthly leader and that His kingdom is unlike any we have seen. Consider your role in His action of moving the earth closer to His kingdom trajectory, His ideal vision of this earth. Ask God to help you see places where you can be a part of His work to create a place where the strong lays with the weak, where the prey and predator eat together, and where the vulnerable are protected from danger.

- Rachel Langley

It is always astounding to me that Paul's letters were written to the Christians in Ephesus while he was in a Roman prison. Talk about a model of being in the presence of Christ!

His beautiful words begin with praising God. He gives thanks to Him for having us in mind while laying down earth's foundation. Paul also reminds us of God's love. A love so great that He decided to adopt us into His family through Jesus Christ. And he writes words of encouragement not letting us forget that we have been chosen, predestined.

So, as we prepare for the arrival of God's greatest gift, how can we be like Paul and give thanks, share God's love, and be encouraging to others? I think we have to start by asking what choices we will make during this Advent season.

How will we give thanks to God during the days leading up to His son's birth? How can we be like Paul and give encouragement to others despite our circumstances? The answers may or may not come easily. But what if we shift our focus and bring these questions to Christ? Trusting the Holy Spirit to provide the answers.

Going this route requires additional work, a deeper faith, and being intentional. If we are committed to find-

December 9 - Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-8

ing the time to be still, pray, and listen, God will reveal ways to answer these questions that are beyond anything we could fathom. And when we choose to execute His answers, His will for our lives, not only will we experience abundant joy and immeasurable blessings; but most importantly, we will be glorifying God in the process.

If we practice this during the Advent season, my hope is that we go back to God on a regular basis, check in, and create a habit of asking these questions throughout the year. Take time to pray over them and let this practice become ingrained, second nature. Then, not only are we passing along the examples Paul wrote in the first chapter of Ephesians, we are living as we are called to live...God with us, in us, and through us.

- Emily Nelson

In Matthew 9, leading up to our scripture for today, we see Jesus busy healing the paralytic man, calling Matthew the tax collector as a disciple, answering questions from John's disciples, raising the dead, healing a sick woman, the blind, and a mute, driving out demons and hearing the Pharisees say: "it is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons". The Pharisees totally did not understand Jesus, just as much of society today does not understand him or even acknowledge him. In Matthew 9:35-36, we see Jesus going into the towns and villages, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. Jesus, we are told had compassion on the people, because they were harassed and helpless. What does compassion mean? The dictionary definition is "sorrow for the sufferings or troubles of others, accompanied by an urge to help". It is also defined as deep sympathy or pity. So, it is being concerned about the troubles of others enough to take action. When was the last time you and I were concerned enough about the sufferings or troubles of others to take action?

Then in Matthew 9:37-38, Jesus seeing the needs all around him, said to his disciples: "the harvest is plentiful, the workers are few. Ask the Lord to send workers into the harvest field". Then, Jesus, being a man of action, calls his disciples to him and gives them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every sickness and disease. sending them out among the Jews to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and drive out demons. Mark, in Mark 6:7, tells

Second Sunday in Advent

December 10 - Isaiah 40:1-11

us that Jesus sent them out two by two, a good way today to witness.

What lessons do Jesus' actions give us for today? Christians, like Jesus' disciples are called to exhibit Christ in the world. How do we do this? Certainly we do not heal the sick, drive out demons, or raise the dead. First, we do what all the gospels tell us: we go and tell, making disciples of all nations. Our charge is not limited to one race but is extended to all people. We are to mimic Jesus in the world. We are to be servants, we are to show God's love to the world. How do we do this? There are many ways: volunteer with an organization, befriend a senior adult or someone who needs assistance, tutor students or teach English as a Second Language (ESL), etc. There are many organizations we can volunteer to assist. Two organizations I have volunteered with are Special Olympics Summer Games for about 20 years and Operation Christmas Child for 10 years. The two serve totally different clients. Working with each organization presented challenges but was very rewarding. One of our daughters is teaching ESL to refugees (through a CBF contact) in an apartment complex. While it can be difficult, she finds it very rewarding. A maintenance person in the complex told her recently: "these people love you, they understand you are doing this out of love". Being a friend, reaching out to those who are hurting, those who have needs, saying a kind word, is what Jesus expects us to do. That is what Jesus did. At this Christmas season, we need to show the world that Jesus lives in and through us.

- Ron Sneed

Today these words probably remind us of Handel's "Messiah", but to the people of that day they had a very tangible and specific meaning. Back then they did not have the kinds of roads that we have today. Palestine was crisscrossed with paths that were little more than beaten tracks, and all it took was a little rain to make these impassable. As a result, travel was exceedingly difficult and uncertain.

Efforts were eventually made to do something about this situation. King Solomon seems to have been the first to tackle the problem. He had rough gravel causeways laid beside some of the main paths of the day. These were called specifically "The King's Highway," and while they were a far cry from our kind of all-weather pavements, the basalt stone was at least the first step toward a more dependable surface. Whenever the king proposed to make a journey, word would go out to "Prepare the King's Highway," to remove any stones that might have rolled onto it and repair any places that might have become impassable. This was a recognized procedure prior to any royal journey, and the Old Testament picked up on this practice and predicted that before the Messiah would arrive, someone would be sent ahead "to prepare the way of the LORD."

To shift the emphasis from then to now, we are constantly in danger of missing the true meaning of

December 11 - Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Christmas in the busy season of Advent. We deceive ourselves and others when we miss Christ in the celebration of Christmas. So now, before the season gets too far along, stop and think about what would make this one of the best Christmases of your life. Take time alone each day for meditation and prayer about what Christ means to you. Take time to express deep love to family and friends. Include the poor and hungry on your Christmas list. And, filled with Christ's love, ask Him to give you at least one person each day with whom to share what He means to you.

Each of us has the responsibility to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord to our hearts, to family, and to people who don't know Him.

- Victor Cole

Selah.

What an appropriate word for Christians in Advent. In a season of commercialism and hustle and bustle, "Selah" speaks a word of peace, pause, and even a word of warning to stop and listen to each one of us. For us, it can be a reset here on December 11. Maybe you have been caught up in shopping and parties and busyness. Hear the word "selah" as your personal word from the Spirit reminding you to slow down and listen.

If we slow down and listen, we can take the time to meditate on our need for a savior such as the Christchild. We can find renewal in our love for the Lord as he chose to bring salvation into the world when all there was to find was chaos, war, and strife. Jesus, on Christmas night, was the Father's "Selah" to the world.

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss...

- Psalm 85:10

Take time today to rest in God's Holy Selah and be reminded that God is faithful to his promises - that in all of our Christmas celebrating, we are truly celebrating the day that righteousness and peace came together for the salvation of our world.

December 12 - 2 Peter 3:8-15

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our savior, Christ Jesus, we have spent the past months discovering what it means to be the presence of Christ. We have looked at our place of work, our schools, where we play, and in our community. If we acknowledge His calling, we discover we are to be the presence of Christ everywhere so that all may receive the gift of salvation.

In today's passage we are reminded that our time is not God's time. We cannot begin to fathom a creator to whom "one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day." While we do know He will return, we know not the time or the place. The Scripture tells us, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." It will be completely unexpected. Until that day we are to be ready because the Lord does not want "any to perish but all to come to repentance."

Our Lord, who became flesh and dwelled among us, was the gift by which all may come to repentance. He was crucified to save all mankind from sin. Although He now sits at the right hand of the Father, He gave us the Holy Spirit and the Gospel to spread the good news throughout the world. As Christians, we are the presence of Christ in the world. While none are without sin, we are told in verse 14 that since we are looking forward to His return we should "make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him."

This Christmas season, let us renew our efforts to be the presence of Christ every day and share this wonderful gift, so that none may perish and all may come to salvation!

December 13 - Mark 1:1-8

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. It is an interesting one. We find ourselves at the beginning of Mark's Gospel and it is dramatically different than the beginning of Matthew, Luke, and John. Mark starts his Gospel simply with the appearance of John the Baptist in the desert and his ministry. It's a curious choice, as readers of this Gospel alone might find it jarring to start the story of salvation with the final prophet in the middle of his ministry rather than at the beginning but at the same time it is powerful.

People walked or rode for miles through the desert to listen to John the Baptizer. They heard his words of repentance and salvation. They did so with joy in their hearts, realizing that their God loved them and that something wonderful was about to happen. Some people did not understand all of what they were hearing or what exactly it meant. Most even failed to recognize exactly whom Jesus was when he arrived, but they were so thirsty for God's love and salvation that they felt compelled to follow John in preparation anyway.

John the Baptist's message applies just as much today as it did in the original Advent. God's love for His people is never-ending, and He sent Jesus Christ as a testament to it. All we need to do is prepare ourselves for His coming — in our case, the Second Coming. God is with us, God is in us, God is through us. During this advent

December 14 - Isaiah 40:1-11

season how can we share this message of hope with ourselves and with others? Something wonderful is coming, and unlike the Israelites in John's day, we already know that it is the salvation of Jesus Christ.

- *Katie Medlin*

“Prepare the way of the Lord!”

Advent is *the* season for preparation and not for Christmas buying guides and decorating preparation, but for true heart, mind, and spirit preparation for the radical indwelling of our Lord in our lives. Looking back at the prophets we can see and feel the longing for our Lord that many who are cradle Christians have never truly felt as there has not been a day when we did not know the Lord. In reading the story of God's people, we can feel the desperation and hear the groaning for salvation and peace.

Because we are living on this side of history, and because we are living in the age of the Church and the age of the realizing Kingdom, we know the peace and salvation offered through Christ that began as Love came down at Christmas, but we also daily feel the strain and groaning of the residual sin and evil that still remains in our world.

May we take this time of devotion and prayer to live in that tension and prepare our hearts not only to receive the Lord but to proclaim with the saints and the angels the salvation of the Lord for all people. May we be like the voice in the desert crying out for all to hear of the great promises of God!

December 15 - Hebrews 1:1-6

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 he also 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 the 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.

- Hebrews 1:1-4

Read and re-read this passage. If you do, it will sound like a confession of faith or a creed. As one of Christianity's earliest and highly circulated confessions, here we find a concise Christology that guides us as we draw close to God's own Son, Jesus. In these verses, we confess that Jesus is God's ultimate Word to us, that through Him all things have been made, that He bears the very nature of God, that he is all-powerful, that He is responsible for our salvation, and that He now sits enthroned with God the Father.

In Jesus, God accomplishes all things. This passage today reminds us of the true meaning and hefty weight of Christmas. We are not just celebrating family time or gifts or Christmas traditions. We are not even just cel-

ebrating the birth of a special baby or the radical, holy "yes" of his mother 2,000 years ago. At Christmas we celebrate God. We celebrate our God's faithfulness to thousands of years of prophecy and promise. We celebrate the day when God revealed to us His fulness in Christ. We celebrate the beginning of God's Kingdom reigning here on earth. At Christmas, we celebrate the entirety of our faith.

Take time to meditate and pray today on the gift of your faith. Think of those faithful saints who taught you about Jesus and give thanks to God for them. Think about the beauty, depth, and richness of a faith in our Triune God. Pray for your faith journey that it would be renewed and your fervor for knowing God would be reignited within you this Christmas.

December 16 - Luke 1:26-38

A teenage girl. A small dusty town. Engaged to a carpenter. Just ordinary stuff, right? Until . . .
Until she is visited by an angel - the angel Gabriel. Until she is told she will give birth to the Son of God – even though she is a virgin. Until she realizes the magnitude of what this could mean to her betrothed, the shame it could cause for Joseph.

What is her response? “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

An attitude of submission to God’s plan, not seeking to save face. A willingness to serve, not be recognized or glorified among peers. Dying to selfish desires instead of demanding her rights be acknowledged. Trusting God for the impossible, even when it did not make sense at the moment.

What might God be asking of you this Advent season? Whom might He bring across your path that you could “serve”? You might think you are “just an ordinary teenage girl from a small dusty town”. But if you will allow God to use you as His servant, be His Presence, fulfill His Word, you just may help someone have an extraordinary Advent season this year – including yourself!

- Rhonda Gubbins

Third Sunday in Advent *December 17 - Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11*

When I was a kid, I used to watch re-runs of the TV series “Superman,” featuring George Reeve in the double role of Superman and Clark Kent. I remember that it used to make me mad that, just because Superman put on a suit and a pair of glasses, no one could recognize him. As I grew older, I came to realize that it is often easy to hide something where no one is looking for it.

Our passage from Isaiah proves this point. The first four verses offer us an exciting and vivid description of what it must be like to encounter God. The prophet is overwhelmed, just as any of us would be. After reading this uplifting and inspiring account, we, too, want to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy!” It almost seems that what follows cannot possibly fit with such an inspirational encounter. Verses 8-10 seem to shut off the people from God. How can this be? As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, we know that God doesn’t want to shut us off. Jesus birth is the embodiment of God reaching for us and seeking us where we are.

The problem is that, just like the people who encountered Clark Kent weren’t expecting to see Superman, we too often are not expecting to encounter Jesus. Because we aren’t looking for Him, I wonder how often we have been in the presence of Christ without recognizing Him.

December 18 - Psalm 126

Fortunately, even when we are missing Him, God never gives up on us. When Isaiah asked how long he would have to speak to a generation with calloused hearts and dulled ears, God gave him a clear answer – UNTIL THE HOUSES ARE LEFT DESERTED. God will NEVER stop reaching for us.

Advent is a season of expectancy. As we go out into the world, let's EXPECT to encounter Jesus. Who knows what we will see when we are looking for Him!

- Maury Tepper

Psalm 126 opens with praise to God for an unexpected and miraculous deliverance. God had prompted Cyrus, the king of Persia, to allow Jewish captives to return to their land and rebuild the temple. They thanked God for the freedom he had given them and continued to pray for those still in captivity, knowing God would turn their weeping into joy.

As we prepare for Christmas, we too celebrate freedom from captivity. God miraculously delivered humanity from slavery to sin through the birth of a helpless infant in manger. When we accept Christ, we are initially freed from sin, but God also continues to deliver us. What has He miraculously delivered you from this year? Doubt? Worry? Grief? Perfectionism?

As we prepare for Christmas this year, let us follow the example of the psalm and praise God for our deliverance. And then share it joyfully with those around us, believing expectantly that they may receive God's deliverance too.

- Laura Thomas

December 19 - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you... May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, 23-24

Advent is a time of hope as it anticipates the celebrated birth of the Savior of the world, Jesus. Paul noted to the Corinthian Church that we should prepare ourselves to take the Lord's Supper (Communion), but should we also prepare ourselves for the Christian high day of Christmas? After all, is it a Holy Day or a holiday? Our passage today gives us an idea of how we can approach Christmas in a most holy way. First, we set our minds on the positive (Rejoicing always) in the reconciliation that God has given mankind. Next we worship continually (prayer being a form of worship) and give thanks to God and submit to his Spirit of Love. And finally, we focus on the true meaning of Christmas (abstaining from the world's view of this 'holiday'). In doing so God promises to bless us with peace and keep us spiritually sound for our Lord Jesus Christ.

- David Brantley

December 20 - John 1:6-8, 19-28

Hiking is one of my favorite things to do. I love being outdoors, climbing over rocks, and exploring the unknown. I was, however, not always this excited by nature. When I was a young girl, my dad would take my sisters and me on hikes around our house. As we walked along outside, us girls would collectively complain about the heat, the bugs, the icky brown stuff on the ground, etc. The worst of it came when we got to the creek. I was terrified to cross over the small creek that seemed so large at the time. I worried because there were only a few wobbly and slippery rocks to step on but then something special would always happen. My dad would offer to go first. He would forge ahead, stopping to adjust wobbly rocks. Where needed, he would add a new rock or tree stump, so that we had a place to step. He went ahead and prepared the way for us. Crossing the creek still terrified me, but I was able to do it more confidently and with greater ease because he had gone before me.

In the Scripture today, we learn about a man named John the Baptist. In his description in John 1:8 it says, "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." Now John was going about baptizing and speaking about someone to come. The Jewish leaders wanted to know who he was and what gave him the right to do all of this. He answered, in the words of Isaiah (40:3), "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" The people did

December 21 - Romans 16:25-27

not quite understand but John wanted to make it clear that someone far greater than him was coming. The light of the world had come into the world in the form of the person, Jesus, and John was simply a witness to that light. By going ahead of Christ, baptizing people, and speaking of the man to come, John helped prepare the way for Jesus. He was able to open many hearts and minds to the message that Jesus would bring. In the same way, the season of Advent works to prepare the way for Christmas. With department stores and TV commercials surrounding us, it is easy to forget that Christmas is about much more than decorations, gifts, and black Friday sales. Each day of Advent works to open our hearts and minds to the message of Christmas. Like a father preparing the way for his children, advent guides us in the right direction. It leads us to focus on the great joy of Christmas. Indeed, Christ coming into the world is the ultimate joy—and far greater than any gift we, or even John the Baptist, could give. It brings to mind the classic Christmas carol, “Joy to the World!” The carol urges every heart to prepare room for the Lord who has come. This advent season, I hope we can take advantage of the time to prepare ourselves for Christmas. Let our hearts prepare room for the greatest joy to the world. Let our hearts prepare room for Jesus Christ.

- Rebekah Gordon

Faith is full of mystery. There is so much that we entrust to the Lord as we seek a relationship with Christ, and through our experiences with Christ our trust grows and our comfort with mystery develops. The prophets of old spoke messages from God to his people, and yet, his people often did not hear or did not trust. But God, in his infinite wisdom, sent us his own Son in order that we would know the depth of his love and the joy of a relationship with him.

In Jesus, God has been fully revealed to all of the world. When God’s Love came down at Christmas, the people of the world who had been walking in darkness saw a great light - a light that brought clarity to mystery and trust to doubts. Will we ever know everything there is to know about God or even fully understand the holy mystery of the Trinity? Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Through the relationship that God calls us into through Christ, we are becoming evermore fully known.

Let us rejoice in the miracle of Christmas, the miracle of knowing and being known by God, our Father and Creator; by God, the Son, our Savior and Redeemer; and by God, the Spirit, our Sustainer and Ever-Present Guide.

December 22 - Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

One beautiful Advent tradition is that of creating a Jesse Tree. The Jesse Tree is the family tree of Jesus tracing back his lineage and retelling the stories that lead us to his birth on Christmas Day. Families can create their own evening traditions throughout the season of Advent around making special ornaments to remind us of the biblical figures in Jesus' family and re-telling their stories. In four weeks, we read about kings and common people, about widows and children and brave fighters. We read about the great and wonderful things that God orchestrated on our behalf. And then, we rejoice in Christ's birth. The best part of celebrating Advent in this way is that it really helps us discover God's faithfulness to his covenant with his people.

In Psalm 89, we hear of God's steadfast love for us and we read about the promise he set forth with the anointing of King David to bring about salvation through his line. Jesse was David's father, and Jesus came from this family tree. In Matthew, Jesus' Jesse lineage comes from his earthly father, Joseph. And, it is traditionally understood that in Luke, his lineage comes through his mother, Mary. Often times we blaze through the genealogies in the Bible, but in taking time to read the names and remember the stories, we discover that God's plan is not arbitrary but it is well-planned for our good and for his glory that all may be offered salvation through his Son, Jesus, the Christ. Praise be to God!

December 23 - 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

He had such good intentions! David actually felt guilty about living in a house nicer than the tent in which the Ark of the Covenant, the dwelling place of God in those days, was resting. He would build a house for God. Should be a no-brainer, right? But through the prophet Nathan, David discovered that God had other plans. One of our spiritual temptations is assuming we know what God wants, and how God wants it done. Just like those before Jesus' birth who were waiting for a Messiah that would ride in on a white stallion and overthrow Roman rule, we fall to the same temptation today. We make a decision to act before we put the vision squarely into God's hands in prayer. We ask God to bless our plans and help them succeed!

As we make our way through these days of Advent – preparation for God's coming to earth – maybe we need to invest time praying for God's guidance and wisdom in some aspect of our lives before seeking God's blessing on our wishes. Personally, I am so thankful God chose to send Jesus in a way I never would have imagined! Help me oh God to trust You and Your Way for my life. Help me to remember that You ARE the Creator, not me.

- Hal Melton

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 24 - Luke 1:46-55

As children of God, we look to our fellow brothers and sisters and to those saints who have gone before us as our examples of how to live a faithful Christian life. Throughout our church year, we give thanks to God for those who stand in our Faith Hall of Fame. We give thanks for grandparents who modeled quiet strength in faith. We are grateful for adults in our church who gave their time to teaching us the Bible from our birth. We revere those men and women in our church who seemed to take on the care of our building as their personal mission from God. A lived, active faith is a faith worth imitating.

In this passage in the birth narrative of Jesus, we find the response of the first sainted sister to say “yes” to Jesus. Her great love and devotion to God led her to a place of humble servitude and to an attitude of “Thy will be done in me” towards God. Mary’s Magnificat is one of the most beautiful pieces of Scripture that depicts one of God’s humble servants giving her life up to His will no matter the personal cost. May we be so brave this Christmas as to say “yes” and “Thy will be done in me” this year. This is the time to recommit our lives to the One who loves, redeems, and sustains us everyday.

Christmas Day

December 25 - Isaiah 52:7-10

Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere, that Jesus Christ is born!

Break forth together into singing [...] for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God

- Isaiah 52:9-10

The story of Christmas is the story of the redemption of the world from sin and death. Peace is proclaimed in the birth of Jesus. We see the power and might of God in the face of a tiny baby whose hands will heal us and whose blood will save us. This perfect Son of God will blot out all of our sin and make us holy. All of God’s love and power is in this tiny little, unassuming Christmas package.

May we be a people of beautiful feet carrying the good news of God’s salvation to all people. May this be the gift given to us that keeps on giving to all the ends of the earth.

Hallelujah! Christ the Savior has come!

