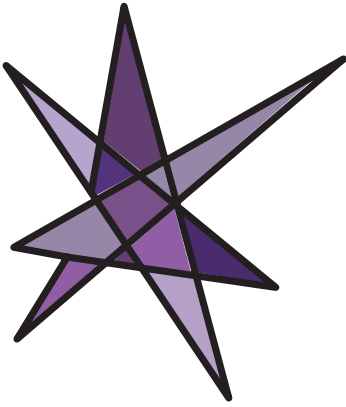


*What They Were Looking For,
We're Looking For . . .*

2019 Advent Devotional Guide

West Hills Church
Omaha, Nebraska



Introduction

Our society sells itself on the idea that the holiday season is about kindness and good feelings. If we're honest, the holidays can leave us short on both. For the followers of Jesus, Advent is meant to be a season of anticipation. We intentionally stoke our desire for the gifts that came to us through Jesus, and also for those gifts we will receive

when Jesus returns. Advent is meant to ignite an inner awareness that rides over the seasonal busyness, that underscores our many holiday celebrations, and that sheds warm light on our quiet suffering. Our faith may inspire kindness and good feelings, but our faith can shine on without receiving either. Our faith moves at a deeper level.

The Scriptures in this devotional guide are bright with the bigger themes. Hope, love, peace, joy – these are the movers of our souls. Something shifts inside us when we believe that this is not, 'as good as it gets'. **Hope** is a handle to grasp when we feel ourselves adrift in ambivalence or despair. Consider also, how we inwardly crave what **peace** promises - a sense of rightness, safety, and healing. Furthermore, what can top the value and fulfillment we feel when we are truly **loved**? And consider how **joy** charges our hearts when we finally gain the object of our hope, or feel the freedom of peace, or become suddenly aware of the depth of our beloved's love.

I encourage you take time this Advent to tap into the deeper side of the season. I pray that the reflections in this booklet will be a platform from which you can dive into what Jesus means for us now, and what it will mean when he comes again.

Andy Hamer
Pastor

The virgin will conceive a child! She will
bear a son and will call him
Immanuel, which means
"God with us."

The Meaning of Advent

The season of Advent begins on the Sunday nearest November 30, and continues through the four Sundays before Christmas Day. This year Advent begins on December 1.

As Christians, we celebrate Easter to mark Christ's death and resurrection, but Christmas is important as the celebration of His birth. Like the season of Lent, Advent is a time of reflecting and preparing for the coming of the King. We can think of this coming in three ways:

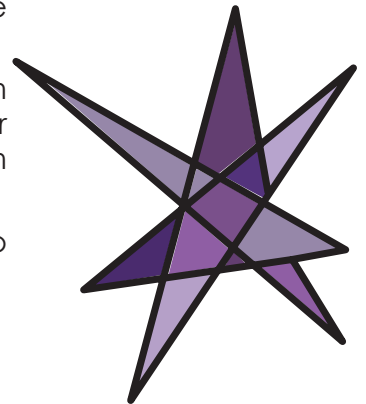
1. The season of Advent represents the coming of the King as a human child. In the form of a baby in a manger, Jesus came to us.
2. The season of Advent signifies the coming of the King in our own hearts, to which we witness year round.
3. The season of Advent reminds us of the second coming of the King, the time at the end of the age when He will return in all His glory.

From now until December 25, we will be in busy preparation decorating, baking, writing cards, shopping, wrapping, etc. Let us not neglect the season of Advent, a time of preparing our hearts to celebrate that most perfect gift--God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The Advent wreath is composed of four candles in a circle of evergreen. Sometimes there is also a central candle called the Christ candle. The four candles are for the four weeks of Advent, one being lighted on each Sunday. They can represent attributes (faith, hope, joy, peace) or characters from the Christmas story (prophets, angels, shepherds, Magi). The Christ candle is not lighted until Christmas Eve. The evergreen represents the everlasting life found in Christ, and the circle further symbolizes life without end.

The Advent wreath itself signifies the progress from darkness to light. The world had waited in darkness for the Light to come into the world. Jesus himself said, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12)

Allow the wreath and the lighting of its candles to help you celebrate once more the coming of Jesus.





DECEMBER EVENTS

Sunday, December 1	Hanging of the Green Service	6:00 p.m.
Friday, December 6	Experience Christmas!	6:00 p.m.
Friday, December 6	InterVarsity Progressive Dinner	7:00 p.m.
Friday, December 13	Celebrations	11:30 a.m.
Sunday, December 15	Chili & Caroling	11:30 a.m.
Tuesday, December 24	Christmas Eve Family Service	5:00 p.m.
Tuesday, December 24	Christmas Eve Candlelight Service	7:00 p.m.

WEEKLY WORSHIP

Join us Sundays for identical worship services at 9:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.

Table of Contents

WEEK 1

date	verse	author	pg.
Sunday, December 1	Isaiah 11:1-10	Carol Isaac	12
Monday, December 2	Isaiah 9:6-7	Bob Drake	13
Tuesday, December 3	Isaiah 2:1-5	Wayne Moore	14
Wednesday, December 4	Micah 5:2, 4a	Ginny Lakin	15
Thursday, December 5	Isaiah 61:1-3	Brian Eichhorn	16
Friday, December 6	Malachi 3:1-2	Les Peterson	17
Saturday, December 7	Isaiah 52:7-9	Sarah Sedivy	18

WEEK 2

date	verse	author	pg.
Sunday, December 8	Isaiah 12:2-6	Betty Manna	20
Monday, December 9	Zephaniah 3:14-17	Kevin Wagaman	21
Tuesday, December 10	Luke 1:11-17	Steve Burgess	22
Wednesday, December 11	Luke 1:26-38	Laura Meyers	23
Thursday, December 12	Matthew 1:18-27	Paul Bates	24
Friday, December 13	Luke 1:39-45	Michaela Dunn	25
Saturday, December 14	Luke 1:46-55	Bridget Backer	26

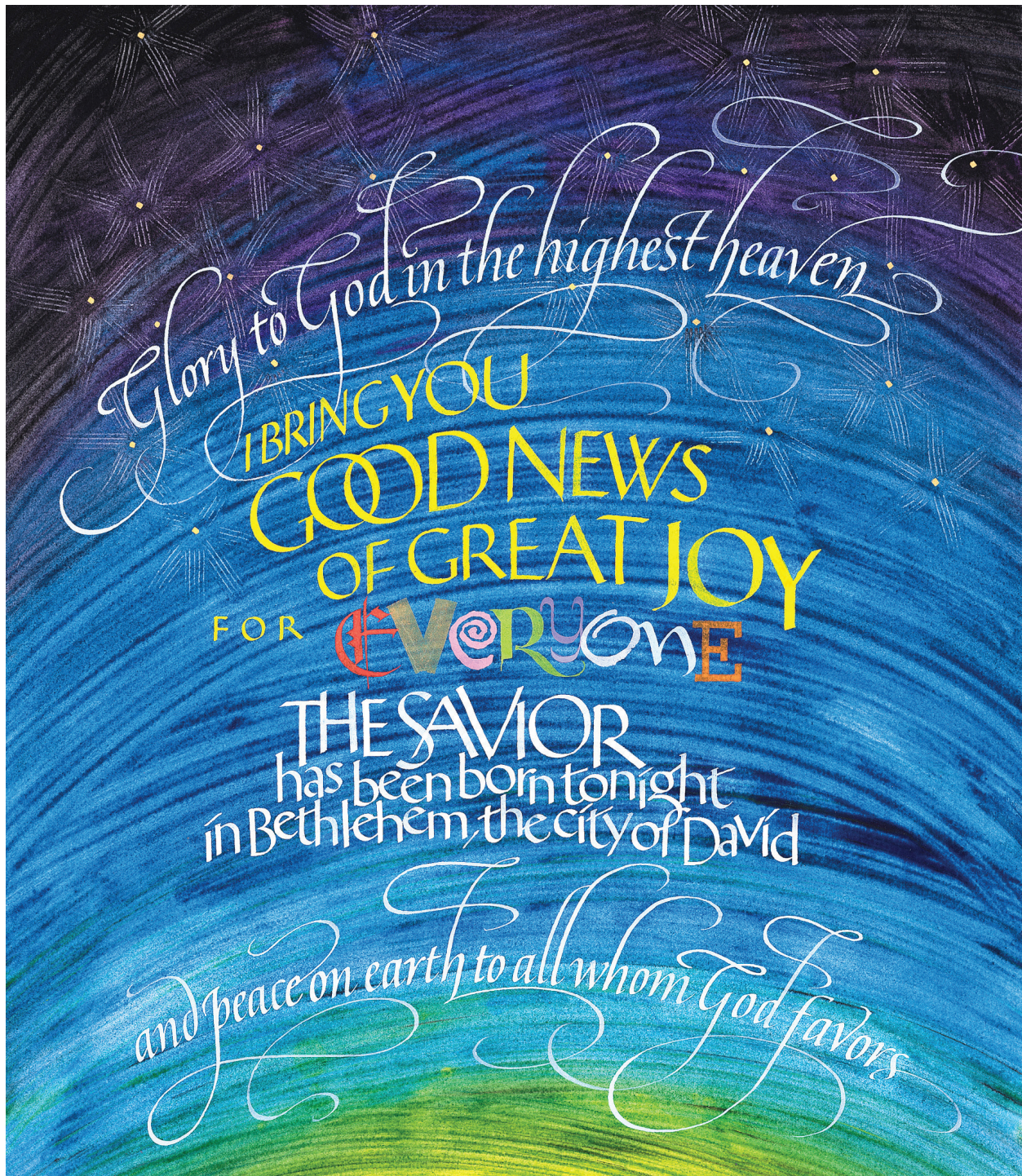
Table of Contents

WEEK 3

date	verse	author	pg.
Sunday, December 15	Isaiah 35:1-10	Gary Anders	28
Monday, December 16	Jeremiah 29:10-13	Angie Arner	29
Tuesday, December 17	Jeremiah 33:14-16	Connie Huck	30
Wednesday, December 18	Isaiah 40:1-3	Dan Travaille	31
Thursday, December 19	Psalms 25:1-10	Rylee Zimmerman	32
Friday, December 20	Isaiah 7:14	Kathy Leach	33
Saturday, December 21	Matthew 3:1-3	Tom Pittack	34

WEEK 4

date	verse	author	pg.
Sunday, December 22	Isaiah 40:9-11	Stacey Neil	35
Monday, December 23	John 3:16-17	Hal Capps	37
Tuesday, December 24	Luke 2:1-14	Jessica Scheopner	38
CHRISTMAS DAY			
Wednesday, December 25	John 1:1-5, 14	Caitlin O'Hare	39



Glory to God in the highest heaven

I BRING YOU
GOOD NEWS
OF GREAT JOY
FOR EVERYONE

THE SAVIOR
has been born tonight
in Bethlehem, the city of David

and peace on earth to all whom God favors



Week One

PEACE



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1

One of my most memorable Christmases was flying to El Paso, Texas, at the age of 12 to attend the Sun Bowl with my family. There were many “Kodak moments”: fitting seven family members into one car and driving two hours to the airport; seeing glass blown at a factory in Mexico; and watching a very good Nebraska football team beat Georgia in the bowl game (yes, this was 1969, the year before Nebraska became national champions). However, the image that stuck in my mind the most was seeing a live nativity scene in the middle of the city. I could not get over the strangeness of a warm climate during the Christmas season, and seeing real people and animals depict the nativity instead of the usual cardboard characters.

Once home, I continued to ponder that live nativity, and at the age of 14, I wrote a Christmas play for my small church, where the cardboard figures of Mary and Joseph “came alive” and discussed the true meaning of the Christmas season. Years later as I read the script, I noticed a few things that I don’t believe my 14-year-old brain grasped. When Joseph spoke, he seemed to come from a place of great wisdom and understanding. In fact, he displayed many of the Christ-like characteristics we read about in Isaiah 11:1-5. However, Mary’s part in the play was more a protagonist or a “doubting Thomas.” Not only was she looking for answers to her questions, but she also appeared to be searching for a peace which constantly eluded her.

In Isaiah 11:6-10, we see a beautiful portrayal of peace and harmony. In fact, it is exactly the type of peace that my “cardboard” Mary was searching for. “The wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the young goat..... and a little boy will lead them.” What a hope this wonderful passage in Isaiah gives us - an eternal future that is characterized by peace and harmony!

As we enter the Advent Season, let us remember that this great gift of peace comes at a cost. It is only made possible through the birth, death and resurrection of our divine Savior.

Peace be with you!

Isaiah 11:1-10

Carol Isaac

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2



When I sat down at the keyboard to write, without a clear direction in my mind, I prayed, God's will be done. Then I read the Scripture for today, Isaiah 9:6-7. While I have read or heard many times the passage, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...", something different stood out to me this time: the word *us*. Always before, I had absorbed *us* in a larger context - God giving His Son to the world, which is true.

But today it hit me differently. *Us* is a plural word, for a collection of individuals. Wow! God gave his Son to me and to you, you and you, that each of *us* may be saved and have a personal relationship with Him.

For most of my life, I have known that Jesus is my Lord and Savior, thinking that He was one, and I am a part of a group of many. Now I can grasp that I belong to him individually.

This is an unexpected answer to my prayers of long ago. I have a friend who always talked about Jesus like He was a long-time personal friend. He seemed to have a familiarity in his relationship with Jesus that eluded me. Now that has changed; I understand that I am one-on-one with Him.

Lord, as we begin the season of Advent, please help us to remember that you are the Giver of all good things, and that they come in Your time, when You know it is best for us to receive them. Let there be peace and calm in our hearts as we journey through this season. May we be a joy and blessing to those around us. Thank you for the gift of Your Son who came to teach us and to die for our sins, even before we committed them. Amen.

Isaiah 9:6-7
Bob Drake



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3

The vision Isaiah saw concerning Jerusalem and Judah reminds me of my desire to worship God. God yearns for me to live by His mercy, grace, and justice. Even though we are steadily fed negative things through the media, God wants us to find peace. Each of us needs to seek God in our weekly church service, but also in our daily time with God. Use your quiet times to seek Him. Listen to what He is telling you.

I have many wonderful memories from my childhood. We lived on the ranch in the Colorado Sandhills. My parents worked hard caring for the many cattle. I can remember when my sister and I fed calves in our basement which were born late in the season. We always had a few to constantly bottle feed.

One particular year my father made a hay sled. Many of you city dwellers won't understand what it is, but that is not important. What is important is the time it took for Dad to make by hand this sled (10" X 18" with wheels) while caring for a few thousand cattle, milking cows, welding machinery, etc. I still have it and cherish it. The sled reminds me how much my parent loved me. It also prompts me to think of my Father in Heaven caring for each of us even though He has millions of us to look after. So during this season, take time to seek God and thank Him for the many things He has given us . . . justice, mercy, grace and peace.

Isaiah 2:1-5
Wayne Moore

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4



My mom and I were very close as I was growing up, the last child and the only girl. We spent a lot of time together shopping, cooking, and my favorite, sewing. Doing all of these things to prepare for Christmas was always extra special. Until that one year. Suddenly, Mom was always finding things for me to do outside of our house without her. Visiting Grandma and Grandpa, going to work with my dad, accompanying one of my two brothers to an after-school event. The worst was spending most of the Saturday before Christmas going with my dad and brothers to a skeet-shooting range . . . definitely not my idea of a fun day! I was totally mystified about this change in Mom's behavior. In fact, I was heartbroken. I wondered what I had done so wrong that she didn't want my "help" or company any longer.

But, wow, on Christmas morning the mystery was solved. When I came downstairs to see what "Santa" had brought, I found a very large trunk with my name on it. I carefully opened it to find a very beautiful doll! And, even better, the trunk was filled with many complete outfits handmade by my mom just for this doll. She was the best-dressed doll that ever was! One outfit that stands out in my memory was a drum majorette uniform complete with the plumed hat and boots. There was a cheerleader outfit, pajamas, a ball gown . . . and many more. She was a very lucky doll and I was a very lucky young girl! It was a spectacular gift and a wonderful relief to discover that my mom wasn't mad at me at all! She showed her love for me in a way that I just couldn't understand at the time. I couldn't see the big picture.

Just as the prophet Micah's people failed to see the big picture of God's love, I failed to see my mom's great love in her sacrifice. Just as Micah's people were being promised the greatest Gift from God Who loved them, on Christmas morning I received a great gift from my mom, made with all her love.

Every year that goes by I realize just how special that gift was and how much my mom must have loved me. And how special the Gift of Jesus is and how much He loves me.

Micah 5:2,4a
Ginny Lakin



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5

Endless Love

Oh God, I am undeserving of Your endless Love.
Despite my faults and selfish ways,
You gifted me with Your One and only Son
Who takes away my sorrow and pain,
And gives me a new life of better ways.
Who shows what love truly is,
Inspiring me to do the same.
I thank you God for Your limitless Love,
It brings light to a darkened world.
Without You, I'd be lost, a completely broken soul.
I thank you God for your never-ending Love,
May all the world know the Greatest Story ever told.

Isaiah 61:1-3

Brian Eichhorn

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6



“What do you want for Christmas?” That is the question most often asked at this time of year. What you desired as a child is not the same as what you want as an adult. Every year what you want changes as you go through the journey of life.

What I have wanted for Christmas the past few years has not been about a gift but about our family being together for Christmas. You see, our tradition is a family dinner on Christmas Eve. It was always at my parents' home on the farm in Plattsmouth. There is something about being out in the country on a snowy winter night that brings to mind a Holy night as the stars are brightly shining.

Our family is not as large as it once was. Our parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins have gone before me. I know they are in heaven and I wonder what they want for Christmas. Then I realize they have the joy of Christmas for eternity! What am I seeking this Christmas? Celebrating Christmas with family.

What were people looking for that first Christmas? I know they were seeking an earthly King. Malachi 3:1 says, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.” This verse makes me think about my family that has gone before me. Were they messengers that God sent to prepare me on my journey to see the Lord? The second verse makes me think about whether I am ready. Malachi 3:2 says, “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.”

I wonder if Christmas family traditions prepare me so that I can stand before Him when He does appear. I believe that my faith and my love will be sufficient for our Lord Jesus that was born in a manger on that very first Christmas.

Malachi 3:1-2
Les Peterson



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7

Since my earliest days, the descent of the first snowflake upon the frigid winter ground has marked the most anticipated time of the year. From the glistening glow of candles lining the streets, to the scintillating red and green lights decorating every surface, to the soft hum of holiday melodies on the radio and throughout the city, Christmas time, for me, never fails to bring joy and excitement.

Taking part in the fun and festivities, my family and I eagerly prepare for the momentous occasion. Homemade ornaments are placed on trees, stockings are hung on the mantel, and milk and cookies are placed on the countertop as we anxiously await the arrival of Santa Claus. Smells of cinnamon and frosting radiate through the house as we make my grandma's traditional sugar cookies. To this day, I can't think of a better way to spend a cold winter's night than cozying up under a blanket watching the latest holiday specials and catching up with the antics of Rudolph and Charlie Brown.

As the years go by, I find it increasingly easier to be caught in the whirlwind we call the holiday season. Being stuck in an endless loop of shopping, gift-wrapping, and traveling leaves little time to slow down, let alone stop and contemplate the meaning of it all. Before the chaos inevitably comes once again, I would like to reflect on what really matters. Just as we should be grateful for a gift wrapped in a shiny box, we should also be overjoyed by the generosity of the gift-giver.

Instead of being focused on the latest holiday jingle, we should instead open our ears, and our hearts, to the laughter and love of those we cherish the most. Those, who at the end of the day, mean more to us than any present ever could. The Christmas spirit is not one of trees and candy, but of compassion, solidarity, and joy.

Isaiah 52:7-9
Sarah Sedivy



Week Two

JOY



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8

I love Christmas carols! My dad was the choir director at our church when I was growing up, and I remember being carried in his arms as he led choir members in caroling at the doors of our homebound friends. As I got a little older, I joined in the singing, not realizing the alto part I sang along with my mother was harmony and not the actual tune. Hearing Christmas carols puts me right into the joy of the season and I like to hang on to that feeling until the New Year if possible!

But last year that didn't happen. The day after Christmas, my happy holiday mood came crashing down as a routine mammogram detected "something" abnormal. A needle biopsy would later confirm that the "something" was indeed a cancerous tumor. In a blink of an eye, my joy turned into fear, followed by anger and tears. I had been down this road 21 years earlier, and I did not want to travel it again! Cancer can take over your life. And it's very easy to fall into despair, thinking that you will never feel good again and never get your life back. Staying positive can be a battle. Nights are especially hard as long, dark hours of insomnia can take your mind places it should never go.

So when I felt fear creeping in again, I started a new journal specifically for this journey and intentionally made it a Gratitude Journal. I wrote in it nearly every night before going to sleep. Some nights started with a prayerful plea, "Lord, I'm struggling to believe that I'll be ok. Please help me!" But I always followed with something that I was grateful for that day, and as time wore on, the "gratefals" took over the pages.

"Today I'm grateful for . . . prescription strength diarrhea medicine!"

"Today I'm grateful for . . . Theresa (my hairdresser) calling to see if I needed her to buzz my head yet. How did she know my hair had just started falling out?"

"Today I'm grateful for . . . family and friends getting me moved from my apartment, into Jennifer's house in only two hours, just beating the coming snow storm!"

"Today I'm grateful for . . . all the people who keep sending cards on just the day I need them."

"Today I'm grateful for . . . my girls and their families, who love me even when I'm not very lovable."

Writing every night, of all the ways God had blessed me during the day, lifted my spirits, calmed my fears, and lulled me to sleep, knowing I was truly being held in my Father's arms!

Isaiah 12:2-6
Betty Manna



The Christmas Wish List is a tradition in many families. When our children were young, we would ask them what they wanted for Christmas. The list would be simple. Long, sometimes, but simple - toys, games, etc. When they got older, however, the list was not so simple.

The nation of Judah were older children who had seen many hardships. In Zephaniah's time, Assyria was the major world power. It had already defeated the nation of Israel, had besieged Jerusalem, and only God's miraculous intervention had broken the siege and liberated Jerusalem. However, the Assyrian empire was still a threat to Judah. In Zephaniah 3:15-17, we can see God's promises to His people: an end to judgments; removal of their enemies; the presence of the Lord in their midst; a strong defender; and rejoicing.

The message of blessings to come would have been welcome words to hear because the earlier parts of Zephaniah's message were not so pleasing. God promised judgment, both to the enemies of Judah and to Judah itself. Out of the 3 chapters of the message, 2 1/2 chapters tell of punishment to come, most of it for Judah. But in 3:9, the tone of the message changes, when God shows his planned gifts to his people:

I will purify the lips of the people

I will remove from you the arrogant boasters

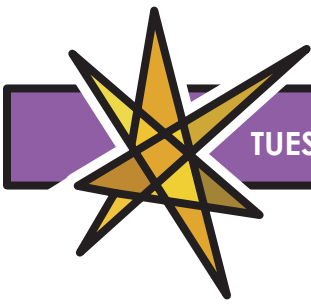
I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord.

He does not say "If you do this, I will . . .", but "I will."

Do you have a "big kid" wish list? I believe we all do. Sometimes the needs seem overwhelming and our strength insufficient. The gift to Judah and to us is this promise: "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves." (Zephaniah 3:17)

In this season we celebrate the coming of the promise: "They will call his name Immanuel, which means *God with us*." (Matthew 1:23) We can sing and rejoice in the promise because we can trust in the God who promises, "I will."

Zephaniah 3:14-17
Kevin Wagaman



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10

As a kid, I was always so excited and filled with anticipation when Christmas arrived. Early one Christmas morning – long before anyone was awake – I got up and went out into the living room to see all the presents tucked under the tree. But it was early and since I couldn't stay awake, I curled up on the couch and slept there until my parents suddenly woke me up.

I was startled, but not like Zechariah was when the Angel appeared without warning with the news that Elizabeth was to have a son and his name would be John (Luke 1:11-17). My jittery nerves that Christmas morning were nothing to compare with Zechariah's astonishment. Of course, as a child, I was looking only for material things.

But have I ever received a gift the likes of which Zechariah and his wife received? Something that would cause many to rejoice? Something that would compel people to realize that this is what they were looking for? Probably not. Or have I?

The gift of Jesus is something to share with everyone. It is personal. This gift is truly something I was looking for but just didn't know it. Can I get back the excitement of a child on Christmas morning? Maybe not, but I can certainly pray for Jesus to fill me with enthusiasm and the right words to help people realize that Jesus is what they are looking for.

Luke 1:11-17
Steve Burgess

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11



Mary was “much perplexed” by Gabriel’s greeting. Imagine Mary’s initial thoughts. She received the greeting of “favored one,” but was then told she will be a virgin carrying the Son of God. I’m not so sure my initial response would be a feeling of being favored. My personal insecurities would immediately show their ugly heads: Why me? Am I a “qualified” Christian? Can I be a good enough mom for Jesus? Can I really do all that is being asked of me?

Truth be told, my first response to the Christmas holiday is similar. I have extremely fond memories of Christmas as a child. I love hearing the anticipation in my son’s voice as he has already started talking about this year’s holiday. But unfortunately, if I’m being honest, my primary response the past few years is one of overwhelming stress and insecurity. December becomes such a crazy time. Can I do everything that is asked of me? Am I “good enough” to provide an enjoyable holiday for my beautiful friends and family? My son expects the tree to be decorated a certain way, schedules for gatherings conflict, and I’m concerned about getting “just the right present” for everyone. These thoughts don’t even touch the guilt that comes from knowing I have these thoughts! Can I stay joyful “when I’m supposed to,” even though the grief of losing my dad is still so strong around the holidays? It is all too easy for me to lose my focus on what is truly important during the holiday season.

In the end I know it will all work out – just the way it is supposed to. I have nothing to worry about. “For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) I am continually growing in my faith, and thanks to the gift of Jesus Christ, I am loved and I am good enough. What more could I want? I’ll keep working on my personality defects, but in the meantime I just need to humbly acknowledge my God each morning and say the words Mary so bravely said many years ago, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Luke 1:26-38
Laura Myers



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12

God always seems to show up when things are falling apart. I can imagine the emotions racing through Joseph when he discovered Mary, his fiancée, was pregnant, knowing the child wasn't his. Betrayal and disappointment are a couple familiar emotions that come to mind. When I get cornered by these feelings, I find myself asking, "Why can't anything go right?" and "Where do I go from here?!"

It seems to me that God has a way of shattering our perception. Isaiah 55:8-9 states, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." We have this tendency to think everything should go according to our plans, but in my experience, and in Joseph's, God has another agenda.

While pondering all of these things Joseph has a dream. God shows up by way of His angel, informing Joseph that Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he is charged to follow through with marriage and raise the holy Son of God. Then comes the most profound part of the passage: Jesus shall be called Immanuel - God with us. At that point we come full circle. God with us, a reflection of the time before the fall. I'm reminded that things fall apart because of sin. Jesus came, freed us from that power of sin and death, and reconciled us to the Father.

As Christmas draws near, let us take time to reflect on the truth that God has come and made a dwelling place in our hearts. Let life's interruptions remind us, Immanuel has come!

Matthew 1:18-27

Paul Bates

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13



When I was growing up, my family spent many Christmases in Colorado Springs at my grandmother's home. On Christmas Eve we would hang our stockings on the fireplace downstairs. At some point in the evening near bedtime we would hear sleigh bells on the roof (my Uncle Rick, I later learned) signaling us to get to bed soon. A simple, childlike belief was present in those traditions. However, around five or six years old I started to have my doubts. I remember one Christmas sitting in my grandmother's kitchen with my mom and asking her, "Mom, is Santa really real?" To which she replied, "What do you think?" I said, "Well I don't think reindeer can fly." "You're right," my mom answered. And that was the end of Santa for me.

Belief comes so easily to us as children, but as we get older that gets harder. Belief often gives way to cynicism as the reality of our sinful world becomes apparent. The world teaches us belief is foolish. We are persuaded that we must be practical, earn our way. We are convinced our worth lies in how hard we work or how well we perform. Along the way, we tend to forget our belief is all God has ever really asked of us.

In Luke 1:35-49, Mary demonstrates this belief for us. Elizabeth praises her, "Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!" (MSG) What a crazy thing for an angel to appear and say you have been chosen to be the mother of God's Son! What a hard thing to believe. But Mary chose to believe that God is as big as He says He is. That God loves us as much as He says He does. That "the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight." 1 Cor. 3:19

Mary's choice to believe this impossible thing was her choice to participate in God's greatness. She didn't have any special gifts or talents, any resume full of related experience to qualify her for the job of parenting Jesus. Her belief was the one and only qualification God was seeking. It's all God is asking of us as well.

Today let us reflect on this amazing truth: To be a part of God's great plan, all we have to do is believe.

Luke 1:39-45
Michaela Dunn



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14

Mary's Song of Praise

Imagine with me the town of Nazareth around the time of Jesus' birth. The fields are desolate. The dirt roads are trodden by many a weary Jew as they prepare to journey to Bethlehem. The oppressive rule of the Romans is evident in their fatigued faces and curved postures. Hopelessness is tangible.

Many of us may also be experiencing desolation as we prepare for Bethlehem. Maybe we are exhausted from a year of difficult classes, strained relationships, or sorrow that weighs heavily on our hearts. Maybe we had expectations of ourselves or of others this year that just did not materialize.

Mary stands in similar shoes. Times were hard for the Jewish people. Their nation had been tossed between the hands of various foreign powers for centuries. No Davidic king sat on the throne. Only a messianic hope lingered for generations that an anointed king would one day reestablish their identity as a chosen people. Yet, they did not know how this hope would arrive and thus, many missed it. But one young woman recognized God's hand at work – Mary.

I have always admired Mary, not only for her courage but also for her wisdom in realizing this was the moment her people had been waiting for. She sings in verse 55, "For He made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever." She acknowledged Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise of an eternal king to sit on David's throne. In response, Mary sang a song that called her people to remember and celebrate all that God had done and was about to do.

Are we also like the Jews so caught up in the waiting or so set in our expectations that we do not recognize that which we have waited for has arrived? Is a "foreign" power crushing your own hopes?

I encourage you to choose instead to sing and embrace Mary's attitude, one of joyous surrender, as you await your own Christmas miracle - whatever it may be. Whether we come exhausted or rejuvenated into another season of Advent, may we remember to respond with praise to the arrival of our God.

What will your song of praise be? Will you cling to the faithfulness that He has demonstrated in carrying you through 347 days of 2019? The eternal nature of God's promise transcends any ending of a calendar year. Let us set aside any expectation that clouds our praise, and sing for the hope to come – singing no matter how many times the chorus must be repeated as we await the new verse that He is composing.

Luke 1:46-55
Bridget Backer



Week Three

HOPE



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15

A memorable Christmas from my childhood was 1958. Recently my sister sent copies of photos from that Christmas. Looking at them caused me to recall the memories and emotions of that time. The minute the Sears, Penny's and Montgomery Ward toy catalogs came in the mail, I poured over them and picked the one and only toy I wanted for Christmas. It was a blue cargo airplane with soldiers, jeeps and guns. The only other thing I wanted was for my oldest brother Dick to come home from his first semester of college so that we could all be together for Christmas. However, our parents announced that Dick would not be able to make it home. I was devastated because without him it wouldn't be Christmas. On Christmas Eve, the family sat down to our traditional lefse dinner. The usual excitement and anticipation of opening the gifts after dinner was missing. No one was talking and I can remember feeling sad and empty. It didn't feel like Christmas. But I was watching and waiting because he just might make it home.

As we started to fill our plates, there was a car that pulled up to our house. It was Dick! He did show up and had made it home. He was standing right there! Now it felt like Christmas. With his arrival (and the blue cargo airplane from Sears) it was the best Christmas ever. That Christmas, I got everything I was looking for.

Today's scripture provides us a picture of what God's people were longing for. And now God has shown up in Jesus and stands in our midst! In Christ, God is the center of our lives. May we be given eyes to see and ears to hear to discover what He is doing in the world around us. May we become heralds of the kingdom to those who are watching and waiting for God.

Isaiah 35:1-10
Gary Anders

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16



Isn't it amazing how the entire Bible is "knit together" in one continuous story and it's all about Jesus? During this Advent season we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus. His coming was foretold in the Old Testament – promised by God, for our salvation!

Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us of such a promise for us! "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, **to give you a future and a hope.**"

Reflecting on that promise reminds me of a very difficult time in my life during the Advent season. I was ill from November, 1993, to February, 1994. Surgery was scheduled for early January after long months of pain and fevers. Because the fevers continued, surgery was postponed several times. The fevers came three times every day, and I was often awakened during the night. Those nights were lonely, although I knew I was never alone. God was with me bringing comfort, hope, love and peace! One morning at 3 a.m., I clearly "heard" a promise from God – "You will be well again!" Daily journaling, during those long weeks, reminded me of the many blessings in my life. Sometimes my handwriting wasn't very legible, yet every day I recorded the many times of care and prayer and encouragement from family, my small group, friends, and always the LORD. After more weeks of illness, I was hospitalized, nearly not surviving, was stabilized and on February 10 was able to have surgery. I was finally released after a two-week stay. My birthday, February 21, was very special that year - God's gift of life! He gave me "**a future and a hope.**"

God promises to take care of us, to give us a future and a hope. He has a plan for our lives. The most important promise is that of our salvation. We make the conscious decision to accept Jesus in our hearts. We accept the gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit. It also means we accept the responsibility of fulfilling the promise we make to our Creator.

Father God, we pray we remember the greatest gift of all - Jesus.

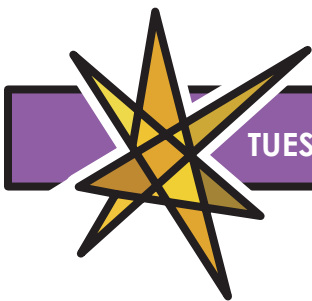
May we accept Your gift with humility.

May we fulfill our promise to You and complete the good work You have ready for us.

May we grow into the people You dreamed we can be. Amen

Jeremiah 29:10-13

Angie Arner



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17

As a child I was an avid reader, so when I became a mom, reading with our kids was very important. I had vivid memories of my mom reading to me, and I wanted to share the books I had loved with my own children. One of my favorite childhood books was *Fortunately by Remy Charlip*. The story is about a boy named Ned who was invited to a surprise party. As he searches for the party, fortunate things happen as well as unfortunate things. Fortunately Ned was able to take an airplane to the state where the party was. Unfortunately the engine of the airplane exploded. Fortunately he had a parachute. Unfortunately the parachute had a hole in it. Fortunately there was a haystack for him to land on. Unfortunately there was a pitch fork in the haystack. You get the idea. At every turn there were fortunate and unfortunate things awaiting him. Every page left us wondering what would happen next. Would he ever find what he was looking for?

During Advent we celebrate with anticipation the birth of Jesus. Many of us have heard this story since we were very young. It is familiar and wonderful as we learn about the people involved and their reactions to the birth of this little child. The narrative of Jesus' birth was full of fortunate and unfortunate events as well. Fortunately, Mary became pregnant with the Lord's son. Unfortunately she wasn't married at the time. Fortunately Joseph was with her when it was time for the baby to be born. Unfortunately there was no room for them in the inn. Fortunately they found a stable. Many people traveled to meet this tiny baby, and they were filled with wonder of what would come next.

As you travel your own journey filled with fortunate and unfortunate events, what are you looking for? We don't need to look for the party any longer; Jesus is already there waiting for us with open arms. God sent His only son to save us. Can you think of anything more fortunate than that?

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Connie Huck

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18



“Are you ready for Christmas?” How many times is that question asked of us each year? I think “dozens” is probably a pretty good guess. And what’s the question usually about? Most likely it’s related to all of the activities we manage to cram into the season—purchasing gifts, decorating homes, sending cards, organizing parties, planning meals, preparing for guests or making travel plans.

Interesting, isn’t it, that the admonition in today’s reading, Isaiah 40:1-3, doesn’t mention any of those things. Instead, it simply tells us to “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” That thought is echoed in the lyrics of “Joy to the World,” when we sing “Let every heart prepare Him room.”

But how do we do that? How can we prepare ourselves **spiritually** for Christmas? How do we get past all of the extraneous events of the Christmas season so that we can truly prepare our hearts for the coming of the Savior?

Psalms 139:23-24 (NIV) seems to be a good starting point: “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” I have heard it said that Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. Both are times for preparation and self-examination. If we are seeking to “prepare the way” during Advent, then it likely means that a lot of heart- and head-clearing must take place so space is actually available. When our minds are filled with so many thoughts and concerns about things generally unrelated to anything spiritual, there simply isn’t room for Jesus, is there?

What about you? Are you **ready** for Christmas? Advent is about preparing ourselves for God’s presence, not about preparing ourselves to give presents. Are you spiritually prepared? Is your focus on the coming of the Savior or are you just barreling toward a deadline? How much greater would be the joy and impact of this Christmas if you would intentionally take the time to prepare for God’s presence? Are you truly ready to stop and take stock of what is really important? Are you preparing for what God has in store for you?

Isaiah 40:1-3
Dan Travaillie



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19

Christmas in my family has always been a pretty big deal; thus, my family has created an important yearly tradition - gathering around to listen to "The Christmas Story." As my grandma gingerly sits down in her padded rocking chair, the rest of the family gravitates towards the surrounding couches. The last stragglers pull chairs from the table, while my cousins and I settle onto the floor like little kids. The crisp sound of the book's spine signals the family to quiet down, as my grandma starts to read a familiar tale. This tale begins with Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem and ends with baby Jesus crying in a manger.

I've always loved seeing my whole family sitting silently in a circle, declaring their faith. As a child, I remember trying to act out the story with my grandma's old nativity scene. Every year I would manage to get further along than I would the year before.

While this tradition seems trivial, it is this act that reminds me of God's love. He gave his own son for the rest of the world to have a chance at the life He intended for us. This simple story also reminds me that God is patient enough to teach the world about his glory, despite the rejection He may face. To me, this is a true sign of his everlasting love for every person on this earth.

Psalms 25:1-10

Rylee Zimmerman

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20



I was blessed to be raised in not only a devout Christian home, but also a musical one as well. My mother was an accomplished musician and had a beautiful lyric soprano solo voice for which I accompanied frequently in worship and singing in our home. This included listening to, learning and accompanying G. F. Handel's oratorio, MESSIAH.

Isaiah 7:14 is significant to me as it is the text of MESSIAH's contralto Recitative. My mother was very influential in my early music studies on the piano and organ, as well as in developing my contralto singing voice. She coached me in learning this Recitative and the Aria that follows, "O Thou That Tellest." I frequently sang it in Advent worship services as well as a soloist in my high school MESSIAH performance.

The message that scripture brings to our lives is often enhanced when the text is paired with beautiful music. This is evident in our congregational singing as well as in other extended choral works. As I have sung this MESSIAH Recitative, I have found myself wondering what it must have been like for this very young Mary to have been given the news that she would conceive a child who would be the Savior, the Messiah, of whom ancient prophecies foretold. What an AWE-filled thought to comprehend! Handel does such a beautiful job of setting this single scriptural verse to music, that I have felt the powerful significance of Mary's calling in my own soul!

The Recitative culminates with the words, "GOD WITH US," which is a translation for Immanuel. I wonder if Mary thought God was truly "with her" as she pondered and perhaps struggled with what was occurring in her life. For what must she have been searching in the months ahead of her? Certainly it involved a great faith in and abiding love for her Heavenly Father. May we, like the young and trusting Mary, continue to seek God's call in our lives as we journey through the promise of this Advent season.

Isaiah 7:14
Kathy Leach



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21

A young couple is expecting their first child. They are looking for a room and someone that can help with the birth. The woman is not on a donkey, but in a Chevy Malibu. They find a room and their doctor at Bergan Mercy Hospital. The year is 1979. Liz gave birth to our first-born son Bradley on December 21st. We took him home on Christmas Day. Our lives were forever changed. We have been blessed with two more sons.

I remember his first month's checkup and how much I hurt when the nurse poked his foot to do a blood test. I almost cried with him. We do everything we can to keep our kids safe, to keep them from getting hurt.

In Genesis 22 God asks Abraham to go to the mountain and sacrifice his only son Isaac. It took them three days to get there. With knife in hand, Abraham laid his only son on the altar when the Angel of the Lord stopped him. What kind of God would ask anyone to sacrifice their only son?

We will be celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ in a few days. God's only Son. The greatest gift ever given to man. Jesus taught us about his Father's desire for us to know him and be saved from our sins. We are saved from our sins by Jesus's death on the cross. What kind of God would sacrifice his own Son?

Preparing the way, John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. The world was looking for a political leader. Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world. He was not the gift many wanted. Jesus preached and taught for 3 years, yet many did not believe. What event would it take to make people believe? Even Peter denied he knew Jesus three times before he died. After Jesus rose from death and the grave, Peter claimed Jesus as his Lord and Savior even to his own death on the cross. The event that was needed for Peter was Jesus's power over death. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we celebrate his birth as the greatest gift.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. Believe in him this Christmas!

Matthew 3:1-3
Tom Pittack



Week Four

LOVE



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22

Christmas memories are some of my favorites from my childhood. We always had our grandparents from both sides celebrating with us on Christmas Eve. We had so many food traditions to anticipate: the crab appetizer to start the dinner, the soup, and Swedish Grit and Lingonberries my mom had spent all day making as the perfect ending to a wonderful meal. On Christmas Eve, we opened our presents and attended the candlelight church service.

Growing up, Chris and I shared many of the same Christmas traditions. As we started our family, we knew we wanted to continue with those traditions. We were both from the same town, Lexington, so were able to continue our special family celebrations and make wonderful memories with our kids and their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. They have enjoyed the same traditions, and of course we have thrown in some new ones.

The strongest memories involve family members. The cousins receiving selfie sticks from Grandma and Grandpa . . . talk about great pictures that year! The tablecloth we all wrote on each Christmas Eve dinner with special fabric markers - so much fun to get out and read the next year. At one house, opening gifts one by one with oohs and ahs and hugs for each gift, but at the other grandparents' house everything opened in one mad adrenaline-filled rush. Grit and Lingonberries still made by Mimi as the perfect finish, and of course, the candlelight service at the end of the night. These traditions all orchestrated by people who have SO MUCH love and joy in their hearts for family and for Jesus and we could all feel the love!!

I especially love Isaiah 40:11 where Jesus gathers his lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. It's a verse I can really picture and almost feel. It is comforting to know God has extreme strength, yet cares for us in such an intimate, loving way. Knowing how much love our families have for us and we for them is just a glimpse into the depth of love Christ has for each one of us. Such extravagant love!!!

Isaiah 40:9-11

Stacy Neil

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23



What an awesome God! The Creator of the Universe loves us so much that He sent his Son so that everyone who believes on Him will not perish but spend eternity with Him!

As a senior adult, I have several memories of joyous Advent seasons. When I was in the 6th grade, I was chosen to be Joseph in our school's Christmas celebration. I remember sitting on the stage with Mary by the manger with baby Jesus, while shepherds and wise men came to worship Him. The auditorium was filled with fellow students and parents singing carols. It was a time of great joy! Later as a teen in our Sunday School program, I again played the part of Joseph. I was seated with Mary and Jesus while the wise men came down the aisle singing, "We Three Kings." Another happy occasion!

When I was in high school, I worked Saturdays, summers, and Christmas vacations at the Buffett & Son grocery store in Dundee. Dundee was an upper middle class community. The Buffett store was a neighborhood store where the customers were greeted by name and a clerk waited on you and got your groceries. No carts or baskets. They also delivered. There was a chain grocery store up the street, a cleaners, a drugstore, a hardware store, a gas station, and a restaurant. Across the street was radio station KFAB. During the Christmas season, KFAB would play Christmas music on loudspeakers to the neighborhood. The shoppers were so happy and friendly during the Christmas season, wishing each other a Merry Christmas. When I moved on from that job, I found that I really missed the interaction and friendliness of the shoppers in the neighborhood.

In high school every year there would be a Christmas program in the auditorium with a nativity and the school choir singing music to the glory of God. It is sad that this apparently no longer happens.

I am really looking forward to this Christmas. We will spend time with our daughter and her family and our daughter-in-law and her family. We are so thankful for family.

We are so thankful to God for his Great Gift, and for Jesus who went to the cross for mankind.

John 3:16-17
Hal Capps



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24

Twenty years ago, we had a houseful of family who had traveled to Colorado to spend Christmas with us, so we didn't have to travel with our tiny firstborn. On Christmas Eve, sitting in the pew cradling my precious, tiny, fiercely loved, and completely dependent newborn, the Incarnation came to life for me in a new way. I looked down at him, and realized anew Mary's calling, and how different her pregnancy, Jesus' birth, and her early days of motherhood had been from mine. Her selfly-impossible task of carrying and delivering the baby who would save us all, of raising him, of seeing him be rejected, pursued, betrayed, mocked, beaten, and killed came alive for me as I cradled my baby, safe, comfortable, cherished, and - like his mother - desperately in need of that Savior.

Ten years ago, I was pregnant with a baby we were calling Hope; we were waiting with great anticipation of what God would do with this gift of life. The first snowy morning in December, I quickly scooped our driveway so we could get to the appointment to hear the whoosh whoosh of Baby Hope's heartbeat.

We were heartbroken to learn that our baby had died, and I was horrified the first time I said it out loud: "Hope died." I knew that sentence was untrue, despite the sad circumstances, so I began to pray:

"God, if I am not going to be waiting expectantly for the birth of my child, will you please help me to be waiting expectantly for something else – the birth of your Child - in this season? Will you please help me to anticipate your hope, your peace, your joy, and your love? Will you please grow these in me instead?"

On Christmas Eve, sitting in the pew with two children beside me and our wiggly four-year-old on my recently restored lap, my prayers were answered. Hope Noelle's short life helped me to understand the Incarnation in a new way again. I realized that Mary's calling is also our calling. As God fill us with his hope, his joy, his peace, and his love – the gift of his Son – we are all called to deliver this good news to the world.

My prayer this Christmas is that we may each be filled with expectation of what God is bringing about in and through us. May His growing presence in us be visible. May our lives, our words, and our actions be full of his love, and may we each carry his hope, joy, peace, and love to the world.

Luke 2:1-14

Jessica Scheopner



I imagine the stillness and quiet of the room. Birth is messy; birth is noisy; birth is effort, concentration, and waiting. But all that is over now. Mother, father, and baby are resting. They are resting in the home's common space, since the guest quarters are occupied. There is not much privacy, but it's quiet nonetheless. The animals are breathing, chewing, shifting their weight from hoof to hoof. The midwife or other women are moving around quietly, cleaning up, recounting the event of the birth in whispered, smiling voices. Perhaps someone is preparing food. The home is simple but tidy. There is an awe that accompanies newborn babies, a hush, a slowness, and tenderness.

In my mind the birth of Jesus is both ordinary and extraordinary. The ordinariness of it is precisely what makes it astonishing. God became human and was born in the same way billions of humans have been born, through the effort and courage of a woman. God chose this unexpected action out of all the endless possibilities. God . . . a baby!?

I am especially grateful for the incarnation: the conception, birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God in the flesh. God, coming to us, moving near to us, becoming one of us. When I have a quiet moment to contemplate this movement of God, I am overcome with emotion. The Message version of John 1:14 says, "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." God, the Almighty, the Creator of the universe, the Beginning and the End, unbound by space and time...my neighbor. Touchable, knowable, breathing, in-the-flesh. John writes, "We have seen his glory. The glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Behold! The living God! Who came to us as a baby.

God's pursuit of his beloved creation is the story of scripture. God pursues, God acts, God seeks. God moves the story forward. It's not just what God does, it's who he is. The Father sends the Son; the Father and Son send the Holy Spirit. And God sends his people, the Church, to the world. We are a part of God's redemptive plan for creation!

On Christmas morning I imagine Mary holding her baby, fully human and fully God, the light of the world, the hope and joy of the world. Hallelujah! The Lord has come!

P.S. My vision of the birth of Jesus has been heavily influenced by the work of Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, renowned New Testament scholar, seminary professor, author, Presbyterian career missionary, and expert in Middle Eastern Christianity. A simple Google search will get you started with videos and articles, if you're interested.

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