

St. John's
Christian Church



2021 Advent
Devotional

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Printed by St. John's Christian Church

Sunday, November 28th...
First Sunday of Advent - Hope

The first purple candle of the Advent Wreath is lit, the Candle of Hope.

Consider the words of the first verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”:

“O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lowly exile here, Until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday in which we recall the hope we have in Christ.

The prophets of Israel all spoke of the coming of Christ, of how a savior would be born, a king in the line of David. They spoke of how he would rule the world wisely and bless all nations.

On Christmas day, the Christ of our hope was born. On Good Friday the Christ of our hope died. On Easter day the Christ of our hope rose from the dead. He then ascended into heaven. On the last day, the Christ of our hope will come again to establish his kingdom over all things on earth.

As the followers of Christ, we await his return. We light this candle to remember that as he came to us as humbly in the manger at Bethlehem and gave light to the world, so he is coming again in power to deliver his people.

We light this candle to remind us to be alert and to watch for his return.

Prayer: Loving God, we thank you for the hope you give us. Help us prepare our hearts for the Lord’s coming. Bless our worship. Help us live holy and righteous lives. We ask this in the name of the one born in Bethlehem. Amen.

Blessings in Christ,
Pastor Erich

Monday, November 29th

Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room

Wait... 27 long days of advent/holiday preparation until Christmas! Or...only 27 days left to prepare for Christ's birth! Do you rush through advent hardly waiting until Christmas Day or do you take in each day as an opportunity to prepare your heart for the birth of the Christ child?

Mary had 9 months to prepare. The shepherds, less than a day. The wise men? A few years. Where are you on your journey preparing for Christ? As a kid, I couldn't wait until Thanksgiving was over. It stood in the way of Christmas and gifts! I could hardly wait! As an adult, I cherish Thanksgiving now. A time to be thankful for our blessings and celebrate as a family. Afterwards, the preparation for "Christ"mas can truly begin.

How are you preparing this waiting season? With great anticipation? Impatience? One of my favorite carols is Silent Night. I challenge you this advent season to listen silently and intently to Jesus as you prepare your heart a place for Him to enter and dwell. Then go and share His love and light to others this Christmas season and beyond. Once again, the waiting will soon end, but the joy and promise of life that only Christ can give, will live on well past advent. Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Yes...the greatest gift has come!

Submitted by Buffy Riley



Tuesday, November 30th

Isaiah 9:6

*“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

The prophet Isaiah told of a Savior to come, and the people had to wait expectantly – with hope.

What do you hope for this Christmas season? A new phone? A puppy? A new car? Time with family? A new job? Hardships to pass?

In our hoping this Christmas season, we can also hope for our Savior to come. This time, to come back to Earth, to bring us home to heaven with Him. Until that day comes, we can have hope each and every day knowing He is with us through the Holy Spirit.

Christmas reminds us of the humanity of our Savior being born as fully God and man. This fact alone should give us hope because Jesus has walked through life from our perspective. He knows how it feels to hurt, love, be tempted, experience friendship, go through trials, and experience joy from a human perspective. He knows how to help us in our hurt and knows how to rejoice with us in our joy because He has been in our shoes and did it all without sin.

So as we come into the Christmas season, let us have hope knowing that we have a Savior who can understand our struggles, joys, and trials, is with us through it all, and is coming again!

Submitted by Adam & Cayla Swisher

Wednesday, December 1st

The In-Between

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

Titus 2:11-14 ESV

For the grace of God *has appeared*...

Yes, of course! The grace of God — His undeserved favor — appeared to us in a Bethlehem manger long ago. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not recognize Him (John 1:10). He was the true King, but He was not like the kings of this world. Instead of hoarding power for His own gain, He healed the sick, fed the hungry, cast out demons, and welcomed the outcast. He even laid down His life to offer salvation to every sinner, even to His accusers, even to me, and even to you.

...waiting for...the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...

Now we wait. Jesus not only laid down his life. He took it up again. He was raised and ascended to heaven, and he will return to judge the world in righteousness. Until that day, we navigate the *in-between*. Like Israel somewhere between the slavery of Egypt and the promised land, we walk with God as He transforms us into the people he made us to be.

How will you live in the *in-between*? Who are you becoming?

What would it look like for you to follow Jesus rather than the kings of this world?

Submitted by Kyle Chase
Pastor, Reliant Ministries, University of Michigan

Thursday, December 2nd

As we think about Christmas and the season we celebrate Jesus' birth, we tend to focus on Mary, the baby, the shepherd and even the wise men. I have always felt compelled to love Joseph a little more. I think he is the forgotten one in this beautiful story.

Let's start with the fact that it wasn't his baby, **BUT** God asked him to father it. He could have "divorced" Mary, **BUT** God asked him to take her for his wife. He could have gone to Bethlehem alone because they really weren't married yet, **BUT** God asked him to take the very pregnant Mary with him. He couldn't find a place for them to stay in the overflowing town of Bethlehem, **BUT** God led them to the manger where I am sure Joseph had never slept before. And I am sure he never delivered a baby before **BUT** God helped him through it. Don't you believe that much of this was out of Joseph's comfort zone? How many times has God asked you to get out of your comfort zone? Have you taken the challenge? Are you as brave and trusting that God will see you through it? The next time you might be asked to teach a Sunday school class, serve on a committee, or serve the church in a way that might get you out of your comfort zone, I ask that you be as "trusting as Joseph" and know that God will get you through it.

Have a wonderful Christmas season and maybe... just maybe, this is the year you "trust like Joseph".

Submitted by Karen Walker

Friday, December 3rd

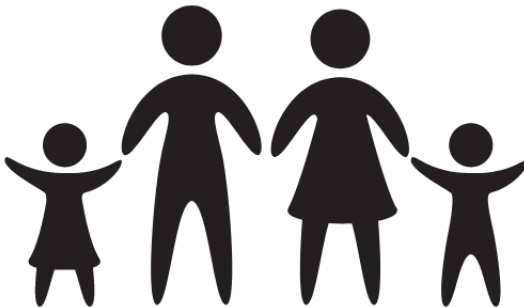
Family

Togetherness. It's something that makes the Christmas season just a little more bright. Decorating the Christmas tree in the living room. The presence of one another as we laugh and look at old ornaments we've made. Sitting in my Grandparent's basement taking turns reading the Christmas story with cousins. Listening to the sermon while we light the different candles with my church family. These are just a few times during this season that warm my heart.

The similarity in all of them? They're spent in the presence of others. Not everyone can have these moments with one another. You could send someone a Christmas card to brighten their spirits. You could invite someone over for a group Bible study. If you can't because of sickness, you could send a letter. Sometimes it feels nice to know someone is thinking of you, even if you can't physically be there with them. If it's available, you could use a phone to call, or even FaceTime with someone. If you enjoy cooking, you could bake your neighbors treats to leave on their doorstep. Everyone is happy and they treat people with kindness. Togetherness is one of my favorite things about the Christmas season.

May your family celebrate together, no matter the circumstances ♡
Merry Christmas!

Submitted by Ella Yoder



Saturday, December 4th

*“I have traveled many moonless nights
Cold and weary with a babe inside
And I wonder what I've done
Holy Father you have come
And chosen me now to carry your son
I am waiting in a silent prayer
I am frightened by the load I bear
In a world as cold as stone
Must I walk this path alone?
Be with me now”*

Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song), by Amy Grant

Mothers and mothers-to-be: Focus on that moment you realized you were going to be a mom. The anticipation of a new baby in your life. Longing for the first moment of holding your child in your arms. And all of the anxiety and fear that comes with figuring out how to navigate motherhood and/or your child's life. Focus on that first moment of holding your child and the immense love you felt for them in that moment... the feeling of your hopes and dreams for your child that you've loved from the moment they existed flood your heart. The pains of wanting to give them the best life possible, regardless of what that looked like.

Can you imagine being Mary? Honestly. Put yourself in her place for a moment as you focus on those feelings above. All of the pure and true unconditional love of a mother for her child. But to know, to *know*, that your child was the Son of God? To raise Him without sin, knowing He would save us all? How did she do it so gracefully? So humbly? After processing the angel Gabriel's visit, how did she not fall to the ground in the immense emotion of it all?

When I hear the song lyrics above, I'm flooded with a sudden understanding of Mary's load as a mother. Yet, she was faithful and willing to bear that load as the Lord's servant.

Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Mary, the mother who loved so purely and so gracefully. Mary, blessed among women, be with me now, be with us now. Guide us with your humble grace. Guide us to lead our young disciples of your son, Jesus Christ, as you so did. Amen.

Submitted by Jocelyn Walker

Sunday, December 5th
Second Sunday of Advent - Peace

The first and second purple candles of the Advent Wreath are lit, the Candle of Hope and the Candle of Peace.

Consider the words of the second verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”:

“O Come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by Thine advent here; Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death’s dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

Last Sunday the first candle was lit in the Advent Wreath, the candle of hope. It is lit again as we remember that Christ will come again to fulfill all of God’s promises to us.

The second candle of Advent is the Candle of Peace. It is sometimes called the Bethlehem Candle to remind us of the place in which preparations were made to receive and cradle the Christ child.

Peace is a gift that we must be prepared for. God gives us the gift of peace when we turn to Him in faith.

The prophet Isaiah calls Christ “the Prince of Peace.” Through John the Baptist and all the other prophets, God asks us to prepare our hearts so that he may come in.

Our hope is in God, and in His son, Jesus Christ. Our peace is found in him. We light this candle today to remind that he brings peace to all who trust in him.

Prayer: Loving God, thank You for the peace You give us through Jesus. Help us prepare our hearts to receive Him. Bless our Advent and our worship. Guide us in all that we say and do. We ask in the name of the one born in Bethlehem. Amen.

Blessings in Christ,
Pastor Erich

Monday, December 6th

God as a Baby

Isaiah 9:6 - For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Christmas is a time where we remember that Jesus was born in a manger by a virgin named Mary. Well, do we remember why he was born? He was born for our sins. He was born to suffer and die on a cross. He was born to bring hope and salvation to people all over the entire world. God took our human nature upon him, and "The Word became flesh." He humbled himself and gave up his glory in heaven to come here to earth as a baby to save us.

Isaiah 9:7 - Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

This verse doesn't just point to the hope of a savior being born, but that same savior coming again to rule and sit upon the throne of David. Christmas is filled with the hope and joy that we have because Jesus came into this world. Many times, we forget that he was born to save us even as a baby, and we just think of the Angels, Mary, and the Wise Men. He came to save people from the horrors of hell. He has come to establish his kingdom here on earth. He will come again to put an end to evil once and for all. He came as a baby the first time, but he will come again as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We can celebrate Christmas because he saved us. Jesus came to die, and through his death we are saved. But it all started a long time ago, when God came down from Heaven, and became a baby. And that baby's name is the name above all names. Jesus.

Submitted by Joshua Reeb

Tuesday, December 7th

As another year comes to an end, we find ourselves reflecting on the past and all the good, the bad, the difficult, and the joy the year has brought us. As we reflect, we ask God why certain things in our lives happened the way that they did. We expected things to happen that didn't, but also experienced things we weren't prepared for.

Starting a new year is a time to remind ourselves to put our trust in Him. We need to remember that now and always, God is with us and is guiding us through life. No matter what ups and downs this new year has in store for us, God is leading the way.

*"I guide you in the way of wisdom
And lead you along straight paths.
When you walk, your steps will not be hampered;
When you run, you will not stumble.
The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn,
Shining ever brighter till the full light of day."
(Proverbs 4:11-12;18)*

Submitted by Emily K. Walker



Wednesday, December 8th

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10

In preparation for this Christmas, I’ve found myself pondering a simple question: “Why did Jesus come to earth?” Take a second to think on that. If you’re like me, your typical response to this sort of question may be something like: Jesus came to earth to die on the cross for our sins so that we can be in relationship with God. Perhaps you might also say that Jesus came to earth to show that he loved us, or to understand the human experience more fully. All of these things are true, but could there be more?

In addition to those fundamental truths about Jesus’ coming, I’ve found myself thinking about John 10:10 where Jesus says that he came so that we may “have life, and have it to the full.” Jesus did not only come to save us from our sins and reveal God’s love for us. He also came to give us life to the full. He came to show us how the good life is meant to be lived. As I read the gospels, especially the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7), I become more and more convinced that Jesus has showed us the best and fullest way to live. It’s a life that leads to good. Good for us, good for our neighbors, and good for our world. I’d like to learn about that way of life! How about you?

Lord Jesus, thank you that you came to earth. Thank you that you revealed your love for us. Thank you that you died on the cross to make a way for us. And Jesus, thank you that you came to give us life and life to the full. We want to be your students. Please teach us how to live this good, full life. Amen.

Submitted by Matt Waanders
CRU, Ohio State University & Columbus State University

Thursday, December 9th

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Matthew 2:2b

There are few “wise” people in the world that ask questions as deep as a small child. My four-year-old daughter recently asked me, “why did God put the star in the sky when Jesus was born?” I am no constellation expert, but I have seen enough informative documentaries to know that every star in the sky that we can see is made of billions of smaller stars. Our Creator spoke a word and these stars were formed. In just 7 days, this world was changed from darkness to light and death to life. When Jesus, God’s holy and perfect Son – the very Son of God – came to our fallen and broken earth, our all-powerful Creator God literally moved the heavens (whether it was for a new star, bigger and brighter than any others, an aligning of planets, angels, or some other major event) to announce Jesus’ earthly arrival. There was now the promise of no more living in darkness and death, but of life and light because of the work on the cross that this sweet baby, our Lord, our Savior, our God, would accomplish. No wonder the sky lit up around the Shepherds with angels not able to contain their joy. The world would thankfully never be the same again.

Have you ever been in a situation where you just wanted out? Whether it is physical pain, mental stress, or a combination of both, you just want a reset button. The nation of Israel found themselves in this position as their nation was crumbling and being captured. They just wanted it to all stop, so they did all in the physical power to do so. They made alliances, fought battles, and more. The problem was, they completely ignored the real power and strength of their nation – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Creator of the world, the God that rescued them from Egypt and had fought so many battles for them. So, the Lord gave them over to the Babylonians to give them a change of perspective. The amazing part of this story is that amid the sadness, suffering and the hardness of their hearts, He kept lovingly pursuing his people. Ultimately, He promised a Savior to put an end to the sin and suffering.

“So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic ... Your covenant with death will be annulled; your agreement with the realm of the dead will not stand.” Isaiah 28:16, 18

If you find yourself in one of those situations of just wanting out, God is pursuing you right now. He wants you to find your rest in the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to this earth for this very purpose and there is no greater reason to celebrate. A great and holy God is pursuing you, are you ready to listen?

Submitted by Bethany Schrock
Freedom International Ministries, Dominican Republic

Friday, December 10th

Advent Cheer, Advent Near, the Truth of Advent Conquers Fear

♪ “O come, O come, Emmanuel...” ♪

As we enter this season, may that beautiful music and those lovely words direct our soul to embrace the truth of Christ’s First Advent. May each of us trust not only in the fact that Christ was born in a manger on that blessed day, but also, in the fact that he bore our sins when he suffered and died on that cross.

We must consider the story as a whole and contemplate what the purpose of His first advent was, also. For, we know that Jesus himself, in doing what his Father asked of him, had the whole in mind. Scripture tells us, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus being seated at his Father’s right hand affirms that Jesus, also, was resurrected from the dead!

As we endure life’s trials that test our faith this advent season, let us keep their purpose in mind, “that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2) and with hearts overflowing with joy, sing the refrain as we await Christ’s Second Advent.

♪ “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel” ♪

Submitted by Tony Frank
World Team

Saturday, December 11th

Ready for Christmas

“Ready for Christmas,” she said with a sigh,
As she gave a last touch to the gifts piled high.
Then wearily sat for a moment, and read
Till soon, very soon, she was nodding her head.
Then quietly spoke a voice in her dream,
“Ready for Christmas? What do you mean?
Ready for Christmas when only last week,
You wouldn’t acknowledge a friend on the street.
Ready for Christmas while holding a grudge?
Perhaps you had better let God be the judge.
How can the Christ-child come and abide
In the heart that is selfish and filled with pride?
Ready for Christmas? You’ve worked hard it’s true.
But just doing things that you wanted to do.
Ready for Christmas? Your circle’s too small
Oh, you are not ready for Christmas at all!”
She awoke with a start and cry of despair.
“There’s so little time and I’ve still to prepare!
Oh, Father forgive me, I see that you mean
To be ready means more than a house swept clean.”
Yes, more than the giving of gifts and a tree.
It’s the heart swept clean that he wants to see.
A heart that is free from bitterness, sin - -
Ready for Christmas - - and ready for HIM.
- Author Unknown

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today. Amen
- Phillip Brooks

From the Archives, in memory of Isabelle Pursel

Sunday, December 12th
Third Sunday of Advent - Joy

“I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.” Psalm 9:1-2, NIV

In this Advent season of preparation, do you ever ask yourself, “What am I preparing for?” Is your answer one of preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son God sent to save the world? Do you set aside some time to reflect on the miracle of this most special birth? If you haven’t, please do so now. Sit back and reflect on God’s love for you, a love that sent Jesus, His Son, to be your personal Lord and Savior, a Lord who teaches those who study His Word how to cope with this earthly life.

I hope you also include in your Advent preparation an aspect of preparing yourself to share this miracle of God’s love with others. Do you take time to tell others about the wonders of God’s love you’ve witnessed in your life? Do you decorate your house with a nativity scene, whereby you witness to the special gift God shared in the stable that night so long ago? Do you sing carols? Do you sing along to Christmas music played on the radio? However you express your praise, please make sure you take time to share the Good News of Christ’s birth with your family, a friend, a neighbor...

Do what the heavenly host did, “praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:13-14, NIV)

For Jesus’ birth in one that brought God in the flesh to all the world. “And they will call him Immanuel – which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:23, NIV) It is a birth that continues to uplift and change people’s lives even 2000 years later. In your own heart, may you offer praise to God for showering us with such joyous news, for today is a day of joy – may Jesus Christ be praise! Amen.

Blessings in Christ,
Pastor Erich

Monday, December 13th

The Advent wreath that the church uses has three purple pillar candles with a pink one for the third Sunday of Advent. All of the pillars have a recess at the top so that the melted wax stays in a pool in the candle rather than dripping down the side of the candle like a taper. For some reason, perhaps the length of the wick, one purple candle does not give as high a flame as the others. Since the wreath is placed higher than the congregation, it can be difficult to see the flame at all. Many times, I have wondered if the person lighting the candles actually got that one to light. Yet as the worship service progressed, a faint glow would appear at the top of the candle and finally, the flame had enough strength to rise up high enough above the pillar for all the congregation to see.

The gift of faith and its subsequent growth are very much like the flame of the candle. It may happen for someone while the rest of the world walks by without even noticing. Some may recall an initial event of declaring faith, like the initial event of a baby's birth or a candle being lit. But once delivered, the gift of faith grows slowly in ways we often overlook.

Perhaps it can be discouraging to look at our own lives and wonder where the faith is. But God continues to call us and prepare us for what He has planned. Our faith may be growing silently, but the flame is alive. Let us continue to follow Jesus who "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Submitted by David Stuckey

Tuesday, December 14th

I'd like to think I have life figured out as an "adult"... but I'm quickly learning that isn't the case! And it's humbling when you realize the person teaching you the most about life is the person who has barely experienced life at all.

So, adults: who out there complains? Raise your hand. Don't be shy. I know you do it! How much grumbling have you done as the temperatures have dropped? As you anticipate snow and ice and cold? And holiday traffic? And busy stores? And Christmas music NONSTOP? Oy!

In the last three years, my sweet daughter has stopped me in my tracks of complaining with her expressions of JOY. Even more so now as we approach this season. Snow? "Yay! It's so pretty, Mommy! Let's go play!" Cold? "I get to wear my favorite coat, Mommy!" Traffic? "I can't wait to see our family, Mommy!" Busy stores? "Look at all these new people, Mommy!" Christmas music nonstop? "Mommy, sing with me!"

My daughter – the one I thought *I* would be teaching – reminds me that this season of CHRISTmas is **so** joyful.

There's beauty in a quiet, cold, snowy morning. Traffic means families are blessed to come together. Strangers in stores bring opportunities to connect with people in kind, Christian conversation. Singing Christmas music loudly in the car is a moment of happy release in a chaotic world (even if you have a Walker singing horribly out-of-tune next to you...)

So, adults: why complain? There's so much JOY to be had.

*"Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy."
Psalm 47:1*

Submitted by Jocelyn Walker

Wednesday, December 15th

“Mary didn’t waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth.”

Luke 1:39

When I picture Mary traveling to visit Elizabeth, I see a kind of reunion that is filled to the brim with all the same emotions we feel when we see family. There was no way to communicate the good news... no phones, telegraphs, smoke signals, Facebook or texting... except in a personal visit. Perhaps both women were the subject of town gossipers. The pity one felt for a barren older woman and the pregnancy of a young unmarried girl, certainly raised eyebrows. Being together these women could support one another and share their experiences of God. It was a trip well worth making. Many artistic renditions show the two woman huddling together...perhaps whispering, or laughing or weeping. Their laughter and tears were signs of the very presence of God. This Christmas season, share your “God” experiences with someone you care for. Be joyful in sharing not only your stories, but also the news of the One who will soon arrive into the world.

Submitted by Nancy Rupp



Thursday, December 16th

Hope Was Born At Night

Out of the silence, *music*
Out of the darkness, *light*
Out of uncertainty, *promise*
Hope was born that night.
-Author Unknown

Before the birth of Christ, hope hung in the air elusively.
There was no Christmas. There was no Savior.
It was a globe of many promises unfulfilled.

Who would have dreamed that Hope would come to our loud, no vacancy world as a helpless baby and found clothed in tatters and born of an unmarried woman?

Indeed, His is an upside-down kingdom, and we live in backward times, and Jesus knows our ache. Jesus knows.

But, Hope was born that night. Actual Hope for our troubled souls and broken hearts. Seek Him, and you will find Him.

Rich encounters with our Savior are in our upturned circumstances, gut-wrenching disappointments, unrelenting grief, nagging frustrations- unlikely places such as these.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13

For further reflection:

Luke 1:46-49; Luke 2:6-7; Romans 8:18-25; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18; 1 Peter 1:3-6; Hebrews 10:23

Submitted by Becky Suon
Freedom International Ministries, Dominican Republic

Friday, December 17th

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35b

The Art of Giving

One of my favorite stories is about a missionary teaching in Africa. Before Christmas he had been telling his African students how Christians, as an expression of their joy, gave each other presents on Christ’s birthday.

On Christmas morning, one of the Africans brought the missionary a seashell of lustrous beauty. When asked where he had discovered such an extraordinary shell, the young man said he had walked many miles to a certain bay, the only spot where such shells could be found.

“I think it was wonderful of you to travel so far to get this lovely gift for me,” the teacher exclaimed.

His eyes brightening, the African answered, “Long walk part of gift.”

It is true; Christmas is an effort for all of us, but I truly believe that the holiday is made more meaningful, more memorable, because of that effort. Isn’t it a part, a valuable part, of our Christmas gift?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Christmas began with the gift of Your Son, who in turn gave the world the gift of His life. Let us remember, O God, that Christmas remains a matter of giving. Not parties, not presents, not material wealth, for Christmas is Christmas when I give of myself. Amen.

From the Archives, in memory of Nancy Ries

Saturday, December 18th

“Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the Lord....Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.”

Zechariah 2:10. 13

Living in a foreign country has its challenges. Being away from home, foreign language, different cultures/traditions, even different climates. When Jesus came to this earth, He left His home and His glory, to save the world. He was already the Son of God, the Word who had been God in the beginning. His home was perfect, full of glory, full of holiness. He could have said “Let’s just end the world now” or even “No, I’m not going”. But because of His love for the Father and His amazing tremendous love for us, He gave up His perfect, glorious, holy home for a lowly girl’s womb, a stable, a manger, and the body of a helpless infant. This was the only way to save humanity from their fallen state. He was the only perfect and holy sacrifice. His blood was the only way. So, He lived among foreign languages, foreign cultures, and a foreign climate, separated from His loving Father. He gave His life in more ways than one because of His great love for us. Let’s spend our life praising and worshiping our Savior for his great sacrifice and love.

Submitted by Bethany Schrock
Freedom International Ministries, Dominican Republic

Sunday, December 19th
Fourth Sunday of Advent - Love

My idea of Christmas is very simple: **loving others**. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that???? Some of the most important gifts can't be wrapped – like giving of your time and helping fill someone's heart with joy. Have you ever made someone's day and seen their face light up? Just imagine if each of us would do just a few easy random acts of kindness...the world would change... and it takes just minutes of your time. Pick out a few of these ideas, or some of your own, and get busy sprinkling that kindness all over!

- * Buy coffee for the person behind you in line.
- * Donate extra winter clothes – coats, hats and mittens, socks – to a local shelter.
- * Find opportunities to give compliments (these are free).
- * Offer to babysit for new parents.
- * Help corral stray carts in a store parking lot.
- * Send Christmas cards to soldiers who are deployed...check for possibilities in the Visitor.
- * Shovel snow from your neighbor's front sidewalk.
- * Invite someone who will be alone to join your holiday celebrations.
- * Pool together some money to buy tank of gas for a friend or relative who can't afford to go home for Christmas.
- * Send a card to those who are in care facilities...check the Visitor.
- * Deliver baked goods to your neighbor.
- * Leave a Christmas card (and perhaps a treat) in your mailbox for the mail carrier.
- * Go caroling at a nursing home.
- * Encourage family members to look each person they come across in the eye, smile and express their appreciation with a simple "thank you or a Merry Christmas!"
- * Purchase a few grocery items for our local pantry.

**Now...get busy!! If you don't change the world, you may change
SOME ONE!**

*"My dear children, let's not talk about love;
let's practice real love." I John 3:18*

Submitted by Nancy Rupp

Monday, December 20th

As we wait for Christ's coming, the advent wreath has always been a special part of the waiting for me. My mother always had one on our table at home during advent. I eagerly anticipated lighting another candle each week until we lit the Christ candle on Christmas Eve. Over the years I continue to have an advent wreath on my table but the symbolism of each candle has caused me to ponder anew each year what the candles are to remind us of, Love, Hope, Joy and Peace. For this devotional I would like to focus on Peace, something every one of us longs for. To have fulfillment, to be satisfied, content and whole is the Peace that is brought to us through the babe in the manger. We are promised in scripture an abundant full life, but we often look for this in the wrong places – the right job, the perfect spouse, enough money, an impressive reputation or even accomplishments that will be acknowledged by others. There are many trials and roadblocks that come our way as we live in this world. Each advent season I am reminded that God knew this and planned for that by sending His son to heal, deliver and restore our lives. So as we wake up each morning we can start anew knowing that the Prince of Peace has come and will always be there to counsel, comfort and guide us. I recently read somewhere that Peace is not the absence of problems but Peace is the presence of God. “may the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7) as we anticipate and prepare for his Birthday and second coming.

Submitted by Lynne Christman



Tuesday, December 21st

What Really Matters

What are some things that you do to get ready for Christmas? Are there any traditions that you hold dear to your heart? One of my family's favorite things that we do to get ready for Christmas is decorating our house with nutcrackers! It is so fun for us to unwrap and place each of them in various places in our house. As a few of you may know, my mom absolutely loves her nutcrackers. She takes great care in making sure that they don't break when being unloaded and reloaded into their box and always repairs the ones that fall apart. However, I know that as much as she loves each of her nutcrackers, she loves her dad much more; he is the one that gets them for her each year. I know that my mom doesn't love him because she knows he will get her new nutcrackers each year, but instead because she knows that he will put so much time and love into giving her a present. She doesn't look forward to his visit each Christmas because she knows he will bring her something new, but instead because she knows she will be able to spend some time making memories with her dad. This is what I think that Jesus wants us to make the Christmas season all about; he wants us to focus our attention on the things that really matter. Things like the birth of a Savior, the homecoming of family and friends, and making a difference in each other's lives.

Philippians 1:10

For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.

Verse Citation:

(NLT Bible translation, biblestudytools.com)

Submitted by Raegan Rutledge

Wednesday, December 22nd

“For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6

In this Scripture we find the message and meaning of Christmas. Isaiah the prophet gave five awe-inspiring names of our Lord that encourage us, thrill us, and fill us with hope at this Christmas season.

1. **WONDERFUL.** When Jesus did His many miracles, the Scripture says, “The crowd was amazed.” (Luke 11:14, NLT).
2. **COUNSELOR.** The Scripture says, “‘We have never heard anyone talk like this!’ the guards responded.” (John 7:46, NLT).
3. **THE MIGHTY GOD.** He is God-Man. He said that He and the Father are one. The Scripture says, “I and my Father are one.” (John 10:30, KJV).
4. **THE EVERLASTING FATHER.** It was by Him, the living Word, that all things were created. He is the designer of the whole universe. The Scripture says, “He created everything that is. Nothing exists that he didn’t make.” (John 1:3, NLT). “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” (Hebrews 11:3, NIV).
5. **THE PRINCE OF PEACE.** There will never be lasting peace on earth until He comes again to reign in righteousness. But He is also the Prince of Peace in other ways. None can have peace with God apart from Him and the peace that he made through the blood of the cross. The Scripture says, “He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of his blood on the cross.” (Colossians 1:20, NLT).

The full meaning of these words from Isaiah should give us enough strength, hope, and joy to face any crisis, endure any sorrow, and meet any temptation.

Submitted by Alice Tedrow

Thursday, December 23rd

A True Christmas Story

It was several days before Christmas and it was with a heavy heart that I was making the almost 3 hour trip to see my 93 year old mother. She had been suffering from dementia for the past several years. In the last 6 months her symptoms had worsened which had necessitated her being moved from one facility and hospital to another as we sought treatment and care for her. My siblings had called the night before and told me that Mom was quite agitated and might not know me. In fact they had suggested that I should not make the trip.

As I drove, I thought of other Christmas Seasons and happy times spent with her. What could I possibly give to my poor mother...alone in a strange place on Christmas?

Mom smiled a little when I walked in her room and I was relieved she wasn't agitated. She occasionally looked up as I put out the Nativity Set she loved but she didn't say too much in response to my chatter. Progression of her disease had taken her voice and her words were often garbled and slurred. At a loss as to what to do next, I opened the hymn book I had brought and began to sing a few of our favorite hymns.

Suddenly, the room was filled with Mom's strong, sweet voice.

"When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more, And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair; When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore, When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there."

For the next hour, we sang together, the room filled with her heavenly voice just as I remembered it. Her words were clear and melodious. We sang from the hymnal, we sang from memory, Mom's rich voice filling the room and hallway. We sang as we used to, her singing alto me singing soprano. We sang as if we were standing in front of my childhood church singing a special. We sang as if we were gathered around the piano at Christmas. The nurses came and asked if they could open her door. A few residents gathered in the hall. A delivery man stopped on his way out. The cook stopped on her way in. Soon however everyone had gone on their busy way and we just sang together looking in each other's eyes. Later as I hugged Mom goodbye and turned to leave, she quietly hummed, "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder, I'll Be There."

When the trumpet sounds, will you be there? Or will you still be hustling and bustling around? This Holy Season may you quiet your heart and prepare "to gather with the Saints upon the other shore" and receive the Greatest Gift of all.

Friday, December 24th

My mom, Ruth Speiser, enjoyed reading poems by Helen Steiner Rice. While mom was in the nursing home I would occasionally read a couple of poems to her on my visit. The following is a poem from her collection titled "*Reflections*". Mom passed into heaven at Christmas time, and I try to read some poems from her collection of books this time of year.

He's the Savior of the World

(Matthew 1:18)

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

All the world has heard the story of the little Christ Child's birth,
But too few have felt the meaning of His mission here on earth.
Some regard it as a story that is beautiful to hear,
A lovely Christmas custom that we celebrate each year.
But it is more than just a story told to make our hearts rejoice,
It's our Father up in heaven speaking through the Christ Child's voice,
Telling us of Heavenly Kingdoms that He has prepared above
For all who trust His mercy and live only for His love...
And only through the Christ Child can man be born again,
For God sent the Baby Jesus as the Savior of all men.

Prayer: Radiant baby Jesus, so tiny but so filled with love and peace and joy, let some of your attributes spill over into my life and abide in me. Help me in turn to share your generosity and reflect your benevolence to those around me.

Submitted by Linda Heer

Saturday, December 25th

It's an absolute miracle that we have reached the four year mark when different members of my family spent different weeks of our Advent season at the American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge in Cleveland, Ohio while my mother received daily cancer treatments at Cleveland Clinic. I could end this devotional right here! What a miracle! Praise God!!

But I would like to go further to talk about one particular snowy night where a group from a local church brought in supper for the whole group of patients and their guests. It was a delicious meal with a full spread of what I think of as Grandma's Cooking on special events: lumpy mashed potatoes with real gravy, warm dinner rolls, green bean casserole, baked chicken, homemade pies, etc.

After they were finished, they wanted us to all gather in the front room of the Hope Lodge for Christmas Carols. Many of you know that I don't sing but Mom wanted to go, so I reluctantly tagged along. We all sat in the high-ceiling room as the voices filled the whole lodge. I remember vividly the group of singers singing Beautiful Star of Bethlehem as tears streamed down my face. This was a new song for me and a moment I will not forget. Sometimes the things that we are most reluctant to do can make a very lasting impact.

I would like to urge you to spend some time today listening to some different renditions of this beautiful hymn. The ones by Patty Loveless, The Oak Ridge Boys, and the one titled a Cappella hymns are my favorite. They can very easily be found by searching for the song in your favorite internet search engine.

My prayer for each one of us this holiday season is that we have at least one moment where our hearts are touched by the Miracle of His birth and what a beautiful night it was!

Submitted by Maggie Enderle



Merry Christmas!