

Advent Devotionals

Christmas 2021



ADVENT

THE SEASON OF ANTICIPATION

Advent is the season of anticipation. We look forward to celebrating God's greatest gift: His one and only Son. We also look forward to the day when Christ will return and there will be no more tears, and no more pain.

We believe this Advent season will teach us patience and perseverance. We are in a waiting posture in many ways as a church and Advent will help us live into a divine story of a people trying to steady their hands and hearts as they waited for what was next.

Every day during this advent season, one of our own has put together a devotion to guide you into the presence of Christ. Take some time each day. Quiet your thoughts and allow these words to lead you into a place of growth, encouragement, and peace. After you read, spend some time in prayer. Ask the Lord what is it that He wants to say to you and how does He want you to respond?

We hope that these devotions enrich your expectant journey to Christmas.

Grace & Peace,

Matt O'Rear,
Worship Pastor



ADVENT: AN INTRODUCTION

By,
Ron Switzer
Young At Heart Coordinator

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming.” Advent therefore is associated with a sense of expectation and anticipation. Although it has come to be associated with Christmas, it was originally about the second coming of Christ, a future event that Christians eagerly await.

The dictionary defines the word *advent* as relating to any notable person, thing, or event. An example might be the “Advent of Television.” For Christians, it has a special meaning referring that relates to the most “notable person” who ever lived: Jesus Christ. And there is no need for us to anticipate his birth, because it already happened about 2,000 years ago.

Since *advent* refers to expectation, let us think for a moment about the Second Coming of Christ, the greatest event in the history of mankind. If you have wondered where you might be on that day, wonder no more. As a believer, you will be with Him as part of this great throng of people ascending on planet earth. The book of 1 Thessalonians puts it this way:

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

May the Lord bless us and help us to be a blessing to others as we serve Him.



Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Romans 12:13

HOSPITALITY

By,
Cari Brown

Recently I came across this verse in Romans, where years ago I had feverishly highlighted, starred and underlined the study notes. I smiled as the Lord brought my attention back to a moment in 2013 that changed my perspective on what it means to offer hospitality.

During that time, I was part of a Christian mom's group for women with young children. It was a huge blessing sharing life with women who were all in the same life stage. Unbeknownst to her, one of the moms in that group made a profound impact on me in a way she probably never could have imagined - with a messy kitchen counter.

At the time, I was a stay-at-home mom to a two- and four-year-old. Days were scheduled around naps, mealtimes, and preschool, and were spent in an endless stream of picking up toys, preparing and cleaning up meals, playing, reading and doing crafts. The house was in a constant state of disarray from all the accoutrements needed for toddlers and preschoolers. I would jokingly tell friends that I was "drowning in sippy cups," and sometimes it actually felt that way.

The thought of having anyone over to our house elicited panicky feelings of anxiety at all the work and preparation necessary to make the house "presentable." So, I avoided it.

As a part of the mom's group, I was invited to a playdate at the home of someone I didn't know very well. Walking into the house, I immediately faced a counter piled high with mail, magazines, school papers and dirty dishes. Many people

may not have paid any attention to that, but I let out a deep breath I didn't realize I was holding and smiled to myself. I felt an immediate nudge from the Lord as a thought crossed my mind... "see, it doesn't matter what it looks like. What matters is that you are welcome." This revelation was a huge gift to me.

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul urged them to share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. At that time in my life, I was in need - of friendships, fellowship, parenting advice and mostly, acceptance. My new friend's gift of hospitality, of opening her home no matter what it looked like, has left a lasting impression on me.

What Paul means by saying to practice hospitality is simply to make other people feel comfortable and at home--wherever you are. There's a difference between Christian hospitality and social entertaining. Entertaining focuses on the host - the home must be spotless; the food must be well-prepared and abundant; the host must appear relaxed and good natured. Hospitality, by contrast, focuses on the guests. Their needs - whether for a place to stay, nourishing food, a listening ear, or acceptance - are the primary concern. I had been stuck in an "entertaining" mindset, instead of the hospitality mindset that Paul taught.

This advent season, may we each find a way to offer hospitality to someone else. One small act of focusing on the need of someone else could multiply to bless many in our community with the light of Christ.



So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10

O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?

By,
Darren Coffey
Tech Volunteer

I was thinking of that movie recently. It's a classic from 2000 by the Coen brothers. George Clooney is the main star. It's not exactly promoted for Christian consumption, but it's a good movie. I was thinking about it because I was thinking about O Lord, where art thou? I think this is a question that we ask a lot. We, meaning all of us - Christians and non-Christians alike. Lord, where are you?

Well, the Bible tells us that he's always there. Pick a testament old or new.

Isaiah 41:10 - So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Psalms 23:4 - Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil because you are with me.

Matthew 8:20 - And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

John 14:17 - Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

There are many, many others too (e.g., James 4:8; Joshua 1:9; Deuteronomy 31:8).

God's probably saying the same thing about us - Darren, where art thou? I'm right here waiting for you. When you're ready, in your time.

Ever since becoming a Christian (around 10 or 11) I've felt God's presence quite a bit, but usually only when I can quiet my brain and listen instead of talking to Him or, as I've done most of my life, not acknowledging Him actively at all. Still, I've always felt a connection, a real belief, that is just as real (probably more so) than anything else you can feel in this world. Yet, I still find myself asking sometimes, God where are you? I mean I know you're right here, but why aren't you saying anything? Why can't I silence my thoughts enough to hear you?



“I bring you good news that will bring great Joy to all people.” **Luke 2:10**

SPREAD THE JOY

By,
Deb Hall

The echo of Joy can be heard in the Christmas story. John the Baptist jumped for joy in his mother’s womb, the wise men were filled with joy when they saw the star, and the angel announced joy to the shepherds by lighting up their field with the blazing glory of God! Today we can lift our voices and proclaim He has come, Joy to the world, let earth receive her King.

There is a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is an emotion based on circumstances whereas joy does not depend on circumstances but instead depends on the one who gives it. A person pursues happiness but chooses joy. Joy is found in Jesus, God with us!

God sent his son, Jesus, to us and for us! He sent Joy to live in our hearts. Christ living in us, through the Holy Spirit, wants to fill us with Love, Joy, Peace and Hope in a measure overflowing so that we can share the Joy, the Peace, the Hope, and the Love of Jesus with others. May we choose to be the carrier of this Joy to the world every moment of every day of our lives.

Father, during this Christmas Season may we be reminded that you desire for us to experience your Joy at Christmas and all through the year in our hearts! Because of the gift of your son, may we choose to be joyful people filled with your Spirit as we share the good news of great Joy to others!



BETHLEHEM NIGHTS

By,
Karl Houseknecht
Worship Team/Deacon/Preaching Team

Tis the season to be merry! Gifts are bought on Amazon with the hopes of shipping in time before Christmas Eve. Artificial trees are bought by the thousands as a nationwide Christmas tree shortage is upon us, brought on by everyone staying home last year and putting up a live tree.

Travel plans are being made. We're hoping that this year we'll be able to gather together safely with our families. We begin stockpiling food. Turkeys and hams and sugar plums. Sugar plums? They're prunes, aren't they? Who eats those?

The Hallmark Channel begins its daily stories of the young, urban professionals returning to their hometowns to save the Christmas pageants / old theaters / family inns and resorts, while finding and misunderstanding and reuniting with their high school flames, and abandoning their big city jobs / promotions to move back to the country. They kiss. It begins to snow.

We start to decorate the house. The nativity scenes come out of storage. We set up the camels, sheep, donkeys, shepherds, angels, wise men (hey...they weren't there!), Joseph, Mary, and the eight pound, six ounce, newborn baby Jesus in his manger.

All is calm. All is bright. And for many of us, that's our yearly remembrance of the arrival of our King. Little baby King Jesus. No crying he makes.

And we forget, until next year. We forget that this is the King whose arrival was heralded by a voice shouting to clear a path through the wilderness, to build highways, to straighten curves and flatten hills, so that God's glory could be revealed.

This is the King who would make ordinary people fishers of men. The King who didn't come to be served but rather to serve. The King who endured the most horrific torture and death imaginable so that his life would be a ransom for many.

This is the King who would defeat sin. The King who would defeat death by rising again. The King who would send God's Spirit to inhabit us the same way he inhabited the Tabernacle and the Temple. The King who would make each of us His temple. If we let him.

I think sometimes we look at all this pageantry, the greenery, the lights, and the baby Jesus of Ricky Bobby, and we forget this is The King, born over 2,000 years ago into the Earth...and we forget to ask him to be born again into our hearts.

Maybe this year will be different for you.

”

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1:21



GOD THE RESCUER

By,
Linda Bernick
Online Pastor

Many, many years ago, back when I could wear a Speedo and look decent, I worked as a lifeguard in various locations—at my college in Williamsburg, a lake near Crozet and even at a Jewish Community Center! During our training, we were instructed to come to the aid of a potential drowning victim in this order: reach, throw, row, go!

Think about it: a person who is drowning can't save themselves. It requires someone else to come to the rescue. First, you reach out with your hand or a stick for the person to grab onto so you can pull them to safety. If that isn't possible, you toss out some sort of flotation device so that they can at least stay on top of the water. If the distance is too great, you row out to them and bring them aboard. To actually go in the water to help out is a dangerous prospect and always the last resort. You risk going down with the person who is in distress and lose your life in the process.

God sent prophet after prophet after prophet to rescue His people. Then at the right time, Jesus took the plunge. He risked everything to bring us safely into the arms of the Father.

The One, whose name means “the Lord saves” rescued us from the deep waters of sin and death. We cry out “Hosanna!”, which means “Save, we pray!” to the One who can save us.

He came and became like us so that we could become like Him. And our hearts cry “Yes! Come, Lord Jesus!”



LAMENT

By,
Tami Bourne

Sometimes during a sermon I get distracted by a word or a thought that catches me off guard. (I am sure this only happens to me) A few weeks ago was one of those times and the word was "Lament". I started losing focus and my mind went to "wasn't there a song about that?" Of course, after I got home I had to google that -- Success I found what this word had triggered in my mind.

"Breathe deep the gathering gloom, Watch lights fade from every room, Bedsitter people look back and lament, Another day's useless energy spent"

Still this word stayed on my mind, what did lament really mean to me, and why did this song from so long ago come to my mind? So I asked my good friend google for the definition and this is what I saw "a passionate expression of grief or sorrow". I prayed and asked God why this word has been pressing on my mind. HIS answer was not subtle.

God knew weeks ago that I would need to understand what lamenting truly meant. These past couple of weeks I have learned that lamenting is different from carrying a burden, or trying to navigate pain and suffering in life circumstances. I have learned that I don't want to be a bedsitter person looking back and lamenting on another day's useless energy spent. I am learning that worship is not just an upbeat and happy time, but grief-filled worship with pain is a deep expression of worship and that is OK.

This little word has become so sweet to me knowing that I can express my grief or sorrow to God and he is waiting with open arms ready to except my lamentations!

LAMENTATIONS 2:19 (MSG)

As each night watch begins, get up and cry out in prayer. Pour your heart out face-to-face with the Master. Lift high your hands.



JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON SO WHY DOES MY LIFE STINK RIGHT NOW?

By,
John Rhea

There's a common myth in Christianity that if you just love Jesus enough or follow him enough or do X, Y, and Z enough you'll be happy and your problems will melt away. Because, Jesus! Just focus more on Jesus! And if that hasn't happened yet, well Jesus is perfect so if it isn't him it must be... you. You're not doing enough. You're not loving him enough. You're at fault. You're why this life isn't working. Well I say "Bulldukey!" on that.

Should you focus on Jesus? Yes. Should you do as he asks? Yes. Will he help you and make life better? Absolutely. But he never promised life would be easy. He never said follow me and you'll get everything you want like a country song backwards. In fact, in John 16:33 in the Amplified version he says [emphasis added]:

"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have [perfect] peace. In the world you have tribulation and distress and suffering, but be courageous [be confident, be undaunted, be filled with joy]; I have overcome the world." [My conquest is accomplished, My victory abiding.]"
John 16:33 (AMP)

"Have" I.e. present tense. And he tells us not to sit back and enjoy life, but to be courageous/confident/undaunted in the face of tribulation, distress, and suffering. That's active.

The problem isn't you, my friend, and the problem isn't Jesus either. The problem is the equation in your head (and mine) that says you + Jesus = easy life. We've substituted "easy life" for "perfect peace". The actual equation is you + Jesus = better life. Better and easy are not equivalent. Healthy exercise isn't easy exercise. Healthy exercise pushes you and makes you work up a sweat. It's hard and uncomfortable and sometimes even painful, but it leads to a better life.

This "easy life" myth we've believed is nowhere more salient or frustrating or debilitating than at Christmas when we're "supposed" to be happy. So this Christmas season I challenge you to let the guilt over the stink in your life drop away. **It's not you who's the problem; it's your unexamined expectations.**



Yet I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand; You guide me with your counsel, and afterward You will take me into glory. **Psalm 73:23-24**

EVEN IF

By,
Julie Haynes
Finance Manager

This past year has been difficult for me. With the world changing constantly, I have been feeling more anxious than I have ever been. Watching the evening news every day, I have been wondering about what if this happens or what if that happens. I try to control what is going to happen so I can plan out how I will handle this situation or that situation. This is a very bad habit because no matter how many scenarios I play out in my head, it never seems to play out the way I had planned. That is because only God knows what will happen.

I was discussing this in our weekly Church Staff Meeting one day and my coworker, Emily Anne, said to me replace the “what ifs” with “even ifs”. Even if this or that happens, God will still be there and will take care of me. This practice is life changing for me. It hasn’t been easy to say “even if” but when I remember to say that, I feel peace from God. One of the verses that I feel God is helping me with this new way of thinking is Psalm 73:23-24. It says:

**Yet I am always with you;
You hold me by my right hand
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward You will take me into glory.**

I hope this helps someone as much as it helps me.



“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” **John 14:27**

LET US RECEIVE PEACE

By,
Amy Keithley

Have you ever found yourself heavily burdened and in deep despair? Maybe you are carrying the heavy burden of sin or you are experiencing excessive demands and feeling oppressed. Perhaps you are feeling weary in your search for God or maybe you are feeling persecuted. In our human nature, we can sometimes withdraw and wallow in self-pity, feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to deal with the burdens of this world. As we prepare for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas and the return of Jesus at the Second Coming, let us receive His peace.

When Jesus learned of John the Baptist’s death, he departed by boat to a deserted place by Himself to grieve. But, he returned to ministry with compassion! Sometimes we need to pause and deal with our grief. We must realize that we are never alone, though, and that Jesus is grieving with us. He has compassion for us. And, He calls us to have compassion for each other. When He returned to ministry and was met with more than five thousand hungry followers, He provided for their needs. He does the same for us: provides us bread for our spirits and flesh. And, He loves us so much that He uses us to be His hands and feet to share in the blessing of helping others. Can you imagine the looks on the disciples faces when they witnessed Jesus feed more than five thousand people with five loaves and two fish? I wonder if their initial shock was followed by deep feelings of joy? I think so!

We each have a different course in life and are called for a purpose. Focus on the One who gives you supernatural peace that surpasses all understanding. Then, go! God has equipped you for your special calling, and He will give you rest for your soul when you come to Him. Faith requires action. It is an exercise of steps. The first step requires only a mustard seed! Thank You, Lord!



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I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples. **John 15:5-8**

By,
Joseph Battito
Worship Team

THE VINE & THE BRANCHES

This is a very well known and referenced verse; pointed to in many sermons and discussions. As many times as I have listened to it and thought I had a deep understanding, I came to the realization that I wasn't even scratching the surface of its true meaning to me in my Christian life.

There have been commentaries that offer analogies that you have to be part of the plant for life, not only intertwined in the vine. Those branches that are wrapped in the vine but not part of the plant will not bear fruit because they lack the nourishment from the plant

Attending Church, having fellowship, and believing are the activities of our faith are just part of the "intwined" portion of Christianity; but unless there is a strong relationship and devotion to Christ you are still not bearing fruit.

I learned this firsthand more than three years ago when I finally decided to fully invest into the life of Jesus and

leave mine behind. Upon doing so I found a nourishment and an abundance I have never known in my "Christian" life. Yes, I believed and went through the motions, cooked, played in praise bands, and participated in church activities but was not bearing fruit and couldn't understand why others appeared to be happy, and didn't have problems as I did. This continually occurred because I was not planting anything to grow, so how can I reap if there is nothing planted; and therefore, my life baren like dead wood (John 15:2) and being cut off from the abundant life offered to me that I ignored because of fear of letting go to God . . .Hmm, I was afraid to trust God?

When I reached my breaking point as a man, I made the decision to rely on Christ my Savior, trust in him and yield to his will. On that day I began to grow in faith and trust, the way Christ spoke of in this passage. I was no longer going through the motions of Christianity but living a Christocentric life and bearing the fruit I often read about but never experienced.

THE BOTTOM LINE

“By relying on Christ to nourish my soul there is a satisfaction that I have never experienced, an abundance never imagined and a peace within for the first time ever. I know he hears me, provides for me and cares for me because I am now part of him, part of the Vine.” - Joe Battito



A WALK OF FAITH

By,
Craig Bernick

Three years ago, right before Christmas, I experienced one of the most difficult times of my life. Unknowingly, a tumor had been forming in my bladder, and it would result in significant bleeding, repeated hospital visits, and an eventual diagnosis of cancer.

This was, of course, quite a shock to me mentally and physically. It was not an easy time! So, Christmas, 2017 was different than any Christmas I had had up until that time. Or since.

Let me be clear --- it was not because of the Good News of Christmas! That is never changing! And greatly comforting in all circumstances! But, honestly, I was still struggling with a physical burden and faith in God to bring complete healing --- and it would be some time before I could say that the situation was under control. But Christ's presence during the walk of faith to healing was crucial for me! And it was a joy and privilege to be in His care during this healing time!

The birth of Jesus Christ that we celebrate joyfully each December reminds us of God's faithfulness and constancy, the fulfillment of His promise of the coming of a Savior, the Advent. Even during struggles and issues in life, He doesn't change! And during our walks in the valley, His presence is there, and He, the One whose birth we celebrate, carries us when we cannot walk any further.

Christ has brought us close to the Father, and we are comforted and consoled by Him. His Advent makes all the difference in our lives!



SEASON OF LIGHT

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The people living in darkness have seen a great Light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a Light has dawned.

Matthew 4:16

By,
Ron Switzer
Young At Heart Coordinator

The word “Light” shows up in scripture over 260 times, and it is a very fascinating subject in both the spiritual and worldly sense. The entire universe that God created is so vast that distance in outer space is measured in Light Years, that is the distance Light travels in one year at the speed of 186,000 miles per second!

If we can get our mind around that, we have taken a step toward comprehending the greatness and majesty of our God. With finite minds and language, we do not have the words to adequately describe the greatness of the God who created Light with His words and has it traveling 186,000 miles in a single second!

During Advent season, we ponder how the birth of Jesus brought Light into a dark world. And even as we celebrate the Light, we are also reminded in scripture that when that Light came, mankind receded to the darkness because the Light exposed our sinful and evil deeds.

The people living in darkness have seen a great Light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a Light has dawned. (Matt. 4:16)

For God, who said, “Let Light shine out of darkness,” made his Light shine in our hearts to give us the Light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2nd Cor. 4:6)

My sincere and fervent wish for all of us this Advent season is that we will see our self in the same “Light”, as God sees us. If we need a scriptural imperative to embrace that truth, we can find it in the words of 2 Cor. 5:21: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Regardless of our sins and mistakes, as believers we will be clothed with the righteousness of Christ right up to the time we see Him face-to-face. And then we will be like Him.



“Hear me, O God, when I cry; listen to my prayer. You are the One I will call when pushed to the edge, when my heart is faint.” - **Psalm 61:1-2a**

PRAY AND WAIT

By,
Kathy Sandridge

I think most would agree that the last few years been quite the challenging. We will certainly remember them for a very long time. I feel like so many around me are tired and weary, and ready to give up on believing this pandemic will ever come to an end. Even in the midst of the chaos and feeling like I am on edge myself, I pray and wait and am filled with HOPE that everything is going to be okay.

As Psalm 61:1-2a reveals, when King David faced trying times, he acknowledged his longing for the One who holds all things together. (Colossians 1:17). God never promised us an easy life, and we need to give up the control that we so desperately want to have over all that is going on in 2020 and seek Him. Our worst days, weeks, months, or even years can bring us to our knees to call upon the One who brings us HOPE. This year has been an extraordinary year for us to pray more than ever and continue relying on our Savior. We can trust and believe that God is still right here with us every step of the way.

Instead of counting down these last days of 2020 as quickly as we can, let's spend each day of Advent preparing our hearts for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. This pandemic may not end any time soon, but as we wait on God and put our hope in Him, we will find that He is indeed more than enough. God is working out all things for our good and His glory.

Pray! And Wait!

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There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12:25-27



FAMILY OF BELIEVERS

By,
Rachel Besecker
Council Member

As we prepare our hearts today and continue to welcome the joy of this season in, I want to begin with a little word association. Read the following words aloud. Say them slowly. Let them fall over you, and then say them again. Accepting. Comforting. Welcoming. Compassionate. Family. What do these words mean to you? When you say them, when you hear them, what comes to mind? Recently, these words were used by many in the Effort congregation to describe why they keep coming back. These words describe why people walk through the doors each Sunday morning.

But what do these words really mean? What does it mean for a people, for a church, to be accepting, comforting, welcoming and compassionate? How can a church feel like family? I believe the answer to these questions is found all throughout the New Testament. The Apostle Paul spends much of his time writing to believers in the early church encouraging them to do, and to be, these very things! He writes to new believers that they should live in unity, encourage one another, serve one another, carry each other's burdens, welcome one another, share in each other's sorrows and rejoice together.

Paul's words were not mere suggestions so that people could get along. His words are a call to all believers to live a life that reflects the love of Jesus. Jesus who accepted everyone despite their past choices, comforted those who were mourning, welcomed those who were lost, and had compassion for those who were hurting. May we come together during this Christmas season as a family of believers, to celebrate the birth of the One through whose grace and mercy we are given life. And may we continue to live this life together as a family, accepting and welcoming our brothers and sisters, just as Christ accepts us.



HUMILITY OF CHRIST

By,
Rob Jones
Council Chair

Around Christmas, we often think about our Lord's humble entry into this world. In those first moments here on Earth in flesh, God set the stage for our Savior to begin a life characterized by humble service. Without wavering, humility circulated through the veins of Christ, even through His final moments when those veins spilled His grace on all of us.

This year has challenged all of us. We have been called on numerous occasions to put aside our wants and desires, and in some cases, even our needs. The tendency, after an extended time of sacrifice, is to turn inward and start looking out for our own selfish desires.

Paul, in his letter to Philippi, encourages us, like the Philippians, to counter these tendencies through a call to emulate Christ's humility. To "value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the other." He goes on to express that even if he were "being poured out like a drink offering" in the service of the Lord, that he could rejoice and be glad. That is a difficult challenge, but it is the model that Christ gave to us.

How are you rejoicing in the service of the Lord this season? **May we all model Christ's humility today and always.**

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.



TAKE TIME TO REST

By,
Reagan Jones

Currently, I'm taking college courses, thinking where I might want to transfer to, and I should be studying for my SATs. I see all of these things as ways that I can work to start securing my future. I don't know what that future will be yet, but I want it to be good. Constantly, something is on my mind, adding a stress that I want to go away. I could keep my mind on one thing at a time, but I won't let myself. Why? Because I want to be in control. However, God wants us to trust Him with everything, no matter how big or small.

As Christians, we are so blessed because we don't have to have the weight of "control" on our shoulders. Our God is strong enough to take care of every aspect in our lives. When I think of Christmas this year, I look forward to rest. A time where I can take a break from the homework deadlines and online discussion boards. We can find rest in the arms of our God when our world is crazy and chaotic. Even so, the holidays will come to an end, and life will go back to normal. When this happens, it is so important that we remember that we don't have to keep everything under control. Our lives, our futures, they're all in our Father's hands. Take time to rest in the Lord this Christmas season, and in the New Year, let Him be in control.

PSALM 68:19 (NLT)

"Praise the Lord; praise God our savior! For each day he carries us in his arms."



“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” - **Psalm 119:105**

A LAMP TO OUR FEET

By,
Sadie Conner
Youth Intern

The Lord is meant to guide us and lead us on the path that He has intended for us. Yet most of the time we let the things of the world and our own stubbornness cast a shadow over the light he provides to guide us.

We let doubt and pride divert us from the things that God has intended for us, away from a full Christian life where we can use the gifts God has given us for his glory.

When we let his light shepherd us we end up on paths like King David or Paul. Leading lives they had never imagined for themselves but doing what God always had planned for them.

In our own lives we do not have the foresight to see what is to come, but God does. So we must try in all seasons of our lives to let him have control so that we can be graced with his glory and love.

So as we come upon the Christmas season and the end of 2020, a hard year for everyone. Make sure to let God fully into your life so that He can show you all the wonderful things He has in store for you.



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He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what he has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the Lord.

Psalm 40:3 (NLT)

By,
Mary Wright
Prayer Team/Online Pastor

A NEW SONG FOR ADVENT

As I was thinking about the anticipation of Advent, the Lord led me to Psalm 40:3 [NLT], He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what he has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the Lord.

First, the Lord is the One who gives us a new song. Just as He orchestrated the arrival of Jesus in the form of a newborn human baby, He gives us the new songs of praise and anticipation that the promise of redemption calls forth. The new song is positive, victorious, acknowledging God as the author. The new day that is blossoming is full of hope, excitement, and revival. God is at work here, and we need to praise Him for His awesome, transforming power.

Second, others will see the effect of this new song and will have a new respect for God’s power. God is calling our church to take the next step. We need to put God first, not our building, not the stuff of past ministry, not our traditions, not OUR will and OUR way, but His. This opens exciting doors to ministry, and it matches what God is doing through the new song He has given each of us in this season of new

beginnings. The Advent Season is a perfect time to reflect on His promises fulfilled through Jesus, and the promises He has made for each of us to partner with Him in a season of transition.

Finally, this new song leads people to trust in the Lord. As people see authentic ministry, Christ-centered, life-changing, community-transforming ministry, they KNOW it is a “God thing.” And they want what God has to offer. Your example leads them to Jesus. The “hand up” that changes lives is irresistible.

How will YOU join God in His life-changing work?

How will you take His love into your community?

Who are your neighbors? What are their needs? How will you become involved in their lives? What gifts does God want you to give back to Him in service?

How will you know what God wants of you? How will you support your church missions and ministries in singing this new song He has given you?

SEEK HIM IN PRAYER

Let us pray fervently for clear direction in this Advent season. Seek Him in prayer. And know that Jesus is ready to provide support for you to follow whatever path He reveals! When He came to earth and took our sins on Himself, it was to set us free for a life-changing New Song. One that not only puts US on a new path, but also provides a new path for others.

GOD WITH US

Devotional & Poem by,
Mike O'Brien

Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing, speak the word but it will not stand, **for God is with us. Isaiah 8:10**

In the book of **Isaiah 7:14** this amazing prophecy appears; Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. These words were prophetically fulfilled in **Isaiah 9:6-7** and actually fulfilled in **Matthew 1:22-23** with the virgin birth of Jesus. Immanuel means "God with us" and has been a comforting concept to believers through the ages ever since Isaiah penned the words over 2700 years ago. For centuries the Jews had His manifest presence in the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle and Temple but He could only be encountered once a year by the High Priest. For God to actually be with His people in human form was an unbelievable prospect.

The characteristics of the Messianic child as described in **Isaiah 9:6-7**, indicate that He will be a mighty and sovereign head of governments and a zealous and just King. At His first advent we see glimpses of His majesty and authority for He was mighty in word and deed but His ultimate power will be revealed at His second advent when He comes as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

However, I believe there is more to this truth that applies to you and me today. "God with us" must also be understood in light of **Isaiah 8:10** which says: Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing, speak the word but it will not stand, for God is with us. The Prophet predicts the futility of all the enemies' schemes against Judah, because of Immanuel. So "God with us" carries the implication that God is sovereignly working His purpose in the lives of His people to protect them and give them victory. He will fulfill His promises no matter how earnestly men may oppose them as **Romans 8:31** says ...if God be for us who can be against us?

Yes, this advent season is a time to remember the babe in the manger whose birth brings us comfort and peace. But it is also a time to remember that Immanuel fights our battles for us today and ever lives to make intercession for us. "God with us" is the believer's cry of triumph as we enter into spiritual warfare each day. For truly God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble **Psalms 46:1**.

God With Us

God with us, Immanuel, Isaiah saw the need.
Mighty God He would be, in word and every deed.

A virgin birth would be the sign, announced in celestial array.
Conceived by God and not by man, and for our sins would pay.

The prophet by another name, called Him Prince of Peace.
Eternity will sing His praise and His reign will never cease.

Long ago Micah saw, just where He would be born,
In Bethlehem, light would dawn for all that weep and mourn.

His going forth was of old, yet few there were that knew,
That this babe in swaddling clothes, was born on God's own cue.

Shepherds watched and angels thronged, as Magi traveled far,
To see the one long prophesied, marked by majestic star.

God with us, Immanuel, sprung from God's own seed.
Eternally on David's throne, His government will He lead.

- Mike O'Brien



”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Luke 2:15 3:22-23



O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL

By,
Julie Anne Herrick
Deacon

Christians around the world will be singing “O Come, All Ye Faithful” during the Advent season. The chorus of this hymn is especially beautiful with altos holding the long note while the other voices sing, “O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.” What a perfect time of year to use the word adore. The focus is on Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us in human flesh. Singing seems like an entirely appropriate response expressing love and adoration.

The verb to adore means more than simply to love. The Latin verb adorare illustrates why: it combines the prefix ad (“to, toward”) with the verb orare (“to pray”). To adore the Christ child means to pray to him, to approach him in a posture of prayer.

What does this adoring prayer look like? It looks like the Olympic runner Eric Liddell feeling God’s pleasure when he ran. It looks like God smiling at the little drummer boy playing his best for him. It looks like you and I using our gifts and talents unreservedly to the approval and delight God and God alone.

Are we doing that which we were created to do? Will we adore him by making every day a living prayer of adoration? As we sing the chorus of “O Come All Ye Faithful” in church and at home, let’s remember to approach the throne of grace this season in full and complete adoration toward Christ the Lord.



BREATH OF HEAVEN

By,
Rosemary Jones
Breathe Women's Coordinator
Preaching Team

**"Breath of heaven
 Hold me together
 Be forever near me
 Breath of heaven"**

These are lyrics from my favorite Christmas song by Amy Grant, Breath Of Heaven. In this beautiful prayer, Mary cries out for God to strengthen her, carry her, and be with her as she mothers His son. More than anything she longs for God's presence to wash over her. Without God's help, she knows that she can't carry the burden alone. She will fall apart unless He holds her together.

Although Mary's burden was unique, her prayer resonates in my soul. I, also, long for more of God's presence in my life. I've known what it feels like to fall apart and need His arms to hold me together. The good news is His breath, His presence is readily available.

Christmas is a reminder that God came near

through His Son, Jesus Christ, and promises to be forever near us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. May we take time this season and every day to pray with a heart like Mary.

Breath of Heaven,

Hold me together, when my future takes an unexpected turn.

Hold me together, when the words and opinions of others erode my confidence.

Hold me together, when the mountains before me seem insurmountable.

Hold me together, Lord, because without you I fall apart.

Open my heart today and every day to know that you are near.

Amen.

”

Thomas said to Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by (through) Me.”

John 14:5-6



ROBES FOR RAGS

By,
Darren Keithley
Family Pastor

God the Son left Heaven to come to earth, not as a king or ruler, but born to common girl Mary and her carpenter husband, Joseph. Why? Why would Jesus trade robes for rags? Why would Jesus trade wealth for poverty? There is no hunger, pain, sorrow, heartbreak, and thirst in heaven, so why come to a world to experience them?

Many people today echo Thomas' question, How can we know the Way? Not a path, but The Way. Jesus, The Way is also the Truth, and the Life. And how can the One who is Life, come to die? Jesus, Life died, to live again, and destroy death in perfect victory. And in Life, we die to live again (1 Corinthians 15:31; Luke 9:23). Knowing the Way is knowing Jesus Christ. But it will cost us to know Him...

There is a fine line between warfare and worship. There is a war between my selfish nature and walking in the Spirit of Christ (Romans 7:21-23). It is the difference between living for self and living a life of worship because we become what we worship. Can I come like a humble shepherd to the manger of God and worship my Savior? Can I come like a wise man and know there is One greater than myself, bow down, and worship my Savior?

Jesus became the Way when there seemed to be no way. To answer the question, “why did the Lord leave Heaven?” is simply answered in a hymn of worship, “Why did my Savior come to earth, And to the humble go? Why did He choose a lowly birth? **Because He loved me so!**”



”

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Matthew 24:42

PREPARE & KEEP WATCH

By,
Jason Bird
Church Administrator

Advent is a season of preparation. The four candles of the Advent wreath remind us that we are to prepare in hope, with Faith, for Peace, and with expectant Joy. We are not preparing for Jesus’ birth...but his triumphal return! The Advent season reminds us that God sent his Son to be the light of the World...and that he is coming again.

As a real person, I need to set reminders for myself. The alarm clock, my daily schedule, even the kitchen timer to know when dinner is ready. Without these resetting reminders, many important things can go undone or forgotten.

The Advent season is that reminder for us. To refocus us on Jesus’ command to keep watch. We need to remain in Hope. Hopeful not that he will return because that is assured, but in the hope that those who don’t know him will come to see him as Savior. We also need to remain in Faith. Knowing that God’s word is truth, and in the sharing of that truth in our words, our deeds, and the full witness that is our life, we can bear witness to the greatness that is God. We need to pray for Peace. The peace that comes with knowing Christ and that our salvation is at hand. We can be the peace to those in our lives who need it, the peace that comes only from God.

Joy can seem impossible at times, living in this fallen world. But this isn’t the Joy celebration for today, but the joy that comes from knowing that despite our present suffering we have a future, a future in the presence of the King... Joy in knowing that our salvation is real and that we are loved.

”

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

**Lamentations
3:22-23**



THE GOD WHO WAS AND IS AND IS TO COME

By,
Matt O'Rear
Worship Pastor

Virginia O'Rear, my grandmother on my father's side, is a woman who personifies hope. Her life hasn't been easy. She's raised four Jesus following children amidst little income, tragically lost one to a cult who later took his life, and navigated the waters of being married to a man with a profound case of depression.

If you had the privilege to talk with her, she would tell you without hesitation that Jesus is the singular source of her hope. She would tell you that life's struggles take a backseat to the persistent, unchanging, immutable hope found through a relationship with Christ. Her hope is not pristine and pretty - laced with fairy dust; no, it is rough, well-worn, and gritty. It is the hope that has had years to mature and harden. This hope is defined by a resolute, unwavering hold on something that has happened and will happen.

As we navigate our own difficult season amidst this pandemic, let us remember who God was, who He is, and who He will be.

Let us remember a God who created us, and despite our sin, loved us so much that He never gave up on us. He bankrupted heaven by sending His sinless son Jesus to take upon our sin and die to separate our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. And last but not least, let us remember the promise of victory and everlasting life free from tears and pain in heaven.

During Advent we acknowledge the tension we live in - Jesus has already come and destroyed the power of death and sin, yet we are still waiting for His return to make all things new. But our waiting is not aimless! In the midst of life's struggles, we wait with hope and expectancy.

May we be a people whose hope is matured and hardened, resolute and unwavering.

**"Great is Thy faithfulness, " O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.**



SIMPLICITY

When I began my journey of pursuing my Master's Degree in Divinity from Fuller Seminary, our former Pastor Ben Jamison gave me some words of wisdom. He said, "Seminary will teach you a lot, but don't let it change you." At the time, I told him, "Of course not." But as mentors often are, he was wise in a way I could only understand down the road.

Seminary has indeed engaged my mind in a way that encourages me to question, ponder, study the Bible, and to think critically and exegetically (there's a four dollar word if I ever heard one) regarding my faith. And all of this is great - I have had many profound moments of understanding. But the minute I sit down to write sermons, I have to check myself that I'm not writing a theological paper.

You see, faith is simple. We as humans can over-complicate the most basic of issues. This is the double-edged sword of Christian education, Sunday morning sermons, and Bible studies. While they deepen our understanding of God, they put us in a space where we use our heads, sometimes to the detriment of our hearts.

So, where are we as a church in this Advent season? We are seeking a new Senior Pastor. We are experimenting with various ways to unify the folks who, previously on Sundays at 9 AM or 11 AM, can be like two passing ships in the night. We're trying to digest what it would be like to sacrifice our musical preferences some of the

By,
Matt O'Rear
Worship Pastor

time so the church can all sit at the same table on Sundays. These are not insignificant things.

What are our tendencies as humans in the face of trial? Seek to gain control? Make another committee? Get lost in policy and procedure? Revert back to comfort zones and make it about us?

Another former pastor, David Clay, was reported as once saying, "fear means go." Indeed, these are challenging times, and there is unknown everywhere.

That's the way the Jews must have felt, hoping and trusting a Savior would come. They thought Jesus was going to be their knight in shining armor. And He was. But instead of an entrance as a grizzled, charismatic political/military figure, He came as a baby. Instead of prancing in on a battle horse, He entered Jerusalem on a donkey.

What I'm getting at, is that we build mental models of what God is - what church is. But more times than not, God reveals himself as something far more simple, far more straightforward. Faith is far rawer and less complex than our bible studies and bylaws tell us it is.

This Christmas morning, take hope in no more and no less than - Emmanuel. God with us.

Merry Christmas!