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ADVENT 2022

Devotionals

For Those Who Came To Find

WRITTEN BY THE FRIENDS AND MEMBERS OF
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF KIRKWOOD

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December 1st by Jim Boal

A voice cries out: In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Isaiah 40:3

There are a few things happening in this short passage. First there is a voice crying out. The identity of the voice is not known, but this happens a lot throughout scripture. All through the second part of the book of Isaiah there are voices calling out. In the New Testament, John the Baptist says, "I am the one crying out in the wilderness." (John 1:23.)

Also, it seems that these voices are always crying out from the wilderness. Not from the temple or a place of comfort, but from a place from which we would like to be rescued. Did these voices need to be in the wilderness before anyone would listen?

Third, the cry instructs us to get ready for something big! Make the highway straight! There is no time of year that we spend more time getting ready for an event than Christmas. We spend time, energy, and money getting ready for Christmas in this culture.

For our first Christmas in 1972, my wife, Carol (God bless her), introduced me to the concept of Christmas baking. She would spend a month in the kitchen making cookies, candies, and cakes just in case a large army stopped by. And, of course, there is Christmas shopping, which, this year, began before Halloween! Because of the economy, merchants are nervous about their sales this year. There are many who depend on this time of year to see them through more lean times.

But the scripture calls us to make the highway straight through this wilderness. What is our wilderness this season, and what is preventing us from preparing a straight path? Jesus, you are on your way. Help us listen to the cry in the wilderness and make for you a straight path.

December 2nd by The Rev. Julie Allen Berger

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming and he answered, The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say "Look, here it is," or "There it is." For in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.

Luke 17:20-21

Part of human nature is wanting to have control, to understand why difficult things happen. Under umbrellas at a shuttle stop years ago — when it had rained for days without ceasing — I was idly chatting with a fellow staff member at Barnes-Jewish Hospital. She told me in no uncertain terms that we had flooding because God was angry at "all the casinos." She took to heart the story of Noah's ark and God's displeasure at human sin.

Three tragically died last month at Central Performing and Visual Arts academy in the neighborhood close to our home. We struggle with how this could have happened. We feel and hear the despair of those who wonder if our nation has reached its lowest point. Amidst gun violence, environmental upheaval, racism, and political impasse, are these the "end times" which precede God's once again needing to wipe our sinful slate clean?

Jesus' response to the religious right of his day, when they sought to pinpoint God's timetable, is enigmatic. You cannot know for certain how and when God acts, Jesus said. How frustrating these words must have been for the Pharisees. How difficult they are for us!

While it is crucial to seek the causes of violence and address them, Jesus' words point me to the reality that not all evil/not all tragedy makes sense, at least this side of heaven. Jesus' words call me to look for how God might be speaking to me through the actions of neighbors seeking healing and constructive change. The realm of God is already here, Jesus says. How can I become a part of God's redeeming work and avoid the trap of passive blame? That is my prayer this Advent as I ponder the gift of Jesus.

December 3rd by Sarah Nepple

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord."

Isaiah 11:1-3a

Hope in the midst of a difficult time! This is what advent is all about! We need hope. Sometimes we feel like that stump. But now we are waiting and preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus! These words are describing such a hopeful, magical time that will come!

There is nothing more magical than the feeling I had on Christmas Eve growing up. We have a special wooden sign in our family that is part of our decorations and reads, "Christmas Eve Forever." I remember the year we added this sign to the decorations at my grandparents' house. It came after years of celebrating together every Christmas Eve. Nana and Pop were so excited to find the sign at the store and had to add it to our special Christmas Eve celebration. It reminded us of the magic of the Advent and Christmas seasons—especially the magic of the family being all together sharing laughter, conversations, and traditions.

One of the many treasured traditions on Christmas Eve was the anticipation of hearing the story of the birth of Christ. All the children would wait as patiently as we could while the adults took turns reading the story, eagerly waiting for Nana to hand us a nativity figurine wrapped in tissue paper. We'd very carefully unwrap the piece and add it to the creche. It was something we knew was going to happen year after year, yet it was just as magical each time we gathered as a family in the foyer and living room and heard the miracle of Jesus. Nothing else mattered to me that night. I had all the important people in my life in one house.

May you be blessed with the anticipation of hope of the Christ Child this Advent season! And of course, Christmas Eve Forever!

December 4th by George Durnell

Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Matthew 24:44

During Advent, we wait. We count the days, sometimes using a festive Advent Calendar, until we arrive at Christmas Day, the birth of Jesus. We prepare ourselves for the Coming of the Light.

The participants of the first Advent had been waiting as well, though some of them did not know it. Mary and Joseph had been told – by Angels, no less – what to expect. And the Magi recognized a new star that indicated to them that the King of the Jews had been born. But the shepherds headed out to the fields that night with no thought that it would be any different from all the nights that had gone before. Then the sky opened, and another Angel appeared to tell them to go to Bethlehem. And the shepherds were not afraid to go to see what had come to pass.

During Advent, we wait. But really, we wait all the rest of the year as well. We wait for Jesus to return. The promised Second Coming. We are just not quite so aware of the ticking off the days because we have no idea when this will occur. We have no pretty poster with a numbered door to open each morning to mark the passing of yet another day. Later in Jesus' life, when he was with his Disciples every day, he spoke of the time when he would be gone and also of the time when he would come again. He reminded them that no one can possibly know when that will happen. They must always be ready to recognize his return. We are still in that same situation. Only God knows when Jesus will arrive to be among us again. So, we must keep our hearts open to the possibility that it could be today. And we must be like the shepherds who heard the Angel's message and went to Bethlehem without fear.

December 5th by Joel Hammond

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Jeremiah 33:14

"Surely coming, but when? Why is waiting so difficult? Anticipation, anticipation. Is makin' me late. Is keepin' me waitin'."

Carly Simon penned these lyrics a little over 50 years ago, and shortly thereafter they were used as an accompaniment to an iconic Heinz Ketchup commercial. God is slow good. We are often in a hurry to get those things we want, when we want them. On our time. The things that are out of our control, however, seem to take forever. As demonstrated to the people of Israel, God's time marches to a different cadence. Forty days turns into forty years. As an aging adult, the season of God's gift of Christ the infant savior seems to come and go more quickly as each year passes, compressing yearly lists of things to do and rituals that seem to be increasingly difficult to accomplish. Oh, if only I could be like a child again! Slowness and stillness. That's how I remember Christmas as a child.

As a grade schooler, I experienced a slow pivot from Thanksgiving to Advent Season. To top it off, waiting for Christmas Eve, followed by Christmas Day, poured slower than molasses. I had to bide my time by searching out the hiding places my parents had for Christmas gifts, even carefully peeking through the wrapping of some finished gifts in the attic, doing my best to not leave a trace of my transgressions! Oh, the waiting!

*"A small part of a hope, of a love that exists.
In the eyes of a child, you will see."*

John Lodge of The Moody Blues composed these words when I was nine years old. I used Christmas money from my Detroit grandparents to purchase a cassette tape that contained this song, *Eyes of a Child (Parts I and II)*, which I played over and over again, well into my late teenage years.

God has provided us the tools of patience and grace to reset our anticipatory clocks, so we can attempt to slow down our Advent and Christmas experiences to what they once were, in the eyes of a child. Slow down this Advent Season to truly experience the wonderment of the Christ Child. God is slow good.

December 6th by The Rev. Linda Maconochie

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

Luke 11:9

In this season of asking, if you have children in your life, you know that they are asking. The question is asked of children by the adults in their lives, what would you like for Christmas? I remember looking at the Sears Wishbook and creating a list of things I was asking for. Perhaps you did too. This is a season of asking, but also a season of searching and knocking.

I wonder what we are searching for and looking for this year. I know it is much more than what we find in a wishbook. We are searching for peace this Christmas. We are tired of hearing about violence, and we are searching for answers to bring about peace. Living in this world, we are concerned about the health of our planet, and searching for more ways to make a difference.

We are aware of our siblings who don't have enough and are searching for a way to fix the system. We are also searching for meaning this Christmas. This past year was a difficult one for me on a personal level, and it may have been for you too. We are asking, searching, and knocking and the good news is that the door will open for all of us. Jesus is born and God's Kingdom has broken into the world.

December 7th by Georgina Sikorski

*"Forget the events of the past, ignore the things of long ago!
Look, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, can't
you see it? I'm making a road in the desert and setting rivers to
flow in the wasteland."*

Isaiah 43:18-19

At this time of the year, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, a baby laying in the manger. It is the epitome of something new, someone to celebrate. And no matter who they were, or what they did, kings and shepherds brought gifts of love and adoration to the new King.

As I reflect upon our last week, our Adult Mission Trip to Kentucky, I think about the gifts which we all have, and bring to those we love. You do not have to be rich, or extremely talented. You are not judged by who you are, but by how you love and give to one another. Our team was not highly skilled, but we were eager to learn, and by learning, we were able to make a difference in the lives of others. We learned how to paint (in the proper way), we installed hurricane hinges (never even heard of those before), we used a table saw (and frightened our kids when we told them so). Mostly, though, we listened to our homeowners, sharing their very personal stories of loss. We were so blessed to be with this community, to see for ourselves the widespread devastation. And to see the dedication of the teams who are helping to rebuild. We met and worked with amazing work partners who had been there for months. And who will return in the spring for another long 8-9 months of dedicated work. They do all this work for their love of God.

In this season, may we be reminded of something new, that Jesus touches us in many ways, and that we have many ways to give and receive the gifts of Christ.

December 8th by Doug Lane

"...for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Luke 2:30-32

It's 40 days after the birth of Jesus. We've had a chorus of angels, shepherds stopping by the manger, followed a few days later by kings from the East. Now Mary, Joseph, and Jesus have entered a temple in Jerusalem to follow a custom of presenting the child. In this scene Jesus is being held in the arms of an old, old man. This is Simeon.

The first time I remember encountering Simeon was when I was a boy, seeing a drawing of him—a drawing of a very old man with a long hairy beard. It was very off-putting. But what a fascinating story! The Holy Spirit had revealed to a very devoted Simeon that he would not see death before seeing God's Messiah. And it was the Holy Spirit which had guided Simeon to the temple that day.

Thus, holding the child, Simeon is praising God and telling God he is now ready, as God's servant, to depart life in peace. Simeon has received the ultimate Christmas gift; one we all celebrate this season.

Today's three verses from Luke complete Simeon's prayer to God, as he sees and realizes what the child is and represents. First, Simeon's own eyes see—and know—God's salvation. Jesus is here to deliver that, as the Savior. Kings and prophets had been searching a long time for this, and it allows a deliverance, a peace with death. Next Simeon realizes God has prepared Jesus "in the presence of all peoples." Yes, not just certain people or groups of people. Simeon goes on to mention the Gentiles, for whom God is preparing Jesus as a light, perhaps to bring them out of a darkness. We know how often Jesus will be called this kind of light. As for those people of whom Jesus was born—and who have long been expecting a Messiah—Simeon notes Jesus provides a glory for them. Thus, this gift of God, from God, is the promise of love, grace, mercy, righteousness, salvation, glory, and release from death. Whether Simeon also sees a future of trials and difficulties facing Jesus and followers through the ages, we do not know. Simeon accepts his departure in peace.

We know NOW what the ultimate Christmas gift really is. Here we discover Simeon, who knew it THEN. Remember Simeon as we open our gifts.

December 9th by The Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz

*In the last days,
the mountain of Yhwh's Temple
will be established as the most important mountain
and raised above all other hills –
all nations will stream toward it.
Many people will come and say:
"Come, let us climb Yhwh's mountain
to the Temple of the God of Jacob,
that we may be instructed in God's ways
and walk in God's paths."
Instruction will be given from Zion
and the word of Yhwh from Jerusalem.
Isaiah 2.2-3a (The Inclusive Bible)*

The Hebrew Scriptures, and Isaiah in particular, are certain that if God is going to do anything important and exciting in the world, the action will take place, or at least begin, in Jerusalem. The city on God's mountain, Zion, Jerusalem – the names are interchangeable – is the location where God's presence dwells on earth. More specifically, the Temple in Jerusalem is God's home; with the most sacred place in the Temple – The Holy of Holies – being where God is enthroned and uses the Ark of the Covenant, where the tablets containing the 10 Commandments reside, as a footstool (see Isaiah 6.1-8 for more details).

Isaiah proclaims that God's people will flock to Jerusalem to be "instructed in God's ways and walk in God's paths." Jerusalem will be the place where divine Words of Instruction will be given.

The child of Bethlehem, whom we await in these Advent days, was born just a few miles from Jerusalem. Many of his most momentous life events took place within Jerusalem proper, and more specifically within the confines of the Temple. As his disciples, we understand Jesus to be the one who teaches us about God's ways and shows us how to walk in God's paths. As our annual celebration of his birth draws near once again, let us be watching and listening and learning – that we may receive afresh and then generously share God's overwhelming gift of love!

Prayer:

Teach us, O God, that in Jesus we may walk faithfully. Amen!

December 10th by Megan Ligeti

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

Luke 1:28-31

Choosing the name for our daughter was easy. When my husband and I were dating and daydreaming about what our future lives could look like, we both, shockingly, loved the exact same name for a girl: Lorelei. I loved the name because of the German mermaid legend. My husband loved the name because of a video game he had played as a child. About six years later, we had the chance to make that daydream a reality when we welcomed our daughter into this world. "Lorelei" suits her.

I wonder...how did God choose "Jesus?" It's fun to imagine God curled up on a couch flipping through a copy of *1001 Baby Names*. I'm curious...what's the real story?

"Jesus' original Hebrew name is Yeshua, which is short for yehōshu'a and can be translated to 'Joshua.' When Yeshua is translated into Greek, which the New Testament is derived from, it becomes Iēsous, which in English spelling is 'Jesus.'"¹

Other interesting notes:

- The meaning of Joshua is "The Lord is my salvation."
- In Matthew 1:21 an angel says to Joseph, "...and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
- Joshua from the Old Testament is known as the person who leads Israel to the Promised Land and the renewal of the Covenant with God.
- Some Bible scholars view Joshua as an Old Testament representation, or foreshadowing, of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah.

What conclusions might we draw from why "Jesus" was that special, perfect name chosen for the Son of God? And, how wonderful is it that reading a verse you've read a million times before can still raise new questions and provide new insights?

Prayer: In this moment, I will take the time and make the space to prepare my heart for this special season. I praise the name of Jesus, my hope, and my salvation. Amen.

¹ Hannah Preston; "Was Jesus's Real Name Yeshua or Joshua and Is There A 'Right' Way to Identify the Son of God?"; *Newsweek*; published on 12/24/2018; accessed on 11/18/22
<https://www.newsweek.com/jesus-yeshua-joshua-there-right-way-identify-son-god-1270917>

December 11th by Charles Croissant

For instruction issues from Zion, and out of Jerusalem comes the word of the Lord; He will be judge between nations, arbiter among many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:3b-4

Advent stirs up all sorts of thoughts about the coming of Jesus — Jesus coming into the world as a human Child — Jesus coming into our hearts — Jesus coming again to judge and rule the world. I look forward to celebrating the birth of Christ. I long to feel that Jesus enters my heart. And in these days, as we hear news every day of war in the Ukraine and elsewhere, I find myself longing for Jesus to come to us and usher in his reign of peace. I believe Christ's reign of peace is foreshadowed in this passage from Isaiah. We have such need of Jesus, to judge between nations and be arbiter among many peoples. But we can also act in small ways to bring about Christ's reign of peace.

During this Advent season and beyond, we can all take steps in this direction by being kind to each other and demanding of our leaders that they seek peaceful resolutions to the conflicts around us. Lord Jesus, help me be an instrument of your peace.

December 12th by Linda Tackes

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Luke 1:32-33.

Preparing for Christmas in our house looks much the same each year. We have family traditions that we partake in to set our hearts and minds in the Christmas spirit. So, what happens when those traditions stop by ways of a loved one moving away or broken relationships or even death? These kinds of changes can put one's mind in darkness which does not make us feel the festive spirit. In Luke 1:32-33 we are told that God the Father will send a Savior to redeem us. This is a Christmas blessing that we can count on all year long. Jesus gives us salvation, a life ever after. If darkness enters this Christmas season, be ready to remember that many centuries ago a babe lying in a manger was sent for us to lift the darkness. As we celebrate on Christmas Eve by singing "O Come Let Us Adore Him," we can reflect on our blessings and our victories over darkness.

December 13th by Jeanne Early

*"The wolf shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them."*

Isaiah 11:6

As I read his poem from Isaiah of the foretelling the child in the manger, I am reminded of the many activities of the Advent season where we gather with our birth families, church families, and friends. As we gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the ultimate reconciler, we arrive from various households and areas of the country ages, experiences, and allegiances.

During the past 2 years our attention has focused on disparate opinions and infectious viruses that have separated us physically and ideologically, yet Isaiah suggests an alternative to us. The poet from long ago suggests an allegiance between the wolf and lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf, lion, and fatling together due to a child in a manger.

This Advent as we hug or fist bump, comfort, confront, wear a face mask or not, laugh, listen and share; we can join together focusing on the similarities that we share as reconciled people of God. I hope that your advent is filled with expectation, waiting, reconciliation and joy.

December 14th by Rebecca Bealmear

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."

Luke 1:41-44

This is one of many moments in scripture which lifts up good and faithful women who endure infertility and who are blessed by God with a child. These are also parent-child relationships of importance to our faith, its foundations, and God's plans for us.

Elizabeth was pregnant with John after a long period of infertility. I immediately recall Hannah in 1 Samuel, who prayed for Samuel, or of my journey through infertility, which lasted six years (2008 to 2015). Hannah and Elizabeth never wavered in their faithfulness to God, and in retrospect, I can see that immersing myself in volunteering at First Pres increased my own faith and sense of purpose during my struggles.

God gave Hannah and Elizabeth sons. God gave Mary a son for her faithfulness, and He gave me a son, too – and two daughters! I joined this incredible club of Mothers, and work to raise good and faithful human beings, as Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary did.

Do you know what I'm realizing? This time with our children is brief. This job is enormous. I am a good, imperfect (and loved!) human trying to raise good, imperfect (and loved!) humans. Hannah only raised Samuel for a few years; Elizabeth and Mary only had a few decades with their children on Earth. I pray to have my children for the rest of my life, and that I am instilling in them faith, empathy, kindness, and love that they will know and share with others. Only time will tell.

The season of Advent is also brief, and we must prepare, and wait, to receive the results of our faith and works. However, we know what is to come at the end of our believing and loving and working and waiting. What a gift we shall receive when He is born! I pray for you the blessings of the season, for gratefulness for all of God's gifts, and, now more than ever, for peace on Earth.

December 15th by Paul Nuckolls

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me. One who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Micah 5:2

The Hope of Bethlehem

By Paul T. Nuckolls

O the Hope of Bethlehem
The ancient prophet foretold.
A place of our redemption,
Providing warmth to the cold.

In this small Judean town
The prophecy was fulfilled.
The promise from long ago
Was quietly revealed.

Just like in Micah's era,
There is violence and disease,
With conflict and dissension
Keeping our days far from peace.

It is easy to lose hope
When dark thoughts shade the light,
But know there is Bethlehem,
And our Savior is in sight.

Do you feel like Bethlehem,
Insignificant and tiny?
Rest assured God is with you,
And to God you are mighty.

What will be your Bethlehem,
Bringing hope amidst despair?
What will be your advent song
To inspire as you prepare?

Be a hopeful child of God,
Look for new possibilities.
Wonder at the birth of Christ,
And what it means for you and me.

Fruitful birthplace of Jesus,
Forever in our hearts,
Bethlehem, Bethlehem
Offering us a new start.

December 16th by Lindsay and Joe Marting

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation...and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

Luke 1:46-47b, 50

Mary's Song...Our Song

Christmas has finally come...and soon the earth will fall "silent" at last. Darkness will settle in on this night of mystery and wonder...this night of beauty and hope. And so, we will come, once again, to hear the story...of a child who is born...a savior who is come...wrapped in swaddling clothes...lying in a manger.

The truth is, Christmas is either the happiest or the most melancholy season of the year for us! Our thoughts fill with memories of Christmases past, of times spent with family, of days when we were younger, that first Christmas when we came home from college, that first Christmas after the baby was born, that first Christmas as "empty-nesters" after all the kids had grown up and moved away.

And, of course, we always think, do we not, at Christmas, of those who once sat with us at the "Christmas table" in years gone by. Those who opened presents with us, reminisced by the fire with us, those who are with us no more. Others of us spend Christmas alone — older, and with no one left except in our memories!

It's inevitable that we travel back in our thoughts to Christmases past when this starry night was so pregnant with anticipation and hope...and our family traditions so warm and precious.

We "want" so much for Christmas and, truth is, we "need" so much for Christmas, too! Not so much the sentimental and commercial...but the hope that Christmas bears and the sign of love that Christmas conveys...that the love of God came to us in flesh and blood...as a baby born in a manger.

And how can we best respond to the hope and love that Christmas brings? Like Mary, when she received the news that she would give birth to Jesus, we sing "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Prayer:

Come into my heart Lord Jesus, in this holy season. Amen.

December 17th by Brad Gift

"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does."

Psalm 145:13

What this means to me:

God's community is always there and will always be there — from the beginning (Genesis), to now, and for all our children in the future. It doesn't change through generations, at election time, or with the latest fad or trend. God is constant and promises to be there for us, even when we have doubt. Sometimes God shows up in the funniest places and maybe when I least expect it. It makes me smile and then I know, it is God!

December 18th by Jackie Trottmann

"Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

Matthew 1:23

Christmas Past, Present, and Future

It's been a thirty-two-year tradition for me to host Christmas dinner with turkey and all the fixings...

The year was 2015. This verse came to mind as I was setting the table. The reality set in that one chair would be missing that year. My mom would not be with us at the dinner table.

I received a call on December 9th from EMT's telling me that my mother had fallen outside her home and had either broken her hip or leg. Robert and I rushed to the hospital. She would have surgery the next day to repair a broken femur. At the age of 90, with congestive heart failure, diabetes, and asthma, a lot of prayers were sent. She pulled through the surgery and had another productive six years.

The month of December had become a blur. Every day was spent trekking to the hospital and taking on the role of health care advocate. It was exhausting. There were very few presents that year. There was no time to get our traditional, real Christmas tree.

On Christmas Eve, however, we received a beautiful gift, a rare, white Christmas. It was a wet snow which covered all the trees and shrubs making the city look like a Currier and Ives Christmas card.

There will be a lot more empty chairs at the dinner table this Christmas. Loved ones come in and out of our lives, some in the form of family members and other in the form of friends. There is, however, one constant, and that is God's love for us. Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. May we find joy in our fond memories of the past, give thanks for the present moment, and know that God loves us always as we take our journey of faith into the future.

December 19th by Rob Monroe

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Verse 15 - When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Being in youth ministry means trying to come up with new, creative, and interesting ways to bring students closer to God through games and activities that might concern adults in the congregation. We talk about parts of the Bible that most would gloss over, and we look at it from a variety of perspectives.

Perspectives is how we approach the story of Christmas with our 8th grade students. Namely we use the whiteboard and list each character we can think of in the birth narrative - the parents, the shepherds, the angels, the animals - everyone we can think of that was a witness to the birth of Christ. We then go through the list of those present in the story and talk about how they might have viewed different parts of the story.

Questions we ask include:

- "What do you think the shepherds thought when they first saw the angel?"
- "Do you think Joseph felt awkward bringing his pregnant girlfriend home for the first time?"
- "Do you think that the community welcomed them the way we hope that they would?"

Then we let students take control and lead the conversation. We let them imagine what the donkey would think with all the extra people (and angels) hanging around in their typically quiet part of town. We encourage them to think through what it meant for God to send a child from heaven to live on earth with us mortals. There are lots of questions, thoughtful ideas and, of course, lots of laughs.

I encourage you to think about all the things that went into the first Christmas from a different perspective this season, you might surprise yourself with something you had not thought of before!

December 20th by Bill Stein

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Luke 2:8-11

We hear these familiar words every Christmas. This familiar passage is followed by a multitude of angels filling the sky and singing "Glory to God in the highest!" To us over 2,000 years later it seems an awe-filled sight – angels filling the sky with light and song, proclaiming the One who was longed for has finally arrived.

The shepherds certainly did not feel the same way. In fact, the passage points out to us they were terrified. In the King James version, we hear they were "sore afraid." The shepherds were among the lowest ranking people in that day. If the Savior had been born, wouldn't the angels have made this announcement to a king or other high-ranking person? Why were they visiting these lowly shepherds in the middle of the night with this amazing news? God chose to come to us through the ordinary – a young woman, her husband to be, a stable with animals, and shepherds.

The first words the angel says are "Do not be afraid." We hear these four words many times in scripture. At a time when there is much to fear in our world – climate change, political divisiveness, disease, terrorism – the angel's message is also to us: do not be afraid. That doesn't mean to be idle in places that require our intervention and prayers, but we should do our work loving God's creation and people without fear or hesitation.

How is God present in the ordinary ways in our lives? How can we all live our lives true to God's call and not be afraid? May this Advent and Christmas season inspire us, once again, to be open to the Good News, and to be vessels of hope, peace, joy, and love.

December 21st

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude
of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth
peace among those whom he favors!"*

Luke 2:13-14

In December Darkness

The whole world waits in December darkness
for a glimpse of the Light of God.
Even those who snarl "Humbug!"
and chase away the carolers
have been seen looking toward the skies.
The one who declared he never would forgive
has forgiven,
and those who left home
have returned,
and even wars are halted,
if briefly,
as the whole world looks starward.
In the December darkness
we peer from our windows
watching for an angel with rainbow wings
to announce the Hope of the World.

Written by Ann Weems in *Kneeling In Bethlehem*

December 22nd by Lynn Rubright

V 9 When they heard the king (Herod), the Wise Men departed from their meeting; and lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them, til it came and stood over where the young child was.

V 10 When they (The Wise Men) saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

Mathew 2: verses 9 and 10 (KJV)

There is controversy as to just what the STAR was that the Magi followed for months that led them to Bethlehem. Was it a brilliant comet with a tail; a supernova; a supernatural event; an alignment of planets predicted hundreds of years before Christ was born by ancient astrologer/astronomers? No one knows for sure.

The light in the night sky may even have been obscured temporarily while the Magi met with Herod in a secret meeting telling him of a holy child they were seeking in the region. But when the Magi continued their journey to find the holy child they sought, once again the star appeared leading them toward Bethlehem. They were exuberant, delighted, perhaps even praising, and singing. "They rejoiced with exceeding great joy".

When we "see the light" something dawns upon us. Our hearts, souls, minds, and eyes open in a new way. LO and BEHOLD! A light appears in the darkness of our spirits. We breathe in and Let Go. Glimmers (or even a flood) of peace and hope return dispelling our fear and anxiety.

Long ago when attending a Christmas Eve service, the sanctuary suddenly went dark. I was startled, even a bit anxious, until the preacher lit a candle. Everyone focused on the tiny glow of light as he lit the candles of two deacons standing next to him. Then one by one candles were lit among us. As we held our candles high, the church glowed.

It is why each year during advent we "rejoice with exceeding great joy" when LO! the Star of Bethlehem once again guides us to the baby Jesus, reminding us that the Christ light of hope has come into the world waiting to enter our hearts.

December 23rd

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Isaiah 9:6

In Search of Our Kneeling Places

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.

When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.

When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.

We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.

In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.

Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.

In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.

This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

December 24th by Doug Mankell

"So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Child lying in the manger"

Luke 2:16

The shepherds didn't waste any time in going to Bethlehem that night. They knew exactly where to go.

For us, of course, it is not quite that easy. No one knows the exact location in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. According to tradition, the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem was built over the specific location of Jesus' birth. I have had the privilege of visiting this Church on three occasions and each time I have stood in line with other tourists and knelt to touch the star-shaped symbol imbedded in the floor where, according to tradition, Jesus was born. Each time, it was a holy moment for me.

One of those moments was especially moving when a group of English-speaking tourists began singing "Silent Night, Holy Night." Almost immediately, tourists from other parts of the world began singing that familiar Carol in their native languages. The Germans sang "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" and other tourists joined in by singing in French, Italian, Spanish, and other languages. That was a sacred moment, to say the least, as we sang that Carol in different languages near the location of Jesus' birth.

The specific location of Jesus' birth is not the most important thing about this season. What is most important is that Jesus Christ came to this earth as our Lord and Savior.

The glorious birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

- have inspired the writing and composition of countless books, poems, songs, hymns, and the New Testament itself.
- have resulted in the creation of thousands of churches, hospitals, colleges and universities, and other caring institutions around the world.
- have transformed the lives of millions of people down through the ages.
- have provided us with the assurance of life beyond the grave.

Nativity

by Kenneth Steven

When the miracle happened it was not
with bright light or fire –
but a farm door with the thick smell of sheep
and wind tugging at the shutters.

There was no sign that the world had changed for ever
or that God had taken place;
just a child crying softly in a corner,
and the door open, for those who came to find.



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