

**THE TRUE MEANING OF
CHRISTMAS**



**DAILY DEVOTIONALS
FOR ADVENT 2020**

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND**

ADVENT SEASON

While God rarely comes at our appointed time, He always comes at the right time. A Savior had been promised to God's people for centuries. And for centuries they longed and prayed for rescue to no avail. Yet on the right day, in the right place, at the right time, Jesus was born. Christmas reminds us that God comes through on His promise.

The season of Advent—the four weeks leading up to Christmas—is a time for us to pause amidst the flurry of holiday activity and remember why we celebrate the birth of Christ. As we do so, we should remember that there are two Advents; one being when Jesus came as the child, and the other, His long-awaited return—the Second Coming. The question of that first Advent was answered once and for all by the declaration of the angels to the shepherds: “*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:11). The Christ had come.

So, just like God's people two thousand years ago, we wait too. We live this side of that First Coming, and long eagerly for his Second Coming.

This Advent, as you prepare for Christmas, we encourage you to take time to pause and to reflect. To enter into the Christmas story again. Allow the drama—the tension—of that first Christmas to lead you to marvel at God's faithfulness. Let it also lead you to gaze longingly forward, past the anxieties of the 2020 Pandemic, to that day when Christ will come again. May a sense of joyful anticipation color your Advent season. And may you recommit yourself to waiting—faithfully, prayerfully.

Members of First Presbyterian Church of Newport, as well as friends and family of our church members, have contributed to this year's Advent Booklet.

Our prayer is that God would use these Advent readings to deepen your adoration of Jesus this Advent Season and keep Him as the center and greatest treasure of your Christmas season. Candles, trees, and wreaths have their place, but we want to make sure that in all the Christmas rush and celebrations we adore Jesus above all.

True Light

Scripture: *True light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.* (John 1:9-10)

Throughout the Scriptures the word darkness is used to represent evil, deception, or falsehood. The word light usually represents truth, goodness, and holiness. In the gospel of John, we read this about light.

At this wonderful time of the year we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord. The above reference is made of him and no other. In a world that often appears dark a little light is always needed. Therefore, it should not surprise us that Jesus even referred to himself as the light of the world. But he went even further and told us why this was so important, “*Again Jesus spoke to them saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12)

Jesus illuminates my life, every nook and cranny, everything seen and unseen. He reveals not only my sin and darker side but also everything good and beautiful. His light is unlike any other and its brilliance awakes my soul. The more I see standing in the light of Jesus, the more I want, or as David reminds us in Psalm 36:9, “*For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.*” There is nothing artificial about the light of Christ. It gives us hope and reminds us that even when things may appear gloomy in this world our ultimate destination is eternal life in the kingdom of light.

It is easy during the holiday season to allow our focus to drift to commercial and artificial light, cute blow up characters on lawns, or the glow of the computer screen announcing the latest big sale. But in the end, we must remember the true “light of the world” has come and calls us to focus on our relationship with him and to be his light in a world that needs to leave the darkness behind.

Merry Christmas,

Pastor Mike



Monday, November 30

God Is With Us

Scripture: *“I will never desert you or forsake you.”* (Heb.13:5)

In the weeks and months after our son David died in an accident, God through His Holy Spirit spoke to me and carried me in ways I might never have experienced, were it not for that awful tragedy in my life and the life of everyone else who loved him. One day about three weeks after he died, I was in the grocery store doing what I felt was such a mundane thing as getting food. Off in the distance I heard three or four women talking and then laughing out loud. I thought to myself “Oh God, I don’t want to be doing this, I just want the world to stop for a while. I feel like I am in such a fog, like I am in a tunnel, I just want to push it back,” and the tears once again came to my eyes.

Then a soft voice spoke to me and I heard it more clearly than I can explain. “That’s not a tunnel you are in, its MY arms holding you.” I have always believed that to be the voice of God’s Holy Spirit. It carried me through that time of grief, and it carries me still. What a comfort to know that always no matter the circumstances or the time, our God is with us.

Prayer: *Thank You Lord for the gift of Your Holy Spirit and for all Your promises to us sealed by the blood of your Son our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!*

Jan Jones



Tuesday, December 1

How Majestic is Your Name

Scripture: *“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heaven. . .When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? . . .O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”*

(Psalm 8:1, 3-4, 9)

When I was stationed in Germany in 1979, a group of us single officers decided to spend the Christmas holidays in Austria. We would enjoy skiing and exchange gifts among our little group, and we’d certainly be festive. My mother had died the year before, so there was less reason to spend the holidays at home in the States.

I had always enjoyed Christmas Eve candlelight services in our little church and other places where I had been stationed. I had noticed there would be a service at one of the small local churches that evening and asked my friends if anyone wanted to accompany me, but no one did. That was fine. I borrowed one of their cars and drove to the church. My German was good enough, and the pastor’s message was slow enough, that I could understand almost everything. Singing “Stille Nacht” (“Silent Night”) in German was just so special and I left the church very much inspired. The Christmas message is universal.

I got into the car and found it was stuck on the ice in the parking lot. I just couldn’t get it to move so I had to walk back to the hotel, not all that far. There was a beautiful full moon shining down on the mountains and village, seemingly just for me as I made my way in the cold clear night. On that lovely walk it was clear to me that there really was a God, and I was awed by the splendor of His creation.

Prayer: *Lord, may all the world see and understand at Christmas and throughout the year, that you are God and you are real, and your universe proclaims that fact to all. Humble us and bless us as we worship you and Jesus our savior. Amen!*

Don Fennessey

Wednesday, December 2

He Didn't Have To, But He Did

Scripture: *“I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”* (Psalm 27:13)

This verse reminds me of goodness of God towards Moses' birth mother. When Pharaoh of Egypt had ordered the killing of all Israelite newborn boys, Moses' mother put him in a basket on the Nile River in an attempt to save his life. The baby was found and brought to Pharaoh's daughter. Desiring to keep him, she sought someone to wean him. Now, there were many women among the Israelites that could be chosen for this task due to Pharaoh's edict. Yet, the woman selected was none other than the woman who had borne him.

I am overwhelmed by God's personal love and continued acts of love on behalf of His people. To this I am compelled to shout, “Dayenu!” I learned this term at our church's annual Seder. At one particular part during the ceremony the leader and group participate in alternate reader and response dialogue. The leader began by reading aloud the acts that God had performed on behalf of the Israelites. After each act is pronounced, the group would respond in unison, “Dayenu!” I learned that it means, “God didn't have to, but He did.” God didn't have to do another thing to show or prove His love to the Israelites, but...He did. In the same way, I want to stalwartly remind myself that He doesn't have to show or prove His love for me with countless blessings, for I have received the salvation of the Lord. Yet, I can boast that “I have seen the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

Prayer: *Lord, we thank You for all that You do for us—not because you have to, but because You loved us enough to send Your Son. Amen!*

Renee Olsen Ashman



Abide

Scripture: *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.”*

(John 15:4)

When I think about my relationship with the Lord, the single word that always comes to mind is “abide.” I have long associated “abide” with home, a place I long for and love to be, where comfort, peace, strength, joy, and beauty abound. My earthly home is a wonderful abode that provides shelter, a place to share with family where love is given and received, and where I am utterly free to be myself and am accepted for who I am.

Yet, it cannot begin to compare to the heavenly home that awaits. But I know the Lord gives me glorious glimpses of this home when I abide with Him. Though I am still on this side of heaven, the Lord is continually teaching me to draw near to Him even as He draws me to Himself. He gently bids me to remain with and in Him that I may know Him and all that He is. Through His Word and through the Holy Spirit that dwells within me, I know a comfort that wraps around me like a blanket on a winter’s day, a peace that is like the quiet of a softly falling snow, a strength that upholds me and protects me from harm, and the joy of knowing the One from whom all the beauty comes. When I abide with Him, I see and I know the fruit of this obedience in the yield of kindness, love, and goodness that is revealed to me in others, and that flows from me because I have been faithful.

So, as I pull out decorations this year, string the twinkle lights, trim the tree, and place the manger scene just so, my heart will know it is home because I know Jesus, the Light of the World. As we bask in glow of the firelight on Christmas Eve and read the story from Luke of Jesus’s birth, I will give thanks and rejoice. I will celebrate the incomparable and glorious gift given to me, and to all of us, because we choose to abide with Him.

Prayer: *Father, may we always abide with you knowing what it is to be part of your family, never to be separated from your loving embrace. May we know the fullness of what it is to be home with you both on earth and forevermore. Amen.*

Stacie Schultz



Love One Another

Scripture: *“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another.”* (John 13:34)

“O Holy Night” is one of my favorite Christmas songs. I love the line in the first stanza which says, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till He appeared, and soul felt its worth.” It reminds us that we are loved and found valuable by an almighty God. However, this year the last stanza seems to impact me more this year with all that has gone on.

“Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;
And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise His Name forever,
His power and glory evermore proclaim.
His power and glory evermore proclaim.”

I have heard that we live in a “Post-Christian” society. In some ways that is discouraging. The values that we hold to be important to us are no longer the “accepted” values in our culture. However, it may be that as Russell Moore stated, “We’re living in a post-pretend-Christian society. There was a previous era when people had a certain basic understanding of biblical truths and some connection to the church. That brought some benefit because, in many cases, there was some sort of stable understanding of morality. But, it also brought a lot of drawbacks because a nominal Christianity doesn’t save. Often what a nominal Christianity does is the worst possible thing: leave people in lostness but convince them that they’re reconciled with God.”

Yikes! I pray that I have not done that with my witness. I love how Russell Moore ended his article, though. “It also means that we have an opportunity to preach the gospel in the same sort of society where the gospel first emerged, which wasn’t some hazy, happy Christian society. It was a very decadent, polytheistic Roman empire. And the gospel was able to speak, stand, and save. I think the same is true now.”

Prayer: *Lord, give us the desire and love for others to share your ‘Good News’ so that the world may know and be saved and for You to be glorified by all nations. Amen!*

Terri Estes Boshka

Saturday, December 5

Christmas at “Our” House

Scripture: *“But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.”*
(Hebrews 3:6)

When I was very young, I was living in a foster home with 14 children in Warwick, RI, and thoughts of those long-gone Christmas seasons still remain with me today. This house was “our” house at Christmas, where the meaning of love was expressed to us all year long. This culminated in the celebration of the Savior’s Birthday—a time when we could show our love to each other and to this couple who loved children and took us into their home.

We all earned allowances, which we saved all year long just so we could buy gifts for each other. We would walk to a local store, Baltrush’s, and buy little gifts of love, not worth much money, for we only had pennies to spend.

The “tree raising ceremony” was always done by all us kids as we sang Christmas carols, while lights, ornaments, and tinsel were applied. Oh, how we sang those carols.

Gifts were meager... we normally each received only one large gift. One Christmas I remember especially well because two large gifts were mine. My father had brought an Erector set! Every child was satisfied and happy, as happy as we all could be coming from broken homes. We were rich and poor, happy, and sad. Happy to celebrate Christmas, share love and gifts; sad because we could not be a real family with our real parents. Poor by the world’s standards, but rich in being loved and having a Savior who saves us from our sins.

This foster home was really our home; we were all family, and our foster parents were our parents. Isn’t this what Christmas is all about? Christ shared his life with us, loved us, and died for us! We do have a real home as Christians with Christ and can celebrate the most loving and happy season of the year.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus thank you that we can celebrate your birth in “our” house, especially during this pandemic, where we can show each other your love for us and why you came. May we also seek to show others, every day of the coming year, the love that came down for us all at Christmas. Amen!*

Tony Ruggiero

Sunday, December 6—Second Sunday of Advent

The Faith of a Child

Scripture: *“He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’”* (Matthew 18:2-4)

I traveled to Guatemala for a mission trip at the end of February right before the pandemic hit the US. Struggling with health issues, I can say without a doubt I was scared. I was scared for my health as well as others, but mostly I found myself being scared for the unknown. Any sort of human nature power I thought I had was completely taken from me. I felt lost and confused but I continually found comfort knowing that the Lord knew this was going to happen, that this was in His plan and I was truly able to rest in that. I never would’ve thought that a week in Guatemala right before a pandemic hit would have prepared me for such a time as this.

As I think back to the people I worked with in Escuintla, Guatemala, their childlike faith continues to stand out to me. These people truly depend only on the Lord for everything. They do not know when they will get to drink fresh water next, or if their children will be safe. Here we are with (mostly everyone’s) daily distractions stripped away and so many are wondering when they will eat next, when they will have another paycheck, and so on. I know our lives are still so different from those in other countries but at the same time, we are the same. Here we are as Christians having to cling onto a childlike faith and only truly depend on the one who is all knowing.

Matthew 11 stuck out to me when reflecting on this year. *“Then Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’”* As we come into this Christmas season, that is usually filled with joy and peace, let us come to Him, like the little children and remind ourselves to hold onto that childlike faith. We may not know what the future holds, but what we do know, is that we serve a good God, who gives His children everlasting grace.

Prayer: *Jesus, I pray that you would walk alongside us and be with us in this season. We do not know what the future holds, but we can have peace in knowing that you are our all-knowing God. Amen!*

Anna Boshka



He Equips Us For Everything

Scripture: *“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service.”* (Timothy 1:12)

This year has been such a different year. One of the benefits of a slower pace of life is the opportunity to look back and reflect on all that God has done. This is one of the verses that summarizes God’s faithfulness in equipping me for everything and anything he has asked me do.

I was blessed to be able to care for each of my parents in their last days. Naturally it was emotionally difficult, but physically it was not possible without the strength the Lord provided. Spiritually, I knew they were both going home to be with the Lord, which was exciting, but it was still hard to imagine my life without them here.

God provides the strength I need for each day whether I am doing something that seems important or just living out his call on my life stuck at home. God has purpose for our lives in the mundane as well in the challenging times of life.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, I thank you that you have provided the good works for us to do and you have provided the resources we need to do the job. You do not call us without equipping us. You have provided for all our needs. May we work to your praise and glory. In Jesus Name, Amen!*

Deidre Ricci



Tuesday, December 8

A Season of Hope

Scripture: *“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.”*

(Isa 7:13-16)

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him.”

(Luke 1:76)

What a year 2020 has been. Fires in the West, Floods in the East, Hurricanes in the South, and COVID-19 everywhere. There are Supreme Court battles and politicians are blaming each other as we are in the midst of deciding our future leadership. I keep asking myself, "What chapter of Revelation are we living in today?"

Isaiah lived in a time much like ours. But Isaiah looked to the future as did other prophets like Jeremiah and Joel, and they talked of the time of the Lord. During Advent, we also look to a time of the Lord. We not only celebrate Christ's birth, but we can reflect upon Christ's presence in our lives.



Advent engages us to prepare the way for Christ's coming. We prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, but it is so much more than preparing for Christmas. We are also called upon to anticipate Christ's coming again and to prepare for the coming of God's kingdom.

Advent is so much more than a season of memories; it is a season of hope. It is an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to follow Christ and prepare for His coming again.

Prayer: *Father, prepare us for the coming of your Son. Help us to examine ourselves and Christ in our lives and the lives of those around us. Help us to reach out to those in need. Thank you for your love, in Jesus Name. Amen!*

Dick Hanson

Wednesday, December 9

God's Unending Faithfulness

Scripture: “*And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’*”
(Luke 1: 46-47)



Let's take a closer look at the circumstances around Mary's pregnancy: she is a teenage virgin claiming to be pregnant with the Son of God. Her betrothed plans to divorce her until an angel intervenes. She has to travel all the way from Galilee to Bethlehem, about 90 miles, on foot, while pregnant! Imagine hiking over the hills surrounding Jerusalem with two swollen ankles, an extra 20 pounds around your middle, and having to stop every hour due to morning sickness. And then she has to give birth in a stable behind an inn in a town full of strangers, the most familiar person being her husband of less than nine months. But in the middle of all of this, we find her singing! What is going on?

I can relate to Mary a bit. My birth story was nowhere near as amazing, difficult, or important, but I did have a baby during a global pandemic. I can remember sitting at home reading the news a month out from my due date, feeling a shadow of fear come over me. The worries began piling up, but I could also see a choice before me: would I choose despair and anxiety, or would I choose to trust in God to see me through according to His good and perfect will? Mary had the same choice: would she trust in God, or would she be overcome by her circumstances? Her choice is clear in the Magnificat: in the midst of all the uncertainty and chaos, Mary lifts her voice in adoration to her God, praising His faithfulness, His goodness, His mercy, His strength, and His provision.

Have you ever felt like Mary, overwhelmed by the task God seems to have set before you? Uncertain of how it will ever all come to pass? In those moments we are not powerless, we all have the option to put our trust in the Lord, to claim *His* power, *His* faithfulness, and *His* strength.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, in this overwhelming and uncertain season, help us to learn from Mary. Teach us to sing praises in the face of chaos, to proclaim Your goodness in the face of fear. Lift our hearts as we lift our voices and thank you for your unending faithfulness. Amen.*

Charlotte Ricci

We Need a Little Christmas

Scripture: *“Make everyone rejoice who puts his trust in You. Keep them shouting for joy because You are defending them. Fill all who love you with happiness. For You bless the godly man, O Lord. You protect him with Your shield of love.”* Psalm 5:11 (NLT)

I wrote the following in a devotional for our 2011 Advent Devotional Booklet. “At this time of year, I find myself humming Christmas carols and other Christmas songs that stir up memories of Christmases past. There is always one song I find myself humming around Thanksgiving—“We need a little Christmas, right this very minute, candles in the windows, carols on the spinet.” I remember more than one Christmas when I didn’t have my husband home for Christmas, because of his Navy duty elsewhere. I always wanted to stay at our home with my children during that time. I always felt closer to him in our own home and in whatever Navy community we were living in at the time than going to our families elsewhere. And I remember often singing along to that song and playing it over and over again. It somehow made things better. But as I remember the words to that song, I think how awesome it is as Christians that we have Christmas every day! We have Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection to celebrate every single morning and the knowledge that we will be in His presence some day. With our economy the way it is, and so many people hurting financially, physically, emotionally, many without work, and many away from loved ones, we don’t have to wait until December 25 to rejoice and celebrate. We can do that every day. He will bring us that peace whenever we call upon His name.”

What I wrote in 2011 is still applicable today—probably more so with our sheltering in and isolated lifestyle. How difficult it has been for so many, not just in our country, but around the world. Psalm 5:11 sums this up for me. The words to one of our favorite hymns are,

“...simply trusting every day, trusting through a stormy way, even when my faith is small. Trusting Jesus that is all. Trusting as the moments fly, trusting as the days go by, trusting Him what-e’er befalls, trusting Jesus—that is all.”

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for the comfort of these words in Psalms. Let us rejoice and shout with joy every day in the knowledge that You are protecting us and loving us. Amen!*

Barbara Estes



Trust in the Lord

Scripture: “... *those who trust (hope) in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles...*” (Isa 40-31)

This Advent we have been asked to write about a meaningful experience where we knew the Lord was at work in our life. I have had the great blessing of seeing my life’s verse, above, come true in my life in a most amazing way. As many of you know, I was diagnosed with acute leukemia three years ago. Due to my age, the particular genetic mutation that caused my leukemia, and its advanced stage when discovered, I was given a 1-2% chance of survival. I told the doctors to do their best, I’d do my best, and we’d leave the rest up to God, and I sincerely meant it. Live or die, I gave it over to God.

None of us know how we’ll react to any given situation in life. We all hope we’ll be strong and of good courage. Faith allows us to do exactly that. When we truly trust in the Lord with all our heart and mind, we can let go of worry. We can let God be God. Since we know that God is only good, that He loves us, and wants only the best for us, we need not worry about outcomes. God is sovereign. He’s got this. Whatever He allows will be for our best. If we can’t see how, it’s because we’re not God. We don’t have His infinite mind. Our sight is limited. We know He loves us enough to become flesh and die for our sins. Well, that should be proof enough to trust Him, fully, in all things. As Paul tells us in Romans 8:28, “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.*” Amen!

It’s usually easy to have joy at Christmas. It’s harder when life is difficult. That is exactly when the joy of the Lord, the peace we have in Christ, the peace that passes all human understanding, is God’s greatest gift to us! May the Peace of Christ be with you this Christmas and always! Merry Christmas!!

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for your precious gift of peace. By faith in you and in your son, our Savior, we have peace. Thanks be to God!*

Dick Price

Praying

Scripture: *“Protect me, O God; I trust in You for my safety.”*

(Psalm 16:1)

Prayer is not a scheme whereby we can move God into our lives, but rather, a spiritual exercise through which we draw ourselves toward God until we are a part of HIS plan and HIS purpose. The purpose of prayer is not to give us what we want when we want it, but to make us the kind of person God wants us to be.

My own earthly father opened all of his prayers at the dinner table each night with: “Our Dear Heavenly Father, as we approach your throne of Grace...” I like to use that same opening when I begin my prayers, because it reminds me of my father when I was growing up.

“Hear my humble prayers, Lord.” I use that opening a lot at the end of a bad or difficult day. “Gracious Father,” when I’m thanking God, followed by “...thank You for making me and for saving my soul.” “My Gracious Redeemer who art in heaven,” or “my Father, full of grace.”

Continue praying every day, pronounce His name when you pray. Living God, I’m grateful for the tender way you help me in my walk with You, I surrender my life to Your care.

“Our Father who art in heaven” should be a familiar opening to everyone, Naomi Circle opens all our lessons with The Lord’s Prayer. Because of the pandemic my lesson was not delivered, Today is the day. Be joyful always when you pray!

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for Jesus, the Christ child. Amen!*

Eleanor Green



Great Power for Us Who Believe

Scripture: *“I pray...his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead...”*.
(Ephesians 1:18-20)

Think about that concept for a while. The power that raised Christ from the dead is within everyone who believes in Christ as their Lord and Savior. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit empowers us to a level we cannot comprehend.

I pray that you will ponder this power, this Christmas season. It is power to overcome our sins, power to love when we don't feel like loving, power to forgive, and power to choose joy when our circumstances are otherwise.

When and where do you need access to the power that raised Jesus from the dead? Paul prayed that power for us. I pray that you will read Ephesians 1:18-20, that you will pray this scripture and believe and receive.

Prayer: *Lord, may each reader who believes in you, have a new understanding of your power, a deeper belief of your power within them, and receive your overcoming and transforming power in their lives. Amen.*

Cindy Price



Monday, December 14

In God We Trust

Scripture: *“I cried out, ‘I am slipping!’ but your unfailing love, O Lord, supported me. When doubts filled my mind, your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer.”*
(Psalm 94:18-19)

November 3, 2020 has come and gone, and this country has voted for another US President. But even as I write this it is still being contested in some states. Historical: yes. Life-changing: time will tell. But I was reminded of a simple truth we see every day, but one that many seem to forget. It is in our pockets, in our wallets, in our banks. It’s not our money, but something inscribed on it. It is the phrase “In God We Trust.”

The Psalmist teaches us a very good lesson. That all our hope, all our trust, all our reliance is to be in the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Doubts and fears have come and gone but will come again. The contested election, ongoing pandemic and our current economic status have many wondering what is next. But do we truly put our trust in God? This goes far beyond who was elected to office at any level. It drives deep into the core of who we are.

I have been challenged recently with this phrase, myself. Do I really trust in God in my everyday life? Do I trust Him with my work, my family, my time, my passions, my future? I would love to say I pass with flying colors, but that would not be true. My prayer for our country is simply this: that we would embrace what is written on what we value so much here in America. That the saying “Yes We Can” will become “Yes HE Can,” as we take comfort in knowing that we can always trust in God.

My life has never been dramatically changed by who is in the oval office, but it certainly has been by the one who resides in the greatest seat of power of all, and whose Son’s coming we await. In God I trust.

Prayer: *Our Heavenly Father, during times of anxious moments and uncertain times, it is comforting to know that Your love never changes, and we can always trust in You. For this and the giving of Your Son we are truly thankful. Amen!*

Don Estes



Tuesday, December 15

Mary's Hymn of Praise

Scripture: *“⁴¹At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her.”*
(Luke 1:39-56)

Prior to Covid-19 lockdown we met once a month for a pot-luck meal and a Bible study. We are a group of church women called Women of Faith. With our travel and fellowship being restricted due to lockdown, we decided to meet every week via Zoom. For most of the year we have been studying the women of the Bible, alternating between New and Old Testament characters. Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been one of our subjects.

The study of the Scripture in reference to her life brought home to me the importance of her faith. God chose her for a reason. Like Elizabeth and Zachariah, Mary and Joseph were descendants of the ‘pious remnant’ who had not left at the time of the Babylonian exile. They had remained faithful to Yahweh and honored the law of Moses. Now God has chosen Mary to bear the Son of the Most High, the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us, the one whom Elizabeth identified as her Lord. Elizabeth's declaration prompts Mary to praise God with a prayer which has become known as the Magnificat.

Mary is most blessed among women because God has looked graciously upon her lowly state and her servanthood. Mary's soul magnifies the Lord. Her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. She recognizes God at work in the salvation history of his people. God has shown all who fear him his mercy from generation to generation. God has brought down the proud, exalted the humble and sent the rich away. God will work his purposes through his Son. Mary recognizes the task she has been given as the fulfillment of prophecy (Isaiah 7:14). She regards the prophecies as having already come to fruition. Like Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2) she is submissive to God's will and obedient to his word. Mary has no idea of the heartbreak which she will experience in the years to come, but for now she humbly accepts God's purposes and praises him for his goodness.

Prayer: *Gracious God, in this season of Advent, may we be like Mary. May we humbly submit to Your purposes, be obedient to Your will, and praise You for Your goodness in granting us Emmanuel, God with us, Son of the Most High. The one through whom we are saved. Amen!*

Dr. Diana Lantz

The Body of Christ

Scripture: *“Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”* (2 Cor 1:11)

One of the wonderful things I have always cherished about worshipping at First Presbyterian Church in Newport RI is the love and fellowship shown by the congregation. This has never been more evident to me and to my wife Cindy than during the past three years as I have fought cancer. We have been totally awed by the love and support and prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ at FPC and elsewhere. You have truly been the hands and feet of Christ to us during our darkest days. We are eternally grateful and are absolutely convinced that God has honored your loving prayers for us by granting me renewed health.

Throughout this ordeal, I have clung to many scriptures for strength and hope, but one has stood out to me concerning the church, the body of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, Paul says, *“We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us again. On Him we have set our hope... as you help us by your prayers.”* This is exactly how I felt many times in this trial, and this scripture came to mind over and over as you showed us your love and support for so long. So, we give God all the glory and thanks for you, the body of Christ, and for our healing. We have endured, by His grace, and are now in full remission.

Now, as the entire world faces a COVID pandemic and many other social and spiritual challenges, we need to love and pray for each other more than ever. Until Christ returns, Cindy and I pray that each of you, in your trials of whatever sort, also find His peace and strength through the love, prayers, and support of your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, so that you, too, like us, may give thanks to God! Merry Christmas!!

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for your precious gift of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are your church, the body of Christ. May we love one another as you love us. Amen!*

Dick Price

God's Manna for Us

Scripture: *“I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; (John 6:48-51)*

I was reading in my Bible and I read the word “famine.” As I thought about its meaning, I began to think of the time we are in in 2020 and how closely it is related to a time of famine (A time of shortage or insufficiency).

We have all experienced some type of famine this year. For me it's been a lack of touch, not being able to hug and kiss my family since February. I have not had the opportunity to sit down with any of you and have a cup of tea or coffee and a chat, neither have I been able to quilt with a friend in her home, or grocery shop, yes you can even miss that which we sometimes think of as mundane tasks. God dealt with the famine, lack of food, the Israelites experienced by sending down Manna. When they went to bed at night there was nothing to eat but, in the morning, there was an abundance. Our biggest need is a Savior, and this Christmas we celebrate once again his birth. His Saving Grace has not changed neither have the other important things in our lives. Family love is shown by not touching, but by virtual hugs and blown kisses. We can chat on the phone or FaceTime, join the hymn sing etc., etc.

Let's spend this Advent Season dwelling on how God has supplied our needs. What has been our manna in the “Famine of 2020?” The virtues of the Advent candles, Hope, Joy, Love and Peace, and the fact that God is still our Rock, our Fortress, and our Redeemer.



Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, we praise You for Your constant presence in our lives, for the manna You supply, for the great gift of Your Son Jesus Christ and the reassurance that You are a Covenant keeping God. We pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!*

Jan Jones

Friday, December 18

Rose of Bethlehem

Scripture: *“God is to us a God of deliverances, and to God the Lord belong escapes from death.”*
(Psalm 68:20)

One of my favorite Christmas songs is “Rose of Bethlehem,” sung by Selah. One verse included is “tis the blossom of God’s love.” Although God’s love is frequently spoken of, almost to the point of making it a cliché at times, is it not something that deserves our attention? God’s love is a mystery. It is above human insight or understanding, yet it can be seen, felt, known and experienced.

God’s sending His son to earth, being born as a baby in a manger, predestined to die for us, was indeed, a mighty blossom of His love. Even though you may be in a season of not feeling God’s love for you now, that does not make it less of a reality.

How do I know of God’s love? My husband overcame death at his salvation. But he also escaped death in 2018 (several times) in his battle with leukemia. We have learned of God’s love and seen it in action through the loving care he received. Every prayer, email, card and loving thought that was given was proof of God’s love to us and for us. But even if the outcome had been different, we fully trusted in His love and were content whatever His will would be.

I encourage you to spend some time in prayer, meditating on God’s love for you this Christmas. You might be surprised by the ways He is choosing to reveal and share His love. Let us look for the blossoms and smell the sweet fragrance that God is to us and that we are to Him.

Prayer: *Lord, May we all have a deeper understanding and experience of your love, especially this Christmas season. Open our eyes to see the blossoms of your love. May we not take it for granted, but receive it fully, as the gift it is. May we praise and worship you always for your amazing love and care for us. Amen!*

Cindy Price



The Greatest Gift

Scripture: *“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”* (Matthew 2:10-11)

Last Christmas I received a gift in the mail from my sister. When I opened it on Christmas Eve, I was surprised and touched by the thought and love that she put into creating such a special and meaningful gift. Her gift to me was a pillow made of dark green material with three snowmen that were cross stitched on to the front of the pillow and with some white embroidered snow falling around the snowmen. You may ask, what is so special about a pillow with snowmen and snowflakes embroidered on it? Our mother died a few months before Christmas, and when my sister and I were going through her clothes we found several sweatshirts and sweaters where she had cross stitched lovely designs. I thought that I would make a quilt out of some of these designs, so I cut out the cross-stitched part of the various sweatshirts.

My sister also took some of the sweatshirts, but instead of cutting out the cross stitched designs she made the body of the sweatshirt into a beautiful pillow with the snowmen on the front. She added the embroidered snow, and did some lovely stitching around the edges. This was not only a gift from my sister, but was also a gift from our mother. This lovely pillow showed me that even though our mother is in heaven, her work and her life lives on. Jesus has given us the gift of eternal life through his sacrifice for all of us, and we are reminded of this everlasting gift of his birth at Christmas.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of everlasting life that You have sent down to us in Your only Son, Jesus Christ. We are grateful that those who believe in him shall not perish but will have eternal life. This comforting thought is with us always, and especially at Christmas when we are without our loved ones. May we find peace knowing that you hold them in the palm of your hand. Amen.*

Kati Machtley

Waiting

Scripture: *“I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.”*
(Psalm 130:5)

Each year, during the months of October and November, we begin the process of collecting and writing Advent devotionals for our yearly Advent Booklet. I often look back through the previous years’ Advent Booklets and reread articles from many of you, as well as some by Saints in our church who have gone ahead of us to be with our Lord and Savior. It seems that in the past five years the number and frequency of departures of friends and loved ones have increased. But that may be because my own years have increased.

The question comes to mind: How many others here are waiting and watching—either for the anticipated loss of a loved one, the birth of a baby, the arrival of a vaccine for COVID-19, or even perhaps the return of loved ones and friends from a combat area? Perhaps we are all waiting. All of us are waiting and hoping for something.

That is what Advent is all about, isn’t it? Advent recalls Israel’s centuries of waiting for the Messiah. Scripture reminds us that we, too, are waiting for God to move in our lives and in our world. Then Advent quietly insists that there is something worth waiting for. It reminds us that our hope is not without a firm foundation; that as surely as God came to those people in the stable in Bethlehem, so He will come to us. With this assurance we can wait together, trusting and hoping in God.

Prayer: *Our Heavenly Father, we are waiting for Your action in our lives. We hope in You, trusting the witness of Him who has come, who comes, and who will come again. Amen.*

Dr. Diana Lantz



Monday, December 21

O Come Let Us Adore Him

Scripture: *“And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”* (Mt 1:21 NKJV)

How wonderful that God gave us the gift of music and song that we may more adequately glorify Him with praise and adoration. *“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.”* (Psalm 104:33)

“Come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the Lord, our God and maker.
Jesus, name above all names, Beautiful Savior, glorious Lord.
Emmanuel, God is with us. Blessed Redeemer, Living word.”
Beautiful Savior, King of creation, Son of God and Son of Man!
Truly I’d love Thee, Truly I’d serve Thee,
Light of my soul, my joy, my crown.
Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow’rs before Thee, Op’ning to the sun above.”

We share this gift of music and song with the angels who, in His presence, continually glorify God and sing His praises. And on that first Holy Night a host of angels gathered in the night sky to praise Him. And so, we also adore Him with our Christmas songs.

“Come to Bethlehem, and see Him whose birth the angels sing;
Come adore on bended knee Christ the Lord the newborn King.
Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room, And heav’n and nature sing,
Angels from the realms of glory, Wing your flight o’er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation’s story now proclaim Messiah’s birth
Hark! the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!’”

Prayer: *Christ Jesus, we thank you for the gift of song to praise and adore thee during Advent and throughout the year. May your praises ever be our heart song until that glorious day we can join with your angelic choir in singing your praises throughout eternity. Amen.*

Alice Thomas

Choosing to See God's Faithfulness

Scripture: *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*
(Psalm 23:4)

A few years ago our daughter spent nine days at Children's Hospital, and I have to say that it was a difficult few days at the beginning trying to figure out what was wrong and seeing her in so much pain. I can't say that I wasn't worried or afraid but I can say that I never felt alone. I couldn't answer questions that my daughter had of why this was happening but I could tell her that we could focus on how much God had already provided so far. We talked about the amazing doctor we got (world-renowned!), the extremely kind nursing staff, the incredible number of prayer warriors praying for her, the support of family and friends, and the support of our work places. We also talked about the promises of God. How he promised to never leave us and that He loves us even more than we can understand.

I think that when we go through difficult times it is important not to focus on the immediate pain if possible. But to hang on to what we know is true, what we have experienced of God's goodness, and to look ahead to the promises that God has laid out for us. I think pain can be so overwhelming at times that if we try to rationalize the good of pain in the midst of pain, it can seem impossible.

After coming home, my daughter said that because of the great care she got in the hospital it makes her want to help others in a similar way. She would not have chosen to go through what she did, but she can see how God might be using it to chart her future. She has seen His faithfulness and provision in so many ways. These experiences are hers now to hold onto as a reminder of His love and to share with others to encourage them in their struggles.

A little four-year-old friend said to our daughter, “I don't know what is wrong with you, but God does.” I love the security she voiced in her heavenly Father, knowing that that was enough.

Prayer: *Thank you, God, for always being enough. Amen.*

Ferri Estes Boshka

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

Scripture: “*And He will be their peace.*”

(Micah 5:5)

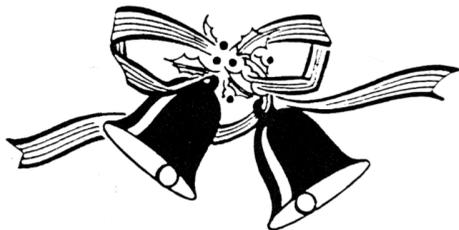
I’m a firm believer in the phrase “in God’s own time,” and have come to realize through the years that He always answers prayers, but not necessarily on our time schedule or in the way we expect. While reading through Kenneth Osbeck’s *Amazing Grace*, a devotional of inspiring hymn stories, I came across the story of the origin of the hymn “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” Osbeck’s story underscored once more for me “in God’s own time.”

In the story he tells how the cruel miseries caused by the Civil War greatly distressed the beloved American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. During the height of the war, after his son was severely wounded, with a heavy heart he put his thoughts into words to create this fine carol. Since he was the most influential American poet of his day, Longfellow brought fresh courage and renewed faith to many of his countrymen who read this poem. He maintained a strong belief in God’s goodness and personal concern for His people.

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” was written in 1864 for the Sunday school of the Unitarian Church of the Disciples in Boston, Massachusetts. It originally had seven stanzas and was titled “Christmas Bells.” References to the Civil War are prevalent in the omitted verses. The plain, direct wording of the present five stanzas gives this clear message: God is still in command and in His own time will cause the right to triumph and will bring peace and good will once more. The beautiful chiming bells of Christmas reassure us of this important truth.

Prayer: *Our Heavenly Father we thank You for the gift of Your Son and the assurance that peace and good will once more come because of that gift. Amen*

Don Estes



Meeting Glory

One of my favorite heroes in the Christmas story is Zechariah. He and his wife Elizabeth, both of the priestly tribe of Levi, were decedents of Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel. They lived 19 miles south of Jerusalem in the ancient village of Hebron. Even though Hebron was a small village nestled in the Judean hills it has always held a prominent place in Israel's history. Remember, David was anointed King of Judah a thousand years before in Hebron. As a Levitical priest, Zechariah was required to journey often to Jerusalem to take his turn and administer the temple offerings and sacrifices during times of festivals and feast. He was a religious man, but he was also a good man and a good husband. When we read Luke 1:5-6 we also learn that he and his wife were advanced in their years and they were childless. To be childless in this culture came with its own set of problems. It would be a subject others would talk or gossip about. Some people even viewed being childless as being out of favor with God. Since children were considered a blessing, being childless could be used as evidence for such an opinion. However, even now, Zechariah and Elizabeth remained faithful to God. I am sure their situation was difficult, and I am sure they had long since given up on the hope of children. But all of this was about to change. We read about this dramatic event in Luke 1:8-14. Zechariah is told he will have a son—great news. But even more, he has an encounter with glory.

This to me is the amazing part of the story. God reaches out and again touches his creation with his glory, sharing his wonderful plan, a plan which would bring about salvation, and Zechariah has the experience of a lifetime. The angel Gabriel shows up as God's designated messenger with the wonderful news. *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."* Luke 1:13 This is an amazing moment but when we read it; we often glaze over the fact that Zechariah's experience is an encounter with the glory of God. In a way it is a face-to-face meeting with the divine. Yes, it is true that Zechariah has some trouble processing the news and the experience. Yes, it is also true that in all of this he would be reminded of the power of God, and yes it all works out for good in the end, read Luke 1:15-80. Yet for me, it is this momentary encounter with God's messenger, God's plan, and ultimately God's glory, that captures my thoughts. It reminds me that God continues to care for his people. He has not, nor will he ever, turn his back on us and walk away. He has a marvelous plan for those who come to him by faith, and like Zachariah we will one day experience his glory. But for now, we will celebrate the Christmas season and the Christmas story with wonder while we wait for our own meeting with glory.

The Birth of Jesus

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, (because he was of the house and lineage of David), to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things, which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)



THE ADVENT WREATH

There is much meaning and symbolism attached to the Advent Wreath, with its four candles, lit one at a time, on the four Sundays preceding Christmas. The wreath itself is a circle made of evergreen, both symbolizing eternal life. The light from the candles symbolize God's light coming into a world of darkness.

The First Candle, lit on the fourth Sunday preceding Christmas, is called the **Prophecy Candle**. It indicates the beginning of the waiting period before Christmas, with the hope of the prophets in mind regarding the coming of the Christ.

The Second Candle, lit on the third Sunday before Christmas, is called the **Bethlehem Candle**. It points to the preparation period preceding the birth of Jesus. It reminds us to keep in our hearts and minds a sense of expectancy as we look forward to His birth and now, His coming again.

The Third Candle, lit on the second Sunday before Christmas, is the **Shepherds' Candle**. It symbolize the sharing of the good news of Jesus birth with the humble shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem first, and then with all.

The Fourth Candle, lit on the Sunday before Christmas, is called the **Angels' Candle**. This candle points to the glorious song of the angels over the hills of Bethlehem, proclaiming the birth of the Savior, and all to the glory of God.

The Fifth Candle is lit on Christmas Eve. This white candle is called the **Christ Candle** and it symbolize Christ, the Light of the world, who has come in fulfillment of all the hopes, dreams, prophecies and expectations of so many.



Notes and prayers



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