

**THE TRUE MEANING
OF
CHRISTMAS**

**DAILY DEVOTIONALS
FOR ADVENT 2024**

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND**



ADVENT SEASON

Friends and Church Family,

We have another Advent and Christmas Season upon us! This season is, for some of us, a wonderful time of cheer, rest, and joy. For others of us, it may (also) be a hard time of loss, loneliness, and grief. I expect to find myself experiencing both sets of emotions this year, as I both prepare for marriage and experience my first Christmas without my father.

In light of this, I want to call to mind the hope and foundation of the Christmas season: God With Us.

Our Advent sermon series will be on this theme, focusing on Isaiah 9:6, which reads:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

As we dive into this verse this Advent series, and as we read our fellow contributions in this advent devotional, let us put Christ front and center. He is our great counselor, a confidant and source of strength; He is God himself, the creator of all things, in human flesh. He is the ruler of His church and the one in whom all things were made, and He is the author and source of peace, in the world and in our hearts.

I pray this devotional will be a blessing to you as we look to Christ Jesus our Lord! And, of course, thank you for all those who have contributed to this devotional!

Yours in Christ,

Sean

Sunday, December 1—First Sunday of Advent

Celebrate!

Will we celebrate Christmas in Heaven? ... Of course I don't know the answer. No one does. But it's fun to think about. We will, of course, celebrate things in heaven. We will also glorify God and praise our Savior, Christ Jesus. And, given that God values different human cultures, I like to picture the saints in Heaven celebrating the birth of Jesus - our traditions will probably look a little different there, but maybe they are recognizable to what we do here and now? After all, the incarnation, which is what we celebrate at Christmas, is the greatest event in history along with creation and the resurrection. I wonder what flavor of birthday cake Jesus would prefer. My guess is Angel Food. Just a guess.

I hope that guessing about Christ's favorite flavor of cake does not sound disrespectful - certainly we should not think of Christ as just some human exactly like us in every single way. He is the exalted Lord of Heaven and Earth, who wields infinite power and is full of infinite glory and majesty. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the King of all creation and the Creator of Heaven and Earth, absolutely Holy and deserving of worship and reverence. And yet, He is also, and will always be, a *real* human like us - surely that means he has preferences and favorite foods? Again, I'm thinking Angel Food cake.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ this year, let's *celebrate*. Let's find joy in the creation God has made, the food and fellowship of friends, and the worship of God with our fellow Christians. Let's also not forget to reach out to those who are lonely and in need.

Prayer: Father, we thank you for the gift of the Christmas season. Whether we will celebrate this for eternity or not, we thank you for the warmth and joy it brings here. Thank you for sending your Son, in the power of your Spirit, into the darkness to save us by your grace. Amen.

Pastor Sean Bland



Monday, December 2

Christmas Traditions

Scripture: *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:10-11 NIV*

I grew up in a small town outside New Haven, CT called Bethany. When I was young, I would help my mom decorate the house for Christmas. She did most of the work of course, but I can remember taking out the Christmas ornaments and always being excited to pull the cord on a music box or set up the manger scene. Typically, something was cooking on the stove, so the house was filled with the aroma of dinner or cookies and the fresh cut Christmas tree.

Because of our German heritage we opened presents on Christmas Eve. But before we could tear into the presents, we had to go look for Santa Claus. My parents were usually busy getting everything ready, so one of my four older brothers would usually take me to the highest point in town, which happened to be an old airport that dated back to 1923 and is considered one of the oldest airports in New England. Gazing into the sky we would see a plane with its red light, and I was convinced it was Rudolph. Upon returning home I could not wait to jump out of the car and tell everyone that I spotted Santa only to find that I had missed seeing him at the house because he had already delivered the presents!

I continued this tradition with my wife Lynda and two boys. Every Christmas Eve we would head back to Bethany to see my family. As we entered town, I would always stop at the airport field, and we would sit silently looking for Rudolph and Santa's sleigh. Sure enough, when we got to my parent's home, we had just missed Santa...

Prayer: *Thank you, Heavenly Father, for blessing us with your Son. Thank you for the wonderful traditions that help us celebrate His birth and share the special moments with the people we love.*



Mark Barnes

Tuesday, December 3

Why do people come to church on Christmas Eve?

Scripture: *For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.* Matthew 18:20

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Luke 2:10

Christmas Eve services bring out the crowds, there's no doubt about it! Why is this one night so special that people who haven't been in church for a year magically appear on December 24? There are some common explanations: It's family tradition. The music is good. Nothing else is open. Nothing on TV....

But there's more. There's something deeper, something more compelling, that calls even the unchurched to join the throngs of Christian worshippers to church that evening. In that hour, we are all one as we hear the old, old story, sing the familiar songs, light our candles, and contemplate the indescribable gift God gave us so many years ago.

That night, we all are filled with a sense of awe and wonder, just as generations before us through have found hope and peace in remembering the birthday of Jesus. We feel the sense of promises fulfilled—of better things to come. For some, it is a renewed call to serve the Lord; for others, a time to contemplate sins and omissions of the past year and commit to doing better in the coming year. For many it reinforces a sense of family, love, and thankfulness for God's bounty. Others wonder how this celebration has survived so many centuries of strife and turmoil, and still seems new each year, but they too are caught up in the glory of the night. Let us pray that all who attend Christmas Eve services this year find comfort, inspiration, and love that transcends everyday comings and goings

Prayer: *Our heavenly Father, help us to fully accept your love and goodness as we come together on the night, we celebrate the birth of your son. Amen.*

Sandra Lang



Wednesday, December 4

Love

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12 *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

This year the church went through a process to see what our mission should be. As part of that process a set of values was created. The first one was that we are Beloved by God. Even when we may not love ourselves, God loves us. He cares for us so much that despite our sinful nature, he sent his only son to die on the cross to free us from our sins. It is that son, Jesus Christ, our savior whose birth we celebrate this season. In response to God's love for us we are called show our love to others. Scripture tells us this. But how do we show our love to others? When I think back of all the times, I felt love is when others took action when I needed it. Those actions can be as simple as providing a smile to a stranger or just listening when someone is going through a hard time. Other actions may require more effort and resources as we seek to show God's love to our church and local community. They may even take us out of our comfort zone. As we are called to speak to the homeless, provide food and clothing to the poor and love others as God has loved us.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, we thank you for loving us. As we go through each day helps us recognize the opportunities big and small where we can reflect Your love for us to someone else. In Jesus name Amen*

Member FPC



Thursday December 5



Surrender

Scripture: Luke 1:38 *“And Mary said, “Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”*

Two years ago, I wrote an advent devotion on this same scripture, focusing on Mary’s listening. I ponder the same word today, only now am I focusing on Mary’s surrendering.

Ephesians 5:18 speaks of a command, “Be filled with the Holy Spirit”. I believe that we are filled with the Holy Spirit to the degree that we are surrendered to Him. It is giving up our own will for His will, our power and control for His power and control within us, moment by moment.

Jesus came to earth, physically in cooperation with the surrender of Mary. God knew she would abandon herself to His will. As one theologian has said, “May you abandon yourself to God that he may mold you into a vessel of His love.” May Jesus, this Christmas, come to earth come to FPC, through your abandonment of self to Him.

Prayer: *Thy will be done Lord in my life, in the lives of all at FPC, that we may be filled with your Spirit and be a true vessel of your love. Help us to surrender to you more fully, moment by moment.*

Cindy Price

Friday, December 6

The Love Chapter

Scripture: *1 Corinthians 13*

While thinking about a devotional for this year's Advent, I came across the following by Sharon Jaynes where she paraphrases 1 Corinthians 13. It is a good reminder of where my (our) priorities at Christmas should be focused.

If I decorate my house perfectly with lovely plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights, and shiny glass balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals, and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home, and give to charity, but do not show love to my church and friends, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties, and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to think about the real meaning of why Christ came to earth.

Love sets aside the decorating to spend time in God's Word.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't become impatient with others to get out of your way because you have so much to do.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust. But giving the gift of love will endure.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, on that starry night in Bethlehem. I am still amazed at Your great love for us. May we never lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas but celebrate Jesus' birth with joy! Help us to give as You gave—with love. Amen.*

Daryl Kolator

Saturday, December 7



Worshipping Our Messiah and King- Following the Bethlehem Star

Scripture: Matthew 2:1 *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi (Wise Men) from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written”. After they had heard King Herod, they went on their way, and the **star** they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

I love the story in Matthew 2 of the Magi (number of them not specified but we assume there were only three because the number of gifts was three; there could have been more). They were overjoyed, excited, and happy at seeing the **star** that brought them to the house where Jesus and Mary were. This was the very first time Jesus was worshipped as Messiah and King and given gifts appropriate for a king to receive. These gifts were symbols of Jesus’ being our Messiah and King. These wise men were Gentiles that first worshipped Him and point to a future prediction of when Gentiles would be able to freely worship Him as their Messiah and King.

Prayer: *Dear baby Jesus, we worship and praise you this Christmastime for coming to be our Savior, Messiah, and King. We praise and worship you with love and joy! Amen.*

Tony Ruggiero

Sunday, December 8—Second Sunday of Advent

Peace Bethlehem

Scripture: *The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace. Psalm 29:11*

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

During the second week of the advent, we hear about the Bethlehem candle that symbolizes peace. As we go through our busy days this time of year, it is hard to feel peaceful. We have just too much to do. Whether it is trying to finish the end of the year business projects, school exams, Christmas plans and church activities. It is hard to feel peaceful. But we must take time feel the peace that God provides us. Through the reading of scripture, prayer, reflections of God's blessing we need to take some time today and every day to reconnect with the Father through Jesus the Prince of Peace. This includes listening to the Spirit within us. Our days may not be less busy but relying on the strength God provides will help us keep focus on what is most important.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, we thank you that the peace that comes from you does not depend on our circumstances. Help us to see beyond our circumstances and experience true peace that comes from you. In Jesus name Amen.*

Mike Ricci



“Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

“Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.”

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.

“That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.” - Linus Van Pelt

Many of us know this as the heart and soul of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The animated cartoon first aired on CBS on Thursday, December 9, 1965 – sandwiched between *Gilligan’s Island* and *The Munsters*. It was a commercial and critical success, winning an Emmy and Peabody award; and it has been a staple for seasonal programming since.



Charles M. Schulz, the creator, was Lutheran; but his popular Peanuts comic never had overtly Christian themes and references. None-the-less he insisted on a biblical message in his Christmas special.

In 57 seconds on that evening, almost 60 years ago, Linus recited the Gospel of Luke (2:8-14), witnessed his faith to 15.4 million viewers (45% of available householders). I call that a small miracle.

Charlie Brown found solace in Linus’s words. And as the story progressed, he found comfort from his friends as they decorated his simple tree. They showed kindness and charity – they *loved their neighbor*.

I think of myself when I see that simple tree, plane and bear. And how I need a Charlie Brown to care about me and how I can only be made beautiful as a gift from other hands.



Prayer: With  Hark! The Herald Angels  resonating in the background, let us pray:

‘Glory to God in the highest’ – we give thanks for the Advent of Jesus Christ, our lord and savior. We also give thanks to you for all the ways that you speak to us. Give us eyes to see and ears to listen. Give us also a voice to spread your good news, and the courage to do so, during this season and all seasons. In your name, Amen.

Tuesday, December 10

Christmas through our years

Scripture: Luke 2:14 *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

Through the changing seasons of our lives there is one beautiful constant—Christmas. It thrills us as children as we see the decorations, hear the stories and songs of Jesus and angels, of Santa and reindeer, of love and giving. We hang our stockings, say our prayers, and open our presents.

As teenagers we experience the joy of keeping the magic alive for the younger ones in the family, for not only hearing, but singing the songs, giving to the poor, and understanding more about the true meaning of this wonderful holiday. We help make the cookies, trim the tree, make gifts, keep secrets, join celebrations.

As young adults, newly married, we discover the joy of beginning new family traditions, sharing the day with new extended family members, combining our new love for each other and our abiding love for Jesus. When our own babies are born, we find our own joy, and we understand better the joy of that long-ago birth that changed the world. We cook, shop, sing carols, send cards, buy gifts and attend church services.

As the years go by, we watch our children's excitement and joy. We watch them go through the same growth in understanding that we experienced, and our joy becomes heartfelt thanksgiving for the wonderful blessings Christmas has brought into our lifetime, through times of happiness and times of sadness...all the seasons of our lives.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for bringing such joy into our lives. May we be worthy of it. Amen.*

Sandra Lang



THE GIFT

Scripture: *Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord."*

I can't imagine receiving a gift and not unwrapping and opening it, simply because I knew what was inside. Have you ever received a present that you knew what was inside? For many people that's what happens to their relationship with God. He sent his most precious gift to us. Some totally ignore the gift. Some take the gift and leave it on the shelf. Others accept the gift knowing what's inside and never bother to open and experience it. They figure knowing about it is all that is necessary. Some receive the gift and accept Jesus Christ into their life to be their personal Lord and Savior. It is only when we take Jesus into our very being that we can know and understand Him. This goes way beyond unwrapping gifts. This is whether we have life with God or not. Christmas is a perfect time to review just where we are with him. May your Christmas season be blessed with a renewed relationship with the living Lord.

Prayer: *Dear God, Thank you for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ and the eternal life with You that He has brought to us who accept Him as Savior and Lord. It is the greatest gift ever given!*

Bunny Miller





GIFT OF CREATION

Scripture: *Psalm 95:4-5 "In His hand are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is His, for He made it and His hands formed the dry land."*

This year we took a road trip to see some of the National Parks out west. Driving through the varied countryside of our nation we were continually reminded of God. Each area we passed had a different expression of the Lord's creation. There were places that stretched on for miles with open flat land that reminded me of the eternal nature of God, as we could see no end. There were the majestic mountains of the Rockies, jutting up towards heaven solid and enduring. There were the wonders of the canyons and the arches that overwhelmed us with a sense of awe. We could not see all the details and they stretched on for miles. The time of day we were there also impacted on what we saw as the morning light illuminated an arch or the full day sun which sent us to the shady side of the formations to the setting sun illuminating different structures. The sheer number of types of rock and the color variations speak of our creator. Scripture is filled God's connection to our earth. Spending time seeing new areas of His creation, I am filled with awe and wonder. I can only imagine how beautiful heaven must be and all the glory that Jesus set aside to come live the perfect life here on earth.

Prayer: *Father God, may we have our eyes open to see you more clearly in your creation. May we be moved to worship and praise you and be filled with your joy and peace.*

Deidra Ricci

Friday, December 13

We Wish You a Merry Christmas!

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 16:8 *“Give **praise** to **the Lord**, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done.”*

On December 25th Christians attended mass to celebrate the Holy Day of Christ’s birth and named that celebration Christmas. We celebrate that Holy Day (now Holiday) of Christ’s coming to the earth as God with us-Emmanuel. It is not just any holiday celebration but a special one for all Christians! We are being persecuted more and more every day by those that want to remove our many religious traditions, especially the holiday we celebrate as Christmas. Just recently TV news announced that the 2024 Nieman Marcus catalog has removed the words “Christmas Catalog” and changed it to “Holiday Catalog”. It started years before to change “Have a Merry Christmas” to “Have a Happy Holiday” which is getting more common by the public with each season. My wife and I make it a point during the Christmas season and in the future to always say “have a Merry Christmas” when someone wishes us a “Happy Holiday”. Make a concerted effort this season to bring the Christmas greeting back into our various places of work or play. Let us keep our Savior’s presence as the real Reason for the Season which is Jesus Christ. Let us all keep Christ in Christmas!

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help us to be bold to wish others a Merry Christmas this season instead of Happy Holidays and keep Christmas as the name we celebrate for your coming as Emmanuel (God with us) to save us from our sins. Amen*

Tony Ruggiero





Saturday, December 14

Hope Prophet

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

When I was a young child, I, like most of us, could not wait for Christmas to come. I not only knew it was coming but also when. The Christmas lights, the tree, big family gatherings, going to church at midnight and of course the presents. Each day the excitement grew until Christmas finally arrived. Christmas Eve and Christmas day were always what I hoped for. Well maybe not all the presents I wanted but the important parts were. The Jewish nation waited many years for the Messiah to come. They had hope he would as it was revealed to them by the prophets. They did not know when he would come but they believed he would. When Jesus came it was not as they would have hoped for. For us however, we know that Jesus as our savior has already arrived so many years ago. We also know that he is the greatest gift we could ever hope for. As we look forward to this Christmas season and the rest of the year, we can continue to have hope for the things we would like to happen. Just like the presents we hoped for as a child. Some of our hopes may not be realized as we envisioned. But we must remember God has the perfect plans for us. You never know, some of our blessings this year may be even better than we could have ever wished for.

Prayer: *Lord thank you for all your blessings and that we can trust you to provide your best for us even when we do not see it right away. We thank you for always having the hope of your son's return. In Jesus name Amen.*

Member FPC

Sunday, December 15—Third Sunday of Advent

A FAVORITE CHRISTMAS TRADITION

Scripture: *Luke 2:11 - “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

This year’s FPC Advent Devotionals suggested we might share personal Christmas traditions. I’m sure everyone can remember many favorite traditions from Christmas celebrations past. I remember several of them that were special to me growing up and to my family, like decorating the tree as a family on Christmas Eve, and hanging our Christmas stockings up so Santa could fill them. Another was reading “The Night Before Christmas” about the jolly old elf. Another was racing my brothers and sister down the stairs at the stroke of 7 AM on Christmas morning to pick out one special gift to open before our family breakfast. There were many similar traditions we repeated each year that are still very special memories of mine, and we continue many of them in our family to this day, but the very best was my father reading the story of the first Christmas from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2. At the end of our Christmas Eve festivities, my father would open the Bible and read to us about the decree of Caesar Augustus for a census to be taken, about the shepherds abiding in the fields at night, about there being no room in the inn, about the angels appearing and the heavenly host rejoicing, and about the Holy Child being born to Mary and Joseph in a stable and being wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger, all as the shepherds were told and witnessed. That’s my favorite Christmas tradition... the story of Christ’s birth!

Prayer: *We thank you Heavenly Father for the gift of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, each and every Christmas, and all throughout our lives.*

Richard Price



CHRISTMAS CARDS

Scripture: *Romans 10:17 GNB “So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word about Christ.*

Even though busy schedules, the Internet, and rising postal rates have reduced the numbers, sending Christmas cards is still a holiday tradition for many. While writing and addressing them can be a chore, remembering the good times spent with each person or family makes it worth the effort. Plus getting the mail during December with cards and news is such fun.

But what about the cards themselves? I get so many with cockeyed reindeer, little mice dressed up in Santa suits, glittery shining ornaments, or glossy stylized depictions of Christmas decorations. I wince at these cards. It’s not that they aren’t pretty or that I am unhappy with the sender, or for the newsy notes inside, but because of the wasted opportunity. Christmas cards afford an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ - God with us. A card with the message of God’s love revealed in the birth of our Savior with real Scripture verses instead of “Season’s Greetings” or “New Year cheer” cost no more to buy and send than other types, and yet they mean so much more. As Christians we can help put Christ back in Christmas with the cards we send. And don’t forget to pray for each friend as you seal the envelope.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to glorify you during this most festive of seasons, particularly in the Christmas cards with send. Let us not waste this opportunity to be witnesses of your love to all the people whose lives we touch. Amen.*

Bunny Miller



Tuesday, December 17

Remembering

Scripture: *Romans 8:38-39 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

My family used to decorate for Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. At some point before Christmas, I'd take a couple oranges and poke cloves into them until I had a design I liked and set them in the kitchen window for added decoration (and the amazing smell). We had many traditions. In fact, if I were to go back to Dec 24th any given year in the 1980s, I could tell you that my family would be eating clam chowder for dinner that night. After dinner, we would sit next to the Christmas tree together and each open one gift ~ the rest had to wait until morning.

While Christmas traditions are often thought of as all the little things we do, what became most valuable to me was who was with me...who was always with me. No matter who my family celebrated with throughout the holiday season, Christmas Eve and Christmas morning were almost always just for us – my mom, my dad, my sister and me.

Although tradition was woven into Christmas for me in those early years, the past 30 or more years have held none. New people that I love dearly came into the family and new experiences were necessary, but meaningful. The stability of those childhood Christmas traditions and the love of my family stayed with me though. They made the last 30 Christmases ok no matter what...whether I spent Christmas with my co-workers and patients, with new family members, with friends or alone... whether I received multiple gifts from the different families I got to spend the holiday with or bought and wrapped my own gifts and put them under the tree I set up by myself...whether I was sitting at a table surrounded by the people I loved most to eat a huge turkey dinner, throwing a frozen pizza in the oven before running off to work and eating in my car or

going out for dinner with another friend that was alone for Christmas... everything was ok! I felt like I was right where I was supposed to be.

The love of my family, those three people in my early Christmas memories, sustained me for the holidays to come.

So on Christmas Eve, when it's late, the house is quiet and I have some time by myself, I sit by the tree in the glow of the lights and I remember. I remember what I had as a little girl on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning through my family and our traditions. And it's the same thing that gives me so much peace now that I know Jesus – a sustaining and steadfast love.

Prayer: *Father God, the way You work is so amazing and I am so grateful. I love putting the pieces together and seeing that you were with me every step of the way. You have provided for me when I didn't know I needed anything, protected me before I knew danger and comforted me and held me close when I didn't even ask. You did all these things first by putting me in the family that was perfect for me. You trusted me in their care and carefully and quietly planted the seed. You took Your Time. And in that time, I was never separated from you. Thank you for your presence and love throughout my life and for being so fully present with me here now.*

And Lord, for those reading this, I pray they feel you near too and ask for them the gift of Your sustaining and steadfast love this Christmas and always.

Kendra Fleming

Wednesday, December 18

If I Believed Like That

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7 *"But the end of all things is at hand".*

When D. L. Moody preached in Brooklyn in 1875, thousands were converted. Pastor Henry Ward Beecher struggled to understand this phenomenon until he met Moody personally. "I saw the secret of his working and plans," wrote Beecher. "He is a believer in the second advent of Christ, and in our own time... He thinks that Christ may come even to-morrow."

Beecher added, "I should be a burning fire all the time if I believed like that."

Peter expected Christ to soon come again too, writing, "The end of all things is at hand.... As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies."

Time is short, and this may be the year when Christ returns. Prioritize your life with the Second Coming in view. Let's speak and serve as those who are longing for our Lord's swift appearing. Let's be on fire all the time.

He thinks (the world is) a wreck bound to sink—and the only thing that is worth doing is to get as many of the crew off as you can.

Henry Ward Beecher, about Moody

Prayer: *Lord, please let us be a burning fire for you at Christmas and throughout the year. Amen*



Thursday, December 19

What Do You Believe?

Scripture: *1 John 5:1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God*

This song by Natalie Grant called *I Believe* stirs something deep within. As Christmas approaches I hear Jesus asking what do you believe?

In a land far away time stood still, long ago there were shepherds in fields or at least this is how the story goes, Woman with child, and an inn with no room, born in a manger. This is how the story goes but it is more than a fable and it's more than a fairytale and more than my mind can conceive.

I believe the Wiseman saw the baby boy the angels called the son of God, heaven's child, the great I am born to take away my sins through nailed pierced hands, Emmanuel has come I believe.

Two thousand years still the story lives on, God's gift to us sent to earth, wrapped in flesh, His only son and the heartbeat of heaven confounded our wisdom but it's still the simple truth that sets me free.

God's great plan for history would send you to the lonely tree that you would come for one like me.

I believe In a cross, I believe he came for one, He came for all, Heaven's child became a man, gave his life for me in spite of all I am. I believe, I believe, Oh I believe Christmas lives in me, I believe.

Prayer: *Lord we pause to remember all You have done to rescue and redeem us. Help us to more fully grasp the depth of Your love this Christmas. Amen*



Nancy Browne



Angels Among Us



Scripture: Psalm 91:11-12 *For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

God orders angels to protect people wherever they go, and to shield them from harm. At this time of year of amazing gifts, I reflect on one that has changed my life. I left home for my first year of college three weeks after my mom died from cancer. I was so lucky to be from a very close and happy family and it would've been hard to leave that no matter what. I was raised with the grace of God in our every action and everyday blessing. Still, it was so difficult to leave my dad and younger sisters at that time and I even asked my dad to drive past the road to my school because I just was not ready. He kindly drove ahead without a pause, to be that patient as a widower and hurting himself was so selfless. We all had a great lunch together and then headed to my future. I would've been scared with my mom still in my life, but without her I was absolutely lost. Then we all met my roommate, Tammy.... I am not even sure how to describe her other than being handpicked by my mom to be alongside me. Tammy is strong, caring, and an amazing angel sent straight to me. She is still a very best friend, was my maid of honor, and her family became close to my family forever. We often hear that when God closes a door, He opens a window, so very true in this case. I first met Tam 35 years ago and if I need her, she is right there. I was blessed with a human angel at a time so scary and unsure, that is God's work for certain.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, thank you for the awesome love and support that you over us every day. Thank you for the gift of your love, the gift of others that comfort us, and the true belief in you and your love for us. Thank you for your most miraculous gift to us this Advent season and always, Amen.*

Jen Bloom

Waiting

Scripture: Hebrews 10:37 *Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith"*

Waiting on the Lord...it's what God's people do. One writer has said that for the Christian, waiting is the application of faith in time. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, mankind has been waiting for God to restore His fallen creation to Himself as He first promised in Genesis 3:15. The "Hall of Fame" in Hebrews 11 recalls those who waited for this promise in faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah...and on down through the generations of God's people. Each saw and understood more of how God was faithfully unfolding the revelation and fulfillment of His Promise. He spoke through prophets. He acted in their midst. He gave them the law, the temple, the priesthood: shadows and copies of what was to come. They waited, and they "died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar"(Hebrews 11:13). I wonder if any of them dreamed that this Messiah would be the Son of God Himself, veiled in the flesh of a helpless infant, destined to suffer and serve, to live and die to provide their redemption? We who live 2000 years after the birth of Jesus have seen the glory of the gospel revealed in Christ. There is more to come, and though we see as through a glass darkly, we have a vantage point that brings the ongoing fulfillment of God's Promise into sharper focus. This advent season God's people still wait. As the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures to us and we see the Father at work preparing the way for the coming of His Son, may our hearts burn within us! May our waiting be joy-filled-abiding-in-Him as we look forward with eyes of faith to His return and the coming of His kingdom!

Prayer: *"He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22: 20)*

Regina Skudera

The Christmas Crèche

Scripture: *Luke 2:1-20.*

As you unpack your Christmas Crèche offer a prayer to God for each item you set up as suggested by James C. Huffstutler

STABLE: As we place the stable, let us remember how the stable, which was never meant to be a home, sheltered our Lord. Let us pray that our homes will be places of hospitality for all who enter them, as well as for our Lord.

STAR: As the star shone to give direction to the magi, let us pray that our faith in Christ will be the direction for our lives.

SHEPHERDS: As the shepherds were the most common of folk, and yet the only ones to be summoned by angels, may we never forget that God calls the simplest among us to tasks of greatest glory.

MAGI: As the magi moved in the deep belief that God was acting in this world, may we always look for that same redemptive activity, and never be so proud that we cannot seek our Lord with childlike faith.

STABLE ANIMALS: As sheep and donkey, oxen and lamb looked down on the holy miracle, may we too stand in awe before each miracle, wondrous or simple, which our God will work.

ANGEL: As the angel proclaimed the tidings of God, may we be open to hear God, calling us to be part of his plan.

JOSEPH: As Joseph wondered, then obeyed, where he could not understand, may we be obedient, even in the face of our own lack of understanding.

MARY: As Mary opened herself to the miraculous working of God through her, may we be instruments of God's love in whatever humble way we are summoned.

Prayer: *Dear God, You sent Your Son into our world - a baby - to suffer and die for us. How much You must love us, Lord Jesus. Thank You for all You have done, for all You are doing in my life, and in my world, and for all You will do. Praise be to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Monday, December 23

A Glorious Preparation

Scripture: Malachi 4:2 *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.*

For those who live far from the equator in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent is a dark time of year. The sun doesn't get very high in the sky and it only shines for 8 hours. It tends to be cold, and truth be told, Christmas comes at just the right time for us. Our minds are taken off the impending winter freeze and we even look forward to just a little bit of snow to make the season just right.

So it is that the radiance of God bursts forth upon us, reminding us that Christmas has so very little to do with Santa, trees, elves, reindeer, fruitcake, snow, Frank Sinatra, eggnog, children's pageants, shopping, the Grinch, eating, and sending cards. When the glory of God bursts forth among us exposing our sin and calling us to repentance and new life in Jesus Christ, all of these things we fill our time with in preparation for Christmas do indeed seem trivial and unexposed to the light. Our traditions seem so far removed from that tiny stable in Bethlehem where a boy was born to dirt-poor parents and laid in a manger. Yet, when exposed to The Light, the Sun of Righteousness, many of our traditions and preparations for Christmas take on meaning and significance that are lost when we simply go through the motions and muddle through. Even in this dark season, The Light shines and the possibility exists to make our celebration of Christmas soul quenching and healing instead of energy sapping and depressing.

Prayer: *Our Heavenly Father, help us to take notice where the Sun of Righteousness is shining as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. Amen.*

Reverend Doug Forsberg (Advent 2003)



Tuesday, December 24

In the Stillness

Scripture: *Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."*

I was recently reminded of a contemporary Christmas song called "Come and Worship" by Bebo Norman. This beautiful song presents two important points. We are all invited to come and approach God, and worship as an act of praise and reverence. Our Heavenly Father calls us to stillness. He invites us to cease striving and to recognize that He is God. Christmas is a time to pause in reflection and to be still before Him; to lay aside the noise of the world, and to acknowledge that he is with us - Emmanuel.

Let us still our hearts and our minds, and worship our Lord, with awe and gratitude.

In the words of Bebo Norman: "Come and worship, Worship Christ the Newborn King." So, during this season, be still, and know the love and peace of Christ our Lord.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we thank You, for the gift of Your Son, Jesus, the newborn King. We come to you today, with hearts full of gratitude and worship. Amid the busyness of this season, help us be still and know that you are God. Help us make room in our hearts for the peace and joy that only Jesus can bring. Free us from distractions and draw us into your presence. We worship You, our Savior and King. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

Darien Petit



Wednesday, December 25 – Christmas Day

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, everyone 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.





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