

## **A Light in the Darkness**

### **December 3: The First Day of Advent**

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

John 1: 5

**Reading:** John 1:1-5

One of my favorite passages of scripture is John 1:1-15. I’m not sure if it’s because of the opening line, “In the beginning...” which harkens back to Genesis 1:1, or the double meaning John created by using the word “logos” or “Word” to describe that which held chaos at bay but also reminded the people that God spoke creation into being. If I’m honest, it’s probably these reasons and more. But one in particular stands out: these five verses usher in a season of *anticipation* and *hope*.

If you’ve ever entered a dark room and searched about for the light switch you understand the hopelessness of a dark situation and the immediate joy of the light. This isn’t only true for physical light, but spiritual as well. *Before Jesus, we had no light*. Yes, we had the Law, but the law could only show us what humanity had done wrong, not how to fix the problem forever. Sacrifices only served as a band-aid to the problem. What was humanity, trapped in the darkroom of sin and shame, to do?

John’s answer is clear: “In the beginning was the Word...in him was life...The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” It is as if he was telling his readers, “Don’t worry! The dark room that we live in won’t be dark forever. You can stop searching for the light switch! God is sending a life light to us! He is coming!”

Throughout this season of Advent, I pray that as you use this devotional you will find time in your day to bask in the light of Jesus Christ. Maybe you only have time to read it quickly in the morning, but I pray that what you read will stay with you. As you go about your daily schedule it would become your meditation and the words of the scripture would fill you with joyful anticipation for the celebration of Jesus’ birth. I pray also that the hope of Christ’s birth and eventual return would fill you with peace so that when we end our devotional time together on Christmas day, we can all say, “Merry Christmas!”

**Prayer:** Father in heaven, you who made the stars and the worlds in their orbit. Thank you for this season which reminds us “to come”. Father, we pray that we would come to you, see your Son in a new and fresh way, and be moved by your Spirit to share your love with others. Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

**Only This Once....**  
**December 4: Second Day of Advent**

“I will put enmity between you and the woman...he will crush  
your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Genesis 3: 15

Read: Genesis 3:1-24

As a transitional pastor, I have had the unfortunate experience of knowing more than a couple of churches that have had misfortune, and when the misfortune has come at someone's hand the problem almost always goes back to the statement, “Well, I'll only do it this once....” *Only this once....*

That was what placed humanity in such a dark state of affairs. Adam and Eve, when tempted with an opportunity to go against what God had decreed, looked at one another and probably said, “The fruit does look good...after all, it's only this once....” And as the saying goes, the rest is history.

Some theologians say that when the scripture states that God walked in the cool of the evening, the author wasn't so concerned about the ambient air temperature as he was alluding to God's temper-ature. What Adam and Eve had done greatly angered God—they blatantly disobeyed—he needed time to calm down before talking with them. He didn't ask

what had happened because he didn't know—he asked because he wanted to hear it from them.

And so, like children playing the Blame Game, Adam points to the woman, the woman to the serpent, and the serpent...well, he didn't get a chance to say anything because God was already working on a cure to the problem. Yes, they would be punished, but only the serpent would be cursed.

When we sin, it affects all those around us, but that doesn't mean that God is going to cut us off forever from him. He will be upset, but his anger does not last forever when we admit to what we have done; when we stop saying “just this once...” and we begin to say, “Father, forgive me....”

During Advent, we are invited to remember why Jesus came in the human form as a baby in Bethlehem. He was promised to humanity to be the cure for our fall. He is the child promised to the woman who would crush the serpent's head, even as the serpent would strike at his heel. The serpent would not have the last say because God was in the process of promising a Savior to our sinful state. And for that, we can praise God not just once, but for all eternity!           -Rev. Nadia Stropich

Prayer: Thank you God for loving us enough to not leave us in our sin and shame but to deliver us from evil. May we live our lives for you each and every day in this freedom! Amen.

## **Here I Come to Save the Day! December 5: Third Day of Advent**

“He lifted me out of the slimy pit...He put a new song in my mouth....Many will see and...put their trust in him.”

Psalm 40:2,3

Read: Psalm 40:1-17

Many of us might remember the cartoon “Mighty Mouse” and the theme song that began with “Here I come to save the day!” In the cartoon Mighty Mouse saves his sidekick Scrappy Mouse and his girlfriend Pearl Pureheart from the evil Oil Can Harry or other nemesis. First airing in 1955, Mighty Mouse joined the legion of other “good guys” of the day, Superman, Bat Man, and the other heroes who began in the humble pages of comic books. It seems in every day and age, humans are looking for a hero, even if the hero is as small as a mouse.

Psalm 40 begins with the psalmist waiting in anticipation of a hero. Calling to God, the psalmist says that God heard his prayers, lifting him from the mud and mire of a slimy pit to put his feet on a firm place. With a new song on his lips, the psalmist extols the people to “praise our God” and put their trust in him.

As you reflect today, who are your heroes? Perhaps a family member or teacher? Maybe a sports figure or close friend who has overcome adversity? What quality about that person do you admire that makes them worthy of the title “Hero”?

Bible scholars believe this psalm is one of the Messianic psalms; that is, one that speaks prophetically about the coming Messiah. That means I want you to stop right here and go back and reread the Psalm....it’s okay, I’ll wait. 😊

Do you see it? The hero the psalmist is writing about is none other than Jesus. He is the only hero who can lift us from the mire and mud of sin and shame and put us back on the rock of God. He is the one who was written about in the scrolls and who performed great saving acts in which the Lord did not withhold his mercy from us.

As we journey through this season of Advent, let us remember the real “hero” of the day, Jesus. No, he didn’t come with a great theme song, a cool costume, or even a sidekick (okay, maybe Peter...) but he did come with something greater than any other hero of pop culture—salvation in his blood. Born to be the final sacrifice he came not to be a hero but to be a Savior, who would take away the sins of the world and restore us in God’s sight.

“Behold, the lamb of God, who comes to take away the sins of the world!” - John the Baptist, John 1:29

He has come to save the day!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, thank you for coming into our world, saving us from sin, and bringing us new life in you! Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

## Tools for the Advent Journey December 6: Fourth Day of Advent

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

Hebrews 11:1,6 (KJV)

...Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

1 Corinthians 2:9 (KJV)

Read: Hebrews 11 & 1 Corinthians 2

How has your faith journey been lately? Most of us could probably say that our faith has its ups and downs. It could depend on the weather, our finances, our health, or the well-being of our loved ones. Some of us are affected by current events or politics. There are many factors that can influence our faith journey.

I'd like to suggest that daily time set aside for reading and meditating on God's Word will strengthen our faith. Find the time of day that works best for you. The important thing is to establish a consistent habit.

Along with daily time in the Bible, daily prayer is so essential. Diligently seeking Him means pursuing a personal relationship with God. By doing this, we will begin to see our faith

increase. As an added bonus, as we invest daily time alone with the Lord, we will spend less time worrying about the cares of this world (which are only temporary anyway).

Question/Challenge: Will you commit to reading and meditating on Scripture and praying to God daily?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, please teach us to have faith to believe in the things we have not yet seen but which you have already prepared for those who love you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

- Gail Johnson



## Dressed Up for Christmas December 7: Fifth Day of Advent

“The Lord Jesus reigns and is robed in majesty and armed with strength. This is a reality and a prophecy of Christ’s return. Yes, Jesus came as a helpless baby, born in poverty, wrapped in swaddling clothes (rags) and lying in a manger. But he will return the victorious, powerful King, robed in splendor.”  
Psalm 93:1-5 (NIV)

Read: Psalm 93

We make an attempt to get all dressed up for Christmas. Maybe a new outfit, something glitzy to wear. But God sees us on the inside and he provides clothing of righteousness.  
(Isaiah 61:10)

Ps 93:5. His statutes stand firm; holiness adorns his house for endless days, O Lord.

We also attempt to adorn our houses for Christmas. Sales of decorations and gifts create million dollar businesses. Some adorn their house for endless days leaving up Christmas lights and trees decorated for every holiday. But all this pales in comparison to God’s house.

As we prepare for Christmas this year; decorating, dressing, cookie making, let us remember Jesus the Christ who reigns in might and be grateful for his gifts.

Prayer: Thank you Lord Jesus for the gifts of salvation and redemption. Thank you for the gifts of family and loved ones. Thank you for being born like one of us. May we honor you as we celebrate your birth.

- Aggie Wilttrout



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**Fear, Faith, Feathers, Oh My!**  
**December 8: Sixth Day of Advent**

"I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my  
God, in whom I trust.'"

Psalm 91: 2

Read: Psalm 91 My Refuge and My Fortress  
-- A Psalm of Protection

**Fear.** In the movie "The Wizard of OZ", Dorothy, the Tin Man, and Scarecrow sing the song "Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh my!" as they travel down the yellow brick road in the haunted DARK forest. In the Bible, David said to Saul in 1 Samuel 17:35 "The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine". We too have lions, tigers, and bears in our lives known as FEAR that God rescues us from. However, when we fear numerous things can happen, but I am going to touch on the fact that fear can (1) hold us back and (2) make us standstill. Fear that holds us back can stop things from happening -- it can stop us from growing in Christ. Fear can stop us from doing something we know we should do. When we are afraid to do something, we know God has called us to do, we need to stop and reflect on 2 Timothy 1:7 which clearly states that "fear is the enemy of our faith in Jesus". This is the worst part about fear as it can cause us to turn inward and rely ourselves rather than having an outward dependence on Jesus or faith in Jesus. This is the fear can keep us in the dark rather than being in the light of salvation. Satan wants us to be in the dark. Jesus wants us to

be in the light. Fear can keep us from God's calling and from being inside of God's favor and will.

**Faith.** In the movie "The Wizard of Oz" when Dorothy, Tin Man, Lion, and Scarecrow finally make it to the Wizard of Oz, Glinda the good witch of the north tells Dorothy "Click your heels together three times and say 'There's no place like home' and you'll be there." Dorothy had to have faith for her to believe that clicking her heels 3 times would take her back home to Kansas. In the Bible, I am sure Joseph initially felt fear when he found out Mary was pregnant and who could blame him when it could mean his death. However, the Angel Gabriel spoke to him and Joseph's fear turned into faith. Joseph knew the word of God and knowing the word of God is how we know our calling. Joseph's calling was to "take care of Immanuel", and since we have Immanuel within us we are called to use Immanuel's strength to daily obey the word of God. Are you questioning what God's calling you to do? If so, read the four Gospels and there you will learn how Jesus' lived his life by showing us how to have a heart (love), doing the will of God, and how God gives us empowerment to be His disciples and do his work. Then, obey what God is telling you to do. I know that this is easier said than done, but if we are being honest with ourselves and if you really think about it...it is easier that way, the first hard step is accepting it.

**Feathers.** In the movie "the wizard of Oz, the flying winged monkeys do the bidding of the witch. In the Bible, we know that God has angels to do His bidding. In fact, God bids His angels to be around us, always protecting us. Psalms 91:4, tells

us that “God will cover us with His feathers and under wings we will find refuge”. Move forward to verse 11 and 12 where God commands his angels to guard us in all ways, they will lift us up. Why does God do this? Verse 14 shares that because we love God, He will protect us and give us (v16) a long life and salvation in Heaven. We are living in a world that is under constant attack of bad news giving us fear and anxiety. There are times when we wish we could be like Dorothy and click our heals together three times and be able to “go home”...to move out of darkness of this sinful earth and into the light of Heaven or that the rapture would finally take place. Unfortunately, we cannot click our heals three times and go home to Heaven, but we do have God's hedge of protection. God has angels protecting the outside of us and the Holy Spirit living inside of us to help, guide, and protect our steps when we call on Him. All we have to do is rely on the feathered wings of God and we will soar like eagles (Isaiah 40:31).

**Oh my!** Fear not, the Lord God is with you (Isiah 41:10) my brothers and Sisters in Christ. I encourage you to keep looking up into the sky and to think on the hymn “**Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus**”...’ **Look full in his wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of his glory and grace, O soul are you weary and troubled, No light in the darkness you see, There's light for a look at the Savior, And life more abundant and free**”. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard

your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). More than ever before **The Church** is needed to be bold and courageous in shining the light of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:14) to a world living in darkness. Take a moment and reflect on this question -- will you accept the challenge and be the light of Christ? What does that look like for you?

Prayer: Father in Heaven, I praise you for your power and strength to do all things. I confess to you the times in my life where I chose fear over faith. I doubted your ability to be able to cover me with your wings of protection. I know I am called to do things, many things and understand that Jesus accepted the ultimate calling to lead me out of an eternity of death and darkness and into the light of salvation. Jesus is my hope -- my home. God you know me, you know my abilities and I know from Psalms 91 that you will be my refuge and fortress if we love you. Today I respond in faith understanding that I cannot control everything that comes my way, but I can control how I respond – fear or faith? As Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, only believe” Mark 5:36. Amen.

- Gayle Jesse



## **Waiting, Waiting, Waiting**

### **December 10: Seventh Day of Advent**

“Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart  
and wait for the Lord.”

Psalm 27: 14

Read: Isaiah 40: 27-31, Psalm 27:13-14, Jeremiah 29:11

With a world that is so fast-paced, any delay seems like forever. Sometimes all we feel like we are doing is waiting. Just the other day I was waiting in line at McDonald’s thinking when did the world just speed up? So many people want things, NOW. The funny part is God doesn’t give things out now, or on our timelines, and sometimes not at all. We know that God has a plan for our life but most of us still want to see his map and take control because “I know a better way.” It's time to give God back the wheel.

Isaiah talks about the power that God holds, a power that is unfathomable. Why should we take control from God when he is everlasting? A God who has understanding that no one can

understand. When we put our hope in God, he will renew our strength. When we remain confident in him we will see his goodness. So, as children of God, I say wait and trust that his plan is there, his plan is moving, and his plan is correct. It may not be when we want or what we want but he has a plan and we have a future. Next time you are in a drive-through or waiting in line somewhere just think, I wait to be renewed, I wait for strength, I wait for Christ.

Prayer: All-knowing God, we know that you have a plan for us. Help us to remember in our times of waiting that you are in control and that you will renew us. Overall Lord, help us to see you in every step of our lives. Amen.

- Austin Michael





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**Prepare The Way!**  
**December 10: Eighth Day of Advent**

“He came as a witness to testify concerning that light,  
so that through him all might believe.”

John 1:7

Read: John 1:6-8

BUY NOW! PAY LATER!  
ONLY 17 DAYS UNTIL CHRISTMAS!  
BRING THE KIDS! SANTA’S READY FOR PICTURES!

Whether we like it or not, there are a lot of different people shouting at us for their attention these days. Sometimes, it’s easy to feel like Charlie Brown, in “*Merry Christmas Charlie Brown!*” Frustrated by the lack of discipline in his cast and the over-commercialization of Christmas, a frustrated Charlie yells on stage, “Isn’t there anybody who knows what Christmas is all about?!” To which his dear friend Linus, blanket in hand says, “Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” And, cueing the lights, Linus begins to recite the famous passage from Luke when the angels hear about the birth of the Messiah.

Before the Messiah was born, however, another baby boy was miraculously born. His name was John and, because he baptized people for the forgiveness of sins, he was nicknamed

“John the Baptist.” His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth were-*ahem*-older than most parents, and the angel of the Lord told them that “he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parent to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

We, too, have been given a task like John the Baptist. We live in a world where many people, especially this time of year, are asking “Isn’t there anybody who knows what Christmas is all about?” As Christ’s followers, we have a perfect answer: to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the one who takes all our sins away. It’s an easy message to share in the Sunday School class or the aisle of Walmart amidst the throng of customers oversaturated with commercialism. The question is, are you ready to share the message just like John? Try it this week, you’ll be surprised at how exciting it makes the Christmas season!

Prayer: Dear God, give me holy boldness to share the good news of your son, Jesus this week. Help others to know that he truly is the reason for the season! Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

## Who's Elijah?

### December 11: Ninth Day of Advent

“This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

Matthew 3:3

Read: Matthew 3: 1-12

It's hard sometimes to know what to do with John the Baptist...he's so...prophet-y! I mean, even by biblical standards he stands out like a sore thumb....did you read about how he dressed? And his diet...I mean there's Mediterranean and then there's *locus*! John isn't exactly the guy you want as your neighbor, and definitely not on your HOA board.

So why did God include *him* in the story of Jesus' birth?

To answer this question, we need to go back and meet another prophet, Elijah, with an equally weird fashion sense and just as much fire in his ministry. Elijah enters the biblical narrative in 1 Kings 17-19 as the voice calling the people back into relationship with God and away from the false gods that the northern kingdom (Israel) had started to worship instead of Yahweh. In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi writes God's message, “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children,

and the hearts of the children to their parents, or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (Malachi 4:5-6) Fast forward to John the Baptist, who began his ministry roughly 400 years after Elijah. He came to proclaim the coming of the Messiah and to bring the people back into relationship with God through water baptism which was a sign of repentance. As he said in Matthew 3:11, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

But the funny thing about John is he didn't consider himself Elijah at the time. Instead, he was so focused on pointing to Jesus that he didn't consider who he was in God's story of redemption. This makes me ask, “Am I focused on me, or Jesus?”

In this season of Advent, let us make sure that in the frenzy of gift-giving, decoration, and trying to make sure we have it all done, we don't lose sight of Jesus in the process. That we are taking time each day to point to Jesus in our words, actions, thoughts, and deeds.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, life can overwhelm us with “To-do's” and we forget that our focus should not be on what we can do, but on who we are doing all of this for. Help us to refocus on Jesus and point to him during this season. Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

**The Zeal of the Lord**  
**December 12: Tenth Day of Advent**

“The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

Isaiah 9:7c

Read: Isaiah 9:1-7

“Zeal” isn’t a word we use in our common, everyday language. But I wish that we would use it more. It’s a fun word. It reminds me of a chubby-faced baby all scrunched up laughing at being loved on by his or her parents. It’s the passion that you see in the perfect execution of an “En Pointe” of a ballerina. And it’s the power that drives a mission-focused church and Christ follower.

When the Bible talks about the “zeal of the Lord” it’s talking about the passion that God has for a particular subject. In other words, it is something that God has such a particular passion for that nothing will stop him from accomplishing his goal. The amazing thing about God though is that his passion has always been about one thing according to the scriptures: regaining an intimate relationship with us, his children.

Stop and think about that for a moment. When we read Isaiah 9 a lot is going on; people will have light in the darkness, their nation will be enlarged; rejoicing will be heard throughout the

nation for war will be no more. All of this will happen because of the birth of a child who will be our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace....WOW!

When Jesus entered the world, the zeal of God the Father came into fruition and when Jesus rose again in glory, the zeal of the Lord had accomplished its purpose...all so that we would be restored to the right relationship with God.

In this busy time of Advent, it can be hard to have zeal for anything when you are just trying to keep your head above water, but I want you to take a moment today and ask, “God where do I need to have zeal in my life?” Perhaps it’s a relationship that needs to be restored with someone. Maybe it’s a rededication to the joy of the true meaning of Christmas. It may even mean taking zeal in self-care and reminding yourself that God is zealous for YOU!

However, the Holy Spirit enlightens your heart and answers this reflection know that God loves you with abundant zeal! So much so that he stopped at nothing by sending his son—even death on a cross—to make sure that we would have a right relationship with him for eternity.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for having zeal for me. I know I sometimes fail to express my gratitude to you but know that I am thankful for your son, Jesus, and the relationship I can have with you. Help me to have the same zeal for others. Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

**Wait Until Your Father Gets Home!**  
**December 13: Eleventh Day of Advent**

“ Peace, peace, to those far and near,’ says the Lord.  
‘And I will heal them.’”

Isaiah 57:19b

Read: Isaiah 57: 14-21

Some of us grew up in homes where the worst statement that could ever be made by our mother was, “Wait until your dad gets home!” For many adults that phrase still sends shivers down their spine and the urge to run and hide must be fought. We know what it’s like to be in the crosshairs of an angry parent and even though we weren’t considering the consequences while we were doing the thing that got us in trouble, we sure feared it after the fact!

But as much as we may have had “the fear of God” put into us by our parents when we were punished for doing something wrong, we sometimes forget that at one time we were under the punishment of God.

Before Jesus came into this world as a fully divine, fully human, we were estranged from God. Adam and Eve had disobeyed his commands and all of us felt the effects. Humanity was in sorry shape! The fear of our Father was real—we could only offer sacrifices of animals and harvest in the hopes that it would be enough to restore our relationship with God at least for a short time until we messed up again. And this worked...for a while, but everyone—God included—knew it wasn’t getting the job fully done. The reason for it was simple, God had a perfect plan in store.

From the beginning, God has planned to send his son to restore our relationship. Again and again, through the prophets, he told his people that salvation was coming; to keep the faith and hold fast for a Messiah-the Savior-would come to save and heal. What the sacrifices couldn’t do, God would do!

Like a loving earthly Father, God would not be angry forever with his children. Yes, he was upset at the sin that we engage in every day, but punishment would not be to cast us out of his sight forever. He would send his Son who would not just restore a relationship between God and his children, but give us *peace*.

Peace isn’t just an absence of conflict; it is rest for the soul. It is the deep heart knowledge that allows us to live life without worry or fear and to enter into rest that can only be described as “heavenly.”

Do you wish for that type of peace this season? Do you pray for this peace for your family members and friends who don’t know Jesus as Savior? If so, I would invite you to ask God to remove those obstacles that are hindering the peace he has to give you. Pray for those who may not know God as Savior and Lord of their lives and invite them in this Advent season to celebrate with you so that you can share your testimony about the peace that comes with Jesus.

Prayer: Gracious God, I ask that you would burn through my heart, cleaning out anything that is not of you so that your peace may reside in my heart. Thank you for coming to make earth your home in the person of Jesus. Amen!

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

## **The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

### **December 14: Twelfth Day of Advent**

“The Lord will indeed give what is good,  
and our land will yield its harvest.”

Psalm 85: 12

Read: Nehemiah 2:1-10, Proverbs 21:1-3, Psalm 85:10-11

Have you ever had that feeling that “It's never going to happen” or “Why do they deserve that, of all people?” It is hard for us to see the light at the end of the tunnel when all we can see are the walls around us. Those walls are confining us to what we have now but maybe not what we want. Reading in Nehemiah 2, we see the struggles and depression of Nehemiah staring at the walls of this tunnel. He wrestles with the thought that the town had been destroyed where his family is buried [3]. Working as the king's cupbearer he was scared to death to show this depression and worry but, through faith, he admits his struggles. We see his continued faith as he prays to the God of heaven throughout his interactions with the king [4]. He continues with his faith by admitting that it was by the hand of God that he was able to receive the king's permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls [8] and we see his continued faith throughout the book of Nehemiah.

It was through Nehemiah's faith in God that he was able to receive the peace and righteous judgement from the king. At any time that king could have killed him just for

looking at him wrong let alone asking for so much in return. Yet God turned the heart of the king to align with his will for Nehemiah. If we as Christians have faith in God to lead our lives, we need to be ready for him to turn the hearts of kings like the rivers of water.

It's through continued prayer that we can seek God's will for our own lives. Let us not forget to praise him and acknowledge that through him our lives continue on to be a demonstration of his light at the end of the tunnel. A light of hope, joy love, and peace.

**Prayer:** Loving God, help us turn to you when we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. Help us to remember that you have the power to move mountains as long as we put our faith in you and seek out your will in our lives. In your name, we pray, Amen.

- Austin Michael

## Seeing the Real Meaning of Christmas

### December 15: Thirteenth Day of Advent

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

1 Corinthians 13:12

Read: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

When I was a child, every Christmas was magical. Maybe because I am an only child, my mother spent a lot of time talking to me about the “real meaning of Christmas.” She would tell me beginning when I was quite small that there were two parts to Christmas. The first was the birth of Jesus, and how his birth saved us. I have to admit that at 3 or 4 years old, I had no idea what Jesus saved us from, but my mother planted the seed that was fertilized with more information each year. The second part of Christmas was the secular celebration with gifts to celebrate Jesus’ birthday and of course, Santa Claus.

As a 3- or 4-year-old child, I was more interested in the second part because of the gifts. I would peruse the toy catalogs until I wore them out. I wanted almost everything and circled what I wanted. My mother would tell me that I could not have everything in the catalogs. I had to share with kids all over the

world. That was another teachable moment that made me think of other children instead of just myself.

After church on Christmas Eve, we read the story of Christ’s birth from the book of *Luke*. My mother would explain that Christmas was the celebration of Jesus’ birth, and we got gifts because Jesus was so good and kind, he wanted us to share in his party. By then I was hyper and was usually threatened that Santa was not going to come because I was not asleep. After a drink of water, a trip to the bathroom, finding my stuffed animal, etc., I finally went to sleep. While I was sleeping and before Santa came, my mom and dad put up the tree. When I got up (early) on Christmas morning, there was a beautiful tree with colored lights and gifts. To a child, it was truly magical: the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. My parents were worn out, but I loved it.

Christmas is still magical to me, but now that I really understand the true meaning of Christmas—that Jesus gave up his life for us to save us from sin. I thank my mom and dad for not only putting up the tree late at night but more importantly, they shared their religious beliefs with me throughout my life. They planted the religious seeds early in my life that continue to grow today. If we don’t tell our children what we believe, someone with other beliefs will.

If you come to my house at Christmas and please do, you will find several nativity sets throughout our house that symbolize

the real magic of Christmas: the birth of Jesus. The real gifts of Christmas are the people who led us to Him.

Prayer: Dear God thank you for sending your Son to us on this Holy Night. May all the parents and grandparents on earth spend time telling the children in their lives about Jesus so that all children can experience the “real” magic of Christmas. Also, may there be peace on Earth tonight and every night. In Jesus name, Amen

- Barb La Posta





## Good News!

### December 16: Fourteenth Day of Advent

“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Read: Luke 1:26-33

“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

The angel, Gabriel, was assigned to visit Mary with amazing news. He was the one who told her she would be the mother to God's own Son. Wow, could you imagine being responsible for such important news and being able to answer her questions?

What is the most amazing news you have had to share? To a child, it may be an award, straight A's, or a present they finally got. To an adult, it may be the news to their parents that they will be grandparents! It may be sharing the news that a

disease is gone. None of us is an angel sent on a special mission but we each have some very important news to share. Who is God sending you to tell about his Son? In this time of Advent, be open to God's leading. He has someone open like Mary was to hear the news.

*Prayer:* Dear Lord, Keep us open to your leading, and prepare us to share the Good News of your Son with the person or persons you have assigned to us. Help us stay excited to share that news.

In Jesus name,  
Amen

- Karen Cowan



## **The Child Who Made Us Children of God**

### **December 17: Fifteenth Day of Advent**

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave them the right to become children of God”

John 1:9-13

Read: John 1: 9-13

I only had to stay in one recess because I was in trouble. I had forgotten my notebook and when my mom came to give it to me, I disrespected her in front of the entire class by blatantly taking her for granted and my teacher was not happy. Neither was my mom when I got home from school, but I digress....

Sometimes we can take things and people for granted. We get so used to their presence and help that we forget to say thank you. This can happen with our relationship with God as well. The best illustration of this is in the book of Judges. The plotline goes essentially like this: The people of Israel would forget about God and begin to worship false idols, God would allow a foreign nation to overtake them, they would cry out to God for help, God would raise a judge who would restore order and people would remember God for a time until the judge died and they went back to their old ways. Wash, rinse, and repeat until the end of the book. Call out to God, then forget about him after he had saved the nation.

It wasn't that God had left the people, it was that the people, in taking him for granted, left him. He had been with them since creation, but they would forget him unless they were in dire straits. So, God chose a new way of getting their attention. He would send humanity his only begotten son.

This is the Good News of Christmas: that even before humanity had a chance to ask for a Savior, God was already on the way to provide. Many missed the event that first Christmas night: the wise men probably weren't at the manger when Jesus was born, and Herod probably didn't know about Jesus' birth until he was a toddler. But God didn't miss us. He had promised a Savior and so he sent one...even if we didn't recognize him or receive him at first.

For those who do recognize Jesus as Savior and Lord then we are the ones who have truly been blessed this Advent season, and it is up to us to share about the child who was born not because of human decision but because of God's decision. The child who made it possible for us to be called Children of God.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for calling us your children and for sending your son Jesus to save us. Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

## **The Biggest Sacrifice**

### **December 18: Sixteenth Day of Advent**

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,”

Isaiah 61: 1-2

Read: Isaiah 61:1-3, John 3:16, Genesis 1:31

Praise song: “I am Set Free” by All Sons and Daughters

You know when your parents say, "Don't eat ice cream before dinner." Then all of a sudden you want to do it. Maybe it wasn't even in your mind but now you think about that ice cream, how creamy, sweet, and delicious it is. Then you think they won't see me, and you eat the ice cream before dinner. Afterwards, you feel guilty and are trying to figure out how to hide the evidence. That is who Isaiah is talking about, all the sinners. There is great news for us sinners, a sign of hope! Someone is coming and, in this passage, it talks about how He is going to free us.

God sent His son to die for us so we could have eternal life in Heaven if we believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. That is not the only reason. God is our creator of everything and wants us to have a relationship with Him. He does not

want us to be in pain. If God is willing to sacrifice His one and only son, are you willing to sacrifice not eating that “ice cream” until after dinner and building a stronger relationship with God?

Prayer: Dear God, I am a sinner and know what you have done for me. Help me to make time for you today and every day. I am glad to be part of your creation and your plan. (Remind God of a time He did something and how much you appreciate Him) In Jesus' name, I pray, AMEN

- Abbie Mitchell



**Dreams Do Come True**  
**December 19: Seventeenth Day of Advent**

“Those who saw with tears will reap with songs of joy.”

Psalm 126: 5

Read: Psalm 126: 1-4

Do you remember your dreams? I am not sure if you are the type of person that remembers your dreams, but I remember some of mine. On some occasions the dreams have become reality, and I consider them a blessing from God. Christians call these types of dreams “prophetic dreams”. Statistics show that almost half of the population has these types of dreams, but we have subconsciously chosen selective recall in what dreams we remember. In Genesis, Joseph not only did his dreams come true, but was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams that came true and saved the Israelites. And who can forget Daniel, known for the prophetic dreams and visions God gave him on the end times. Scripture tells us in Numbers 12:6 (NIV), “*When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams.*” Just as God spoke with Moses face-to-face here in Numbers, I too see my prophetic dreams as God speaking to me, preparing me for what is to come. My dreams reassure me by letting me know I am on the right path of following the Holy Spirit, which makes me feel at peace and gives me JOY. Take a moment to think about if you or a family member has ever had a prophetic dream. How did it make you feel? Sacred, nervous, happy, or thought you were going “crazy”.

Whether you have had prophetic dreams or not, as Christians because of Jesus Christ we have hope that our dreams of a better future await giving us JOY. The third week of advent is JOY; therefore, let us now read today’s advent reading, Psalms 126:1-4 (NIV).

*1 A song of ascents. When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.*

*2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'*

*3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

*4 Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev.*

Some Bible translations title this section “Lord give our riches back.” What exactly does this mean? How does that relate to today's reading? In verse 1 we read how much JOY the people had from being set free from captivity. It was like a dream come true -- to finally be set free. No amount of money can set you free from sin – Jesus is the only one who can truly set you free from the oppression of sin. Verse 2 and 3 express their Joy and laughter through songs they sang to God for setting them free. Do you praise and sing songs to Jesus for setting you free from the oppression of sin? Finally, in verse 4 we read about the exiles being restored. We too have been and continued to be transformed by Jesus Christ and will one day be fully restored when Jesus returns. As Christians, the Holy Spirit is living inside of us and that is the true riches of this world. Jesus’ riches of setting us free give us JOY and help us to grow in His likeness like the rivers in the Negev desert. If we are living like Christ, we are growing like the rivers of Negev into a strong Christian that is prepared for the future. A future

time when Jesus will come back to set us free from the oppression of sin and darkness that lives in this world.

Prophetic scripture comes from God to give us HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and ultimately LOVE from God. Dreams coming true of a better future fill our hearts with joy. Joy to persevere each day to be able to give our lives (take up our cross) to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ. Psalm 39 reminds us that life is short and we are not sure how much longer we can endure our sinful nature that makes us feel like captives, but always remember that Jesus will soon return and free us fully from our sinful natures and we will be restored. In today's advent reading, we learned that we will be fully restored -- what a time of JOY that will be when this dream comes true. Revelation 21:4 tells us of a time when there will be no more tears, death, or pain and I want to encourage you today to take a moment to create a "no more" list and write down all the things of this sinful world that will be "no more" when we in Heaven. In time, this "no more" list will be a dream come true.

Prayer: Father in Heaven, we praise you for the JOY you give us, especially knowing that sin will one day no longer oppress when Jesus returns. We thank You for the prophetic scribes who devoted their lives to serving You through the scribing of your words that you breathed into them to give us hope, peace, JOY, and love. Forgive us for the times we have wandered from the dreams you wanted us to follow and instead followed our own dreams. We pray to stay yielded to your patient, loving, and guiding right hand, so we can one day make all your dreams come true of us living in Heaven with you. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

- Gayle Jesse



## Generation to Generation

### December 20: Eighteenth Day of Advent

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever;  
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all  
generations.

I will declare that your love stands firm forever,  
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.  
You say, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have  
sworn to David my servant,  
'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm  
through all generations.

Psalm 89:1-4

Read: Psalm 89: 1-4

"Through all generations," jumps out at me in this passage. It makes me think about those who showed me God's great love and faithfulness. Maybe like me, it was your mother or grandmother. Perhaps it was a pastor, Sunday school teacher, camp counselor, aunt, uncle, or father. Maybe they took you, sent you, or brought you with them to church. Someone from the previous generation stepped into the gap to tell us about Jesus.

Because of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, we are included in this covenant/promise that God made with King David.

Ps 89:4a "I will establish your line forever."

To whom will we declare that God's love stands firm forever? It is upon us to pass this on to the next generation. How will we do this?

- Share the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.
- Pray with and for your children and grandchildren.
- Teach Sunday school.
- Volunteer to help with V.B.S.
- Pay for a child to go to church camp.
- Pack a Christmas Child shoebox.
- Just do it!

Prayer: God of my fathers, thank you for your faithfulness in all generations. Help me to be part of the generation that is intentional about telling the next generation about you. Give me the energy and strength to see where you are calling me to action. Amen.

- Aggie Wiltrout



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## Generation to Generation

### December 21: Nineteenth Day of Advent

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

Matthew 1: 21

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

As the mother of Jesus, Mary is usually honored and spoken of highly for her faith in bearing the Christ child and believing the angel who made this announcement. But have you thought about Joseph? Why was he chosen to be the man who would father Jesus? What were his qualifications?

Joseph was pledged to marry Mary. He could have divorced her when she was found to be with child which was not his. He was a righteous man. Joseph was in the lineage of King David, fulfilling the promise spoken of in Psalm 84:4.

Joseph believed the angel who appeared to him in a dream and told him not to fear taking Mary as his wife because the child she conceived was from the Holy Spirit. This fulfilled Isaiah 7:14. Joseph acted upon the command of the angel of the Lord and took Mary home as his wife.

Joseph showed great restraint because he didn't use his authority as her husband to have a physical union with Mary until after Jesus was born. Joseph did as the angel said and named the child Jesus.

Finally, Joseph also listened to the angel who spoke to him in a dream to warn him that he should "wake up!" and take Mary and Jesus and escape to Egypt because Herod was going to search for Jesus to kill him.

Prayer: Almighty God, I pray that you would give me strength to endure when you call me to tasks that I do not understand. Give me grace to see your divine call in all people and honor in all that I do. Amen.

- Aggie Wilttrout



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## Title

### December 22: Twentieth Day of Advent

“Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.”

Psalm 96: 7

Read: Psalm 96: 1-13

Christmas and music seem to go hand in hand. Whether it is caroling with church friends, flipping through the radio stations to catch your favorite Christmas song (I finally heard “You’re a Mean One Mr. Grinch” last night!), or the sacred moments of singing “Silent Night” as the closing hymn of the Christmas Eve Candlelight service, singing is a large part of the Advent season.

What makes you sing? Is there something that just makes you want to praise God with a song? For me, even though I am of the “joyful noise” variety of musicians, I love to sing with the radio when I’m baking Christmas cookies with Madelyn, or alone in the sanctuary because of the great acoustics. There’s something about singing that expresses our heart’s desires like no other venue possibly could.

Advent is especially a great time for music. Johann Sabastian Bach’s “Magnificat” “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” and “Ave Maria”

being among some of my favorite classical music that reminds us of the joy Mary felt as she greeted her cousin Elizabeth, the angels proclaimed the birth of the Savior to the shepherds and Mary, full of honor.

The Psalmist understood the power of music and its ability to help us share emotions too great for simple words. In Psalm 96 he invites the reader to “Sing to the Lord a new song...Sing praises to his name....Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.” The Psalmist doesn’t care if you have the “voice of an angel” or “a joyful noise” all of creation is invited to sing its praise to the Lord.

This Advent we will have plenty of opportunity to sing to the Lord! It may not be a new song, but perhaps it is an old song with new meaning. I invite you to look up the translation of Mary’s “Magnificat” or “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” and then read the Bible passage its based on. (Don’t worry; if you Google it both the translation and Bible passage can be found.) Make this your new Advent spiritual practice of meditating on a Christmas hymn, you’ll be surprised how an old classic can become a new song in your heart to praise God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we give you glory in heaven, all the earth magnifies your name for you have blessed Mary with a child, a baby boy, Jesus who has come to bless us forever with the forgiveness of sins. Sing praises to your name forever. Amen.



**Priest, King, & Prophet**  
**December 23: Twenty-first Day of Advent**

“Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.”

Matthew 1:17

Read: Matthew 1: 1-17

Two genealogy lists in the New Testament are very important—Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:21-38. The one in Luke tells the genealogy of Jesus from the line of Mary. This is important because the Jewish bloodline ran through the mother’s side of the family. But to be considered a legal heir, your legal rights came through your dad, which is why the line of Jesus through Joseph is listed in Matthew. However, there’s something extra special about this genealogy list. Not only does it prove that Jesus had a legitimate line to the throne of David but it also outlines the Three Offices of the Messiah: Prophet, Priest, and King.

See, the first fourteen generations begin with Abraham who was a priest before God. Even though he lived before the priestly line was officially formed with Aaron, he sacrificed to the Lord and followed the decrees of the Lord God; hence fulfilling the role of priest before the Tent of Meetings and the temple. According to the prophecies, the Messiah would fulfill

the role of Priest who would not just offer sacrifices to the Lord but as we see in Jesus, would BE the last sacrifice to the Lord.

Then we have King David beginning the next fourteen generations. This is because the second office of the Messiah would be that of King. It is his throne that would reign forever and ever. This is fulfilled as Jesus ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of God until he comes again to earth to establish his kingdom reign for eternity.

And finally, we have the time of the exiles, which were marked by the Prophets. Jesus in his teachings often gave a prophetic message about his death and resurrection, not to mention his promise that he will come again in glory.

This is all capstone by the fact that the number fourteen in scripture is considered the perfect number of seven multiplied twice to mean that not only is it perfect is it 100% perfection.

So, what does that have to do with Advent? Well, as we prepare to hear the old family stories again, let us not forget the family history that brought about the coming of Jesus, the one who is our Priest, King, and Prophet!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you laid out the very genealogy for your son to come at the perfect time to be our all in all. Thank you for the gift of your son who fulfills everything that we need. Amen.

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

**My Soul Magnifies the Lord**  
**December 24: Twenty-second Day of Advent**

“His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.”

Luke 1:50

Read: Luke 1:46-55

“Mary Did You Know?” is one of my favorite Christmas songs, not so much because of the theological correctness of it, but because it tells the story of what the child she would give birth would become for all of creation—salvation incarnate.

See, Mary did know about her baby boy. Luke records one of the most beautiful hymns of praise from Mary as she tells her cousin Elizabeth about the child that the Holy Spirit has conceived in her.

She begins by recounting that for over 400 years the Lord had been silent. There had been no prophet, but now he had chosen not only to speak to a young woman of humble origins but to place his very Son, the only begotten one of creation, inside of her. But it wasn't for her blessing alone, but for all the generations who would be blessed by him and who would call him Lord and Savior.

But he didn't do this for the proud, the arrogant, those who believe they don't need salvation. No, God was going to give those who were overlooked, overburdened, and unappreciated a divine gift. He was going to not just extend his mercy to them; he was going to dwell with his people for the first time in history. Fully divine in fully human form.

You see, God never forgot his chosen child Israel. As Isaiah 49:15-17 states, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”

Mary's song reminds us that God has not forgotten us. That he has a plan which will be revealed to us in his perfect timing. Yes, waiting isn't always easy, but when we are waiting on God, we know that his perfect plan will be accomplished.

So, be of good cheer! Let your soul magnify the Lord! He is good and his steadfast promises remain true, for unto us a child has been born!

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you on this Christmas Eve for the blessing of your son Jesus. You not only spoke love over your people; you provided us with love incarnate. Thank you!  
Amen

- Rev. Nadia Stropich

**On the Day You Were Born**  
**December 25: Twenty-third Day of Advent**

“But the angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.’”  
Luke 2: 10-11

Read: Luke 2:1-20

In the small town of Nazareth, so many years ago  
Joseph and his wife Mary, as the story goes  
Received word that to Bethlehem they must travel  
On the back of a donkey  
Through hills and gravel  
Mary was with child  
And close to delivering  
With anticipation they both were quivering  
Upon their arrival, there was no room in the inn  
So they slept in the stable  
Among sheep and oxen  
And there Mary gave birth

To their firstborn son  
A baby named Jesus  
Who would be “The One”  
He was wrapped in swaddling clothes  
And laid in a manger  
Shepherds nearby were greeted by angels  
Who proclaimed the birth of Christ in the night  
And the shepherds traveled  
To see this wonderous sight  
And they found Him there sleeping  
Peacefully in the dark  
And Mary treasured and pondered these things in her heart  
As Christians, on Christmas, we celebrate His birth  
We understand the importance, the meaning, the worth  
Of Jesus arriving to save us our sins  
The anticipation of His birth over  
The wait for His return begins

- Leslie Killen

Prayer: Praise the Father! Praise the Son! Praise the Spirit  
three in One! God of mercy, majesty! Praise all creatures to  
the King of Kings! For this day we praise you, Father God.  
Amen.