

Advent 2022

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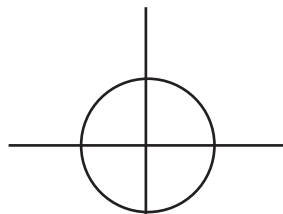


“O Antiphons”
by Dr. Paula Artac

Advent

from the Latin word
adventus, “coming” or
“arrival.” The term is
associated with the
practice of many churches
of observing a time of
preparation for the birth of
Jesus Christ.

Traditionally, the Advent
season begins four Sundays
before Christmas Day and
continues through Christmas
Eve. An additional thought
associated with Advent is
that it serves as a reminder
that the Messiah who came
the first Christmas will
someday return at His
Second Advent.



You Want Me to Read What?! *This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah*

When you hear or read the word genealogy what comes to mind? A lengthy list of names that are unknown to you? Names you have trouble spelling let alone pronouncing correctly? No doubt this is often the case when asked to consider genealogies in the Bible. But what if a particular genealogy addresses our deepest hopes and longings? What if a genealogy was constructed so as to inform us that God's plan was coming to fulfillment?

The Gospel of Matthew opens with such a genealogy (1:1-17), though it is often passed over in order to get to the actual story of Jesus' birth (1:18-25). A list of Jesus' ancestors was essential for the writer of the first Gospel. Those of Jewish heritage who believed Jesus was the Christ (or Messiah) were genuinely concerned with who was included in His ancestry. This is also important for us: in informing his readers of the lineage of Jesus, Matthew was also teaching of God's plan for salvation; a strategy that was carried out by people of little fame, who were seriously flawed, yet nevertheless included in the work of our sovereign Lord.

Biblical genealogies tell the story of God's redemption; this is especially true of Matthew's. His goal was to provide context for the Christmas story—as well as the entire Gospel—in order to show that God redeemed His elect through the birth, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. Genealogies are important to those presenting them—similar to when we discover that the real reason someone invited us over for dinner was to share a pictorial history of their family! They wanted to tell us a story that is important to them.

What I hope to show in three subsequent devotions is that Matthew's genealogy speaks volumes about God's love, grace, and unexpected ways of working out His will in the world. There is a story behind each and every name listed in Jesus' ancestry, even if a name seems unfamiliar. Likewise, all those who contributed to this devotional have a story to tell. Likely it will not include an examination of a genealogy but there is an event or situation or a writing—no matter how mundane to some—that triggered a “God moment” and like Matthew they want to share it with us. May we be thankful as we glean many truths from what they have written.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, sharpen our eyes and improve our understanding so that we don't miss what you are telling us. In the Name of the One who has given us His inspired Word, amen.

An Act of Prayer for Preparation

“Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” Psalm 34: 8

As the season of Advent begins, the nights grow long. So too- our lists lengthen, our schedules fill; our burdens seem to have grown. The weight seems heavy- we carry much. We may feel tired. There is time, room, and strength simply because there is grace. One more at table, one more to visit, one more to shelter.

Let us be *blessed* simply because Grace is. Grace is ever present in all our worry, in all our busy. The Lord is our refuge. We have much. Let us see this as our truth. Take it in and allow whatever is placed on our “plate” to be tasted and seen—good in the Light of Grace. We taste and see that God is good. Let us ask this question and try this simple act of prayer.

What item on our list, what worry, what unknown variable, can we give to God so we might create space for the Light of Christ?

A Simple Act of Prayer

Light a small candle.

Light it with a simple prayer.

May this light be as Christ's Light.

Be with that light for a few moments; take in the glow and scent.

Call to mind one item, worry, or the unknown that perplexes.

With a deep breath, blow out the candle and watch the smoke rise up.

*As this smoke rises, I give my prayer to you Christ,
trusting You will tend to every need.*

I am with You and You with me.

Watch the smoke rise until it clears.

Community Contribution 2016

Prayer

May such a prayer be sent up and may space be cleared within –
to be open to the light beyond the candle- the Light of Christ.

May we be blessed and take refuge in this Light.

In Christ Name, we pray, Amen.

Every Day Eggs

“Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.
Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.” Psalms 43:3-6

We eat eggs every morning; it is the simplest and most nourishing option for our family. Yet, our pan is so often dirty with the eggs of the morning before; I'd love to say we wash it right away, that we are always on time and never rushed and running out the door, dishes are never left on the table and the pan is never left on the stove...but that would be the thing of fairytale. We hope each year to find a non-stick pan and we invest in them, buying this one or that one, hoping for that perfect pan. Each year the pan disappoints. The eggs are, nourishing yes, and also sticky and stubborn. We may want the pan that has the non-stick magic, but elbow grease is the one thing that works.

We have to put the effort into the cleaning, the preparation, the follow through. There are no magic pans, no Teflon; nor ceramic; nor new coating inventions. Scrub the pan, cook the eggs, be nourished and continue on. We build our strength for the truly worthy task of dedication and constancy through our every day—washing the pan, cooking the eggs, being nourished through our work and our choices each and every day.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

Let us pray, O Lord of Every Day and Every Moment, grant us the willingness to focus on doing the work and letting go of the wish and want that it “just cleans itself.” Oh God, lead us this Advent, remind us of the wonder of everyday work, its meaning beyond the basic task; prepare us and strengthen us for the goodness and meaning of your calling to the light of your Son. Please God, open our hearts through the work of preparation. Grant us grace in the moments of hurried and forgotten and not wanting to. We welcome your Son; we thank you for the work of the day. In your name, we pray, amen.

Free to Wonder

“Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”

Psalm 77:7-9

Things happen in this life. Things that don't make sense. Things that lead to doubting, to fearing, to wondering if God even cares. Sometimes it can feel like a taboo, this doubt. When we feel it creeping up, our knee-jerk reaction is to immediately shun the questions, for fear that we're not acting as “good Christians.” We're told repeatedly, with absolute confidence, that the Lord is good. That His faithful love will endure forever. And we believe it, we do. But there are some moments when we can't help but ask “does God even care?”

In the deepest throes of internal agony and doubt, the question is not whether we will have this doubt. The question is what we will do with it. This psalmist provides us the formula to overcome these questions. Not by shoving them into the deep recesses of our minds, but by turning back and remembering. Remembering the acts of God. Remembering who He is and how He has shown up.

“Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:

the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

I will remember the deeds of the Lord;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

I will consider all your works

and meditate on all your mighty deeds.” Psalm 77: 10-12

In your darkest moments of fear and doubt, remember. Remember who God is. Remember how He has shown up again and again, not only in your own life, but for all of humankind. The Bible is a story of the radical love of the Father, proven by His grace and forgiveness over and over.

It's okay to have these questions. But instead of feeling guilt and shame for them, commit yourself to overcoming them. In studying the word and remembering who God is, you will only grow closer to the one we have the privilege of calling Father.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Lord, remind us of your good works. Let us not falter in our steps with you. When these questions arise, allow us to hand them over to you, trusting in what you have done and said. In moments of weakness and pain, help us recall all that you have done for us. Make our memories long and strong and let us be encouraged. In your name, Amen.

Little “a” and Big “A”

“So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Acts 1:6-11

There is an advent I look forward to every year. It is definitely a little “a” advent, in contrast to the big “A” Advent we are in the midst of celebrating right now, but it is an advent, nonetheless.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines advent (little “a”) as the arrival of a notable person or thing. Notable is a rather subjective term, so allow me to introduce you to my notable friends, the snowbirds. These snowbirds are not the human type that I learned about when I moved to Florida several years ago, these snowbirds are the avian type and are specifically, dark-eyed juncos. These small, yet hearty birds spend their summers across Canada and Alaska, then as the winter winds start blowing, they make their way south and arrive in almost all the lower forty-eight states. They rarely go to Florida... could it be there are too many of the human type of snowbirds migrating for their liking? I am sure it must be the temperature and not the number of human snowbirds that keep them away.

These amazing little birds arrive in Kansas around the middle of October and stay until the middle of April. The advent of the snowbirds to the back patio of the Trigg home is a blissful occasion and one that is eagerly anticipated. When the calendar changes to October we look out the back door every morning with hope that “today will be the day.” Then, on that joyous day of advent, the one who spotted the first snowbird excitedly proclaims to the household, “The snowbirds have arrived!” We mark it on the calendar and watch every day as more and more of these birds appear until we have our own little flock.

Our little “a” advent of the snowbirds is of course nothing compared to the big “A” Advent of 2000 years ago or the big “A” Advent we are awaiting. Our little “a” advent is announced by the lucky human who spies the first snowbird not by angels breaking through the night sky to speak to startled shepherds. There is no star telling our neighbors to come and bring gifts to our newly arrived guests. Can you imagine the announcement of the Second Advent?

Our little “a” advent happens once a year and we only have to wait 6 months from the time the snowbirds depart until they arrive again. It is incomparable to the wait our ancestors experienced for the First Advent and for the Second Advent we expectantly await. Our little “a” advent gives me only the smallest taste of what the big “A” Advents are like. I get to experience eager anticipation, elated announcement, and abundant jubilation and for that I am grateful.

by Janice Trigg

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for all of the little “a” advents you allow us to experience as we celebrate the First Advent and wait with hope for the Second.

Advent is All about Arrivals. But Two Babies?

Matthew starts his Gospel with Jesus' genealogy, showing Davidic lineage.

John goes back much further and begins his Gospel with Jesus' identity as God.

Mark jumps right into how John the Baptist is the one who prepares the way for the Messiah that Isaiah foretold would come.

Luke goes deeper into John the Baptist's story and how he came to be. John was born to an older couple who were without children. John is a few months (six) older than Jesus and we discover they will be relatives. Two arrivals connected by family from two incredible miracles, involving two women – one quite old and the other quite young. Two dads who must accept the incredible news that would send anyone to their knees.

Luke 1:39–45 (NLT):

39 A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town 40 where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. 43 Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? 44 When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. 45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

This is the start to THE incredible story as only Luke tells it.

First, John was foretold to be special. And his main specialty is that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from even before he is born (Luke 1:15).

Second, this actually is evidenced when Mary visits Elizabeth. Mary voices a greeting to Elizabeth upon her arrival. The unborn John shares his miraculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit and reveals to his mother (Elizabeth) that the Lord has arrived within Mary!

The first testimony to Jesus' Lordship as Messiah was from an unborn baby to his mother about Jesus who was an unborn baby in his mother.

If God can do all of this in these two families, what kinds of advents might we be in store for in our lives? God is the God of the possible.

by Rev. Dr. Kevin Walden

Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe who knits us together in our mother's wombs and leads us by Your Holy Spirit into Your truth. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear what Your Spirit says to us today and every day.

Seeing Hope

“Advent begins in a vision of a healed alternative for the world.” Walter Brueggeman

In the season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas Day, we Christians dare to see Jesus arriving, being birthed into our world of chaos, division, despair, and turmoil. Into our world still suffering from and dividing over a pandemic, the babe of Bethlehem is born. In the midst of toxic divisions over race, political affiliations, border security and the very nature of truth, the prince of peace is born and visited by wise men from the east.

While we are wondering, even despairing about overwhelming personal, national and global difficulties and tragedies, the prophet Jeremiah pens a divine, hope-filled advent promise, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” (Jeremiah 33:14) There it is. When things seem to be falling apart or even beyond repair, the prophetic imagination dares to initiate a vision for a healed alternative for the world.

As the story unfolds, John leaps in his mother’s womb, Mary sings of joy and justice, shepherds hear angelic words, wise men follow a star, kings of empire are afraid of a baby and a world changes its calendar. We may pray with Isaiah, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down....”(Isaiah 64:1, NASB) only to be surprised by hope with God’s answer; a baby born to a peasant teenager and laid in a feeding trough. When the baby laid in a manger is later lifted high upon the cross, the temple curtain is torn from top to bottom. Mercy flows, forgiveness is unleashed, and a king is crowned. It’s a whole new world. Do we dare to see it?

by Rev. Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Eternal and loving God, grant us vision to see your hope for a new world, hope born into history to change history and hope born through a human to transform all humans. Amen.

Not What I Expected. *This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David*

For Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah. A key qualification of the Messiah was that he must be a “son of David,” coming from the tribe of Judah as did the great Jewish king. God made a covenant with David and promised that one of his descendants would always rule over God’s people (2 Samuel 7:16). During David’s reign, Israel enjoyed freedom and prosperity. In light of Roman occupation at Jesus’ time, it should come as no surprise that the Jewish hope was “that God would send to his people a king such as David had been, a king who would deliver his people, a king who would restore the greatness of Israel, and lead them to a glory such as they had never known before” (William Barclay).

The importance of David impacted the structure of this genealogy. Matthew has conveniently arranged the ancestors of Jesus into groups of fourteen. That number would immediately catch the attention of Jewish Christians, for the practice of the day was to assign a numerical value to the *consonants* in the Hebrew alphabet. Hence with David’s name (d+v+d) we have $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$. Matthew used this guide for dividing Israel’s history into three important periods: (1) the ancestry from Abraham to King David (1:2-6); (2) the ancestry from David until the Babylonian exile (1:7-11); and (3) the ancestry from the Babylonian exile to Jesus (1:12-16), which included the return from exile to live in the promised land without a Davidic king to rule. But those dark days are over, for Matthew concludes his genealogy with Jesus the Messiah, the long-awaited son of David who was born to free Israel.

But there was a problem. Matthew’s understanding of Jesus as the “son of David” (1.1) and the proclamation of the same title when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (21.9) didn’t mesh. The declaration of the people that the son of David was entering Jerusalem was accurate but their expectations of Him as the one to free them from the Romans were not. Jesus didn’t come to solve the problem of Roman occupation; rather, He came to free Israel from its greatest enemy—the sin that held it captive! What Jesus was doing for Israel, He was doing for the world—paying for sin. To accomplish this, Jesus came as the Messiah of Israel so He could be the Savior of the world.

Have our expectations of what God should be doing in our lives led to disappointment and even anger? Have we found ourselves frustrated in who Jesus turned out to be for us? Has COVID impacted our particular world to the point that nothing will ever be the same? Have financial hardships, deaths, broken relationships and shattered dreams, impacted our lives, only to discover that our pain and grief are intensified during the holidays? Following the exile, Israel suffered over six hundred years without freedom or a Davidic king; it seemed God was taking too long to bring restoration and healing; it seemed He had forgotten His people and His promises.

But He was working: He is always working—often behind the scenes—to bring His will to fulfillment. The pain and suffering that life brings speak against His love and care; the lack of immediate proof of His rescue often leads to doubt and fear. Until the resurrection, Matthew held the popular view of the Messiah as a warrior sent to drive the Romans out, and no doubt he felt let down by God at the crucifixion. It was the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit that enabled him to come to grips with the fact that, in a mysterious way, God has set His people free through the coming of Jesus Christ (“Jesus the Messiah”). The promise is there; the fulfillment will not be rushed, even for those who trust and await healing.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

O God of Comfort, come to our aid soon for at times we don’t feel Your Presence or see You working. It may take us less than a minute to read the third group of ancestors in Matthew’s genealogy, but such a reading covered a long time of pain and doubt. May we ponder and learn. I pray this is the Name of the One who is always on time, amen.

Routine of Light

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”
Ephesians 5:6-14

We enter the season again, the time when the warmth of weather wanes, and we are chilled and shadowed in the fall and following winter months. Yet, we anticipate (or try to) the coming of light in the holiday celebrations. Our routines require us to begin the preparations, to think of what family we will visit or which invitations to send out, which to accept. We are told to make our lists and set aside our time in prayer, in service, in reflection. It is these routines that set the tone for our season; yet it is our choices and then our actions that make those routines work. We are working against the weather and against the consumerism that so pervade this season.

Let us take heart in the routine, and choose to do the work of the simplest task—make the decision and then go forward. Remind yourself that your will is to align with that of God’s will. Align yourself with that higher power of goodness; use its momentum to bring you up above the cold of the season, stretch toward the light.

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” John 1: 4-5

As an exercise in setting aside the cold, setting aside the consumerism, setting aside the unmotivated and tiresome of too many mundane realities—what will you pray upon to call you toward God’s will; what will you think on to move you in that direction; what will you do to prepare the way for the celebration of Christ’s Light born into our troubled world?

by Community Contributor

Prayer

God of Light, grant us the strength to choose one prayer, one thought, one action. God of All, we come asking for your help that we might live our lives with Your Will as our beacon of light. In gratitude and in faith, we pray. Amen.

A Season for Faith

The Christmas Season is a Season for Faith. Faith is believing that God will do what he has promised because of who He is. Faith is present in our everyday lives. We believe, without question, that the sun will come over the eastern horizon tomorrow morning; Fall will turn into Winter, Winter to Spring, Spring to Summer, Summer into Fall and then Fall into Winter again. Without proof or evidence, we also believe that the promises made by the child born on the 1st Christmas morn will be. This child grew and fulfilled his father's desire by telling us of things to come. "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you". John 14:2,3.

Faith and Hope go hand in hand. Faith in God brings us to Hope. Hope is the confident certainty of all that God has promised will come to pass because of who He is and what He can do. God promises us eternal life through Jesus Christ. A very famous verse tells us that "For God so loved the world he gave his only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life". John 3:16

Hope brings us to Grace. Grace is defined as Unmerited Favor. We need to do nothing for God's Grace expect to believe in Jesus Christ as stated in John 3:16. Romans 5:2 brings Faith, Hope and Grace together in one verse.

"Through Him (Jesus) we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Romans 5:2

by Submitted in 2015 by Virginia Pine (1952-2022)

Prayer

Lord, this Christmas Season, may we rejoice with Faith, Grace, and Hope. In Jesus name, Amen.

Act Like Someone is Watching

“One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, ‘Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?’ The man said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?’ Then Moses was afraid and thought, ‘What I did must have become known.’” Exodus 2:11-14

Sometimes we think that we can get away with our sins. We look around and think to ourselves, “No one is around to see me do ____.” You can fill in the blank with anything that you do in secret. However, no matter what, God will be watching. As we examine this passage from Exodus, we read about a terrible sin that Moses committed. One that is unforgivable by today’s standards. After Moses committed this terrible crime and discovered others had seen what he had done, he immediately fled to avoid his punishment from Pharaoh. Moses would then start a new life in Midian where he could leave behind his old actions. As I was reading this, I wondered about why the murder wasn’t viewed as such an evil act. Sure, others were afraid of what he has done, and he would have been punished but Moses continued to live. Not only live but would eventually bring the world the 10 commandments that even listed, you shall not murder.

What a change of events! A person who had committed one of these cardinal sins is now telling people to not follow his actions. My main point is God uses people in mysterious ways. God knew what Moses had done. He knows all things. Yet he still used Moses to deliver his words and commands to the public as they are just as lost. We all are! No one is perfect. No one is the perfect messenger to read God’s word. We are all living our lives, going through unknown obstacles. Except, we are all united by one common meaning. We are God’s children. We are all created equal. Created in his image to be able to carry out his good deeds.

So today, as you go out into the world, remember that you are not perfect and that is ok. Remember that someone is watching your actions. You can choose to do more good than harm. You are always in control of yourself and can use your life to empower others. To inspire others to accomplish something great. To encourage your spouse to take that next leap of faith. Or maybe even start that adventure that you were putting off. God is watching you every day, and he is proud of you. Today let’s be reminded that our God is good and is always here for anything that we need. Let us pray.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

God you are good. You always are here to guide us. Lead our hearts to cause more good than harm today. Let us always be reminded that someone is watching us. And use that reminder to help us serve you more. To use your reminders to make the people around us better. God, you are a gracious leader. One that calms us in times of fear. A God that tends to us in times of need. Teach us to call on you when we need to remember that someone is there for us. We thank you for today and all the days to come. Amen.



– Thursday –

A Peace-Filled Equation

There is a verse in the Bible that is known by nearly everyone. It's one of the most quotable verses in the Bible, mostly because it's so encouraging: "The Lord is Near! Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation with prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. And the peace that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6

When someone is struggling, this is one of the first verses that is quoted. It can seem almost frustrating, to know in your head that you are to have the peace of the Lord, but not to feel it. Trying to force yourself to feel the Lord's peace sounds fairly counterproductive.

Of course, we all want peace that surpasses all understanding. The question is, how are we supposed to feel this peace when it seems like everything that can go wrong, is?

The thing is this verse is not a stand-alone verse in the Bible. It's in the middle of a paragraph, connected to a couple of other sentences. The peace of the Lord is an effect. To find the cause, you have to back up a few sentences.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 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: 4-7

There are five different actions to receive the peace of the Lord.

- 1) Rejoice in the Lord always
- 2) Let your gentleness be evident to all
- 3) Do not be anxious about anything
- 4) With prayer and petition present your requests to God
- 5) With thanksgiving present your requests to God

Then, and only then, will the peace that surpasses all understanding guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

Paul gives us a pretty great equation to seek and find this peace. Oftentimes, it seems like passively reading the words and promises of the Bible is supposed to provide you with these gifts. But we need to put in the effort, taking the time to receive the benefits. The Holy Spirit lives within you, make no mistake. But we have the gift of free will. And with that free will, we must exercise intentional relational habits with our Father in Heaven. It is then, and only then, that we begin to see the gifts in action.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Father God, thank you for this peace. Please lead me to meditate upon these things. Lead me to rejoicing in you, to remaining gentle and not anxious. Help me deliver my requests into your capable hands and increase my thanksgiving. Thank you for your gift of peace. Thank you for the Holy Spirit who will help me. Reveal these truths to me and help me live them out, oh Lord.

“Do I really matter?”

The voices of the world tell us that of course we matter... *if* we make enough money, garner enough social media likes, or make good enough grades. It is easy to hear those voices and feel like we don't quite measure up. We just don't matter *as much* as a lot of other people in this world.

Joanna Harader invites us to reconsider that question in her Advent devotional *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*. In her book, she asks us to consider eight female figures of Scripture: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Mary, Anna, Sophia, and the unnamed “weeping mothers” grieving Herod's violence. A search of Scripture makes you wonder how much these women really matter in the grand scheme of things. The Bible doesn't spill too much ink on their stories, and the lives that they lived were rather mundane, or complicated, or sometimes both. You wouldn't put any of them on the list of Fortune 500 CEO's, social media influencers, or philosophical giants.

And yet, Scripture tells us that these women *absolutely do matter*. Each of them, as Harader writes, “prepared the way” for Jesus. The first five were all a part of the genealogy of Jesus, and the last three played an important role in his early life. In their time, they were ignored, abused, or deemed irrelevant. But in the long scope of Biblical history, they demonstrated courage, faithfulness, and prophetic wisdom that drew a line straight toward the life and ministry of Jesus.

So this Advent, don't let the world tell you that you don't matter. Next time you feel too irrelevant or mundane or complicated to make a difference, know this: you're in good company.

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.’” Luke 1.46-48

by Rev. Dr. Matt Sturtevant

Prayer

Lord, I know I matter to you. Help me live my life in ways that matter in your kingdom. Amen.

What Are You Waiting for and What Are You Doing While You Wait?

“For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 Holman Christian Standard Bible

There is an old adage that says, “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” Right now we are in a waiting mode. I did not say resting nor sleeping, I said waiting. There is a difference. I want us to be active in this time. We should be preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ WILL come again. Christ is coming to receive a prepared people and take them to a prepared home in Heaven, will you be ready? Will you be one of the ones who is able to know you are prepared for whatever happens?

You see, we are to become new creatures in Christ Jesus. This means we are going to have to let go of the familiar and embrace the unknown. We are to possess the mind of Christ. We have to study the Bible and learn what Christ will do in any given situation. This can be a scary situation. This is why it is so necessary that we keep our eyes upon Jesus Christ.

We are on a boat and we are in a tempest storm. But we don’t get to get out of the boat; we get to stand still and see the salvation of God. We are to believe God will deliver us no matter the circumstances. This is why we are to study the Word of God “the Bible” to show ourselves approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed rightly dividing the word of God. We are part of the body of Christ. Are you worried about what is going on in your arena, your world? Well, instead of worrying, invite Christ into your boat and you WILL surely make it to shore safely. I invite you to pray, not worry, about the problems that appear in your world. Remember storms will come and go, but God is steady and perpetual. So, while you are waiting, pray about everything and don’t worry about anything. Give everything to Jesus, casting all our cares on God because God cares for us.

by Dr. Dorothy L. Smith

Prayer

Let us pray, Lord God we ask that you empower us with the Holy Spirit that we may be steady in the storms of life. Help us to pray and seek your face while we are in the storms of life. Help us to pray and not worry as we go through the storms of life. In Jesus’s name, we pray. Amen.

Way Too Messy. This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham

In addition to the reference to David, Matthew also begins his genealogy with a mention of Abraham. To identify Jesus as a “son of Abraham” would first of all establish Jesus as Jewish. But more importantly, it reminded one and all that Abraham is the beginning of the history of salvation for Israel. The genealogy itself is “a résumé of salvation history, of God’s way with Israel” (W. B. Tatum). God called Abraham and promised him that through his offspring the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). By making a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:1-21; 17:1-27), God promised to bring salvation to the world, beginning with giving the promised land to Abraham’s descendants and eventually installing David to rule them in God’s name.

So far so good. But soon Matthew stunned his audience. The people of his day were well versed in the hope of Israel’s salvation at the exclusion of Gentiles. The idea that God planned to save the entire world was not well accepted by the Jewish people, and when Matthew described the manner by which God was working to accomplish such salvation, some would have been insulted.

To begin with, it was unusual to include women in genealogies. Was God using women to set up His kingdom (the apostle Paul would say yes, Galatians 3:28-29)? Moreover, God was using Gentile women; the names of Rahab and Ruth clearly show that Gentiles were to be included in the ancestors of Jesus. But that is not all. The inclusion of Tamar, who seduced her father-in-law Judah (Genesis 38), and of Rahab the harlot (Joshua 2), implies that sexual irregularities can be part of God’s way to bring His plan to fruition. No less on Matthew’s mind was the mother of the Messiah who was found to be pregnant before the consummation of her marriage with Joseph. Such a beginning would cast aspersions on anyone presuming to be Messiah.

But Matthew is not done yet. David, so honored by Matthew, was identified as taking “Uriah’s wife” (Bathsheba) for himself. And Matthew’s listeners would complete this story by remembering that David eventually arranged for the murder of Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:14-27). To top this all off, almost half of the kings from David to Josiah were judged to have done evil in the sight of the Lord.

What does all this say? Whether good or evil, God works through all to accomplish His goal. Our sinfulness will not derail God’s grace as it did not stand in the way of God completing His plan for Israel. None of us has passed the point of no return and we must show similar thoughts towards others (Ephesians 4:32). We must not limit God’s grace to a particular ethnic group or nationality. Neither should we limit God’s salvation to only those who think or look like us. This position does not override the truth that only those in Christ will be saved and this salvation is based solely on faith in Christ, the One named Jesus for “he will save his people from their sin” (Matthew 1:21). Rather, the power of our Savior to redeem us as sinners is introduced in the opening verses of Matthew as he describes God’s march toward redemption of the world, a development that will not be hindered by the sin of those He chooses to use or by the preconceived notions of those who think God only works with certain people.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, let us be open to Your power to redeem as You work through the untidy and unexpected twists and turns of salvation. In the Name of the One who never ceases to amaze us, amen.

Charged

“The sun will no more be your light by day,
nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun will never set again,
and your moon will wane no more;
the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your days of sorrow will end.
Then all your people will be righteous
and they will possess the land forever.
They are the shoot I have planted,
the work of my hands,
for the display of my splendor.
The least of you will become a thousand,
the smallest a mighty nation.
I am the LORD;
in its time I will do this swiftly.” Isaiah 60:19-22

The weekly Chapel services often include a “charge” for the listeners just before the closing prayer. Maybe your church services include a similar call each week. I like the word and its many definitions and uses. We pay the charge (the cost) at a show or an event to gain entry. We face charges if we break the law. We entrust someone with a task or a duty, “the committee was charged with finding a solution.” We store up or fill a device or even the atmosphere; “she charged the battery before the camping trip;” “the room was charged with the excitement of roaring fans.”

I recently heard a poet read a line from her work (“Protest Poem” by Franny Choi);
“Joy, you have to charge to make work.”

Advent is that time of charging- the Joy of Christmas is only possible with the season of waiting, this season of preparation where, in hope, we place our thoughts upon the wonder to come and we endeavor to ready ourselves.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of all charges, we offer our lives, filled with prayer and service in this Advent season, hoping for admittance into the wonder of the Christmas Miracle. Facing the truth of our worthiness only through your grace and your trust in us, we fill ourselves with such spirit and grace. We share this journey with our brothers and sisters and we pray we are ready for your gift of your Son.

In your name, may it be so; we are so charged; we pray, Amen.

No One Stands Alone

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

Paul planted the church of Thessalonica in a very short span of time. After establishing the church, he had very little time to stick around for teaching and training. As he writes this letter, he's writing in the hopes that the people of this church have not fallen away. This newly established church was undergoing some serious opposition and Paul was worried that their new faith wouldn't withstand the oppression. He was writing to encourage these new believers, to assure them they were not alone.

Are there moments when you feel like you're under attack? Like the storms of this world are too much for you, like the circumstances of this life are surrounding you, leaving you with no hope and no escape?

Do you ever feel like it's not worth it? That standing against this world's circumstances, the darkness of the times, is senseless?

You are not alone. The church of Thessalonica was undergoing the same sort of conflict. In fact, everyone was. It's impossible, when you're coming up against so much pain and anguish, not to feel like no one understands. But stand assured, this suffering is a suffering shared by all of the Christians past. No one is alone in their trials and tribulations. No one is unseen by our most merciful God. Be encouraged, dear one. As Paul writes, “We will be with the Lord forever.”

Those are our words of encouragement. For, as bad as this world may seem, as dark as life can become, there is hope, and hope eternal. This life, these circumstances, will be over in the blink of an eye. And we will be left with an eternity surrounded by our brothers and sisters, reunited with Christ. Hold on tight a little longer. And know that He sees you. This will not last forever.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Father, see us. Surround us with your peace. Hear us. Let us seek you in and through our trials. Give us reminders throughout our days that you see us, that you are watching us, and that you know precisely what is happening in our lives.

We love you, and we thank you for your continual encouragement and your everlasting promise. Amen.

Fish For People

“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.” Matthew 4: 18-20

You don't have to be a pastor to be in the field of ministry. I will say it again, you don't have to be a pastor to be in the field of ministry. Everyday “normal” people who work regular jobs have the opportunity to do God's work. Sometimes, I feel as if our world perceives that our Pastors are the only ones who need to work for God. However, it's flipped the other way! There are way more people working other jobs than just in the ministry field. It's our responsibility to live out God's characteristics and traits in our everyday lives no matter our career. Regardless of the field in which we work, we have the opportunity to impact the lives of others. We live in an ever-changing world. One that now lives more on phone screens than in-person gatherings. A world that has more empathy for sporting events, than for finding common ground on real issues.

So today I challenge you to fish for people. As we read in the text, God called two brothers working the fishing nets to find new followers. These weren't necessarily people who were first in their class or had the fanciest education. Two human beings, who were doing their job, were called to serve.

What have you been called to do? Have you been challenged to train a new person at work? Maybe you are grieving for a loved one that you have recently lost. Or even have a new baby in the family giving you plenty of restless nights. Guess what, there are many others going through those exact same challenges! Go out and find them. Share your struggles, your human emotions that keep you up at night. Search for common situations that have made you into the person that you are today. Go out and fish for people. Let them help you. Pray together, share your feelings, and follow God. Let us pray.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God let us cast a wide net. A net that is welcoming to all who are willing to listen. Let us use your words and teachings to remind people that they are loved. That you are always there for them. Not only as a savior, as a friend, an ear to listen, and as a father. God, when we are called into action, show us how to act. Remind us of your lessons, shown in the example of your son Jesus, to help others. Let us share with others that your net is endless, and one that is available for anyone. We give thanks for these many blessings that you share and say all these things in your son's name. Amen.

The Spirit Gives Life

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”
John 6:63

On the surface, the pandemic seems to have faded away. The majority of people are not wearing masks anymore, large gatherings are now welcome, and less people are getting sick; however, the deep cuts of this tragedy are still healing. I see it every day as an educator of young children. Students are scarred by the lack of connection in their primary socializing years, and this is affecting their everyday peer interactions and self-regulating skills.

As I’m guiding students and adults through these fresh wounds, I am reminded of John 6:63: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” On the surface, my students seem back to normal, but I know below the flesh their internal well-being is still being renewed. As I pray for my students, I turn to the one true God who can fully renew spirits and breathe fresh life back into them. His teachings, community, and unconditional love give me the tools to help heal those around me. I know many older souls are wounded beyond my classroom, so today, I encourage you to look closer. Whose flesh appears to be healed, but has a gaping hole in their spirit? Perhaps you may even find a hole within yourself. Ask the holy spirit for guidance, and to open your eyes as you gaze beyond the surface.

by Nicole Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,
Help me to look past the false idols of this world. To know the difference between something that heals the flesh, and something that heals the spirit. I ask the holy spirit to fill my heart to guide me as I seek your presence, words, and community. Lord, I want to be of service to others today, so all are renewed in your unconditional love.
In your name we pray,
Amen.

A Carol for Change

There are two people who are featured in the pages of the Advent lectionary: John the Baptist and Mary the Blessed Mother. The Archangel Gabriel, said to be one of the most beautiful of God's angels, greeted Mary by saying, "The Lord is with you. You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Luke 1:31 NRSV

In Advent we wait, as John the Baptist waited for the Messiah, as Mary waited for her baby, we wait for our Savior. We can imagine the stars themselves getting ready. How do we wait and prepare ourselves for the joy of Christmas?

What about looking at Charles Dickens, who in his 19th century Christmas Carol, was giving us more than a story, but also a morality play? Dicken's London was a grim place to live in, especially for the poor. As we all know, in the Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge is the character that is given a chance to change before the day of Christmas.

Dickens writes: "He was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A wrenching, clutching, covetous old sinner! Solitary as an oyster."

Scrooge tells his nephew, "What's Christmas but a time for paying bills without money?"

Three ghosts come to haunt Scrooge, the first one his former partner Marley, who is dragging the chains of past sins.

"At this time of the rolling year," the specter Marley said, "I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? "

We know that the ghosts convince Scrooge to better his life, and just in time, before Christmas day, he does just that. He transforms into a gentleman much loved in London.

At every Eucharist we attend, we say in the Our Father, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others." Maybe we all love the Christmas Carol because of its message that we can, with prayer, change. Then we can joyfully say, along with Dickens and Tiny Tim: "God Bless us All, Everyone" on Christmas morning.

by Rev. Mary Donovan

Prayer

Make our hearts ready, oh King of Glory.

The Grateful Heart Is a Happy Heart

“Be thankful always, pray at all times, and be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.” - 1 Thess. 5: 16-18

Advent is a great season to become grateful for what we have and what we have received from above. Let's start thanking God for all things including everything we complain and carp about, and then watch closely for what happens. After all, He brings good out of the worst and unhappy situations - even when we have caused the situations. If He brought forgiveness, resurrection, and healing out of His cross and death, He can bring goodness out of anything; hence the reason to thank Him for even adverse situations of life.

The story goes of God's appearing to a man and offering him three wishes. The man said, “Well, Lord, I'm a little embarrassed to ask for the first wish but my wife is such a nag that I ask you take her back.” The Lord did just that. At the wake people were saying to the man things like, “Oh, she was such a wonderful lady! She did more than her share of the work of keeping the house and yard tidy. She was such a great cook. She really supported you and raised the kids well. She taught them to respect you.”

Well, all of such comments made the man think he made a really big mistake with his first wish, so for his second wish, he asked that the Lord bring his wife back to life. And God did so. After that, the Lord waited and waited for the man to ask for his third and final wish, but the man never asked.

So God came to him and said, “I'm waiting to hear your third and final wish.” The man replied, “I'm afraid to ask because when I made a blunder with my first request, at least I had a second wish to correct it. If I make a mistake with my third request, I have no fourth one to correct it, so I'm afraid to ask.” “Hmm,” said the Lord. “Would you like some help deciding upon your final request?” “Yes, I most certainly would, Lord,” the man replied. “What would you suggest?” “Why don't you ask for,” said the Lord, “a grateful heart?! That way, no matter what happens in your life, you'll be happy!”

In the light of this story and this season of hope, we need to ask often “What's the good emanating from a bad element in my life?” Then thank God for all of that. Gratitude is a desideratum for a happy and peaceful life. Let us all pray for grateful hearts often!

What are some happy as well as unhappy situations that we can thank God for during this season of Advent?

by Rev. Justin D. Gnanamuthu, C.S.C.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for bringing something good out of a bad situation. Help me, Lord, to see the good you have brought out of the bad in my life. Help me, Lord, to see the good you are currently bringing out of the bad in my life. I thank You, Lord, for this season of Advent which reminds me of the hope you have brought to me by your birth. I thank You, God, for everything.

“Gratitude is when memory is stored in the heart and not in the mind” – Lionel Hampton

Matthew's Genealogy: All's Well That Ends Well

I read countless term papers while teaching at Ottawa University. What I learned early on was that the introduction alerted me to whether the paper was of good quality or not. My thought was: "If students couldn't clearly state what it is they were going to write about, then the remainder of the paper would be characterized by vagueness and lack of order." Thankfully, Matthew's genealogy is of "A" quality.

At first the opening words of Matthew's genealogy were sweet music to the ears of his recipients. He was describing the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, the One bringing to fulfilment all the promises of God to Israel (2 Corinthians 1:20). But a close reading of the entire genealogy conveyed the thought that the Messiah's coming was not as expected, thus planting in the mind of the recipients of Matthew's Gospel (and in our minds also) that believing in Jesus is an adventure waiting to happen.

God's goal in sending Jesus was to bring salvation to all who would believe: First to the Jew, then to the Gentile; to those of either gender; to those who were well known and those who were unknown. All of these make up the body of Christ: "And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" (Revelation 7:9).

Each name in the genealogy was a person known to God and used by Him. But for the most part we know little to nothing about that person. But does obscurity lessen their importance? This thought was the main motivation of a book I wrote earlier this year. The book, *Well Done*, proposes that our work for God is more about our devotion to Him than what we do and how many people notice our work for Christ. Society uses the wrong metrics to evaluate someone's worth and Christianity, for the most part, uses the same standards. These wrong assessments are prestige, influence, accolades, recognition, and meeting numerical criterion (e.g., souls saved, those we are discipling, etc.). Such standards can easily distort our understanding of success, which in God's eyes is obedience no matter who we are or what we do.

By most accounts Jesus was anything but successful. And He didn't make it easy for Himself by demanding that His followers take up their cross as a prerequisite for discipleship and in the long run lose their lives (Matthew 16:24-26). He made it clear that the way for the disciple is narrow, and few find it (7:13-14). His true followers then and now are in the minority. If the metrics mentioned above were used to evaluate Jesus' time on earth, He would have come up far short of a successful Messiah.

But He was an astounding success in that He obeyed God and created a new community for Him. He built the church (16:18) and promised He would welcome those who were faithful with the words "Well Done" when their time on earth was completed (25:21).

Most of us will appear as unimportant to the world, and if we are not careful, to ourselves as we question our importance to God. Like many in the genealogy we go about our daily lives fulfilling our ministry to those in our home, our church, our neighborhood, and our vocation. We serve others, often unnoticed by the world. Our Lord *customizes* what we are to do. Discipleship comes in all shapes and sizes and the final appraisal of our work is simply have we "faithfully discharged our responsibilities as disciples, whether they have been small or great. It is the master who allocates the scale of responsibility; the slave's duty is merely to carry out faithfully the role entrusted to him" (R. T. France). This is what makes us successful and assures we fit into the overall plan of God, as did the people listed in Matthew's genealogy.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for showing us how valuable we are to you, a truth made clear with the assuring words that the One who was born the Messiah was none other than You (1:23), promising a Presence that will continue for eternity (28:20), amen.

A Time of Waiting

Advent: a waiting time; waiting for the Light in a suffering world of psychological darkness; the homeless; the thirsty, breathing dust. Children, starving past recovery; sinners longing for redemption.

"I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent...
What sights you, heart, saw; ways you went
And more must, in longer light's delay." (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

But what is that?

"A voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight a highway for our God! Every valley shall be exalted; every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the rough places smooth." (Isaiah 40: 3-5)

In Romans, we read,
"The night is far gone. Let us, lay aside the work of darkness, and put on the armor of the light." (Romans 13:2)

But still we wait, lighting our Advent candles in futile hope, waiting for "Xmas" in the malls!
Oh, people of God, it is time!
Rise up, and feed those hungry!
Sate those thirsty!
Visit the unfortunate!
Open your eyes to your time and place!

"At the center of our being is a point of nothingness and absolute poverty. It is the pure glory of God in us. It is like a diamond, blazing with the invisible light of Heaven.
It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we could see these billion points of light, coming together, in the Face and Blaze of a Sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely." (Thomas Merton)

Paul says, "You need to persevere, so that when you have done the Will of God, you will receive what He has promised. For in just a little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay." (Hebrews 10: 35-38)

The Spirit and bride say,
"Come!"

by Submitted in 2013 by Rosemary Holzhuter (1938 to 2022)

Prayer
Maranatha!
Amen!

Something Beautiful

“...and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” Isaiah 35:10

Near Paraguay’s capital city, Asunción, Cateura is a slum alongside a landfill. The villagers survive by recycling items from this landfill. But from these items something amazing and beautiful has emerged—an orchestra. The Recycled Orchestra of Cateura, also known as the Recycled Orchestra, is an orchestra composed of children from Asunción, Paraguay who play musical instruments made from scrap materials collected from Asunción’s Cateura landfill.

Violins are made from oil cans with bent forks as tailpieces. Saxophones come from drainpipes with bottle tops for keys. Cellos are made from tin drums with gnocchi rollers for tuning pegs. But the orchestra didn’t start with recycled instruments. Around 2006, Favio Chavez, an environmental engineer in Cateura, decided to teach the children music. His classes became so popular that he ran out of donated instruments. He asked a talented carpenter from the community, Nicholas Gomez, to make instruments from stuff from the landfill. Thus the Recycled Orchestra was born.

The orchestra has toured many countries, lifting the sights of the young musicians and changing their lives. “The world sends us garbage,” says Chavez. “We send back music.”

Violins from landfills. Music from slums. This is symbolic of what God does for us. The prophet Isaiah envisions God’s new creation in chapter 35. Barren lands burst into blooming flowers (vv. 1-2). Deserts flow with streams (vv. 6-7). Impoverished people become whole to the sounds of joyful songs (vv. 5-6, 10).

The Recycled Orchestra gives the world a glimpse of the future, when God will wipe away the tears of every eye and poverty will be no more.

(Google “Recycled Orchestra of Cateura” for videos of the orchestra performing.)

by Jan Lee

Prayer

Loving God, help us to turn the poverty in our lives into something beautiful. Amen.

WWJD

“4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

Have you ever seen bracelets that say WWJD? This acronym for What Would Jesus Do, stands as a reminder to think more like Jesus. At first, I was like, “Why do I need a reminder on my wrist?” Shortly after that when someone cut me off in traffic, or I hit my finger with a hammer working on a project I was reminded, “Oh, maybe I do need more reminders.”

As we are reading this section in Deuteronomy, I think sometimes people read verse five and then stop. Yes, I think loving our God is very important. However, what is just as important is doing this on a regular basis. What is something that you do that reminds you of Christ? Maybe it's going to church every Sunday. Maybe your reminder is that you serve in a local non-profit to make your community better. Possibly you pray each night to have a conversation with God about what is going on in your life.

Sadly, I think our world needs more reminders, and sadly I don't think any of us have enough money to buy WWJD bracelets to hand to every single person we come in contact with for the rest of our lives. As I kept reading, I was encouraged. My favorite part of this passage is verse seven. Share your experiences not only with your spouse and friends but impress them on your children. The youth of today are our future. I'm sure you have seen the kids act a little differently today than back in my day. Think about all the distractions they have competing for their attention: Netflix, Xbox, and my personal enemy, Tic Tok. Each working harder by the day to capture the attention of billions of people across the world.

What we do will impact the people around us and our children. Let's use today as a reminder to be more like Jesus. What would he do in today's world? How would he use his 24 hours each day? Search in his words for a solution. Let us lean more on scripture and teachings rather than the most popular items trending on social media. Today challenge yourself to think differently, to think as Jesus once did.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

Let us pray. God teach us to be more like your son Jesus. Let us be reminded of his words and teachings in your scriptures. Show us opportunities in our daily walk where we can apply our knowledge to improve and uplift the people that are around us. God, you have already created the perfect recipe by creating each and every one of us uniquely. Now show us how to use our gifts and talents to make your world a better place. Let us be reminded today to think first, about what would Jesus do. We say all these things in your son's name. Amen.

– Thursday –

For Us

“Jesus said,
“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man
remains in me, and I in him,
he will bear much fruit;
apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5

It was during the Christmas Eve pageant.
Three women were coming down the center
aisle. The two younger ladies were worrying
about their clothing and if they would
remember their lines.

The more experienced lady said, “It’s okay, it’s
not about us.”

And yet—it is for us, God sent the Gift.

by Chaplain John Grummon

Prayer

Lord, Thank you for the Gift of Jesus.

What Does Christmas Smell Like?

As a school counselor, I once was walking a sixth-grade student to a session at an overnight outdoor education event. At one point she told me I smelled good. This secretly triggered some guilt since I was wearing perfume which the students were not allowed to bring. She quickly went on to say that I “smelled like a counselor should smell.” Now I’m not sure what a counselor should smell like, but some scientists say that smell activates more areas of the brain than any of our other senses.

As we enter Advent and prepare for celebrating Jesus’ birth, do the scents of the Christmas season help put you in the Christmas mood? I imagine the scent of pine, Christmas cookies, hot cocoa, peppermint, and an inviting fire in the fireplace. To think about that very first Christmas, though, the scents would have been quite different - perhaps dusty & sweaty shepherds, manger smells such as animal droppings and feed, then new baby smells and eventually frankincense and myrrh. What an incredible and unique way God chose to have the Savior of the world enter this world!

Imagining the vivid sights, sounds, and smells of the real Christmas Story is something I try to do during Advent. (I haven’t yet found an aerosol spray labeled, “The First Christmas,” though frankincense and myrrh are usually available.) The pace of life during the time and culture of our Savior’s birth was much slower than our busy, fast-paced, technologically-advanced world. Perhaps we could slow down a bit, breathe in the smells of Christmas, spend time enjoying the sights of Christmas, and make time to participate in the sounds of Christmas even as they are today. God created us with – gifted us with – our senses to help us. They can warn us of danger and help us discover things or relive memories, but also assist us in preparing to celebrate the Greatest Gift of All.

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Luke 2:7, ESV

by Rev. Melody d. Walden

Prayer

Gracious Lord, remind us to slow down as we approach Advent. Help us be intentional as we decide how to celebrate Jesus in the season of His birth. Amen.

– Thursday –

The Sacred Space of the Incarnation

“And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for
the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.’
Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.” Luke 1:46-56

In the book, *Expecting Emmanuel, Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*, author Joanna Harader, writes,
“...Mary goes beyond even what ‘was spoken to her by the Lord’ – or at least what we heard spoken to her.
She believes the promise and she understands what the promise will mean for the world. With this deep
understanding of Gabriel’s words, Mary sings of the revolutionary scope of God’s promise being realized through
the incarnation: the powerful will be cast down and the lowly lifted up; the hungry will be fed and the rich set
away empty. As she bears Jesus in her body, she lives the fact of God’s past-tense activity (Jesus’ conception) that
signals an already-here but not-yet-fully-realized liberation.”

“...One of the deep gifts of Mary’s song is that it holds all time together in the sacred space of the incarnation. It
reminds us that the Might One, embodied in Jesus, is our beginning and our end, the Alpha and Omega, the one
who was and is and is to come.”

“...as we prepare for the coming of the Christ child, may our hearts, like Mary’s, magnify our God!”

by Dr. Paula Artac

Meditation

May I live as Your servant. May I be truly humble before You and others. May I use well the opportunities and gifts You
place in my hands, serving You and others for Your glory. May I seek after what really matters, offering myself to You in
every facet of life. Amen.

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see
evermore and evermore.

Oh, that birth forever blessed
when the virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race,
and the babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face
evermore and evermore.

This is he whom seers and sages
sang of old with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word.
Now he shines, the long-expected;
let creation praise its Lord
evermore and evermore.

Let the heights of heav'n adore him,
angel hosts his praises sing,
pow'rs, dominions bow before him
and extol our God and King.
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
ev'ry voice in concert ring
evermore and evermore.

Christ, to thee, with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unending praises be,
honor, glory, and dominion
and eternal victory
evermore and evermore.

— Marcus Aurelius C. Prudentius, 4th c. —

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May our great God and Savior use these devotionals to minister to one and all.

Dr. Richard Menninger

Retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion

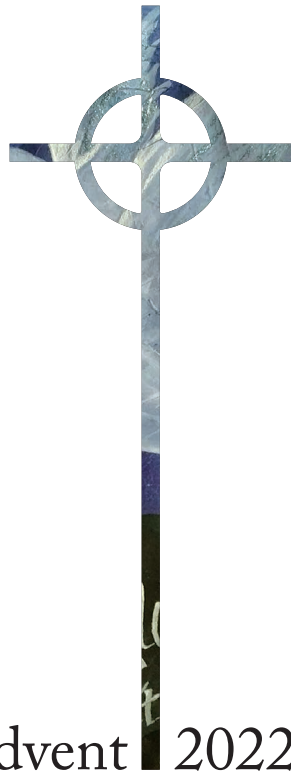


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