



Advent 2020

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Nov. 29	Just the Facts Ma'am Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	6
Nov. 30	Second Planting in Hope Fredrikson Center Team	7
Dec. 1	The Hand of the Lord Rosemary Holzhuter	8
Dec. 2	Miracles Virginia Pine	9
Dec. 3	Where Do I Sit? Kurt Hamilton	10
Dec. 4	Faith in the Lord Eugene Shawano, Jr.	11
Dec. 5	Advent – A Time of Gratitude to God at All Times Rev. Justin Gnanamuthu, C.S.C.	12
Dec. 6	Behind the Scenes Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	13
Dec. 7	Flexible and Adaptable Community Contributor	14
Dec. 8	Spiritual Medicine Kurt Hamilton	15
Dec. 9	Christ Among Us Jan Lee	16
Dec. 10	Preparing or Passing? Jacob Martin	17
Dec. 11	Deep Ground of the Soul Dr. Paula Artac	18
Dec. 12	An Advent Mash-up Rev. Matt Sturtevant	19
Dec. 13	What's in a Name? Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	20

Dec. 14	Song of Joy Trish Dowd Kelne	21
Dec. 15	Trusting God Hailey Gonzalez	22
Dec. 16	The Season...The Struggle Teresa Toland	23
Dec. 17	A United Force Nicole Hamilton	24
Dec. 18	Watched Out and Unready Chaplain John Holzhüter	25
Dec. 19	Be Still and Know Dr. Dorothy L. Smith	26
Dec. 20	Pay It Forward Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	27
Dec. 21	Deep Peace the Fredrikson Center Team	28
Dec. 22	Gowns and Good Tidings Janice Trigg	29
Dec. 23	Christmas – A Time to Celebrate God’s Merciful Love for Humanity Rev. Justin Gnanamuthu, C.S.C.	30
Dec. 24	Now and Forevermore Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	31
Dec. 25	Hopeful Waiting Chaplain John Holzhüter	32
	<i>O Come O Come Emmanuel</i>	33
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	35



"Expectation"
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.

Just the Facts Ma'am

The title of this devotion is a quote incorrectly attributed to sergeant Joe Friday of the detective series *Dragnet*, which aired on television in the 1950's. Nevertheless, it aptly describe the Christmas story as presented in the gospel of Matthew. As a reporter would write about what he or she investigated, Matthew simply jots down the key details he learned.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed, a legal arrangement that bound the couple to each other as husband and wife, though the marriage was not to be consummated until a year later. So strong was this contract that sexual relations with another person other than the betrothed was considered adultery. The relationship could only be dissolved through divorce.

In this account, Matthew matter-of-factly states that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He offers no explanation or embellishments to make it more attractive. Like the writer who penned the opening verse of the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Matthew assumes his statement is true. If you want more proof, I am afraid none is forthcoming at this point: you simply must deal with it as is.

While the virgin birth is beyond scientific explanation, its necessity is crystal clear. This unique birth teaches us that Jesus is divine, and at the same time, human: he was born like us (Matthew 1:25). Jesus, the eternal Word of God, appeared in human form (John 1:1, 14). Simply put, God became human: this belief is referred to as the Incarnation. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary with such power that Jesus came into this world truly human yet without the inherited sin of Adam; he was born holy, the Son of God (Luke 1:35). As a result, our Lord was able to remain sinless (Hebrews 4:15) and became the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

Just stating the facts.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Lord, help us see that we will not come to faith by understanding everything, but we can come to a clear understanding of truth by coming in faith. In the Name of the One whose miraculous birth leads us to faith that is embraced by our reason, amen.

Second Planting in Hope

“We wait in hope for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love be with us, LORD,
even as we put our hope in you.”

A deluge of spring rain fell in the few days after our pumpkin seeds were planted. They seemed swept away, the ground flooded. We replanted, with the remaining seeds: some pumpkin, some winter squash, some just the last ones without label. The second planting was unplanned and rushed, yet hopeful that something would come up.

We discovered, in about 10 days, where the flood waters flowed. A bundle of little sprouts came up, all tangled together. The plot was a bit of a mess, mingled types and all vines once the summer took hold. We did some transplanting, but mostly just went with it. Vines were growing everywhere, some even wrapped round a Rose of Sharon bush nearby. By harvest time, the bush looked like a Christmas tree with small pumpkin ornaments—an unexpected delight! The hopes of our world turn up in places unexpected and in variations unplanned, yet food for the table and gifts from God’s earth.

As we begin this Advent, we may not know what has been planted, or where, nor what weather holds; yet “we wait in hope for the Lord,” and in that hope—our help, our shield and unfailing love.

by the Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of the Unknown, gift us with hope, planted in our hearts, felt in our moments of flooded and barren ground, keep our eyes turned to you Lord and the hope of your Son. May we tend the fields of our hearts, replanting and transplanting, and setting roots in you toward a bountiful harvest through Christ. In you we hope, Amen

The Hand of the Lord

“But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.” Job 12:7-10

One of my students mentioned her family raised and tended horses on their farm. After talking with the family, we arranged for a field trip, and all the students joyfully loaded the bus and off we went for a day at the farm and a chance to see the horses.

It was nearing the end of our trip and the owner of the farm had given a tour and then allowed the students to take their lunch sacks and sit outdoors to enjoy before the bus ride back to school. We happened to be standing near the corral where their prize white stallion stood – tall and regal. I took the apple from my lunch and offered it but was rejected. The stallion neighed and sauntered away, uninterested. It was then that the rest of the horses in the corral began to head to pasture, following the stallion. But there lingered a young filly, she was the color of a new penny, glimmering in the sunlight, beautiful beyond my imagining.

She took my breath away and I leaned into the fence, but the owner just smiled and said, “Oh you’ll never get near that one.” Undeterred and awestruck by her radiance, I slipped through the fence and walked toward her. She shook her mane and paused. I spoke to her as if to a heavenly creature, “You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.” Perhaps she understood, she knew the gifts of God’s creation. She stepped toward me; I stood motionless as she came closer and finally, she placed her head upon my shoulder and rested there for a long moment before turning and galloping off toward the open pasture.

It was a gift, that remains in my heart, her beauty such a reflection of God’s creation and grace.

by Rosemary Holzbuter

Prayer

May we wait, in this Advent season, undeterred by those that might discourage or lead astray. Let us look to God’s creation for beauty, for purpose, for the glory of God in our midst. May we find rest in the hand of the Lord. Amen.

2

– Wednesday –

Miracles

“You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.”

Psalm 77:14

“So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe”.

John 4:48

The Bible is full of miracles. Miracles from creation in Genesis to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelations. The birth of our Savior Jesus Christ is one of the biggest miracles because His life gives us eternal grace.

Just think about Jesus’s birth. It is full of miracles. Born to a virgin as promised from the line of David. Born in a stable with his birth announced by Angels to shepherds in the field. A star guides wise men to see the King of the Jews. Joseph being told in a dream to flee with his family to Egypt because King Herod seeks to do Jesus harm. Born to be our savior.

The miracle of birth happens every day and we take it for granted. What other miracles do we take for granted or don’t even see? Have you ever received unearned financial gain? How many times has a parking space become available when and where you need it? Little things in life that just happen to come your way through no action of your own. Then there are the big miracles. Have you ever been in a car and see a serious accident about to happen and you somehow come out unharmed and you have no idea how that happened?

Take time during this magical season to see all the miracles in your life. It is amazing.

by Virginia Pine

Prayer

Thank you dear heavenly Father for the miracle of the life of our savior Jesus Christ. Help my eyes to open to see all the miracles that happen around me every day. Thank you for your grace. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Where Do I Sit?

“When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.” Luke 14:7-8

This is just the beginning of a great parable and lesson from Jesus. In the lesson, Jesus is explaining to his disciples a lesson on humility, that we should take the lesser seat at an occasion and let others sit in the best seats. What are the best seats? Maybe it's front row at your favorite sporting event? Or possibly the end of the dinner table so you don't have to stretch your neck? As followers of Christ sometimes we don't always get the best seats in the house. However, we all get a seat next to Christ if we believe in him. I think this idea of humility gets lost in the culture of the 21st century. Sometimes, humans get distracted with greed, technology, or time-wasters instead of finding a way to their seat. We are all trying to get to better seats, when we all already have one. The parable continues with verse 9 “If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.” Again, this idea is being taught of giving up your seat for others. The parable continues in verse 10-11 saying, “But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is the part that caught my eye. I don't need to compete for a better seat in my life, because I am waiting for God to come to me and invite me to heaven with him. This parable does a great job of reminding us that we don't have to compete to get into heaven. We are not more important than our other fellow brothers and sisters. Instead, we are all created in his image. That is why we are all unique. God uses each of us and our individual talents to glorify his world. We don't have to compete to be at the end of the table, or to have a front row to God.

Instead, we have to work at getting people to sit at the table. We have to show our lost friends the open seats. Instead of playing a game of musical chairs, why can't we go out and find more chairs so everyone has a place to sit? The parable concludes with Jesus talking to the host about inviting the poor, crippled, and blind to the party instead of rich neighbors. Today instead of working on someone who already has a seat at God's table, go and help someone else who needs help seeing their chair.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God, we are grateful that we live in a place where we can worship you freely. That we can speak your name freely and talk about all the good that you do. We are grateful that you use us to speak your name to others. That you lead us to find your lost sheep. That you teach us your word so we can continue to share it with others. Today, remind us of your humility that you share with us. Show us our lost brothers and sisters and help us bring them to your table, to have a seat next to you in heaven. We are grateful that you give each of us a chair. We just thank you for this day, and every day that we get to be with you. We say all of this in your Son's Holy name, Amen.

4

– Friday –

Faith in the Lord

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Isaiah 41:10

Good day, in this Advent season as it always is brothers and sisters in Christ:

I say thank you to our Lord for all that he has done for us. He gives us a strong shoulder to lean on! Helps us understand that he is always that great counselor when we need an ear. Most importantly, he has all the answers we need, if we are willing to listen to what he is saying to us.

Faith in our Lord is not just talking, but practicing every day, especially now, when there is so much fear in our world. Practicing our faith does give us a sense of strength that He is with us, right by our side. I believe the world needed a wake up call; we started to believe in man more than we believed in Him.

Our Father who reigns over us all deserves our praise and thankfulness every day, minute and second of our beautiful days. Without Him, I believe this time would be almost unbearable, but with Him all things are possible.

So if there is one thing I can share during this beautiful season of Advent, it's all about Him and we should be ok with that because we owe everything to him for all that we are. He tells us we will never walk alone!! That in a crazy world is all the comfort we need.

by Eugene Shawano, Jr.

Prayer

May our Lord give you peace and joy during this unusual time but remember that he is only a whisper away whenever we need him. That is always!! Amen

Advent- A Time of Gratitude to God at All Times

Christmas Eve is surely my family's most frenzied day of the year and, in its wind down, the time we "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" 1Thessalonians 5:18

We are in the holy season of Advent which prepares us to receive the Lord in our hearts and minds. Our preparation to receive the Lord is a conscious and prayerful activity. One way of preparing ourselves to receive Him is to become ever grateful, even in adverse situations, for the numerous blessings we have already received. It is counter intuitive to give thanks when something bad happens, but the life of faith is beyond logic. So, take the plunge. Pick an event in your life that you wish did not happen or is not happening. Thank God for that over and over and over and over again. God's ways are inscrutable. He has some plans for us even in the worst situations.

There was a villager whose sole means of support for his wife and family was a horse which helped him work in the land. One day the horse ran away. The other villagers came by to commiserate with the man. "Oh, what a terrible thing to happen," they all said. He said, "We'll see." The next day, his horse returned with 30 other horses. His fellow villagers came to visit to celebrate with him. They all said, "What good fortune you have!" He said, "We'll see." The next day, his son was trying to break in one of the wild horses and fell off and broke his leg. The villagers again came by to commiserate. The man again said, "We'll see." The next day, the army came to town to conscript all the young men for war. They did not take the man's son because of his broken leg!

Bottom line: Thank God in all things, for we trust He will eventually bring good out of each. During this season of Advent, let us wake up and ask ourselves these pertinent questions in order to become grateful beings: What good has come from some bad things in my life? What have I learned from some bad things in my life? To be more compassionate? To trust Him more? To pray more or differently? To try harder? To not try so hard? A greater appreciation for family and friends? To live the serenity prayer?

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

Prayer

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." (R. Niebuhr)

Grant me the attitude of gratitude.

Behind the Scenes

Our earlier look at this passage revealed that Matthew described Jesus' birth in a style much like a reporter, simply relaying the facts surrounding this history-changing event. In the process he describes the actions of Joseph, a model of obedience.

Upon learning that Mary, his betrothed wife, was pregnant, Joseph follows the law righteously but with compassion. He plans to divorce her because of her "adultery" but to do so in a way that would not draw attention to her unfaithfulness. But he is informed in a dream that he should keep Mary as his wife because she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, he is to take her home and when her son is born give him the name of Jesus. This he does.

But my description of Joseph's actions is not really the main point of this passage. Despite the attention Joseph receives from Matthew, these verses are really about Jesus, even though he does not appear until the final verse (Matthew 1:25). In our passage, Matthew informs us as to how Jesus entered history, who He is, and his role in the salvation of humanity. Yet, today as then, only the eyes of faith can see God working in the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. In fact, this passage should guide our reading of any story in any gospel. God is always working behind the scenes to bring about what needs to be done to ensure the protection and salvation of His people.

This truth becomes apparent in the story of Herod the Great searching to kill the infant Jesus and how Joseph acts to protect the child and keep Him out of harm's way (2:13-23). God's providence, His involvement with humans in accomplishing His will, should never be far from our mind when we read a story in the Bible (especially for the first time!). The mystery and suspense should not turn our attention away from the fact that God is working in all situations and all people to accomplish His will. Matthew is teaching you to "have faith in your journey. Everything had to happen exactly as it did to get you where you're going next" (Mandy Hale). Joseph is an example of that truth as he was used by God to ensure our salvation through His Son.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

To the God who hides Himself that we might trust Him to get us to where we are supposed to be. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Flexible and Adaptable

“A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy.”
Proverbs 29:1

With many parents, I share the weight of being a “first year teacher” and straddling the realities of education and work within the walls of home. Grateful for the option to “work remote” even with reduced pay, we have juggled—and are just doing the best we can. At the first Zoom parent teacher conference, we lauded the teachers for their flexibility amid the changes and the teacher responded, “Flexibility and adaptability.” It is a pattern I’ve practiced, and yet forgot. So focused on the constant change of this past year, I forgot the second part of that couplet—to be flexible and yet also to adapt. It seemed our need to change was so rapid and continual, that we never paused for adjustment or to adapt before the change required flexing again.

Entering the winter now, and likely another round of change to come and to continue, let us prepare,
– not just to be flexible, but to adapt and to repeat.

by Community Contributor

Prayer

Lord be with us in the changing, grant us nimble minds and steady hearts rooted in our faith in you; guide our actions that we might follow your path, with turns and twists, keep our faith strong as a steely silk by which we are ever tethered to you, bending and adapting as we continue on toward the light born of Mary, your Son. In his name, we pray, Amen.

8

– Tuesday –

Spiritual Medicine

Proverbs 17:22 “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”

What happens when you don't feel good? You go get some medicine, right and start to try to feel better. You slow down, don't go to work, and recover from whatever it is. We never know when we are going to get sick, it just always hits us. Medicine, sleep, and home remedies all help take us back to normal. However, what happens when sin creeps into your life? Or a sudden life change that you didn't see coming? What is the medicine for our hearts when sin has taken control of the wheel?

As I was reading through Proverbs the other day, I came across this passage. “A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” Proverbs 17:22. I feel as if sometimes we don't look hard enough for the medicine. Instead of running to the store to get “the good stuff,” we decide to stick it out. Or we will state that we are fine and that it is only a little cold. However, we aren't taking care of ourselves. We are neglecting the fact that we have endless supplies of spiritual medicine on the shelves. Our bible, prayer, meditation, and many other resources are constantly available; yet we look for other outlets. We create voids in our lives to relieve the pain that we are experiencing, because it's easier. Replacing our pain instead with human sin.

There is another resource. God. God is always in our lives. He is constantly leading us to new opportunities, people, and outlets. God is constantly seeking us even as we become distracted. God is showing us people with a cheerful heart to become our medicine. He is showing us his love without asking for payment. God is our medicine. So I challenge you; the next time that your human instincts kick in, look for some spiritual medicine. Instead of heading towards your next deadly habit, turn to prayer. Rather than reaching for something destructive, look for a bible instead. Turn to medicine instead of wicked thoughts. See what God's spiritual medicine can do for you.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God we ask you today to remind us of your love. That you are the creator of all things. You care for us as your children and remind us of better things. Today let us remember that we fight sin with love. That we do not give up. That when things get tough- we remember you are always fighting for us. Let us not give up on this fight against sin. Instead, let us turn it into power for your name. We say this and all things in your great name, Amen.

Christ Among Us

“The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Matthew 25: 40

Óscar Romero served as the fourth Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador. He spoke out against poverty, social injustice, assassinations, and torture amid a growing war between left-wing and right-wing forces in his country. In 1980, Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass in the chapel of the Hospital of Divine Providence in San Salvador.

His words written in 1978 reminds us of Christ’s words in Matthew 25:31-40.

*Advent should admonish us to discover
in each brother or sister that we greet,
in each friend whose hand we shake,
in each beggar who asks for bread,
in each worker who wants to use the right to join a union,
in each peasant who looks for work in the coffee groves,
the face of Christ.
Then it would not be possible to rob them,
to cheat them,
to deny them their rights.
They are Christ,
and whatever is done to them
Christ will take as done to himself.
This is what Advent is:
Christ living among us.*

– Óscar Romero, December 3, 1978

by Jan Lee

Prayer

Loving God, remind us always to treat all we meet as Christ living among us. Amen.

Preparing Or Passing?

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ...If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Romans 12: 9-10, 18

There are many Christmas traditions I remember being a part of growing up - putting up and decorating the tree (we usually used an artificial one), changing the advent calendars every day, making cookies of all kinds, shapes, and sizes, putting up Christmas lights, being with family, lighting the advent candles. There's plenty more, but you get the point. I'm sure you have your own Christmas traditions. Many might even be the same. Yet, no matter the tradition the reasons are the same.

We are preparing for the coming for the Lord, Jesus. We are preparing to share the hope, love, joy, and peace that comes with the Light of the World. The longer I live the more I understand why preparation is needed to experience, let alone share, such magnificent things with the world - hope, love, joy, peace. I won't speak for you, but in my limited and expanding experience each takes an incredible (uncomfortable even) amount of effort. I think each year we are at risk of taking the gift of Christ and all he provided for granted. We treat Christ's birth story as “X-mas”. We treat God's gift and the life of Jesus as a day each year to mark off the calendar until next year; making it just another day to X off.

I encourage you to do the hard work - take intentional time to be with God - this Advent. For, as the world is ever reminding us hope, love, joy, and peace is preceded by hardship and takes action to create and sustain. How can I, you, we be prepared to receive hope, love, joy, peace, and Christ this Christmas? And everyday day after?

I share these words from a wonderful hymn as a possible answer to such questions, and as a prayer to let change, let peace, let Christ be on earth with, in, and through you and me.

by Jacob Martin

Prayer

Let There Be Peace on Earth

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

Let There Be Peace on Earth, the peace that was meant to be.

With God as our Father, brothers all are we.

Let me walk with my brother in perfect harmony...

With every step, I take let this be my solemn vow.

To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

Amen.

Deep Ground of the Soul

“...The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” Luke 1:49-55

EXPECTATION

My soul stands vulnerable in the barren desert,
the divine hidden from my eyes in the darkness of
unknowability.
Waiting and watching,
all exterior recognition is cast aside.
My heart breaks open pouring out all sense of self,
longing for water to quench the thirst of my seeking.
I have journeyed long into this darkened ground of my soul
only to find not myself. Only to find...nothing.
Where can I run?
Where can I run
but to run beyond myself,
only to find abundance in my soul sanctuary,
the empty bowl, filled with God.
Temenos.

Enter into my soul, speak to my heart.
Impart the words that angels celebrate.
Be audible to me in the stillness of my soul's silent cave.
Lead me from the wilderness of my ignorance.
Make me whole,
filled with light transparent.
Infuse my being
Fill me with grace
to be in God,
Transparent.

Humble maiden, empty and expectant,
unencumbered and bare,
you stand in service to the mystery of the darkness,
the expectant guest loved without question.
There is nothing between you and God.
You are immersed in God.
In not knowing, your heart is purely in the Oneness,
forgetful of self sinking to your knees in receptivity.
Sinking and letting go,
Sinking deep and letting go.
You are truly blessed with understanding,
infused by grace, abundant with new life within you.
Transformed.

by Dr. Paula Artac

An Advent Mash-up

“For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.” Daniel 6:26b

I recently watched a video that created a mash-up trailer of *The Hobbit* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Someone had the idea that these two vastly different movies could be interwoven, and the result was surprisingly logical. Somehow, it all made sense to see Gandalf driving a post-apocalyptic battle vehicle, or the *Mad Max* desert replacing the mountains and plains of Middle Earth.

I had the same thought when I saw the text the Narrative Lectionary chose for the first week in Advent: Daniel and the Lions’ Den (Daniel 6). Talk about a mash-up! Surprisingly though, the result made sense. The people of the Christmas story waited under the thumb of Empire (Rome) in the same way that Daniel served under the Empire of Babylon. They experienced the jealousy and fear of King Herod, just like Daniel and his friends were victims of King Darius and his edict prescribing who they could worship. And most importantly, in both the Christmas story and Daniel, God intervenes in unexpected and life-giving ways: in one story saving a life, and in the other creating One.

Perhaps this year feels like we are living in a similar mash-up: global pandemic, economic collapse, and political chaos...alongside of the twinkling lights and piped-in music of Christmas. But maybe this is the year that the waiting of Advent makes the most sense. We wait with anxiety in the midst of Empire, hoping for justice and peace. We wait while leaders battle from places of fear and cynicism, and we long for a Prince of Peace. And most importantly, we wait upon the unexpected and life-giving actions of a God who still works in our world today.

by Rev. Matt Sturtevant

Prayer

God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, grant us wisdom to see your work, and courage to join it afresh this season. Amen.

What's in a Name?

When children are given names today the meaning of a name is usually not foremost in the parent's mind. Normally what motivates the parent is whether the name carries on the memory of a family member or simply if it has a pleasant sound to it. This was not so in the time of Jesus. Names were more intentional than today, for they often expressed the essential nature and character of the person named.

Matthew's name means "gift of the Lord" and little did his parents know when they named him that his most treasured gift to the world would be his gospel. Matthew shared the Gospel by writing a gospel. That is, his gospel contains the Gospel, the good news that God came to Israel in order to save the world. Matthew was Jewish, a man who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and followed him in discipleship, most notably when he wrote the gospel which bears his name. The Gospel began with Israel, for the good news revealed that the long-awaited Messiah had come.

The importance of names in the time of Matthew is not lost on the Christmas story. Joseph is commanded to name Mary's son, Jesus (Yeshua in Hebrew), "because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21, NIV). Jesus, a popular name, was a variation of Joshua, which means "the Lord saves." Early on in his gospel, Matthew describes Jesus' purpose for coming to earth. Joseph is a Son of David, as is Jesus (1:1, 20) and this title reveals that Matthew believes Jesus is of the line that will produce the Messiah or Christ. The Messiah was popularly believed to be the warrior-king that would free Israel from its enemy Rome. Such a view of salvation was something Jesus encountered throughout His ministry, especially at His triumphal entry on Palm Sunday (21:9).

What was not popular at the time was that the Gospel presented salvation in terms of redemption from sin not political oppression (Psalm 130:8). That is, Matthew understood Israel's' greatest enemy was not Rome but itself, not foreign invaders but the sin that separated it from God. Matthew will later remind his readers that Jesus "will save His people from their sins" by giving "His life as a ransom for many" (20:28). The manger Jesus was placed in at his birth was seen by Matthew to be at the foot of the cross.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Father, may we not make Christmas all about the sentimentality of a baby, no matter the miracle of His birth. Rather, may we see that when the child was named Jesus, the work of the cross was set in motion. In the Name of the One who came as a child and left as a King, amen.

Song of Joy

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;” Psalm 98:4-8

My daughter plays the Ukulele and recently learned a short snippet of Ode to Joy. She plays it for my mother when we visit at the memory care community. The music reaches through the window that stands ever present in our visits; we are on one side and mom on the other. Music seems to be the joy of each visit, giving us a connection where touch is not possible, words get lost and masks cover our smiles. So she plays, mom taps her foot and sways; I sway too. It feels like old times, at least for a moment. We find each other.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of Joy, bring us new moments of joy within the unknown of this time. Where there are barriers to love, let joy lift our hearts and guide us through. May your Spirit be the music that brings us together. Your Son comes to us anew, bringing Joy to the World. Let our hearts hold true to this sounding joy. Amen.

Trusting God

“Trust in him at all time, oh people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.”
Psalm 62:8

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Proverbs 3:5-6

For me, trusting God was something I always focused on, my whole life. When something wasn't going the way I wanted it to go, I would just tell myself “God has a reason” and maybe I don't understand or see it now, but one day I will. As it says in Psalm 62:8, “Trust in him at all time, oh people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.”

It's easy for us to be calm and trust in God when everything is going your way and good, but we must believe in him at all times — good and bad. God knows everything we are going through and everything we will go through in the future. We have to know that all things are possible with God. He knows the desire in your heart and if you trust in him with the things that you want most, he will take care of it and never leave you alone.

“If you can?” said Jesus, “Everything is possible for one who believes.” (Mark 9:23). When I was in my junior year of college, something happened to me that I never thought would happen. It broke me, made me feel so many different negative things. It was hard for me to believe that God would let something so awful happen to me. It took me a little bit to realize and understand how God would never give me something that I couldn't handle and that no matter the situation I have to trust in him and know that with pain comes strength. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6). I used this verse a lot during that time and it helped me realize that I do have to trust in the Lord with all my heart and know that he will make my path straight.

After realizing all this it helped me grow closer to God and helped me fully trust him in more ways than I ever did. You have fully devoted yourself to him and his way to fully be able to experience the life he has created for you.

by Hailey Gonzalez

Prayer

God grant us the courage to trust in you and follow the path you make for us, the strength to look to you in our dark times and the willingness to share your light with others. In Your name we pray, amen.

The Season...The Struggle

“Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” John 3:18

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.” Peter 4:1

“and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.” Isaiah 58:10

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the LORD Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:15-17

My personal life experiences have given me a firsthand taste of hunger, pardon the pun, as well as holidays without presents, decorations, or family celebrations. My heart breaks at the thought of children not experiencing these things, or parents agonizing over the choice of being responsible, if that is even a possibility in today's times. Parents want to share their past traditions or dream of better provisions, as some may carry a burdened past with them. I do understand the reason for the season as many of them may also. Understanding as well that life experiences help mold the wonderful hearts of future difference makers, but in the moment, the struggle is real.

“But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the LORD. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the LORD has told us about.” Luke 2:10-15

by Treasa Toland

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for my struggles as in them I have grown closer to you. I ask that in this season you continue to guide us as we try to assist our neighbors, to introduce you into the lives of those who struggle with knowing you and to grow in their hearts the desire to welcome your son Jesus. To guide us in the direction we must go so that all who hunger can be fed, and to keep us safe in our endeavors. In Christ's name, Amen.

A Unified Force

“And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”
Colossians 3:14

As a teacher, I see my kids do a lot of interesting things. As I watch them stick a pencil through their orange, eat an apple with a spoon, or drink from their water bottle without taking their mask off, I can't help but think why. It's hard for me to put myself in their shoes and imagine their thought process. Even though my seven and eight-year-old students might not be making the best decision from my point of view, they had a valid reason in their minds to do that action. In today's stressful world people are having to make more impactful decisions than ever before. It's easy to sit back and judge their choices from an outside perspective, but the truth is we don't fully understand their situation because we're not in their shoes. All we can do is offer support, gentle guidance, and compassion because they're trying their best.

Colossians 3:14 speaks words of wisdom in these uncertain times: “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” With so much distance and division right now, we need a unifying force and that force is love. When we love one another we create a strong bond that is not easily broken, we shed light in dark times, and most importantly we show who God truly is; love. Today, I challenge you to look beyond someone's choices and simply view them as someone to love.

by Nicole Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

We cannot thank you enough for your all-encompassing, overwhelming, unconditional love. Because of your powerful love, we have the strength to love others regardless of the choices they make. Help us, as Christians, be a unified force to live out your greatest commandments and be a light in difficult times. We know you are in control and leading us every step of the way even if we're unsure of the future. Thank you for all you have done, are doing, and will forever do.

In your name, we pray,
Amen.

Watched Out and Unready

The evening after the presidential election was called, I watched on the evening news as crowds of people went out to celebrate in the streets. The results were not official yet, but they seemed compelled to come together, in anticipation of what loomed on the horizon. They were watchful and ready for new chapters and next steps. I realized that I was feeling mostly frazzled and overwhelmed. I was well-numbed by the protracted vote tallying drama. I was weary, stunned and scarred from the frequency and vitriol-levels of the barrage of political commercials. Vote counting and angry ads kept repeating, like unwanted songs that you can't seem to get out of your head. I was unprepared for any next chapters and just wanted to sleep until the present one was over. I felt like the 'unprepared bridesmaids' in Matthew 25...drowsy and running out of fuel!

"And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (25:10-13)

I thought about how tired the firefighters must be in California, Colorado and other places facing wildfires; laying their clothes out to the ready before they went to bed and parking their vehicles road-facing and near when they went to get supplies at the store. I had no real excuse to not be full of Christmas expectations and new year anticipation. I had allowed myself to get tuckered out by the drama of watching real-world TV...yikes! It is Advent and my life is well-filled with helpings of redemption, blessings and joy. Sorry God, thank you for everything. I will get my perspective righted and priorities straight. I will be watchful and ready and not let my brain be subsumed by fruitless, political funk.

by Chaplain John Holzhüter

Prayer

God, you have given me so much that it is easy to take your blessings for granted. Help me to stay mindful, grateful and watchful. Ready for Your next steps; immune and untouched by perceived slings and arrows of the world's endless drama. Amen.

Be Still and Know

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”
Psalm 46:10 NIV

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” Exodus 14:14 NRS

This has been the most unusual year I have ever seen. I have never been in a pandemic. I have never been in or seen a worldwide shut down. The whole world shut down for the year 2020 and we have not returned to life the way we remember it yet. This maybe the new normal but I hope not. But before we panic and begin to say things we will be sorry for, let's look at something positive that has come from this event. We have been forced to slow down or stop and evaluate what is important to us. Suddenly relationships are first in our lives. We value people more than things; we realize things can be replaced but people cannot.

We realize and understand what Romans 8:28 is saying; “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.” Two things we must put into perspective are: God did not cause the Pandemic but He is using it. God is not the author of confusion as stated in 1 Corinthians 14:33, “God is not the author of confusion but of peace as in all the churches of the saints” KJV. The next thing is we can see clearly who is the author of this problem, Satan. Now we can stop fighting and demeaning each other and join forces to fight the real culprit, the Devil. When we combine our effort to fight a common enemy, with the help of God, we will be victorious. We no longer can use the excuse we do not have time to pray because we have plenty of time and reason to pray with and for each other. We even have time to call and see how each person is doing. Now, that's a new normal worth keeping.

Now as we concentrate on Christmas, we can focus on “What shall I give Jesus this year?” Jesus only wants one thing from us for His birthday gift; He wants all of us, our heart mind soul and body. Something we can each afford to give. Will you give Jesus Christ this wonderful present this year and make him happy?

by Dr. Dorothy L. Smith

Prayer

Let us pray. Lord, we love you with our whole heart and we know that you love us. Help us to remember we may be the only Christ many may see; therefore, we want to live lives so transparent they can see you within us and want you in their lives. As many come to you in this time of crisis, help us welcome them into the family and help them grow to be more like you in every way. For Christ and in His name we pray, Amen.

Pay It Forward

When Matthew sat down to write his gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote in his own words not only what he had observed during his three years with Jesus, but also what he experienced in his walk with Christ after He ascended to the Father. As a man who treasured the Old Testament, Matthew was convinced that the hope of Israel's salvation had been fulfilled in the work of Christ. And what better way to convince the Jewish people of his day that Jesus was the Messiah than by showing the connection between the Old Testament and all that Jesus said and did while on earth.

We see from our passage for today that Matthew was quick to cite prophecy to show that Jesus' Messiahship—so unexpected—was what had been God's plan all along. He writes, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')." The prophet Matthew quotes is Isaiah (7:14). The formula "All this took place to fulfill" or its equivalent frequently shows up in his gospel (Matthew 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9). Isaiah 7:14 refers to the days of King Ahaz of Judah when Jerusalem was threatened by Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah offered a sign to ensure God's rescue: a virgin will become pregnant (naturally) and give birth to a Son of David to rescue Ahaz. While the king foolishly rejected Isaiah's proposal, nevertheless the prophet saw God promising to save the political kingdom of His people. Isaiah trusted God to keep His word even if he was unsure of the timing of future events. Unselfishly, Isaiah knew he was serving us (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Likewise, Matthew sets out to serve future generations by writing his gospel. He did so because of the events that had happened in Jesus' life following his birth. He surely heard of the story of the virgin birth during Jesus' ministry but Isaiah 7:14 wouldn't make sense until after Jesus' resurrection: The ultimate proof of Jesus' divinity was the cross and empty tomb, not the virgin birth.

Isaiah and Matthew were convinced of God's trustworthiness and took it upon themselves to serve future generations of God's people.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, may we serve others—including generations to come—by sharing the good news in such a way that its influence continues throughout time. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Deep Peace

“I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.” Psalm 85:8

Have you seen *Kung Fu Panda* – the 2008 animated film? Strange question, but there is a scene where the Kung Fu Master and teacher repeats over and over to himself in his meditative efforts: “deep peace, deep peace, deep peace...” yet he allows himself to be irritated by his student’s shortcomings and pestering silliness. He seeks acclaim and reward rather than humility, acceptance and diligent work.

So often we long for “deep peace” and yet the every day work is scoffed at—the necessities of getting rest, avoiding unhealthy distractions, nourishing our bodies with healthy food, drink and exercise, disciplining our minds and hearts through structure and commitment to serving others and challenging ourselves to reach for connection beyond Netflix, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Games...

This Advent let us seek the peace that comes after a hard days work; let us find the motivation to push the power button and do the extra chore; let us take steps outside to see the peace in God’s majestic natural wonders; let us reach out in letter or in call to connect with the brothers and sisters around us longing for connection; let us understand the deep peace God grants in our weary days when we seek first to serve each other and find we have seeded peace in our own depth through the grace we give another.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of Peace, your light awaits us, if only we turn to you and take the hard fought steps that tire us and yet enliven us with your deep peace. Help us in our efforts, in your name, we pray. Amen.

Gowns and Good Tidings

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Luke 2:9-14 (KJV)

This passage of scripture is one that I personally treasure because it is one of the first passages I remember memorizing as a child. You see, I was given the opportunity to play the angel of the Lord one year for the Christmas pageant at First Baptist Church of Overland Park, Kansas. The memories surrounding the whole event are rather fuzzy. I don't remember exactly how old I was or who played the other roles. I know I was probably selected for the part of the angel because I was the tallest one in my class. I do remember a long white gown, a golden rope belt to wrap around my waist and a gold tinsel halo for my headwear. I also remember practicing, over and over, the words that I would speak and memorizing the words that came before so I would know just when to make that proclamation,

“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

To this day this King James Version plays in my mind no matter what version I read or hear – nothing else sounds quite right. Isn't the power of memorization amazing?

I'm sure as underwhelming as all the costumes were that night in Overland Park, the message of the Christmas story rang loud and clear in that small sanctuary, just as it does all across the world in all the Christmas pageants. For the humblest to the grandest Christmas pageant the costumes will fade away but the word of the Lord stands forever.

by Janice Trigg

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for your word stands forever. Please seal up your word in our hearts and bring it to mind when we need to remember.

Christmas – A Time to Celebrate God’s Merciful Love for Humanity

“Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.” Romans 12:10

During my high school years in India, I once had gone home for my Christmas vacation from the Jesuit run boarding school. While staying at home, on a fine, sunny day a vagabond came pleading for some food. My mother gave him some leftover food. An hour later, to my surprise, I found that the vagabond had vanished with that fine plate and a silver cup. Understandably, I flew off the handle and vowed to bring the person back to the spot. Soon, he was brought back to my house. I could see the plate and the silver cup hidden in his bundle of rags, so I chided him with the harshest words for his dishonesty.

My mother seemed to have watched the commotion in front of the house. When I realized she was there, I froze but she went back into the house. The vagabond feared that she had gone to inform the cops, so he grew worried and entreated me to show him mercy and appeal to my mother not to inform the cops. Minutes later, to my utter surprise, my mother returned with another plate and a few more silver cups and gave them to the man. The man stood speechless, moved to uncontrollable tears. He raised his hands in humble salutation and asked forgiveness. Since my mother had shown mercy and treated him with dignity, the vagabond went away a changed man, resolved to steal no more.

My mother’s response helped me alter my perspectives on people, things and the world. She had a choice either to react or to respond to that vagabond. She had also an option either to punish and humiliate him or to restore his dignity and let him go as a liberated human person with his honor intact. She chose the latter and thereby turned the vagabond’s heart from the material things of plate and cup to God, the giver and everlasting forgiver. In his life, it was a notable transition – from evanescent rags to perpetual riches.

How do we act when confronted by such situations in life? By reacting, we can demean and denigrate the other, but by responding mercifully and generously, we can restore the person’s rightful relationship to our loving God. By becoming a man, Jesus has shown us the way to become truly human in our lives. Christmas is all about the commemoration of that indelible fact.

“It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you.”
Mother Teresa

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

Prayer

May the Christmas – 2020 make us happy to be thy children, and as we come to the close of this year, may we be filled with grateful thoughts for what God has done to us through Jesus. Amen.

Now and Forevermore

An interesting thought about the gospel writers is that none of them “ever remembered Jesus.” This quote of James Denney usually comes across as puzzling until you recall that you only remember someone who is not with you. The gospels are living books. The words that Matthew wrote are alive, for he experienced the presence of God as he wrote and believed that his readers could likewise sense the same Jesus that he walked and talked with for three years.

It has always been God’s desire to live with humanity and no doubt His heart was broken in the Garden of Eden when He had to ask Adam, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). After He called Israel out of Egypt, God fashioned the tabernacle (“place of meeting” or “tent of meeting”) where He would live among His people (Exodus 40:34-38). This idea was carried on with the building of the Temple but sinful people were never able to overcome sin and experience the continual presence of God. That is, until the coming of Christ: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means God with us)” (Matthew 1:23).

Both his given name and the title Immanuel (or Emmanuel) reveal much about our Lord: Jesus specifies what our Lord will do (“He saves us”) and Immanuel identifies who He is (“God who comes to reside with us”). He is “the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling (lit., ‘built his tabernacle’) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Although Jesus is never again referred to as Immanuel in the New Testament, Matthew’s insight is not to be overlooked. Jesus is “God with us,” who is in our midst (Matthew 18:20) and promises to be with us until the end of time (28:20). Today, because of the Holy Spirit living within us, Jesus is God with us everywhere and through all time. As the apostle Paul writes, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank You for being the Son of God who is the Lord who saves; thank you for being the God who is with us, now and forevermore. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Hopefully Waiting

“As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man.”

It is Christmas, but this year I am not in my normal holiday rut. I would like to say it is because I had determined to be more Christ-mindful and holiday-meaning-aware, but abandoning my usual routine was a forced choice, of course. The continued impacts of COVID-19 have caused yet another disruption in my traditions and routine. And I have decided that...this is probably a good thing! I fear I would have been one of those folks, in the days of Noah, eating and drinking and doing all the rest--taking things for granted and mostly oblivious to the pending loom of the storm. Instead of the normal hubbub and plans, I feel much more mindful, this year, of the anniversary of the miracle of Jesus coming into the world for what it truly was. Remembering His gift of hope, I feel compelled to hopefully wait for the new normal of the new year. To work to be more open to God's plan and less prone in the comfortable lull of my old grooves and set ways. And so I pray...

by Chaplain John Holzhüter

Prayer

God of great expectations and unceasing wonders, the new groove You set, through the miraculous birth of Jesus, afforded a new world-path for grace to manifest. Help me to be watchful and ready and not take You lightly or for granted. May this Christmas' quiet celebrations deep-root in my heart and may I live them daily going forward; well into the new year and focused on beyond.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

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

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