



Advent 2021

Advent 2021

Nov. 28	Mind Readers Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	6
Nov. 29	Are you ready for Christmas? Jan Lee	7
Nov. 30	Mantle of Unity Keith Shrimpton	8
Dec. 1	Misdirection Kurt Hamilton	9
Dec. 2	Love Does Sydney Shrimpton	10
Dec. 3	Seeing Hope Rev. Tiger Pennington	11
Dec. 4	Here I am Lord Dr. Paula Artac	12
Dec. 5	All In? Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	13
Dec. 6	During the Waiting Community Contributor	14
Dec. 7	Action is Needed Kurt Hamilton	15
Dec. 8	Living in the Moment Nicole Hamilton	16
Dec. 9	To Do or To Be, That Is the Question Sydney Shrimpton	17
Dec. 10	Bearing Gifts Rev. Tiger Pennington	18
Dec. 11	Following Joyful Noise Chaplain John Holzhüter	19

Dec. 12	Back to the Future Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	20
Dec. 13	Joy in Return Trish Dowd Kelne	21
Dec. 14	Wonder Keith Shrimpton	22
Dec. 15	Door vs. Window vs. Hole I Make in the Roof Elizabeth Hall	23
Dec. 16	A Simple Conversation Kurt Hamilton	24
Dec. 17	Taking Our Hand John Grummon, Chaplain, BCC - retired	25
Dec. 18	Who Are You Leaning On? Dr. Dorothy L. Smith	26
Dec. 19	The Missing Piece to the Puzzle Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	27
Dec. 20	Re-conditioning Trish Dowd Kelne	28
Dec. 21	Who's Leading Whom? Sydney Shrimpton	29
Dec. 22	Star of Wonder, Star of Night, Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light Janice Trigg	30
Dec. 23	Peace Among Those Whom God Favors! Rev. Matt Sturtevant	31
Dec. 24	Good to the Last Drop - CHRISTMAS EVE Dr. Rich Menninger, retired Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion	32



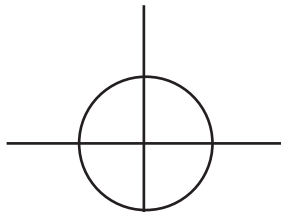
O Lord
of Israel

of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the
flame of the burning bush
and gave him the law on
Sinai -- Come and redeem us
with outstretched Arm.

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.



Mind Readers

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John 1:1

When we consider the Christmas story, we usually look to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke for the well-known accounts of our Savior’s birth. But the Gospel of John—in its unique way—also highlights the birth of our Lord, not by portraying what happened, but by offering profound theological reflection not found in the other Gospels mentioned. This should come as no surprise. After many years of studying and teaching courses on the four Gospels, I have concluded that Matthew and Luke (and Mark) focus on what Jesus did; the apostle John, however, concentrates on who He is. Unlike the familiar descriptions of the wisemen and shepherds, John views Jesus’ birth through the eyes of one who had long pondered the importance of who Christ is. John walked with Jesus while on earth, but he took sixty years or so to reflect on who He is before writing his Gospel.

After much contemplation, John writes that Jesus is the Word, the *logos*. This Greek term includes the thought that Jesus is God’s communication and revelation to the world. We use words to communicate our thoughts and to reveal what is on our mind. Jesus became the primary means for God to express His thoughts to us. Only John describes Jesus as the *logos* in the New Testament (see also 1 John 1:1; Revelation 19:13) and I suggest that he couldn’t have chosen a better term.

Today’s verse teaches that Jesus has always existed and that the Christmas story doesn’t mark the origin of Jesus but His transition from His pre-existent glory to His living on earth as a human being. Jesus existed before creation and actually took part in creation (John 1:3). Note how John’s opening words “In the beginning” remind us of the opening line in the Book of Genesis.

Furthermore, John is quick to teach that Jesus has always been with God, and, in fact, is God. To see Jesus as the Word is to read the mind of God. The remarkable thing about today’s verse is how it completes the Christmas story as found in Matthew and Luke. We need the details of the Christmas story to show us how Jesus entered this world; we need the opening verse of John to appreciate who our majestic Savior is.

In four upcoming devotions, I will examine what is probably the key verse of the Gospel of John, verse 1:14. As I am thankful to have the opportunity to contribute to your Advent season, my hope and prayer is that this devotional guide will be used by God to open your eyes to the truth that to see Jesus is to know the thoughts of God, for “the mind of God has become a person” (William Barclay).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, You are the “Word of God” (Revelation 19:13) and the “Word of life” (1 John 1:1). Let us use our ears to hear Your voice during Advent season. In the Name of the One who calls to His sheep, amen.

Are you ready for Christmas?

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’” Isaiah 40:3-5

How are you going to spend the four weeks before Christmas, the time Christians know as Advent. For many, it is the busiest time of the year with so much doing. Will we save any time for being? That’s what my niece, OU graduate and chaplain at North Kansas City Hospital, Joy Morony Freeman asked in a poem she wrote several years ago.

Are You Ready for Christmas?

*Are you ready for Christmas?
Are the presents bought and wrapped?
Cards sent?
House decorated?
Cookies made?
Christmas meal planned?*

*Are you ready for Christmas?
Are you finding Hope?
Experiencing Joy?
Spreading Peace?
Being Love?
Embracing the story of the greatest gift?*

*The first list is the list of doing
The second list is one of being
I may never get the first list completed
and that is fine
Because as long as I am focused on the second list*

*Then yes
I am ready for Christmas.
Are you?*

by Jan Lee

Prayer

Loving God, as we look forward to celebrating the birth of your Son, may we remember that the most important things in the Advent season are the hope, love, joy, and peace that He brought to earth. Thank you these gifts. Amen.

Mantle of Unity

“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” Psalm 133:1

Unity is an incredibly important aspect of the Christian walk, yet so easily we can be dissuaded from its practice. Scripturally we know how easy it is to cast the first stone, we know the teaching of turning the other cheek and how hard it is, in the moment, to do as Christ taught through example. The challenge attached to this particular Psalm is one of working toward that unity in the face of disregard or division. Following the example given to us, even as he was mocked and beaten, to strive for unity and relationship with all people.

by Keith Shrimpton

Prayer

Lord of Heaven and Earth, we ask that you would create in us a worthiness to uphold the mantle of unity that you have placed as a central theme to your Gospel. Instill in us a steadfast perspective to keep our hearts, minds and souls fixed on your purpose and your desire for unity among your people. Amen.

Misdirection

“Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the Moabite officials. But God was very angry when he went, and the Angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.” Numbers 22:21-23

This story always puts a smile on my face. Balaam’s donkey is simply performing his duty by being a mount for his master to ride. When his donkey turned and moved off the road, Balaam immediately corrected him to get him back in line. Two more times this happens as the donkey is allowed to speak. The scripture continues with, “²⁶ Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. ²⁸ Then the Lord opened the donkey’s mouth, and it said to Balaam, “What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?”

A simple question the donkey should be able to ask as it was not its fault that the path had been altered. The master on the other hand is upset with how the donkey has made him look. Yet the donkey is the same as always, and one that has been faithful to his master. The Angel of the Lord allowed the donkey to talk to express his frustrations with Balaam. “³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you? “No,” he said. ³¹ Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. ³² The angel of the Lord asked him, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me.[a] ³³ The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it.” (22:30-33)

An unlikely hero in this situation as the donkey was just trying to serve his master. The donkey was protecting Balaam from going down these roads. He was heading down a reckless path several times. Once he was challenged in his path, he punished his faithful companion. This is one key takeaway that I received from this story. Donkeys can talk?? No, I’m just kidding, but also not. My biggest takeaway that was sometimes we are quick to act in anger against our closest followers. This donkey has been by his side for years and always acted appropriately. A faithful servant was being punished because of an outburst. I think this story serves as a reminder that when we are faced with conflict, we have to remember God’s teachings to not act out in anger. Remember this story the next time that you let anger fuel a situation. Let us go to God together.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God remind us today of our misdirection. That you are our guide that leads our lives as we continue to teach your ways. Let us use this story as an example of not only how to control our anger, but to teach us to be patient. Lord show us how to lead from your teachings. Let our minds be open to what you have done and what you are doing. We are thankful for your work, and for your world. Let us continue what you have started. We say all of this in your Son’s name, amen.

Love Does

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” James 4:13-17

We are saved by grace, not by works. Only by the merciful hand of our Savior are we allowed entrance into Heaven, not by our own actions or by human will. There is nothing we can do to earn this salvation. No amount of giving, no selfless deeds or just actions. We simply aren’t perfect or good enough to obtain salvation on our own—this is why we need a Savior.

However, like everything in life, there is a balance. Because, though we have been saved by the merciful act of the Father, we are called to live a life that is set apart from others through a process called sanctification. Through sanctification we become more and more like Jesus, drawing closer to God through prayer, study, and our actions.

It’s the human condition that keeps us on the hamster wheel, trying harder and harder to do all the right things for all of the wrong reasons. We compare our own actions to others’, judge ourselves and other people, and do our best to be the best in an effort to make God happy. We run ourselves ragged, piling on the good deeds and following all the rules so we can be called “Good Christians.” But what if this isn’t how we’re supposed to be living?

What if we’re supposed to be so full of joy and thankfulness that the Spirit of God fills us without us even thinking about it? What if we stopped driving ourselves to the point of exhaustion with all of these duties and roles? What if we lived so close to Jesus that our deeds resulted from a heart full of grace and peace, not one of competition and judgment?

Faith without works is dead, it’s true. But when your relationship with God is your first priority, when you’re so full of the joy and peace and love that comes from the Spirit that you shine from the inside out, your works become an overflow of your heart. You become sustained by the grace of God alone, not by anything you could ever do.

God desires a relationship with you. He doesn’t need you to show off for Him. He doesn’t need you to impart all of these rules and roles upon yourself. He doesn’t need you to be the best, to call yourself a “good Christian.” He just wants you. When you prioritize Him, all of the good deeds follow naturally—all of the love overflows from your heart and into others.

Stop working so hard. Let the Holy Spirit fill you as you spend time with Him each day. Thank Him fervently, and watch your life become an outpouring of good faith and great love.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Father, thank you for your salvation. Please forgive me for trying so hard to be the best for you. Help me to feel surrounded and encompassed by your love so that I can spread it to others. Thank you for your Spirit that shines so brightly within me. Show me how to be a light for others. Amen.

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.

Here I am Lord

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?’
Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” Isaiah 6:8

During Advent, we set our goal to come before God with a sincere heart and to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ, awaiting His coming again in glory. If we are searching for an effective way to prayerfully connect with the Divine, the following poem by Vaclav Havel gives us a place to start, responding to God with, “Here I am, Lord!”

Václav Havel (1936–2011) was a playwright and poet who wrote the following poem during the activist protests and uprisings that toppled communist rule in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Havel served as the last president of Czechoslovakia (1989–92), and the first president of the Czech Republic (1993–2003).

*It is I who must begin...
Once I begin, once I try –
Here and now,
Right where I am,
Not excusing myself
By saying that things would be easier elsewhere and somehow,
Without grand speeches and ostentatious gestures,
But all the more persistently – to live in harmony
With the “voice of Being,”
as I understand it within myself –*

*As soon as I begin that,
I suddenly discover,
To my surprise, that
I am neither the only one,
Nor the first,
Nor the most important one
To have set out upon that road...
Whether all is really lost
Or not depends entirely on
Whether or not I am lost....*

by Dr. Paula Artac

Prayer

Dear God,

Thank You for Your beautiful promise that You are with us no matter what we face. And that no matter what we face, You will never leave our side. Amen

All In?

“*The Word became flesh* and made his dwelling 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

If you were asked to give one word to capture the essence of Christmas, what would it be? There are several possibilities but based on today's verse, I would offer the word *incarnation*. This term conveys the essential belief that Jesus was God in the flesh. This conviction is one of the most important for Christians and one of the most doubted—if not attacked—by skeptics. To hold that the incarnation is true is to affirm that Jesus was fully God and fully human. It is safe to conclude that as the Gospel writer John began to fathom the meaning and significance of Jesus' death, he came to understand the significance of Jesus' birth. Or paraphrasing Athanasius (296-373 A. D.), without a correct understanding of the incarnation one cannot properly understand Jesus as payment for our sin.

This is because the incarnation is part of God's solution for the dilemma humanity faced. Sin severed our relationship with God and since sin came into the world through a human (Adam; Romans 5:12), the only one to repair that broken relationship with God is yet another human. But because sin renders us imperfect no human can ever restore that relationship; only God can restore the relationship because only God-in-the-flesh is able to live a sinless life, the requirement to be the sacrifice for our sin. “Since no one except God can make satisfaction for our sins, and no one except man ought to make it, it is necessary for a God-man to make it” (Anselm 1033-1109 A. D.). Hence, the incarnation, which addresses our need for a Savior.

Most would agree that a major difficulty for nonbelievers of today is Christianity's claim that Jesus is fully God. Yet surprisingly, in John's day some people had more trouble accepting that He was fully human. Humanity didn't need a Savior, a perfect human being to die on the cross. Rather, one could find salvation through secret knowledge known only to a select few, as reflected by divine beings like Jesus. John labeled those who denied Jesus was fully God and fully human as false teachers and liars (1 John 2:22-23), manifesting the spirit of the antichrist (4:2-3).

And there is no reason to think John would hesitate to use such designations today to rebuke those who deny that *The Word became flesh*. To deny the incarnation is to deny the need of a Savior, the necessity of the cross and the reality of an empty tomb. In short, to deny the incarnation is to deny the gospel!

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Father, may we take this Advent season with all seriousness and be intentional about our thoughts and beliefs concerning the importance of Christmas. In the Name of the Word of God, amen.

During the Waiting

“I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope.” Psalm 130:5

Waiting requires being in limbo; where you are is not where you are intending to be. There are times though when one must be present without anything to be done—just there to wait. There are times one can be distracted while waiting- a scroll on the phone comes to mind, or a game.

As part of our Advent, let us make a practice of the “waiting times” in these days remaining before Christmas. When you tangibly wait- at a red light, in line at the store, while your computer reboots, while picking up take out- determine a practice to draw yourself into the waiting of Advent. Maybe just counting your breaths; steady and aware. Or choose a verse or two from scripture and recite it, just let the words repeat and be present in the waiting. Select your verse before you need it. Here are a few verses for reference- use them, or select your own. Or you might try just one word for your waiting word, maybe Emmanuel.

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Hebrews 11:1

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?’
Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” Isaiah 6:8

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John 1:1

“A voice calling, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” Isaiah 40:3

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” Luke 1:39-47

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:14

by Community Contributor

Prayer

Gracious Lord, help us to be present in the waiting of this season; allow us to grow closer to you and to ourselves and our community as we anticipate the wonder of your Son. Amen.

Action is Needed

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Hebrews 11:1

What does the word action mean? Action can be defined as, “the fact or process of doing something, typically to achieve an aim.” It’s a simple word, but one I think is sometimes overlooked. I feel the world is lacking in action. What do I mean by this? Sometimes we all are moving along in our routines. The idea is that we cannot act without disrupting the easy system we have created for ourselves. The opportunity of action is always near us, yet do we act? Do you rise to the occasion of acting when the situation needs you? I know for a fact that sometimes when I see challenges or opportunities, I turn and look to see if someone else will act first. The first step can be the hardest. God provides us opportunities to display the confidence to act.

I sometimes fail to see the items for which I am praying. When we ask God in our prayers for patience, he provides us with circumstances to be patient. Asking God for hope will give us situations where we can be hopeful. At first, I would become easily frustrated as I was not receiving guidance for what I was asking God. I think at the beginning of my Christian walk, like many others, we have this hope that God is going to wash away all of our problems.

Faith is something that sometimes we have to enter blind. Just because God isn’t fixing my situation, it doesn’t mean that he isn’t providing me opportunities to act. Action is around each of us. God puts us in situations of free choice to let us make our own lives. Situations and outcomes derive from what we do every day. We each start this world with a unique situation. However, that situation is created in a world that is limitless with potential and opportunity.

So today, believe in something that you cannot see. Act on something that you normally would overlook. Start your next experience. Trust in a God that has provided confidence in faith. Let us pray together.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God we look to you for action. Let us be change agents for your kingdom as we serve your name. Teach us to be observant to the fact that we can believe in something that we cannot see. Show us your ways through opportunities of action. Be with us as we start these new challenges as we turn them into a community. We thank you for this kindness as you look over us today and every day. In your Son’s name, we pray, amen.

8

– Wednesday –

Living in the Moment

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” Isaiah 43:18-21

March of 2019 seems like so long ago now that we’re about to enter 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic has been with us for over two years, and it’s hard to believe it’s been prevalent in our lives this long when most of us thought it would only last a few weeks, maybe a few months at most. I often find myself thinking about when life was “normal” before the pandemic and wondering when we will be able to go back to that normalcy. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I don’t think it will ever be the old “normal” it once was. Our world has been changed and is continuing to change all the time, and that’s okay. It took some time to accept this idea, but I am comforted by God’s words in Isaiah 43:18-21.

In Isaiah, the Israelites have lost touch with how much God has provided for them, and he finds them blind to what he is trying to do for them. God urges them to forget the past and focus on the present because he is providing for them in new ways that they are missing. They are not only missing the good that God is doing in their lives but also the opportunity to praise him just like we were designed to do. Like the Israelites, I find myself dwelling in the past. I focus on all the good things that were happening before the pandemic instead of focusing on the beautiful moments God is growing in my life right now.

As Christians, we have the honor to be an example for others. God calls us to praise him in all circumstances, even amid a pandemic. My challenge for you today is to not dwell in the past, but focus on the present, and praise God for the blessings in front of you.

by Nicole Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

You see more than we could ever fathom. We may not understand everything going on in our world, but let us be comforted by the fact that you are always present in our lives, and always producing good things. Give us the eyes to see your blessings, and the wisdom to stay in the moment instead of in the past. In your name, we pray, amen.

To Do or To Be, That Is the Question

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’” Luke 10:38-40

Would you invite Jesus to your party?

What is your initial reaction to this question? Is it a resounding “Yes! Think of the conversations we could have!”? Is it a feeling of panic, of stress, as you think about having the King of the Universe partake in your food and look at your mismatching curtains? Is it a feeling of embarrassment as you think about what He would think about your conversations, your actions, your house’s decor? Martha was a bit frazzled when Jesus came to visit. She wanted everything to be precise, perfectly set, established efficiently and worthy of praise. Mary, though, sat next to Jesus, not serving, not helping her sister, not frantically dusting. She sat at his feet and she listened to Him.

Martha tried to show her love and respect through her actions. She wanted Jesus to know how hard she was working for Him, how highly regarded he was. She tried to earn His favor and reward through work and duty. Mary showed her love by spending time with Jesus, by engaging with Him, through listening to His words and letting them work inside her. Jesus makes it clear which way is better. “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41-42

Jesus knows everything about you. He loves you, all of you. Even the part of you that gets really nervous and stammers or snorts when you laugh. He loves the way you decorate your house. He loves the effort you put into the casserole. He loves you. And nothing you can do or say can change that. He doesn’t need you to be perfect, to put on a flawless performance. He simply wants to spend time with you, to teach you.

Don’t keep Him from your party because you’re scared He’s going to see something to make Him change His mind. Don’t hold Him at arm’s length because you don’t want to make a mistake or embarrass yourself. Don’t work yourself to the bone trying to show Him how much you love Him without ever actually spending time and getting to know Him.

Draw near to Him because He cares for you. Invite Him to your party. Spend every moment of every day with Him. He stands at your door, and He has so much to teach you. Open up, let Him in. You’ll find, after spending some time with Him, that He truly does make the best party guest.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for loving me. Thank you for knowing everything about me. Help me draw closer to you, to open up to you, to spend every moment learning from you and feeling your love. Thank you for wanting to draw near to me. Amen.

Bearing Gifts

“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry,

‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.’”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” Luke 1:46-47
The season of Advent invites us into the story of God’s transforming gift of love, the story of Jesus, sweet little Jesus boy laid in a manger. Our Christmas celebrations encompass meals prepared and meals shared, gifts given and gifts received. The casual, reflexive Christmas question is, “Are you ready for Christmas?” Translation: “Have you planned your meals and bought the gifts?” But deep down inside, we know there is so much more to the season than our family celebrations.

The Advent/Christmas story leads us to Elizabeth and Mary, pregnant women bearing gifts. Elizabeth’s John the Baptist is the preparer of the Way for exultant Mary’s gift who will save us all. What a jubilant and mysterious encounter we see in Luke 1:39-45! Mary, possibly seeking respite from the rumor mill of her questionable pregnancy, seeks solace in her relative Elizabeth. Yet there is no secrecy here for Elizabeth is bearing the gift of a prophet who leaps for joy upon Jesus’ arrival in the safety of Mary’s womb. Instead of silence or secrecy, Mary receives affirmation and confirmation. She may have arrived beaten down by the burden of small town talk and relational tension, but she receives a gift that inspires her exultant song known as The Magnificat. This small town, pregnant, peasant teenager is bearing the gift of revolutionary love that transforms the world.

What if we began to consider what gifts we are bearing rather than what gifts we will receive? What if the church leaped for joy like John upon sensing Jesus’ presence? And what if the church, like Mary, celebrated being bearers of Jesus for the sake of the world?

by Rev. Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Eternal and loving God, may we, like John the Baptist, see Jesus so clearly that we leap for joy and may we, like Mary, sing for joy as we share in bearing Christ for the sake of the world. Amen.

Following Joyful Noise

When I was a younger me, much of what shaped my developing faith came from the lyrics of my families' favorite hymns. I remember my mind's eye, wide with visions of "Christian soldiers! Marching as to war, Looking unto Jesus, who is gone before" (Sir Arthur Sullivan) and pondering on the tangible shape and scope of an "instrument of peace" as it 'sowed love, faith, hope, light and joy.' (Prayer of St. Francis)

One of my early favorites was the hymn 'Whatsoever You Do' (Willard Jabush), based on Matthew 25, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"

As an adult then, and in the rather dark times of now, I was typically frustrated, after watching the news. While praying for clearer guidance in my response to the sheep God's asks me to tend, a tune popped into my head and I recalled these (Corporal Works of Mercy).

- 1 Feed the Hungry
- 2 Give drink to the thirsty
- 3 Clothe the naked
- 4 Shelter the homeless
- 5 Comfort the imprisoned
- 6 Visit the sick
- 7 Bury the dead

More than the Bible study of my youth, these are now Bible practices I know I am called to do (as a Christian) and not just to folk I like. And so I pray:

by Chaplain John Holzhüter

Prayer

God of tough and tender, I am here to do Your will. Grant me the wisdom to comprehend where I can best sow seeds and the grace to do Your tangible work for those most in need of Your care. Amen.

Back to the Future

“The Word became flesh *and made his dwelling 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

The apostle John’s interpretation of Christmas takes on a familiar Jewish tone when we examine the words *made his dwelling among us*. God has always wanted to be with His people and to fellowship with them, beginning with Adam and Eve. But sin broke that relationship, and the couple was expelled from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3). However, God would not be deterred and after Moses led the people out of Egypt, he built a tabernacle for God to dwell in so that His Presence would again be among His people (Exodus 25:8). The tabernacle—though portable and temporary—anticipated the day when God would reside permanently with His faithful.

Eventually, the tabernacle was replaced by Solomon’s temple, which in turn, was destroyed and replaced by the second temple. That temple was enlarged and improved by Herod the Great and was the temple which stood when Jesus was on earth. The people of Jesus’ day looked to the temple as proof of God’s Presence, but John flipped that notion on its head.

He took seriously the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 that God would send the Messiah into this world to be born as a child and He was to be called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” Jesus remarked once that “that something greater than the temple is here” (Matthew 12:6), and John affirms that by telling us that our Lord understood His body to be the real temple (John 2:19-22). The second temple was destroyed in 70 A. D. and by the time John penned the words of his Gospel, the idea that Jesus was the embodiment of the Presence of God was well-established in John’s mind. What is more, the term to *dwell* literally means “pitching a tent,” for John “sees the whole ministry of Jesus as a ‘tabernacling’” among His people (Lesslie Newbigin).

But there is more. We who have accepted Christ as Savior and Lord are together considered the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) and even the temple of God (3:16), for the Presence of God dwells in us through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. But the best is yet to come! John tells us that when the new earth is here, we will hear the wonderful words, “Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and* be their God” (Revelation 21:3; NKJV).

The incarnate Word of God has come in the flesh and communicated God’s thoughts through His words and actions. He pitched His tent with us, beginning when He took His first breath in Bethlehem. The tabernacle of God includes the concept of the divine glory. We will pursue the idea of glory in my next devotion, but I would like to end this one with the thought that God sent His “true” tabernacle into the world that we might “glorify God and enjoy him forever” (Question One, *Westminster Shorter Catechism*).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Word of God, come pitch Your tent in our hearts that we may take Your first Advent as a sign that the best is to come with Your second Advent. In the Name of our only hope, amen.

Joy in Return

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

“Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.” –Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*

In this week of Advent where many light a candle for joy, the idea of returning a gift of joy inspired a recollection to a few winter’s back.

While exploring the first snow of the season with my then young daughter, my steps settled into the slow rhythm of a toddler’s. Walking in the snow, a joy in itself. Walking with a young one, in the snow—what a delight. We came upon a bunny, surprised from its “stand-still and be unseen” statuesque pose; it leapt and bounded away. My daughter roused to a run, or as much of a run as possible in snow boots and with toddler legs. The stone hidden in the snow was about as surprising. She tumbled and I came stumbling after.

Once noses were wiped and bones checked, we lay laughing in the snow. And the hurt of the tumble was no more, only joy and a readiness to see the next bunny or crunch along at steady pace. In the winter of Advent, take notice of a moment of joy – in the wonder of the world that is young and joyful, wounded and steady—giving to you and awaiting you. Step outside, look for the gifts and share.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

Dear God of Joy and Wonder,

As we await the gift of Christ, grant us hearts open to your gifts and willing to give of ourselves in return. Make us hunger for the giving and content in the offering. In gratitude we pray, amen.

Wonder

“Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” John 20:30-31

This passage has always brought a child-like wonder in me. Considering the many acts and miracles we have recorded in scripture, this statement says that we only have a fraction of the whole story. To imagine the countless parables Christ spoke, miracles He performed and lives He altered can certainly allow us to bear witness to the real and true power His message sends. Believing the message of scripture does have a tendency to reawaken a proper perspective in each of us, not letting us grow too big for our own good and to become blind to that child-like wonder.

by Keith Shrimpton

Prayer

Lord, we ask for your grace in keeping us child-like in our awe and wonder. Keep us mindful that we don't have all the answers. Keeping us open to your plan, your purpose and your wonder. Amen.

Door vs. Window vs. Hole I Make in the Roof

“I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

I cannot stress how good God is despite, well, life. I know I’ve let the world creep in a bit too much as of late and God is working to get my heart right and back to where I seek Him first.

We’ve all said or heard the cliché of ‘When God closes a door, He opens a window.’ With the season I’m in I’ve heard it a lot. There is no window so far, and that’s okay. Why? Because every tough season brings maturity and growth.

Matthew 7:7-8 (NRSV) says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Here’s some more gritty truth. I haven’t been knocking or really even seeking as much as I could/should be, and yet God is here surrounding with my family and fulfilling our needs and getting us through.

Mark 2:1-12 tells the story of Jesus healing and forgiving the paralytic. The friends of this man are so desperate to bring their friend close to Jesus that they removed the roof and dug through it in order to lower their friend down to Jesus. These people were so eager for Christ they straight up tore up the roof of this house!

Jesus is focused on the spiritual side of things. He’s after getting people saved and it has nothing to do with this life on earth. There is no guarantee for a hunky-dory life. There is a guarantee for unconditional love and a new body and home in Heaven. Jesus is after our hearts.

So, these tough times, which make me stop being as selfish and turn to Him first versus coping on my own, are a blessing, because they re-center me and get my heart right again. I haven’t been seeking as much as I know I should, and yet Jesus is still here making sure we’re surviving and our needs are met. All the while he’s planting stories of followers being eager for Him in front of me and opening my heart to see His calling to come and seek Him first. He wants our hearts to be eager for Him. He wants us to seek, ask and dig that hole in the roof if we have to, and that window will open, it just may be a skylight instead.

by Elizabeth Hall

Prayer

Papa God, thank you for loving me. Thank you for looking at me with love and warmth in your eyes as you chuckle and shake your head gently as I stumble, and thank you for then tucking your hand around my elbow and helping me back up to continue down life’s paths. Love you Papa, amen.

A Simple Conversation

“When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, ‘Will you give me a drink?’ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?’”

A simpler time was when we would walk up to a stranger and talk to them face to face. Jesus saw the woman sitting at the well as another human being: a person, and one with whom he wanted to have a conversation. However, fear overcame the woman as she was shocked that he spoke to her. Jesus didn't see her as a lesser being, nor a person that he was above. Jesus never spoke to anyone in the demeanor of a superior being, but instead as a leader. This is what makes Jesus so powerful; he doesn't lead by control, but through a simple conversation. The Bible is full of stories, adventures, opportunities for Jesus to show us his power through his words. Words that have the strength to help or hurt. With words always evolving, we as followers of Christ are challenged to review his teachings to keep us on point.

Getting back into our example, Jesus is starting the conversation. He initiated the dialogue by asking for a simple task, a drink. The woman looks at him with confusion, as if he was talking to someone else. It's not that she cannot complete the task that he has asked, but surprised that he is talking to her. She shares about her past and the life that she has once lived. However, Jesus already knows this information. He knows each one of us and continues to ask simple tasks of us.

So with this in mind, it made me think of a challenge. A challenge to initiate a conversation with a stranger. What is the value of this? Uncomfortability creates opportunities. In today's world, it's easy to go through the motions. It's easy to continue to scroll on your phone. It's easy to watch the next episode of your favorite tv show. It is not easy to hold a conversation. Nor to start one with a stranger. However, think of the reward we gain from learning from one another, from transferring new ideas, skills, and the experiences that shape us as human beings.

Take this dialogue with you as a charge to be different—to take an opportunity to talk with someone new, and to learn something old. Today, be more like Jesus and find out why humans are so unique in every way. Jesus died so that we all could live. Why not use this time to see and learn what he died for. Please pray with me.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God, open our hearts to our brothers and sisters. Let us not look at one another through a device but instead through the eyes of others. Show us real conversations about experiences that you let us have. Bring us understanding through this charge of discomfort. Give us memories from new friends and fellowships. Let us use this day to become close to one another and through that, closer to you. Thank you for your Son, the leader of all. We say this in your name. Amen.

Taking Our Hand

Our family was vacationing in Colorado. We were attracted to a tall observation tower. If we climbed to the platform on top, we could get a clear view of the snow-capped mountains surrounding the valley. My wife and 9 year- old son quickly headed up the wooden two-plank steps. I noticed my 6 year-old son was looking at the 2-3 inch open space between the two planks. He was hesitating to go beyond the first step. I offered to go ahead of him. He raised one foot, but he didn't move. So I moved behind him and told him I would be there if he needed any help. He still hesitated. I moved up beside him. He took my hand and we walked up the steps together.

Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet. "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (which means, "God is with us"). Matthew 1:22 & 23.

Now I need help. The hand of Someone I trust who is bigger than I, reaches out. We join hands and go forward together.

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for being with me and taking my hand. In your Holy Name, amen.

Who Are You Leaning On?

“And now, little children abide in Him, so that when He is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before Him at His coming.” 1 John 2:28 NRSV

Who Are You Leaning On? What is your confidence in? Are you living in Christ? Or are you visiting Him when you have an emergency? Where is your home? These questions may seem frivolous upon first observation but they are more relevant than they seem. You see, to *abide* means where do you *live*, not where do you *visit*. Are you living in Christ? With the state of the world: the pandemic, economy and all the other problems we are experiencing, you may be trying to get through this maze called life on your own, then you discover this is just too complicated to traverse alone.

If your permanent address is not Christ, then you may want to consider moving from your current home of worry and distress to abiding in Christ. If you abide in Christ, you will experience love, peace, and fullness of joy, never to be alone or unsure of how you are going to make it again, because one of the names of Christ is Immanuel, *God with us*. If you abide in Christ, you can be assured that all your needs will be supplied by Christ, because it says in Philippians 4:19, “My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory through Christ Jesus” NKJV.

by Dr. Dorothy L. Smith

Prayer

Lord God, I come thanking you for the privilege to call you my God. I thank you that I can live in you and depend upon you for all my needs. Lord, I thank you that there is no shortage in you. I thank you for supplying all my needs and for never leaving or forsaking me. Help me to follow your example and as you bless me, I'll be a blessing to others.

It is in Jesus' name and for Jesus' sake, I pray. Amen.

The Missing Piece to the Puzzle

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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

The Gospel of John reports that as Jesus was dying on the cross, He entrusted His mother Mary into the care of the apostle John (19:26-27). It would only be natural if John learned as much as he could from Mary concerning the events surrounding the birth of the incarnate Word, for he was not present at this event. She would have simply recalled the report of the shepherds who had witnessed the glory of God in the fields while watching their sheep, for the “glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9). That fearful moment was followed by the appearance of the heavenly host singing the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, “glory to God in the highest” (2:14). When the shepherds departed Bethlehem, they returned to their flocks glorifying God for all they had seen (2:20).

The italicized words of our verse for today remind us that our Lord was born in glory. Essentially, glory means the Presence of God, which Jewish thinking describes as the Shekinah, and often is visible in some spectacular manifestation. This is seen in a cloud in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10). John would have easily perceived this glory in Jesus’ miracles (John 2:11) and His transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). But it would take the eyes of exceptional faith to see this glory in His death on the cross, for such a revelation would only come after Jesus’ was resurrected. John testifies that he belongs to a faith community for “*We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father.*” Along with other believers, John came to understand that he had witnessed the glory of God in Christ during His time on earth, a glory reserved for the unique and beloved Son of the Father.

The One who “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3) had entered the world in glory, in the birth of a boy who was placed in a manger. John had learned after much reflection and contemplation that without Christmas there would be no Easter. His understanding of the incarnate Word was incomplete until he realized that Christmas should drive us to our knees anytime we think of it, especially during Advent. John no doubt understood Christmas as a wonder; though it testifies to the beginning of Christ’s life on earth, it is often the last step to comprehending the incarnation.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

*Who is He in yonder stall,
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!
'Tis the Lord! the King of glory!
At His feet we humbly fall,
crown Him! crown Him Lord of all!*

- B.R. Hanby

Re-conditioning

“A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.” Proverbs 15:4

Re-conditioning—it is a new concept we have been learning with our rescue dog, Norman. He joined our family last year when we were sheltering in place. We have discovered he struggles with *alarm barking*. And for the non-dog folks out there—he barks, not just a lot of barking, barking times a million, trillion; and at every sound, every car, every movement. Every noise causes a barking mania.

We sought professional help and learned that Norman needed to be re-conditioned. Likely his previous owners would scold him, or worse spray with water, or worse hurt him, when he barked—and we had also scolded him thinking saying, “NO!” was the way to change his behavior. The trainer taught us these actions just confirm his alarm; “I am barking because I am scared, and guess what, I was right—now they are yelling, now I hurt, so I better bark some more...and some more and some more...”

With the trainer’s help and some really disciplined work, we are making progress. When Norman barks, we give him treats, and then distract him to perform a trick. We remain neutral and soothing in our demeanor (this is not easy—but well worth the effort). We reward him for the good behavior, rather than scold for the bad; we re-direct and encourage success. So, he learns that a sound, does not need to be scary, and maybe it is actually ok. Once the panic and mania have been soothed, then his brain is open to learning new behaviors—ones that work within our family. It is a process—this re-conditioning; Pavlov was right-and it does work.

I can relate to the alarm barking—so much is scary in our noisy world—and we might just bark and bark and bark until we are horse and tired. Our thoughts can even bark at us, repeating over and over the worries and fears. We even bark at the ones offering love and compassion. Maybe during Advent, we can take time to offer ourselves soothing words, reminding ourselves, of the words in Isaiah, “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). We are lifted in God; we are gifted in the coming of the Lord to be with us; we are children of God. We are good.

When the barking in your head is loud, step away to hear the soothing words and refocus on the good we can create in this world. Keep at it; it is a process. Encourage yourself for the good you do; little successes make a difference. Nurture that, move toward that and let the quiet come.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of all things, creatures loud and quiet, the scary and the soothing, thank you for being with us and help us remember Your love is so full and true, it came to us, in the miracle of your Son, born of Mary. May we quiet our hearts in You, over and over again, soothed by your ever present love. Amen.

Who's Leading Whom?

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

This is one of those verses that most people know and use. It speaks of strength, encouragement and hope. But it is also a verse that is often taken out of context. The situation in Jeremiah's day was bleak. The Israelites had been forced into exile by the Babylonians, their temple had just been destroyed, and families had been ripped apart. Their future was uncertain and everyone was crying out to the Lord for help.

Many false prophets were making declarations to appease the people, telling them not to worry, that God would come to save them soon. They were preaching the quick-fix, the fast-food of that generation. “Don't worry guys; God heard you, He's gonna save you, just chill out and He'll be here soon to rescue you. Just hold on a little longer.” They were right—God had heard them. He was going to rescue them. But this was not going to be a quick fix. In fact, God told them to settle down, get married, have some kids, then help those kids find some spouses because, well, they were going to be here awhile. (Jeremiah 29:5-6)

We're always looking for the quick fix. We don't like to wait. We don't like to endure. But sometimes that's exactly what God calls us to do. Like the Jews in Jesus' day, who were waiting for a Savior to come and lead their military, to bring salvation through the sword, we like things to be tangible and immediate. But in everything, there are seasons. We follow God—he doesn't follow us, and His plans are much grander than we could ever imagine. Like sending the baby boy to be the savior of the world—a humble carpenter who was far more perfect than we could ever be.

God knows the plans He has for you. But more than likely, they will not include a quick fix. If you're in a season where you're feeling unhappy, trapped, a season of waiting, a season where you're fed up— just wishing for something to change, to be different, take heart. We may be waiting, but God calls us to prosper in this season of waiting. We may be focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, but God calls us to do so joyfully. We may feel like we're simply treading water, but God allows us to tread with a smile on our faces, secure in the knowledge that His plans will indeed prosper you and not harm you, will give you hope and a future, even if they don't presently make sense or aren't what you want right now.

Take heart. Trust the Lord. Turn to Him and be joyful in the waiting, patient in the affliction, and hopeful in the realization that He is near – He does hear you, and He is for you.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Lord, in this season of waiting, bring us to our knees in submission, realizing and remembering that it is you who are leading us, you who are creating the timeline. Help us to wait in joyful acceptance, resting in the knowledge that you are the purveyor of all perfect plans. Amen.

Star of Wonder, Star of Night, Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’” Matthew 2:1-2 ESV

I love looking up at the sky...especially at night!! I am enamored with the moon, the stars, the planets, meteor showers—you name it, and I will look for it. I even get email alerts from NASA to tell me when the International Space Station will be visible, and I watch in wonder as it streams across the night sky. I guess you could call me a star gazer or more accurately a nighttime sky gazer, definitely not an astronomer but definitely an astrophile. As far as stars go, I can point out the Big and Little Dippers, the North Star, and Orion’s Belt. For the planets I can usually identify Venus because of its “Evening Star” status but when it comes to Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, and Mercury I need the guidance of Google, my Skyview app, or the enduring “go to” in my house, The Old Farmer’s Almanac. So, I cannot even imagine what it took for the wise men to uncover the mystery of the star that announced the birth of the king of the Jews.

Watching the night sky gives me a sense of my size in the vastness of the Universe and gives me a sense of awe for the Creator of the Universe. There is not enough space in this devotional to talk about my musings regarding the way the Universe is expanding and how God makes it all work together. So, let’s just talk about that one celestial event that God used to announce the birth of His Son! There are different theories about what “his star” specifically was; some say a comet, some say a grand conjunction of planets, and some believe a heavenly miracle—God breaking in and putting his own signature of glory into the heavens for that epic event.

No matter how that Christmas star actually came into being, it is amazing to me and even more amazing the way the story unfolded. First, there were wise men from the east who somehow learned about the star. They had either been waiting and watching for it or they saw its brilliance and then searched to find out why it appeared. So, they had the knowledge of what the star meant and then they needed the time and means to travel as far as the star guided them. These wise men also had the insight and the understanding of honor to know this king of the Jews was worthy of worship. What incredible characters God used to add to his magnificent story. I find it so intriguing that God used these men, who were not of the house of Israel, in his grand scheme to show Israel and the whole world what a holy treasure had just been born.

“O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

by Janice Trigg

Prayer

Father God, please guide us to your perfect light, the Light of the World. Help us to be as humble as the wise men and acknowledge our need to worship your Son. Amen.

Peace Among Those Whom God Favors!

“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.’” Luke 2.13-14

Can you imagine how hard it was to live the life of a shepherd? Always on heightened alert for wandering sheep, dangerous animals, and exposure to the elements! Even at night, when others are home and snug in their beds, shepherds were ever-vigilant, eyes peeled for predators slinking through the grass. I cannot imagine that it caught many eyes when the Bethlehem want ads invited: “Wanted: Shepherd. Must be willing to work in dangerous conditions for little pay and no respect.”

That’s why it’s so surprising to read in Luke, the angels’ words to the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace *among those whom he favors!*” Wait a minute...God favors these guys? Yeah, right. But it is right. It’s the story of Christmas, that the “unfavorable” are favored, again and again. Poor, young, unwed Mary must have had a double take when the angel said “Greetings, favored one!” Old, forgotten Simeon danced on frail legs when the baby Jesus was brought before him into the Temple, causing him to sing that he could now be “dismissed in peace.”

The Christmas story is filled with reminders that **God favors us!** Richard Rohr reminds us of an old Jewish teaching that every one of us has our own angel marching before us, proclaiming “Behold, the image of God!” We don’t need to march through life, putting others down to make ourselves feel better, or living on high alert against perceived threats. When we feel like we are not smart enough, attractive enough, or talented enough, the Christmas story is a message of peace: *we are favored. We are enough.*

by Rev. Matt Sturtevant

Prayer

God of peace, remind us again—or maybe teach us for the first time—that we are enough. Amen.

—Friday—

Good to the Last Drop

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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

I now close my look at how the Gospel of John (1:1, 14) enlightens us concerning the significance of the birth of Christ. While Matthew and Luke provide the details of the event, John reveals who the baby is and how such a beginning ensures God’s grace and truth will prevail. The Word, which came in the flesh, is no other than the mind of God. That is, Jesus is the *logos* for He said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

The closing words of John 1:14 say it all: The Word became flesh and was “*full of grace and truth*.” The birth of Christ brings to the forefront the truth that God honors His covenant with His people. He showed His grace by becoming the God of Israel: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). And He remained gracious when He promised the new covenant despite the rebellion of Israel (Jeremiah 31:31-34). God pledged His love and loyalty to His people when Isaiah wrote: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...and he will be called... Everlasting Father” (9:6).

Our Lord’s birth reveals that the grace of the old covenant was personalized and contemporary in John’s life and can be in ours also. God’s grace, imbedded in the Old Testament, exploded when the incarnate Word appeared in the town of Bethlehem and manifested itself in the life of Christ (John 1:16). Grace clearly carries with it the idea that what God has done for us will remain underserved for eternity. Grace is a thing of beauty. David had it right for he wanted to dwell in the house of the Lord forever so that he might “gaze on the beauty of the Lord” (Psalm 27:4). In Christ we encounter the sheer loveliness of God.

But John also reminds us that the Word is truth, for truth is that which reflects the being and will of God. Jesus said it directly, “I am the Truth” (John 14:6) and if His disciples keep His teachings, then they “will know the truth and the truth will set them free (8:31-32). Truth is best understood by observation.

While discussing the concept of truth with another may result in invigorating dialogue, it will often leave us grasping for something tangible. But if you look at Jesus, a truthful and beautiful person, we have a better hold on the truth of the gospel and what God is showing us. The Lord chose not to redeem the world by the wave of His hand; instead, He redeemed it by entering our world as we did, through the womb. The Word of God truly shows us the goodness and beauty of God by demonstrating an overflowing love as evidenced by His death and resurrection.

While Moses caught only a glimpse of the glory of God (Exodus 33:18-23), those of the faith from the apostle John onward have encountered this glory in One who is full of grace and truth. So much so, “for from His fulness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). That is, as followers of Christ, what we “draw from the ocean of divine fulness is grace upon grace—one wave of grace being constantly replaced by a fresh one” (F. F. Bruce).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, may we be grace upon grace to others as we communicate the Word of God and glorify You in our words, thoughts, and actions. In the Name of the One born in the town of Bethlehem, amen.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank those who contributed to this devotional booklet. First, a heartfelt thanks to those who shared their thoughts in word, so that all may be blessed. Thanks to Lee Stadler for his design work. And finally a special thank you to Trish Dowd Kelne, who generously gave her time to help make this devotional a reality.

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



Department of Theological and Religious Studies

1001 South Cedar Street

Ottawa, KS 66067

www.ottawa.edu/Advent



Advent 2021