

**DAILY DEVOTIONS
2021**

Advent
The Season of Hope and Expectation



*Compiled writings from
the family of
Bethlehem Church*

WHAT IS ADVENT?

Celebrating Advent involves intentional preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ. For Christians, the Advent 2021 season reminds us not only of Jesus' birth, but of His eternal presence and eventual second coming. What Does Advent Mean?

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word *Adventus*, which means "coming." Within the early Christian church, Advent was a season of preparation for the upcoming church season of Epiphany. Over the centuries, the connection between Advent and Christmas became more closely aligned. Eventually, this gave way to the modern Evangelical celebrations of the Advent season.

Advent is meant to be a time of hope, faith, joy, and peace. In Advent, we are reminded that God sent His Son to this world so that we might have a relationship with Him. Yet, Jesus also comes to suffer with us and help us navigate our pain.

When Christians and families celebrate Advent, they unite in a generational tradition of celebration and anticipation of Jesus' second coming.

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOPE IS A NOT SO SECRET SECRET

November 28th

There have been Christmas gifts that I've both given and received, that the contents were known before the gift was opened. It still, however, gets wrapped and it still ends up under the tree. So we might say it's a not so secret, secret – to the one who's receiving it.

That's a bit like how we receive the gift of hope. As a Jesus follower, we know the gift already. It's all wrapped up in faith, and it's placed in us, waiting for the wrapping paper to be torn off and the contents to be revealed.

The Apostle Paul said in Colossians 1:27 (NLT) And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory.

Paul assures us as readers, Christ is alive within us as believers, and the outcome of our hope is as sure as the not-so-secret package under the Christmas tree.

Prayer: LORD, thank you for the gift of hope that comes by faith in you. Allow me to pick up this gift and daily hold and shake it as a reminder of your coming and in anticipation of your return. It's true, Christ in me, is our hope of glory. Amen (Colossians 1:27 NIV)

Pastor Tim Shekleton

SEASON OF HOPE

December 1st

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

This season is filled with so much hope, the hope of seeing loved ones, the hope of a small child looking at toys, the hope of family traditions. With all of the hope that surrounds us this season it can be easy to get caught up in all the worldly hope and forget about the eternal hope this season brings. The hope of Jesus' birth lasts beyond the lights or the new gifts, his hope lasts all year round. It gives us hope for one day seeing him face to face in heaven. It gives us a reason to have hope in a world that can seem so hopeless. Sometimes this world seems so heavy, and we can get worn down by it. I think back to what it must have been like to be the wise men continually looking for the sign, they had to have been weary from searching the night sky for years, but they held onto hope. That hope led them to meeting the King of Kings. In this season I pray we can find renewed hope in the story of the manger, and I pray we can hold onto this hope all year long.

Prayer: God I pray as we celebrate this season of Christmas that we would remember your story of hope. That we would let the hope you give fill us and pour out of us onto those around us. In your name Amen.

Myranda Schanil

Miracles Around Us

December 2nd

Psalms 34:1 I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

One morning this past October I saw the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen. For fifteen minutes I was in awe of the large bands of bright reds and yellows far above the horizon in the eastern sky. It seemed like God outdid Himself that morning. I don't know how anyone could see that and not realize there is a Creator.

There are things we see every day in creation that point to our Creator. Our bodies are full of organs and complicated systems that work together to keep us breathing and our hearts beating without our thinking about it. A small seed planted in the ground grows into beautiful, intricate flowers or plants that produce food. God gives animals natural instincts to know how to care for themselves and their young, find shelter, and migrate. Every spring, life begins anew after a long winter. The list goes on. If we take the time, we can witness miracles all around us that →

bring us to awe and wonder. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, including us, and He deserves our praise for this and just for who He is.

As the familiar chorus goes: Our God is an awesome God;
He reigns from heaven above
With wisdom, power, and love.
Our God is an awesome God!

I recently heard a speaker/author say that she reads three Psalms out loud every day. That is a habit I am starting.

Prayer: Lord God, it boggles my mind how you do everything that you do, how you know us and love us individually down to knowing the number of hairs on our head. Fill me with childlike faith and help me to keep my eyes always on you and praising your name continually.

Elroy and Patsy Klein

A Heavenly Perspective

December 3rd

2 Corinthians 4:18 So we do not look at what we can see right now, the troubles all around us, but we look forward to the joys in heaven which we have not yet seen. The troubles will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.

This verse jumped out at me today in light of the fact that we are still experiencing a pandemic that has literally been turning our world upside down! It's easy to look back at former times dwelling on how much better things may have seemed then. However, the Bible tells us that these troubles of ours won't last very long. God has a plan for us that is beautiful beyond our comprehension!

My Bible footnote says: Our troubles should not diminish our faith or disillusion us. Instead, we should realize that there is a purpose in our suffering. 1) They help us remember Christ's suffering for us. 2) They keep us from pride. 3) They help us look beyond this brief life. 4) They prove our faith to others. 5) They give God the opportunity to demonstrate his great power. Don't resent your troubles—see them as opportunities! Amen.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, help us to fix our eyes on You and not on the troubles and trials of this life. Fill us this Advent season with hope, joy, peace, & love in Your beloved Son Jesus. Amen.

Ruth Pederson

ETERNAL GIFT

December 4th

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Jeremiah 29:13

About 7 or 8 years ago our 3 oldest children were writing their Christmas lists. The youngest, Josey, too small to put her wishes down on paper, unexpectedly asked me, "Mom, what do you want for Christmas?" Ah ha! Finally! Finally, someone in my family had taken mom into consideration and was truly concerned about what she would like for Christmas.

I gazed upon her sweet face and replied, "Oh, honey...all I want is a good little girl."

She gave me a puzzled look, squinted her tiny eyes, and innocently questioned, "Why do you want another kid?"

We are all involved in a gift exchange with our Creator. The most perfect present was sent over 2,000 years ago from the God who loves us. This treasure never goes out of style, is a "one size fits all" for those who will accept it, and is suitable for all ages. We don't have to wait for the UPS or Fed Ex man to deliver it. We don't even have to wait until Christmas to open it. All He asks for in return is to seek Him with our hearts, make Him the Lord of our lives, and share His Good News with others. It is truly the gift that keeps on giving.

"What can I give Him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;

Yet what can I give Him: give my heart"

In the Bleak Midwinter-Christina Rossetti

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. We ask that you would help us to seek Him in every aspect of our daily lives. Help us keep Him in our hearts not only at Christmas or on Sunday mornings, but in all we do. In Jesus name, Amen.

Jolene Vipond



REAL JOY AND PEACE

December 5th

Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

I love getting ready for Christmas. Decorating, baking, wrapping gifts, listening to music, watching White Christmas and Elf.....I love it all. But none of that would matter if I wasn't also preparing my heart and celebrating the real reason for Christmas.

Christmas lights, although pretty, can be a little frustrating. Especially when they don't stay lit. Years ago, we had a puppy who thought that Christmas lights were a toy we had hung for him to yank and tug at. That dog looked so proud both times he tore the lights completely off our house. The tangled pile of lights on our sidewalk didn't look festive, magical, or Christmassy.

Cookies are delicious. At first. After a few holiday gatherings, the crumbled remains of picked over cookie trays go into a single, tightly sealed container and take on the flavor of all the other leftover goodies. Weeks old soggy Chocolate/Cinnamon/Ginger/Peanut Butter/Peppermint isn't a great combination.

Presents can be fun to give and receive, but even those gifts that were begged and pleaded for will eventually break, get lost, or outgrown.

If lights, presents, and cookies are the only reasons we celebrate each December, there is no way we will ever find lasting peace and happiness. That can only be found through Christ, our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Here is something to remember as we prepare for Christmas: Jesus is the Light of the World (John 8:12). He never grows dim. Jesus never becomes stale, nor does He take on the "flavors" of the world. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). We just can't outgrow Jesus. He promised that He will be with us always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

Katie Murphy

FOLLOW ME

December 6th

“Follow Me...” Matthew 4:19

Jesus spoke these words “Follow Me” to the potential disciples Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Those two words of Jesus are repeated many more times (12) in the Gospels. Those words must be important. “Follow Me” were words used to call people into a relationship with Him.

How is our society reacting to this two-word command? More importantly, how am I responding?

By the grace of God, I believe in Jesus - we have a personal relationship - Jesus is my Savior and Lord. Do you have a personal relationship with Him? He was born on a day, we call Christmas, which we celebrate every year. We all know Christmas is coming...in the “church world” we call the coming of Christmas, “Advent” ...the coming of Jesus.

I am so blessed to be part of a loving church body that strives to and thrives in serving Him. What a joyful objective! Would you please join us in making others Followers of Jesus?

Prayer: Jesus, please help us to stay centered on “Following You’ this Advent Season...and always!

Joe & Jeannie Spafford

IN HIS PRESENCE

December 7th

Psalm 73:28 But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.

When we are near those we love, we have a sense of comfort, calm...all is well. As our children grew and began to leave our home my favorite times were when we were all together again in one place. It didn't matter where, just that we were together...all is well. This is still true today. We have 4 grown children, spouses and 4 grandchildren and it is not all that often when we are all together in one place. I am thankful for technology that keeps us connected on a daily basis. This does not replace the need to be face to face but brings comfort and joy to a mother's heart.

Though I have never seen Him, being in God's presence is like no other. I know His tender, sweet Spirit. There is joy, tears, conviction and deep love. In my busy life I have practiced being with God like I learned from Brother Lawrence. →

Brother Lawrence was a monk in Paris in the late 1600s. For Brother Lawrence, washing dishes, a mind-numbing task became a means through which he could commune with the divine while discovering and living out a life of deep purpose. Practicing the presence of God was his lifestyle. He writes, “But when we are faithful to keep ourselves in his holy presence and set him always before us, this not only hinders offending him and doing anything that displeases him, at least willfully, but it also begets a holy freedom, and if I may so speak, a familiarity with God... by often repeating these acts, they become habitual, and the presence of God rendered as it were natural to us.” (The Practice of the Presence of God)

Prayer: God thank you for your presence, help me to draw closer to you this Advent and may I experience the fullness of joy, in Jesus name, Amen.
Cheryl Shekleton

SOUL'S DELIGHT

December 8th

2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. NIV

The Christmas season is my favorite time of year. And one of my favorite things to do is listen to Christmas hymns. Much to Matt's dismay I start listening to Christmas music towards the end of October, when the weather turns cold and the air gets crisp.

Listening to familiar Christmas hymns when it is cold outside and cozy inside brings me great joy. One of my favorite Christmas hymns is “Oh Holy Night.” The verse below sums up the Christmas season.

“Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth.”

That is the joy of knowing Jesus: our soul feeling worth. That is why non-believers feel like they are missing something and try to fill it with possession or status.

Today if you know that worth, that joy, that freedom the Jesus brings into our soul, when we accept Him in, then you are truly blessed. If you don't know that worth, that joy, and that freedom, pray this prayer.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Thank you for coming to this world as a baby and dying for my sins. I ask you to come into my heart today, fill my soul with worth, and joy, and freedom. Amen

Amber Hansen



“O COME LET US ADORE HIM”

December 9th

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is “O Come Let Us Adore Him”. The word adore is defined as “loving and respecting someone (something) deeply, to worship.” I’ve adored many things in my life; my children, activities, material things, other people. Even though these have all been great blessings from the Lord, I was adoring them and putting them before the Lord. Funny thing is I didn’t even realize it until BAM, the Holy Spirit convicted me. He convicted me of worshiping many things above the Lord, spending too much time and thoughts on worldly things and not prioritizing personal worship. I seemed to have time for my personal agenda which didn’t always include personal time with the Lord.

1 Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” We are chosen, we belong to the Lord and are called to declare His praises. This Advent season, think about how you are declaring His praises? How are you adoring our Savior Jesus Christ? Are you worshiping the wrong things? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you prioritize your life, show you ways to declare His praises and to adore Him above everything else!

Prayer: Dear Lord, You alone are worthy, we give you all the glory, we praise your name forever O Come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord. Amen
Rebekah Schmidt

WORTH THE WAIT

December 10th

“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31

The Hebrew word translated here as wait also means “hope for” and “anticipate”. Advent is our season of preparation and anticipation... getting ourselves ready for celebrating the coming of the Light of the World- our Savior and King.

Well, none of us likes waiting, but life has shown us that often the best things in life requires this from us. For me, this was illustrated through a hobby of mine- fishing. I have enjoyed fishing since childhood. Yet over my life I have caught one trophy fish, a 6 ½ pound smallmouth bass. It took me 25 years. But since that moment of the fight and the successful landing of that fish, I have never forgotten the thrill. What a moment it was! Yet, this experience pales in contrast to the waiting, preparation, and accepting of the coming Messiah- Jesus. For nothing→

in this life compares to redemption and the promised new life we find in Christ. So let us prepare, and anticipate again this season, for our King is coming and will come again!

Prayer: Precious Lord, we wait again for the arrival of Immanuel, God with us. And with your coming we pray that you would renew our hope and strength again in you. We pray this in the name of Jesus- Savior of the World! Amen!

Jon Kramka, Director of Congregational Vitality

Northwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church

SHELTER OF HIS WINGS

December 11th

Psalm 91:1-3, 4 He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord "He is my refuge and my fortress. My God in Him I will trust...He shall cover you with His feathers and under His wings you shall take refuge."

On October 13th we were returning from shopping when just outside of White Rock my cell phone gave a warning that a tornado was headed our way and we were to get to the basement right away. I looked around and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. How silly I thought. As we were putting things away, it sounded like a strong wind. I looked out and saw large branches flying by my window. It only lasted a minute or two so I went back to work.

Soon I heard a very loud roar and realized it was time to head for the basement. By the time we reached the top step, it was all over, but the devastation was overwhelming: trees were down just south of the house, part of the roof from the machine shed just north of the house had been ripped loose and hurled across the yard and slammed into a grain bin taking the power line with it. The large pole barn had been sucked out of the ground and flipped onto its roof with the poles now up instead of down in the ground. Only one side wall remains standing, but we are so blessed. Though the house was right in the middle of all this destruction, it was untouched. God place His hand over us and said "this for you may come and no farther." Job 38:11 He is a good, good Father.

Prayer: "Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good! For His mercy endures forever Psalm 118:1

Carol Ekberg

THE LIGHT

December 12th

Scripture John 8:12 “Jesus spoke to the people and said, I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness because you will have light that leads to life”

When I was growing up, our family tradition was to go to my Grandparent’s house on Christmas Eve. We always gave my Great-Grandmother a ride to and from as well. When we dropped her off late at night every Christmas Eve, she would insist that she didn’t need any help walking the sidewalk and getting into the house. She always said “When I turn on my outside light, you will know I made it in.”

We would sit and wait and watch for the light to turn on. Then we would drive away into the dark night with the snow glistening and looking out the window, the light still seemed to shine so brightly. We would watch until we could see it no more. That is a special memory that I will forever carry in my heart. I also think it’s really fitting for today’s world. It can be a dark, sin filled world. It is a good reminder to let your light shine bright.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to see your light this Advent season, and all year round. I pray that we may take the time to be present in the moment, and always remember that “Jesus is the reason for the season.” In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Annie Veldhouse

WAITING

December 13th

Isaiah 9:2 “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”

As we journey through this season of Advent, we reflect on the many seasons of waiting that God’s people have journeyed. The Jewish people waited in God’s silence for 400 years, longing for the promised Savior. Moses and the Israelites wandered the wilderness for 40 years, waiting to enter the Promised Land. Jesus’s followers endured three agonizing days after His death, and after His resurrection and ascension, they waited another ten days for the Holy Spirit.

Waiting... so much agonizing waiting. What are we waiting for this Advent season? Our world seems stuck in an extended season of uncertainty and insecurity. We all wait for the chaos to end and normal to return. How long will we have to wait? What will calm our fears and give us strength and hope? →

Yes, the people walking in darkness have seen a great light. “For unto us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) The living God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Hebrews 12:8) He knows the end from the beginning, and He promises to sustain us and rescue us (Isaiah 46:4, 10). Indeed, His Word gives us hope, comfort, and encouragement. It is a record of the past, an instruction manual for the present, and a road map for the future.

As we prepare to celebrate Christ’s birth, we often envision a joyful and peaceful scene—and it was. It was also stressful and fearful, much like our lives today, wrought with uncertainty and insecurity. Mary could have been stoned. Joseph could have divorced her. Herod could have killed Jesus. But God had a plan. God had a purpose. He always does. And His plan always prevails.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for your sovereignty, power and authority over all things seen and unseen. Thank you for the gift of your Son, our Savior. Thank you for your enduring love and promises that never fail. We give all glory and honor to you, the One who is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than all we could ever ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work in us. Amen.

Starla TeKrony

LET IT SHINE

December 14th

Matthew 5:16 In the same way let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Chuck was a retired pastor that lived across the street from my parents in Arizona where they and other snowbirds spent each winter. Everybody loved Chuck. He was the kind and handy go-to man on the block who helped anyone in need and was famous for helping hang Christmas lights. Chuck lived there year round and looked after the neighbor’s places after they returned back to their summer homes. Every time he was greeted with a “How are you doing?” Chuck always responded loudly and excitedly with, “Any better and I’d be in Heaven!” He always reminded me of Tigger from Winnie the Pooh with his high spirits and positive outlook. His sunny disposition and confident celebration of the eternal life he looked so forward to, has never left me. My young and jaded, all too often, Eeyore point of view changed the →

day I heard his response to a simple greeting from a passerby. With God, things indeed are good, but in the next life, they will be so much better!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the assurance that we will one day get to be with you forever in Heaven. What a glorious place you have prepared for us. Until then, let us be a light to those who need it. -Amen.

Joy Pipgras

PUTTING “CHRIST” IN CHRISTMAS IN TODAY’S WORLD *December 15th*

“And she shall bring forth a son, and you will call his name Jesus: for he will save his people from their sins.” – Matthew 1:21

If you’re anything like me around Christmas, you love hanging up stockings, ornaments on an artificial Christmas tree, sipping hot cocoa, and highly disliking listening to the song about Grandma getting ran over by a reindeer (OVER. AND OVER. AND OVER. NON-STOP.)

But do you really truly remember what Christmas is about? In today’s world some people go to the Christmas service, go home, and resume in today’s idea of Christmas. Now, I’m not saying anything’s wrong with hot cocoa, the Grinch, spending time with family, watching corny movies and listening to even cornier songs, and eating sugar cookies. But did you ever put the history of the word “Christmas” in perspective? Back in the post-Revelation days, it was referred to as “Christ’s Mass” because people would have Mass when they celebrated it. Then, in 4th Century AD, there was a man. His name was St. Nicholas. (You see where this is going, right?) St. Nicholas turned into Santa. Then, soon, people dropped the extra “s” in Mass, and turned “Christ’s” into “Christ”, and mashing the two together. Soon enough, people forgot that the word (and the holiday) is about Jesus, not a reindeer with a red nose or eggnog, or any of those things (although I do loooooove eggnog.) It has the word “Christ” in it! Stop thinking about what Santa will give you, remember the great gift God gave you: JESUS!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help us to look beyond the cookies, movies, songs, and everything we associate with Christmas. Help us, Jesus, to remember that on Christmas, you are the reason for the season! Amen!

Kendra Jade Veldhouse



COMFORT IN THE STRUGGLE

December 16th

As I reflect on the past year, there was one overwhelming theme— "This too shall pass." Daily I would try to tell myself that things can't get much worse only to see my worries become reality. As I began to fall into this pattern, I decided I needed to start leaning into "His Word" in hopes God would just give me a "fix" to all problems. Now I realize what I really wanted was a bandage. Let me be honest - God did not fix all my problems or stop them from continuing to happen-to my disappointment.

As I started to look for "answers" I realized that God didn't want my problems to just go away. He wanted to strengthen my relationship with him, so I could find comfort in him through the pain and heartache that I am sure to endure in this life. Verse after verse God told me that he is with me, to comfort me and to fight my battles. He never promised that my struggles will be over while I am here on the earth. He did, however, promise a final victory to those who accept him and put their trust in him.

As I look back at the verses that brought me comfort in this challenging season, I realize that God was giving me the gift of comfort through a relationship with him. Which I think is much better than some "quick fix" or bandage to cover-up the problem. How blessed I am to have a God who sees my needs and offers me guidance through his loving word, to bring me hope and comfort.

VERSES OF COMFORT: "Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." *Matthew 11:28* "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. My enemies will retreat when I call to you for help. This I know: God is on my side! I praise God for what he has promised; yes, I praise the Lord for what he has promised." *Psalms 56:8-10 NLT* "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." *John 1:5 NLT* "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." *John 16:33* "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed." *Psalms 34:18 NLT* "He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us." *2 Corinthians 1:4 NLT* "I cried out, "I am slipping!" but your unfailing love, O Lord, supported me. When doubts filled my mind, your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer." *Psalms 94:18-19 NLT*

Sarah Dawson

KEEP UP THE FAITH!

December 17th

Ephesians 2:8 "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this, it is a gift from God." NLT

Several years ago, I took part in a men's Bible study. Each Thursday morning, we would dig into a section of scripture. Our leader was very knowledgeable about the Bible. He would pick, dig, and pry into the verses and find precious nuggets of history, God's character and Jesus' life on earth. Occasionally, we would hit a snag in our discussion. Sometimes we didn't understand the value or meaning of a section of the Bible. Maybe we disagreed on the interpretation or the application for us today. It could have been something that happened in everyday life like the death of a loved one or a troublesome medical diagnosis. In those troubling times, a BIG man named John would say, "We are making this too hard. We just have to have FAITH!" So, as we journey through life, remember, God's got you, Jesus saved you, keep up the faith!

Prayer: Lord, help me to lean into you and remember that you are bigger than anything I am facing and I can trust you!

Kevin Pederson

A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION FOR A BABY

December 18th Morning

Romans 8:37-39 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Celebration of Joy, Peace, Understanding, Love and Amazement
How did all of this come about from a baby from a teen aged mother and father? I married a strong, loving, faithful US Marine. I was raised in a Christian home with loving parents and an older brother who always protected me. I have a good education and warm house and food on the table...what more would I need?

The following reflections are from song lyrics of "Mary Did You Know?" Mary did you know you would be raising a child that would be the 'Great I am'? I know of no one that could walk on water, Mary, did you know? Who can save our sons and daughters, Mary did you know? Who will deliver you, Mary did you know? Who can make a blind man see, Mary did you know? Who do you know that walks with angels, →

Mary did you know? You kiss the face of God, Mary did you know? Who among us make the blind see, Mary did you know? Who among us can make the deaf hear, Mary did you know? Who among us can make the dead live again, Mary did you know?

How do we know that all of this came about? From lessons from the Bible, from Pastor Tim's sermons, our Sunday school teachers, our faith? I know all of this because my soul tells me so, that all little ones are His. The Bible tells us so. I feel the love, comfort and support from the Great I AM deep within me. I am not always faithful to him, some days my way would work out better, if he really knew me. For nearly 72 years I have been surrounded by the Great I AM. He stayed with me during trouble times and when all the joys of life fill my heart.

Romans 8:32, 35 Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?

Prayer: Dear God, the child who sits at your right side is the Great I AM and I am so grateful and filled with Joy as we celebrate his birth. That I have the pleasure to know you and feel you in my bones. Amen
Clariece Brecht

WE ARE THE CLAY – YOU LORD THE POTTER *December 18th Evening*
Isaiah 64:8 But now, O Lord, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand.

It seems very difficult for all of us to accept the biblical truth that explains who we are and where we come from. We live in a world of the big four P's: power, prosperity, popularity and pride. It can be very hard to fit God into this present day system. But like it or not we are created beings, made by God from the dust of the earth who formed us and then breathed life into us. *Gen. 2:7* So life began. He then formed us all in our mother's womb. *Jer. 1:5* He has a plan for all of us. *Jer. 29:11.* Jeremiah Chapter 18 reminds us that when we get off track of His plan, He corrects us. Then He promises to complete the work He began in us. *Phil. 1:6* He is the potter and we are the clay from start to finish, but there are many details. The great message for us in Jeremiah 18 is that God doesn't give up on us He simply reshapes us. For this process, we must remain pliable.

When we accept Jesus as our Savior we take an oath to serve Him with all our heart and soul. We give Him permission to carry out His→

will in our life. When we stay pliable His tender hand feels good, when on the potter's wheel. But when we become hardened He still reshapes us but uses the anvil instead of the potter's wheel. In His hands He uses the hammer and high heat in order to achieve His desired goal. He always gives us a choice, the potter's wheel or the anvil. I personally know how the anvil feels.

Prayer: Lord, we come to you and ask you to help us see your good and perfect will for us, help us to strive for your will and help us to stay pliable to make it easier for us to complete the work you have planned for us. In Jesus name, we pray amen.

Glen Drafa

4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT

CHRISTMAS AWAY

December 19th

John 15:13 NKJV "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

I believe we all have that one Christmas that really sticks out for one reason or another. Maybe it was the odd food that we ate or the outrageous thing that someone wore or the last year there was a Monopoly game played between your uncles. It happens in many families, if we're being honest. It was also those times when we get to see our family that do not live geographically near us. Sometimes if those family members did not come for Christmas, it likely meant it was going to be at least two or more years between seeing them. Because we never had to travel "home" for Christmas, I never got to experience what a Christmas away from home was like. Not until I spent it at Camp Virginia, Kuwait in 2004. That year I experienced what a Christmas away was like. I was one of the people that you likely said a prayer for. I was one of those troops, I was one of those soldiers, I was those serving overseas. It was a surreal feeling knowing there were literally millions of people praying for you. One thing that I know for sure that year, there were many families back home here that were missing their soldier. Sadly, for many families that Christmas prior to deployment was their last with their soldier.

This year, my prayer is for those families. Those families that have an empty chair at the dinner table. The families that did not have their son or daughter come home. →

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we remember those that have laid down their lives for us and our country. We remember those that have served and made the ultimate sacrifice to protect us back home. We ask Lord that that Your love is poured out and comforts those that are without their loved ones. We pray Your protection over the ones that stand guard. We pray for the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends that are without their soldiers this year during this Christmas and Advent season. May Your favor be upon them and may they find hope and peace in knowing that Your Son made the most ultimate sacrifice. In His name we pray. Amen

Jacob Veldhouse

GREATEST LOVE

December 20th

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

I love nearly everything about the Christmas season. I love the time spent with family and friends. I love driving around town and seeing the beautiful light displays. I love the delicious Christmas treats to eat. I love how cozy my house feels with the Christmas tree lit and my hot chocolate in my mug. There are so many things to love this time of year and a lot of them are really great things that bring so much joy. This season is meant to remind us of the greatest love ever shown. Over 2000 years ago God sent His one and only Son down to the world to live among us. This is what we remember and celebrate every Christmas season: the overwhelming, never ending love of God. This year as you experience the things you love about this season, let them remind you of the love God has for you.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for loving me so much that you sent your only son to become flesh and dwell among us. I pray that every time this Christmas season I experience something I love, I am reminded of the love you have for me.

Pastor Greg Schanil

LOVE IS ENOUGH

December 21st

1 John 4:7 "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."

Love is important. Showing love to others is something Jesus has asked us to do. He says to, "Love your neighbor as yourself". (Mark 12:31) There are many ways that we can show love to our neighbors. We can talk with someone, send someone a card, bake cookies for someone, help someone, or ask someone over for dinner. Sometimes you can feel like what you're doing for someone is not enough, but what is important is that you are trying. God can see that we are helping others and showing love to them.

Sometimes it can be hard to show love like when you don't feel it, or if someone hurts you, or if you feel like you don't have time. But you can remember Luke 6:27-28 which says, "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." This will help you to remember that God wants us to love others no matter what. If we need help, we can pray and ask God for strength, courage, and bravery.

Prayer: Dear God, please give me the strength, courage, and bravery to love others the way you love them. Please help me to notice when people need help or need a friend. And please give me the courage to know how to help them. Amen.

Merritt Sando

DON'T RUSH

December 22nd

Psalm 27:1, 13-14 The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?...I remain confident in this; I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living, Wait for the LORD be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

When my child was younger, the nurse would offer a sticker at the end of each appointment. She would hold out a basket of stickers and ask him which one he would like. He always wanted to examine the contents of the basket before making his choice. Would it be Superman or PJ Masks today? Dinosaur Train or...could that be Daniel Tiger down below? As his mom, I grew impatient with how long it took him to choose. I would say things in my mom voice like, "great job, honey, now let's go." Or, "the nurse has things to do – let's move along." Finally, the nurse looked at →

me and said, "Please don't rush him. This is my favorite part of my job. I love watching them choose."

What I saw as unimportant, the nurse saw differently, and I was appropriately put in my place. My child was not hurried. He would make his decision when he was ready. This is what the nurse knew better than me. My ability to wait mattered greatly.

We are not very good at waiting. We are grabbing our phones or making lists or rushing off to the next thing. Yet Advent is a season of waiting. We don't have control in the waiting because it is not up to us. We cannot make things happen faster or slower than they are going to. So in the meantime, we had best sharpen our waiting skills and not try to rush things, because God is faithful.

Prayer: God, help us learn to wait. Prepare our hearts as we wait for you.

Kara Stromberg

Associate Superintendent of the Northwest Conference

Evangelical Covenant Church

TRUSTING ALWAYS

December 23rd

Isaiah 41:13 "For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you."

Mary likely wasn't expecting to find out that she would be carrying the Messiah. When the angel came and spoke to her, she must have felt scared, excited, nervous, surprised, and overwhelmed! She was young and engaged to be married to Joseph. This probably wasn't the life that she had originally planned for herself. However, she responded to the angel and said, "May your word to me be fulfilled." (Luke 1:38) She chose to trust God and trust His plans for her life.

God may not send His angels down to give us huge news like He gave to Mary, but he still does speak to us today. It can be incredibly difficult to choose to trust Him and go along with what he is asking us to do. It requires a lot of faith, hope, and trust.

Taya shares this story, "Once God gave me a feeling to give all of my money to people in need through VBS. I decided to listen to God and did what he asked me to. After, I felt really good. I felt that those people needed the money more than I did for alpacas for their families. I think you should listen to God, even if He asks you to do something scary. God wants us to help other people and love them as we love ourselves. If you are confused, you can ask a Christian friend to help you understand →

what God is saying to you. Or you could ask God to help you trust him by praying to Him.”

Prayer: Dear Jesus, please help me to trust you. Help me to hear your voice and understand what you are asking of me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.
Taya & Heather Sando

CHRISTMAS EVE

ULTIMATE GIFT

December 24th

Luke 1:26-38

Christmas time speaks to us about so many things as we hear and read the account of Jesus birth yet once again. There is a phrase spoken by Mary, the mother of Jesus, that has lasting impact for us as followers of Christ. When the angel Gabriel came to her to declare that she was to be the mother of Jesus, God’s own Son, her response is profound. We find the account in Luke 1:26-38. In verse 38 we read Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word”.

What trust, courage and obedience from Mary as she was brought news that would alter her life in unimaginable ways! She simply responded by surrendering to the Lord’s word and His leading! Will you and I have the same response to the Lord’s word and leading? Certainly it won’t be identical to what He revealed to Mary but the Lord is speaking to us day by day through His word and the voice of the Holy Spirit for the directives and truths for our lives. Will you and I respond with ‘Let it be to me according to your word’?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, bring my heart into surrender and obedience to simply say “yes” to You as You lead me in the details of my life. Amen.

*Pastor Mark Olson,
Retired Pastor, prayer warrior and friend*



CHRISTMAS DAY

CHRISTMAS DELIGHT

December 25th

John 1:10-14, 16 He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another.

Every Christmas when I was young my dad would get out the old wind-up Kodak 8mm movie camera and putting on the light bar with 4 flood lights for that deer in headlight effect, to film the excitement of his boys on Christmas morning. By today's standards we didn't have that much but to us it was overwhelming. Our enthusiasm was boundless. One Christmas stands out clearly as my brother bounded around like a kangaroo and our dog running around in response. No doubt all a response to our parents saying, "this is supposed to be a movie SO MOVE!"

Years later as a parent myself, watching our children's excitement, I understood the delight my dad must have had to be able to give us gifts that were so enjoyed. As a family we never had a lot of extra, but my parents made these gifts a priority, it cost them a lot to do that. When our heavenly Father sent His son to earth, the event behind Christmas it cost Him a lot. Sending Jesus to sacrifice everything to live, to suffer, and to die that we might receive the gift of new life through Him, so we could be resurrected to new life and relationship with Him. He paid that cost so He could experience the delight in us.

May you experience the excitement of God's ultimate Christmas gift this season, and express boundless joy as you receive it, and live in it, as God watches with endless delight.

Prayer: Lord, may we never lose our excitement for what Jesus has done for us, and the delight You have for us when we respond and receive what you have offered. Amen.

Pastor Brian Schanil, Vista Covenant Church

BLESSED REMINDER

December 26th

Psalm 139 You are wonderfully made, dearly loved and precious in his sight.

Years ago, I started the tradition of telling my young children before I dropped them off at school or a friend's house, one at a time, to "Remember whose you are." This was their daily reminder that they were a precious Child of God; royalty in His kingdom. I do admit that it had dual meaning, as it was also a reminder to watch their manners as a member representing our family. A few years later, one of my youngest replied to my daily reminder with, "You remember whose you are too!" as he winked, smiled and bounded out of the car. I know he thought he was being clever, reminding me to also mind my manners. But as I watched him walk away, I was overwhelmed with the blessed reminder I had just received from my own child that I too was indeed a child of God. Oh how my heart sang at this! In this season as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, may you remember how beautiful you are in His eyes and to boldly claim your identity in Him.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us your son. Thank you for loving us so dearly that you gave His life so that we may receive your ultimate gift. –Amen

Joy Pipgras

