

*We welcome you to this Advent season
and to this devotional booklet,
specially designed and written
by the members of Trinity United Methodist Church,
DeLand, Florida.*

*To get the most out of this devotional,
we encourage you to pray before beginning each day.
Then read the Scripture listed at the top of the page
before reading the devotional thoughts.
After reading and meditating further on the Scripture,
pray to the Lord
for enlightenment and direction
and thank Him for new insights.*

*May the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Babe of Bethlehem,
the Promised Messiah,
and our Risen and Triumphant Lord,
come anew and afresh to you
this Advent season.*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2017

Isaiah 64:1-9

*The God who Acts on Behalf of Those
who Wait for Him*

Isaiah opens this text with the mighty acts of Creator God shaking the mountaintops and putting fear in the hearts of His enemies, but too quickly moves into our naughtiness as God's created children. But I wonder, are those God's enemies or ours that he speaks of? Two childhood images come to my mind.

First, playground banter on how great one of our parents are ... my dad/my mom did this or that Juxtaposed with this is this same parent handing down justice when we have done something wrong. One of the greatest fears I had as a child is when my mother would say, "I've had just about enough from you. Just wait until your father gets home!" Isaiah gives us the very best response, *Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember [my] iniquity forever*. Sure wish I had that verse memorized for a response to my parents so long ago!

That leads me to my second thought as a child. Do you remember climbing up on Santa's lap and he asks, "Have you been a good little boy or girl?" With all eagerness and total sincerity, we respond, "Oh, yes, Santa, I have been very good this year!" After receiving my candy cane, so full of myself, I climb down, but I know in my heart that I have just told one whopper of a lie! I have been fighting with my brothers, day in and day out. We have caused every form of mayhem one can imagine and I just told Santa Claus how very good I am. What was wrong with me?

So, God's children, deceitful and unjust as we are, seek to have the great and glorious Master reign terror on our enemies. We continue to cry for justice and God remains silent ... until humility and patience permeate our very being. We don't have to wait until Father gets home; Father is always

with us. Our plea, "O Lord, do not remember my sins forever," is an admission that we long for God's loving embrace.

Thank you, Lord, for forgiving and loving me, beyond me. Amen.

Dale Golden

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2017

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Eagerly Waiting for Our Lord

John and I came from similar backgrounds in that church and family were a big part of our lives. Growing up in the northeast, the weather the week before Christmas was usually either snowing or just plain cold out, and since school was out of session we either went sledding or skating. As Christmas Day got nearer and the excitement of getting gifts wore us to a frenzy, we were reminded by our parents that we should never forget that the greatest gift of all is the birth of the Lord Jesus.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel - which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:22-23)

Carol Dill

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2017

Mark 13:24-37

The Day and Hour Unknown

Picture this: One morning you wake up with a confusing jolt because you know you had slept in, but there is no sun to mark the time. All the oceans with their high and mighty waves have come to a stop and what once was this spectacular sight is now eerily silent. The stars which once led men to their destinations by following their constellations have now all diminished into darkness and have bid life farewell. All these majesties and splendors which God has created are no longer to be experienced and we are left behind only to hear the trumpets of the angels and the Son of Man coming to collect His sheep.

I don't know about you but I get this rollercoaster of emotion when I read these verses; first everything I know to be true and certain is no longer and terror starts to set in, but then I read the Good News and learn that Jesus Christ is coming and this immense joy replaces the fear. Then I get to the part that tells us that the time is near yet uncertain. Hesitation begins to set in because – what if I miss it?

Some might think that these signs we are told about will be impossible to miss, but if a good 10 verses are spent on warning us to watch, I wonder how easy it could be to miss it. I remember in high school, my friend would make this joke saying that something spectacular could be happening and no one would know about it because everyone was so immersed in themselves.

Please, don't take these verses lightly. Watch, notice the signs, and follow the Word, for the Son of Man will not come until all is completed and when the time comes, the majesties and splendors will surely be multiplied beyond comprehension. What a sight that will be!

Maia Carr

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2017

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Restore Us, O God

Here is a psalm/song that is to be sung to the tune of a yet older tune called “The Lilies of the Covenant.” Petitioners, in the role of a flock, are expressing their plea to their Shepherd, God: *Restore us, O God*. The single name references to three tribes (Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh) indicate that this is very much a refugee’s prayer/song, by those assembled in Jerusalem having escaped northern terrorism. They’re calling out to God – *Awaken Your might*.

Longing for God to restore, shine on, and save them, they pour out their frustration over their miserable state as refugees. Even as they bring their remnant of the vine back to its root, everything they’re experiencing is like being fed bread of tears and being offered tears to drink, by the bowlful by this very same God to whom they pray and sing. In addition, how harsh, on coming south, to be a burden on neighbors and those helping them, while their persecutors mock their anguish. So they plead, *Shine Your face on us*, or, as many other prayers for peace express it, “Lord, be with us.”

The last few verses could be paraphrased: “We (the oppressed) are Your vine – broken, burned and perishing. We plead: Let Your hand rest on the Son of Man at Your right hand and we’re fully Yours. Revived, we’ll call on Your name.” Certain commentaries attribute the phrase “the son of man” to kings and leaders deemed to have been placed in those positions by God. I believe those providing refuge to other covenanted souls just had to be sitting at God’s right hand. So these, our ancestors in faith, singing and praying this prayer, believed God wants us to ask Him to both help us and use us in such situations. Further, God promised when we do emulate Jesus’ acts as Son of Man, those who seek help and those we help in God’s name are revived in God and are God’s own.

Becky Hurlbert

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2017

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort for God's People

In these verses, our Lord is teaching us that He is our comfort and our strength. He is with us always in all we do. God will never leave you or forsake you.

We are His children and He is our loving Father. His love and forgiveness is everlasting. This is our promise from Him:

*The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the Word of our God stands forever.*

Our God lives! This is our comfort forever.

Kathy Clark

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2017

2 Peter 3:8-15a

The Day of the Lord

Prepare or procrastinate? That was the question my daughter and I discussed concerning installing our hurricane shutters before Irma came to visit. I wanted to procrastinate. She wanted to prepare. She won and we were thankful as the wind and rain pelted our house.

Think of the time we spend preparing for one thing or another, like the birth of a baby, a wedding, or the holidays. Advent has begun and preparations are being made for Christmas when we celebrate the first coming of Jesus, but how often do we think about preparing for His Second Coming? The Lord promised to come again (John 14:2-3) and the angels announced at His ascension, *This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly and mysteriously as He left* (Acts 1:11, The Message).

The Apocalypse will precede His return, but the Bible tells us no one knows the day or hour except God: *a thousand years is as one day with the Lord and the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up*. Therefore, we must strive to live every day as if it were our last. How? By daily Bible reading, devotions and prayer, using our God-given gifts and talents to serve others, and living lives that glorify Christ.

Prepare or procrastinate? Which will we choose?

Carolyn Harner

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2017

Mark 1: 1-8

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. (Mark 1:5)

I have always enjoyed history. Actually, I wanted to be a history teacher. I suppose what is so intriguing about the Gospel of Mark is that it is a real-life account of the life and ministry of Jesus. What is even more interesting is that, several hundred years prior to Mark writing his account of John the Baptist and Jesus, the prophet Isaiah predicted that John the Baptist would announce and prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

According to Mark, John the Baptist was an interesting kind of a man. Many today would probably call him a loner, an outcast, not a social kind of a guy. Many today would most likely avoid him if they saw him walking down the street. He dressed in strange clothes that were different than what most Jewish people or Romans were wearing at the time. He chose to live in the desert so that he would be away from all distractions. He wanted to spend his time preparing the way for Jesus. Yet this humble man, living alone in the desert, eating strange foods, dressing in old clothing, is considered by many to be the greatest man mentioned in the Bible.

As a young child, I visited rural Georgia and attended churches that did not have a baptismal pool. Many of the baptisms were conducted in a local river or farm pond. Having seen these outdoor baptisms helps me understand what Jesus and John the Baptist discussed when John said, *I can only baptize with water; He can baptize you with the Holy Spirit*. Let us not forget the importance of our baptism. We are saved by the Holy Spirit, not the water.

David Griffis

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2017

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 *Surely the Lord's Salvation Is Near*

"I'm sorry to inform you that there is nothing more we can do for Richard. There is no need to do by-pass surgery. He has had two major heart attacks within a week that have destroyed 90% of his heart muscle capacity. He only has six to nine months to live. He will be placed on a very restrictive diet, and if he were to have any salt, he could die instantly." The words stunned my ears in the CCU waiting room as the surgeon gave us this disturbing news. The patient was Richard Clason, who had been the only "real" father I ever knew for most of my life.

Dad was a good person, but he was not a godly man. He loved his family, was fiercely loyal to them, never talked about others, and minded his own business. He was never prone to be demonstrative about his feelings, but in the last days of his life, he expressed his love freely to his family. More importantly, my dad opened his heart to God through the intervention of an earthly angel named Donna Bartleson, the minister at my mom's church. Though Dad didn't attend church, he always encouraged Mother to go and never stood in the way for her to be an active member. In the past, Mother would try to have ministers visit the house and pray with Dad, but he refused until Donna entered his life. She visited him faithfully in the CCU and at his home, and he referred to her as his own personal chaplain. Donna not only won my dad's affection, but she won my dad's spirit and soul for Christ.

On December 4, 1994, just one month after Dad's initial heart attack, Mother found Dad sitting comfortably in his favorite chair after she returned from church. He was so peaceful that she didn't realize at first that he had gone to be with the Lord. He had trimmed the Christmas tree the night before he died, a loving act that was his final gift to my mother. His salvation was God's gift to my Dad.

The Psalms contain such beautiful words of comfort and promise. The psalmist began chapter 85 by appealing to God's past mercies for Israel which included restoring her and forgiving her sins. Then the plea was made in verse 7 where the author states, *Show us Your unfailing love, oh Lord, and grant us Your salvation.* Verses 8-13 contain God's reassuring answer to the prayer. God will save His people, He will restore their fortunes, and He will keep His covenant of love and peace with them. Israel, God's chosen and holy nation, hadn't always been faithful to God, yet God was faithful to them. One of the most beautiful images of the love and compassion of God is contained in verse 10: *Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.* There was no more dramatic way God showed His love for us than when He sent His own son to be a sacrifice for our sins. Love and faithfulness met together in the person of Jesus Christ. Righteousness and peace characterize God's dealing with His covenant people, those who believe in Jesus, His Son.

My dad accepted Jesus into his heart in the last minutes of his life. God in His mercy and compassion accepts all who believe in Jesus. Thank you, God, that we have been blessed by Your love and faithfulness. If anyone reading this has a loved one for whom you have been praying faithfully for his/her salvation, I would encourage you to keep praying and trusting Jesus to work in your loved one's life. Surely the Lord's salvation is near.

Cherrie Casselberry

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2017

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Year of the Lord's Favor

Busy lives zap our energy and sometimes make us feel like a wilted flower; when the wilted flower receives a little water and attention, it seems to perk up and look happy again. Feeling God's love is like what a sprinkling of water does for the wilted flower; God's love makes us strong and perks us up. Isaiah 61: 1 says, *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted. When we bask in God's love, we are restored, and we are able to bring beauty and joy and comfort to others. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.* (Isaiah 61:11)

We can bloom too! We can spring up and do good things for others, our community, and our world through God's love and restoration.

Jeff & Michele Bishop

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2017

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

*Do Not Treat Prophecies
with Contempt*

Tucked in the final instructions of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is a short admonition which says, *Do not treat prophecies with contempt* (1 Thess. 5:20). The previous verses are so familiar: *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*. But prophecies? What prophecies?

For the past year, Not Your Mama's Class has been studying Romans. We are finally to Romans 9, where Paul discusses the fate of the Jewish people who failed to recognize Jesus as the long-awaited (and long-predicted) Messiah. Did they treat the Messianic prophecies with contempt? Did their own presuppositions creep in and blind them to the reality of God's purpose among them?

But we've accepted Jesus as our Messiah, our Savior. In fact, this Advent season we review all of the Old Testament prophecies about His coming to earth, and marvel at all God did to bring each and every detail into fulfillment. So what prophecies could we be treating with contempt?

How about these? *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven* (Acts 1:11). *Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End* (Revelation 22:12-13).

Yes, Jesus came as a babe over 2000 years ago. But He is coming again – soon! Do we believe that prophecy? Do we live each day fully for Him, confident that we are one day closer to His return in glory?

Cindy Fox

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2017

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Testimony of John the Baptist

The coming of John the Baptist was foretold twice in the Old Testament. The first is in Isaiah 40:3: *A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* Then again by the last prophet, who says: *See I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes* (Mal. 4:5). Following this prophecy of Malachi, God's prophets were silent for 400 years.

Before his birth, two extraordinary events came to pass to reveal who John the Baptist would be ...

A man in service to God... The angel Gabriel announced to the priest Zechariah that he and his barren wife Elizabeth (a cousin of Mary) would have a son who would *bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And He will go before the Lord, in the power of Elijah, ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (Lk. 1:16-17).

... and one who knew the Messiah. When Mary visited Elizabeth to share their miraculous pregnancy stories, Elizabeth said, *As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy* (Lk. 1:44).

John the Baptist was a man of truth and obedience. He lived a simple life drawing people to him by speaking the truth of repenting of sin. Baptizing in water was to be a sign of an individual's repentance. John carried out the commission given to him by denying to the Jewish authorities that he was the Messiah or Elijah. He told of the One who was greater than he, for he had recognized the Messiah, Jesus, BEFORE either had been born!

Each of us as believers has been commissioned to point to the Light, to share the Good News, to praise the Lord. Are

we as obedient and dedicated as John the Baptist? Do we recognize the presence of God in our lives? Do we give Him the praise He is due rather than believing we have done the work? In our many opportunities to do so, God will empower us through the Holy Spirit to share Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

As others came to know the way to repent through John the Baptist's service to God, may we announce to a fallen world of the greatest Gift even given, the Reason for the Season,

THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST.

Susan Largen

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2017

Psalm 126

Restoration from Captivity

Captivity serves as the imprisonment and confinement of our souls. Glory be to God that I finally realized my way will never be enough and most definitely leads to a dead-end.

For so long I was eager to change the world by glorifying God. I focused on what I would major in, where I would go to school, and with whom I would surround myself. Therefore, I began to compare myself to others and allowed self-doubt to act as chains wrapped around my ankles, hindering me from doing God's will at all.

Before I went to college, I so filled my mind with all the "what if's" of who I was about to become and what I was about to do that I forgot to let God sow His seeds in my life. God reached out to me in the beginning of this semester, shook me up, and reminded me that I am free to laugh and dance with a heart full of joy because He has restored my fortunes. I was living in the future so much so that I forgot about who I am right now. God led me to restoration and now I am transitioning onto a completely new path of life, singing songs of joy. Now I am letting God take control of the wheel while I turn the music up and sing and dance, riding shotgun.

Enjoy the ride!

Patricia Bishop

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2017

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

*Your Throne Will Be Established
Forever*

In the Old Testament, 2 Samuel, Chapter 7, you will find Nathan, the Prophet, talking to God to learn what He had on His mind.

God to David; "Don't build a house for me.
For, I plan to build a house for thee."

It was through Nathan, God let it be known.
He did not want a house built from cedar or stone.

It was decreed by the divine
That Jesus would come from David's ancestral line.

This was not for the monarch, David, of his day,
But, for all God's people this had to be the way.

The birth of Jesus would fulfill
That this forever promise would be God's will.

Through David God would plant the spiritual seed.
Jesus's birth would be the deed to feed the need.

In the scripture of Samuel it was told
All people are to be in God's great household.

This passage foretells and helps explain
The advent of a new servant reign.

God spoke through Nathan revealing to David this endeavor
That His house and kingdom would be established forever.

*Thank you, God, for the forever promise fulfilled by the birth of
Jesus. Amen.*

Merry Weaver

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2017

Romans 16:25-27

The Revelation of the Mystery

Mysteries, oh, the mysteries of life! In the Old Testament, the mystery was kept secret. In the New Testament, it was then made known by God to the apostle Paul. He received a direct revelation – it was God’s plan of salvation for the Gentiles, kept secret from the beginning of time. Redemption, salvation from sin and evil, by faith in Jesus Christ, was available to people of all nations.

Just before Hurricane Irma pounded our area (while I was lifting up prayers that we all would be safe), I went to the drive-through at my bank and pulled into either the second or third lane, approximately 30 feet from the window. By then it was just the teller and me. After completing my transaction, I started to leave, but something caught my eye – there was a praying mantis on a pole, visible in the area we both could see. As I stared at it, the teller said, “That’s a praying mantis.” I told her it had been years since I’d seen one! She then related to me that her husband worked in construction and, after a hard day at work, when he got in his truck there was a praying mantis sitting *on his steering wheel*.

Why was there a praying mantis at the bank drive-through, visible to two people 30 feet away from each other? I had been to this teller before, but now I believe that day we both felt a connection through Christ over just another mystery of life, through one of God’s creatures.

June Shearin

Symbolism and meaning: The praying mantis is the spiritual symbol of stillness and patience or prayer in many cultures. The Greeks call them “seer” or “prophet.” In parts of Africa, it is considered good luck if one lands on you.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2017

Luke 1:26-38

The Angel Gabriel Visits Mary

Every Christmas, I look forward to those time-honored traditions of decorating the house, hanging the greenery at the church, putting up the Christmas tree, baking (and eating) lots of goodies, and reflecting on memories that I hold near and dear to my heart. As I age, this process is becoming more important to me, especially since some of my dearest memories are fading.

One memory, however, stands strong in my heart, mind and soul. It's hearing the beautiful carol "Mary, Did You Know?" as sung by Trinity's own Cindy Hunt. As I listen to Cindy's silky contralto voice and the soft strum of the guitar, I am swept up in the moment when time seems to stand still. It's a haunting melody – one of those that lingers long after the song has ended.

I cannot help but be transfixed, wondering about that day when the Angel Gabriel visited Mary. That an angel, a strange man-like being, would suddenly appear out of nowhere and begin telling her things she didn't understand is a scary thought. Wisely, the angel allays her fears and says, "It's okay, don't be scared ... Now, let me tell you some very good news..." And then the lyrics kick in:

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would one day walk on water?*

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would save our sons and daughters?*

*Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered will soon deliver you?*

Wow! Did she know just how special He would be? Or that the precious little baby she would deliver, in a stable no less, would be the key to salvation for everyone, everywhere, for all time? Did she have time to think about the

repercussions – the stigma that she, Joseph and the baby would face? Could she trust God to somehow work out every problem they would encounter for years to come?

Clearly afraid and puzzled at first, we see how Mary's unending belief and trust in God soon took over her fears. Her faith began to guide her thinking, instead of her head. It was a transformational moment. As unreal as it sounded, she accepted all that the angel foretold and responded as only a true follower would, for Mary truly believed as she said: *I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*

Now that, my friends, is faith personified: to believe without seeing or knowing it to be true, to unequivocally trust in something with all your being, and to obey (without a second thought) the words of a stranger. Wow!

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
is Lord of all creation?*

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
would one day rule the nations?*

*Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
The sleeping Child you're holding is the great "I am"?*

How's your faith by comparison? Do you trust in God so much so that you would be willing to submit your every decision to Him? That His will should be done and not yours? Can we ever get to that point in our lives where we can fully trust Christ? The answer is yes, through God's *justifying grace*. And, it will be a most remarkable moment when that happens – a transformational moment – just like the one that Mary had.

Anita Campbell

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2017

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

*I Will Sing of the Lord's Great
Love Forever*

“Anticipation, anticipation. It’s making me late. It’s keeping me waiting” was sung by Carly Simon and was made famous in the Heinz Ketchup commercials of the 1970’s. It wasn’t written for an Advent devotional, yet when I read Psalm 89 it seems to summarize up the very verses assigned. The first four verses sing of praises for the kindness of the Lord. And they remind us that the Lord made an agreement with David that his descendants would be kings forever!

But then Psalm 89 goes on to describe a vision of a king coming up from the common people: King David. And the description of how God had anointed him with “holy oil.” God goes on to say that David would be strong and outwit his enemies and destroy all who hated him. The Psalm continues with the promise that God will protect David and surround him with love and that David will “hold sway from the Euphrates River to the Mediterranean Sea.”

Imagine those that heard about this king that was going to save them – how excited they must have been. Finally! Someone from among their “common” ranks to save them! Someone who could identify with their struggles! He certainly was described as “king of all kings” and someone who had found the favor of God. The anticipation of when David would be king must have been overwhelming at times. This same overwhelming feeling would be felt many years later by a virgin mother, shepherds in the field and in wise men traveling from afar all anticipating the presence of yet another king – Jesus!

“Anticipation, anticipation, it’s keeping me waiting”!

Cindy Rosso

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2017

Isaiah 9:2-7

For to Us a Child Is Born

This passage is a “wonderful” reminder of my youth. It is particularly easy for me to remember when I first read and memorized a portion of this biblical passage. I was in 5th grade and my dad was our Sunday School teacher. He gave us a homework assignment one week. The class was asked to read, memorize, and say the following verse in front of the whole class:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

Some presume that the prophet is foretelling the coming of Jesus in this specific passage. I was mesmerized as a young person as I read the glorious names describing the “Son” that would be born. We, as Christians, have the belief of an everlasting life with our Heavenly Father and his Son and the peace in heaven.

As I get older, I see more and more of my family and friends getting serious illnesses or passing away, like my dad, who passed away nearly seven years ago. I miss him every day. As a Christian, I cannot wait to see my earthly dad again alongside our Heavenly Father.

Merry Christmas and blessings to all!

Buster Hunt

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2017

Titus 2:11-14

*We Wait for the Glorious Appearing
of Our Savior*

As I read these verses I am especially struck by verse 12 – *That grace instructs us to give up ungodly living and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this world.* Every morning before I get out of bed I pray to God that I may be more like Him in my thoughts and actions. I am very fortunate that I belong to a group called “Wednesday Women” who help me along in my journey of trying to be a better person. Some days are better than others, but every morning I have new hope and with God’s guidance I try to be more like Him.

We are blessed because we have God’s grace and that is more important than any worldly possessions we have!! Especially at this time of year, let us stop listening to what the advertisers say we must have to be happy and strive to be content with God’s love and His grace. That is the best gift we could ever hope to get.

Lucy Halavin

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2017

Isaiah 62:6-12

Jerusalem, Your Savior Comes!

The prophet Isaiah is found here proclaiming the message of the return of the exiles to Jerusalem after a long Babylonian captivity. He speaks of the rebuilding of the city, of a poetic new name "Sought Out" against the old "Forsaken." He speaks of reminding God of His promises of blessings. He speaks to a depressed people of the joy of homecoming and a renewed relationship with God. He raises a song of Advent to the Jewish people of his day, looking forward to a new time and a glorious relationship with God.

As we celebrate the Advent season, we find, starting with the apostles and coming down over the ages through countless Christian messengers, the promise of our freedom (salvation) from sin and a glorious relationship with God through Christ. This relationship is to extend through eternity, based on our response to God's love. Let us respond to God's offer with a resounding AMEN- "So Be It."

Don Taylor

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2017

Luke 2:1-14

The Birth of Jesus

This beloved story of Jesus' birth is familiar to many of us, and even if we never went to Sunday School or church, surely we heard Linus read the passage in "A Charlie Brown Christmas"!

Some of us may have heard the story so many times that we have stopped listening or started to take it for granted. The only thing worse is those who have never heard the story at all, and, more to the point, have never been introduced to the Savior whose birth the story celebrates.

If this Christmas we could try to hear it as if it were for the first time, we would discover anew the setting in history of when and where this birth occurred. We are also introduced to the main characters of Joseph, Mary, and their child. His birth is announced by angels to shepherds.

In the announcement we have a wonderful message that begins: *Do not be afraid*. Throughout the Bible we find this encouraging word: "Do not be afraid," "fear not," "God is for you, not against you!" They say that there are 365 variations of the message "Do not be afraid" in the Bible – one for each day of the year! God does not want us to be defeated by fear, but rather to be filled with joy as we receive the good news that is for all the people. The good news is for everyone – that includes you and me – everyone!

The arrival of a baby is usually a cause for wonder and joy as we celebrate the miracle of birth, but this is an extra special baby that has been born – He is Christ the Lord and He has come to save us from Satan, from sin, from ourselves. The Savior has been born!

The angels are praising God because He has sent His Son to bring grace and peace to all who dwell on the earth!

One of the great hymns of Christmas is "Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come!" He not only has come in the past on that night long ago in a stable in Bethlehem ... He not only will come in the future to set all things right and to take His people home to reign with Him forever... but He is come. He is here right now – "God with us!"

We should not be afraid because we are not alone. God is with us. God has sent His Son into the world to let us know we are loved. He has come to save us from our sin and to make us His very own for time and eternity!

Some say that the most important events in history are when Jesus died on the cross and when He rose from the dead to give us victory over sin and death. Indeed, those are the core beliefs and central events of the Gospel. But if He had not been born as the Son of God we would not have a Savior.

The baby grew to be a man who lived among us. He came to bring God to us and to bring us to God. If there was ever a birth worth celebrating, it is the birth of Christ the Lord!

But it doesn't end there. He wants to be born in us. He wants us to tell the good news to others because the Savior is born to bring good news to all people!

Let us read the story afresh and hear the message anew.

*O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

Phillips Brooks

Dan Casselberry

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2017

Luke 2:15-21

The Shepherds Find the Baby Jesus

The shepherds were in town! One knew they were coming before they could even be seen. The smell preceded them! The smell was almost sickening! People did their best to avoid them. Some ducked into one of the shops that lined the street while others simply held their noses until they had passed by.

These men lived with their flocks in the fields that surrounded Bethlehem. They were the ones who raised and cared for the lambs and the older sheep that were reserved for the sacrifices in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Theirs was an important, but not highly regarded, occupation. You see, the sheep used for sacrifice in the Temple had to be without blemish or they were unacceptable. The shepherds, however, were considered blemished because while they were in the fields, they could not observe the laws dealing with cleanliness. Their blemish was their uncleanness. They were avoided almost as if they had the plague!

One night, while they were in the fields with their flocks, the sky became as bright as day *and the glory of the Lord shone around them*. An angel appeared to them and said, *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people*. It was then that they learned that Jesus the Christ had been born.

When the angel left, they began to discuss among themselves what all this meant. They finally decided to go see with their own eyes this Child about whom the angel spoke. *And they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger*. Mary and Joseph didn't seem to mind the smell or the intrusion of these men who were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. They listened carefully to the story the shepherds told, a story Mary would remember for the rest of her days.

And the shepherds, after worshipping the Child, returned to their flocks, *glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

It was a night they would forever remember. God had announced the birth of His Son, not to the high and mighty, but to them: humble, lowly shepherds who were ignored by the world. In God's eyes, they were important – important enough for God to send His Son to be their Savior.

John Campbell

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2017

John 1:1-14

The Word Became Flesh

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (Jn. 1:1).

The young pastor was discussing the scriptural passage with a retired pastor. The young man was enthusiastically reflecting with his older mentor on the depth of meaning of “in the beginning,” going on about John’s use of “the Word.” His commentary emphasized the scope and complexity of the first two verses. As he paused, his older friend said, “That sounds good, but will it preach?” The acid test of any Christian theology carried to the pulpit is “will it preach?”

Most likely any theological discussion of the first fourteen verses of the Gospel According to John would involve a discussion of “the Word.” The gospel author writing in the common Greek of his day used a word common in his philosophical-theological world: *Logos*. It translates to us as “word,” but as it is used in this gospel its meaning is much more than just “a” word. *Logos*, here, means “The” Word! *Logos*, Word, used here is the very essence of God! John uses the specific Greek word for that reason. *Logos* means “the essential nature, the essential character of a thing.” Does that preach? Oh boy, does it ever! In the beginning was God in His very essence! It preaches and when comprehended it will grab us in our own human existence. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. And God was sending His own essential self to enter our human situation in the same way that you and I entered our human situation, as an infant, moreover, as an infant of ordinary, if not poor, station of life.

John's Gospel theologizes what Matthew and Luke put in narrative form. They tell us of the angel's announcement to Mary; her being overshadowed by God's Holy Spirit; the perplexity of her betrothed Joseph; their journey to Bethlehem; the birth and manger; the shepherds and the wise men. God gave Himself to us in the infant of the manger who would become the Savior for all of humankind who would receive Him as such!

Does the Word, God in His essence, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, revealing Himself by becoming flesh and bone, the Son of Man, does that preach? Oh, does it ever! God was in Jesus of Nazareth. He was in His teaching, in His preaching, in His living, in His death on the cross for our salvation, and in His resurrection to secure our salvation. God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. God revealing Himself in this manner marks the Advent season. God, who has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth to be our Christ is the story of this season.

Tom Cunningham

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2017

Hebrews 1:1-4

The Son Superior to Angels

The message in Hebrews is the sufficiency and superiority of Christ. Hebrews 1:3 clearly states that Jesus is not just like God, but is God. Jesus is the full and perfect image or representation. Not only is Jesus Christ the representation of God; **He** does and has done the work of God.

Deeply rooted in the Old Testament, Hebrews 1:1-4 are verses of encouragement to remain strong with Jesus as **He** is the complete superiority. Christ is the perfect revelation of God, the final and complete sacrifice for sin, the compassionate one and the way to eternal life. Jesus reveals God to man by **His** entire being, not just words but by **His** character and deeds. Poetically structured with alliteration and rhythm, the first four verses of Hebrews eloquently draw the reader into the power and majesty of Jesus Christ: *the Son radiates God's own glory and the Son is far greater than the angels.*

Just as the Jews of the first century were tempted to fall away from Christ, we, too, as Christians are tempted to fall away from our faith. As followers, we believe in Christ but may deny His presence in our practices. *The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and He sustains everything by the mighty power of the command* (Heb. 1:3) reminds us to not exclude Jesus's wisdom in the guidance of all things in our lives.

Hebrews tells us Jesus Christ is the eternally begotten Son, without beginning and without ending. Who Jesus was, what **He** said and accomplished by dying and rising from the dead, is God's word to us. Christ is the message from the Father. Let us remember to take the time to listen earnestly. Let us remember to put our trust and our hope in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as our Savior through which then we will be united with our Lord and Savior in a saving relationship.

Through this: *In the last days God has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir to all things.* (Heb. 1:2), we can rejoice in the fact the Son of God can make good on all promises. The Son of God is the heir and **He** will have in subjection to Him all that is. *When He had made purification of sins He sat down at the right hand of Majesty* (Heb. 1:3) encourages us to remain strong and unshakable against temptation to ever doubt our sins can be forgiven. Let us embrace Hebrews 1:3 and be confident that Christ reigns today. May we face the challenges of our modern world filled with pressures of self-sufficiency by listening to the Word of God and know that Christ upholds all things.

Let us rejoice!

Karen Robbins

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2017

Titus 3:4-7

The Kindness and Love of God Appeared

So how was your Christmas? Did it meet your expectations? Anyone disappointed with their gifts, the company, the food, something someone said, someone who didn't show up, call, visit? As we know, our experiences are not often like those on the Christmas movie channel. What we secretly lust after in the stores doesn't often appear in our Christmas stocking. We hope, but never really know whether the gifts we gave were liked or appreciated. Shopping can often be spending the appropriate amount of money and hoping for the best. Out of the Five Love Languages, gift-giving isn't necessarily our language.

Forest Hill Church in Charlotte made a video this Christmas. It shows a family waking up on a regular day, but everyone is wrapped in Christmas paper, as is their food, faucets, light switches and car. It ends with "This Christmas, may you be grateful for all the gifts around you!" How different is a Christian Christmas from a secular one? Is it merely church attendance?

The verse that precedes the passage for today says, *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all sorts of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another* (Titus 3:2). We used to live for ourselves, for the gifts, for the food, for the movies, for the general excuse to overindulge in whatever way we chose.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, WHAT THEN? How have we changed since we realized that Jesus saved us, renewed us through the power of the Holy Spirit, poured out His grace generously on us, made us heirs to His kingdom, gave us the hope of eternal life? Not because we deserved any of those incredibly generous and

costly gifts, but because of His kindness, love, mercy, grace and unimaginable and incomprehensible generosity.

Lord, we pray that You would open our eyes this season to all that You have freely given us – gifts that we don't deserve or appreciate enough. Help us to live differently and to share Your gifts.

Helen Jackson

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2017

Isaiah 52:7-10

The Lord's Salvation

The story recounted in Isaiah 52:7-10 opens on a mountain. Often, when people find themselves on the top of the mountain, they look around in expectation. We look for beautiful vistas, creative cloud formations, flowering trees, and even a glimpse of wildlife, if we're lucky. What a gift these mountaintop views are. It makes one want to shout and sing, listening for the echo as your voice comes back to you.

However, the watchmen in Isaiah may not have even noticed the mountain views that day. They were looking for something even more profound – a message from the Lord. When the message finally comes, the watchmen hurry to bring the news to those who are waiting. They raise their voices and announce peace and joy and the good news of happiness. They declare without hesitation, *Your God reigns*. Unable to limit themselves to speaking, they burst into song declaring, “God has redeemed Jerusalem.” What an amazing event. Don't you wish you could have been on that mountain and been the one to bring the good news? Don't you wish you could have been one of these watchmen who sang for joy?

Well, you can be. You can follow their example. When you find yourself on the mountain (or anywhere or everywhere else, for that matter), sing out the Good News of God's salvation. Listen well because you will hear it echo across the mountain top into the valleys beyond and over the next mountain top. “God is our salvation. God is our... God is...”

Sally Hansen

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2017

Revelation 21:1-7

The Alpha and the Omega

The Alpha and the Omega – The Beginning and the End.

Powerful words. Words pointing to the beginning and the end of all time. The old earth (and heaven) have disappeared and now begins a new heaven and a new earth. Relating these verses to a current theory of the beginning of the universe as we now know it, God was there before the Big Bang occurred and will be there when the last star finally dims and dies. In the beginning there was no light, something that is now theorized to have occurred right after the Big Bang, when there was no light for some 300,000+ years because photons had yet to form. As part of the “beginning” God created light and continued with creation and ended with creating man and woman. He gave them Eden as their paradise. He also gave them eternal life (the tree of life, from which there was no restriction) and wanted them to know only good and not evil, hence He forbid/restricted them from eating from another tree, the fruit of which gave knowledge of good and evil. But because they disobeyed by eating fruit from that particular forbidden tree, God punished them by taking away eternal life and kicked them out of the Garden of Eden.

And so here we are today, knowing that we have sinned and also knowing that eternal life exists, but how do we obtain that? Look at what the cycle is ... in the beginning God was there and in the end God is there. Look at your birth as your beginning – your point in life when you are least sinful. Weren't you closest to God at your birth? Wouldn't you like to be as close to God now or at the end of your life as you were at the beginning? Remember, God has told us with these verses He's there at the beginning and at the end – and I would venture to say that He's with us in between also. Additionally, in these verses in Revelation God is giving us back eternal life through the springs of the water of life. Eternal life was taken

from us by God when we were kicked out of Eden. Now He gives it back to us, but only when He is part of our life.

God was with you at the beginning. Let Him be part of your life now and at your life's end. Having God be a part of your life – something to look forward to in great anticipation – is truly an Advent.

Jon Robbins

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2017

Galatians 4:4-7

Abba, Father

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

Many names throughout scripture describe God's identity and character, but the most prominent name found in the New Testament is Father. When we experience salvation through Jesus, we are given a unique relationship with Him as His children where we can call Him "Abba Father" which literally means "Daddy." In a culture full of broken homes, many fathers lack strength, integrity, and compassion. When we become part of God's family, we discover a father who is good, right, and perfect in every way, who also invites us as His children to approach Him as our loving Daddy.

Here are some questions for you ask yourself about God being your Father:

- Is it easy or difficult for you to view God as your loving Father?
- How does knowing God as your Father impact the way you view your relationship with Him?
- How does viewing God as your Father impact the way you approach Him in prayer?

Take a few minutes to praise God for proving Himself faithful as a loving Father.

Ruth Packer

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2017

Philippians 2: 5-11

The Attitude of Christ Jesus

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ...

What are the characteristics of a servant? Humble, putting others first always, doing menial and lowly jobs, always on call, being treated as a sub-human or invisible, one whose opinion doesn't count. Who wants to be that? No one that I know of.

But Jesus took on those characteristics and even gave His life as a sacrifice for those He didn't even know. Why? Because His Father, God, asked Him to. God had required many sacrifices from those in the Old Testament. Jesus giving his life was the final, the last, sacrifice ever. No more would God ask His followers for a sacrifice of oxen, cattle, sheep, or other food. A sinless human sacrifice by the name of Jesus would be the once for all.

How can we ever measure up to Jesus' attitude — one of giving, loving, forgiving, patience, goodness beyond measure, selflessness. We can't, but God can help us as

1. we pray for His characteristics daily, even hourly, to live in us.
2. we read the Bible and ask for His knowledge and the strength to overcome.
3. we plaster our homes with positive statements and Scripture as a woman in a *Guideposts* story did. She wanted to always have a positive, faith-filled word in front of her.
4. we diffuse bad attitudes with humor, laughter, or a positive word.

Listen to the words of Colton Dixon's song:

*Let them see You in me,
Let them hear You when I speak,
Let them feel You when I sing,
Let them see You in me.*

*Lord, help me to serve You and others without complaint as I
seek to be like You. You are GRACE personified.*

Lana Saxon

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2017

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I Delight Greatly in the Lord

I believe this has been one of the most difficult, heartbreaking years of my life. Now, don't get me wrong – there have been times of joy, such as watching my youngest child graduate from high school, spending time with my sister and her family over the summer, celebrating my eldest child's first wedding anniversary, and cheering for my swimmer as she shaves time from her races. Then, the mat was pulled out from under my feet, and I landed in a heap of hurt.

The scripture in Isaiah tells the story of what a wonderful thing God has done for us in dressing us in the robes of salvation so that we may have a different relationship with Him. Yes, this is absolutely overwhelming! Even more so is verse 11: *I delight greatly in the LORD*, because I've experienced this as my saving grace.

I delight greatly in the LORD! While I cry and ask how things could happen this way, I know Yahweh is listening and holding me upright. That relationship Isaiah talks about is here! It's what He does as He listens to me and then sends someone to help. Or as He sends others with similar stories to let me know I can live through this time. It's why I can truly say, "My soul rejoices in my God."

Melissa Fuller

MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 2018

Numbers 6:22-27

The Priestly Blessing

²² *The LORD said to Moses,* ²³ *“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:*

²⁴ *““The LORD bless you
and keep you;*

²⁵ *the LORD make His face shine on you
and be gracious to you;*

²⁶ *the LORD turn His face toward you
and give you peace.”*

²⁷ *“So they will put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”*

Growing up in the church I’ve recited Numbers 6:24-26 thousands of times, usually as a benediction at the end of a service. If you’re like me, this ritual always sounded like a wonderful way to part ways, while not really giving much thought to its origin.

Now go back to verse 22 which begins *The LORD said to Moses* – WOW!! This is not a blessing from your pastor or your fellow church goers; this is a blessing direct from GOD filled with HIS promises for each of us from the beginning to the end on this journey called life.

In 2018, think of ways you can bless others by letting them know they too have been blessed by GOD.

To go deeper, learn the priestly blessing (Aaronic Benediction) in Hebrew: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnEHIVkFyoA>.

Shalom.

Donna Beaty

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2018

Psalm 8

O Lord, How Majestic Is Your Name

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Just reading the first verse of Psalm 8 makes my heart sing for joy! Words from this chapter are used in my most favorite choral anthem, "The Majesty and Glory of Your Name" by Tom Fettke. I will share the lyrics below.

*When I gaze into the night skies and see
the work of Your fingers.*

The moon and stars suspended in space.

Oh, what is man that You are mindful of him?

*You have given man a crown of glory and honor,
And have made him a little lower than the angels.*

You have put him in charge of all creation:

The beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea.

Oh, what is man? Oh, what is man that You are mindful of him?

*O Lord, our God, the majesty and glory of Your name
transcends the earth and fills the heavens.*

*O Lord, our God, little children praise You perfectly,
And so would we. And so would we.*

*Alleluia! Alleluia! The majesty and glory of Your name.
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

AMEN

Conya Hartman

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3, 2018

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, Shine, for Your Light Has Come

When I read the first two words of Isaiah 60, my mind went to memories of walking past the preschool Sunday School room, hearing a rousing chorus of, “Rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory!” A church lady would lead the song, banging it out on a half-tuned piano, joined by a choir of little angels singing their hearts out. The chorus was the only part of the song I remembered, so I looked up the lyrics. It’s about Noah, his obedience to God in building the “arky, arky,” and how everything ended up being “hunky-dory, dory.”

Isaiah does not mention Noah, the “arky, arky” or the flood, so maybe the song really has nothing to do with today’s scripture reading. Or does it? Isaiah gives us a call to action. Just like Noah was called to build the “arky, arky,” we are given our own instructions – to rise and to shine. In other words, we can’t just stay in our comfortable place, basking in the light of the Lord. We are supposed to get up and do something! A mountain, a tree, a cloud, even the moon – these are all objects which beautifully reflect sunlight. But, the mountain and tree just stand in place. The cloud floats wherever the wind takes it, with no direction of its own. And while we speak of the moon rising, we know it really doesn’t rise – it revolves around the Earth based on forces of gravity and momentum. Unlike these objects, we have to take the affirmative, intentional action of rising up so our light can shine.

And, yes – we are supposed to actually shine. A faint glow is not sufficient. Throwing off a little light? Not good enough! The reflection of the sun pales compared to our calling. We have to actually shine with the radiant light of the Lord whose glory has risen on us. And through our obedience to this calling, others will come to know and praise Him, like maybe some of those little angels singing their hearts out.

Rise! Shine!

Alex Ford

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4, 2018

Ephesians 3:1-12

The Mystery of Christ

Many agree that when Paul wrote this, he was imprisoned in Rome, but he mentions nothing about it in this passage. Instead Paul tells of his imprisonment to Jesus Christ. How he came across his sentence to Christ is quite different then how most of us came to Christ. On the road to Damascus, the Pharisee once known as Saul was enroute to find Christians and kill them. Suddenly the Lord appeared to him as a bright light, and called the man out!!!! It made him a true believer!!! As a matter of fact, God chose him to spread the Good News to the Gentiles. So Paul made many missionary trips around the Mediterranean stopping at synagogues and converting Jews and Gentiles to Christianity and establishing many churches. What was he saying? What was he explaining?

The above passage shares God's plan for all His children – that we are, in fact, all equal. Why? Because God affords to us by grace, at no cost to us, salvation through His Son that He sacrificed for our sins, so that by accepting Him we receive eternal life!!! What a great deal!! So go out and ask somebody – do you know the great mystery of the New Testament??? Do you???

Daniel Vergara

FRIDAY, JANUARY 5, 2018

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

All Kings Will Bow Down to Him

Psalm 72:1-7 is asking that the king (president, ruler, etc.) judge his/her people with righteousness and the poor with justice. It is asking for prosperity for the people. It asks to defend the poor, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor. It is asking for righteousness to flourish and peace to abound.

This is what everyone wants or should want. Think about a world with PEACE. How awesome would that be! I kind of think that way back then there was as much “stuff” going on as there is today. I tend to think at all different times in history most people wanted fairness, righteousness, prosperity and PEACE. Sometimes I think we forget about the poor, however. I have volunteered many times at Interfaith Kitchen. In the beginning that was totally out of my comfort zone. Now I see the joy in it.

Psalm 72:10-14 is asking for all leaders to fall down before God because God delivers the needy and the poor. He has pity on the weak and needy. *From oppression and violence He redeems their life and precious is their blood in His sight.* An ideal earthly king, (president, ruler, etc.) attends to the needs of the downtrodden. Wouldn't that also be awesome! Then there would truly be worldwide PEACE.

We all can do our part in helping the needy by donating or volunteering. It really makes your heart feel good. Try it sometime if you have not already. It's truly contagious. Don't forget, I am not just talking about adults. There are many needy children who also, through no fault of their own, need much help. Step out of your comfort zone even if it be in little steps.

Deb Bennett

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6, 2018

Matthew 2:1-12

The Visit of the Magi

When I go on a journey, I try to think of everything I might need, not only along the way, but when I get to my destination, as well. For example, if I may become ill along the way, I should pack items that would help me feel better. If it rains, an umbrella or raincoat; if it's cold a light sweater or jacket as well – you never know. If I'm going to be outside a lot, then I better pack some sunscreen and a hat.

Lastly, I want to pack enough clothes for the journey. The last thing I want to do is go to the laundromat on my journey. Oh yes, since I'm traveling with Dale and our grandchildren, I have to think of their needs. I just know they are going to forget something and I have to be the one who is prepared.

My problem with Matthew is that he doesn't tell us what the travelers from the east needed for their journey, and I cannot help but think about the long two-year journey they were on. However, we are told they asked good questions along the way so they would not be lost. We are also told they brought gifts with them for a king, not just any king, but the King of all kings, the Messiah. They packed gold, frankincense, and myrrh and then they worshipped the newborn king.

Like the magi, when we gather for worship, we too bring the gifts of our pockets, as well as our love and our service to the Messiah. At the end of this gospel, Jesus said that He was sending **us** out to *make disciples of all nations* (Matt 28:19), and the magi who represent other nations were already on their sojourn with bags packed! Imagine that.

It is clear that the light of God shines most brilliantly through Jesus Christ, but it shines through the journey of your life, too, so that everyone may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

If it were not for the darkness, the wise guys from the east would never have seen or been guided by the light two years after the birth of Christ. God sent the light of Christ into the world to save us. However, 2000 years later, many people are still bumping into things and getting lost in the darkness. Be guided by the light of Christ as you journey through your life and don't be afraid to take a different path.

Joleen Golden

SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2018

Matthew 2:13-18

The Escape to Egypt

Choices, choices, and even more choices. Life is so full of them. Some are easy to make with a definite "Yes, this is the right thing to do." Other times, things are more complicated with possibility of danger or harm.

In today's world, we certainly hear and know about refugees. We may even know a refugee family. Usually some kind of fear creates a feeling of danger, making one want to flee to safety to find a safe haven for their loved ones.

We don't know much about Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus of Nazareth. He and his wife, Mary, were just a young couple whose newborn son was celebrated by the heavens singing, and an assortment of visitors came to stand in awe, some even bringing gifts of great value. What was happening?

And then, Joseph had a strange dream. An angel appeared and warned Joseph that King Herod had heard of his

son's birth and ordered the baby to be killed! A choice had to be made. This trip would be no relaxing vacation to see the sights of Egypt, but one of quickly leaving in the middle of the night, undoubtedly looking behind them as they fled. They had become refugees.

Was Joseph aware of the possibility of his tiny son becoming the Savior of the World? What thoughts ran through his head as they quickly made the trip to Egypt? What was going to happen next? God doesn't always send the expected to us.

God may be opening a door for you and me. A favorite poem of mine is "The Road Not Taken," by Robert Frost, a former neighbor of mine when I lived in South Miami. Some choices take us to a strange land or complications. We may not know what awaits us around the next bend, but we take the new road knowing that God is with us on a new path or adventure.

We should be prepared for the next joy. It comes in all kinds of packages. Keep the door open for God to send us the unexpected.

Marilyn Thomas