



**Hendricks
Avenue
Baptist
Church**

**Advent
Devotional
Guide
2019**

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First Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come

*the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.*

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

*⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

*⁵O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!*

In 740 B.C. Assyria was threatening to overrun Syria and Palestine. Isaiah's people were overwhelmed. They needed guidance and a dream to pin their hopes on. Isaiah offered that as he envisioned a time when swords could be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Achieving such peace would involve walking in the light of the Lord.

We always look to dreamers for vision and hope. Perhaps our most famous modern dreamer was Martin Luther King, Jr., who offered

his vision of country no longer divided by race, but judged by character. He saw a civilization throwing away the swords of racism and the spears of hatred. His peaceful resolve changed our country.

Where are our dreamers now? Millennials say their five most pressing concerns for the world today include climate change, large-scale conflict, inequality, poverty, and government accountability. We are searching for the visionaries in politics, religion, education, and public service who can solve these pressing problems. We want to get a glimpse of the light of the Lord. We seek it in all the traditional places where leadership has been found, but perhaps we need look no further than ourselves. Maybe, we are the light. We have within us the ability to act with compassion, to deny self, to look for the good in all God's creation. We need to connect with our dreams in a personal way and ask ourselves, "How can I shine the light of the Lord?"

—Ansley Parfitt

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2019

Romans 6:1-11

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In this and every Advent season we find and express so much gratitude in God's promises, *his* story, and our path back to him through the advent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The next advent of Jesus

is also promised and spoken in his own words. If we have accepted him in faith, we have been baptized into his death and resurrection, making us like him (6:3-5).

It doesn't stop there, though. We are free from the penalty of sin that separated humans from God, but how to translate that into being free of the sin of our humanity, which remains, can be a difficult concept on the surface. Let's look at 6:8-10. These are the definitive statements of the finality of Christ's victory over sin and death because he lives again forever. We believe these statements as Christians, so in this entire portion of Paul's letter to the church at Rome he is encouraging them to live out what they believe—that they are dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11). Just as I see the completeness and surety of all the promises God has made to us, I look forward to the return of Jesus, which will represent the fullness of God's story and promise to *us*.

Praise God the Father, and his Son Christ Jesus, for loving us and dying for us!

—Terry Ezell

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2019

Psalm 124

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—

² if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,

³ then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;

⁴ then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;

⁵ then over us would have gone the raging waters.

⁶ Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

⁷ We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

⁸ Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Sunday, December 1, marks the first of four Sundays of our season of Advent, our special time of anticipation, expectation, and preparation for the coming of the Christ Child on Christmas Day.

Advent is the season of joy and celebration, and a time when we give gifts to one another. As we give gifts, so also does Jesus give gifts to

us. He reminds us of his Father's love for us. He gives us a renewed sense of hope as we face the challenges of life. He gives us new insights and wisdom that we can share with our loved ones. He gives us freedom from guilt as we lay our failings at his feet. And, above all, he gives us peace and joy as he assures us that he holds us in the palm of his hand.

As David tells us in Psalm 124, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." In this Advent season, so it remains that his Son Jesus offers us life everlasting.

Prayer: Let us remember that our help is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Amen.

—Bill Mason

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2019

Matthew 24:23-35

²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'There he is!'—do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ Take note, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look! He is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look! He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

²⁹ "Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven,

and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

³⁰ Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these

things have taken place. ³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The main theme of this passage is that when troubling signs of the future become apparent, we must look to God for reassurance and hope. After all, God sacrificed his own Son to make nearer one's auspicious fate. But, leaning on God when life gets tough does not always sound realistic. Society, and maybe even we ourselves, tell us that mostly money and other material things will solve our problems. In some cases, they are right. However, these material things only have the potential to solve material problems, or earthly problems. As Christians, though, we should not be so concerned with earthly problems. Yes, paying bills, fixing broken relationships, and keeping the seams of our life from ripping open are all important and valid issues that can keep us up at night. But God has a habit of showing us signs that everything will be okay. Whether this is witnessed through small, everyday actions or through people, it is important that we recognize them and give thanks for them. Wherever God is is where our comfort, relief, and hope can be found.

Prayer: Dear Lord, whatever challenges we are facing right now, we lift up our worries to you. We hope to see the signs of your working in our lives and pray that these signs give us a more optimistic outlook on our future. We ask you to help us be more willing to lean on you when we are hurting, and we thank you for new beginnings and the chance to begin again. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

—Hannah Gray

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2019

Isaiah 4:2-6

²On that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. ³Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, ⁴ once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. ⁵Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a

canopy. ⁶It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Where are you on the journey to Bethlehem? As we anticipate Jesus' birth, we feel joy, praise, and thanksgiving.

But in our daily lives we have ups and downs, ins and outs, twists and turns. We seek solutions. Isaiah says Jesus, Messiah, the Branch, came for that purpose.

The LORD has a plan. He begins by washing away the negative thoughts and things we hold onto in our ways of coping. He brings the beauty of hope and encouragement. Sometimes the Spirit turns to judgment and fire to get our attention. The heat promotes purity of heart and mind. Fire ignites our passion and compassion, praise and exaltation.

He provides for our needs. He makes his presence known day and night through the cover of his love manifest in the fellowship of the humankind and creation. He provides shade from the heat of the day. We won't wilt. And refuge from the storm and rain. We won't drown.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we give thanks for your coming. All glory and praise! Amen.

JESUS CHRIST BRINGS BEAUTY AND GLORY.

—Ann Carter

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2019

Acts 13:16-25

¹⁶ So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak:

“You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen. ¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. ¹⁸ For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ After he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance ²⁰ for about four hundred fifty years. After that he gave them judges until the time of the prophet Samuel. ²¹ Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. ²² When he had removed him, he made David their king. In his testimony about him he said, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.’ ²³ Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he

promised; ²⁴ before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.'

My family has this little Santa Christmas countdown stand. As a child my family gave me such a hard time for how I counted. Somehow I would shave off days—because you can't really count Christmas Day or Christmas Eve because, well, we are celebrating together and you can't really count the actual day it is. I was always just so eager to get to Christmas and Christmas Eve.

Eagerness is a funny thing. We are eager to get to the weekend, to our birthdays, to see family. We have an end destination in mind—and we can prepare. But how hard must it have been for the Israelites to be eager and to prepare for the hundreds and hundreds of years they were waiting for something that had been promised—for the coming of their Messiah?

We prepare ourselves for the four weeks leading up to Christmas, but what if we were told to prepare for something promised but not yet provided? What if Christmas were something we celebrated every 40 years, or every 450 years? How different would our preparation be? Would our excitement wane? Would we stray from the path toward our promise? Or would we stick to the course and patiently wait it out?

During Advent ask yourself this question: "Is my eagerness for Christmas going to sustain my walk of faith all year? Will it sustain me for 40 years? Will it sustain me through the deserts of my life?"

Prayer: Gracious God, as we journey through Advent, may your presence provide us with the patience and resilience to make it to Christmas. Amen.

—Claire Chinn

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2019

Psalm 72:1-7

¹ Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

² May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

³ May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

⁵ May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

⁷ In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

Psalm 72 is a timely passage for our *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life), particularly our political situation. The psalm is one of nine Royal Psalms (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 110, 132) that sing praise to the king as God's chosen representative on earth. Most scholars believe this was a coronation hymn for the king of Judah. The psalm highlights the prayers of the people for the king and the importance of understanding the king's role in relationship to God and God's people.

In our seven verses, the words justice and righteousness (often used interchangeably) are used six times. The congregation of Israel longs for a king who governs on the behalf of all people, especially their most vulnerable citizens. The power given to the king is to be used as an extension of God's *shalom* (verse 7) so that peace and prosperity might abound among all people.

Yet, as we so often see, power and human self-interest cloud our vision. Ultimately, Jesus is the only one who can fulfill the words of Psalm 72. Yet, the psalm is not merely a prescription for a king. Rather, it is a call to all of God's people to be participants in and messengers of God's *shalom*. While we pray for our leaders to model their leadership and governance after King Jesus, we too are called to live and work in such a way that "righteousness may flourish and peace abound."

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in this season of longing and anticipation, give us hearts that long for justice and peace to be realized in our world. And fill us with enough courage and foolishness to believe we can make a difference in this world. Amen.

—Britt Hester

Second Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 8, 2019

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”*

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

I remember the Christmas music a few years ago when Ken Medema was with us. I remember Ken holding onto Drew Shapard’s shoulder as Drew led him down the aisle toward the piano (you remember that Ken is blind), Ken shouting, “Prepare ye the way! Prepare ye the way of the Lord!” I remember the hair standing up on the back of my neck. It was

chilling.

Matthew tells us about preparing the way. He describes John the Baptist. John the Baptizer. A wild man. He purportedly wore rough clothes made of camel’s hair (how itchy!) and ate locusts and wild honey. Honey, yes, locusts, not so much (although they are purportedly full of protein). I’ve seen him depicted in paintings with an animal skin around his shoulders, which seems to fit his described personality. He shouted, he exhorted, he accused—and he baptized.

Baptism was a familiar rite to the Jews. It was an ancient custom associated with the cleansing properties of water, from the beginning of time a sacred element to God and to humans (and animals—*National Geographic* shows us pictures of animals, predator and prey together, at the same water hole). One of those whom John baptized was Jesus.

The warning John thundered, echoing Isaiah’s prophecy, applies to us too, as we travel together through Advent, preparing the way for the Lord, making the road straight and smooth as best we can.

Prayer: Lord, make me aware of the road as I travel through Advent. Help me smooth it out, make it straight. Amen.

—Julie Mason

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2019

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more

and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

My dad recently butt-dialed me. This happens on occasion with my dad, and usually I get a message of muffled sounds from a phone inside his pocket on my voicemail. However, this time I picked up. I quickly realized he had no clue I was on the phone. He was speaking with my mom in the background, discussing his day and excitement about eating pizza for dinner. Being the wonderful daughter that I am, I decided to listen in for a couple of minutes. Their genuine conversation reminded me of how I often look to them for the treatment of others with kindness, graciousness, and love.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul urges the audience to remember what they have seen and heard from those around them and Jesus so that they might live to please God. When we call to mind those who have set the example for us, we might think of family members, friends, or people in our church community who have taught us how to live so that we might please God more and more. During this Advent season we have hope. We hope that we might remember what we have seen and heard in the example set for us by others. We hope for growth and that we might live to please God more and more.

(It's interesting that Paul remarks that the church of Thessalonica does not need someone to write to them to tell them to love because they have already been taught by God.)

—*Emily Farmer*

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2019

Romans 15:14-21

¹⁴I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. ¹⁵Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. ¹⁸For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹by the power of signs

and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. ²⁰Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, ²¹but as it is written,

*“Those who have never been told of him shall see,
and those who have never heard of him shall understand.”*

Paul's passion, single-mindedness, and humility are on display as he reminds his readers of the importance of giving Christ the glory in all their gospel-spreading work. Shortly after reading this, I came upon a disheveled fellow brandishing a “Jesus Saves” sign on a street corner and, after my initial reaction of sympathy, thought:

- a) He looks like some of the renderings of Paul I've seen, and
- b) How freeing it must be to be that passionate and uninhibited.

Passion and certainly single-mindedness seem to be in short supply in our sophisticated Christian faith these days. We call ourselves Christian, but many of us check that box after we've checked career, college and/or pro-football allegiance, and political persuasion. We exuberantly endorse morally bereft, egomaniacal politicians; cheer madly for overpaid, rule-bending and rule-breaking sports figures; and fawn over vacuous, self-absorbed entertainers. While it may be impractical, and probably not very effective, to pump a “Jesus” sign on a street corner, maybe we can set a bit of our dubiously directed zeal to the side and save it to help spread the good news of our faith, always giving God the glory, as Paul directs us to do.

—*Art Mills*

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2019

Matthew 12:33-37

³³“Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. ³⁶I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Have you ever said something and as soon as you said it, you wish you hadn't?

This Scripture tells us that the result of our negative thoughts leads to negative words toward others. Similarly, having positive thoughts leads to positive words toward others. Unfortunately, having negative thoughts is part of human nature. When we have those thoughts, God calls us to come to him in prayer so that our hearts can be changed through him. Everyone knows the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The truth is that words do hurt. So, it is important as followers of Christ to make sure that we are careful with what we think, so that we may lift others up instead of bringing them down. As Christians, people see our words and actions as reflections of Christ. Therefore, we must make sure that our words and actions reflect what Christ has called us to be. So, each day, when you have negative thoughts, go to the Lord in prayer, and ask him to soften your heart so that we can live out Christ's love toward others.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for sending Christ to be an example for how we should live our lives. Soften our hearts each day, so that we can show love toward others and reflect your will for our lives. Amen.

—Maddie Weise

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2019

Psalm 146:5-10

⁵ *Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,*

whose hope is in the LORD their God,

⁶ *who made heaven and earth,*

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ *who executes justice for the oppressed;*

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ *the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.*

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ *The LORD watches over the strangers;*

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ *The LORD will reign forever,*

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

In his book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Norman Vincent Peale tells the story of a young man training to become a trapeze artist. He'd completed all the necessary practice exercises and was said to be ready to perform, but when he stood on the platform, far above the ground, he froze. He cried out that he was too afraid and just couldn't do it! The instructor gently put his arm around the frightened young man and said, "Yes, you can do this. Just throw your heart over the bar and your body will follow."

It occurred to me that this expression describes what it means to put our hope in God. The psalmist tells us that God is the creator and sustainer of all life, provides for the oppressed and downtrodden, loves and provides for those who are in relationship with him, and has always been and will always be our one true hope in this life. In other words, we don't have to stand on the platform and tremble with fear.

With all the trappings of the holiday season, if we are not vigilant, we will find we are putting our hope for a joyous Christmas in all the wrong things that will often disappoint. Strip away the tinsel and lights, and it's really very simple. Through the gift of Christ, God is pleading with us to put our lives and the lives of those we love in his hands alone. It can be scary, but if you "throw your heart over the bar" and grab onto this very big God of ours, the rest will follow, and God never disappoints.

Prayer: Gracious God, teach us to trust in you with every breath we take, knowing that you alone are our refuge and hope.

—Susan Stepp

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2019

2 Peter 3:11-18

¹¹ *Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.*

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

What a day to pick for an Advent devotion. One of the days that we dread in the calendar, a day of bad luck, a day to avoid.

Peter begins this passage reminding us of the day of judgment and how terrible it will be, maybe another Friday the 13th. But he quickly reminds us that this is not a day of despair, but a day to look forward to in the midst of the chaos. We are given a promise by God that we will experience a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness will prevail. We need to be secure in this promise that no matter how many Friday the 13ths there are in our life, we live with a promise of love, forgiveness, and redemption in Jesus Christ. We have the assurance that Christ is in control of this world, not fate or bad luck.

Today thank God that in the midst of our world we can find security and grace—a grace that was shown to us in the manger as Jesus came and dwelled with us at Bethlehem. A grace that was given to all of us.

—Dawson McQuaig, Jr.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2019

1 Samuel 2:1-8

¹ Hannah prayed and said,
“My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

² “There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³ Talk no more so very proudly,

let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵ Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

⁶ The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷ The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.

⁸ He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s,
and on them he has set the world.

During the season of Advent, we often hear the phrase “waiting for” or “preparing for the Lord.” For some, waiting is a time of excitement and delight. We wait for meaningful time with friends, the beautiful sound of children’s laughter on Christmas Eve, or the loving hugs from family on Christmas Day. For others, waiting is challenging and grueling. It’s filled with hardship, fear, and anger and pleads to the Lord for mercy.

Hannah knew this kind of waiting all too well as she waited, barren, longing for a son. Hannah struggled with sadness and distress. She wept before God, bargained with God, and pleaded for a son. It is in these times that it can be difficult to wait and see what the future holds.

In the midst of life’s struggles it can be difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but Hannah’s prayer reminds us of the power of hope and trust in God. Hannah’s prayer of praise follows difficult prayers for mercy. God hears Hannah’s cry and answers her prayer, and Hannah fulfills her commitment to dedicate her son Samuel to the service of the Lord. Overwhelmed by gratitude, Hannah cries out this prayer beginning with “My heart exults in the Lord.”

Hannah's prayer describes the magnificent power of God. Prayers of thanksgiving challenge us to pause and see God's love and presence in our lives.

Prayer: What prayer of gratitude do you have for God? Today, as we wait during this season of Advent, you are invited to pause and lift up a prayer of gratitude toward God.

—Courtney Hester

Third Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 15, 2019

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

"Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

Matthew 11:3

This is a season of waiting.

If we are not careful, though, we will spend it waiting in traffic, waiting for a good sale, waiting in line, and waiting for it just to be over.

What if—WHAT IF—like the imprisoned John, we found ourselves waiting in a place of discomfort? Perhaps that's the point of the waiting. Waiting allows discomfort and challenge and the type of seeking that, in time, provides a response.

Jesus' response to John's question "Are you the one...?" was to tell him (through John's disciples) that miraculous healing had begun (Matthew 11:4-5). His response to us is the same.

Be still, look around, and see those, like John, who are pointing to The One for whom we wait. They will be actively going about the work of God's kingdom. You will find them with those who are hurting, hungry, and scared. They will be showing comfort and mercy, and they will be peacemakers.

It is the Kingdom of a God that provides us the waiting space.

Prayer: Dear God, may we attentively wait with active anticipation during this Advent Season. Amen.

—Judy Kermitz

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10

¹ *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

³ *Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

⁴ *Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!*

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you.”

⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

⁶ *then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

⁷ *the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;*

*the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

⁸ *A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

⁹ *No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

¹⁰ *And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

Key verse: Isaiah 35:8 “A road will be there and a way; it will be called the Holy Way.”

The Prophet Isaiah wrote during distressing times in Israel and Judah. The people were waiting for relief from God's judgment and were anticipating the coming of Messiah. This is why when Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:17-19, the people listened in amazement when he said, “Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled.”

Now think back to when Isaiah wrote chapter 35; the people were suffering, besieged but not forgotten. God remembered them. God used Isaiah to deliver a message of hope about the future to a time of transformation. Verses 1-2 tell about the transformation of the desolate wilderness; verses 3-6a describe the transformation of the weak and infirm, which was fulfilled by Jesus in Matthew 11:5. Then finally we read of the transformation of God's people in verses 6b-10.

Isaiah prophesied there would be a new way—a Holy Way—that God's people can take back to “Zion singing, crowned in unending joy.” Advent is a time for us to journey back to Zion to listen to the word the shepherds heard the angels declare: “Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord, was born for you in the city of David.”

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your transforming grace that saves us from our sin. Thank you for making a way for us to journey to Zion over and over again, singing and crowned in unending joy. Make this Advent a time of transformation into your holy nature. Amen.

—Dan Stallard

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2019

Psalm 42

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,

while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:

how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶ and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”

¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my body,

my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,

“Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

When Bill and I were first married, we lived in a small, rural town in Southern Virginia. There was only one Baptist church, which we joined and became active members. We felt that we were where God wanted us to be. When we moved to Jacksonville, we visited several Baptist churches, and a Methodist church, but didn't feel the presence of God or the warmth we had felt before we moved. The Spirit of God led us to continue to search for his presence in worship. Like the Psalmist, we were thirsty for what we had experienced before, and felt that perhaps we just didn't fit anywhere.

Then we visited HAB. We knew almost immediately that this worship, this House of God gave us the experience we had been searching for. People were friendly and welcomed us with warmth and openness. We felt the presence of God as we worshipped and began to know the church members. It didn't happen all at once, but over the period of a couple of months, we knew that, if we gave of ourselves, God would use this place to guide us on our faith journey,

Do you feel God's presence in our Bible study, our worship, our vespers?

Prayer: Dear God, continue to guide me with your loving care. Let me experience the calm and consistency of your presence. Let me give back to others warmth and love, for this place surely is filled with your Spirit and the love of your people. Amen.

—Julie Babcock

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2019

Zechariah 8:1-17

The word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying: ² Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. ³ Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called

the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. ⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. ⁵ And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. ⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? ⁷ Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; ⁸ and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

⁹ Thus says the LORD of hosts: Let your hands be strong—you that have recently been hearing these words from the mouths of the prophets who were present when the foundation was laid for the rebuilding of the temple, the house of the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ For before those days there were no wages for people or for animals, nor was there any safety from the foe for those who went out or came in, and I set them all against one another. ¹¹ But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. ¹³ Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.

¹⁴ For thus says the LORD of hosts: Just as I purposed to bring disaster upon you, when your ancestors provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, ¹⁵ so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. ¹⁶ These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, ¹⁷ do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD.

Through the prophet Zechariah God tells his people he will bring them back to Jerusalem and Judah. “Don’t be afraid,” he says.

But God has things which he expects from his people. Speak the truth to one another. Join together in festivals. You must love truth and peace.

Are not these the steps we should practice every day? Loving one another and forgiveness can be our everyday practice.

God’s love reaches so far in our everyday travels. Sometimes we think we don’t have a mission, but where we travel each day we are an

example of Christian love. Truth and love are key to our lives. Being a Christian is a support system, not a burden.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank you for this beautiful day. Help us to keep our head and heart pointed in the direction of thy love. Amen.

—Lee Hutchins

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2019

Galatians 3:23-29

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

When I was baptized, I remember my children’s minister, Claire, telling me about the new family I would join. She said that being baptized into the church meant all the adults would watch over me as I grew up. They would be looking out for me, just as they had for her when she grew up in the church.

Galatians teaches us about that family. It tells us that no matter who we are, we are all one in Christ. It doesn’t matter where you’re from or what gender you are; Christ loves all of us. All that matters is that we all have faith in Jesus.

Jesus gives us the perfect example of how to live our lives and love each other. We should love everyone just like Jesus loves us. When you meet someone who seems different than you, remember we are one in Christ.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for giving me a church family that loves me. Help me to remember that everyone, all over the world, is one in Christ.

—Aidan Chandler

2 Samuel 7:18-22

¹⁸Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? ¹⁹And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant’s house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD! ²⁰And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD! ²¹Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. ²²Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears.

David, a lowly shepherd and musician, is humbled that his unlikely lineage—his house—has been chosen to bring forth God’s unconditional promise to Israel. Moved by this realization, he boldly proclaims God’s sovereignty. He extols God’s faithfulness, for he has personally witnessed God’s miraculous handiwork. Ultimately, David is at a loss for words: “*And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God!*” (v. 20).

In the broader Biblical story, we see God’s grace-filled wonders in the lives of others called by God, such as Moses, Isaiah, and Mary, whose song to God is very similar in nature to David’s prayer. These individuals did not possess great riches or even prestige, yet God chose to work through them anyway. Instead, they had a relationship with God that encompassed a prayer life that was both humble and bold. They, too, were at a loss for words, but through God they were empowered to change a world that desperately needed their humility and courage. For David, his prayer seems to have been a source of reassurance for Hebrews living in exile who were beginning to lose hope in God’s covenant.

As we approach the Fourth Sunday of Advent and near the wonder and beauty of Christmas, perhaps we too might find comfort in knowing God works in unconventional ways, and that through David’s lineage, “the hopes and fears of all the years” are met in the One who has, who is, and who will come to serve the world, both humbly and boldly.

—Tommy Shapard

John 3:31-36

³¹The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³²He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. ³³Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. ³⁴He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. ³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.

I enjoy collecting angels—mostly American folk art or Jim Shore. There is one angel that is very different. It’s not valuable—just a refrigerator magnet—but I consider it precious. It came from Miss Al.

Miss Al was on Malcolm’s Meals on Wheels route. She was not healthy, lived very modestly, and was not a complaining person. She praised God and had prayer as part of each visit. Besides the delivered food, she often needed just a few items from the store, which we would get for her. Through the months our family—Jennifer, Hunter, Shelby, Brooke, and I—got to know her too. She prayed with us and for us by name. Eventually she was moved to a facility, and we could not find her. She remains in all of our hearts.

“The Father loves the Son extravagantly; he turned everything over to him so he could give it away—a lavish distribution of gifts” (John 3:34-35, *The Message*).

Miss Al received God’s lavish gift of love and caring. She gave us far more than we could ever give her.

Prayer: Dear God, open our hearts to receive the lavish gifts you give to us. Help us to share those gifts with every person we encounter every day. Amen.

—Joyce Hanson

Fourth Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
And they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Very little is said about Joseph in the Bible, and he says nothing himself—the Gospel writers give him no speaking parts—but Matthew offers one of the few glimpses given of this saint’s mostly hidden life.

The word Matthew uses to capture Joseph is as remarkable as it is intentional: “righteous.” Righteousness is a big deal in Matthew, which uses the word more than all the other Gospels combined.

Later, Matthew will depict Jesus saying that the *disciples’* righteousness must go beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees, who notoriously did not lead “hidden” lives. Jesus roasted them for putting up a good front but being empty on the inside. Joseph was the opposite.

Matthew shows us a man who is concerned about the dignity of others, and he is a man who has dreams. When we meet him, God has interrupted his life. His choice is to either quietly do right by Mary and move on or *give up* his dreams—indeed, his whole life—to an

unconventional family arrangement and the ministry of teaching that is parenting. In the end, he chooses obedience, which is what righteousness is really all about.

A few chapters down the road, the expected child is grown, and Joseph has clearly rubbed off on him. Jesus is shown as concerned about the dignity of others and as having a ministry of teaching so in touch with authentic righteousness that others are leaving *their* lives behind in response to *it*.

Prayer: Interrupt my life today, Lord, and in this season, if it means a hidden life with you. Amen.

—Andy Farmer

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2019

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶And Mary said,

My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Something about this season calls for music. Songs of the season have been playing on local and satellite radio stations for weeks. Chances are we’ve sung one of your favorite Christmas songs in worship (or we will!). So here’s the question...what makes a song meaningful and

memorable for you? Is it the tune? Does it take you back to a special moment in time? Is it easily remembered?

I suspect one reason a particular song resonates with you is that its lyrics are true. They represent an accurate view of reality and experience as you see it.

During the Advent season we do a lot of singing, but we also hear a song. A song offered by a young woman finding herself in less-than-ideal circumstances, yet offering herself in praise and service to God. Speaking of God, Mary sings how the proud are scattered, the humble are lifted up, and the hungry are filled with good things.

Do Mary's words regarding the work of God resonate with your experience and lived reality? Why or why not? If Mary's words are true and accurate, how can we sing along with her while working alongside the God she praises? How can we go about lifting up the humble and filling the hungry with good things? Something about this season call for music. It also calls for action.

—Kyle Reese

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2019

Isaiah 9:2-7

² *The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

³ *You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

⁴ *For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

⁵ *For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;*

*and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

I examined the multiple scars on her back and six blue numbers on her inner left arm but did not know their significance until Eva shared that she had been sent to Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps in 1944. The daughter of Hungarian Jews, she had converted to Catholicism but was, nonetheless, seized by the Nazis for her Jewish ancestry. Eva explains in her book, *Appointment in Budapest*, that out of the abyss of hopelessness there resided in her an inexplicable faith in God, “that after I have been tried, at the very end, my life will be saved.”

Handel, emerging from a time of depression and despondency, was inspired to compose *Messiah* in 26 days in 1741. Catnapping for only 10 minutes at a time, his inspired work was crafted “to God alone be the glory.”

“For to us a child is born... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”—an incredible gift from God through Handel to us.

Out of darkness, HOPE. God intervenes unexpectedly and in incredible ways that we cannot even imagine.

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for intervening in our lives with unexpected grace. Help us to share your light with others this year so your hope may abound. Amen.

—Joe Stepp

Christmas Day

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2019

Luke 2:1-14

¹ In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Merry Christmas!

We have been preparing and today is the day! Our precious HAB children have told us Luke’s story once again with the traditional Christmas play that is one of the special highlights of Christmas. The four Sundays of Advent with the lighting of the Advent wreath, the special Christmas music and worship have all been leading to this day. Stating it simply, the reason for this season is to remind us that God is with us. We tend to clutter it up with so much that we forget the reason for the season: God who created is still trying to create within us. God continues to offer the gifts of Hope, Faith, Joy, and Peace that our Advent candles represent. The only cost is opening our lives to receive them.

On this Christmas Day, 2019, let us set aside social media, news, and the other junk that tends to consume us, whether we are the stressed-

out young or old. Let’s be present with each other and open our hearts to family and friends. Let us stop looking for magic or perfection in relationships, but love and accept in simple ways. Each of us faces many challenges, and the Christ candle symbolizes the ultimate gift of goodness—God came to dwell among us, and through Jesus we are shown the truth, the way—a good life.

Prayer: Oh, Lord, thank you for the light of Christ you offer to us. We pray that we may awaken our hearts on this Christmas Day to receive the Light of the world. Set us free and calm our fears so that we may receive your Love and pass this presence of God/Goodness to those around us. Amen.

—Anita Snell Daniels

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