



University Baptist Church

Austin's progressive voice of faith since 1908



Advent Devotionals
2014

Advent.

A time of waiting.

A time of waiting in the darkness.

Anticipation.

Searching for the impending light.

Searching for the hope that finds its
way in the most unexpected places and
people.

A baby in a manger of teenage
parents.

So in the darkness, we wait.

Prepare our hearts.

Be ready to receive the child.

The hope of the world.

Wait in anticipation.

Advent.



Every year for Advent, we here at the University Baptist Church invite you to join in an intentional time of preparation. Throughout the hype and rush that often becomes the season before Christmas, we invite you partake in a slowing down, watching, waiting, and anticipating the coming of the Christ child.

This advent devotional provides a suggested scripture reading for every day. Each day also includes a devotional written by our very own members. This year, we have chosen a selection of devotions written by our members in years past. The words of the past still ring relevant, true and speak to what it means to live in anticipation of the Christ child.

May this provide you a time of reflection, peace, and stillness during this Advent season.

Peace to you,

Pastor Stephanie

November 30

Deuteronomy 30:15-18

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways...[then] the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

I have long been fascinated by the story of Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democracy activist and Nobel Peace laureate. Her struggle to end the repression of the people of Burma who live under an abusive military regime has become an international symbol of heroic and peaceful resistance in the face of oppression. For most of 16 years, Aung San Suu Kyi has lived under virtual house arrest, her freedom to move and speak – and even to see her family – restricted. While the ruling military junta would like nothing more than to see Aung San Suu Kyi leave Burma, she has steadfastly refused to depart, insisting that she cannot abandon the cause of freedom for all the people of Burma.

Many have been moved by this amazing story, including Bono of the rock band U2, who wrote a song to her in 2000 called “Walk On.”

You're packing a suitcase for a place none of has been.
A place that has to be believed to be seen.
You could have flown away,
A singing bird in an open cage,
Who will only fly, only fly for freedom.

Walk on, walk on
What you've got they can't deny it,
Can't sell it or buy it.
Walk on, walk on.
Stay safe tonight.
("Walk On" U2, 2000)

In a sense, this song and the courageous defiance of Aung San Suu Kyi captures a key element of Advent. Advent is a place that has to be believed to be seen. Not only are you sure to miss God's entry into our world if you don't believe, in some very real way, the belief is what creates that reality. Just like freedom is unlikely to ever come to Burma without the persistent belief of Aung San Suu Kyi and others, God's kingdom will not come if we don't believe it into existence.

Hence the words of Deuteronomy both herald and create the season of Advent...love the Lord, walk in God's ways, choose life!

Contributed by Ryan Valentine, 2005

December 1

Hebrews 12:1-3

"Do you see what this means--all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running--and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed--that exhilarating finish in and with God--he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

The Message, Eugene H. Peterson

Thirty-nine-year-old Gabriela Andersen-Scheiss staggered into the stadium, suffering from heat prostration. Her right leg was stiff and her left arm was hanging limply by her side. While spectators gasped in horror, doctors noted that she was perspiring - a good sign - and they let her continue. For 5 minutes and 44 seconds, she lurched along the final lap around the track, occasionally stopping and holding her head. Finally she fell across the finish line and into the arms of waiting medics. Andersen-Scheiss placed 37th. Remarkably, she recovered rapidly and was released by medical personnel only two hours later (from the International Olympic Committee Website).

I like Mr. Peterson's interpretation of this passage. When I first read it, Gabriela Andersen-Scheiss' story came to my mind. She was so focused on her goal that she finished the race even though she was suffering from heat prostration. As followers of Christ, we must always keep our eyes on Jesus. Even during those times when our faith may be tested, we have the Holy Word that can revive us and get us back on track. I thank God for Jesus!

Contributed by Edith Butcher, 2005

December 2

Ezekiel 34:1-16

I've never had much of anything to do with sheep. Every now and then, though, I've helped an uncle on his small ranch, and I suspect caring for cattle may have some similarities to caring for sheep. In my limited experience, working cattle is a filthy, demanding, exasperating operation. Naturally, a seasoned hand can weigh the cattle, vaccinate them, tag

them, and move them from one pasture to another with more finesse than I can manage. But, even under the best of circumstances, I feel certain that the cows don't act any smarter or braver.

So it probably wasn't particularly complimentary when Ezekiel compared the people of Israel to sheep. The Israelites, by implication, were diseased and lost, wandering among the temples of other gods, forgetting their covenant with the God of Abraham. However, Ezekiel's message is directed against the shepherds, not the sheep:

Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost.

Sheep can't protect themselves, bind their own wounds, or heal their own sickness. Their well-being is entirely in the shepherd's hands. Ezekiel declares that the shepherds of Israel have failed in their responsibility – failed so completely that God is against the shepherds and will take away their sheep.

Behold, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out...I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel...I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick.

At times, all of us are frightened, lost, broken, sick – but no king or president, no priest or pastor can be the perfect spiritual guide we need. Instead we claim the promise that was given through Ezekiel and fulfilled in Jesus. In this season we celebrate the birth of the child who became the good shepherd, the shepherd who chose to lay down his life for his sheep.

Contributed by Paul Taylor, 2000

December 3

Romans 13:11-14

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in clambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.

Have you ever awakened in the middle of the night and realized that you have forgotten an important task due the next day? In a panic, you throw off the bedcovers and set about getting the task done. Romans 13:11-14 tell us that we have forgotten an important task, and that the night is far spent. Our salvation is nearer than we might have believed. But we must put ourselves to the task!

What are we to do? The scripture directs us to cast off the works of darkness, and to put on the armor of light. We are to do battle with evil. We are to speak out against sin, and we are to avoid conflict with our fellow man. That is a tall order. We are human beings, and we alone cannot remain as steadfast as the Lord wishes us to live.

We are told to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” He is the armor of light. He is our shield. Clothed in His authority, we will be able to prevail against the powers aligned against us. Clothed in His righteousness, we can aspire to be more like Him.

The night is far spent. We must arise and get about our task. The Son is Coming! We will want to be found about His work, not our own. Get up and get about His task!

Contributed by Bob Bass, 1996

December 4

Luke 1:5-25

What a dramatic scene this is. Zachariah walks into the sanctuary alone to perform his priestly duties, and there stands Gabriel, the angel of God! I can certainly understand why Zachariah would be afraid. But Gabriel tells Zachariah such wonderful news -- "...your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth."

Gabriel then moves beyond the personal miracle God is going to perform for this couple. The angel tells Zachariah how this child will prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah. Gabriel gives Zachariah the global vision of this miracle, "He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Wow! Great news! But look at Zachariah's response, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

Bless him, Zachariah is concerned with the very real and rational reasons why all this won't work. Aren't we all just like Zachariah? God places before us visions of the future and the work God is going to do in our lives, both personal and in our community. And yet, sometimes we allow what we think are the very real and rational reasons why these things cannot happen to prevent us from moving toward God's vision for us and for our community. Let us pray that we will respond to the miracles and mission of God with more open hearts and minds and simply believe.

Contributed by David Stahl & Hans Venable, 1999

December 5

Psalm 33:18-22

Psalm 33 is a psalm of praise to God, the Creator, and Preserver. In verses 18-22, the psalmist writes:

*Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
On those who hope for His lovingkindness
To deliver their soul from death,
And to keep them alive in famine.
Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield.
For our heart rejoices in Him, because we trust in His holy
name.
Let Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, be upon us,
According as we have hoped in Thee*

How amazing it is that the Creator, the most powerful, the One who spoke the universe into being, watches those who revere and hope for a loving relationship with Him. And He does more than watch: He delivers us from spiritual death and sustains our bodies through times of physical need. Because we have experienced His help and protection in the past, we can trust Him. Because we sense His presence with us now, we can rejoice! Because of all we've learned of His nature and powerful love, we can hope for a future filled with God's richest blessings.

This is a season filled with so many hopes, from the hope of receiving a special present under the Christmas tree to the hope of getting through a holiday meal without old family squabbles, from the hope of a short line at the cashier to the hope of finding a warm coat or blanket to wrap yourself in. I pray that this Christmas season we remember to trust, rejoice and hope in the Lord's lovingkindness, causing us to show love and kindness to those around us.

Contributed by Kari Taylor, 1995

December 6

Psalm 17:6-9

St. Nicholas Day! When I lived in Germany I was introduced to the custom of putting your shoes out on December 5th and on December 6, St. Nicholas Day, you would receive presents in your shoes - if you were good and a piece of coal if you were not good. How excited the children would be waiting for the arrival of St. Nicholas. It was about this time 5 years ago that Kay and I found out she was pregnant with twins. I remember the excitement and the waiting to find out if we would have one child or two. Larry reminded me at God's Family Dinner that the season of Advent is all about the waiting and the excitement of what is coming. As we enter this season of waiting and excitement, remember the words from Psalm 17, verses 6 through 9:

I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer. Show me the wonders of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who are out to destroy me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.

This season of Advent I pray that we will all take a moment and remember the excitement and anticipation of the season. It is well worth the wait.

Contributed by Renee Field, 2013

December 7

Psalm 37

How many times during this season do we seek solitude and quiet? How do we find patience when we have so many things to do and so little time? Is it possible to be still?

I have shopping to do, groceries to buy, food to prepare, gifts to purchase and wrap, cards and letters to write, friends to visit, bazaars and open houses ... the list continues with TV specials to watch, emails to answer, the Nutcracker performance with friends, yelling at basketball games, and football too.

I'm not a patient person - finding a parking place, combing the crowded aisles in stores, listening to the incessant chatter of people on their cell phones, standing in a line to get in or out of somewhere, driving anywhere in Austin, hearing that repetitious drummer boy on and on and on

And then it happens: I walk outside in my front yard and it is quiet; I hear the mockingbird sing; I hear the blue jays calling. Quietly I fill the birdbath and water the plants the deer have somehow not eaten. I look upon and care for the coral vine (Queen's heart) my mother loved and I transplanted to my front porch.

I notice the sunlight glistening above and through the leaves of my yaupon and the neighbors' live oaks. I hear the wind and the flutters of whitewings.

God fills me with stillness in this moment and I can now patiently wait. Please, Lord, let me remember this moment every day, every hour as I wait for you.

Contributed by Peggy Mueller, 2010

December 8

Matthew 11:2-11

This is a wonderful passage. It makes my heart swell to hear Jesus talking about all the cool stuff he has been doing: lame people walking, dancing in the street, spinning and spinning in the cool evening; lepers' fingers growing back and the holes through their eyelids healing over with baby soft, pink, warm skin; deaf people calling out to one another across the crowded auditorium talking about how wonderful the music sounds; moms and dads walking in the street with their children, holding hands with their children, once dead, and now alive again. "Of course I am the One. What other could there be? Just exactly what would you expect another one to be doing? And here's some nice stuff about John, John the Baptist. John is the greatest person born of woman. John's a prophet. John's more than a prophet. Here, take this down, carefully. Write it on something. Does someone have a pen? Say John is like the guy in Malachi, the covenant messenger. It's a little book; you have to know where to look. It's in there, though." Makes the little part of me that is still Baptist proud.

Then I think about John. He was a dark man, black eyed, skin burnt to nearly black, too. Dressed in the rotting skins of animals. His beard, huge 'cause he never shaved in his whole life, caked with dirt and lots of parts of bugs caught in it. That's what he ate. The skin around his mouth is sort of caked and greenish with bug guts. Look there, just on the right side, only an inch or so down from his mouth, a bug leg, one of those big brown back legs from a roach. Stuff caught in his hair, too -- little sticks and pieces of rock, more bug parts. And his hands, skinny and sticky with dirt. And the smell. His eyes feral always jerking, looking from place to place and back again, constantly scanning for where the next big is coming from. I see people like this now. Sleeping

under the bridge, eating, wolf-like, out of the dumpster, out of the trash, searching, searching. "Are you the one, or should we look for another?" So I slow down at the intersection and hand the guy a couple of bucks. Maybe he will drink this next bottle as communion.

Contributed by Joe Bell, 1998

December 9

Zechariah 7:8 - 8:8

The word of the LORD came to Zachariah saying: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

In the previous verses the LORD YHWH drew attention to former prophets and the words they had spoken about fasting and hypocrisy. Zechariah then urged his contemporaries to heed these words from the past and apply them to their lives and actions. Here YHWH specifically establishes the basis for true worship, including fasting, by appealing to earlier canonical principles that provide worships moral and spiritual framework; for example Micah 6:8 and Isaiah 56:1 that creates the ethical dimensions of true religion. Fasting or any other religious practice that is not founded on a true covenant faith toward GOD and each other in the covenant community is of little value and is to be avoided at all cost.

These words that the LORD delivered through the prophet Jeremiah aren't new but we apparently need the reminder; we can be GOD'S very own people and yet do a terrible job exhibiting some of the most foundational aspects of

GOD'S character. The LORD is the perfect judge, the most compassionate helper of the weak and forgotten and the only One in whom nothing but good resides.

*Because I have been blessed by thy great love, dear Lord,
I'll share thy love again, according to thy word.
I shall give love to those in need;
I'll show that love by word and deed;
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed. Amen*

Contributed by David York, 2009

December 10

Jude 17-23

But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, 'In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.' It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Truly, the hardest part of Facebook is having to listen to everyone else's opinions. Recently, an old high school friend posted his disgust with organized religion because of its wasteful spending. When I tried to tell him not all churches were mega churches or plated in gold, he told me, "I guarantee your church's budget is over \$2 million." (Feel

free to get your laughs in here.)

My initial reaction to criticisms of the Church is to drag the ignorant, arrogant punk to God's Family Dinner, to the Street Youth Drop-In Center, to Pride, to September 9, 2001 in a sanctuary chanting "God is love!" in response to hate and fear, and rub their nose in it. "SEE?!" I'd shout. "We are doing the work of GOD! What have you done lately to help ANYONE?"

So maybe I take these criticisms a little too personally, but it's exasperating hearing people berate the church while citing only televangelists and ancient popes. "You're being as closed minded as the people you criticize!" I want to shout. But today's reading from Jude reminds us of Christ's compassion. When faced with divisions and criticism, we are told to keep the faith, not to fight back; to pray, not to preach; to have mercy, not to tear down.

In Christ, there is no retaliation. There is no war mindset. Christ comes not as a warlord to strike down the powers that be, but as a model of perfect love. And through this perfect, patient love, so contradictory to the ways of power and the expectations of the people he came to save, Christ turns the whole world on end.

Contributed by Anna Strickland, 2013

December 11

Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall want for nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
and leads me beside the waters of peace;
he renews life within me,
and for this name's sake guides me in the right path.*

*Even though I walk through a valley dark with death
I fear no evil, for thou are with me,
thy rod and thy crook are my comfort....*

*Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

(The New English Bible)

No one had sheltered nor protected the writer of this psalm from life's realities. From grim experience he wrote these words. He found that his exposure to hate and opposition compelled him to draw on the resources of God's strength that he would not have discovered had it not been for the many things that had confronted him in his personal life. The writer speaks to the experience of God's children in every age who find themselves deeply conscious of their need for restoring peace.

Just as the shepherd provided pasture, water, rest, protection, and any other need that his sheep might have, God provides his children's physical and spiritual needs. Thanks be to God!

Contributed by Gerrell Moore, 2005

December 12

John 3:16-21

John 3:16 is a passage that many children are taught to memorize in Sunday school, or in my case elementary school. It begins, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." As a young adult, this passage seemed pretty straightforward, believe in Jesus and go to heaven. But there was more to the passage that I would understand later.

Growing up with the notion of sin and its consequences was something I learned from the first piece of candy that my 3-year-old hand stole from a grocery store. My mother took me back to the manager and made me take it out of my little purse and apologize. Then I got a spanking.

Thankfully I was never a good thief and that moment in time ingrained in me the belief that stealing had some shortcomings no matter how Brach's buffet of sugar wooed me.

Although I didn't perpetrate my heist under the cover of dark, I was definitely hoping I wouldn't be exposed. Verses 20-21 explain, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Fast-forward a few decades. I still grapple with sugar cravings, but I now understand a little more about sin and eternal life. Christ is the light on a path that has many forks. I wish those forks included more calorie-free chocolate cake, but I digress. He asks us to follow Him closely, since

the light falls off quickly around Him. He knows the path to His father and we can trust in that knowledge. When we choose to believe in God's only son, we are choosing a very special path, one that leads to eternal life.

Sin to me is falling short sometimes, and trying to hide our weaknesses from God. Some people's weaknesses lead to evil, but in the end we are all accountable in some way. I am learning more and more that my weaknesses can be His strengths. When we borrow His strength and wisdom instead of our own, we can love completely, we can forgive and be forgiven, we can overcome temptation, and we can give His strength to others. When we let go of all the talents that our creator has blessed us with, we are not left bereft. We are filled with even more than we can imagine. Zechariah 4:6 reminds us where to draw our wisdom, strength and courage. It states, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit", says the Lord."

Christ has the answer to my dilemma, whatever it may be. So I can stop digging in my bag of goodies and start looking in Him. It is in Him where I can find the sweetness I crave, the patience, the faithfulness, the joy, and the peace of knowing I can lean on him when I am weak. Christ says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And so Paul states in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Christ's power rests in me. And you. Thanks be to God.

Contributed by Alisa Marrow, 2008

December 13

Psalm 25:1-10

Dear Lord, It's easy to forget who I am. It can become easy to believe that I am in control, that I am so smart and can handle anything that comes my way. Then I read a scripture like this and You remind me even King David was hopeless without you. He teaches the humble His way. I should be so humble.

What does this scripture have to do with Advent? It puts me in a solemn mindset. Like the Muslims on their Hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca. On the last three days, they are in a state of Ihram, or contriteness, peace, patience and humility, so they are in the correct mindset to view their most beloved place. As Christians, this should be our attitude as we approach Christmas. I pray this is my attitude. I want this Psalm, David's prayer, to be my song; Remember Thy loving kindness . . . do not remember the sins of my youth . . . to You I lift up my soul. May I turn my spiritual eyes and heart to You looking through advent toward the day of Your earthly birth to the celebration! Praise God, Praise You!

Amen & Amen

Contributed by Lily Watson, 2003

December 14

2 Peter 1:1-11

2 Peter 1 reminds us that we are to develop Christ-like virtues, and crowning the list is “unselfish love.” Surely, this includes caring for the poor and marginalized, as Psalm 41:1 reminds us: “How blessed is the one who treats the poor properly” (Net Bible). Advent is an appropriate time for reflecting on how we treat those in need throughout the year. Do we feed the hungry? Do we clothe the naked? Do we invite strangers into our homes? Do we consider the effect our purchases have on others who have less, or do we try to buy things at the cheapest prices? Do we use energy sparingly so that others can enjoy God’s earth? Do we give to those who can’t take care of themselves and help the able find ways to earn a living? Do we stand up for the rights of those who don’t have a voice? Do we share a smile or a cup of water? Do we pray?

Contributed by Terri Vaughn-Cockroft, 2010

December 15

Luke 12:32-33

Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Sell that you have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth.

Life has been given as the purest of gifts. Life’s creation and subsequent offerings to each of us is the richest

opportunity we will know here on this earth. Give of your time and blessings freely such that we demonstrate Thanks and Love for one another daily. Fear not the different experiences and individuals you encounter throughout your life. Embrace the opportunities, grow, learn and be thankful for the Journey.

Contributed by Barbara Doebener, 2005

December 16

Psalm 119:49-72

Think of a time you ever found yourself engrossed in a subject or hobby. When that happens to me, I want to spend as much time doing and learning about it as I can. It gives me a joy I cannot describe in words. Some of us call this “geeking out” over something and goodness knows sometimes that passion will get you teased. Any band or theater nerd can attest to that.

In this passage, David has found true delight in God’s word, and refers to it lovingly. He writes that, despite persecution, he still follows through with God’s words and works hard at it. He has that passion for God’s word that I had for marching band; in fact, much more. To make the passion worthwhile, however, takes continual effort. The more you put into something the more you get out of it. How can you keep that same passion for serving Christ through your life today, and every day?

We all must answer this for ourselves, but we have an almighty God that will show us, if we have a little faith.

Contributed by Katy Kammerdiener, 2011

December 17

Isaiah 9:1-7

As a child, one of my favorite Christmas traditions was seeing the many light displays. My family would pile in a car and go in search of Christmas lights. Sometimes we would drive around our neighborhood or hometown in search of neighbors' displays. On many occasions we took an evening trip to a town nearby and watched a big Christmas light show. I have always been amazed at how several small lights, when arranged together, could provide enough light to see in the dark night sky. Although I have gotten older, the lights of Christmas never cease to amaze me.

The passage from Isaiah celebrates the coronation of a new king. It proclaims that light has come among a people who have walked in darkness and oppression. During this advent season, we celebrate the coming of Christ who taught us the way of light.

*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.*

This advent season, we celebrate the coming light of Christ. Christ has taught us the power of love and the way of justice. As we celebrate the birth of Christ, may we embody Christ's teachings of love, hope, and peace. May we seek to bring light to those in darkness.

Contributed by Jonathan McBrayer, 2013

December 18

Jeremiah 31:7-17

For thus says the Lord:

*Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
And raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
"save, O Lord, your people,
the remnant of Israel."*

*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the farthest parts of the
earth,*

*among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.*

*With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.*

*Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."*

*For the Lord has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong
for him.*

*They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of
the Lord,*

*over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.*

*Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.*

*I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
And my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,
Says the Lord.*

Jerusalem has been destroyed. Instead of being carried off into exile like so many others Jeremiah remains in Jerusalem living among the destruction. This prophet who once proclaimed God's impending judgment, now stands among the peoples' ruins singing words of hope and resurrection. I wonder if the people were able to hear the promises he makes on God's behalf -- "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow." Jeremiah sings of a God who guides, nurtures and provides. Israel would not hear Jeremiah's prediction of chaos. I doubt many would believe these words of new creation. Yet, they needed to believe to hope, and his song was preserved. A timeless song, a beautiful lyric, a soothing melody for the suffering.

As Scott Peck opens his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, he exclaims, "Life is difficult." Indeed, life is difficult! If you live long enough, you hear the song of suffering, chaos and death. But to stand in the road of destruction and sing a song of hope takes faith. Jeremiah's song is a balm for our pain. We need it. We want to sing it. We thank God for the saints who sing it when we cannot find our voice. As we look toward a new year and new century, may we journey on in hope and joy. May we keep singing!

Contributed by Gina Bethune, 1999

December 19

Matthew 3:1-12

John says "Repent, for the kingdom is almost here." He viewed a society that would soon be swept away... a corrupt society characterized by inequality of wealth, oppressive taxation and abuse of power.

His message flows from insights gained in wilderness withdrawal. He has looked at life from inside out -- with God's Spirit as prompter. A chosen people are called to prove the sincerity of their repentance by their life and conduct.

And in the midst of tragedy and the harshness of judgment the Messiah will come. He will lift the grain from the threshing floor and honor it with abundant use... Prepare ye the way for the Lord.

Contributed by Phil Stovall, 1996

December 20

Psalms 138

When I read this Psalm I heard such praise, trust, love and loyalty. Had something terrible happened and there was suddenly hope or was there simply an outpouring of tremendous love for our Lord? I love the vision of crying out and being strengthened by the love and power of God. I love it because it is so much more than a vision. It is a reality in my life and each time I have cried out his hand has saved me.

In a world that recognizes the rich and the famous. We honor them by naming buildings and stadiums after them, we see in this chapter God cares for the lowly-even me.

I am thankful I was given this verse for my Advent devotional. It reminds me that the Lord has a purpose for my life and he will never abandon the plan he has for me. I too want to sing the praises of my Lord and I know that he guards my life, he is always there to save me and he loves me forever-and you too!

Contributed by Sherry McCurdy, 2008

December 21

1 Peter 2:2-3

Now that you realize how kind the Lord has been to you, put away all evil, deception, envy, and fraud. Long to grow up into the fullness of your salvation, cry for this as a baby cries for his milk.

We need to rid ourselves of all the sins that bring us down and realize how good the Lord has been to us. When we do this we no longer want to do those things. As babies cry for milk and find that it is good, we get a taste for God's goodness to us. Then we want more of the good things He can give us. During this time of Advent we know especially that God loves us and has given us His best in His son, Jesus Christ.

Contributed by Helen Kinnamon, 2005

December 22

Luke 2:17-18

When they saw this, they made known what they had been told about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Every birth is a miracle that we celebrate by calling relatives, mailing cards, sending e-mail, and placing notices in the newspaper and church news. Relatives and friends arrive to share in the miracle, a miracle God set in motion at the beginning of time. Dreams are dreamed about the future of the infant.

Almost 2000 years ago God sent a miracle to Mary and Joseph. No phone calls were made, no cards were mailed, no e-mail messages were sent, and no notices appeared in the newspaper or church newsletter. Instead God reached beyond this world and sent angels to announce the birth to unsuspecting shepherds. A child had been born, the angel told them. He was the messiah, the savior sent by God, his father, to God's people.

How many dozens, or maybe hundreds, of times have we read or heard Luke's account of the birth of Jesus? Do we ever get tired of hearing the story? Do lovers ever tire of hearing "I love you?" No, love is sustained by affirmations. Do children ever tire of hearing the same story read to them over and over? No, children are delighted to know that poor, mistreated Cinderella escaped from her horrible stepmother and sisters and lived happily ever after with a prince.

We don't get tired of hearing that God, out of his infinite grace, sent a messiah, a savior, to give us hope for life everlasting.

Contributed by Lester Harrell, 1997

December 23

Luke 2:17-18

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Though this Scripture was written long after Mary was considering her answer to God about giving birth to the Messiah, I can imagine the Angel Gabriel saying these very words to her. Her life shows that she was gentle, and though she might have worried at times about her son, she undoubtedly "let her requests be made known to God." By the time Jesus had fulfilled his mission on earth, I think Mary was certain that the peace of God had guarded her heart and her mind throughout the thirty-three years of his life. It was certainly not an easy decision she made that day, but I think she could look back on her life and rejoice that she was so honored.

This same admonition from Philippians challenges us today, giving us the steps to achieve the peace of God, which will guard our hearts and minds in the same way that Mary experienced it. Her life was not easy, and all of us today experience difficulties, illness, death of loved ones, hard decisions relating to our mission for God, but if we keep these promises alive in our minds, we too will experience this peace, which is so precious.

Contributed by Gladys Peterson, 2005

December 24

2 Corinthians 4:1-7

Gifts -- treasures -- come in all sorts of packages. When I was a child, I knew that what I wanted to see on Christmas morning was lots of BIG presents under the tree with my name on them. As I've grown older, I've learned that the best present -- the treasures -- sometimes come in small packages.

I have many treasures, many things that I cherish. My diamond engagement ring. The letters my now deceased grandmother wrote to me while I was in college. A string of fake pearls my mother received for her sixteenth birthday. Photographs from my European vacation. My copy of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Christmas ornaments from various places we've visited.

Last year on Christmas Eve, Ky and I were coming home from the hospital with our twins Grace and Michael, the most wonderful treasure of our lives. As many of you were gathered in the sanctuary for worship, we were walking into our home with two precious lives in our arms. These tiny babies were our s to love, to care for, to nurture. We had waited so long for them. And now, they depended upon us to thrive. That's a tremendous responsibility. It's overwhelming. But treasures can be that way. They must be cared for. They are meant to be passed along.

I'll want Grace to have the letters from my grandmother whose name she shares. And perhaps Michael will have an appreciation for John Irving novels. The photographs and Christmas ornaments can be divided between them. The treasure that I most want to share with my children, though, is the great love of Jesus Christ. Although they are barely a

year old, I've already thought a lot about how I will share my faith with them. I know that we'll attend church. I hope that they'll see faith in action in my life. I'm sure we'll probably tell Bible stories at bedtime.

And I'll tell them about the miracles that they are, and how we brought them home on Christmas Eve as their church family was gathered in worship to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Contributed by Lisa Cauble, 1997

December 25

Luke 2:1-7

The sun rises, the presents are opened, stray pieces of wrapping paper and ribbon lie under the tree, their purpose accomplished, the gift received. In the brief stillness between the family gathered around the tree and the busy preparations for Christmas dinner, you take time to reflect on the meaning of the day.

In some ways it feels like an ending: all the work done, all the waiting over, a season completed, like a mother who has finally given birth after nine months of waiting. But every parent knows birth is not an ending, but a beginning.

Mary looks into the eyes of her newborn after a long night of labor, and she is filled with wonder. What will this child be? Her waiting and now her wonder express the waiting and wonder of her people. They have waited long for the Messiah. Today Messiah is born. But what now? What now?

A season of waiting has ended. But a new season has been born, the twelve days of Christmas, where we, too, know our hope reborn. He is the promise of God-with-us. In him, God guarantees: after every hard night, a dawn; after every long labor, a birth; after every long dying, a resurrection. In this baby God assures us there is always more. There is always the question we will answer together with God: What now?

Writes Herbert O'Driscoll:

Each of us decides if Jesus is to be the special one, the unique one, the one who makes all the difference, the one who provides the ground of deepest meaning in our lives. If this is true, then no wonder this yearly

festival can make us glad. It can be what snatches that gladness from the grasping and demanding hands of sorry or pain or loss. We will know that we are celebrating again the birthing of everything that holds meaning in life for us.

May God's peace and our eternal hope be born in your soul again today. Merry Christmas!

Contributed by Larry Bethune, 1995

