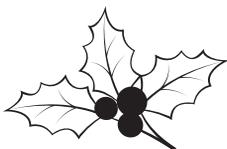




CANTICLES OF CHRISTMAS

An Advent Devotional

Eastbrook Church



PRIMUM MUNDI
MAGNIFICENT
BENEDICTUS
GLORIAM
NUNC DIMITTIS

Canticles of Christmas

Advent 2022



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Introduction

From my earliest memories, music filled my home. My parents enjoyed music and helped my older brother and me to both learn to enjoy and play music. When Christmas season would come around, we would often play and sing Christmas songs together as a family or when gathering with extended family. There's nothing like hearing your aunts and uncles join in to sing in harmony with one another in beloved Christmas songs. Maybe you have memories like that with family, friends, or caroling around the neighborhood or in retirement communities. There's something about singing songs of Christmas joy and glory with others.

As we journey toward Christmas this year, we want to enter the songs of the season. This doesn't mean we're going to simply pull out our favorite hymns. Instead, we're going to step inside the songs that resound within the Christmas story. In the Gospel of Luke we encounter several songs that are traditionally known as "canticles." A canticle is a hymn or psalm-like song, usually drawn from a biblical text, and the word is taken from the Latin *canticulum*, which is a diminutive form of *canticum*, meaning "song."

These little songs pack a powerful punch. With Mary, we get a glimpse of surrendered faith and we magnify the Lord for His powerful work and kingdom breaking in through Jesus. With Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, we praise God for His unfolding purposes of God through John the forerunner and Jesus the promised Messiah. With the angels, we celebrate the glory of God that certainly is declared in the heavens but now comes to earth in Jesus.

Paying attention to these songs of praise, we want to join with God's melody in Advent and Christmas. Advent, from the Latin word *adventus* ("appearing"), is a four-week preparatory season building toward celebration of Jesus' nativity at Christmas. In Advent we look back with wonder at Jesus' birth roughly 2,000 years ago, while also entering into the history of God's chosen people, Israel, whose prophets anticipated Jesus' birth in the messages. Simultaneously, we stand as the new chosen people, looking forward to Jesus' future return at the end of human history. In a sense, we attune our hearts, minds, and ears to the song of salvation God has been singing with joy over His people since creation (Zephaniah 3:17).

In your hands is a devotional written as a sort of hymnbook for the canticles of Christmas, rooted in the Gospel of Luke and supplemental texts that augment the themes of those canticles in Luke's Gospel. This devotional can be used individually, but is also intended for use in groups, such as housemates or families.

So, open your hearts and minds, perk up your ears and attune your voices. God is singing and He invites us into His song. May we have ears to hear and lives that sing back the glories of Jesus through Advent and Christmas this year.



Matt Erickson
Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church



How to Use this Devotional:

Each week of this devotional begins with a Sunday reading written by our Pastoral staff for older students and adults. There is also a version called "Family Talk" written by a member of our NextGen team, intended for families with young children. Each day Monday-Friday has a short devotional thought written by one of our Eastbrookers with questions at the end for deeper reflection. There is a weekly memory verse, and Saturdays are intended for small group discussion and for deeper reflection.

As a family, you may want to join in on our Nativity Building activity. Use your own Nativity figures or the Nativity Story Stones made during Family Advent Night for this activity that allows for slow, progressive building of the nativity scene. Look for this symbol (*) throughout the devotional to find each step. The gradual nature of this activity and the periods of waiting remind us of how God's people waited years for the promised Savior to be born! *"When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son..."* (Galatians 4:4).

Finally, you can also interact with the digital version of this devotional in a variety of ways: on the Eastbrook App, on Instagram, via daily emails, blog, or PDF. Find these options and links on our website at eastbrook.org/canticlesdevo.



Luke 1:38

May it
be unto
me as
you have
said.

FIAT MIHI

Fiat Mihi is the first canticle of Christmas; the Latin term used in the Church to describe the amazing response of Mary to the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:38, upon being told that she had been chosen to carry the Son of God in her womb. When translated from Latin to English, *Fiat Mihi* means "Be it done in me" or, as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message Bible*, "Let it be with me."

Fiat Mihi

READ LUKE 1:34-37

"May it be unto me as you have said." (Luke 1:38)

Imagine a family gathered in the living room on Christmas Eve. Shreds of wrapping paper litter the floor, Christmas music blares in the background, and cups of eggnog teeter precariously on end tables. Everyone watches as Dad gets up from his chair and places a huge, shiny present right in front of the youngest son.

Six-year-old Timmy rips off the shiny paper and discovers a label showing a deluxe model railroad set. Timmy, stunned, pauses for a minute, then looks up at his father.

"Oh Dad, I don't think you mean to give this to me. I'm not really ready for something like this. Maybe I need more training, some classes, a seminar? You can take this back to the store. I'll just settle for a little jar of bubbles."

No six-year-old in the world would respond like this! Children shriek, and jump, and tear right into their gifts—even the ones they really aren't ready for!

If kids know how to accept good gifts from their father, why can't we? The excuses Timmy gives are the same ones we use when God wants to give us the gift of serving Him in a new, and sometimes, risky way. We struggle to believe that God actually wants to use us.

Mary had the same struggle (Luke 1:34-37), but she didn't let the struggle dictate her obedience. Instead, she accepted the privilege that Gabriel was offering, believing that God would somehow equip her for the task.

What if Mary had said "no" to this calling from God? What would she have missed?

But she didn't say "no"; she relinquished control and surrendered to God's plan. Because of this, Mary is called "*blessed*" for all of time (Luke 1:45). When we follow God's call, "ready or not" we can move out in faith and watch in expectation, as Mary did, for all the blessing He has planned for us.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Think of a time when you took a risk to follow Christ. What was the fruit of that obedience?*
- *How are God's good gifts sometimes hidden by struggles?*
- * *Set up the stable, but leave it empty for now. Long before Jesus was born on earth, God was getting everything ready.*

Family Talk

READ LUKE 1:34-37

What do you think of when you hear the word “obey?” You might think of the rules at your house, maybe a puppy you’ve been trying to train, or about a time when you had to decide between right and wrong. When I hear the word “obey” I think of surrender. Take a moment and hold your hands in front of you and make the tightest fist that you can—and then, take a deep breath and open your hands. That is a picture of surrender. Of trusting that you don’t have to hold tightly to your own will.

In Luke 1:26-37, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her that she’s going to have baby Jesus. Mary doesn’t have a husband and asks a big question: “how?!” Now, God could have responded “it will happen because I said so!” Instead, the angel explains to Mary that God plans to be with her through it all, every step of the way! This was a loving invitation to trust and obey God’s plan for her life!

God cares about you. You are not a puppet on a string, forced to do something you did not choose. But, the cool part of all of this is that God created us to do good works! He loves you and invites you to join His story by obeying Him. Not because you have to, but out of thankfulness for the gift of His love. Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIRV) says:

God’s grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn’t come from anything you do. It is God’s gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can brag about earning it. We are God’s creation. He created us to belong to Christ Jesus. Now we can do good works. Long ago God prepared these works for us to do.

Did you happen to read verse 38 of Luke chapter 1? Mary surrenders to God’s big, beautiful plan. I imagine her holding her hands open, palms up as she says, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Mary chooses obedience; not because it will be easy (having a baby is hard!). But because she trusts in God’s love for her. No matter how young or old you are, God is inviting you to love Him with your obedience to His word. Your questions, doubts, and fears are never too big for Him. He’s inviting you to bring all of those to Him, and surrender. . . to obey. Look down at your hands again. As we enter into this beautiful season called Advent, take a moment to hold your hands open and say yes to God’s plan for your life.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *How did Mary answer the angel’s announcement?*
- *What did Mary believe about God that helped her trust Him?*
- *Why is it good for us to obey?*

A Willing Surrender

READ ROMANS 12:1-2

Hmm... *"May it be to me as you have said."*

Really? Can I say this like Mary did with no caveats? Without any "ifs"? May it be to me as you have said if I don't have to move. May it be to me as you have said if I don't have to give up my favorite TV show. May it be to me as you have said if I can go with friends. May it be to me as you have said as long as I'm comfortable.

What trust Mary had in her Lord! To step into the unknown willingly. But she stepped with the Known. She did not know where the path would take her, but she had the Ultimate Companion and Guide. Romans 12:1 urges us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Mary offers herself to be used in God's plan with no caveats.

Offering myself for service to God is often challenging and accompanied by reluctance on my part. However, I never regret it. God rewards me with peace and great satisfaction in doing His will. He is no one's debtor. I think of my family's trips to Haiti. I don't like to fly, and I don't like heights. Going to Haiti involves going by air. And getting to Jeremie, where Eastbrook's field workers, Dr. Wolf and Nurse Cherlie, are based, involves driving along treacherous curvy mountain roads with such steep drop-offs, I don't know how I managed. However, not only have I gone twice (maybe I was ignorant the first time but how about the second), I am willing to go again. Why? Because God showed up each time and He used me and blessed me in ways hard to explain.

Advent is a time to reflect. How often do we reflect on Mary's heart and her decision to trust the One she served? Obedience to our God and King is the centerpiece of our walk with Him. There would be no incarnation without obedience. We see the obedience of a Son and the obedience of a girl. Both willing to bow to the will of the Father. May we do the same.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why is it sometimes hard to surrender to God's will? What are the benefits?*
- *Reflect on Mary's heart. What can you learn from her humble response this Advent?*
- *Work this week on memorizing Romans 12:1-2*

A Lesson on Humility

READ JAMES 4:6-10

Tuesday, November 29

Humble yourselves and submit yourselves to the Lord. What does it mean to humble ourselves before the Lord? According to verse 6, being proud and being humble contradict each other, so we cannot be humble and proud simultaneously.

There are 7 ways James suggests we counteract pride and practice humility in our lives. Those are to:

1. Submit yourselves to God
2. Resist the devil
3. Come near to God
4. Wash your hands
5. Purify your hearts
6. Grieve, mourn, and wail
7. Humble yourselves before the Lord.

Based on these 7 things, we are to focus our relationship on the Lord and confess our sins, being grieved by how we have sinned against the Lord. Some of my closest moments of intimacy with the Lord are when I'm more aware of my sin and experience His forgiveness. When my sin is more visible, I see more clearly my need for a Savior. Jesus. I experience His forgiveness and am brought closer to Him.

A practice that I've implemented to help me become more aware of my sin and depend on Christ is *spiritual breathing*, a term coined by Bill Bright, the founder of Cru. Just like regular breathing has 2 parts: exhaling impure air and inhaling pure air, spiritual breathing does the same. When we become aware of an impure area of our life, we exhale and confess our sin to the Lord, asking for His forgiveness. Then we inhale and surrender to the Lord's control of our lives, asking Him to empower us to live in step with Him. As 1 John 1:9 says, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* Oh, what good news that is!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How do you think becoming more aware of your sin on a daily basis would affect your walk with the Lord?*
- *What can you do to become more aware of your sins and confess them to the Lord as the Spirit brings them to mind?*

Trust

READ PROVERBS 3:5-6

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”
(Proverbs 3:5-6)*

These verses have personally impacted my life and the path that I am walking today. My name, Ndiloma, actually means trust. I remember when I was 8 my mom would wake my brother, sister, and me up early in the morning and she would pray this passage over us before we got ready for school. She wanted to make sure that whatever obstacle the day would bring us, we had a direction and could have confidence the Lord would keep us on the right path. She also taught us that no matter what we were going to face, as long as we held on to that truth, we could keep our head held high.

I remember one time I got in trouble with the school cafeteria because they thought I was stealing. I told them the truth and my dad backed me up because he knew I was an honest kid; it was just a misunderstanding. I learned that because I lived my life trying to do the right thing, my dad would go to bat for me any day of the week and I would be able to look him in the eye and keep my head held high because I knew that he knew I was telling the truth. This is the confidence we should all strive to have in our daily lives because living for the truth and knowing the truth is our job as God’s people.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Is there a time when you struggled to find the right answer?*
- *How did that situation impact you in life?*

The Interests of Others

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Did Mary have insight before Jesus was born? Paul was looking back when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. Today's passage discusses traits and attitudes of Jesus and therefore what Jesus-followers are to look like. Mary could not see Jesus' example then but she affirms them in her actions, words, and in her acceptance of the responsibility put before her by the angel.

She must have looked at the example of the Old Testament heroes and prophets and then somehow, Mary took the message she received from the angel with grace. Learning you are going to be an unwed mother with no prospects if her fiancé rejects her hardly seems to provide encouragement or comfort. Her response indicates comfort was not her goal. Her intent was to do and follow God's will. Her actions epitomize the opposite of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Mary had depth in her relationship with God even at a young age.

The church today can be an amazing place when it looks to the interests of others. Our personal lives can transmit the message of Christ when we look to the interests of others. The question is how do we and how did Mary put on this mindset of humility and compassion? It is certainly not a western trait, but the directive from Paul's letter is there to work on it.

For us, we additionally have the example of Christ and His selfless love and action, and in that example we have a beginning. Mary trusted God's message that the person of the message would bring hope and salvation. We have that same opportunity in our neighborhoods and families to be that example as well. Let's use our hearts, minds and actions to acknowledge Jesus' work and humility to bring His hope to our communities. Oh for the day when *"every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How can you exercise, in a tangible way this week, putting others first?*

Where Are You God?

READ PSALM 9:7-10

Have you ever wondered where God is in the midst of suffering? I have. Where were you, God, when my mother first tried to kill herself? Or when I was placed in a new, abusive home, because my mother was in a psychiatric ward and my father was in jail? Why didn't You intervene when my parents divorced? Or when I was sent to live in a new state with my mother and her new, violent, alcoholic, husband?

Where are you, God, when darkness appears? Fear. Abuse. Addiction. Depression. Childlessness. Financial strain. Shame. A broken relationship. Divorce. Cancer...the list of suffering is long. Sadly, it dims our view of God. Sorrow casts shadows of doubt. Darkness deceives us, making false images appear as real. Who is ruling? God? Or evil?

Where are you God? *On My throne.*

Why aren't you doing something? *I AM.*

Beloved friends, God is not a ruler sitting idle on His throne. Rather than watch darkness consume us, He volunteered to go face to face with suffering, on our behalf. Surrendering to death on the Cross was not defeat but God having the upper hand. God was and is ruling!

Before we were even born, God intervened. Before diseases, famines and wars appeared, God established a strategic plan to save the world. Before Adam and Eve got their first taste of evil, God was ready to rescue them (and their offspring) from the dominion of darkness. In the midst of suffering:

God is our hope. When we feel forsaken remember God's Word, *"In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world."*

God is our refuge. When we are overwhelmed, run to Jesus who says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."*

God is our light. When we find ourselves surrounded by darkness, hold onto God. Trust in Him. Just as a source of light is a comfort in a dark cave, Jesus, the Light of the world, is our comfort in a dark valley. *"The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Is it possible that God could have the upper hand in our suffering? Read Romans 5:3-5 in a variety of translations.*

BY TERESA FREDING

Reflect & Respond

Saturday, December 3

OPEN IN PRAYER

Prayerfully look back through this week's readings and devotionals. Ask God to speak to you freshly as you consider them again.

KEY VERSE

Review the memory verse for the week, Romans 12:1-2. What hope does it give you as you live your life for God this week?

WEEKLY THEME

As you think of the theme for this week, "*May it be unto me as you have said*" (*Fiat Mihi*), where do you most need to apply this in your relationships, your work or how you live for and think about God? Write out a one or two sentence response that you can apply this week!

SHARE

With whom can you share your thoughts about this?

NATIVITY BUILDING:

- * *Place Mary, Joseph and an angel figure across the room from the stable. Just as we read in this week's Scripture, God sent an angel to tell Mary to tell her that God had chosen her to be the mother of Jesus.*



My
soul
glorifies
the
Lord.

MAGNIFICENT

Magnificat, also called the canticle of Mary, is found in Luke 1:46–55. In Scripture, the hymn is found after the jubilant meeting of Mary, pregnant with Jesus, and her relative Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. It is named after the first word of its first line in Latin (“*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*,” or “My soul magnifies the Lord”). Elaborate musical settings have been created for the *Magnificat* and it is traditionally sung each day at evening prayer, or vespers.

Magnificat

READ LUKE 1:46-55

Several years ago, as I was going through a particularly dark time of grief, I was in the habit of trail running at a nearby nature preserve. During that season, I felt like every run was a series of metaphors that God used to speak to me. The sharp bend in the trail told me about how life takes unexpected turns, the hills and the valleys brought to mind all the scriptures that talk about God's presence in our joys and sorrows, and even the unexpected butterfly flitting along as I ran was a pop of joy from God, reminding me of His lightness and hope.

In times of crisis, our spiritual sensitivity often peaks. Mary was not in a dark season of grief, but she was experiencing an enormous life change—one that few would understand, except maybe Elizabeth. Elizabeth was old, but she was pregnant. Mary was an unknown, small-town girl, but she was being elevated to the high calling of being Jesus' mother. And she knew, God wouldn't stop there:

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.* (Luke 1:52-53)

Mary was beginning to see that what God was doing within her, is what He planned for the entire world—lifting up the lowly, bringing down the proud, filling what is lacking, doing away with excess. Mary's life was a metaphor for the new kingdom.

And why was God turning all the tables, and creating this upside-down kingdom? It's what He does. It is His nature. He is holy, and righteous, and He remembers His promises: *"for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name . . . He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors"* (vv. 49, 53-54).

God loves us as we are, but He is not content to leave us there. He is always transforming, always turning the tables and re-creating. This Advent, let's look for the ways He is doing this in our own lives, and in the world around us.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What are some other Scriptures that make you think of God's "upside-down" kingdom?*
- *Why is it significant that God remembers His promises and sees the struggles of His people?*
- * *Place a donkey near Mary. She may have ridden a donkey to Bethlehem, because she was so close to having a baby. Years later, Jesus Himself would ride a donkey into Jerusalem.*

BY LAURE HERLINGER

Family Talk

READ LUKE 1:46-55

My family lived on a small farm in the 1970's loaded with animals, machinery, gardens, and green tree-filled pastures. My older sisters had ponies and horses and participated in the 4-H club. I followed their example but found that riding a horse was not as exciting for me as it was for them! My dad suggested showing cattle instead and taking a steer to the county fair. I did; fourteen-year-old me with a 1250-pound Hereford steer! I showed my steer in a class of my peers and their purebred, fancy animals, and received a pink ribbon. The pink ribbon is much lower than blue ribbon, and since every 4-H participant received a ribbon, my pink ribbon was very, very, very far below the blue ribbons! However, we all were allowed to auction off our steers at the end hoping to receive the highest price per pound for our award-winning livestock.

Much to my surprise, my pink ribbon steer entered the auction pen and bidders started their offers at \$1.00 per pound. That's high! How could this be? My steer was not a purebred; it didn't have a pedigree of any sort. Why was my steer worth as much as the blue-ribbon ones? Well, my father had prepared the way by inviting business owners from our town to the auction. These businesses wanted to support our family so they bid high! What a blessing! One of my steers paid for two years of college back then.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was surprised, too, when she learned of God's plan for her (Luke 1:38). Mary was not from a noble family; she did not have wealth. She was humble and willing to accept God's plan and she praised God for this (Luke 1:48-49). God's plan for Mary was His plan for us as well—the sending of His Son, Jesus, to save us from our sins.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *Read or listen to the words of Mary's Magnificat again. What did Mary recognize that God had done for Israel that could be given a 'blue-ribbon'? (Hint: the start of each verse)*
- *Take time together to offer praise to the Lord for all that He is and has done in the life of your family. Extra credit: create a 'blue-ribbon' out of paper and write out your praises!*

Miracles in our Midst

READ PSALM 34:1-10

I can forget that the most rational thing in the world is to worship God and talk about Him. And yet when we encounter the world we might get the feeling that situation is reversed (Romans 1:19-21). How willing am I to appear uncool, foolish, and crazy for the sake of Christ? How willing am I to bear the name of Christ and to stand beside Him, even when His name is dragged through the mud by others? What's more, how can I worship God in the middle of it all, like David did in Psalm 34?

Psalm 34 was written by David after he pretended to be a madman to escape a dangerous situation (1 Samuel 21:10). In this episode, David, a sane man recently anointed to be the king of Israel, was so scared he might be murdered he feigned insanity in public. It was a dream job turned nightmare. Would he have taken the job if he knew that it meant running for his life, and demeaning himself in public? And yet David praises God with these opening lines, *"I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth"* (v. 1 ESV).

How could he say that after all he'd been through? Where did he get the strength not to go back to Samuel and hand in his letter of resignation?

David had a right view of God, he was clear-eyed about his own condition and that of the world. So when David leaps into the pages of Psalm 34, he is spurred on not by his complaints, but by a fresh encounter of his deliverance and his living hope in God. David's cup might have appeared half-empty to the world around him, but with eyes of faith he could be certain it was overflowing. Even though David had escaped with his life, the promised Messiah would sacrifice His life like a passover lamb, so that all who seek refuge in God would have eternal life (Exodus 12:46, Psalm 34:20, John 19:36).

Centuries later, we know that Jesus was that promised Passover Lamb, who takes away the sins of the world. And like David, we still live in the midst of those who oppose God and suppress the knowledge of Him. Therefore, let us try to take a cue from David and refresh our memories about the miracles of God within our midst.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What is something you can reflect on that God has done in your life that will lead you to praise Him today? Take a moment and thank God in prayer for the ways He has blessed you!*
- *Work this week on memorizing Psalm 34:1-3.*

BY STEVEN JAEHNERT

Hannah's Song

READ 1 SAMUEL 2:1-10

Have you ever been overwhelmed by the goodness of God? By His graciousness and generosity to you?

Often, His goodness flows to us (or is most evident?) in our darkest times. When I was in high school I was determined to go to the Air Force Academy, and when those plans fell through in an unexpected way, I was devastated. But God, in His mercy, used that to bring me into a true relationship with Him, one that eventually led me to become a pastor and to the life I have been blessed with today.

Our text today is Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel. Hannah had been praying faithfully and desperately for a child and God had answered her prayer! Hannah erupted in praise:

Then Hannah prayed and said: 'My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.' There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God... He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed. (vv. 1-2, 10)

The last words of her prayer "his anointed" in Greek can be translated *Christos* or Christ. Could this prayer be giving us a glimpse of Jesus? It sure sounds like it. Read Luke 1 and you will see many similarities between Mary's song and Hannah's.

Hannah didn't know it at the time, but the son that God granted her was Samuel, a prophet of the Lord. It would be through her son that the Lord would anoint Israel's first king, Saul, and its greatest king, David. Hannah's prayer-song points us to the ultimate fulfillment of kingship in Christ. God changed Hannah's grief into joy for her and for countless others. God used what was painful and changed it into something amazing. I wonder if Hannah ever knew the true value of the gift God had given her (and the rest of the world through her).

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When has God's overwhelming goodness been shown to you after a moment of darkness/desperation?*
- *How can you express your gratitude and praise to Him today?*

The Presence of Peace

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

What does it mean to have peace? In this section of Philippians, Paul is imploring believers to cultivate peace in the midst of trials. Many of us in the church have likely been told that “giving your anxieties to God” is the antidote to your pain. I am sure many of you, like me, have some baggage with this.

For many years, my faith was more about knowing Bible verses than it was about knowing God. So when hard things started happening, I was pointed to this passage that teaches us what to do with worry. However, without an understanding of God’s heart and the experience of His presence, I interpreted verse 6 as God’s preference and permission to deny the pain of life’s trials. But when Paul says “*don’t worry, instead pray*,” he isn’t telling us to disengage with our circumstances and think about happy things—he’s actually teaching us to engage well with God in our circumstances. When Paul tells us to rejoice and pray with thanksgiving, he’s teaching us to engage our full selves with God’s whole heart. Remember, lament is a form of prayer which shows us how to cry out and praise God with the same breath.

As believers we are often called to respond to things in a manner that seems disproportionate to the situation: “*if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*,” “*love your enemies*,” “*consider troubles an opportunity for great joy*.” What if these seemingly incongruent responses are actually an invitation to know God more, not just please Him?

In this passage, Paul is not just giving us rules to follow, he is inviting us to engage with a way of life that actually lets us know and experience God in our bodies. In verses 7 and 9, he promises that the presence of the God of peace in our minds and hearts will exceed what we can understand. This means that when we engage with the way of Jesus and cultivate peace in our minds and bodies, there is something we experience of God that we don’t yet know and can’t yet fully understand. What a beautiful invitation!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What worries can you take to God in prayer so that His promise of peace can be made real in your life?*
- * *Place the magi in another room. These travelers remind us that Jesus’ followers would be from all nations. In this week’s Scripture, we see that Mary understood this, too. One day, we will all glorify the Lord together with people from all nations on earth!*

BY EMILY CAPP

Praise Him

READ PSALM 150:1-6

There are places that I go to commune with God just as Jesus often did. In my case those places are usually near water. I have even given these places names like The Garden or The Mountain Top. These are the places where I feel the most confident that God hears me and I hear Him.

Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46-55) reminds me of the prayers of praise and thanks that I experience in those places. We often pray for the needs of others and ourselves and rightly so, but we should never forget the prayers of praise for God when He does something wonderful in our lives.

- Praise Him when he pulls us out of the darkness.
- Praise Him for granting you a desire (not a need) when there are so many in the world in need, and yet He still takes the time to bless you with something that you only wanted but was not a need.
- Praise Him when you understand how powerful He is and how powerless you are. In this world, power is something that many strive for yet our all-powerful God gave up all power to take on our weaknesses and become like us (Philippians 2:6-8) so that we would have a way back to Him.
- Praise Him for this because it is foolish and upside-down according to man's wisdom.
- Praise Him for being a humble King.

Praising God is not simply saying the words but often involves music and song (Psalms 150:3-5). Yes, be sure to sing to Him in your favorite places of prayer and praise. Just as Mary sang God's praises for even being noticed and blessed by God, let us sing our praises to God as the world focuses on Jesus this holiday season and we remember the great things God has done in our lives. *"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."*

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Where is it easiest for you to praise God?*
- *Take time this week to go there and sing praises for the goodness God brings into your life!*

I Can Only Imagine

READ REVELATION 7:9-12

Most of my thoughts of heaven have been about me being in God's presence. Sometimes I think of worshiping with the angels and twenty-four elders around the throne—I wonder if my body would stand under the weight of God's glory or if my lips would be able to utter any words. I also imagine how happy I would be to hear God tell me, "Well done, faithful servant." I would love that. Hearing God say I didn't do what He asked me to do has always brought me to tears. I don't want to hear that.

Revelation 7:9-10 shows the reality of God's presence; *"a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb"* (v. 9 NLT). Oh, that is so much fun to imagine. The vast crowd shouts with a great roar, *"Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"* (v. 10 NLT). They know all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and are grateful that through Jesus, they are redeemed to be in God's presence (Romans 3:23, John 3:16). If you ever wonder why God deserves all the worship, one reason is that He lovingly holds our existence, redemption, and sustenance now and forever.

Imagining heaven is great, but we are still here on earth. How can we wholly lean into the reality of being in God's presence here on earth? I want to worship God daily; imagine I am in His presence, here and now. God says in Jeremiah 23:24, *"Am I not everywhere in all the heavens and earth?"* (NLT). I can sing and dance to worship God and obey His words in my daily choices. I can always strive to love others as God loves them. I want to please God here.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How about you? Do you agree that God alone deserves your worship?*
- *How can you bring more worship of God into your daily life?*
- * *Bring out the figures of sheep and shepherds and set them outside of the stable. Along with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds would be the first to glorify the Lord.*

Reflect & Respond

Saturday, December 10

OPEN IN PRAYER

Prayerfully look back through this week's readings and devotionals. Ask God to speak to you freshly as you consider them again.

KEY VERSE

Review the memory verse for the week, Psalm 34:1-3. What hope does it give you as you live your life for God this week?

WEEKLY THEME

As you think of the theme for this week, "*My soul glorifies the Lord*" (*Magnificat*), where do you most need to apply this in your relationships, your work or how you live for and think about God? Write out a one or two sentence response that you can apply this week!

SHARE

With whom can you share your thoughts about this?



Luke 1:67-79

Praise
be to
the
Lord.

BENEDICTUS

Benedictus, also called the Song of Zechariah, is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving sung by Zechariah, a Jewish priest of the line of Aaron, on the occasion of the circumcision and naming of his son, John the Baptist. Found in Luke 1:67-79, the canticle received its name from its first words in Latin (*Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel"). The hymn is addressed to the Israelite people about their long-cherished messianic hopes and to John the Baptist as the prophet and forerunner of the Messiah whose kingdom of peace is about to begin.

Benedictus

READ LUKE 1:67-79

The plumber said he'd be at your house between 9 and 11 am. It's 12:30 now and there's no plumber in sight.

Your old classmate said that she would call to make plans to get together this weekend. Oh well, she must be too busy.

Your position "has been eliminated" in a corporate restructuring plan—after you've given 18 years of faithful service.

In a world of broken promises, is it any wonder we have difficulty comprehending a faithful God? We've read and re-read His promises, and we believe them on one level, but yet, there's that kernel of doubt, will God really come through?

Zechariah had the same struggle. As a priest, Zechariah was well-schooled in the Torah. He read the Old Testament prophets' words about the coming of Messiah and the redemption of His people. But now, it was getting personal. The angel's message was telling Zechariah that his own son—who would be born miraculously late in life—would be the forerunner of this long-awaited Messiah. Seriously, how can this be possible?

At some point during this silent stretch of months, Zechariah's heart began to soften. Was it when he learned that Mary had a similar encounter with an angel? Was it when the baby first kicked in Elizabeth's womb? Or, was it when he finally held Baby John in his arms? Whenever Zechariah's heart changed, he learned that God's promise-keeping is not like ours. God always remembers, never gets diverted from His plan, always fulfills His Word.

Because of his change of heart, Zechariah is able to turn to his infant son and prophesy over him (Luke 1:76-79). John would be the last of the old-school prophets, pointing the way to Jesus. And Jesus, like a rising sun, would extend the light of salvation to the whole world. We get to live in the fulfillment of that blessing! Our own transformed lives in Christ should be a constant reminder that God will keep His Word, and will finish what He has started—the perfection of our faith and the restoration of the world.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why does faithfulness stand out in our culture? Are there obstacles to believing that God will do what He says He will do?*
- *Think about what it must have been like for Zechariah to slowly realize that God was keeping His promise of a baby born to Elizabeth. Describe his mix of emotions.*
- * *Scatter some sheep figures all around the room. Let them remind you of how people are lost without a shepherd, but God saw this and sent Jesus to be their Good Shepherd.*

BY LAURE HERLINGER

Family Talk

READ LUKE 1:67-79

*“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel
Because he has come and redeemed his people.
He raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of his servant David.”*

When I was growing up, my mom would sing to me. She sang lullabies like “Frere Jacques” and “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” She rewrote the lyrics to Brahm’s lullaby for our family. Her longest piece was a medley of songs from her childhood and hymns. Every night as she tucked me into bed, she would sing over me the truths from God’s word with love.

Today’s song from Luke is like my mom’s medley. Zechariah, the singer, has just become a dad, and he’s excited. An angel of the Lord called Gabriel had told him over a year before that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, but he had a hard time believing it. He and Elizabeth hadn’t had any children, and they were old enough to be grandparents. But God is faithful to keep his promises and now the promised little boy has come!

Zechariah is also excited because another promised boy is on his way. Throughout the Old Testament of the Bible, God revealed his plan to the prophets to send a savior to rescue his people. The angel who told of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s baby, John, revealed that John would prepare the people for the long-awaited savior. Later, when Elizabeth met Mary who was pregnant with Jesus, baby John jumped in her womb, already excited to be near the savior.

When he gets news of his son’s birth and God’s promise fulfilled, Zechariah’s joy overflows. He remembers the songs of David and the prophets. Promises hundreds of years old come to mind. He remembers the words of Gabriel, the angel, about his son, John. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and creates a new medley of praise to God that he sings to his son.

I wonder how many times John heard that song growing up. He heard about the forgiveness of sins and God’s mercy. He heard about the strong king (called a horn in this song) who would bring salvation. He heard about Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *What songs do you sing as a family to praise God and remember his promises?*
- *Read Luke 1:67-69. How is Jesus described? (Jesus is the Lord in this song.) What does Jesus do in this song?*

A Singular Focus

READ PSALM 111:1-10

As I reflect on the Advent season, I think about how busy these weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas often are. It's such a wonderful period of time filled with travel, holiday parties, time spent reconnecting with friends, enjoying the company of family, and so much more. I often find it so easy to get caught up in the compressed busyness of the season and on a wider level, the busyness of life during this season.

And as someone who often struggles with being perpetually busy and just finding that there are so many awesome things that I want to be involved in but just not enough hours in a week, I read Psalm 111, and am struck by the beautiful single focus the writer has. In 10 verses there are 24 references to the Lord. In this one Psalm the character of our God is written about, promises for the future are established, references to the past are given, and all glory and praise are summarized by the first (and last) line: *"Praise the Lord."* Wow.

In the midst of the Advent season and all that surrounds it, do we need to spend a bit of time being like the psalmist and tying all things back to the proclamation of *"Praise the Lord!"*? I know for me, that answer is "yes!" It is a constant reminder and a bit of a reality check—one that I am thankful to have amidst a world and year that is so marked by struggle, sin, and suffering. In this season and in all seasons, praise the Lord!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Take time today (10 min, 15 min, as much as you can!) to singularly focus on praising God. Start by thanking Him for the ways He has blessed you in the past and move into praising Him for who He is in your life today.*
- *How can you remember to do this everyday?*
- *Work this week on memorizing Psalm 111:9-10.*

Making Outsiders into Insiders

READ ROMANS 1:1-6

My wife and I first came to Eastbrook 19 years ago, as a young couple, new in the city, looking for a place to belong. Like many people, we thought we would be church-hopping for a while. But our first Sunday we recall being welcomed with open arms and invited to join the church's mission of serving and loving people.

I was reminded of that as I read this passage in Romans 1:1-6. In it I see a juxtaposition of two groups. On one side is Paul who was set apart, an individual who is a Hebrew, an insider with the promises of God. On the other side is the Gentiles who are (seemingly) excluded (Ephesians 2:12) from the promise of God—the outsiders. In this passage Paul talks about his mission (call) from God to bring all the Gentiles to obedience of faith—in other words making the outsiders into insiders.

My early experience at Eastbrook was similar to that where leaders and members made a concerted effort to make us feel welcome and include us in things like plugging us into ministries that served the internationals and help people with medical needs. There was a constant, joyful effort of the leaders and church members (the insiders), taking the new people (the outsiders) and helping them plug in to the life of Christ in the body. Through all his writing Paul continues to encourage the church to reach out to those on the outside to include them in the life that is in Christ.

This season of Advent, I pray that we as a community in Christ will learn by the power of Holy Spirit, like the apostle Paul, to continue to reach out to those on the outside and include those on the inside—for the sake of His Name.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When have you felt like an "outsider"? Did anyone reach out to include you? If so what did they do?*
- *Like John the Baptist, we have been given the mission of proclaiming Jesus to those around us. How will you pursue that mission this week?*

"Good" People

READ MICAH 7:18-20

You don't have to be "good."

Growing up, I was that kid who made sure adults liked me. I would go out of the way to please the adults in my life, because I wanted to make sure that I got the good and positive attention. And listen, it worked most of the time. But then I grew up and realized, that those kids (read: me) are just as flawed as everyone else. Big time flawed.

Micah, in his song here, drops some huge names. Abraham and Jacob, to an Israelite, are big stars. Every Hebrew person reading or hearing this immediately conjured up the stories they would have known about these two giants of their history. They were revered and venerated and mentioned alongside names like Moses and Joseph. Micah knows that the stories of these two men's lives were filled with great deeds, big moves, and following God into crazy places. But also, these two people were deeply flawed. Abraham had a lying and faith problem. Jacob also was deeply deceptive and faithless at times.

But even though they were not "good" people all the time, Micah knew the stories, and saw God's faithfulness continue. Micah starts out this passage glorifying God's deep commitment to forgiveness. God is not a God that holds onto His anger, but delights in mercy and compassion. Abraham and Jacob would not have been the people they were if it wasn't for God's character of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.

Even though we as God-followers are called to a higher standard, we are also inexplicably called to be fine with not being "good." If these two men (and many other founders of our faith) were shown faithfulness, goodness, forgiveness, and love, we too can rely on that from our Creator. And why is that? Because our goodness is not based in our character, but in Christ's. When we stand before God, it is Christ who perfects us, not anything we do ourselves. So let go of that pursuit of being that "good" kid, and pursue a God who perfects us by simply being who He is.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Recall a time when you strived to be "good" even though the intentions were less than good. How did it work out?*
- *In what areas of your life do you live that way now? How can you let the God of compassion, faithfulness, and love rescue you? What can help you trust in his character for your goodness rather than yours?*
- * *Bring your sheep figures close to the shepherd figures. The shepherds were keeping watch at night when they heard the news about Baby Jesus!*

BY NIC FRIDENMAKER

Comfort!

READ ISAIAH 40:1-5

When I read the words of our text, I hear in my mind Milwaukee's Messiah Community Choir singing these verses form the first three movements, and I hear God's tender voice crying "*Comfort, comfort*" to His people. When Jesus came, His path had been made straight by John the Baptist, and He revealed exactly who God was—God's glory! Jesus will come again, and all of creation—the valleys, mountains, hills, rough ground, and rugged places will be made whole in Him.

But now we live in the in-between, and God calls us to comfort and encourage those around us, to remind them that their debts have been paid in Christ, and that they are God's beloved people.

In 1986, when we were living in Mali, West Africa, I received word that my mother was dying. I was able to get flights to be with her during those last days of labored breathing. I dreamt of some kind of miraculous reconciliation with this woman who bore me and yet who I barely knew. I dreamt that the scars of her mental illness and alcoholism would be removed. As I prayed by her side, she told me that she had made her "peace with God" and didn't want to talk with me about it. Moments later, she went into a coma and died.

I cried during my long flights back to Mali. I felt so bereft—a mother wound I felt would never be filled. My plane to Brussels wasn't full. I was in a window seat and a small, elderly Belgian woman was in the middle section. She beckoned me over, asked why I wept, and told me to lie across the seats with my head in her lap. She gently stroked my hair, as a mother would comfort her child.

In these confusing times when hope is darkened, how we need to hear the strains of God's tender words of love and concern to us, "*Comfort, comfort my people!*" Allow God's love to reassure your heart today that you might proclaim His hope and sure plan to those around you.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When have you received unexpected comfort in times of despair?*
- *How can you be a source of comfort to someone around you that might need words of hope?*

Present Glory

READ ISAIAH 60:1-3

I remember my first service at Eastbrook in Fall 2017. One of the first things that struck me is the unusual setup of the Worship Hall. I was initially confused by the stage on the long side of the room, and the main entrance coming from basically backstage, but it quickly became my favorite quirk about our physical space.

Growing up, I attended a large church where the stage felt very tall and separate from the members of the congregation. As a musician there, worship felt similar to our high school orchestra concerts. We were under bright lights and could hardly hear the congregation singing, even though there were many people. To me, it felt very structured and hierarchical.

At Eastbrook, the experience is much different. The “sideways” setup of the Worship Hall shortens our distance from front to back and unifies the stage and the congregation. I’ve experienced worship from every angle—from the back corner of the stage to the farthest of congregational seating. The effect of Eastbrook’s environment is that no matter how many people are in that room, whether you’re in the band or congregation, it truly feels like we are all singing in unison to praise our God. It’s the most consistent place and time that I feel like I start to understand God’s glory appearing over us, a visible and tangible display of His holiness.

Darkness covers our earth today just like it did in Israel as told in Isaiah. In Isaiah 60:2, we are reminded that *“the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”* This happens in present tense; God’s glory is already here for His believers. When we find those moments of glory within our lives and the lives of those around us, it feels like we get one step closer to the day that all nations will come to His light (v. 3). This Advent season, as we wait in expectation for Jesus’ arrival, let us notice those moments and thank God for His present glory in our lives.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When you think of the light of God coming into your life, what comes to mind?*
- *Have you experienced people being brought to God because of the Light He is shining in your life? How/when?*
- * *Move Mary and Joseph and the donkey a little closer to the stable. God was carrying out His good plan, even when others did not notice.*

BY SAREENA DANIEL

Reflect & Respond

Saturday, December 17

OPEN IN PRAYER

Prayerfully look back through this week's readings and devotionals. Ask God to speak to you freshly as you consider them again.

KEY VERSE

Review the memory verse for the week, Psalm 111:9-10. What hope does it give you as you live your life for God this week?

WEEKLY THEME

As you think of the theme for this week, "*Praise be to the Lord*" (*Benedictus*), where do you most need to apply this in your relationships, your work or how you live for and think about God? Write out a one or two sentence response that you can apply this week!

SHARE

With whom can you share your thoughts about this?



Luke 2:14

Glory
To God
in the
highest.

GLORIA

Often referred to as “the angelic hymn,” the *Gloria* was first intoned by the angels from heaven for the birth of Christ on earth. The *Gloria* is a true hymn, sung by the angels and found in Luke 2:14. It is also known as the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* from the first line of the Latin translation. The Messiah’s coming brings glory to God in the heavens and peace to humans on earth.

Gloria

READ LUKE 2:8-20

Long check-out lines, blaring commercials: “Only 10 more shopping days until Christmas!” Social media posts reminding you, you never did get that perfect family portrait for the annual Christmas card—but it looks like everyone else did!

Where is the peace of Christmas?

Warily, you plop into your favorite chair and start scrolling through the news. Stolen cars and reckless driving in the city. Drug overdoses taking too many young lives. Desperation at our borders. War and unrest abroad.

Where is the peace of Christmas?

We think of peace as the absence of trouble, but the biblical concept of peace, or *Shalom* is much richer. *Shalom* describes wholeness and restoration. Jesus was called the “Prince of Peace” in the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 9:6) because He would be the One to bring reconciliation between God and humanity by paying for our sins with His death on the Cross: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20). Jesus has reconciled us to the Father, and as we walk with Him, He restores us and makes us whole.

So, when we read the *Gloria*, we can know that the angels were really making an announcement to the shepherds: Now that Jesus is here, so is peace.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He greeted everyone with the same announcement: “Peace be with you.” Peace, or *Shalom* is part of Jesus’ nature, so where He is, there will also be peace. Even in the midst of an over-committed season. Even in a world of suffering.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When do you most feel the shalom of Christ?*
- *How can you be someone who brings the shalom of Christ into the lives of others?*
- * *Place animal figures in the stable. This barn was a humble place for Jesus—the King of highest Heaven—to be born!*

Family Talk

READ LUKE 2:8-20

What comes to mind when you hear the word “angel”? Do you think of fairy-like creatures in long flowing gowns, holding harps and flying among the clouds?

That’s how artists have been depicting angels for many years (even just flip back 2 pages to see an artist’s rendition of an angel!), but what if I told you that the Bible gives us a very different picture of angels? There are only two angels named in the Bible: Michael (Revelation 12:7), and Gabriel (Luke 1:19 and 26) – names that we associate with boys.

In this week’s Scripture reading, we see an angel appearing to the shepherds. The very first thing the angel says is: *“Do not be afraid!”* Rough-and-tumble shepherds probably wouldn’t be afraid of angels in flowy gowns! THIS angel looked powerful!

In fact, in Luke 2:13 we read that *“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel.”* The word “host” here really means an army of angels! Think back to all the Bible stories you know where angels show up—they’re protecting, leading, battling the enemy and yes, delivering super-important messages! They’re more like soldiers than fairies!

And these soldier-angels were worshipping God, saying:

“May glory be given to God in the highest heaven!

And may peace be given to those he is pleased with on earth!” (Luke 2:14, NIV)

In other words, our praise and worship—*glory*—goes UP to God, who deserves it! And, the peace of Jesus comes DOWN to be with us. This is the good news of Christmas!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- *What are some Bible stories that you know of, that include angels? What are the angels doing in these stories?*
- *What are some ways that we give God glory? What does this look like?*
- *Jesus came to earth as a human baby to lead us back to his Father. How does knowing this help us to have peace?*

Headhunters & Armed Robbers

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

What does an armed robber from Wisconsin and a headhunter from the Himalayans have in common?

It's impossible to experience what receiving that angelic message must have felt like for those shepherds the night Jesus was born. Nobodies, probably with no aspirations of an education for their children, perhaps plagued by patterns of abuse and dysfunction, were visited with the greatest announcement the world would ever know. "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*"

Just like that, there was more than hope... more than a promise... there was an announcement that things on earth would finally begin to be reclaimed in a way that would bring God's true *Shalom*.

Today's passage contains that familiar verse, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*" (v. 17 NKJV). The armed robber and the headhunter have this in common: I have personally witnessed their "old" life having passed away and their "new" bringing life to their communities because of the transformation of the Holy Spirit. My god-brother, Martell, who grew up around Eastbrook, committed multiple armed robberies long ago. Atsem Konyak is from one of the last headhunter tribes on the planet in the Indian Himalayas. Yet, God Himself imputed the accountability for the trauma, fear, grief, and loss caused by these men... onto Himself. Jesus "*became sin*" that Martell and Atsem might "*become the righteousness of God*". When these men trusted Christ, the old passed away. "*The flesh*" was to be regarded no longer.

Today, Martell's sole passion is to bring the peace of Christ back to his community through his real estate investment business, serving otherwise vulnerable tenants with understanding, and working together, no matter their record. Atsem Konyak is the pastor of a church in a persecuted part of India where believers often lose their jobs and are even disowned when they follow Christ. But these men have something else in common—they will one day celebrate together before the throne marveling that they were reconciled at just around the same time for the most unlikely of reasons. Will you be reconciled, too?

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Work this week on memorizing 2 Corinthians 5:20.*

BY RYAN ATWOOD

God Empowers Ordinary People

READ ACTS 1:8

God reveals Himself to ordinary people. He also employs several unlikely men and women to be His instruments.

Can you imagine the astonishment of the shepherds when the angels appeared and announced Christ's birth? In biblical days shepherding ranked low in the job/career arena. Shepherds carried an odor—smelly like their sheep. People looked down on them as poor, uneducated, and ceremonially unclean—barred from the temple. Yet, God invited shepherds to Jesus' first birthday party.

Thirty years later, Jesus selected twelve unlikely men. Among the group, He chose several unlearned fishermen and a corrupt, disdained tax collector.

"Jesus, really? You overlooked pious religious leaders for these guys?"
Extraordinary!

Before Jesus left the earth, He commissioned these same men to preach the Gospel. He instructed them to reach out to the Jews and Gentiles. While you are at it, Jesus said, "Reach the world." Can you hear their internal voices asking, *who me?* Then, the day of Pentecost occurred, empowering them to do things beyond their human abilities. Clark Kent went inside a phone booth and came out Superman. Jesus' followers climbed the stairs to the upper room, confused, doubting, and timid. But after the wind of the Holy Spirit, they spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem, clear-headed and bold. I can only imagine their awe and wonder.

I join hands with the shepherds and the disciples. In college, I needed a tutor to correct my papers before turning them in to my instructors. On our first meeting, the tutor read my beginning paragraph, then looked up at me as if to say, "How in the world did you get into college?" If someone took a poll, I'd top the list of "The most unlikely to write a book"—let alone get one published. But I have done both—seven times.

Christ commissioned His disciples and me and you! Go! Reach family, community, and the world.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When have you been most surprised that God is calling you to be His ambassador?*
- *How will you live out that call this week?*

BY VICTORIA MCAFEE

Jesus, Our Thirst-Quencher

READ ISAIAH 12:1-6

Water is life. Living on the shores of Lake Michigan we easily take our access to clean, fresh water for granted. Palestine and Israel, being arid climates, do not have as readily available fresh water. Perhaps this is why water plays such a prominent role in Scripture.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, in John 4:13-14, that He has water where the drinker will never thirst again. Water symbolism abounds in the Psalms for how we should desire God (see Psalms 42:1 and 63:1). Reading Isaiah 12, verse 3 stands out to me because of the mention of water.

Isaiah brings us this beautiful imagery of God's absolute abundance in the plural use of 'wells'. Overflowing, deep wells of salvation are available to us. The thought of cool, drinkable water makes me physically thirsty, and also spiritually thirsty. Salvation isn't something we can "quench" with anything physical, or even any other spiritual thing for that matter. It is only by God.

There have been many times in my life where I have felt spiritually dry or been in a season of waiting, and the imagery of drawing water from the abundance of God sounds like peace, like a salve, a thirst quencher I desperately need.

The challenge for me lies in drawing from that well, and with joy. I love the reminder of that verb: Isaiah tells the Israelites to *draw* from the well. There is action expected, there is engagement. When I am spiritually thirsty, how often do I seek other things to satisfy that longing?

The season of Advent is a season of expectant waiting. As God's people waited for the Messiah, we too are still in a season of waiting, "the now and the not yet." When we find ourselves in smaller seasons of waiting, how can we draw from God's wells with joy? Looking back on what God has done, on who Jesus is, and choosing to say "*glory to God in the highest!*" is a good place to start. Because no matter what our circumstances are, we can drink from the abundant wells of salvation through Jesus. Lord, teach me that this is enough.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How can you experience and express joy even as you wait for the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises?*

BY MAC LITTEL

Holy Anticipation

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-11

As a young boy the excitement that came along with Christmas centered around the promise of the mysterious and wonderful gifts to be discovered under the Christmas tree! Growing up my family's tradition was to open gifts on Christmas Eve, after going to Christmas Eve service at church! I could barely pay attention in those services as my mind imagined what was in each wrapped box that I dutifully scouted in advance. As a father, my excitement around gifts has shifted more to giving gifts to my children, family, and close friends and sharing in the excitement.

In this fourth canticle recorded in Luke 2:8-20, we see the angels proclaiming the arrival of God's gift to the world and the shepherds responding with joy and excitement! Listen to these words the angels proclaim: *"Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests."*

In 2 Corinthians 4:1-11, Paul also talks about the wondrous promised gift of new birth through this same Messiah who caused the angels to rejoice, Jesus Christ. The value of this gift is hidden from those who do not believe, *"...blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ."* (v. 4 ESV), but then Paul shares the solution to this condition of blindness and hopelessness in verse 6, *"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"* (ESV). Paul goes on to say that this gift of Jesus Christ will sustain us when we are pressed on every side, when we are confused, persecuted, and struck down (vv. 7-9). For this gift of life in Jesus Christ is revealed in our mortal bodies as we journey through the difficulties of life.

What a promise. What a gift. Just as the angels praised God for the Messiah Jesus as the gift of peace for God's people, we can accept the gift and not just be brought out of darkness, but experience the peace of God in our own lives.

I am reminded this Advent that as anticipation builds for Christmas, that boyhood joy for presents under the tree is but a small taste of the true joy and glory of living life in Christ no matter what comes our way.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What does the gift of Jesus Christ mean in your life? How can you reflect the life in Christ in your own life and share that joy and peace with others?*
- * *Place Mary and Joseph in the stable. The time has almost arrived for Baby Jesus to be born!*

BY KEVIN EIDE

Messengers to All Nations

READ PSALM 105:1-7

I am so intrigued by the symmetry that can be found between the Old and New Testaments. The same themes with different characters pop up again and again. Makes me want to sit up and pay attention to those recurring themes!

In the passage today, we are reminded of the personal nature of God and the privilege we have to know Him. And also the magnitude of His awesome power and deeds. We don't keep that awareness of the living God to ourselves, but rather share it freely—to all nations.

Verses 1 and 7 bookend this theme of God to all nations, verse 1 *"make known among the nations what he has done"* and verse 7 *"his judgments are in all the earth."*

Now compare that to the passage in Luke 2:8-20. Specifically verse 10, where the angel proclaims the *"good news of great joy that will be for all the people."* Both the Psalmist and the angel were messengers of the same theme.

About 10 years ago I took the Perspectives course offered at Eastbrook. This course expanded and solidified my awareness of God as a God of all nations and how He desires us to be His messengers—next door and to the remotest corner of the globe.

We see the shepherds taking action as messengers in verse 17, *"they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child."* Back in Psalm 105:2, instruction is given to, *"tell of all his wonderful acts."* Praise mixed with proclamation!

We also see repetitive content in the action words in each passage: Give thanks, call, make known, sing, tell, glory, look, seek, remember, and rejoice are from the verses in Psalms. While in Luke 2 we hear: praise, glory, see, spread the word, glorifying, joyful.

As I re-read these words I am struck by how I could meditate on a different word from one day to the next as a way to dwell on words of action that recur throughout passages such as the two today.

Dear Lord, help us to be filled with praise as we share to all nations.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Which call to action found in this passage will you choose to meditate on and apply?*

BY KEVIN PETERSON

Reflect & Respond

OPEN IN PRAYER

Prayerfully look back through this week's readings and devotionals. Ask God to speak to you freshly as you consider them again.

KEY VERSE

Review the memory verse for the week, 2 Corinthians 5:20. What hope does it give you as you live your life for God this week?

WEEKLY THEME

As you think of the theme for this week, "*Glory to God in the highest*" (*Gloria*), where do you most need to apply this in your relationships, your work or how you live for and think about God? Write out a one or two sentence response that you can apply this week!

SHARE

With whom can you share your thoughts about this?

NATIVITY BUILDING:

- * *Place the Baby Jesus figure in the stable. In the middle of the night, in this little barn, Jesus was born! "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given" (Isaiah 9:6).*



Isaiah 9:7

For
unto us
a child
is born.

CHRISTUS
NATUS

Christus Natus is not technically one of the traditional canticles of Christmas. But for the purpose of our devotional this year, we wanted to include a week of study just on the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, the Messiah! We asked the Eastbrook Academy junior Latin class to translate "Christ is Born" into Latin, and they returned with "*Christus natus*." This week, let us sing our own songs of joy as we celebrate the birth of Christ!

Christus Natus

READ MATTHEW 1:18-25

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14)

Of all Isaiah's prophecies most associated with Christmas there is none closer than Isaiah 7:14 about the Immanuel child. This is in large part thanks to Matthew's Gospel. After telling us about Mary's miracle child, an angel visits Joseph to tell him the miracle baby Mary carried was from God. And Matthew says:

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

That name Jesus, Matthew tells us earlier, means *"he will save his people from their sins"* (1:21). The name Jesus is basically the same as "Joshua," which, like "Isaiah," is a derivative of the word for salvation. The name Jesus and Joshua have the same basic meaning as Isaiah: *Yahweh God is salvation.*

With these notes from Matthew, Isaiah's old prophecy feels like it's shaped into something new. Originally a word of judgment upon King Ahaz of Judah—the kingdom is ending and your reign will fall—now has a different tone—the kingdom has arrived with forgiveness of sin—through the Jesus story.

There's a day unlike any other day coming... and the sign will be Immanuel. Yahweh God is still mighty and present to accomplish His purposes amidst the nations and our lives.

Today we celebrate the birth of that Messiah who brings a new song to humanity—a song of salvation, a song of joy, a song of peace, a song of God's new beginning for us. So, let's join the melody of God's marvelous song today and every day.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Pray a prayer of praise and thanksgiving (or sing a song!) to God for sending Jesus to earth as our Savior.*
- * *Place the shepherds near the stable. The angel told them that the Savior had been born! They believed, and they were the first to see Jesus and to tell others about Him!*

BY MATT ERICKSON

Family Talk

READ MATTHEW 1:18-25

Do you ever like to read Bible stories and put yourself in the place of the Bible people? Come along with me, as we spend the evening with the shepherds . . .

For them, this was just one more night out in the fields. Can you feel the middle-of-the-night chill in the air? Do you hear the swish of tall grasses all around you? Do you feel the oil on your hands after rubbing an injured lamb and cuddling it in your arms?

You lay on your back and look up at the stars. It's like someone spilled sugar over the dark sky—tiny specks of light everywhere! You're just beginning to doze off when, suddenly, the light grows brighter and brighter! You blink open your eyes and look up—so do the other shepherds! And so do the sheep! They start bleating and bawling!

A tall, powerful figure appears in the light and says, *"Don't be afraid! I have good news! Tonight, the promised Savior has been born in Bethlehem! And this is how you'll know it's God – He's wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger!"*

Wait—what? A manger—that's what animals eat out of! That's no place for a baby, and it's certainly no place for the promised Savior of the world!

You look up again – and there in the sky, the stars have been replaced with more dazzling light—angels—as far as the eye can see! They are worshiping, loud and strong!

Suddenly, you're not tired anymore—you roll up your blanket and gather up your staff, your water, your food. "Let's go to Bethlehem!" you say to the others.

The sky is dark again, except for a big, bright star over the town. Your sandals kick up clouds of dust as you run out of the fields and onto the streets. You start searching, from home to home, stable to stable. Then, your shepherd-friend calls out, "They're here! I've found them!"

There, in the straw, among the animals, a young mom and dad are hovering over a manger. And there, in the manger, a tiny baby sleeps!

A baby that looks just like any other baby, but one who is like no other baby—ever! This baby is the One promised for hundreds of years! And this is the baby that would grow up to save us all. You can't take it all in—there are no words. You kneel in worship. One by one, the other shepherds do the same.

But then—a poke in your ribs! Your shepherd-friend says, "We've gotta tell people!" And though you don't want to leave, your friend is right. This news is too good to be kept secret—this baby changes everything!

"After the shepherds had seen him, they told everyone. They reported what the angel had said about this child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." (Luke 2:17-18 NIV)

BY LAURE HERLINGER

God With Us

READ MATTHEW 1:18-25

The Word of God gives many names and titles for Jesus Christ: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Bread of Life, Good Shepherd, The Door, The True Vine and more, but my favorite title for Jesus is Emmanuel, found here in Matthew chapter 1. Emmanuel means “God with us”. Imagine it—the God who created the universe and sustains it, the God who holds the past, present and future in His hands—this God has come close to us!

Joseph must have clung to this truth that God was with him when he courageously took Mary to be his wife, even though cultural and family forces were tugging at him to walk away from her. I’m sure Joseph realized that if Almighty God was right there with him in his obedience to the angel, it didn’t matter what anybody else said or did.

I think of how much it has helped me when people have decided to go right with me in my struggles. I think of our IT guy who didn’t just tell me how to run a projector that was baffling me, but went over to another building where it was, and walked me through the whole process. I think of the time I went to see someone in a sprawling and confusing care facility, getting hopelessly lost, and having a worker not just tell me where to go but walk me all the way through crazy stairwells, tunnels and elevators to my destination. I think of how my sister-in-law stuck with me for 5 hours when I had a health crisis away from home. These are small things, but they point to Jesus, our “*God with us*”, who will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). No matter what happens in this next year, we can say with the Scripture, “*The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?*” (Hebrews 13:6).

Jesus is our Emmanuel.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When have you experienced “God With Us”? How did God reassure you of His presence in a time of need?*
- *Work this week on memorizing Matthew 1:22-25.*
- * *If you have other townspeople (or toy action figures!) bring them near the stable to worship Jesus, too!*

BY RUTH CARVER

Expect the Unexpected

READ MICAH 5:2-5

God loves to surprise us.

He is the ultimate artist dropping a new album at midnight, the clever author delivering an unexpected plot twist with thirty pages left. This is the God who blessed Abraham and Sarah with a child in their old age, who shocked Mary, a virgin, with the announcement that she would bear His son, who through Jesus consistently healed the sick and broke bread with those whom culture deemed undeserving.

In much the same way, the prophecy in this passage shows us that God loves to subvert expectation.

In the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC, at the time Micah foretold the Messiah and His kingdom, Israel and Judah were experiencing the turmoil of invasion and cultural upheaval. The promise of a leader who would provide peace—particularly *“when the Assyrians invade”* (v. 5), not too far from reality at this time—would surely have been welcome, yet might have seemed unbelievable. As would much of what Micah predicted, that the promised one wouldn’t claim a great, influential city as His home, but would instead come from Bethlehem, *“small among the clans of Judah”* (v. 2); that He would rule as a shepherd *“in the strength of the Lord,”* not a dictator backed by money or military might.

That is one of the great things about our God: He almost never does what we anticipate. He raises up greatness from the lowly and humble. He shows power through peace and strength through tenderness. He sends His son into the world not as an iron-clad warrior, but instead a tiny, vulnerable baby.

Christmas and Advent often feel like seasons of comfort—the familiar smells of dishes relatives bring to pass, sights of the same decorations neighbors have put up for years, the muscle memory of seasonal hymns and traditions celebrated among family and friends. But ironically, it is really a season commemorating the unexpected.

The circumstances of our day and age may look different than they did in Micah’s time, yet we still live in a broken world, we still hope for peace and security. And the promise in this passage still remains for us—God is faithful. He just might be showing up in ways we never could have predicted.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What is the most unexpected aspect of the Christmas story to you? Why do you think God might have chosen to bring it about in the way He did?*

BY RACHEL SHUSTER

The Righteous Branch

READ JEREMIAH 23:1-6

The Book of Jeremiah was written when God was about to exile the Kingdom of Judah for their rank apostasy. In this passage, the Lord begins with a stern rebuke to people who were supposed to be providing spiritual care for the people. It is a sobering passage for anyone who provides any ministerial care for others.

For the past eight years, I have taught Sunday school. Teaching fifth grade this year often feels like shepherding a small flock of sheep...who stopped at Starbucks on their way to the pasture...and ordered double espresso shots. When I read this passage, I think of my own shepherding responsibilities, whether serving NextGen or even with my family, my two children. Woe to me if my words or actions are driving people away from the Lord!

Then, the passage turns with a wonderful prophecy. First, God will gather His flock with better shepherds. Beyond that, in verse five, God promises a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely, do what is just and right. In the Christmas story, we see this *"righteous branch"* revealed as Jesus.

The reality is that for every Christian involved in ministry care (which is all of us), we are all sheep! As another Old Testament Messianic prophecy says, *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray."* I will never be a perfect shepherd to my family, the kids. Praise God that when Jesus came, He arrived as a man who always did what was just and right. For the 5th graders, I can rest knowing that the Good Shepherd is protecting them, teaching them, correcting them justly and rightly, just as He has and continues to shepherd me in that way. Even through difficult times, I know that Jesus' gentle shepherding has always been perfect. When I've wandered, He found me and brought me back. He's always led me to good pasture.

The passage ends with naming this king, *"The Lord our Righteousness."* Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are our righteous Good Shepherd and King.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Where can we trust in God's wisdom, justice, and righteousness today?*

BY KEVIN KELLY

A Song to the Child Born for Us

READ ISAIAH 9:2-7

It is good to sing. Research has shown that singing can be good for you on many levels. It may help lower stress, boost immunity and lung function, enhance memory, improve mental health, and help you cope with physical and emotional pain (*Healthline.com* Nov. 2020). It is even better to not just sing, but to sing to the child born for us at Christmas. This child is Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Why should we sing songs to celebrate Jesus at Christmas? Isaiah 9:2-7 gives us plenty of reasons. You see, we were people walking in darkness, totally lost, but who have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2). Jesus is that light. He is the Light of the world who drives out darkness of sin and death (John 8:12). He has come to save us. I believe that is why there is so much light lit at Christmas from candles to LED lights to celebrate the newborn King. Isaiah continues to note that this child, our Messiah will increase our joy (verse 3). The angel said in Luke 2:10b *"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."* Jesus is the joy-bringer. That is another reason to sing. Indeed, one Christmas carol we love to sing states, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King".

Then we come to the climax of the story by Isaiah in verses 6 and 7 of chapter 9, where he tells us that a child has been born for us. Isaiah then lists His name. He is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This is amazing. This is glorious. This is good news. This is worth singing about. The child born at Christmas for us is God Himself. Verse 7 lets us know that Jesus will reign on David's throne and His kingdom will never end. Angel Gabriel repeats this to Mary in Luke 1:32-33 where he states, "...*The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David...his kingdom will never end.*" This Christmas, let us join Mary, Zechariah, the angels, Simeon and all of creation in singing songs (canticles) of Christmas to the newborn King.

FOR REFLECTION:

- * *What is your favorite song to sing to celebrate Jesus' birth? What does that song help you to remember about God's gift to us?*
- * *Bring the wise men to the stable to worship Jesus and present their special gifts to Mary. They had traveled far from other lands. Just as Simeon said, Jesus would be a "light to the*

BY FEMI IBITOYE

More than a Season

READ ISAIAH 11:1-5

AAAARGH! Christmas is over and I still have food left over and presents to exchange and thank you notes to write...STOP!

Now that we put Christmas day behind us, we need to start thinking of what is ahead. When we make our resolutions, many want to give something up—bad habits like drinking or smoking or an action that is detrimental. But what about starting something instead of stopping?

God made the most incredible resolution thousands of years ago. He didn't stop doing something, but He gave us the gift of His Son to celebrate and embrace every year. We have the tools to make our lives an homage to the one true God. His fairness, support and protection are there for us every moment we live. The resolutions we make can be revisited every time we fall back and need to commit to who God made us to be.

We talk about putting Christ back in Christmas, but we need to put Him back in other days as well. After we celebrate His birth, we should remember the enormity of what that is; that this was something that was revealed to the world every day through the prophets in the Old Testament, the reality of the New Testament and is still revealed in the blessings of every day. Isaiah told us that Jesus would be an offshoot of Jesse, and of God. The promised Messiah was not exactly what the people expected. Our Messiah would use the Spirit of the Lord to judge us, not by our actions but by our hearts. Jesus is not a warrior God who fights our battles, but a righteous and just God who will help us through our struggles and fears.

While we may have to remind ourselves that we have a Christmas season, and not only a Christmas day, God never forgets. He is faithful and giving all the days of our lives. We know that Jesus is more important than the aftermath of the holiday. When we figure out what we want to do as the year switches over we can also think of what God has given us and what kind of help we can give to each other in His name.

Pray for someone you know and ask God to be in his or her life today. You will feel so much better while you dump that final bowl of mashed potatoes or exchange your misfitting gifts, thinking of the blessing God could be in their lives.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How will you keep the gifts of God prominent in your life not just during the holiday season, but all year as well? What visual reminders will you use?*

BY MARGARET DUCHROW

Reflect & Respond

OPEN IN PRAYER

Prayerfully look back through this week's readings and devotionals. Ask God to speak to you freshly as you consider them again.

KEY VERSE

Review the memory verse for the week, Matthew 1:22-25. What hope does it give you as you live your life for God this week?

WEEKLY THEME

As you think of the theme for this week, "*For unto us a child is born*" (*Christus Natus*), where do you most need to apply this in your relationships, your work or how you live for and think about God? Write out a one or two sentence response that you can apply this week!

SHARE

With whom can you share your thoughts about this?



Now
dismiss
your
servant
in peace.
NUNC DIMITTIS

Nunc Dimittis is a brief hymn of praise sung by the aged Simeon, who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Simeon was at the Temple in Jerusalem when Mary and Joseph came to present the infant Jesus for the rite of purification according to Jewish law and custom. Simeon recognized the baby as the promised Savior, took Him in his arms, and raised his hymn of praise. Found in Luke 2:29-32, it is called the *Nunc Dimittis* for its first words in the Vulgate (Latin) Bible: *Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum, in pace* ("Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace"). Because of its implications of fulfillment, peace, and rest, the early church viewed it as appropriate for the ending of the day. Since the 4th century it has been traditionally used in evening worship services.

Nunc Dimittis

READ LUKE 2:22-38

*“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations . . . (Luke 2:29-31)*

Simeon saw Baby Jesus with his own eyes, and had held Him in his own arms. God had come to earth—in the flesh.

Luke tells us that Simeon had been waiting *“for the consolation of Israel.”* The beautiful word consolation is *paraklesis* in Greek, and it means “comfort” or “encouragement.” In its other forms, in the New Testament, *paraklesis* is used to refer to the Holy Spirit or Jesus. The comfort that Jesus brings is His presence. He did not need to take on flesh in order to better understand us. But, maybe we needed Him to take on flesh so that WE might know that He knows? (See Philippians 2:5-8 and Hebrews 4:15).

This is what separates Christianity from all the rest. While so many others attempt to reach their gods and appease them, our God decided to reach us in the most tangible way possible. He *“took on flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood”* (John 1:14, The Message).

Jesus’ coming to earth was the fulfillment of everything that Simeon had been waiting for. Israel had been given the law, the prophets had spoken, and now the Messiah had come to rescue His people. Simeon’s quiet waiting was His great act of faith. Yes, now Simeon could depart in peace.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How is Jesus’ presence a consolation in your life?*
- *How are you waiting for God to act in your life? What helps you to keep believing, as Simeon did, while you wait?*

Family Talk

READ LUKE 2:22-38

Before you begin reading this devotional with your family, set a timer for 5 minutes and tell them if they don't move or talk until the timer goes off, they'll get a prize. You can decide to make the prize something spectacular (a special treat or toy) or something disappointing (an onion, a sock) depending on what reaction you want to elicit.

You waited months and months for Christmas to come . . . now it's over. The gifts are all unwrapped, the decorations come down and the parties are over. It feels sad! Maybe you opened a gift that was just placed on a shelf, maybe you ate it and now it's gone. After months of hoping and waiting and thinking, "once I get _____ I'll be happy!", you don't feel happy, just disappointed and let down. Perhaps your Christmas was like that.

But, maybe, just maybe you received a gift that was worth the wait! One that you look forward to playing with or telling your friends about. One that won't sit on the shelf but will be used all the time. Something spectacular!

In our Gospel lesson, there were some people who had waited a very long time for something to happen. Anna and Simeon were people who worked in the temple. Both of them were pretty old and they had waited their entire lives for the Messiah. They knew God had promised to send a Savior who would lead and rescue the people. Simeon was a priest, and God had told Simeon that he would get to see the chosen Messiah before he died.

Mary and Joseph took baby Jesus to the temple after He was born. They had special ceremonies to do for Him. God told Simeon that the time had come for him to see Jesus, and he knew just what baby it was. Simeon was so excited to meet Jesus! He gave thanks to God for letting him witness the Messiah. He even said that he was satisfied and could die in peace, because he had laid eyes on the promised one. Another old temple worker was there, Anna. She also blessed God and gave thanks for this newborn Savior. Both Simeon and Anna had waited for years and years. Do you think they felt disappointed? No! They were so joyful and thankful that they had seen Jesus. He was worth waiting for.

And that's what we need to remember. As we finish one year and enter another, and as we say goodbye to Christmas, we want to recall what it is we celebrate. We are not only happy that Christmas has come, but that CHRIST has come. Jesus reminds us that God never forgets His promises. Sometimes it seems He is slow to answer our prayers or act on His word, but He always will. Jesus is the best gift of Christmas, and He will never disappoint. We don't just celebrate His coming one day a year. We should give thanks for it every day! He was born, lived, died, and rose again for us, to give us blessings and salvation. Let's thank God for that now, and always.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- *What would it look like for us to celebrate Christmas EVERY Day of the year?*
- *In what ways is Jesus the best gift ever, one worth waiting for?*

BY MARY ANN CALER

The Only Race Worth Running

READ 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8

"You take over. I'm about to die, my life an offering on God's altar. This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, he's an honest judge. He'll do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for his coming." (2 Timothy 4:6-8 The Message)

This fall I played soccer for the Eastbrook Academy Middle School Team. From the very first practice, our coach had us running for long periods of time. He said an average High School soccer player runs about seven miles each game! He wanted us to build up our endurance and speed so that when the other teams got tired we would still be running hard.

During some of our matches, we saw this in action! Our players would be dribbling the ball at speed down the field and the other team's defenders would be panting and struggling. This season was our best season ever—we went 2-1-2 and I think the fact we could still run hard when we needed to at the end of the game was a big part of that.

The verses for today are saying we want to run the race of our life hard, all the way to the end. "This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause!"

I'm pretty young and have a long life ahead of me, but Paul is saying the only thing worth doing for the rest of my life is following God.

There are a lot of things I like to do; play on the iPad, read books, build with Legos. But loving God and learning about Him are the only things that will last for eternity!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What do you think it takes to "run the race of faith" till the end?*
- *Are the things you have focused your attention on that have kept you from fully seeking God? Repent of these and refocus your heart on what matters to God the most!*
- *Work this week on memorizing 2 Timothy 4:7-8.*

BY LANDON CALER

Putting Things Right, Now

READ ISAIAH 42:1-7

This first of the servant songs introduces the servant as someone who brings justice. In the Bible, justice means “putting everything right”.

Biblical authors have written about God's justice both as a future reality and also as a present reality. We should not just wait for the end when God will put everything right. According to the artist Makoto Fujimura, in the post-resurrection reality, “redemptive and restorative acts are the signs of the New Heaven and the New Earth,” and we should begin that restorative work now.

For the last several years when immigration has been a focus, I have been documenting people living under pressure, such as refugees and asylum-seekers. Most of the time, they have faced injustice or are currently facing injustice in the part of the world they are living in. I have also moved to other issues like documenting people in the Navajo Nation where half of the residents lack running water and healthcare access during the pandemic. These interactions have forced me to reflect on the role of photography and art in God's mission of justice and peace and what I can do locally to mobilize causes of justice through photography. They have also forced me to reflect on how to do these things while avoiding any personal or political propaganda or by exploiting those in the photographs, but still raising awareness of injustice in the world.

In the last few months, one third of Pakistan (my country of origin) was underwater after massive floods, then there was news from Bangladesh and neighboring countries that are far away from here but are facing environmental justice issues right now. I wonder what we can do beyond thinking and praying about it.

I realize that seeing the people behind these issues is something I can still do without art or photography. Living a life of sustained attention is a start, becoming aware and then finally moving to responsibility.

N.T. Wright has put it this way, “It's time we actually took these issues seriously, partly simply out of love, because. . . justice is what love looks like when it's facing the problems that its neighbor is dealing with. And if we can't translate our love into justice, then I think Jesus himself would say, 'Have you actually understood what the word love means in the first place?'”

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What does it mean for us and for Eastbrook to follow the servant in justice (making things right) locally? What does it mean to be a church of the servant?*
- *How can God's restorative justice flow through us to the world?*

BY ASHER IMTIAZ

A Living Stone

READ 1 PETER 2:6-10

There is a house near where I live that has been under construction for over a year now. I walk past it almost every day as I leave for work, and it has been so cool to see the full transformation from the foundation to now a beautiful home. As I read this passage today, I am reminded of how important it is that Jesus is our cornerstone, the foundation upon which we can build our life.

Just before the verses we read today, Peter tells us that we are being built into a spiritual house, and a royal priesthood. In verse 6, we are reminded from Isaiah 28:16 that God has provided a chief cornerstone. Jesus is the foundation of everything we build our life upon. This passage then says that to those who believe, He is precious. The cornerstone is rejected by the disobedient and unbelieving, but is precious to those who believe.

In verses 7-8 Peter continues on the theme of Christ being the cornerstone, and outlines a story through these verses. The chief cornerstone is a stone that stands at a corner and the same stone becomes the starting place for two walls. Jesus' desire was to have Jews and Gentiles be united. This stone (Jesus), was a stumbling block for the Jews who thought the Gentiles should not be in the family of God.

It would be unfortunate if this passage ended there, but Peter offers an exhortation which every Christian can declare:

[We] are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (v. 9)

These words are not just reserved to the people of Israel but to all who believe in Jesus! We are brought into the family of God through Jesus.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How did you come to believe in Christ? Spend some time journaling on the ups and downs that Christ has brought you through. How has He served as your "cornerstone/foundation" through those times?*
- *Read v. 10. How have you received mercy from God? How can you extend mercy to others in your life?*

BY GABRIEL DOUGLAS

True Wisdom

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:20-25

Where is the wise person?

Where is the teacher of the law?

Where is the philosopher of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)

True wisdom must reveal who God is! And surprise! Only the Cross of Christ tells us who God is. The most humble, loving, sinless, omnipotent Being in existence.

True wisdom must be believed in order to be our kinsman redeemer. And surprise! The Father sent His only Son by the virgin birth as the only eternal man to become sin for us so that we might be born again as perfect, eternal children of God.

Only divine wisdom and divine power could take a Roman cross and make it the place of eternal forgiveness for repentant sinners.

Who understands how "all there is of God" could foolishly participate in dying by crucifixion, not only for our sins but also for all the sins of mankind.

Jesus told the people outside the Temple that before Abraham was born I AM!

HE lives at this moment in every second of time and eternity.

Salvation cost God everything... He spared not his Son.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *As you look around this Christmas season, where do you see the wisdom of God surpassing the wisdom of this world? How can you share His wisdom with your family, coworkers and friends through the unique opportunities this season gives u?*

BY MARC ERICKSON

What Truly Matters

READ EPHESIANS 1:15-22

This passage includes one of my favorite prayers by Paul, verse 17. He prays that we would receive the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we may know God more. He wants us to see what truly matters in life (wisdom), to see what's really going on in our hearts and in the hearts of others. And ultimately to see how Christ is living His life here now on earth (revelation), so that we might be caught up in that life. All of this is for the purpose of knowing Him more.

When we can see what truly matters, when we look for where the life of Christ is flowing, and we step into that wave of life with our hearts, minds and bodies, we experience living in a new way. We experience salvation. Redemption. Mind. Body. Soul. We encounter God in ways that are tangible and powerful. Paul is praying that we would know our Father in Heaven in this way.

This passage has helped me understand that my faith is more than a mindset. It's not something that only lives in my head and my emotions. It comes to life when I put my whole self into the things that matter most, when I practice my faith in response to the wisdom and revelation that God is giving us.

The rest of this passage, verses 18-22, goes into more detail about what He wants our hearts to truly understand. He has given us great hope. A glorious inheritance to be received in the community of believers. And power. . . the same power that was there when Christ rose from the dead. To know Him is to see and step into all of that with all of ourselves, so that we may know Him better.

This passage has been a main focus for me as I pray for my wife, Laura, our four daughters, and their classmates at Eastbrook Academy. I love having access to St. Paul's prayers. His words guide my prayers, and they give me confidence that I'm asking God for something He delights in giving us.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What do you think is the significance of the fact that when Paul prays for wisdom for us, it is focused on our knowing God more?*
- *For whom can you pray this prayer today so that their life can be lived with a greater understanding of who God is and what He wants for their lives?*

BY GREG MARSHALL

Reflect & Respond

OPEN IN PRAYER

Prayerfully look back through this week's readings and devotionals. Ask God to speak to you freshly as you consider them again.

KEY VERSE

Review the memory verse for the week, 2 Timothy 4:7-8. What hope does it give you as you live your life for God this week?

WEEKLY THEME

As you think of the theme for this week, "*Now dismiss your servant in peace*" (*Nunc Dimittis*), where do you most need to apply this in your relationships, your work or how you live for and think about God? Write out a one or two sentence response that you can apply this week!

SHARE

With whom can you share your thoughts about this?

Special Thanks

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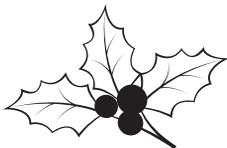
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WORKS CITED

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.
2. Illustrations are from Paul Mohn's *The Holy Child*, published in 1875. Adapted and used by permission.





ADVENT 2022

Our 2022 Advent Devotional, “Canticles of Christmas,” explores the prayers found in the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1-2, as doorways into the celebration of Advent and key theological revelations of God’s plan in Christ.

