

The background of the entire image is a deep blue night sky. At the top center, there is a bright, multi-pointed starburst or comet-like light source that radiates outwards. Below this, the sky is filled with numerous small, distant stars. In the lower half of the image, there is a dark silhouette of a forest. Scattered throughout the forest are many small, glowing white and yellow lights, suggesting a winter night scene with lights from houses or trees.

God With Us

REV. STAN BEARD

2017 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

*Dear Friends,
The miracle of Christmas, once again, is being
celebrated around the world. The message and
meaning of "God With Us" is still the greatest
story ever told. May the presence of the Christ
child be real to you and your family this year.
Thank you for your lives of faith and service.*

Merry Christmas!

Marie and Stan Beard



1st Day - Sunday, December 3

Scripture

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.

Isaiah 9:6



Reflection

Great things, great people always seem to begin with birth. Conception, ideas, dreams. Nothing incredible happens immediately. The gradual development of anything or anyone starts quietly, dependent, unspectacular. Even God needed time to mature and go through all the stages of childhood and adolescence before he was ready to reveal to the world the light and love of the Savior.

Many times, I suspect, Jesus must have felt the tension of impatience, yearning to be useful, desiring to demonstrate to a dark and desperate world that God's Kingdom was ready to be fully revealed. He must have wondered quite often, "Why the wait? What's the hold-up?" Why does it take so long for so many of us to grow up?

Thirty years. God in Christ was alive on this earth for thirty years before anything public or powerful or life changing occurred. There is no rush or urgency in the story of Christmas. Advent tells us to ponder, reflect, and look ahead with patient expectation for the glory which is to come.

As with the Christ Child, this season let us live with the wonder of what lies ahead. Let us patiently embrace the mystery of God's future for us. May we not grasp so aggressively personal fulfillment and instant success, but rather allow the modest journey of following a non-hurried Jesus to bring us our joy or purpose. Stay behind the banner of the King. No need to push or shove. We will grow healthy and strong, as did our Lord, by following His star, not ours.



2nd Day - Monday, December 4

Scripture

And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:7



Reflection

The Christ of The Prophets had many names. He was, and is, described by Heaven and Earth as:

Wonderful: Perhaps the most satisfying word in the English language

Counselor: Making things clear, giving guidance, offering direction

Mighty God: Powerful Ruler, Personal King

Everlasting Father: Personal, Family, Provider, Lover, Protector

Prince of Peace: Putting down the weapons, causing the fighting to cease, bringing safety to the land

What a description. What a King for the ages. What a perfect one to follow. Advent gives us another opportunity to reflect on just how complete and how comprehensive our God really is. He covers all our hopes and fears. He touches us at every level of our need. He gives us that ultimate and continual assurance that we are not left to our own devices.

We are not alone. The One who created the universe cares for us. Call Him by His name. Thank Him for walking with you as we journey through Advent together.



3rd Day - Tuesday, December 5

Scripture

This very day, in David's town, a Savior has been born for you. He is Christ, the Lord.

Luke 2:12



Reflection

Babies are not easy to take care of; they require constant twenty four hour attention to assure healthy growth, and proper development. Infants, also, don't express much gratitude to those loving care givers who demonstrate so much patience and compassion day after day, week after week. Babies on the other hand, simply cry out for more.

The first Christmas was not a magical moment filled with well-planned, beautifully wrapped treasures for people to instantly enjoy. From the start, the first reality of Christmas was filled with difficulty. There was more wonder than pleasure; more hope than personal satisfaction. There were more questions than answers.

But wonder and hope are stubborn things. They grow. They don't go away. They lead us forward along the path of joy that is worth far more than any perishable item.

God's gift in Jesus takes work and care, and time to understand. The outcome of this gift of Advent outdistances and outlives all the others. Let the journey to Bethlehem grow in you this Christmas! Do not let Advent end too soon.



+ + + + + 4th Day - Wednesday, December 6 + + + + +

Scripture

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:12



Reflection

God placed a wall of protection around the events and the miracle of Christmas. Mary was comforted by an angelic visit. Joseph was reassured to marry Mary. Jesus was exiled to Egypt as a young child. The Wisemen were sent home in safety by another route.

And so it went. Nothing was easy, comfortable, or clear about the birth of Christ. But through it all God's hand of direction was in the middle of everything.

Might we claim that same truth for us, and our families this Christmas? When illness, death, divorce, and depression rage all around us, may we sense the miracle gift of God centered in our hearts. Hard things might happen, but a good God manages to still prevail. Deep disappointments cannot cancel out the light shining in the darkness. Christmas will never go away. Christ the Savior is born this day! And as God did with the Wisemen, He will lead us, not only to the manger, but also safely home.



5th Day - Thursday, December 7

Scripture

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Romans 15:4



Reflection

A central truth of our hope in Christ is to learn to endure. So many of us have tried to twist that word and make the meaning of our hope not so much to endure, but to fix, or reduce, or eliminate, or heal. Endurance that might involve challenge or pain has not been a very popular concept to modern day followers of Christ. We want to believe that hard things will be removed rather than endured.

Our text reminds us that the biblical response to endurance comes through encouragement. God gives us each other to lift up, bear burdens, stay close and continually affirm one another as we wait for the fullness of Christ. Our suffering may linger, but with the miracle of encouragement we may learn to endure most anything.

Christmas may seem far off or miles away, but with constant voices of encouragement our hope in the coming of Christ will stay real and strong! Give the gift of encouragement to someone this Advent season. We need it!



6th Day - Friday, December 8

Scripture

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea,"
Matthew 2:4-5a



Reflection

I wonder why the time and even the location of the birth of Jesus seemed to be common knowledge to so many of the religious leaders and scholars of that day. If they knew, why did they not act on that knowledge? Why did it take a group of traveling Magi to get the attention of anyone in Israel?

Are there things, important things, and life changing things, in our lives that we know about but continue to ignore day after day? What will it take to get us motivated to make the short trip to "Bethlehem" and discover the answer for the deepest yearnings of our hearts? Why is it that what is most important is so often least considered?

Christmas, perhaps, is not only important, it just maybe the most important truth we will ever know. Life on this planet makes little or no sense at all without a loving leader and caring creator. What difference does it make if we live without the bright hope of God being with us? Let's go to Bethlehem. It is well worth the trip. In fact it is the only trip that really matters.



7th Day - Saturday, December 9

Scripture

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14



Reflection

Advent describes the journey of preparation for Jesus to come into this world as a human being. God incarnate; coming in the flesh, becoming like us in size, shape, feelings, wants, needs, etc. Two questions, however, continue to be pondered down through the years which have never been fully or finally answered. Both help us get a firmer grasp on the meaning of Christmas.

1. Why did God have to reveal himself through the form and shape of humanity? Why not choose one of many other ways of getting our attention and captivating our hearts? That mystery still lingers.
2. Why did Jesus enter our world in such humble, impoverished, vulnerable surroundings? Why not enter in power, comfort, pomp and authority? What was the point of Christ being so weak and underwhelming in his human form? That mystery also remains.

As we wonder about the realities of that first Christmas, let us also ponder our Christmas this year. Is the mystery still real to us? Is the wonder of it all still central in our holiday celebration? Do not let well-worn family traditions or religious rituals block out the magnificence of the mystery. Christmas is simply too big and important for any of us to comprehend.



8th Day - Sunday, December 10

Scripture

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21



Reflection

For living to me simply means “Christ” and if I die I should merely gain more of Him. If you knew you would live to be only 35-45 years old would you take it? Would life be worth it if it was only half the length? No grandparenting joys, no retirement leisure, no second careers, no??? On the other hand, no old age to deal with, no long drawn-out, age-related diseases to endure, no societal marginalization, on and on!

Is a long, unremarkable life better than a short significant one? Do endless days mean that much if we really do not know how to use them? Which is better? Where do we place our emphasis, energy and resources? In the end, what wins? Long or meaningful? Advent reminds us daily that Jesus is coming. He is entering our world, our society, and our hearts. His life was a short one. His disciple’s lives also were rather short. Kennedy, King, Lincoln and untold millions of others lived lives that were limited to half their normal expectations.

Why not maximize today, and forget the relentless focus on tomorrow? Advent will soon be over.

Christmas is coming. Jesus is here! Life is to be celebrated with great hope, not just extended with little purpose.



9th Day - Monday, December 11

Scripture

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Matthew 2:16



Reflection

Why is it that Herod is King? Why do evil, self-focused, cruel human beings so often have power? How can murder, dishonesty and greed help any society? How does it happen? Why does it seem to continue to happen? Why does power cause so much pain?

Jesus was a threat to Herod. He exposed every narcissistic nerve in this King of Palestine. Herod's normal, and only response was elimination; removal of this baby, the new born King. How sad it is when we realize that the very reason Jesus came was to instill a new heart in Herod; to make him a loving, better, more capable, successful and productive king. Yes, Jesus wants to change us. Yes, he wants to transform us. Yes, he wants us to be like Him.

Let us not be threatened by the possibility of change this Christmas. Meet the Christ child. Grow to love him, and watch your life and purpose take on rich meaning and new direction. Eliminating Him from your life won't help. Including Him will!



10th Day - Tuesday, December 12

Scripture

And those who heard them were amazed at what the shepherds said.

Luke 2:19



Reflection

One of the still unanswered mysteries of the Christmas story is that shepherds heard it first. They got the early scoop, listened to the never-to-be-forgotten angelic choir, and were invited backstage to a personal audience with Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Shepherds? It makes no sense. Today, could you imagine that God, when wanting to announce the most important news ever shared with the human race, that He would tell it to farm workers in central California? Where's the strategy in that? What's the point of them knowing what's going on? How could shepherds help spread the news? Who would listen seriously to their take on this "fake news"? Why believe them?

Perhaps God doesn't care all that much about publicity. Maybe he loved these young animal care-givers as much or more than anyone he created. Suppose he simply wanted them to experience the best first. Maybe, just maybe, God really does have a special place in his heart for the weak, ordinary, powerless of his world. What if entitlement, privilege, and mean something else to God?

What if our Advent journey leads us in a different direction and when we finally arrive at the manger we have an entirely transformed way of thinking and living?



11th Day - Wednesday, December 13

Scripture

To you, who were spiritually dead all the time that you drifted along on the stream of this world's ideas of living, and obeyed its unseen ruler (who is still operating in those who do not respond to the truth of God), to you Christ has given life!

Ephesians 2:1-2



Reflection

Why is it so natural to think of death as lifeless, still, no movement, numb, decaying, and contained? Where did we pick up the image that death means end, conclusion, over, finished?

The scriptures give us a far different image when life and death are discussed. The biblical thought defines life as light, love, closeness, warmth and togetherness. Death, on the other hand, is defined as darkness, separation and being very alone.

Neither concept has an ending. One moves closer and closer to unity and harmony. The other gets farther and farther away.

Everything about Christmas celebrates life, family, love and closeness. Though not always achieved, the yearning for life never leaves.

This year ask Jesus to fill your holiday hope with his life-giving joy. He will drive out the darkness of death and separation and fill your heart with Himself and all the life that He will bring. Christmas is the beginning of life everlasting, as well as the pushing back the darkness of death and despair.



12th Day - Thursday, December 14

Scripture

All creation took place through him, and none took place without him. In him appeared life and this life was the light of mankind. The light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.

John 1:4-5



Reflection

On August 21, 2017, a total eclipse of the sun occurred in many parts of the USA. It was witnessed by millions of star-struck sky gazers yearning to glimpse an approximate two minute miracle that happens very rarely. One interesting astrological reality: a total eclipse of the sun, no matter where one gazes, is never quite total. The diamond ring around the edge of the passing moon is still revealing its light and spreading its warmth. Darkness, though never total, appeared only momentarily. The sun still provided its power and light to a looking, gazing world. The eclipse was not able to totally block the sun.

So often our world feels so dark for so long. Will the eclipse of evil and violence ever pass? When will the sun ever shine again? Christmas is the resounding word from the heavens that the dark is temporary. The “diamond ring” of God’s love and power will prevail forever. Evil is temporary. Love will outlast everything. Do not let passing pain and heartbreak eclipse your Christmas hope. Nothing can put it out! What is happening in Bethlehem will shine forever. Stay true to your advent adventure!



13th Day - Friday, December 15

Scripture

So the word of God became a human being and lived among us. We saw his splendor (the splendor as of a father's only son), full of grace and truth. And it was about him that John stood up and testified, exclaiming: "Here is the one I was speaking about when I said that although he would come after me he would always be in front of me; for he existed before I was born!"

John 1:14-15



Reflection

What happens when someone or some family moves into your neighborhood, perhaps even next door? It won't be long before you begin to "see" who they are. The volume of music, the care for their yard, the behavior of their kids, the style and purpose of their lives. Neighbors can see what's going on. It won't take long.

God took a mighty risk when he chose to move into our neighborhood, (earth) become one of us (human), and reveal his heart and love to those around him. Christmas, primarily, is a demonstration of a life lived full of grace and truth. And also a life which has come close enough for us to see His glory, learn from Him, and quite naturally pass it on to others.

Christmas should be contagious. God, in Jesus Christ, came close enough to impart his life to us. We then, move in the direction of those we love with the spirit of Christ sharing grace and truth to others. What began with Jesus should never end. His spirit should live through us and impact those in our neighborhood.



+ + + + + 14th Day - Saturday, December 16 + + + + +

Scripture

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Luke 1:56



Reflection

Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins. Their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, must have become close friends during their time of pregnancy. Mary was quite young, probably a teenager, not married, a virgin. In many respects she was still growing up. Elizabeth was nearing the end of her life and still childless. Hope was fading for her, shame, now and then, would overtake her. Neither of these handpicked women were prepared for what was to come their way. Rearing special sons in extremely difficult circumstances for world changing purposes must have felt overwhelming.

Mary and Elizabeth needed each other. Though vastly different in age and place in life they were similar in the journey God had picked for them. They needed each other to talk, to cry, to be understood. They needed to be together.

Christmas promises that for each of us. In our difficult, confusing lives we need someone to walk with us and understand. With the birth of Christ we no longer are alone. Together with Him we can love, grow and serve. Find a good friend who will see and share the same truth you do. The meaning of this season will be enriched with a friend.



15th Day - Sunday, December 17

Scripture

And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Luke 2:40



Reflection

Our grandson recently graduated from the eighth grade with honors. To celebrate his achievement we gave him a gift of several shares of well-known, and hopefully stable, stock. At first, Connor was underwhelmed; not knowing exactly the meaning, potential, and risk of common stock. Nothing to see, ride, eat or play with. “What’s the point?”

Some of his graduating buddies received similar gifts, and before long, being a stockholder in a well-known company was “cool”.

Christmas is somewhat like that. Unknown, uncertain at first, as the baby in Bethlehem begins to grow in wisdom and stature the more precious he becomes. Christmas is more than materialistic magic one morning a year. Gifts to play with and then grow tired of, does not come close to getting at heart of this holiday. (Neither do stocks, by the way.) Jesus Christ, as he becomes known and trusted, far outdistances anything unwrapped that special morning.

Allow him to grow. Give him your full trust. Let Him lead us to the dividends of joy, love and hope.



16th Day - Sunday, Monday 18

Scripture

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:1-2



Reflection

My mother was a school teacher, mostly first through fifth grade. She loved children and loved to bring surprise into their young lives. Quite often on Saturdays or on summer days mom would announce that day we are going on a “mystery ride.” My two brothers and usually a couple other kids would load into the front and back seats. (yep, no seatbelts) and off we would go. She would never tell us where, how long, how much, etc. Her only promise was, “it’s going to be fun. You will love it!”

With snacks, fruit, bats, balls, sand buckets, and other stuff packed in the trunk (of which we knew nothing), off we would go. Sometimes to the beach, or the park or a dairy farm, or an orange juice factory, or the sand dunes, etc. We never stayed long at any spot. We never knew what was next. She would never tell. But no one ever said no to a mystery ride.

Advent is the announcement of God’s mystery ride. His mind and heart is packed with loving ideas for us. His trunk is filled with all we need. He comes to fill his car with those who desire his love and adventure. We never know the details, but would never miss the ride! Once we learn to trust the adventure, the minor details don’t matter much. Merry Christmas!



17th Day - Tuesday, December 19

Scripture

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

John 1:3-4



Reflection

Was the coming of Christ into the world a way to pay the penalty for a fallen, disobedient, human race? Was Jesus angry with our behavior, or was he heartbroken with how lost we had become? Did He come to clear up a hopeless mess, or did he come to begin an everlasting relationship filled with love and joy?

Christmas is complicated. You and I will never fully know all the dimensions and motivations involved in God's plan to be with us, live for us, die for us, and create a whole new kingdom for us to enjoy and serve Him eternally.

The dark side of sin and the cleansing of our hearts, and the sacrifice extended to us, will never be fully understood. But the relentless, pursuing, never backing away, love of Jesus, revealing a new way to love and live is even more profound than the sacrifice. We simply cannot comprehend it all.

Christmas gives us a new start. The eternal dimensions may be too much for us but the life transforming truths are real. Thanks be to God!



18th Day - Wednesday, December 20

Scripture

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Matthew 2:22-23



Reflection

Three times, in three different situations an angel came to Joseph with surprising information.

“Marry Mary even though you are not the father”

“Flee to Egypt even though that is not your home”

“Return and live in Nazareth, don’t go through Judea.”

When is difficult news too much to handle? How much should Joseph have to take? When will all of this heavenly direction come to an end? Why is life so complicated for the holy family?

Christmas, quite often, asks us hard questions and give us difficult directions. The happy holiday does not always turn out that way. Our lives, sometimes, are uprooted with pain, disgrace and bitterness. One more challenge from God seems more than we can bear. We didn’t expect “Egypt” or “Nazareth” to be part of our Christmas plans. We never signed up for this.

Joseph’s response was to follow the angelic messages and trust the heavenly word. He seemed to sense someone knew more, and cared more for his family than he did. Joseph is a strong model for us. His family became rather remarkable! World changing, as a matter of fact.



19th Day - Thursday, December 21

Scripture

He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."
John 3:2



Reflection

When my good friend received the heart breaking news in the 1970's that he had lymphoma, with the odds of living stacked against him, one of his first responses was to purchase a black Cadillac with red leather seats. Vic survived the cancer, sold the caddy and lived another joyful 45 years.

Vic died a few months ago of heart failure. This time no new car was necessary. Life, love, time, faith, service, grandkids, family had filled his life with so much more. Vic had all he needed. He gratefully knew his life, though almost over, was ever so full. He needed no more gifts to satisfy him. With a deep, genuine trust in Christ he knew that nothing else ultimately mattered. Christmas, this year, came for my dear friend, a little early. In our last conversation before his death, Vic restated how peaceful and yearning he was to be with Jesus. Nothing left to buy, the ultimate gift was soon to be revealed.

Would that also be true for us this advent. God's very best gift to us begins at Christmas. The fullness of that gift is realized when we meet Jesus Christ face to face.



20th Day - Friday, December 22

Scripture

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14



Reflection

What does it take to be understood? How do we make sure the person with whom we are talking really gets the point we have been trying to make? How good it feels when the phrase, “oh now I see what you are saying” is stated with clarity.

God’s decision to become a human being (Jesus Christ) had that idea in mind. He wanted us to see and understand not only His greatness and power, but also His loving, compassionate heart. His desire was for us to see, not just hear, the fullness of his being. He wanted us to know Him.

What a decision! What a sacrifice! What an incredible risk! What if the people on this planet still did not see His wonder of pick up on His warm, patient character? What if they just are not that interested in seeing God in human form? What if they simply did not care?

How heartbreaking it must be for God when we accept, and then abuse, His gifts of creation, but reject His best gift of relationship. Let us really see Him this year as we celebrate the ultimate purpose of Christmas. That’s the best of all gifts.



21st Day - Saturday, December 23

Scripture

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:12



Reflection

Dreams seem to be different today. We don't put too much stock in the dreams that come our way. Most are only dimly remembered, not taken very seriously and hardly ever acted upon. Is it, perhaps, because we are asleep? We simply don't seem to trust what we dream about.

A dream saved the Magi's lives. They were warned to go home a different way. The text makes it sound like each of the wise men dreamed the same dream. Their dreams led to action and ultimately a new and different path.

Does God still want to get our attention while we are asleep? Has prayer replaced dreams in how our Lord communicated with us? Does he want us to be fully awake when he gives us direction? Is He still, like with the wise men, trying to get us to alter our course and find a better way?

Whether dreams, visions, prayers, whether awake or asleep, God wants to lead our way home. Quite often it will be a different way. Let us pay attention to His word to us. Let us not ignore His direction for our lives. He knows how to communicate. Let's pay attention!



22nd Day - Sunday, December 24

Scripture

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew 2:10-11



Reflection

Quite often, I have wondered what it is that prompts us to give generously to a person or a cause. What motivated the Magi to share their treasures with a little child? What was it, do you suppose, that got through to them to begin their relationship with Jesus with worship and generosity? What gets to our heart, and causes us to open the flood gates to distribute our resources?

Perhaps the Wise Men offer a clue. What (or who) we worship is usually what we support. Their first response was the bended knee. The open pack of sharing what was precious came second; naturally and joyfully. Basically worship is about acknowledging what is central and sacred in our lives. It is giving regular and continual attention to those values, people and things that mean the most to us.

To worship is to tell ourselves and our society what we have chosen to be most valuable. To give, then, is not hard. It's only natural.

Our packs are filled with treasures, filled ironically by that One born at Christmas. He began long ago on that Bethlehem morning to grace our lives with more goodness than we could ever imagine. His provisions are abundant. He loves to give freely to those he holds dear. It is the message and meaning of Christmas. He loves to give us what we need.

And now, on Christmas Eve, as we pause to worship with our families, will it be natural a response to open our lives, packed with God given treasures, to give without conditions to people most important? Will the example of Jesus, and then the Magi, apply to us?

Worship first. Give freely. Trust daily. The child from Bethlehem did that for us.

Merry Christmas.

*Merry
Christmas!*

The image displays the text "Merry Christmas!" in a black, elegant cursive font. The text is arranged in two lines, with "Merry" on the top line and "Christmas!" on the bottom line. The entire text is embellished with numerous small, black, four-pointed stars of varying sizes, scattered around and between the letters, creating a festive and sparkling effect. The background is plain white.

Christmas Eve Service Times

Sunday, December 24th

One morning service
9:30am in the Sanctuary

Three evening services
5:00pm family worship experience
7:00 and 9:00pm traditional candlelight services
with carols and hymns.

The morning and evening services
will feature different messages



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