

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

From 11/22/2020, Christ the King Sunday, through
January 3, 2021, Epiphany Sunday

Greetings:

As I begin writing this devotional guide for the time period listed above, the 2020 Presidential Election has not yet happened. I sit at the kitchen table wondering what will be the results, how people will react, what impact the election will have on the world, on our country, on our community, on my family, and on me. Just doing that wondering exhausts me. However, I take refuge in the fact that God is in command and so I turn all things over to Him.

This devotional guide is meant to offer support to you in the midst of your everyday living. Some members of Friendship United Methodist Church have been willing to share their Holiday stories with all us. For that, I am grateful and know that their sharing will be a blessing to us and others.

I do not have a magic eight ball to ask questions and get answers concerning the future. I only know that 2020 has been a year with much upheaval, both in individual lives and families. There is much tension caused by the Pandemic, the racial tensions, economic woes, election nonsense, and of course the changes that have occurred. Much will never be the same as it was. But many other events have changed the course of humanity and the way we have lived as well.

Yet, we must go on. We must learn and be willing to pick ourselves up, brush ourselves off, face our reality, and move forward trusting in God and continuing to live as God would want us to.

This guide, hopefully, will bring about some hope, encourage you to challenge your current faith status, develop some goals for the future, and keep moving forward in living each day to its fullest for the Glory of God no matter what may come.

There is something written for every day, using different means. So, let's get started.

Rev. Thomas E. Young, Jr.
Friendship United Methodist Church

NOVEMBER 22, 2020, CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

Genesis: 1:1: "In The beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,..."

Exodus 20:3: "...you shall have no other gods before me."

Everyone has something or someone that takes priority in their lives and in their hearts. For some it is property, wealth, a person, and the list could go on. The sensible person knows that it is best to put God and Jesus Christ first. We are reminded that God should have first place throughout the scriptures. We should have no other gods before God and we are to seek God first and God's Kingdom. Many people talk about faith and claim to be a Christian, but their actions and their words say otherwise. This is because God has not been given first place in their lives.

Let me ask you a question as we begin our devotional guide, who or what has first place in your heart and in your life? Is it God or is it the world?

I guess to answer the question I just asked, we need to begin with why should God be given first place in our hearts? There are three main reasons I can think of. God should be given first place in our hearts and lives because simply, God deserves to be in first place. Just remember how God has put up with all of our sins over the years and has continued to love us, forgive us, and bless us. God loved us so much that God reached down to us, through Jesus Christ, to offer us salvation. Yes, God deserves first place in our lives for what God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

We should give God first place because God knows all things – God is all wise. God knows us – everything about us – our needs, our joys, and our sins. God can supply our every need and heal us from our sins and restore us to a right relationship with God.

Do you remember the old legend about two men who planted two trees? The first man prayed for the rain at a particular time and for the sun at a particular time and his prayer was answered. However, his tree died. The other man simply prayed, "Lord, send what is best of sunshine or rain." His tree thrived. One man used his own wisdom, the other man trusted God to send what was best. God is all wise. God knows our needs and can supply them all. God should be first in our hearts and lives.

We should give God first place in our lives and hearts because God is all powerful. God has the power to save, power to keep, power to make or power to

break. God speaks and it is done. God is the one that we should trust with our eternal salvation and future.

Food for thought: Who or what is first in your heart and life?

November 23, 2020 Who or what is first in your life? Part 2

Yesterday I shared with you about why we should give God first place in our lives and in our hearts. Today, I want to share with you about when should we put God first? That is a thought provoking question. I believe that putting God first should begin when we are children – with our children. We need to teach our children that it is normal and okay to think about God. We teach them the importance of brushing their teeth, to have good manners, to study, to work hard, speak correctly. Therefore, should we not teach them to put God first in their lives? Why should we not read them the great stories from the Word of God?

It is interesting to note that children are always seeking joy. I think we all need to consider how to spell, “joy” as we seek it as well. The way to spell “joy” is “J” for Jesus, “O” for others, and lastly “Y” for yourself. We also need to keep it in that order.

We should put God first in the joys and ambitions of youth. Ah, to be young again. Remember those days? Do you remember the conflict that you felt within yourself between God and the world? In 1 John 2:15, we read, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any person loves the world, the love of God is not in them.”

There were many temptations that I had to navigate through in those days – decisions to be made as to who or whom I was going to follow – who or whom was going to be first place in my life. I chose to follow God, to live for God. I hope that you did as well.

We should put God first in the cares and responsibilities of adulthood. Life is not easy as we have transition from childhood through youth and then adulthood. There are many challenges and difficulties to get through. God’s help is needed more than ever. God wants to help you bear up under all the pressures.

We should put God first when we come to old age and its limitations. I have begun to slow down and stumble around at times. The stiffness from the years has arrived without much fanfare. As I look at the future, I have concluded that my life moving forward will need some support from God and knowing the presence of Jesus Christ. Death seems to be coming closer as I have conducted several funerals in the past months for family members. To be ready for that final moment in this world and to have the assurance of a future with my Lord, I need to keep God first in my heart and life.

Prayer: O God, we have made many choices about our living. Hopefully, we have chosen to put you first in all things and through all time. Amen.

November 24, 2020 Who or what is first in your life? Part 3

Today we need to look at where we should put God first in our lives. God should be put first in our homes. In my relative's house, I have seen this saying on the dining room wall: "Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation." Is that true in your home? Do you talk about your Christian faith while eating dinner around the table? Have you shared your story of salvation with your family in your home? Is the Bible read in your home?

God should be put first in your social life. That would make a difference in the way many people act. Do you remember the saying, "You cannot run with the hare and the hounds?" You must make a choice between the world and God. We are reminded in the scriptures to choose this day who or whom we will serve? Have you made a choice?

God should be given first place in and at our work. I know there are rules about bringing your faith to work at some places. However, you can be a witness for God in the simple ways you go about your work – the ways you treat others at work – the way you talk, and so on. Just doing your job with the right attitude can make a difference in someone else's life and help bring them closer to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

God should also be put first in our individual consciences. There is a story about Martin Luther. It seems that Luther had become very discouraged. One morning his wife came out dressed in mourning clothes. Luther asked her, "Who is dead?" She responded to him, "God is dead." Luther, taken back by her answer responded, "Nonsense. God is immortal. God has always lived and always shall live." His wife looked directly at Luther and said, "But you are acting as if God was dead." Luther got her meaning, put away his discouragement and doubt and went back to work for God.

Thought & question: Do you take God with you wherever you go?

November 25, 2020 Who or what is first in your life? Part 4

One last point to this 4 day devotion: We discussed about the why, when, and where that God should be put first in our lives, now what about the how can we put God first in our lives?

We can put God first by loving God. I must ask, do you really love God? I remember visiting my uncle and aunt. They were both very ill. It was Christmas Eve so I gave them a Christmas present. My uncle thanked me for the present, but then said, "Tommy, next time you do not need to bring me a present, just bring yourself. Your visit means more than any gift." I believe that God feels that way. We do not need to bring God anything, just bring ourselves and allow God to be a part of our lives.

We can put God first by trusting in God for all things. Let's face it, most people trust in God and praise God when everything is good. But when life throws us a curve ball, instead of praising God and trusting in God we begin to grumble. Consider the pandemic. Many times I have been asked has God forsaken us. Has God forsaken us or have we stopped trusting in God to see us through? We need to understand that God will walk with us not only in the good times, but walk with us through those difficult and trying times as well. When we keep God first, God will see us through.

We can put God first by our obedience. We sing, "Trust and obey for there is no other way." But do we mean it? We should put God first by obeying God and we do that because we love God.

We can put God first by giving our best to God. The world calls to us to follow it. But we are not to do that. Instead we pledge ourselves to following – to serving – to loving God – letting God have first place in our hearts and in our lives. This is the higher calling from God delivered to us through Jesus Christ.

When we claim to be a Christian, we are claiming a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That means that we are striving for the Kingdom of God, that God is first in our lives. So, we come back to the original question to you, who or what has first place in your life? Hopefully, your answer is that God is put first in all things, especially your heart and life.

Prayer: O God, life is a journey, an adventure, which without You in our lives, has no meaning. Bless us as we live striving to keep you first. Amen.

NOVEMBER 26, 2020 THANKSGIVING DAY

Thanksgiving 2020 will be so different than what we have been accustomed to. Are you ready for it? People will need to be social distancing. Some people will be alone. What about the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade? It sure will be different. For some families, there will be empty places due to death or illness. Okay, that is enough of depressing thoughts.

President George Washington wrote a Thanksgiving Day Proclamation in 1789. It has been published in many newspapers since then. I thought that it would be good for all of us to read it or perhaps read it out loud at our Thanksgiving Day gathering.

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful to His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint committee requested me to "recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanks-giving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many single favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks, for His care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for a single and manifold mercies, and the favorable interposition of His Providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war. For the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been established constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the nation. One now lately instituted, of the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have to acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which He hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humble offering our prayers and supplications to the Great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually to render our national government a blessing to all people, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace and concord. To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us, and generally to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

(Contributed by Virginia McMillan. Reprinted by California Encompasser, December 1998)

Food For thought: What, in the midst of everything during 2020, do you have to be thankful for?

NOVEMBER 27, 2020 WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is defined as a season of four weeks including four Sundays. The word “Advent” derives from the Latin “Adventus,” which means “Coming.” This Church season, which will begin on November 29th, proclaims the **comings** of the Christ whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again. Christ comes to people continually in Word and Spirit, and whose return in final victory we consistently anticipate and prepare for. Advent every year is to remind us to prepare and remember.

The season and remembrance of Advent is more than lighting of candles on a wreath. We remember about the lighting of candles, but we have forgotten the reason why we light the candles. Have you shared with your spouse, your children, your grandchildren about the real meaning of Advent? The idea of preparing and remembering what God did for all people through His Son, Jesus Christ.

I grew up in an atmosphere of my family talking about Advent. My father, a decorated Korean War Veteran who spent winters in combat, would say that Advent needs to be respected and honored. My mother, who taught Sunday School for over 37 years, stressed the meaning of being prepared for the Second Coming of Christ. There was no thought of decorating the house until after Thanksgiving weekend. And the light decorations did not get turned on until 10 days before Christmas. This was done to experience the anticipation of what the house would look like when lit, but more than that, to remember the anticipation of the people who were waiting for the Christ to come. I was always taught that the lighting of the house decorations was in celebration of the spreading of the Good News – the Gospel – throughout the world that Christ was born! Then the taking down of the decorations meant that the waiting was continuing for Jesus Christ’s return.

Food For thought: Why do you decorate your home? Is there a meaning that you have shared with your family for the why, the when, and significance?

NOVEMBER 28, 2020 MORE ABOUT ADVENT

In 1 Peter 1:10-16 we read the following, which is a clear description of Advent:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look! Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

Advent is upon us. I suggest that you do more in your daily devotional life to be aware of Advent and be willing to ask questions and share what you know and learn with your family, friends, and co-workers. Advent is here!

Prayer: O God, allow the meaning of this season of Advent be seen in our lives, in our actions, and in the love we show to others in your name. Amen.

NOVEMBER 29, 2020 FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“Ready or Not, Here Comes Jesus!”

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered,

'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He(Jesus) told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

"I will open my mouth to speak in parables;

I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man."

Are you ready? Jesus is coming! He is coming at an unexpected hour! The fact is that Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, whose birthday we are getting ready to celebrate again, tells us to get ready for He will return, come a second time, and bring the fullness of the kingdom of heaven at some unknown time. Jesus' triumphant return is a reality that will take place. Are you ready for it?

Remembering playing "Hide and Seek" growing up? The "It" person is counting to a specific number when the search for everyone begins. For us the passing of each day is a part of the countdown that is taking place leading up to the moment of Jesus Christ's return. With the children's game of "Hide and Seek" everyone knows when the countdown will end and how much time they have before the search starts. The reality for us is that we do not know how long we have or when the countdown will end and Jesus returns.

Jesus has been stressing the fact that we must be always ready – waiting, watching, and praying. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus promised a celebration for

those who are ready for His return when it happens – a big banquet in the kingdom of heaven.

In the Church we celebrate that God is the Creator, God is the Redeemer – through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Church understands God as the Sustainer through the activity of the Holy Spirit. However, the Church needs to acknowledge and proclaim to the world the promise that Jesus Christ will return again at an hour that only God knows. This is also a responsibility of the Church through its work, mission, and teaching especially during the season of Advent.

End of part 1.

Question: Is the church of today living into its responsibilities of proclaiming the Good News that Jesus Christ will return?

NOVEMBER 30, 2020 READY OR NOT PART 2

Let us remember in these early days of Advent that the Church is be proclaiming a message – a total message of the Gospels to the world. Part of that message is to remind people they need to be ready for Christ's return. Are you ready? Have you seen to it that your family, friends, co-workers are ready? As a Christian, you are a part of Christ's Body, the Church, and therefore you have a responsibility as a part of the Church to proclaim the whole Gospel.

The Church is to be a place where the Good News is shared – the poor and needy are cared for – the hungry are fed – where oppression and injustice is met with conviction and love – where everything is done to glorify God, build up the kingdom of heaven, to make the world better and prepare it for a triumphant return of Jesus Christ. Telling the whole Gospel story must include the telling of the promise of Jesus' return and how we are to be prepared always.

John Bunyan, who wrote the Christian classic, "Pilgrim's Progress" led a very interesting life. In his younger days, Bunyan said that he had four sins. First was dancing. Ooh, say it is not so. Second was bell-ringing. This was sneaking into churches at night and ringing the church bells just to start a little trouble in the community. The third sin was "Tip cat." You can look that one up and could be a

devotion all of its own. The fourth sin was reading the life of the English Martyr Saint Bevis. Yes, there is a Saint Bevis, who actually helped inspire the cartoon, “Bevis and Butthead.” By our standards, Bunyan’s sins are not that impressive, but to him, they were very serious. John Bunyan gave them up when he was converted and he began to concentrate on the business of the Gospel. He preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ with such power and conviction, radically different than anyone else, that he was imprisoned for 12 years. That is where he wrote “Pilgrim’s Progress.” His vivid descriptions of “the narrow path straight as a rule could make it, running one, uphill and downhill, through city and wilderness, to the Black River (of Death) and the shining Gate” has captured and continues to capture the minds of educated and uneducated people alike. I, myself, just finished re-reading it again in early October.

What John Bunyan did in his writings is also the business of the Church – to find imaginative and inspirational ways to tell the whole story of the Gospel including the return of Jesus Christ. By sharing the whole story of the Gospel, the church is warning, helping, witnessing to the people about our complete Faith.

Advent is here! We have been warned to be prepared for the triumphant return of Jesus Christ. We hear from Jesus Himself, “Ready or not, and I did warn you, here I come!”

Thought: We prepare our homes, is our hearts ready to celebrate the birthday of Jesus? More importantly, are we ready to meet Him when He comes again?

DECEMBER 1, 2020

In Isaiah 64:1-5b, we read:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence-
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fires causes water to boil –
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,*

*you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.*

Let's face reality in this year of 2020. M. Scott Peck, in his Book, "The Road Less Traveled," on page 15, states plainly and with boldness, "**Life is difficult.**" That states our current human condition quite well. There is a yearning in society that begins in the human heart to transform the difficult present into a brighter future. The same yearning is reflected in the reading from Isaiah above.

In our current culture, many are assuming that transformation will come about through human efforts. The prophet Isaiah, however, was convinced that God would have to bring transformation about simply because human efforts will prove to be futile without God's involvement. So Isaiah pleaded and wanted God to come down and get involved with our living.

Waiting provides a relevant theme for Advent. While waiting, Isaiah's people looked for spectacular signs from God of God's appearing. Some of these we just read about: Mountains quaking and kindling brushwood, causing water to boil.

At the very first Christmas, people were waiting for the Messiah's coming in splendor and might. Therefore, with the exception of a few shepherds, they missed the cry of a baby that was born in a Bethlehem stable. In search for the spectacular, it is very easy to overlook the ordinary events through which God appears.

Prayer: O gracious and loving God, may this Advent season be for us a time of expectant waiting for Your coming, especially through common, ordinary events of life. Amen.

DECEMBER 2, 2020

What about Isaiah 64: 5c – 9? Let's read it below:

But you were angry, and we sinned;

*because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

While waiting for God to come, Isaiah becomes introspective. He becomes aware that “we have sinned,” causing him to repent. Repentance is an appropriate theme for Advent, the season of waiting. While waiting we, too, need to repent.

But what does it mean to repent? What have you repented of? Or maybe, what do you need to repent of? Isaiah completely bares his outer and inner life before God. This is true repentance. True repentance is what John the Baptist urges for the people and for us in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of the world. The preparation that John talks about in the Gospel of Luke is a cleansing of our whole lives by repentance.

It may be that precisely this call to repentance can prompt us to clean up the inner clutter of our lives, especially as we prepare for Christmas. There is joy born of true repentance. This feeling of joy is not unlike the joy of a patient, who, after major cancer surgery, is told that all the malignancy has been removed.

Prayer: O God, may this season of Advent be for us a time of repentance, that we may find the true joy of Christmas. Amen.

DECEMBER 3, 2020

Psalm 80:1-7:

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and
Benjamin and Manasseh.*

Stir up Your might, and come to save us!

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

*O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full
measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among
themselves.*

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:17-19:

*But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made
strong for yourself.*

Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Advent, the season of waiting, inevitably leads to the season of fulfillment, to Christmas. In actual life, what happens if the season of waiting seems to take forever? This is almost how it feels as we deal with the Pandemic, which seems to be like the ever ready battery rabbit, it keeps going and going. This is psalmist predicament expressed in the ready for today.

He psalmist prays, but God is silent and indifferent. Even worse, God seems to be cruel and heartless. The people are humiliated before their enemies, who deride them and taunt them. And yet, the psalmist does not lose hope. The Psalmist continues to plead for God to come and save – to restore – to save.

Let us take this Psalm to heart. Then our waiting will be expectant. In this age of cultural torment and turmoil due to the Pandemic, the racial strife, the economic woes, we must never give up waiting and hoping. Our faith and trust in God must not waver.

Prayer: May our waiting, O God, be faith-filled and expectant, no matter how dark the present circumstances may be. Amen.

DECEMBER 4, 2020

Advent is the season of waiting, but for us in 2020, who already know about the first Christmas, what are we to do? Are we simply to play-act as we wait for another Christmas? The reading from 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 speaks to this. Let's read this passage:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul wrote after Jesus was born, lived, taught, faced the cross, resurrected, and ascended. Paul explained the meaning of waiting as he is dealing with a problem he faced in the Corinthian Church. Leaders of the church boasted of their advanced knowledge of the Gospel, their eloquence, and the variety of their spiritual gifts. While offering thanksgiving for these gifts, Paul immediately talks to them about the future, of all things yet to come. Paul reminds them that in spite of all their present knowledge, God still has more truths for them. God sent God's Son into the world that first Christmas. But Jesus Christ will come again to complete what the first coming started.

Paul reminds us, as well, that even as we give thanks for the gifts we already possess, we wait for Jesus Christ's coming again to complete our Christian life. The Second Coming of our Lord need not be only the distant end-time event. Jesus Christ's coming can be at any time. Therefore, Advent is a season of

thanksgiving because Jesus Christ has already come and a season of anticipating Jesus Christ's coming again to complete what he has begun.

Prayer: May we come more and more to a spirit of thanksgiving for Your Son's coming and a sense of anticipation for His coming again. This we pray, O Lord. Amen.

DECEMBER 5, 2020
"O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM"

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), minister of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, wrote this hymn in 1868. Three years earlier, Brooks had been in the Holy Land at Christmastime. His hymn recalls the peaceful view of 19th century Bethlehem from the hills of Palestine at night. The hymn marvels that in the dark and quiet beauty of this little town, many years ago, the Messiah was born. "While mortals sleep," intones the song, "the angels keep their watch" over the Christ child. And even more wondrous is the silent, even secret way in which the Savior came into this world. "So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of His heaven."

Brooks also wrote another verse that is rarely sung and that very few know about. It goes like this:

Where children pure and happy, pray to the blessed child,
Where misery cries out to thee, Son of the mother mild;
Where charity stands watching, and faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,
And Christmas comes once more.

Christmas can be a nostalgic time of recalling the past, even the far distant past of Christ's birth. But Phillips Brooks says that Christmas can come once more in a human heart. How can this happen? And can it happen to you and me? The answer is yes, if you pray the prayer of the hymn's final verse as we know it:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide in us, our Lord Emmanuel!

“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” - John 3:7, 8

DECEMBER 6, 2020 SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Here we are only 19 days before Christmas. Are you prepared for a different kind of Christmas – Christmas 2020. Despite everything else going on around us, it still seems as if there has been Christmas advertising since about October 1st.

In the tradition of the church, the church has a gradual journey which emphasizes prayer and a sense of anticipation in the season of Advent that leads us to a climax of festivities on Christmas Day. But, in our current culture, many Christians act as if they had never heard about the season of Advent.

I have been told that 45 years ago, there was an unwritten rule that stores waited until Thanksgiving before unleashing their all-out Christmas Blitz. It is not like that anymore. It is no wonder that some are dealing with Christmas fatigue when Christmas Day arrives.

During the season of Advent, we are to remember and celebrate our Lord’s coming into the world in order to save the world. Advent allows us the opportunity to make sure that we are prepared to celebrate our Lord’s Birthday and are ready for our Lord’s Second Coming.

But it seems that most people are interested in getting ready for the celebration of Christmas, but forget about the reality of the Second Coming. Years ago it was more important to talk about whether a person was ready for the Second Coming than it was to get ready for Christmas Day and celebration of what has already happened. It is to these people who wanted Jesus Christ to return quickly that we have these words in 2 Peter 3:8-15a:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth with everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

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

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

We will continue tomorrow.

DECEMBER 7, 2020 TIME TO WAIT PART 2

The early Christians found it difficult to wait for Christ's triumphant return. Jesus had come, died, risen, and ascended. A new age had dawned, but not that much had changed. The people were still struggling, still waiting, still hoping for Jesus to return and make everything right.

It was hard for them to wait. We understand, it is hard for us to wait. Everything is quick and we do not like to wait. We get frustrated in the check-out lines at Wal-Mart.

If we are not to lose sight of His Star, if we are not to lose hope, then we must learn how to wait for Jesus to return. Many years have passed since Jesus ascended into heaven. The world has changed and is changing – but there are those who are still downtrodden – still oppressed – and there is still much to do if we are to truly love one another as God through Jesus Christ, loves us. Darkness

still seems to have control. And the people in darkness are waiting for their final deliverance.

Maybe we get so excited about Christmas in October, trying to concoct a Christmas Spirit, because, in reality, we have so little of Christmas.

For many, Christmas is a celebration of everything that we are not. We want our Christmases to be like a Hallmark Channel movie – all joy, happiness, warmth, and of course happy endings. But they are not. No matter how white our Christmases, they do not cover the bleak reality in which many live.

Many are infected with depression when they realize that another Christmas is coming and going and they are still not happy and only have a small reminder of all the joys, peace, goodwill, and hope they do not have.

More coming tomorrow.

DECEMBER 8, 2020 TIME TO WAIT PART 3

It is difficult to wait. The scripture above tells us that we must wait if we are to be present at the coming – the triumphant return of Jesus Christ. So, we wait. As we wait, which is difficult, we should view the season of Advent as a time for penitence, honesty, confession, and preparation, a time to be delivered from ourselves.

Some of our best childhood memories are centered on waiting. I believe sometimes, that in this age of instant everything, we miss somethings that are important, because we are not willing to wait. I was always told that waiting makes the final product better.

Jesus has come and now we are waiting for His Second Coming, which will give us the fullness of glory. Until then the world is not complete. There is still much darkness to overcome.

We need to remember that only God knows the hour, the day, the year, when Jesus Christ shall return. We are to wait with patience.

The scripture reminds us that we are waiting for nothing less than “a new heaven and a new earth.” That does not happen in a minute. God is not slow.

However, God's work takes time and we are on God's time, which means that Jesus Christ will return when the time is right.

That is the reason that we need to watch, wait, and be ready. In the glitter, hustle, and bustle of this hectic season, it is so easy to miss the light of Jesus Christ. It is so easy to overlook the meaning of Jesus' birth and His Coming again unless you are waiting on it. Ours is a waiting time. And it is this gift of time that enables us to share and help others prepare for the return of His Presence among us.

We wait. We wait in hope, in the knowledge that God is moving among us, acting in our lives, bringing His Light into our darkness, giving birth to new life amidst our cold winter days.

Prayer: Yes, Lord we wait. It is hard to do, but we are doing it. We struggle with so many different issues as we come to this season of Advent 2020. The world is changing. But the one constant in this is You and the promise of Your Triumphant Return. Help us to be on watch as we wait. Keep us constantly prepared for that great return. This now, we pray, in the name of our Savior. Amen.

DECEMBER 9, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11 Reads:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term,
That her penalty is paid, that he has received from the Lord's hand double for her
sins.*

A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"

*All people are like grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever.
Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice
with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the
cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"
See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with
him, and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
And carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Those who are forgiven break with the past. They are free then to launch a fresh start. That is a sure sign that we are capable to make changes.

Those who have been through a twelve step program, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, know that they start in the depth of a life in ruins, a life they have allowed to slip from its best. Yet, they show a great deal of courage in making and determining a new start to living. They prepare ways of healing and strength to come coursing through them despite the setbacks they have suffered. In their journey they are making a path through their wilderness to recovery and wellness and yes, even wholeness.

Our country, our world, all around us we are facing a long haul to recovery from the wreckage of human relationships and health. We must do more than just wait and watch. We must be traveling along the highway in prayer and hope doing all that we can to heal ourselves and to make better relationships with each other.

Thanks be to God for those this Advent season who bear witness to the coming of the Savior into our lives.

Prayer: Dear God, there is much wreckage around us, and yet You call us to make a fresh start in unpromising circumstances. Because You create community out of chaos, we join You in rebuilding our lives, our neighborhoods, our nations, and our churches. Amen.

DECEMBER 10, 2020

Please reread Isaiah 40:1-11 from yesterday.

The future tenses in Isaiah 40 seem to be imperatives: If these conditions are met, then the glorious and blessing filled consequences promised will happen. We can prepare the way for “the glory of the Lord” to come.

If the people in captivity in Isaiah are to be lifted up and the mighty on their thrones are brought low, then the mighty and awesome Presence of God will come.

Preparing the way for the Lord’s return also includes straightening out the crooked routes we impose on people to achieve the same gains we have obtained and leveling the playing field where all people live out their lives. If we promise equity in the areas of justice and strive to fulfill that task for the good of humanity, then all people shall see the glory of the Lord together.

Prayer: Gracious God, who works for justice, renew our resolve in this Advent Season to bring down the obstructions, straighten out the crooked paths, and level the rough roads people must travel on to obtain dignity and the necessities of life, so that your glorious presence will become known to all. Amen.

DECEMBER 11, 2020
THE SYMBOL OF THE LIGHTS

One of the major symbols of Christmas is the Christmas Tree lights. Think about this, at one time real candles were used on the Christmas Tree. Thank goodness, the candle has been replaced with electric lights that are not only used on Christmas Trees, but are used everywhere around the house.

The symbolism of light is at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus is known as the Light of the world. It is our faith that if we want to know how life is to be lived as God intended it to be, then we need to see life in the light of Jesus’ life and teachings.

The multi-colored lights remind us of the variety of wonderful things that we have in life. The abundance of light in this season speaks to the abundant life offered in Jesus. Jesus taught, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The Old Testament also used the symbol of light to help us understand what God has given to us. In Psalm 119:105, we read, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." To walk in darkness is a frightening experience, especially when you are walking through new territory. Life becomes easier when you can see where you are going or if you have found a way of living that helps you to know where and how you should go. The Word of God is a guide to living the one true life and Jesus is the Word that "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14).

Think about it.

DECEMBER 12, 2020
THE POWER OF LIGHTS

We all have seen lights glowing on a Christmas Tree or on some other outdoor or home decorations. In order for the lights to work three things are needed: the light bulb, a source of power and wires to carry the electricity to the light bulb. When you have all three and the proper connections are made, then you can light up. But if any one of these three parts is missing, or not working properly, the light will go out.

A similar condition exists in our spiritual life. If we are to be aware of the presence of God in life three things are also needed. First, we must accept the fact that we are not perfect. We need forgiveness. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8, 9). "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

We cannot save ourselves; just as the light bulb cannot light itself. When we are willing to accept forgiveness then we are ready to be lighted. God is the source of that salvation, that power. Acknowledging this brings the second needed element – power – into the picture.

The third essential is the connection between the power and our need, and the connection is Jesus Christ. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and people, the person Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

Once God has entered our life, we can experience what Jesus meant when he said, “You are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:15, 16). When the current enters the light bulb, and the light is as it should be, it will shine.

Prayer: O God, in the midst of this Advent season let our light shine brightly. Amen.

DECEMBER 13, 2020 THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Are you ready for a shock? In these next few devotions I am going to be talking about the idea that you do not need Jesus. What!? Just bear with me on this. Let's begin by reading the Gospel of John 1:6-8 and then verses, 19-28:

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us.

What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The person the world needs now. Who could that person be: A wise person like Socrates: A military genius like Alexander: A brain like Einstein: A leader like Lincoln: Who? What about Jesus? No, the person the world needs right now is not Jesus. Now take a moment and sit down to catch your breath. If the world does not need Jesus, then who does the world need?

Right now the world needs someone like John the Baptist. Let's face it, if Jesus came into the world without John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, the world would not know, appreciate, or accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. It was necessary for someone to prepare the world so that when Jesus came, the world might accept Him.

The season of Advent is a period of preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas or at the end of time, and John the Baptist's ministry, his work, is the central theme of the season.

God knew that the world needed someone to prepare humankind for the coming of His only Begotten Son. That is why we read, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." Remember, John's birth was also miraculous. John was sent by God with a mission to prepare – to ready – the world for Jesus Christ. John understood his purpose – his calling – and who he was. John was honest to say that he was not the Christ – not the Messiah – not the prophet – not Elijah. John knew that he was sent to witness to the people about the coming of Christ. The scripture reading explains his work: "He came to give testimony, to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him."

We continue tomorrow.

DECEMBER 14, 2020

Before you can know Jesus Christ, you must first deal with or confront John the Baptist. John will prepare you to receive the Messiah – the Christ. John the Baptist is the person that the world needs now because he is the voice of God crying out in the wilderness of our world – John is the one, who when asked by the religious leaders back then, “Who are you?” replies to them and to all of us even today, “I am the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” John is the voice the world needs to hear.

John’s voice made people understand their need for a Savior – a Messiah – a Christ. Before you can accept or know Jesus as the Christ, you must understand your need to repent of your sins and your need for a Savior.

John the Baptist made the people of his day aware of their sins. In his preaching, John exposed and condemned the sins of his day. John was a very uncomfortable figure for many. Someone who confronts you – points out your sins – is always someone who makes you very uncomfortable with yourself and with that one. John’s appearance even produced reactions as he stood against the normal dress of that day. He was a wild-looking figure living in the open country, living off the land.

When John spoke, he did so in very frank and forceful language in which he condemned the sin of the day and called people to turn from their wickedness. John threatened people with the damnation of hell-fire. He said that the axe was at the trunk of the tree and every evil tree would be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The reality is, we need a person like John the Baptist today. Do you agree that we are living in the most sin saturated society with the least consciousness of our sin? Sin, it seems, is no longer sin to our modern society. There is sin, of course, but we do not call it what it is. We need someone like John the Baptist today.

The closest one, in my opinion, was Billy Graham, who proclaimed that everyone needed to “be born again.”

There will be more in tomorrow’s devotion.

DECEMBER 15, 2020

What are we doing about sin today? It seems that sin is being accepted as a normal way of living. Some say that without sin, life and living is boring. We seem to be unconcerned about our sinning. There are those who accept sin and sinning as a fact of life, we try to control it if it gets out of hand. We even try to legalize it. If we cannot stop sin, we shrug our shoulders and accept it as a fact of life and move on.

But then along comes John the Baptist. John calls upon us to do the right thing when it comes to sinning – repent. Repent means that we have come to a point where we have deeply grieved and offended God. We recognize that we are helpless and hopeless in our sins. To repent is to make an about face, from sin to goodness, from Satan to God, from ourselves to Jesus Christ. Repentance means a whole new way of life, a radical change in lifestyle.

John wanted people to make their life's path straight. John called the people to repent because through such an act new life begins both for the individual and for a nation.

A person like John the Baptist is what the world needs now. Perhaps through a person like John, the world might confess its sins and repent. But more than a voice is needed. We need someone to call us to repentance and point us towards Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. In our scripture reading printed in the first devotion of this section on the 13th, John tells the people that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. John was not the Messiah. John was only giving witness to the Messiah telling the world that Jesus Christ was the one who was the answer to their sins.

This is what our world needs today as we confront sin and evil. We have been trying to make people good in so many different ways. Someone like John the Baptist is needed to proclaim a message that the only solution to sin and evil is Jesus. We need someone crying out in the wilderness for the world to repent.

All sin is against God and only God can take it away by forgiveness. God responded by sending His only Begotten Son into the world on that first Christmas. That was done to redeem us and save all people.

We do need someone like John the Baptist today. All the witnessing that John did was great. But we need that witnessing about God now. People are living in misery caused by sin. We need a voice crying out in witness to Jesus Christ.

Now let me return to my opening statement. The world today does not need Jesus Christ. The world right now needs a person like John the Baptist to call people to repent and to point people to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Our world desperately needs Jesus Christ. But to get people to Jesus Christ we need first to go through a person like John the Baptist who convinces people of their need for Christ. During this Advent Season John the Baptist confronts us with our sins that we have committed. By doing so he is pointing us toward our Savior, Jesus Christ this Christmas. God sent John for this purpose.

Prayer: O God, help us not to take for granted the importance of John the Baptist. We ask that you raise such a person as John today, to help our world find its way back from sin to You. Amen.

DECEMBER 16, 2020
MY CHRISTMAS STORY By Betty Brinker

My childhood memories of Christmas took place in the 50's in our 3 generational household. When we kids saw a great big smile on Grandma's face that went from ear to ear we knew that Christmas season was about to begin. We knew she would next say, "Kids, it's time for baking Christmas cookies!" When we saw her actually put a large clump of sweet butter in a bowl, we knew without a doubt that it was cookie making time, the best time of year.

Miraculously, all fights between my sister Louise and me versus big brother Eddie stopped in a split second as we all began working together to help Grandma bake wonderful and delicious Christmas cookies. She would roll out the dough. Eddie went to work on the cookie cutting, carefully choosing a variety of Christmas shapes. Louise and I did the decorating. We had Christmas trees, snowmen, stars, Santa, and candy canes to decorate by the hundreds.

Grandma mixed up egg white, sugar, and chopped walnuts for us to spread on some of the cookies, my favorite kind. She manned the oven, and by the end of the day we had tons of the beautiful cookies that couldn't taste better. When the cookies had thoroughly cooled she placed 2 or 3 dozen each in pretty boxes that she had been saving up. These were to be Christmas gifts for our teachers and for

all our visitors over the holiday season. Most memorable was the happy look on the recipients' faces when presented with the large decorative box of Christmas cookies that we had made together. This Christmas miracle of peace and joy lasted throughout the holiday season until the day after Christmas when presents were opened and fights over toys resumed.

DECEMBER 17, 2020

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 we read:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Have you ever written a "Thank You Note" to God? Well, why not? I know 2020 has been a very difficult, unique, and a downright disheartening year. But has there not been at least one thing that has happened in your life that you could write a thank you note to God about? C'mon, at least just one?

This past summer I was dealing with "the ulcer." Pain and discomfort surrounded me. Stopping this medicine and adding that medicine. Then a mass on top of the kidney was discovered, which led to more testing and evaluating. This is not how I wanted this 2020 summer to go. Finally "the ulcer" was treated and the mass was benign. Hurrah! Oh, I will have to have tests done every 4 to 6 months, that's okay because right now I am fine. Thank You, O God!

Paul tells us to rejoice and give thanks to God in all circumstances. Wow! That means I need to thank God for every single day and all that has happened in that day. That is hard to do! But yet there is something that we can thank God for every day.

It was always encouraging to receive Thank You notes. So, why not write a Thank You to God. Maybe call it a "Thanks List" on which you write everything you thank God for. When you write your list it will help you to realize how bless you truly are by God.

Prayer: Lord, I am so thankful that You remind me that no matter what situation I may be in, there is always a reason to give thanks to you. Amen.

DECEMBER 18, 2020
CHRISTMAS PAST by Cynthia Sybert

As you know, my two biological brothers and I were adopted by wonderful and loving parents in Butler, PA. I can remember Christmas beginning with the same entrance into the living room every year. We were in our matching PJ's, then covered with a sheet or blanket and escorted in to the living room for the big unveiling!

First of all, we never saw the Christmas tree until the morning of. Our Godparents (mother's sister and husband) arrived from Ohio on Christmas Eve. After Dad read us the traditional "Night before Christmas," we were sent to bed. Then all the action began out in the living room. The tree was retrieved from the neighbor's hiding place, and I believe it was the women's job to decorate our tree. My father and uncle put together the toys that needed assembled (actually, I think my Dad was being directed by my uncle). After working late into the night, I'm sure Mom and Dad didn't want the three of us waking up too early!

Mom always had the aunts and uncles and grandparents over to our home for dinner. Of course, our celebration was also a happy a Christmas birthday to our mother!

Now, let me zoom ahead to 1981. Again, as most are aware, Rob came home one day to inform me he joined the Army, but that's a whole other story! Rob's first duty station was Fort Gordon, Georgia. As Rob was not entitled for us to be moved by the Army, since he just finished basic training, the move was on our own! Yep, we loaded up my Mom's car with our two children, Jennifer and Kevin, and only essential items we could stuff into the trunk for the big journey to Georgia!

Well, our Christmas that year was memorable. Since our money was tight, we went into the woods and picked a small fir pine, which we called our "Charlie Brown" tree. Jennifer and I made popcorn to string on the tree, and decorations from construction paper. It's amazing how God sees to our every need through the power of prayer and love!

DECEMBER 19, 2020
FOR OUR CHILDREN AT CHRISTMAS

This prayer is one of many written by Peter Marshall included in the collection, "The Prayers of Peter Marshall," organized by his wife and author, Catherine Marshall. This prayer is from the section of the book entitled, "Prayers for Special Days." If you want to learn more about Peter Marshall, take some time and Google. This prayer is written in old English.

Lord Jesus, who didst take little children into Thine arms and laugh and play with them, bless, we pray Thee, all children at this Christmastide.

As with shining eyes and glad hearts they nod their heads so wisely at the stories of the angels, and a baby cradled in the hay at the end of the way of a wandering star, may their faith and expectation be a rebuke to our own faithlessness. Help us to make this season all joy for them, a time that shall make Thee, Lord Jesus, even more real to them.

Watch tenderly over them and keep them safe. Grant that they may grow in health and strength into Christian maturity. May they turn early to Thee, the Friend of children, the Friend of all. We ask in the lovely name of Him who was once a little child. Amen.

DECEMBER 20, 2020
JOSEPH'S STORY: THE GREATEST STORY EVER HEARD
THE INTRODUCTION

The opening verses of the Gospel of Matthew, through the 17th verse, provide the passage of scripture which is often called the "Begats," tracing the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham to Joseph. The chapter begins: "The book of the generations of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Forty-two generations later, the 16th verse reads: "And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ. Beginning at verse 18,

the chapter reads: “Now the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, took place in this way. When his mother, Mary, had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sin.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

In the next daily devotions we are going to imagine that Joseph is speaking to us telling his story. Let’s go back in time and listen to what Joseph has to say surrounding the greatest story ever told.

DECEMBER 21, 2020
JOSEPH’S STORY PART 1

“I am getting old. I know it is time, it is inescapable. I felt I was getting old once before, but Mary changed all of that. She came into my life and it was just as if she gave me a new life, a second life. I had been lonely for so long! When my wife, Susannah died, and our baby died with her at birth, I felt my life had died too. All the joy seemed gone and all the brightness was made dark. There was nothing but my work, my craft of woodworking. Working the wood seemed for so long to be the only meaning I had in life. And I must say, beautiful things came out of whatever piece of wood I worked over with my hands and tools. I made useful things, beautiful things, things that captured the beauty that existed in my heart. A beauty I was unable to show in any other way, until Mary came along.

“I have never been good with words, not fluent, I never led any group in the town, I liked being quiet. But today I need to make some things known to you

and to others about the life of Mary and myself. I need to tell this story because it is an important story.

“I met Mary while working on a house in Capernaum. I was glad for the work it was quite a challenge and it would last for a long time.

“I met Mary after I went to work in Capernaum. She served me my noon meals. Her mother was the cook and her father kept the stables. Mary was young, but self-possessed – quiet and kind and gentle, yet aware of everything. At first I thought the feelings I began to have for her were nothing but the foolish imaginations of an old man. Then I thought, “If she was only closer to my age, I do believe a new life could begin for me with her.” And then I started to perceive that there was something more than duty in her watchfulness of me, her attention to me and my needs as I worked. I spoke quietly to her father about her, and he already knew – she herself had told her father that if I should ever tell him that I cared for her, she would be willing to become my wife.

DECEMBER 22, 2020
JOSEPH’S STORY PART 2

“My heart was full of feelings that I thought had long since gone. Mary and I had happy visits about what our life together would be when my work there was done and we would return, husband and wife, to my home in Nazareth. Then that troubling shadow fell upon us. I overheard the whisperings of other servants one day, and that very afternoon, before I could bring up the matter with him, Mary’s father came to me in deep distress and said, ‘We do not understand it. Mary’s going to have a baby. We know that you and she have never been together as husband and wife. She will not tell us anymore. She says that she must talk to you. Undoubtedly you will want us to put her away now. Undoubtedly this will bring to an end any plans that you and she made together.’

I was hurt and even more than that, I was confused. Things like this happen to other young women, but I could not believe it about Mary. She had said that she wanted to talk with me. I wanted to talk with her, but not then. Something in me could not deal with the matter right then. I told her father that I could make no decision about Mary and myself. I would talk to her, but I was not ready at that

moment. He seemed to understand. I went back to my work, but my mind and my heart was not into it. I was in turmoil.

“That night I fell into a very deep sleep – like no other sleep I had ever had. I dreamed that an angel of the Lord stood before me – what a wonderful sight. The angel knew what it was that was bothering me, for without any introductory words, the angel said, ‘Joseph, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. It’s true that she is going to have a baby, but the baby has been conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. This child will be a boy, and you will name him, Jesus, because he will save the people from their sins. And he will also be known as Emmanuel, for people will say, “In Jesus God is with us.”’

“Suddenly, it was dawn – the angel had left. I got up and ran to Mary. I found her, took her by the hand, and told her what had happened. That’s when she told me about the angel’s visit with her and how she was going to have a baby, a son whom she should call Jesus, who would be a King. The angel told Mary that the power of God would conceive this child in her womb and that this baby would be the Son of God!

“I knew that Mary would be my wife, and that we both would be parents of this special child. My heart was filled again with joy – so much so that I wanted Mary to be mine right then. But my work was not quite finished, and Mary felt she needed to go to visit her cousin Elizabeth before she was married. We agreed to be married when she returned, and I gave myself joyfully to the completion of the work in Capernaum.

“But there came a new development which seemed to make life difficult again. A Decree came from Rome about an unusual census which was to be made in our land, and in which each man was required to enroll himself in his ancestral city. For most people, that was no great thing, because most people lived where their fathers before them had lived. But I did not. My father had come from Bethlehem and I needed to go there to be enrolled. As soon as Mary returned we were married and left for Bethlehem. I took her with me to enroll her as my wife. It was a slow and difficult journey. There were many others who also were traveling and often times it was difficult finding a place to rest for the night. But we managed and finally arrived in Bethlehem – the city of David.

DECEMBER 23, 2020
JOSEPH'S STORY PART 3

“Once we arrived in Bethlehem, I quickly realized that Mary needed a place to give birth to the child that was promised. In Bethlehem I went to an old Inn trying to get a room. But, because of all the people there was no room there. The Innkeeper, a friend of my family, allowed Mary and I to stay in the stable. I was not very happy about that, but Mary kept reassuring me that everything would be fine. Mary was so uncomplaining, and as it turned out, the Innkeeper had done us a great favor. The stable was warm and private. The animals were far better company than most of the guests in the Inn would have been. There was clean, soft straw, and the Innkeeper did provide for as many of our needs as possible. We were probably more comfortable that night than any other night since we had left Nazareth.

“That very night the baby was born. Mary and I handled things alone. Considering the trip and all, the birth went remarkably well, and I had mercifully little time to think about anything. Neither did we have much time to consider all that we had been told about the baby. I was so grateful that we were in Bethlehem, where we could stay a little while. Mary and I were both in awe of the baby. He was such a beautiful child. Even the animals seemed hushed around us, and seemed to be looking in wonder at all that was happening there in their barn. When it was over, Mary had wrapped the baby, she laid him in a manger filled with straw, and they both went to sleep. I went outside to take a break. It was a beautiful night – a wonderful night – the sky was glorious – one star right over us seemed to be the brightest. I remembered the things that we had been told about this baby. This was God’s Son – but my son as well.

DECEMBER 24, 2020
CHRISTMAS EVE
JOSEPH'S STORY PART 4

“There was more that happened in Bethlehem. I did register for the census. But, there was more that happened surrounding the baby Jesus. The dawn of the day after He was born brought Shepherds to the stable seeking the Baby Jesus.

They shared with Mary and I how the angels appeared to them while they were watching their flocks at night and told them that a Savior was born and that they could see this baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem. The Shepherds were moved as they related their story to us and as they gazed upon Jesus. And then, a few days later, a very impressive caravan arrived – three oriental noblemen – three Wise men – who looked quite out of place there at the stable, but they too, had come to worship the new born King.

“Very soon we were warned in a dream to go Egypt, because the baby was in danger, that all babies were in danger from King Herod. This time traveling was much easier and we made good time. We did not return to Nazareth for quite some time, but when we did go back, our lives developed a happy and comfortable order. Jesus was not a difficult child. He learned my trade and He did well, and the people of our city seemed to trust Him and respect Him. But still, boys will be boys. Once Jesus stayed at the Synagogue in Jerusalem after the celebration of the Passover and we had to go back and get Him. Those were fear filled days. But Jesus was alright. He was in the Temple, talking with the Scribes – better put He was amazing the Scribes with His knowledge.

“Well, as I said at the beginning, I am old now. Mary is still young, still very beautiful. I am afraid that soon, very soon, I will join my ancestors and she will be alone. But Jesus will see to her care. I am afraid that I will not be around to see the fulfilling of these prophecies that Mary and I were told about. But I believe that Jesus will fulfill God’s Will. I remember that night that He was born – I can still see the Shepherds – the animals in the stable – those Wise Men. Jesus is something special.

“My part in his life has not been a small one. I am grateful – grateful that I could be a part of it and so grateful for Him. I always took pride in my craftsmanship – the works of my hands – but this boy will be the most beautiful thing upon which I have set my hand. Sometimes I know deep things are going on within His heart. All those things I will never truly understand. But I do know enough so that when death comes for me I will die content. Through Jesus, God has blessed us. In this child, God will bless all hearts!”

DECEMBER 25, 2020
CHRISTMAS DAY

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the Inn. In that region there were Shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the Glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke is the proclaimer of good news to those who are poor, despised, powerless, and disenfranchised. Included in Luke's Gospel are many stories about women, children, Samaritans, and lepers, all of whom were marginalized by

the purity laws of Judaism. It is to those who need protection that Jesus comes with words of welcome and hospitality. Luke names the shepherds as the first recipients of the message of Christ's birth, for they, too, were ostracized by the orthodox hierarchy. While they went about their ordinary work in the long, watchful night hours, God's messenger announced that the Savior had come.

Once their fear had been dispelled, these simple peasant folk made their way to Bethlehem where they found the Christ Child sheltered in circumstances of poverty and need. Matthew makes no mention of the stable or of the cattle feeding trough which provided a cradle for Jesus. Luke seems to be telling us that God's Presence is revealed where few would expect such encounter and to those overlooked by the elite and culturally respectable.

Soon the shepherds began telling their story. And people were amazed by the message and the messengers. They passed on what was told them, "good news of great joy for all the people" in the coming of the Messiah. Thus, they became the heralds of the Gospel.

Today we share the shepherd's joy in God. We know that we, too, are invited to participate in the proclamation that is communicated most powerfully by those in whom Jesus Christ is born and given shelter.

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER BY PETER MARSHALL

We yearn, our Father, for the simple beauty of Christmas – for all the old familiar melodies and words that remind us of that great miracle when He who had made all things was one night to come as a babe, to lie in the crook of a woman's arm.

Before such mystery we kneel, as we follow the shepherds and Wise Men to bring Thee the gift of our love – a love we confess has not always been as warm or sincere or real as it should have been. But now, on this Christmas Day, that love would find its Beloved, and from Thee receive the grace to make it pure again, warm and real.

We bring Thee our gratitude for every token of Thy love, for all the ways Thou hast heaped blessings upon us during the years that have gone.

And we do pray, Lord Jesus, that when we celebrate Thy birthday, we may do it in a manner well pleasing to Thee. May all we do and say, every tribute of our hearts, bring honor to Thy name, that we, Thy people, may remember Thy birth and feel Thy presence among us even yet.

May the loving kindness of Christmas not only creep into our hearts, but there abide, so that not even the return to earthly cares and responsibilities, not all the festivities of our own devising may cause it to creep away weeping. May the joy and spirit of Christmas stay with us now and forever.

In the name of Jesus, who came to save His people from their sins, even in that lovely name we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 26, 2020

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep....God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. - Genesis 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....All things came into being through him....in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. - John 1:1, 3a, 4

Before time began, God spoke into the darkness of chaos bringing light and order. Throughout history the divine word continued, often through reluctant messengers, frequently in times of dreary waiting and chaotic loss. Then God came as the Word made flesh – the ultimate proclamation of the Creator’s love – dwelling among us. God consented to share our humanity and so to sanctify our struggle to live faithfully in a fearful world.

A compelling picture emerges in this passage. Jesus Christ comes into the world bringing light, offering new life to all who are ready to receive the gift. The Word is rejected by some but welcomed by those ready to receive the invitation and become children of God.

Today Grace upon Grace is poured out for us as we celebrate the gift of God in the form of Jesus Christ. The Word is again given that we, too, might receive,

embody, and speak, into the struggling confusion of our day, the life-giving word of hope. God is with us and for us. How can we be afraid?

Prayer: O God our Creator, fill our lives with wonder as we witness new things coming to be. Grant that Jesus Christ the Word may be heard above the cacophony of the world's fears and that the Holy Spirit energizes us to proclaim hope in a darkened world. Amen.

DECEMBER 27, 2020

In Psalm 148 we read:

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
For he commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
Praise the Lord from the earth,
You sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost,
Stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
King of the earth and all peoples,
Princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike, old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted;
His glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful,
For the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

The natural world celebrates God's goodness by being fully what it was made to be. Angels, sun, moon, stars, water, sea monsters, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind, mountains, trees, and creatures – all participate in praise to the Creator. People whether of high or low status, young or old, are also called upon to praise the Creator of all things. We learn our capacity for living and growing fully into the persons God created us to be by joining our proclamation of praise with the rest of the created universe.

Taking time to be in creation, to see and listen to the voiceless ones, enables us to find our own songs of praise. Out in the oceans the whales play, and awe fills us by the thought of them. Watching the sun rise behind mountain peaks we see God's grandeur; the first blooming crocus invites our wonder as the long winter months end. These are "big" moments, but every day there are small miracles of life to be celebrated by those with eyes to see. The city pigeons perched on a lamppost above early morning gridlocked traffic causes us to smile, give thanks, and slow down a little. The weed that thrusts its way through concrete causes us to remember those hard times through which we have grown in our faith, and a "Praise the Lord" escapes our lips. We are coming to life, coming to fullness as we give voice to all creatures in our daily prayer of praise and gratitude.

Think about this: Take a short walk outside with the intention of noticing the natural world, allowing it to "speak" God's promises.

DECEMBER 28, 2020
MEMORIES PART 1

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Christmas is always a time of memories. There is always that picture in every family's photo album of their child's first Christmas. It is a lot of fun to look at those pictures and relive those memories.

The second chapter of the Gospel of Luke is a lot like a photo album of our Lord's childhood, a glimpse back into the simplest times of his life. Obviously, there are no photos for us to look at, but in this chapter we hear a little bit about our Lord's early life, from His birth through an event when he was 12 years old. Not much is told about those years. It is almost as though a whole box of memories was lost.

The memories belong to Mary, the mother of our Lord and Savior. She shared them with others. They were remembered, and Luke, inspired by God, wrote them down for us. These memories are a testimony to a life that, from its very beginning was God's greatest gift to humankind.

Looking back at our Lord's childhood, we realize that he had earthly parents who were God-fearing and religious. They were Jews who practiced their faith. Therefore, in keeping with the laws of the time, they brought Jesus to the temple when he was about forty days old and offered a sacrifice that God prescribed for a new mother and her new firstborn son. Luke tells us that Mary had "found favor with God." That was because God was a vibrant part of their lives. She believed in God, obeyed God, and lived for God. Jesus was fortunate to have been blessed with good, God-fearing parents.

Something happened that day when the parents of Jesus carried Him, tiny and vulnerable, into the temple. An old man and an old woman became part of His childhood. Simeon and Anna were their names and they feared God as well. They were looking for the consolation of Israel, hoping for God's Messiah, the promised Savior to come. The moment that they saw the baby Jesus, they recognized Him to be the Christ and spoke of Him to all "who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Simeon especially was filled with joy and blessed God for this great gift.

DECEMBER 29, 2020

MEMORIES PART 2

Simeon had been waiting to die. He was an old man who had lived a full life. The only thing missing was seeing God's salvation, and God had promised him that he would not die until he saw the Savior. God kept the promise. Simeon saw Jesus and when he did, it was the climax of his life. Simeon said that he could now die, because God did everything for him. Simeon was full of trust in God.

After Simeon had prayed his joyful prayer of thanks to God, he turned his attention to Mary. Simeon's words to Mary were not about how cute the baby was, but about the child's ministry. Simeon told Mary that Jesus would be the cause of many falling and rising. All those who rejected Jesus, believing in their

own righteousness, were going to be lost, falling to the depths of Hell. All those who despaired of themselves because of their sinfulness and looked to Jesus alone for forgiveness and rescue would be saved, lifted up to heaven itself. Then Simeon gave Mary a hint about our Lord's ultimate purpose for coming: His death on the Cross in payment for the sins of the world. "A sword will pierce through your own soul also," he told her.

Those words must have caused Mary's heart to skip a beat. Her baby, this perfect little boy whom she had given birth to, was going to be a cause of grief to her. Mary could not see how it was possible, but the words surely came back to her the day she stood at the foot of the Cross and watched Him die – the day He gave her to John and she heard Him say to her, "Mother, there is your new son."

These memories Luke wrote down for us some time after Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into Heaven. One gets the feeling reading them that Mary looked back over our Lord's whole life and saw how, from the very beginning, He came to be the Savior, to give joy to an old man, comfort to an old woman, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to all who believed in Him. Jesus came to live a single, solitary, purposeful life, a life of redemption.

There is one other character who is prominent in our Lord's "Scrapbook," that is the Holy Spirit. It was through the Holy Spirit that Simeon and Anna knew who Jesus was. It is through the Holy Spirit that anyone ever knows Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Gospel of Luke, like the Book of Acts, is a testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit who guides us into the way of peace. The Holy Spirit guides us to know Jesus.

Because of the Holy Spirit people believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit persuaded Simeon. Like the rest of us the Holy Spirit came upon him. One day, in the temple, Simeon saw the baby Jesus with his parents. Simeon took the child into his arms and blessed him and confessed that the baby Jesus was the Christ – the Messiah – the Savior of the world.

We are not always able to discern the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives or in the lives of others. Sometimes we cannot tell that the Holy Spirit's been with us until we look back and see His work in retrospect. Simeon probably thought he went to the temple that day just because he had nothing else to do. Once he got there he learned the Holy Spirit had guided him to be where the Christ was going to be.

DECEMBER 30, 2020
MEMORIES Part 3

Let us not forget this Christmas that the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. The Holy Spirit works in us to bring us to meet Jesus and then to develop a personal relationship with Him. It is a blessing to look back over our lives and see how God through the Holy Spirit was involved in it.

The collection of memories about our Lord's birth and childhood end with these words: "He grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom (he was very close to God) and the favor of God was upon him." The favor of God was upon Jesus and through Jesus God's favor is upon each of us.

Prayer: Almighty God, the Christmas of 2020 is different than any other Christmases most of us have experienced. There will always be memories of Christmas past to make us smile. This Christmas there is much pain, grieving, sorrow, and despair. But once we remember the true meaning of Christmas along with our Christmas memories of other Christmases, we should be able to find hope, and courage, to move forward in our living trusting in You for a sense of deliverance. Be with all the families around us, our neighbors, our co-workers, and the churches. Help us even in our pain, to strive to bring good cheer and a message of "peace on earth and goodwill towards all people." Amen.

DECEMBER 31, 2020
NEW YEARS' EVE

In Jeremiah 31:7-9 we read:

For thus says the Lord:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the mountains; proclaim, give praise, and say,

"Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel."

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.

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

One of Israel's most traumatic experiences was the exile to Babylon. God had brought the people out of Egypt and into a rich land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). There they had built a kingdom that had reached the zenith of its power under David and Solomon. Their future seemed assured. Then something went wrong. The people and their rulers went astray. The kingdom was divided, and decline set in. Eventually, Israel was conquered, and many were carried away into captivity.

As we come to the end of 2020, with all of its twists and turns, perhaps we can understand something of the disappointment faced by Israel. Most of us began 2020 with great expectations. We made resolutions. We established goals. We promised ourselves and others that this year we would do certain things, that our lives would be more faithful.

Now as 2020 comes to an end. As we look back at those resolutions that we had made in January. We cannot help but notice how strange and disruptive this year has been. Many of the things – goals – we had intended to accomplish strayed away from us because of so much out of our control.

But 2021 gives us the possibility of making a comeback – a return. God said, "With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back." Through this same prophet, God is calling us back to renew hope and determination – to a newness of life – to a new beginning – to a return to God for guidance, hope, and love.

Prayer: Thank You, God, that even when we look back at our lives in despair, You are always there for us, that we may look to You for hope. Lead us into a newness of life and new beginnings. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior. Amen.

JANUARY 1, 2021
HAPPY NEW YEARS!

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:10-14

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

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

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again.

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

I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

*I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,
says the Lord.*

The period of exile in Babylon is also called the Babylonian captivity. The people of Israel were captives of the most powerful empire of their time. To them the situation must have seemed hopeless. Yet, the prophet proclaims the power of God that will free Israel even from such a mighty master: "The Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him."

There are many powers that can enslave us. But none of them is mightier than the past. Against any other master, we can rebel. But the past we cannot change. That is what makes our feelings of failure at the end of the year so overwhelming. A year has gone by, and we are powerless to undo what we did, or even to recover the time we lost, when we failed to do what we ought to have done. We may try to undo the consequences of our past – and in most cases we should. But the past itself, these last twelve months, we cannot undo. It is there, apparently forever, with a givenness we cannot challenge. No matter how hard we try, we cannot undo it. It is a far mightier master than the Babylonians were

to Israel. Just as Jacob (Israel) was bound by “hands too strong for him,” so are we burdened by the weight of a past we cannot change.

But the God who ransomed Jacob from “hands too strong for him” can also ransom us from whatever binds us no matter how strong – even from the weight of the past.

That is the meaning of forgiveness. God ransoms us from the power of our sin, from the shame of our failures, from the weight of the past. Thus, as we approach a new year, we can do so with joy similar to that of the prophet Jeremiah’s words. Read them again, and rejoice with him!

Prayer: Cast away from us, O God, all of our failures and sin of this past year. Take away our frustrations and our grief. Let us move forward in 2021 with great hope and expectation. Amen.

JANUARY 2, 2021

Scripture: Psalm 51:10

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Did you ever have the experience in school of erasing an entire blackboard? When the slate has been wiped clean, it is as if nothing at all had ever been written on it.

This is what God does for us when we come to God confessing our sin and seeking forgiveness. In 1 John 1:9 we read, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

How many times in your life have you wished you could start all over again with a clean slate, with a new life? Resolve in these first few days of 2021 to allow God to wipe your slate clean by confessing your sins and letting God give you a brand new and clean start.

Remember, the Apostle Paul did this when he said in Philippians 3:13-14, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Prayer: Our Creator, we come to You aware of our sin and our failures. Yet, we are confident in Your Love and Mercy toward us. Thank You, O God, for giving us Your wonderful Grace and forgiveness and for wiping the slate of our lives clean. Let us start this New Year walking with You and living for the fulfillment of Your Purpose in our lives, now and forevermore, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

JANUARY 3, 2021

EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Confessions – on the start of a New Year Prayer by Peter Marshall

Our father, grant that in the days of this new year we may feel Thy love, the love that surrounds us, the love that will not let us go but will ever bring us back – back to Thy side, back to Thy will, back to Thy way.

In that way we would walk, O Lord. For though, we like sheep have gone astray, like sheep, we are tired – tired of missing Thy path and stumbling along paths of our own choosing. Like sheep, we would return to the fold.

We would come back to Thee, confessing that we are not proud of the mistakes we have made, not too proud of our record as we look back over the last year. We are conscious not of our triumphs and successes but of our failures. We are in no boastful mood, O Lord, as we look into a new year. We seek now Thy forgiveness for our stupidity and our obstinacy, for the blindness of our hearts, for the wrong choices that grieved Thee and subtracted from our own happiness.

Wilt Thou forgive us, Father!

Humbly and gratefully we open our hearts to receive that great miracle of grace. We thank Thee for the fresh, strong wind of Thy Spirit which comes to bring us refreshment, cleansing, and perfect peace. Amen.

CLOSING REMARKS

As I was finishing this devotional guide, my exhaustion during this 2020 year was gaining momentum. The exhaustion was taking a toll and still is. I guess it is fair to say that my exhaustion comes from a great many sources demanding my attention: the Pandemic, the Race situation, the economy, family issues, changes to ministry forms and styles, and of course, the election.

Today is November 9th, and I am sitting in my office putting the finishing touches on this devotion guide and still listening to the comments, the news, etc., concerning the election of Joe Biden as the next President of The United States of America.

What are my hopes and dreams for 2021? “Peace on earth and goodwill towards all people” seems to sum it all up. But I would add a wish, a prayer, always for a time of recovery that enables healing, love, togetherness, and a hope for the future.

2021 will have its difficulties, setbacks, and even joys. But we must always be vigilant and strong and willing to forgive the past and forgive others and live together in harmony side by side.

To you, the reader, I hope there was one thing that brought a smile to your face and another thing that caused you to pause and consider your life. There’s one more thing: I hope that somewhere in this devotion guide, you found one thing that helped you to be aware that God Loves You!

Rev. Thomas E. Young, Jr.