



ADVENT IN PLAIN SIGHT

DEVOTION BOOKLET



A Devotional for the Season of
Advent and Epiphany

written by members of our church family

Friends, as we journey together through Advent this year, may we do so with the intention of growing closer to one another and closer in relationship to God. A huge thank you goes out to the members of our congregation, from elementary school-aged children to folks in their late 80's, who have thoughtfully written the devotions contained in this booklet. It is our hope that in sharing these intergenerational perspectives on the Scripture texts that you will gain a new appreciation for the Word and for our fellow members and friends with whom we worship and "do" ministry. If you are participating in the Advent In Plain Sight Bible study, you will find that the Scripture texts are the same for each day as they are in this booklet. To further enrich your Advent experience, use the Advent In A Bag. We anticipate that this experience is meaningful for you and that your hearts are more spiritually formed and prepared to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

- Mona Petersen, Director Adult Christian Education and Small Groups Ministry

Nov. 27: Genesis 28:1-5

Jon Bock

So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham." Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau. -Genesis 28: 1-5 (NIV)

Today marks the first day of Advent. What a beautiful tradition our community of believer's get to be a part of with the Hanging of the Greens. I am always, almost instantly, filled with the awe and wonder of the Christmas spirit during this service. It is a spiritually enriching way to begin Advent, waiting at Jesus' gate for his entrance into our world. The gates of Heaven, however, have been opened up for us ALL long ago. In this scripture, Gen. 28: 1-5, Isaac reaffirms our need to be in community. "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples".

Advent, Christmas, The Hanging of the Greens; none of it would be the same if we experienced it alone. Worshiping God, anticipating our Savior's birth, reading and studying scripture, and so much more, it is all meant to be done with others. Being together, where one or more of us are gathered, is the way God created us to be. ANY and ALL are better together. I pray that this Advent season is set apart and made Holy. Not only for you and yours, but for those on the "sidelines" of our lives. How can we open the gates of our lives, our church, and our faith to those around us this month? May you be challenged and blessed.

Nov. 28: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Kathy Craven

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep those words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. -Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

As we begin our spiritual journey through Advent this year, we should keep these words from Deuteronomy repeating in our minds every day. How many times have we heard this commandment preached on Sundays, in Bible study classes, and from our earliest lessons in Sunday School when we were children? On the other hand, how many times in our daily lives do we repeat this commandment in our minds or even think about it? Maybe we should make this a spiritual practice this year by taking time each day during Advent to reflect on how this commandment can impact our lives and those around us. After all, as we wait patiently during Advent for the coming of our Lord Jesus wouldn't it be nice to welcome Him on Christmas Day by loving Him the way God told the people of Israel to love God. And while we are at it, let us remember what else we are supposed to do "to love our neighbors as ourselves." If we practice this love, God's Love, we can be a beacon of hope in a world that desperately needs it.

Nov. 29: Psalm 118: 15-21

Leslie & Fred Depenbrock

Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The LORD's right hand has done mighty things! The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!" I will not die but live and will proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death. Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. -Psalm 118:15-21

Advent is a time of looking forward. We use the days to center on what it means to invite Jesus into our lives. These words were written long before Jesus' birth but as Christians, we can use them as an introduction to not only who Jesus is himself but what he came to do. The Psalms often mirror much of what we humans feel as we go through our own lives. The gates of the righteous (v.19) have been opened so that we may enter and give thanks to the Lord. Shouts of victory, songs of joy resound in the tents of the righteous. We are being invited to come in. Let us use these days that have been given to us to prepare ourselves to enter through those gates. In a real sense Jesus our Lord, is being introduced. Because he lives, we can

too, with the righteousness that has been given through him. We are forgiven and invited to join forever with him and others who trust him. This Psalm celebrates the mighty things that he has done. He is now our role model of how we are to live.

Nov. 30: Jeremiah 7:1-7

Aubrey & Stiles / Dan & Jori Arnold

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message: "Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. -Jeremiah 7:1-7 (NIV)

A gate is an entryway, a distinct line, leaving one place behind and entering a new one. A change. God instructs Jeremiah to preach at the gate to tell the people that they must change their ways. The gate would be a point at which many people would hear the message. The gate would be the place where the people were entering to worship. As we are in the season of advent and preparation for the birth of Jesus, we know God wants to see real change within us. While Advent is a season of penitence, prayer and joyful anticipation, it is also a season of God going through the gate from heaven to earth. Jeremiah is preaching to people like us, believers. He demands that we go through the gate and emerge changed. Not just go through the motions. During our family discussion of this text, Aubrey and Stiles had some comments about gates.

One that we found interesting is likening your heart to a gate. Follow your heart and the gate of the Lord will open. Another is that the Statue of Liberty is the gate of freedom. We like that analogy for this season because if we enter the gates every week and truly seek to amend our ways and live as God would have us live, we will enjoy the freedoms of our faith and be liberated from our earthly fears and desires.

Dec.: 1: Matthew 24:29-35

Ryan Klements

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. -Matthew 24: 32-35 (NIV)

I can remember when I was younger how much I loved the build up to Christmas. This was back when stores actually waited to put out Christmas decorations until at least Thanksgiving, so it made it seem that much more magical because it did not last long. One of my favorite parts in particular was how my mom and my grandparents would slowly transform their houses into Christmas wonderlands over the course of four weeks. Here and there familiar decorations would pop up. Each one reminded me that the big day was getting closer and closer.

Then out of town family members would arrive, and the house would feel so inviting and warm and full of love. I loved it all. The lights, the smells, the sounds, and of course the presents! Then as quick as it arrived, it would be gone. The decorations would get packed away, the tree would be taken out to the curb, all that was left of the homemade cookies was just a few crumbs, and the out of town visitors would all go home. But one thing would remain. One thing didn't get boxed up with the ornaments. The feeling. The warmth and the love that I felt would be there all year round! In Matthew 24:32-35 I'm reminded that we are constantly going through seasons. Some good, and some not so good. But one thing we can always count on is God's love. No matter where we are in life, His love is always with us.

Dec. 2: Acts 3:1-10

Robert Eldredge, Kristofer Fegenbush and Benny Fegenbush-Eldredge

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. They recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. -Acts 10:3:1

When you see a gate, what does it mean to you? A sign of welcome. A barrier to entry. Protection. A blocked exit. Defense. A transition. An open door. A barricade. A reminder of exclusion. A gate's purpose, its message, its meaning shifts greatly—depending on who you are, and whether you're inside or outside or invited to this community at all. The "Beautiful Gate" was one of the entrances to the Temple in Jerusalem prior to its destruction of the Romans in AD 70. Some scholars believe the word may refer more to ripeness—happening or coming at the right time--than to beauty. All sorts of folks were forbidden to go any further than the outermost court at any time—non-Jews, foreigners,

uncircumcised people, and anyone considered impure. Gates kept out the exiled, the cast out, the marginalized, the unclean. I know folks who've felt barricaded outside the gates of communities of faith. Maybe you do, too. Heck, I've felt that way sometimes.

A beggar would have known that wealthy visitors would pass through these gates. To get the best results, he'd want to sit where the traffic was greatest. He'd encounter special visitors of high social and financial status. Because of his disability, someone lame from birth couldn't work, of course. He was dependent on the generosity of other people. To move anywhere, in fact, he needed help. And true enough, people would carry him to the gate of the Temple every day. Imagine the faithfulness of these friends, day after day, physically carrying this man to a place where he could get help to survive! (How am I helping "carry" those around me to where they need to go?)

Peter and John did not have money for the beggar. (The early church lived communally.) Yet when John and Peter passed the man, they discovered an opportunity to help through faith and love. These Jesus-followers were able to offer healing—at this ripe, right time—through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, after all, didn't give his followers the Holy Spirit so we could snuggle with warm, fuzzy feelings, safely enclosed in our sanctuaries. The Spirit is expansive—crossing barriers and borders to heal those too outcast or stigmatized or scarred or scared or traumatized or broken or shamed to dare enter a sanctuary.

In these modern times of great economic divide, in South Florida communities marked by enormous wealth and devastating poverty, how does money filter our vision of the beggar and the gate and the disciples and the Spirit? Are we as followers of Christ open to our own needs of real healing? Do I recognize my need to find my true identity in Jesus Christ, and not in financial stability? Do I try to satisfy myself with money or see income as my sign of being blessed? Do I forget that we all lie at the gate of the temple begging to be healed from our own misplaced faith and security?

How do I encounter those needing, even begging for help? How many times do I hurry by, racing through my schedule, focused on my destination? Do I provide for their real physical needs with generosity? Most of the time I may give them some money. But do I forget to pray for healing upon their lives? How am I volunteering and donating and marching and advocating and showing up and helping out and holding space and feeding and listening and picking up and carrying and bandaging and fighting for justice and meeting needs and loving? Do I accompany strangers and neighbors past the barricades to a place of praising and leaping and shouting and walking and rejoicing in community?

Showing up at church once a week, saying a hearty Amen from inside the safety of those walls—honestly that's a lot easier for me than engaging deeply with God daily in a way that develops concern for poverty, injustice, hunger,

and sickness. "The Beautiful Gate" appears to us every day at intersections, at coffee shops, at little league games, at highway entrance ramps, at grocery stores, at nightclubs, and train and bus stations in our city and every city around the world. These are gateways at which to spread Jesus' message through our actions, faith, prayer, and love. The condemned and shunned? They are waiting for us outside the gate. The unwanted refugees? Waiting for us. Those traumatized by the families or churches or communities in which they grew up? Waiting for us. Those who can't pay for housing? Assault survivors? The lonely? Rejected? Fired? Imprisoned? Struggling with addiction? Kids kicked outta their homes? Forgotten elder? The neighbor who doesn't speak English? The transgender woman targeted by the political commentator? Those fighting disease? The one who doesn't look like me? Awaiting us. Jesus shatters barriers. He turns over tables. He opens gates.

He communes with grubby sheep-herders and star gazers and sex workers and grieving sisters and noisy children and politicians and widows and ragamuffins. And exhausted parents and hyper 11-year-olds. He welcomes and he loves and he heals across human barriers of race or economic status or disability or gender identity or immigration status or country of origin or sexual orientation or mental health or education. Jesus didn't welcome outcasts and embrace untouchables to make them acceptable to God. He did it to show them, and all the rest of us, that God already had accepted them. We celebrate a savior who crossed the gates between divinity and humanity. We worship He who tore the veil. If you've ever been told there's no place for you, please know that Jesus already set a place for you at the table. Beautiful, indeed!

"Swing wide the city gates—the righteous gates! I'll walk right through and thank God." Psalm 118:19

Dec. 3: Acts 21:30-36

Harvey Mayton

The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"

-Acts 21:30-36 (NIV)

The connections between the life and teachings of Jesus and the incident of

Paul being thrown out of the temple in Jerusalem are intriguing. Though it was not realized at the time of his birth, one of Jesus' missions on earth was to break down societal and religious divisions. Much of his life and teaching was devoted to emphasizing that everyone is welcome in the kingdom of God and that it is open to all—Jew, Gentile, Greek, Roman, etc. During both his personal mission and as his followers spread the Gospel after his death and resurrection, this message of inclusion was a paramount one.

Yet, as the incident in Acts 21 shows, this message was an incendiary issue for Paul's audiences. The very idea that he might have brought a Gentile into the temple was enough for the crowd to call for his death. They had clearly missed the message from Jesus, carried on by Paul and others, that we are all children of God and welcome in his holy places and into his kingdom, on earth and in heaven.

Certainly, this message is still difficult for our world today. When we look at many of the continuing difficulties, they involve the concept of "us versus them" and the message of the superiority of some cultural and religious groups over others. Cultural and religious discrimination and conflicts are foundational to political controversy in societies throughout the contemporary world.

Maybe Jesus' message of inclusion for all in God's kingdom was too much for humankind to absorb. Paul certainly paid a price for preaching this message, as did Jesus himself. We can keep trying, however, by loving those different from ourselves, respecting and honoring differences and practicing acceptance of all God's children. That is what the infant Jesus was destined to do. So can we.

Dec. 4: Psalm 80

Karyn Greep

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.

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

How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.

Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. Its branches reached as far as the Sea, its shoots as far as the River.

Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes? Boars from the forest ravage it, and insects from the fields feed on it. Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root

your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself.

Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish. Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. -Psalm 80 (NIV)

As a child, I will never forget the feeling of waking up on Christmas morning – my siblings and I having to stay in our bedrooms until my parents woke up, turned the Christmas tree lights on and made coffee. There was such anticipation and excitement as to what gifts were under the tree! Those minutes in our bedrooms felt like hours as a child. The Christmas season can have an adverse effect on people that are alone, feeling unloved, unworthy, unforgivable, suffering from illness or grieving the loss of someone close. To them, they may feel like their grief and tears shed are enough to fill a bowl. Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. This season of Advent is about the birth of our Messiah, the one who came to restore us and our faithfulness, so that we can experience abundant life. We can wake up each morning knowing that Jesus is working in our life, walking beside us, filling us with hope and salvation so that every morning feels like Christmas morning.

Dec. 5: Jeremiah 13:15-17

Shiron & Kambiz Pezeshki

Hear and pay attention, do not be arrogant, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before he brings the darkness, before your feet stumble on the darkening hills. You hope for light, but he will turn it to utter darkness and change it to deep gloom. If you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord's flock will be taken captive. -Jeremiah: 13:15-17

Jeremiah, the prophet, weeps over the Israelites after they turn their backs on God. Further, when the people of Jerusalem rejected Christ, He wept for them. Likewise, when we become captive to our own arrogant, self-centered thoughts, we neglect God. By ignoring God's wise council in scripture and prayer, that saddens our Lord. We are distanced from His helping hand. In prayer and praise, let us forever seek our forgiving and compassionate God who always considers our best interest.

Lord, should I wander off like a lost sheep - seek me! I will recognize you by the sound of your voice! I love it when you reveal yourself! Please do it now! This is my plea, that you will continue to prompt me, give me endurance to serve you and reflect your love. Amen

Dec. 6: Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

Mary Helen & Lou Merchant

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. “For whom am I toiling,” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” This too is meaningless—a miserable business!
-Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

In January of 2020, A former member of our church was in worship. I knew that she was a teacher in China and spoke with her after the early service. She said that she had left China because of a virus that was spreading quickly through the countryside. I had not heard about it. Well, I know you know what it was and it wasn't long before it reached us.

On March 15, 2020, in-person worship for us was canceled, and we all learned about Livestream worship. Easter was on April 12 that year. I was sure we would be back together by then, it was a month away. But as you know in-person worship was a long way off. We had “Rally Day” as a drive by where we stopped at different locations and were given information and treats. We were delighted just to see the faces of some members of our church family. Finally, on September 20, we could worship in-person again, by reservation only, seated far apart from one another, with masks on.

Those months and the ones that followed, taught us the implications of Ecclesiastes 4. Being separated from one another for months was “miserable business.” Being together as a church family is a blessing that I think we always took for granted. Now we know that it can be taken away. Our church family, and worshiping together is such an important part of our lives. We cannot keep warm alone. God planned for us to be His family. In Advent, as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we can be grateful for the love and fellowship He taught us to treasure.

Dec. 7: Psalm 126

Lew Lash

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of

joy, carrying sheaves with them. -Psalm 126 (NIV)

This psalm is considered a psalm of ascent. A tome which is lifted up to the Lord in which the writer talks of the things that have been graciously done by the Lord for the people of Israel. Little did the people of Zion know that they were to receive a greater divine gift of the Christ Child.

A statement such as vs 3, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy" could readily be the war cry for those who witnessed the mystery of the birth of the Chris Child those many centuries ago. It is that joy that fills us when the church goes dark on Christmas Eve as we prepare for the Light of the Baby Jesus to shine forth and light the entire sanctuary.

As we march through the late days of November through to increasing anticipation of the birth of the Savoir, may all the promises of Isaiah be manifest in the Babe of Bethlehem. May we joyfully sing about the pending birth of the Son of God who will take away the sins of the world.

Praise be to the Lord for His love knows no bounds.

Dec. 8: Luke 7:36-49

Rena Craven

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you. "Tell me, teacher," he said.

"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,[a] and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven. "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves,

"Who is this who even forgives sins?" -Luke 7: 36-49 (NIV)

Advent is about the preparations for the birth of Christ, a time which should bring tears of joy, hope and peace. Instead, my tears are from stress, high expectations and chaotic preparations for a “perfect” Christmas. In this scripture, Luke 7: 36-47, while Jesus is dining with a Pharisee a sinful woman comes uninvited to clean and anoint Jesus’ feet with her tears and expensive perfume; an act that demonstrates an overflowing love and her true faith. I am not an emotional person and find emotional situations uncomfortable; to show emotions is to show a sign of vulnerability and weakness. I know this is what Jesus wants from us: true vulnerability, reliance only on Him even if it makes people uncomfortable. But, knowing and doing are two separate things; how do we change our focus during this Advent season from ourselves to the coming of Christ? We are to rely on the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness to provide us with that inspiration. So, when you want to cry out in frustration, let those tears remind you Jesus is the reason for the season.

Dec. 9: 2 Timothy 1:1-7

Patty Stover

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. -2 Timothy 1:1-7 (NRSV)

This is being written after Hurricane Ian with so many tears that have been shed, are being shed, and will continue to be shed for a very long time. Tears for loss of life, loss of homes, drinkable water, warm meals, warm beds, destroyed businesses, and on and on.

What does Paul call Timothy, his protégé and friend, to do during Timothy’s challenging times in ministry? What does God call us to do in our challenging and unsettling times? Paul encourages Timothy to rekindle his God-given gifts rather than foster a spirit of cowardice, which is not from God. Like Timothy, today we are being called to live up to our potential to be filled with the spirit of power, love and self-control. We are called to connect with the spirit within through the laying on of hands and from those loved ones, such as parents and grandparents who supported, loved and led us in our walk of faith.

In this Advent season, let us bravely and without reservation, step away from our fears and anxieties. Let us pursue community with others by offering them our support, love and kindness; thereby furthering God’s kingdom on earth.

Dec. 10: Revelation 7:9-17

Patrick Wrisley

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, 17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." -Revelation 7:9-17 (NIV)

We live in both the already and in the pregnant expectancy of the not yet. Advent is not just about the coming of the baby Jesus, but Advent is also a time that we eagerly look forward to in the future at the culmination of time when God will reveal the new heaven and new earth. It will be a time when the Light of Christ is so winsomely bright there is no more pain, suffering, injustice, or any other thing or being that can separate us from the extravagant love of God. The Second Advent is when we no longer see the baby Jesus in the manger, but we will behold the Christ, the Pantocrator, the Almighty Universal Ruler of All, the one who is, who was, and whoever shall be. The First Advent on Christmas and the Second Advent at the consummation of time are two bookends that hold between them the winsome Story of God's intentional pursuit of us; between these bookends God gives us glimpses of what eternity will be under the loving care of the Holy Pantocrator.

Prayer: O Holy Pantocrator, universal King of all things seen and unseen, fill us with your loving Spirit so that others may experience you as we do. Amen

Dec. 11: Isaiah 11:1-2

Bob and Debi Case

Then a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, a Spirit of counsel and strength, a Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. -Isaiah 11:1-2

It is important, during the hustle, bustle of the holidays, to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas and the incredible gifts that we have been given through the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is easy to forget that we are all designed to bear fruit for the kingdom using those gifts all throughout the year.

With the Holy Spirit living inside us, the gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, council and strength can be maximized when we are open to listen to God's direction and follow His plan for our future. We are all "in this world", but we do not want to be "of this world" with all its distractions that take us away from the loving arms of our Lord.

As you prepare for the holidays, take time to listen to the whisper of the Holy Spirit and keep Christ in your Christmas. Embrace the love and fellowship that this season brings with less focus on the material elements and human expectations that can become overwhelming. Your time, attention and availability to those you love are the greatest gifts and far more generous than anything you can buy from the store.

Dec. 12 : Job 12:13-25

Nic Merchant

*To God belong wisdom and power;
counsel and understanding are his.*

*What he tears down cannot be rebuilt;
those he imprisons cannot be released.*

*If he holds back the waters, there is drought;
if he lets them loose, they devastate the land.*

*To him belong strength and insight;
both deceived and deceiver are his.*

*He leads rulers away stripped
and makes fools of judges.*

*He takes off the shackles put on by kings
and ties a loincloth[a] around their waist.*

*He leads priests away stripped
and overthrows officials long established.*

*He silences the lips of trusted advisers
and takes away the discernment of elders.*

*He pours contempt on nobles
and disarms the mighty.*

*He reveals the deep things of darkness
and brings utter darkness into the light.*

*He makes nations great, and destroys them;
he enlarges nations, and disperses them.*

*He deprives the leaders of the earth of their reason;
he makes them wander in a trackless waste.*

*They grope in darkness with no light;
he makes them stagger like drunkards.* -Job 12:13-25 (NIV)

In the Book of Job, the main character, Job, encounters all manner of inexplicable calamity. He has spent a lifetime honoring God, living rightly and yet all he has: possessions, health, family, honor are stripped away. The book is an ancient expression of wrestling with the ubiquitous existential question: "Why does a good God allow evil in the world?"

Job's friends exhaust themselves seeking to convince Job that it must be because of something he has done. They tell Job to stop complaining and repent. Job refuses. Today's passage is Job's sarcastic reply to their insistence that he deserves what he is getting and cliché offerings.

Have you ever encountered advice like this? Have you ever given advice like this?

"Stop complaining"

"Shake it off"

"Work harder, try harder, do more"

Sometimes this is exactly what we need to hear. Sometimes it isn't. One of the lessons we learn reading Job is that complaint against the Creator can be the only act of faith we can offer in certain seasons of life. It is a tangible way that we keep the conversation going.

Perhaps, this Advent season you've not received good tidings and are not experiencing great joy. You have permission from Job and other Biblical giants (see Lamentations and myriad psalms) to complain, to wring your hands, to push back. Just keep the conversation going. You are being faithful.

Dec. 13 Jeremiah 13: 1-11

Sam Stark

This is what the Lord said to me: "Go and buy a linen belt and put it around your waist, but do not let it touch water." So I bought a belt, as the Lord directed, and put it around my waist. Then the word of the Lord came to me a second time: "Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks." So I went and hid it at Perath, as the Lord told me.

Many days later the Lord said to me, "Go now to Perath and get the belt I told you to hide there." So I went to Perath and dug up the belt and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but now it was ruined and completely useless.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "This is what the Lord says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless! For as a belt is bound around the waist, so I bound all the people of Israel and all the people of Judah to me,' declares the Lord, 'to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened.'

-Jeremiah 13:1-11 (NIV)

With the reverent side of the holiday season inevitably comes the secular side. We all fall for the allure and shine of new, fancy toys and such. Statistics show that almost \$729 billion was spent by Americans during the 2019 holiday season - a number that is almost incomprehensible.

We focus on material items and think that they, in and of themselves can bring us happiness and thus make us prideful. This happiness is always temporary, however, and we need to remind ourselves that nothing material lasts forever. The only thing that lasts forever is God's love for us, His children. This was shown through the holy birth and the death of His only Son. Neither time nor weather nor human hands will ever ruin that. That is the greatest gift we have ever received and God has given it to all of us.

So let us remember what the reason for the season is. Keeping this at the forefront will help us to avoid the pitfall of pridefully thinking that things can bring us true happiness.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, remind me this holiday season that is what's on the inside that You desire, not the outside.

Dec. 14: Matthew 3:1-6

Caroline Dubois-Weber

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. -Matthew 3:1-6 (NIV)

This passage begs the question: how are we preparing for the coming of Christ this advent season? For most of us, the weeks leading up to Christmas are characterized by frenzied consumer behavior. The hours spent browsing amazon for the perfect gifts, hanging elaborate decorations, and scouring costco for recipe ingredients, add up. While partaking in these activities is a staple of the holiday season, I think we can all take a page out of John the Baptist's book. He is the perfect reminder of how we are called to look intrinsically throughout advent, rather than having our priority be the material focus of the outside world. Advent presents the unique opportunity to spend time reflecting on the previous year and how our faith has grown and developed. This does not mean we, too, must walk around in camel hair like John the Baptist. However, we can challenge ourselves to shift our focus from things such as our outward appearance to, rather, how Jesus is appearing in our thoughts and actions. What will you do today to prepare your heart and mind for Christ?

Dec. 15: Mark 6:7-13

Beverly Fickinger

Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. -Mark 6:7-13 (NLV)

Fresh from being rebuffed in His hometown, Jesus decided to send His disciples out on a 'trial run' ostensibly to see how well they had learned and understood His teaching. They were told not to overpack but to bring only the bare minimum and to trust in Him to provide for all their needs through the people to whom he sent them to teach. A testament of faith to be sure. Instructed to travel in twos to fulfill the Jewish tradition requiring 2 or more witnesses to testify to the truth, they were to ask for hospitality, not to beg. Accept the hospitality that was given, not look for a better deal which would insult the hosts that He had chosen. If they were not offered hospitality, they were to leave and shake the dust from their feet proclaiming the unworthiness of the non-host and symbolically condemning them from acceptance into the Kingdom. This story emphasizes that Jesus was proclaiming the belief that faith would be our saving grace and adherence to the Law was no longer the path to God and salvation.

Dec. 16: John 21:15-19

Patrick McCawley

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" -John 21:15-19 (NIV)

When I read this scripture, I thought about how Jesus talks to Peter about the differences in age. When you're younger, you dress yourself, but when you're older, someone else dresses you and leads you. I think that Jesus is speaking to Peter in a broad sense. When you're younger, you tend to think about yourself a lot and everything is about you. Every kid is like that, we're kind of entitled

to it because our brains aren't fully developed yet and, at the end of day, it is a part of our psychology.

But Jesus is also explaining that, when you're older and wiser, it's your duty to help those who are younger than you by showing them the right path, which is the life that Jesus lived. He wants us to be an example to the youth. And he also wants us to help those who are older by showing them kindness and compassion as they age. He wants us to be caring. I think Jesus wants us to be servant leaders - to take care of each other and to love each other by following the example that he set for us.

Dec. 17: Revelation 1:9-16

Barb & Jim Sabin

I (John) turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands and among the lampstands was someone "like the son of man", dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow and his eyes were like blazing fire. -Revelation 1:12-14

These busy and special days of Advent bring to mind a host of wonderful images....a brilliant star shining in the night sky, shepherds tending their flock, camels with kings bearing gifts, Joseph walking beside Mary riding a donkey. As we are preparing to celebrate the birth of our Savior, perhaps our favorite image of this First Coming is of the Holy Family and the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

In ancient times Advent was a season of preparation for the Second Coming of our Lord, risen and exalted as a prophet, king and priest. So perhaps it is not surprising that the apostle John's vision, described in The Revelation, is in stark contrast to our imaging. He saw the "son of man", not as a babe wrapped in cloths, but wearing a long robe tied with a golden sash, with snow white hair, eyes like a blazing fire and a face that shone with the brilliance of the sun. John saw the Risen Christ!

Maybe this Advent season, as we welcome the Christ Child, we need to expand our expectations by sharing John's vision. We could allow Advent to fuel our anticipation of the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior, the Creator of the Universe.

Dec. 18: Genesis 2:4-9

Petersen Family

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the LORD

God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

-Genesis 2:4-9

The first question the kids had was, “Why was a tree chosen to be the thing in the middle of the garden and the thing that held the knowledge of good and evil?” So, why not a rose bush, or a basil plant or a vine? Their answers varied. My daughter shared, “I think God chose a tree because a tree represents life, and God’s love. The branches of a big tree are like God’s arm stretching out to hold us. Trees also give us oxygen we need to live.” One of my sons added, “A tree is a whole environment itself. It is a home to mammals, birds and different types of fungus, it also holds water, and it provides food for animals and people.” Together we talked about how powerful God is, so powerful that he didn’t need a seed to plant to grow a tree. He just thought of the tree, and poof, there was a tree! The same is true for us humans in that we need a “seed” of sorts that grows into a human. God created a human that was a perfectly formed adult that wasn’t conceived or born. The overarching takeaway for us is this: A big, beautiful, thriving tree with green leaves and a strong trunk and limbs, that can provide life for so many creatures, serves as a metaphor for God. He holds us, provides for us, gives us shelter and food, and creates a place to go for safety. He is big and all powerful. As we make our way through this last week of Advent, we will be thinking of this image and find ways to show thankfulness for all that He has provided, is providing and will continue to provide for our good.

Prayer: Dear God, please help us remember to come to you for comfort and to fill all our needs; that you are our safe place when the world can be dark and cold. When we look at our Christmas tree in our family room, we will be reminded of these truths. When we see trees out in the world from now on, we have another way of seeing you in it and to be thinking of you. Amen!

Dec. 19: Psalm 1

Alix Pfeifer

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. -Psalm 1 (NIV)

Picking out a Christmas tree is as much a part of the season as Bing Crosby, wrapping paper and cookies. We don't cut down our own trees here in Fort Lauderdale, but I think we're all familiar with the red and white tents that fill up our green spaces right before Thanksgiving.

You know the drill. Pick out the best cut tree, tie it to the roof of the car and haul it in the house for decorating. A tree covered in trinkets and glitter becomes a Christmas symbol in our front window. But our beautiful tree is flawed. Just like us.

We are warned in Psalm 1 to be wary of those trees that don't prosper. Like our Christmas tree, a tree without roots will soon wither, and you will be vacuuming up needles for months. Instead, we are called to delight in God's law, plant roots, and to be steadfast. During this Advent season, place yourself firmly in God's hands and you will grow deep roots in righteousness.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, we thank you for this blessed time of year. Thank you for all the beauty and time with family and friends. Keep the roots of our spiritual trees firmly in you as we navigate through the glitz and glam of the holidays. Amen

Dec. 20: Job 14:1-10

Pam Masten

We're all adrift in the same boat: too few days, too many troubles. We spring up like wildflowers in the desert and then wilt, transient as the shadow of a cloud. Do you occupy your time with such fragile wisps? Why even bother hauling me into court? There's nothing much to us to start with; how do you expect us to amount to anything? Mortals have a limited life span. You've already decided how long we'll live— you set the boundary and no one can cross it. So why not give us a break? Ease up! Even ditch diggers get occasional days off. For a tree there is always hope. Chop it down and it still has a chance— its roots can put out fresh sprouts. Even if its roots are old and gnarled, it's stump long dormant. At the first whiff of water it comes to life, buds and grows like a sapling. But men and women? They die and stay dead. -Job 14:1-10 (The Message)

Advent is both a time of joy-filled anticipatory celebration of new life and it's also a time of preparation for what God is doing in the world and in our lives. In Job 14, we find a wonderful image of new shoots coming out of a tree. Even if a tree is cut down, its roots can put out fresh sprouts. Interestingly, the Hebrew for "sprout" has the same root as the word for Job's renewal in verse 14. In Advent, we wait and prepare for the coming of new life, renewal and hope, not only for the future, but for the present. Like a tree, there is always hope! Advent hope is filled with confidence because it looks back to see what God has already done and looks forward to what God will do.

What does Advent teach us about hope and waiting?

What does it mean for us to put our hope in Jesus?

God's grace has come to us in the form of a baby, even Jesus Christ. In this season of anticipation, we remember God's promises and look forward to the new things God is doing. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Dec. 21: Isaiah 41:13-20

Chandler Gelb

For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel, do not fear, for I myself will help you," declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. "See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff. You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away. But you will rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel. "The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it. -Isaiah 41:13-20 (NIV)

A few years ago, when Brené Brown was first sweeping the nation with her TED talks, books, and podcast, I gave her a listen. As a professor and researcher, her work focuses on the effects of courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. She highlights that one of the underlying reasons why people struggle to live whole-hearted lives is due to uncertainty. Uncertainty makes us nervous and fearful. We immediately have thoughts like... "but will God follow through? What if I fail? Will I have to do this alone? What if I'm not fill in the blank_ in the end?" We will make the wrong choices just to have certainty in our lives instead of waiting for God and finding His voice. In the scripture from Isaiah 41:13-20, we hear, "Do not be afraid," "Do not fear," "I will help you," and "I'm holding your hand." We repeatedly hear in this scripture that God is with us, that we do not need to fear, and that there is no obstacle that is too difficult for him. In this season, when a new year is coming, which usually brings change and uncertainty, I hope you find peace in knowing you don't have to feel uncertain or fearful because God is taking your hand and going with you.

Dec. 22 Matthew 3:7-12

Oswald Chambers 1992 Updated Edition "My Utmost for His Highest"

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you

can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." -Matthew 3:7-12 (NIV)

Have I ever come to a place in my experience where I can say – "I indeed – but He"? Until that moment does come, I will never know what the baptism of the Holy Ghost means. I indeed am at an end; I cannot do a thing: but He begins just there – He does the things no one else can ever do. Am I prepared for His coming? Jesus cannot come as long as there is anything in the way either of goodness or badness. When He comes, am I prepared for Him to drag into the light every wrong thing I have done? It is just there that He comes. Wherever I know I am unclean, He will put His feet; wherever I think I am clean, He will withdraw them.

Repentance does not bring a sense of sin, but a sense of unutterable unworthiness. When I repent, I realize that I am utterly helpless; I know all through me that I am not worthy even to bear His shoes. Have I repented like that? Or is there a lingering suggestion of standing up for myself? The reason God cannot come into my life is because I am not through repentance.

"He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and fire." John does not speak of the baptism of the Holy Ghost as an experience, but as a work performed by Jesus Christ. "He shall baptize you." The only conscious experience those who are baptized with the Holy Ghost ever have is a sense of absolute unworthiness. I indeed was this and that; but He came, and a marvelous thing happened. Get to the margin where He does everything.

Dec. 23: Matthew 7:15-20

Gigi Yach

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

-Matthew 7:15-20

These are part of the last chapters that record what is known as the "Sermon on the Mount". We are warned of the "wolf in sheep's clothing". The coming of Christ is truly God's message to us how not to be devoured by life. Jesus warns his followers they must enter the narrow gate and walk the hard road that

leads to life, not the wide and easy gates that leads to destruction.

Jesus goes on to tell us not to be fooled by others, or by ourselves. False prophets can be identified by the fruits of their lives, fruits meaning the outcomes of their actions and choices. Only those who do the will of God will be allowed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

People may appear respectful, kind and wise, but we must look at the fruit of their lives to see what they represent. Some claim to speak on behalf of God when they do not. Saint John the Baptist called these false people a “brood of vipers”.

Good deeds are not absolute proof that someone has true faith. It is by living the teachings of the infant child, that was sent to us, that we can build our lives on a solid foundation, not shifting sand. God’s word is eternal. This holiday season, let us remember to give the fruits of kindness, joy and love to those we love, remember and encounter.

Dec 24: Luke 2:1-7

Lauren Byrne & Caryl Spoden

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

-Luke 2:1-7 (NIV)

Whenever I read this Bible verse from Luke, my mind shifts to Charlie Brown’s friend Linus, decreeing the real meaning of Christmas and reciting “ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” I often visualize this scene, assisted by both commercialized images and religious nativity scenes. However, rarely do I contemplate the actual meaning of the act of swaddling Jesus in clothes. While there are various theological and historical interpretations, I view this as an act of both God’s heavenly love and a mother’s earthly love. This humble, ordinary act is a good reminder to me this busy holiday season to slow down, feel the power of Jesus’s love and prioritize giving this most important gift: love.

Dec. 25 : John 1:1-5

The Green Family

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not

understood it. -John 1:1-5 (NIV)

One of our family's favorite advent memories is lighting up the sanctuary on Christmas Eve using candles lit from the center candle, the Christ candle. As a curtain of darkness envelops the room, our focus is on the lone candle ablaze. We find this to be a most solemn and magical moment. Solemn in the recognition of this precious gift from God and magic in the promise it shares and spreads.

Slowly the candle wick's chatter back and forth, igniting and spreading the gift of that single flame. That light in the darkness. The light marches steadily from row to row and pew to pew. Cascading over and through the darkness, till it reaches everyone in the room. Lighting their faces and hearts and banishing the darkness. As we sing Silent Night in the now brightly lit sanctuary, you feel the power and promise of God and his people.

What are some other ways we celebrate the advent that your family holds dear to their hearts?

Dec. 26: Luke 2:8-20

Mona Petersen

There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him. -Luke 2:8-20

The early part of this chapter of Luke is famously read at Christmas. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, an angel appears to proclaim the good news to common shepherds. The men were terrified before being comforted by the angel's explanation. His appearance to them, most likely, was meant to emphasize God's intent to spread the Gospel to all people, and to value even the least-valued people of the world to do it. These shepherds are privileged to see an enormous number of angels, all at once, proclaiming the birth of Christ, explaining where He can be found, and who were praising God. Their song celebrates God's glory and the peace which the Savior brings to those who believe. (John 3:16-18).

The hope for us is that no matter where we are in life, be it geographically, socially, economically, or spiritually, we have a God who gave each of us the most precious gift. A gift that would pay the ransom for our sins with his own life and offer the promise of a life everlasting with Him in heaven when He comes again. Even though this event happened thousands of years ago, we

celebrate and remember what it meant for new Christians then, and what it can mean for Christians today. We all have times in our life that feel dark, scary, or unsure. It is when doubt and fear control our thoughts and actions, that we give in to sin. Jesus's birth reminds us that there is a light that shines through any darkness, any sin, and offers comfort, life and hope, and love. What a loving Father we have to share such a gift!

Dec. 27 Psalm 51

Don Hayes

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. -Psalm 51:1-12

While working I happened upon what appeared to me to be a dead mockingbird lying in a black plastic ice tray. As I approached the bird it suddenly panicked and fluttered around trying to get free of the tray and me. I soon realized that his foot and one wing were hopelessly stuck to the tray by an EXTREMELY sticky substance. When I reached down to help him he snarled and pecked to try to defend himself. I spoke gently to the little fella trying to calm him down so that I could cut the glue free from the tray, (a very inhumane rodent trap). He was filthy and seriously disabled by all the glue that was still on him. One of his feet was swollen and the one wing all tangled and stuck together from the glue on it. (I think that sin is kind of like that nasty glue; spiritually blocking us from functioning properly and something that we can't possibly cleanse ourselves from on our own.)

After a short prayer and doing some research, we were directed to the "Presidential Veterinary Center" in Hollywood. Not only did they know how to get most of the glue off, but they did it with LOVE, PATIENCE AND GENTLENESS. Forty-five minutes later we were able to free the bird of much of the glue. When I first found the little guy he was hysterical, but within a few minutes of us loving on him, he calmed down and actually fell asleep in my hand. (Just like us when we confess to our gracious heavenly Father, he cleans us and fills us with His restful peace.) As I was walking back to my truck with my little patient, I could hear mocking birds singing to each other amongst the

trees surrounding us. Then totally and unexpectedly, my new friend completely surprised me with a delightfully happy typical mocking bird song. It blessed my socks off!!

I believe that little creature knew that Almighty God had rescued him, cleansed him and that now he was joyfully free. Thank You Lord!

Dec. 28: Proverbs 3:1-8

Kelley Jackson

...In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths...It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body. -Proverbs 3:6,8

The Advent Season through our Lord's Birthday may provide you with a sense of anticipation and excitement...but what happens after this is over? Do you reflect on how you have served the Lord over the past year? Do you mindfully anticipate where you might continue to serve, or explore new areas of service in the coming year? Perhaps this is time for..."a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body"...as King Solomon proposes in the scripture during this transitional time of closing one year and beginning anew. Consider taking a journey and transport yourself to a spiritual place located along a street named Mindful Awareness. Upon arrival, proceed cautiously and consider making a personal investment in resetting your physical, mental, and spiritual health with wisdom, nourishment, and peace in order to fully know the word, do the work, and be the disciple Christ longs us to be. His word guides us along the perfect pathway..."he will make straight your paths". His navigational system never fails to deliver us to our purposeful destination with an on-time arrival.

May peace be with you today, tomorrow, and throughout the coming year.

Dec. 29: Matthew 5:1-11

Leannah Robinson

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." -Matthew 5:1-11

We visited the church on the Mount of Beatitudes – a hill in Northern Israel on the Korazim Plateau and tried to imagine the crowd listening, spread out

on the hill below as Jesus preached. How could the people at the bottom of the hill possibly hear a man at the top of the hill speaking? Obviously, they did hear him because the Bible records that Jesus spoke to crowds of thousands on many occasions. However, according to both Matthew and Luke, Jesus preached this sermon only to his disciples. Jesus saw the crowd, then called his disciples to follow him up the hill, away from the people. I missed that completely in all my readings of the Sermon on the Mount. I wonder why Jesus did not give this sermon to the entire crowd?

The word beatitude comes from the Latin word beatitude meaning blessedness, but I never studied Latin and thought “beautiful” rather than blessings. So of course, I had a problem with the first beatitude because “poor in spirit” doesn’t sound very beautiful. The second beatitude was appealing because we all mourn many things at different times in our lives and it is wonderful to know that God will comfort us. The next 5 beatitudes are all obviously good things to “be”: meek, hungry for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers. Getting persecuted for being righteous is not a pleasant prospect, but it is certainly deserving of a good blessing. That is what I thought before reading the NIV study bible explanatory notes, which indicate the Beatitudes can be understood in at least 4 ways. It includes a chart that recommends ways to develop the “attitude” needed to be so blessed. The Greek word translated “blessed” means “happy, blissful”. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the word to refer to more than a superficial happiness; here blessed refers to a state of spiritual well-being and prosperity. This happiness is a deep joy of the soul. The character traits mentioned in the beatitudes are perhaps not so much traits we can strive to acquire as much as they are part of the way God made us. I would love to be pure in heart and a peacemaker but can’t imagine getting there on my own.

Just before Advent we celebrated Thanksgiving and counted our blessings. The blessings God has bestowed on me are too numerous to count even if I don’t qualify for the Sermon on the Mount blessings. Let’s carry gratitude for all our blessings with us as we celebrate Christmas and the incredible gift of the saving Grace of our Lord. Blessed are we who believe and have accepted His saving Grace.

Dec. 30: Matthew 9:2-8

Jeannine Coursen

Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” Then the man

got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man. -Matthew 9:2-8 (NIV)

When I received the request to write about the above passage with HEARTS in mind, I thought about the 1955 song, "You Gotta Have Heart", written by Richard Adler. After listening to it (via YouTube), the lyrics were perfect and inspiring relating to the passage. Richard Adler faced many challenges in his life, one was battling cancer. Perhaps, this song helped him in his recovery (he lived until age 90). The lyrics emphasize having heart, having hope and opening doors.

Jesus saw the faith of the group bringing the瘫痪 to him, yet Jesus knew the man had a deeper need than just the healing of his paralysis. Did the man even know he needed his sins forgiven? Was the crowd surprised that Jesus addressed the man's sin first?

"Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Jesus offered the suffering man words of encouragement and spiritual healing. This was a heartfelt message of hope (invisible miracle).

The teachers of the law in the crowd thought that the men did not have the authority on Earth to forgive sin and said to themselves that Jesus was blaspheming. Jesus asked them why they entertained evil thoughts in their hearts.

Our Lord backed up his words with action and the瘫痪 was able to rise and walk home (visible miracle). We need to open our hearts, as the crowd did, and encourage others to take hearts, have hope, love God and believe.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for this day and for loving unconditionally. We celebrate that you are with us and our families every day, Guide us to serve you faithfully and help us to take heart daily to encourage others to also take heart. Heavenly Father, we praise you for giving us the opportunity to spend eternity with You. Amen.

Dec. 31: John 14:1-7

Paul Pfeifer

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. -John 14:1-7 (NIV)

Life can get complicated in a hurry.

It could be an unpaid bill in the back of your mind. It could be a project or

deadline we've been avoiding. Or maybe it's that little tooth ache that you're pretending isn't there. But we put on a brave face. We head to jobs. We keep up our social calendars. We break bread. We battle traffic. We push through anxiety. Home gives us a refuge from so much of that.

That problem at work? Put the phone on silent and turn on a football game. That guy that cut you off in traffic? Gone as fast as you can queue up Netflix. But those are earthly solutions to earthly problems.

In John, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me." Jesus invites us to rest our heads on His shoulder. He promises to be our advocate. And He can be our refuge.

The word "let" or paraphrased to "allow" implies choice. That we can choose peace, if we seek it through Christ. We can find that refuge in Jesus. Our home. Our heavenly home.

God is in control ... in this year, the next and forevermore.

Jan. 1: I Corinthians 3:1-15

Maddy Moore

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. -I Corinthians 3:1-15

In the verses prior to this section, Paul is reprimanding the church at Corinth for following teachers above God. They allowed themselves to be divided over which teacher they "followed" and by doing so they caused jealousy and

quarreling to enter the church. Paul then uses an analogy to show that while he planted the seed of faith in them and Apollos watered it, it was truly God who made it grow. He follows this metaphor with the one that we see in this section: that we are God's building. This is reminiscent of the idea that we are God's temple and therefore should keep ourselves pure. Paul is encouraging us to truly examine our lives against what the hard truth of scripture says—that we must love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. We must be willing to surrender everything in our lives for God's glory. By holding our desires at arm's length and God's desires close to our hearts, we build on the strong foundation that Jesus started in us. Paul's warning here is that if we don't do this—if we don't seek to love God by following His Word—then all the parts of our lives that we build outside of our submission to God will be "burned up".

This can seem counterintuitive to the loving God we know, but God cannot love those whom He does not wish to see rid of sin. This passage still ends on an encouraging note. Paul promises that even if a Christian has mistakenly built their life on false teachings and incorrect views of God, they will still be saved. Jesus' work on the cross is powerful enough to still save even if one's entire life has been built on lies. Believing the truth of Jesus' perfect life, forgiving death, and encouraging resurrection, is how we are saved. Following in the commands of scripture is how we build a ministry that lasts. Let's thank God for His abundant mercy in saving us and let us seek to honor Him in our every action!

Jan. 2: James 5:1-6

Robert Jackson

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves on the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.
-James 5:1-6 (English Standard Version)

These verses are grouped together in my Bible under the heading "a warning to rich oppressors." The Bible footnotes tell me that in those days, so many of the wealthy built their success on cheating their workers out of their wages. This Advent season, as I think and pray over what it means that God has come to be with us, I try to look at how I treat those around me, those for whom I'm responsible, whether they be in a role under my leadership or in a role of leadership over me, or merely just passerbys. What does it look like to treat those around me with fairness? What does a Biblical view of justice look like, not just to those in far off places, but also to those in everyday, ordinary

interactions? Then through the Advent lens of “God is with us,” this Emmanuel revelation to us – I start to think of the many gifts I’ve received by his presence and ultimate sacrifice, as well as countless other more tangible blessings. I ask myself then, “am I hoarding these gifts to myself?” So often, my answer is yes, I am hoarding these gifts that weren’t mine to begin with. As we go forward in this Advent season, I would like to challenge myself, as well as you, my church family and friends, to prayerfully examine our lives, that we may treat those around us fairly, with a Biblically-minded justice, as we pass along the gifts that were entrusted to us to distribute, however that may look.

Jan. 3: Genesis 41:37-45

Reid Masters

The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?” Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.” So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.” Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. -Genesis 41:37-45 (NIV)

We are created in God’s image and that can be a tall order to live up to. We know our bodies are flawed, mortal shells that we are given in this temporary life. However, that shell houses the most substantial and eternal essence of who we are...our spirit. In this way, we are both mortal and eternal. Since God lives in us, we are simultaneously human and divine. WOW - no pressure!

In this lesson, Pharaoh recognizes that the spirit of God resides in Joseph. He immediately proceeds to transform Joseph’s outside appearance to match the inside. Joseph was given new clothes, a new name, a bride and new authority! He was reinvented because God’s Spirit was recognized in him.

Sometimes, it’s easier to recognize qualities in other people, instead of ourselves. Are we aware of the Spirit’s presence? Do we seek to find God’s Spirit in everyone? Do we treat strangers the same way as we would treat the Holy Spirit? What would the world be like if we did?

Finally, do we make room within ourselves for the Holy Spirit to live? Do we perceive ourselves as mortal bodies or eternal spirits? If we value God’s presence in us. Let’s live into that! Let’s be the Christ-light for all to see.

Jan. 4: Exodus 32:1-6

TJ, Sarah and Jake DelNegri

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. -Exodus 32:1-6 (NIV)

These first 6 verses of Exodus provide us with a record of Israel's first significant 'disappointment' after agreeing to enter a covenant with the Lord (Exodus 24:3). In short, this involved making and worshiping of idol(s), crafted from gold earrings brought from Egypt under the authority of Aaron. This was a violation of Israel's promise to honor and obey, which occurred after Moses told them to wait for his return (Exodus. 24:14).

From the time the Israelites left Egypt, they had been leading a spiritual life; however the people of Israel were not patient.

When Moses did not return as quickly as they expected, they rushed to actions that were 'comfortable' to them. They reverted to past endeavors that they knew were not in alignment with the covenant or would be acceptable under Moses' authority. They reverted to following beliefs and practices that had abused them (sin), instead of trusting their Lord who had delivered them. Today, we would term this as 'out of sight, out of mind'.

The people of Israel wanted things to happen when they saw fit. They did not understand that God has his own timetable. What's the old saying, 'You plan, God laughs'.

The root of their disobedience was their unwillingness to do the right thing when things did not happen when/how they wanted them to. This is the key point in this story!

Putting faith into action means TRUSTING GOD when things do not go according to OUR plan.

Jan. 5: Psalm 19

Kim White

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above[a] proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. -Psalm 19 (ESV)

We got up before daylight to catch the sun rising over the mountains onto the hoodoos in Bryce National Park. Looking at our map we made sure we got to the correct spot. Madame Day greeted us with visions of hoodoos that spun a story of vibrant oranges, reds, purples as the sun filled the darkness. Richard and I marveled at the glory of God in that moment. His gift of nature was so amazing – only He could have created this moment.

But His gift does not end there. God gives us His written word. His word is “better than a red, ripe strawberry,” “better than a diamond set between emeralds.” Just like the park ranger gave us a map to find our spot, God gives us a better map to find our spot with him – His words found in the Bible. We know his words direct us easily on the right path. They are His words direct us to hidden treasure. His word keeps us from danger, from others and ourselves. God knows we will falter and sin. The ultimate gift he gives us is his Grace through his Son, Jesus. As we are preparing our hearts this Advent season, this is my prayer, “Dear Lord, keep me from foolishly thinking I can do on my own what can only be completed through you. Cleanse me Lord, wash my sin from me. I want to start the day sun-washed like the hoodoos. May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my Redeemer. Amen

Jan 6: Matthew 2:1-6

Bill Cranshaw

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." -Matthew 2:1-6 (NIV)

We see the reception that the Messiah received having come into the world. The Jewish religious leaders were indifferent. The political rulers were hostile. Only the Gentiles from outside Israel wanted to welcome and worship Jesus. These would be the typical responses throughout the ministry of Jesus. Only the Magi recognized the significance of the unusual star. They knew it signaled the advent of God's son. The Magi announced that this was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. That Jesus was the promised Messiah who fulfilled what the prophets had predicted.

I reflect on the 2nd verse in the question that the Magi asked, they state where is the one "who has been born king". Their statement is that the moment he was born he was king of the Jews and of the world. Jesus' status as Israel's king did not come to him later in his life. He was not going to become king because of some future event, he is king at this moment. He is the ruler right now. It makes me wonder if during the minutes of the day, I view Jesus as king, this very moment.

Jan. 7: Exodus 35:20-29

Pat Martin

Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses' presence, and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: broaches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the Lord. -Exodus 35:20-22 (NIV)

It was a sunny fall day at our local outdoor market. Having just purchased small pickling cucumbers, I began to look for fresh dill, usually readily available. How disappointed I was to find none but was approached by a stranger who overheard my predicament. She offered to go home to pick some from her garden nearby, returning shortly. She refused to accept any payment but willingly gave me exactly what I needed. Her willingness and generosity touched me deeply.

In reading this passage in Exodus, we learn that when Moses was overseeing the building of the Tent of Meeting many Israelites, both men and women, willingly brought their treasured gold jewelry as a sacrificial offering to the Lord. We know as well how willing Mary was to bear Jesus, saying: "I am the Lord's servant. (Luke 1:38). During the recent season of Advent when we celebrate Christ's birth it is traditional to give generously to family, friends & those in need but now and throughout the rest of the year may this attitude

spill over to inspire us to continue to give of our gold and our talents willingly and as generously as we are able.

Prayer: Lord, you have given us so many gifts to help us along life's way. Teach us to not only appreciate them but also to use and share them to the best of our ability to help others as we live each day. Amen

Jan. 8: Mark 1:9-11

Adam Leon

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." -Mark 1:9-11 (NIV)

The imagery of cleansing water, fellowship, Heaven opening, and God speaking, make Christ's baptism, and first appearance in public life, powerful and miraculous. Christ's baptism is a comforting picture of His acceptance of God's will.

John baptizing Christ gives the appearance of John leading the way for Christ. A more delightful understanding of the scene is that neither Christ nor James is in control. God is in charge. Christ, through James, accepts and trusts God's Will. The humbling position taken by Christ should be reassuring to us all that "letting go and letting God", is our best approach to life.

The question is: Can I learn to trust God the way Christ did?

It is a challenging proposition to completely accept God's Will. Many times, God also asks us to relinquish all understanding of His Plans, making our intention to trust Him even harder. Tests of Faith come along at all points in our lives and God's call can be difficult. How can we respond faithfully each time He calls us?

Fortunately, God gave us an ideal to emulate in Christ. If we mindfully attend to Christ, and His responses when tested, we will get better at meeting our own challenges. And God, who has already given us Grace, will see our efforts, and be "well pleased".

Worship Schedule for Christmas Eve

5:00pm

Family Candlelight Service

8:00pm

Traditional Candlelight Service
with Cathedral Choir and Communion

10:00pm

Traditional Candlelight Service
with Kirk Singers and Alumni

Worship Schedule for Christmas Day

11:00am

Traditional Worship Service

All services will be held in the sanctuary.



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