

# 2012-2013 ADVENT DEVOTIONS

by Members of  
RIVER ROAD CHURCH, BAPTIST

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

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December 1, 2012

## INTRODUCTION

The Advent/Christmas season is the most wonderful time of the year. Excitement and anticipation fill the air as we approach Christmas day. But before we get to Christmas, our lives will be busy with shopping, cooking, buying presents, mailing cards, decorating and a thousand other responsibilities. If we are not careful, the main focus of our celebration can get lost.

In order to help our congregation focus more clearly on the meaning of the Advent/Christmas season, our church has prepared these devotions for Advent. A different member of our church has written a special thought for each day of December and into the sixth day of January to help us reflect on the meaning of this holy season.

Advent is a time of preparation for the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is a time of waiting, watching, thinking and reflecting about the significance of the coming of Christ at Christmas. These days afford us the opportunity to prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Lord.

These devotions can be used as a resource for private devotion or for your family's daily devotion. Read a selection each day with your family and reflect on its meaning. You might also want to light a candle on your Advent Wreath each Sunday as a part of this celebration. You might also consider, if you have small children, introducing a few pieces of the manger set each week. Utilize the devotions in your own way to have a more meaningful Christmas.

Merry Christmas.

William Powell Tuck, Editor

## The Good Promise

Jeremiah 33:14-18

Advent should be the season of renewed preparation. It is a time that provides Christians an alternative to commercialism that ends the celebration of our Savior's birth on the very day that celebration should begin. As our world prepares months in advance with a superficial anxiety that begs us to love those who somehow miss the point, this "holiday cheer," for all that it is, unknowingly lacks what it truly needs the most.

Advent reminds Christians of how patient we are expected to be and how important prayer is in this life. The faithful are not waiting for Christ to come, like patients in a doctor's office. Rather there is a palatable anticipation that manifests itself through the power of prayer, absolution and charity.

The Holy Spirit as our companion in this season of faith reminds us that the promise of salvation is not something that we should idly wait for. It is our Creator's expectation that we attempt to live the very life that Christ led for us, that we become an example and a living testimony for Him.

We read and re-live the great events in biblical history because the Word is alive and nowhere more than during Advent. As the mysteries of Advent are presented, we are drawn to take a renewed part in the preparation of His coming.

How important is this "good promise" of His coming? It is only important if we think that we must truly prepare for what we hope to truly receive.

Mark Pounders

## "Comfort Ye"

Isaiah 40:1-4

1. *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.*
2. *Speak you comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*
3. *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*
4. *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.*

We have an older Bible at home in which Isaiah Chapter 40 bears the subtitle *Promulgation of the Gospel*. The verses above are drawn from that Bible, and reflect the language of the King James Version. That same language was employed by George Frederic Handel when composing his most famous work, *Messiah*.

The Advent story comprises the first of *Messiah's* three parts. Following the familiar orchestral introduction, a tenor assuming the role of Evangelist sings, "Comfort ye." When the Evangelist concludes his solos, he has imparted all four of our quoted verses. I confess that I have myself been known to sing these words around the

house....and in the car....and in a few other places. They have for me become a personal promulgation of the Advent season.

Handel ultimately weaves much of Isaiah Chapter 40 throughout the Advent portion of his beloved oratorio. *Messiah* was first performed before a Dublin audience in 1742. It has been performed on countless occasions every year since. On Sunday, December 9, at 7:30 p.m., *Messiah* will again be performed at River Road Church by the Chancel Choir with orchestra and harpsichord. The Sanctuary will have just been decorated for the holidays, why not gather up friends and family, and make this feast for the eyes and ears your own Advent promulgation? Please be with us when our Evangelist steps forward to sing, "Comfort ye."

Roy Terry

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December 4, 2012

### Furthering God's Kingdom

Luke 20:9-18

If we take our eyes off our computer screens for a moment and look around us, we are absolutely surrounded. Surrounded with the latest 4G smartphones and the biggest flat screen TVs. Surrounded by charming homes filled with souvenirs and furnishings gathered throughout our extensive travels. Surrounded by degrees and shiny awards that we have earned by our intellectual gifts and long hours of work. And surrounded by friends and family that sincerely love and care for us, even when we mess up. In today's world, it is so easy to convince ourselves that we deserve all of these things, and that we have earned them through our own talents and hard work.

The fact is though: these are all gifts from God.

The parable of the tenants is a strikingly similar story of how God has entrusted each and every one of us not only with a unique set of talents and resources, but also with the gift of his son Jesus. He has left us here on earth, in his vineyard, for an indeterminate amount of time and plans to come back at a later date to collect what we've been able to harvest.

Let us not be greedy like the tenants and believe that all that surrounds us is our own. Additionally, let's approach each and every day, especially in this Christmas season, with a renewed focus of how we can use what we have been given for God.

Gregg Cothran

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December 5, 2012

### Singing God's Praises

Psalms 147:1-11

"Those who sing, pray twice." When Mike mentioned St. Augustine's quote in a sermon recently, it really struck a chord with me. Having joined River Road's Chancel Choir in January, I feel very privileged to be surrounded each week by wonderful musical talent. To be uplifted by inspirational songs and lyrics is one of the great joys of

worship. To stand in our magnificent Sanctuary and sing glorious thanksgivings and praise to God is indeed an act of prayer.

Prayer is one of the most important elements in building a strong relationship with God. He loves us so dearly that he gave his only Son to die for us. God's desire is that we do His will. Showcasing our talents and accomplishments is one thing; but consistent prayer and conversation with God keeps us from being self-centered in our wishes and to remember those whose needs are greater than ours. Asking God to bear our burdens helps us to develop a greater faith and trust in Him and to more clearly see His hand at work all around us.

The scripture from Psalm 147 states, "How good it is to sing praises to our God." Whether we are singing Christmas hymns in church, listening to our children sing in their holiday pageants, or singing along to the sounds of the season on the radio, lifting our hearts and voices in song is a passionate way to praise God with joy, with love, with thanksgiving, and with never-ceasing prayer.

*Prayer:*

*Dear Lord, As we celebrate the Advent season, please help us to remember our many blessings and to know that with your unfailing love bestowed upon us, we have nothing to fear. Amen.*

Amy Hubbard

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December 6, 2012

### Encouraging Your Neighbors

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Our scripture today comes from 1 Thessalonians 3: 1-13. In this chapter, the Apostle Paul gives further evidence of his love for the Thessalonians, reminding them that he sent Timothy to spread the Gospel and to encourage them to be faithful during times of trial. He sends them good tidings, and concludes with fervent prayer for them.

It is important that we always comfort one another in our faith, and remind one another that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and that we should all rely on him in times of trial. Additionally, we should pray for one another as Paul prayed for the people of Thessalonica.

As you prepare for Christmas, by shopping for friends and family, and addressing Christmas cards, take time to pray for each person you encounter whether in a check-out line at Target, or as you send or receive a card. Pray that their faith may be strengthened and that they may become blameless and holy in the presence of our God.

*Prayer:*

*As Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else..."*

Emily Phillips

December 7, 2012

## A Gift of Heart

Luke 20:41-21:4

In today's scripture, Jesus is teaching the disciples about giving. He wants them to understand the importance of giving with love and compassion. During this time, the scribes were obsessed with following the law including giving to the church. First in line, they brought many coins of small denomination so the coins would rattle loudly as they dropped them into the treasury. Next in line is a widow, poor in finances yet rich in her love of God. Embarrassed perhaps by how little she had to offer, she quietly slips her last two tiny coins into the collection. Part of the treasury might well have been used to care for widows and orphans; thus, she may not have even been expected to give. She felt immensely blessed by God's love, and in turn, she gave with her heart.

Today is the seventy-first anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. We admire and remember the ultimate gift that so many gave on that day. Their lives were given serving and defending their families, their country, and their God. Theirs was truly a gift of heart.

It is likely the widow never knew that Jesus used her loving spirit to teach his own disciples a lesson in giving with love. The scribes, well, I think they would be proud that we still remember them so many years later; they had a knack for missing the point!

*Prayer:*

*Dear Lord, we pray that we give generously with our hearts for the right reasons.*

Paula Miller

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December 8, 2012

## Living in the Present

Psalm 90

I love a chorus from Psalm 90, "Under His Wings." Looking at Psalm 90 though, I realize how we need to look at it even more with reference to our lives. God is everlasting, "even before the hills were created." We must look at His time, for a thousand years can be as a day in His sight. We must search out the wisdom and understanding of our God as we live in His will today.

Moses states in Psalm 90 that God has been our dwelling place for all generations. Our sin and circumstances have caused our pain and sadness. We spend our years as a tale told, signifying nothing. We must accept reality, not living in the past, nor using "rose colored glasses" to look at our future, but by accepting in whatever state we are to search out God's will in the present.

Our present must be in the divine perspective. We must ask for mercy and ask God to help us live in wisdom and understanding in this life today as it is in the light of who He is. In this Advent season, especially, we must "number our days and let others see the beauty of our Lord upon us, yea the work of our hands."

Joyce Parker

December 9, 2012

Pleasing to the Lord, as in Days of Old

Malachi 3:1-4

Malachi's message was spoken to people who had been returned by God from exile, but who had not wholly returned to God. Their priests were not truly messengers of God; their offerings were not worthy. Nonetheless, the message of the Lord delivered by Malachi is that, at long last, God will return to the temple he had abandoned before the exile, He will purify the sinners who set up the barrier to his presence and the relationship of God and people will be restored.

This sounds like a promise of the Messiah until we read in verse 4 that this promise is looking backward. This is a promise of restoration to the time of Moses when the covenant was first made, to the time of Solomon when God filled the temple with His presence, to a time when the people approached God only through priests, and atonement offerings were constantly required. The new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah is not mentioned here.

The Israelites to whom Malachi spoke could not have imagined that God would come to his people in person, or that He, himself, would be the temple, the perfect priest, the perfect, final offering of atonement, and that purification would be made through His suffering. They could not have imagined that He would offer a new covenant based on His grace rather than His law. Seeing ourselves in their place, but knowing Jesus, we are again astonished at God's grace.

Sheila Marsh

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December 10, 2012

Life Gets Better

Psalms 40:1-17

When I first read this scripture, I immediately began laughing and knew it was a cruel joke on God's part to teach me to be more patient. I am not a patient person; it is not in my nature. I am especially intolerant of inefficiency and incompetence. I do not wait well. It is uncanny how often I find myself behind the only customer in the grocery store who doesn't own a debit card and who is still penning a check and searching for a driver's license as I drum my fingers on the checkout counter and roll my eyes obnoxiously.

I have had a challenging year and have found that while my prayer life has never been stronger and my communication with God has never been more intense, his response time has often been slow and frustrating, at best. Waiting for the Lord, even with a hopeful heart, can be so complicated!

What I have come to learn, though, is that the longer I wait, the more I trust God and his insanely crazy timetable. Dr. Slatton used to talk about "kingdom moments." You know, when for a short time, everything seems as it should be ALL the time. And yes—even in my grief and disappointment—I have sensed kingdom moments, and I have found genuine peace.

Advent is about waiting. Sometimes we must wait and wait and wait. And sometimes waiting means enduring enormous amounts of pain and desperation for long periods of time. I have a sign in my new house that reads, "Life Gets Better." I believe it. But I now trust it gets better not because of my own efforts or labors, but because of the plan God has for my life as I wait *impatiently*.

A few Christmases ago I gave a good friend in this congregation a refrigerator magnet with these words. "In the end, everything will be OK. If it's not OK, it's not the end." Thanks be to God. Amen.

Audrey Thomson

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December 11, 2012

### Righteousness and Justice

Isaiah 42:1-4

The words found in Isaiah 42:1-4 constitute a poem through which the writer introduces God's servant. God chose him, and God delights in him. Therefore, God upholds him. Furthermore, God has placed his spirit upon him to equip him for his ministry. The servant's mission is to bring forth justice to the nations. By peaceful means, the servant will lead the nations of the world to obey the laws and yield to the will of his God and Sovereign.

According to verse 2, the servant does "not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." That is, the servant is not loud and condemnatory. He is not tyrannical and fierce. He is the Prince of Peace.

Verses 3 and 4 complete the prophet's description of the servant's mission. He will not destroy or discourage those who strive for righteousness. Neither will he fail nor be discouraged until he has succeeded "in establishing justice in the earth."

As we plan our celebration of the "servant's" birth during these days of Advent, let us remember that Jesus' mission is to establish justice in the earth. In the Bible justice is associated with righteousness. The psalmist declared, God "loves righteousness and justice . . ." (Psalm 33:5). Along with "hope," "love," "joy," and "peace," we must include the words "justice" and "righteousness" in our Christmas vocabulary.

*Prayer:*

*Defender of the Righteous,*

*Companion of the Just,*

*I thank you for this holy season.*

*May all nations praise your Name, and commit themselves to righteousness and justice.*

*Amen*

Frank Schwall

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December 12, 2012

## Called to Proclaim an Impossible Possibility

Isaiah 6:1-13

During the period of mourning following the death of King Uzziah, Isaiah goes to the temple and has a vision of being ushered into the throne room of heaven where God sits in elevated glory. The prophet's response is a feeling of inadequacy and guilt, but he receives the miraculous message that "your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Verse 8 states that the prophet was not invited into the presence of God simply to enjoy God's company. God is seeking for someone to proclaim the divine message. Isaiah, who was so recently rescued, now replies, "Send me."

In keeping with the experience of Isaiah, Henri Nouwen provides a description of the experience of calling in the life of all believers: taken, broken, blessed, and given. In our personal spiritual encounter we are taken into the very presence of God. In God's holy presence, we understand our own brokenness. Then we are blessed by God and enabled to live with the help of God's presence and strength. Finally, each one of us is given a commission to serve. You will notice that those are the same words spoken during the observance of the Lord's Supper as the bread is taken, broken, blessed, and given.

The precise message given for Isaiah to proclaim is a harsh word of judgment spoken to God's people who will "not listen and not comprehend." It is as if God has given up on the beloved children who had been divinely chosen. Isaiah pleads for his people asking how long must they wait for relief and redemption? God's answer is difficult to translate, but it is something about new life from a dead stump, about life coming from death, about an impossible possibility. The answer, of course, is the miracle of Christmas and Easter.

Tom Graves

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December 13, 2012

"Behold the Days Are Coming..."

Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34

Jeremiah, one of the best-known prophets of the Old Testament, was a man who knew great suffering and sorrow. He preached during one of Israel's darkest times: the fall of Jerusalem. "The word of the Lord came to me" was his consistent message to his people. Yet it always fell on deaf ears. As a result, he experienced rejection, grief, loneliness and humiliation, but Jeremiah remained true to his calling.

The high point of his message appears in today's verses. He does not sound like a leader beaten down with opposition and defiance. It is a clear message of hope and promise, of love and restoration. He describes a new covenant of God with his people. It is a relationship of love given and love received.

It is amazing that so long before the birth of Jesus that Jeremiah in all his rejection could proclaim such promises that came to us through Jesus. Some of the most profound words of prophecy in all of scripture are found in chapter 31 of Jeremiah. We see the promise of God's great love, which is poured out for us in the life of Jesus. We now know that we will have his law and his love in our hearts and that our sins will be



forgiven. Advent and Christmas give us a time to recall this promise and celebrate its fulfillment in the birth of Jesus. “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord.”

Emily Tuck

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December 14, 2012

### Prophecy of the Coming of a New Ruler

Micah 5:2, 4-5a

Today’s scripture contains prophecy of Micah that God will bring forth a ruler for Israel, who shall come from Bethlehem and the lineage of David. The Gospel writers provide the details of Jesus’ arrival on earth some 500 to 600 years later, including his birth in Bethlehem to Mary, promised in marriage to Joseph, a descendant of King David.

Does it amaze you, as it does me, that Micah (or as scholars believe, one of his disciples) writing hundreds of years earlier could foresee this great event? How did he know?

Perhaps, this prophet could announce his vision so many years before the event unfolded because he lived a life that was in touch with God’s plan for the world. The writer had obviously studied the history of God’s promises and blessings to the early patriarchs, and he had lived his life developing a faith that God would provide, in the future, a leader without peer for his people. Indeed, his faith was so strong that he could also express his hope that all the nations of earth would recognize this ruler’s greatness, producing a world at total peace.

*Prayer:*

*Our Heavenly Father, as we once again relive this season awaiting the coming of Your Son, give us the wisdom to envision Your Plan for the world and our part in it. Renew our faith and hope so that it is as strong as that of your prophet of old and cause us to act in ways that will enable Your Kingdom to come on earth.*

Dan Stevens

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December 15, 2012

### A Thrilling Promise

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

If you love Handel’s *Messiah* as I do, you probably cannot read these words without hearing the soaring chorus based on this passage. Though probably written in the 8th century B.C.E., these words have been embraced by the Christian Church and used as an Advent text to celebrate the fulfillment of the wonderful promise of the coming of the Son of God, the anointed One, the Messiah.

Such a thrilling promise! We claim it as we worship in the Advent season . . . we who have walked in darkness now walk in the hope of seeing the great light and believe that we will again have our hope fulfilled by the glorious birth.

*Prayer:*

*Lord, grant us the thrill of your promise and the joy of your fulfillment of this gift in our lives.*

Doris Curtis

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December 16, 2012

### What a Word!

John 1:1-5, 14

I love this passage, because it is such a poetic interpretation of the story of Christ entering the world. It hints at tangled truths larger than we can easily articulate: God is Word and Word is Light and Light is Being and God is coming into the world. All these concepts all tumbled together, coming across almost more an expression of *feeling* than of thought, but no less true for it. Perhaps indeed more true for it.

At the core of John 1 is *logos*, the Greek word most often translated as “Word.” In a theology class in college, I discovered this term is much more complex than that one word. *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* defines *logos* as “something said (including the thought); by implication, a topic (subject of discourse), also reasoning (the mental faculty) or motive; by extension, a computation; specially, (with the article in John) the Divine Expression (i.e. Christ): account, cause, communication, concerning, doctrine, fame, have to do, intent, matter, mouth, preaching, question, reason, reckon, remove, say(-ing), shew, speaker, speech, talk, thing, ... tidings, treatise, utterance, word, work.”

I’d always known that saying Jesus was the Word was no simple metaphor but was something deeper, but I could never articulate it as meaningfully as I could once I saw all those marvelous, nuanced terms being presented together. Jesus is the Word, yes, but what a Word! God the powerful, multidimensional, creative, genetic, verdant Word is becoming flesh and living among us in the world.

Eric Johnson

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December 17, 2012

### Jesus: Savior of “a People” or “All People?”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

It has been difficult for me to relate this passage from Zephaniah to the season of Advent. Yes, it is a song of joy about a loving, forgiving, and even singing God, and I especially like the idea of a singing God, but who does God love, forgive, and sing about? It is “a people,” and that is what gives me pause.

Although the specific people referred to in the passage are Israelites, what I find difficult to accept is the idea that God would have a special relationship with any one people or nation. In addition, the passage has overtones of militarism and self-centeredness. It refers to God’s removing Israel’s enemies, giving it victory, and

punishing its oppressors. It also speaks of the Israelites' becoming famous, prosperous, and praised by the whole world.

Why do I find these aspects of this scripture passage unsettling? Because they are contrary to everything that Jesus stood for. Jesus came to be the savior of all people, not just the Jews; to provide eternal life to all individuals, not fame and fortune to any particular nation or group of persons; and to bring "peace on earth" but not through "the sword." In short, Jesus came to give us a better understanding of God than Zephaniah gave us.

At Advent, therefore, let us give thanks for the birth of Jesus because he showed us that we do not have to be members of any "people" in order to be loved by God.

Ellis M. West

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December 18, 2012

### The People Who Missed Christmas

Matthew 2:1-2

One of my favorite Christmas books is the *Miracle of Christmas* by John F. MacArthur, Jr. Every year I go back to the chapter entitled "The People Who Missed Christmas," where MacArthur writes about all the people of the time and why they missed the miracle of Christ's birth. According to MacArthur, these include the Innkeeper, Herod, the Religious Leaders, the Inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Romans, and the people of Nazareth. All missed the Christmas for various reasons, including busyness, fear, indifference, religious ritual, idolatry, and even familiarity.

As we enter the season of Advent I am reminded of this text and it causes me to pause and consider whether I am also missing Christ's birth. It seems that "preparations" for the season begin earlier each year, with Christmas merchandise appearing in the stores before Halloween. But despite all the build-up and advertising, it seems that we are much like one of the parties identified by MacArthur.

This Advent, it is my prayer that I will spend as much time seeking the Son of God as I will in picking out a Christmas tree or a gift.

*Prayer:*

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Miracle of Christmas and the gift of your Son who came in human form to dwell among us. In this most holy season may we not be so busy that we fail to remember the real reason for our preparations. Like the Magi, may we continue always to seek the presence of your Son.*

Ken Lantz, Jr.

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December 19, 2012

### Be Unafraid (and Smile)

Luke 1:26-29

In this short passage, the angel Gabriel goes to Mary to foretell the birth of Jesus. Gabriel begins by excitedly telling Mary she is highly favored by the Lord. Instead of rejoicing, Mary is troubled by his words. Instead of hearing the positive greeting from Gabriel, she worries about what this greeting could really mean for her. Instead of accepting his warm welcome, she is fearful. You can almost envision Mary's anxious face, turned away from this exuberant greeting.

Fortunately, we know how the story goes - Mary is the recipient of God's most precious gift and has no reason to fear. God has a very special purpose for Mary. This knowledge makes it easy to gloss over the passage thinking, "It is silly for Mary to be afraid!"

But what happens when we don't know the ending? What happens when this greeting is for us? Do we stand back in trepidation when God calls upon us? Do we miss opportunities to serve Him because we are fearful and our minds are closed?

Be open to hear God's greeting and rejoice. Whatever He has in store for us is for His purpose. Be unafraid, turn towards God and smile when He calls. Everything is easier to handle with a smile and an opened mind.

Laurie Gray

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December 20, 2012

### Was Mary Psychotic?

Luke 1:30-38

These verses focus on Mary, who was probably a teenage girl and apparently a virgin. Considering Mary from a bio psychosocial perspective she is biologically female, probably not much past the age of puberty, naive and is engaged to a man named Joseph. She represents nothing special in her culture. Psychologically she believes that an angel talks to her and forecasts her future to be the mother of the son of the most high God. One could question whether she was mentally ill and was experiencing grandiose delusions and auditory and visual hallucinations. She seems in contact with reality as she asks a logical question to the angel in regard to **how** she can conceive a pregnancy as a virgin. Culturally she is related to Elizabeth who had not been able to conceive a pregnancy into older age and now Elizabeth is six months pregnant with the future John the Baptizer.

The greater message comes to Mary from the angel when the angel says, "For there is nothing that God cannot do."

As the history of the early church grew through the centuries Mary became a dominant female figure among Roman Catholics. Her status first pronounced in Luke 1:30-38 remains important to the Rosary. These words are good news.

*Hail Mary, full of grace.  
The Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou amongst women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners,*

*now and at the hour of our death.*  
*Amen.*

Henry Holland

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December 21, 2012

### Early Warning

Matthew 1:18-23

There is a commercial that features a man in a variety of situations in which he is about to do something he will likely regret afterwards. At each critical juncture, a car horn sounds and he retreats. In one scene we see him playing poker and about to go “all in” until he hears that car horn and pulls back. The commercial turns out to be for a vehicle that has a tire pressure monitoring system that lets you know when you’ve put enough air in the tire by, you guessed it, honking the horn.

In our scripture lesson for today, Joseph also gets a heads up about doing something he will likely regret afterwards. God doesn’t use a car horn, but speaks to Joseph in a dream. God tells him that despite his instincts, he should stick with Mary even after learning the news that she is pregnant out of wedlock. Joseph takes the message to heart and stays, becoming the father of one who will save others.

I suspect we can all think of a time where it would have been nice to have had something or someone warning us that we were about to make a choice we would have second thoughts about later, a choice that hurts another or costs us in ways we did not anticipate. God may not always speak to us as clearly as a car horn or an angel in a dream, but God has spoken to us through the Christ Child and promises to be with us despite our choices, offering us redemption and comfort in the midst of them.

Sheryl Johnson

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December 22, 2012

### The Greatest Lullaby

Luke 1:39-56

When Mary visited Elizabeth, there was a stirring within the old woman’s womb. “The babe leaped for joy.” Pregnant women feel movements as the unborn turns inside them and expectant fathers watch with awe when they see the ripple of the mother’s layers of skin as the child inside moves. But the baby to be known as John did more than move. He leaped!

Elizabeth was quick to express her feelings, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” She recognized that her young relative had been favored by God, just as she, too, had been blessed with miraculous conception. Yet Elizabeth realized that there was an even greater significance to the child in Mary’s womb. She recognized that Mary was “the mother of my Lord.”

Luke's telling of this story immediately follows with the *Magnificat*, Mary's song, which became one of the chief canticles of the Christian Church. In truth, it is the greatest lullaby.

In four stanzas, the *Magnificat* includes themes of submission, the character of God, the uplifting of the poor and downtrodden, and the promises to Israel. It was a heady song for babies within two mothers' wombs. One would foretell the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. The other was the Messiah.

In our time there are expectant mothers who play soothing music, often classical pieces, with the idea that the fetus can be affected by the sounds. Mary's lullaby – reflective of her great trust and faith – was sung for two babies waiting to be born, waiting for their great place in the story of God's redemption for humankind.

Fred Anderson

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December 23, 2012

God's Intervention – Riding on the Emperor's Calendar, Pride and Power

Luke 2:1-4

Recalling these familiar verses in Luke reminds us of two different ways we often experience scripture as well as life experiences. For example, just like Luke's verses, I remember the Panama Canal from 3rd grade by rote recall. But then, when I visited the Canal, its history, people, and working processes inspired a deeper knowing.

Looking further into Luke's familiar verses, we see that God used the Emperor's decree to transport Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, all without raising eyebrows. The trip was about the same distance as Richmond to Waynesboro, Virginia. We can drive that now in about one and a half hours. It took Joseph and Mary about three days. How difficult that trip must have been for them.

While Bethlehem provided a historical link to David, it also contained an under-the-radar lesson God left for us and the world. As Matthew Henry's Commentary puts it:

*“He [God] well knew how unwilling we are to be meanly lodged, clothed, or fed; how we desire to have our children decorated and indulged; how apt the poor are to envy the rich, and how prone the rich to disdain the poor. But when we by faith view the Son of God being made man and lying in a manger, our vanity, ambition, and envy are checked.”*

When I witnessed the Panama Canal's huge lock gates open slowly, I realized that the huge ship had been lifted over four feet in height. Later I learned that the lift was not powered by some giant-human, ambitious engine, but instead by God's own law of gravity using water stored nearby at a higher level. The Panama Canal continues to provide the world this direct-trip link between two major bodies of water. Similarly, Advent reminds us that the world has been gifted a Holy link directly between God and humanity through Jesus, the Christ, a living example of God's nature.

*Thought for the Day (From John Darby's Synopsis):*

*“This act only accomplishes the marvelous purpose of God, causing the Savior-king to be born in the village where, according to the testimony of God, that event was to take place.”*

*Prayer:*

*Lord, ground us in your love and help us see from your son Jesus Christ, what we need to see, to be ready to carry forth your plan for us. Help us to sense and know that your loving intentions often flow through seemingly routine events, places and people in our lives. Amen.*

C. Page Highfill

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December 24, 2012

### Silent Night

Philippians 2:6-11

Am I ready? The big day is almost here. Have I adequately cleaned the house, purchased the presents, prepped the dinner, and spruced up the spare bedroom for Grammy to stay in tonight? Have I hung enough ornaments on the tree, placed candles and ribbons in all the windows, and readied carrots and celery for Rudolph and the gang? I did manage to pick up the dry cleaning – we have to look our very best for church tonight, don't we? I bought the coconut cakes from Ukrop's Bakery and have already soaked the country ham in apple cider. I am as prepared as I can possibly be.

So why is my chest tight? Why do I feel like maybe I have forgotten something really important? For despite all my planning, all the money and time and energy I have spent getting ready for Christmas, there is still an element of surprise at play here; still something beyond my grasp, beyond my ability to be in control of the situation.

After all the shopping, all of the gift wrapping, all of the parties and socials, cookie sharing and well-wishing have ceased, the night is silent. Hushed with the quiet expectation that we are about to witness something terrifyingly magnificent, we wait. We wait for the most wonderful of exclamations: *Christ the Savior is born!*

Matthew Straw

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December 25, 2012

### A Son Is Born

Luke 2:5-7

Today's three verses make giving birth sound so easy and effortless. There seems to be so much missing from the telling of Mary's birth experience. We are preparing for our own "first son," and have found that there is so much to worry about and consider. In today's world we will go to birthing classes that will prepare us for the birth of our child. We already know exactly where we will deliver – at a hospital with a doctor guiding the entire process.

Mary had none of this preparation and support. Can you imagine how terrified she must have been? She was a young mother who likely had no idea what to expect from the labor and birth process. When her time came, the only place she and her husband could find was a barn as there “was no room in the inn.” There were no nurses and doctors present to ensure the safety and comfort of the mother and child. Mary was alone with her husband and the barnyard animals. And while she was in great pain and struggling to give birth, she must have been concerned for her child’s health and safety.

Her concern was probably heightened because she knew she was not giving birth to just any child, she was birthing the Son of God. We imagine that during this time, both she and Joseph prayed to God and that their faith in him helped them endure the process of giving birth to Jesus Christ. It is amazing to think of what Mary (and Joseph) underwent to give birth to our Lord and Savior. When reading these few verses today, imagine the scene and all that Mary and Joseph went through to give “birth to [their] first son.”

Jack & Sara Heisler

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December 26, 2012

### FEAR NOT...

Luke 2:8-11

Before these words were spoken, Caesar Augustus was known as “the Savior” for all people and praised by poets, historians and politicians for bringing great peace and order after years of war and chaos. To counter this claim with an assertion of another Savior, proclaimed by a divine messenger, was treasonous, if not an impossible statement to believe by any Roman citizen. Luke looks to Bethlehem, the city of King David, not Caesar’s city of Rome, for this Savior’s origins. And although Caesar was lauded as the bringer of peace to many, others were still traumatized from censuses, poverty from excessive taxes, ongoing revolts and revolutions. No wonder the shepherds were terrified.

Imagine being told that the Messiah, this Savior you had heard about and longed for through generations of your Judaic upbringing had finally arrived in such an atmosphere. Your hopes and dreams at such an unsettled and fearful time have been answered by this supernatural proclamation by (of all things) an angel! “Good tidings of great joy” is the divine message for all people. What would that feel like?

Fear is a powerful emotion, which often overrides the true Christmas message and challenges Christian faith on a daily basis, at least for this Christian. But Christ, our Savior, is God’s assurance of hope to us in the midst of a world that often seems to thrive on fear.

*Prayer:*

*Lord, help us to respond and not react, and to remember that only you are our Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Louise B. Mason



December 27, 2012

## The Prince of Peace

Luke 2:12-14

During Advent season, people speak of "Peace" when, in fact, there is no peace on this earth . . . no cease-fires, no halt to the threats of terrorism, no end to hatred and crime. As it is written, it's the Prince of Peace who came to bring us peace with God.

Christ's birth would have been purposeless if it had not been told to the world. The angel and the shepherds were the first evangelists. The angels broke the darkness of the night, and their humility, with good, joyful news. The good news is that the Prince of Peace, the source of our joy and peace, has come and broken into the fortress of darkness. Lowly shepherds were not shocked at the news of the Lamb of God being born in a sheep's pen. To them, this message is much more meaningful than to kings who were jealously holding on to what they had in this world. Perhaps we need to let go of the world a bit in order to receive the peace of the Gospel. We can do this by giving. God gave His only Son, and his example of giving everything for us, is a great example for us to follow.

The joy in giving is motivated by love, and the ultimate sign of love is found in God's love for us. The world needs to hear what the shepherds and angels were telling others. We are the ones to say it in our day – we can't expect angels to do our job.

Martha Lou Green

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December 28, 2012

## Verifying Visions

Luke 2:15-20

If an angel spoke to you would you know it?

People have an enormous hunger for the spiritual. While the idea of God and spiritual beings may be easily dismissed in a philosophy class, we are not so sure. Our own mortality convinces us that we are more than just flesh and blood. We hunger for hope that life means more than eking out a daily existence and just staying alive.

The shepherds, keeping watch over their sheep in the fields at night, received a revelation from heavenly messengers who announced that the world's Savior had been born. They could have easily dismissed the angelic messengers by saying: "We had some bad wine with supper last night. You would not believe what we saw! Visions! Angels!" No doubt they did say, "We are just poor shepherds. Why would angels come to us?"

The uneducated shepherds did something that educated people often do not do: they decided to check out the message for themselves. No second-guessing for them. And surprise, surprise, they found the Savior of the world right where the angels said He would be. And they returned home glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard!

When was the last time God surprised you? Are you even open to that possibility? God does not surprise us just with angelic choirs. We can experience Him in something as simple as a beautiful sunset or the colors of leaves in the fall. Simple things can

become avenues for seeing the holy. Messengers of good news are all around us if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. This Advent season would be the perfect time to be open to the God of Surprises.

Rob & Bettina Sandford

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December 29, 2012

### The Practice Of Saying “Thank You”

Isaiah 12:1-6

Christmas is over. We have transitioned from a frenzy of giving to sending and receiving thank you's.

An expression of thanks can come with differing degrees of enthusiasm. Some people say thank you because they should – not because they want to. You can tell the difference. Then there are thank you's that are special.

This year my special note came from out of the blue. A friend wrote of her visit to our house, and what a gift it had been. She talked of fond memories of our time together. She won't forget the visit - I won't forget her note. It rang true. It was from the heart. And it made me feel good.

Christmas is all about the greatest gift. The birth of Christ was God's way of delivering salvation to each and every one of us. Have we said thank you? Is our thank you special? Does it make God feel good?

These verses remind us that praising God is the way to communicate our gratitude. Lifting out voices in praise helps God know that we understand and appreciate what he has done for us. It also reminds us that each and every day, we have someone that loves us and cares about us, no matter what is going on in our lives.

Perhaps this coming year we can each add a moment of praise to our daily routine. Have you said thank you to God today?

Susan Rucker

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December 30, 2012

### Carrying the Meaning of Christmas into Every Day

Revelation 2:3-4

John, writing from the Isle of Patmos, affirmed the early Christians for their faithfulness during difficult times, but he also cautioned them not to abandon the love they had at first for Christ. It is fairly easy to express our love for the Christ-like way during the Christmas season, but it is more difficult not to abandon that love or grow weary serving Christ throughout the rest of the year. Let me suggest some ways to carry forward the impact of the birth of Christ with us into the rest of the year. Carry Christmas with you as a time of:

*Remembering...* remembering the stories about angels, the Bethlehem Inn, the cattle stall, the birth of a baby, a star, wise men and a manger crib.

*Hearing...* hearing greetings of “Merry Christmas,” “Peace on Earth,” and hearing familiar carols, Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” and Vivaldi’s “Gloria.”

*Loving...* loving by touching, listening, noticing, remembering, understanding, and embracing. “We love because he first loved us.”

*Giving...* giving gifts to those we love and appreciate, gifts to help the poor, needy and lonely. Let us continue to give the gift of our presence to others with our attention, love and concern. Celebrate the greatest gift of Christmas—the gift of God’s Son.

*Receiving...* receiving the wonder, beauty, and mystery of God’s presence in the birth of a child at Christmas.

*Hoping...* hoping for peace, compassion, good will, and tolerance among all people.

*Thanking...* thanking those who have helped us and loved us along the way.

*Worshipping...* worshipping by continuing to fall down faithfully before Christ and declaring that He is Lord of lords and King of kings.

If we seek to do these things maybe we can keep Christmas throughout the year.

*Prayer:*

*O Loving God, help us to keep the real depth of Christmas with us every day in this new year. Amen.*

William Powell Tuck

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December 31, 2012

Praising

Psalms 98:1-9

This Psalm is one of praise to God in anticipating the coming of the Divine One. Praising... You may have a song that you find yourself humming, or you might have a song that you love to sing along with another one. Take this a step further, and you may hear a song that gives you chill bumps or fills your eyes with water. That is what our choir at River Road does for me on many occasions. Take it up a notch from there. The *Hallelujah Chorus* is one of my all time favorites. I love all the various parts that are sung and the number of instruments that are being played. I can only imagine that this MUST BE a glimmer of what the “heavens rejoicing” has got to sound like!

To listen to the voices that the Lord has given people tells me without a doubt that God is with us, among us, loves us, and blesses us. Praising to me takes on a different level when singing and music are involved. It must be so pleasing to God to have us celebrating Him in such a special way.

Ashley Evans

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January 1, 2013

The Ordinary Made Extraordinary

Matthew 2:1-2

At Christmas time, many ordinary things are made extraordinary. Shepherds are honorable guests, a manger becomes a crib, and the birth of a child is the gift of hope and salvation to the whole world. The Magi were able to see an ordinary night sky and see God's message to seek out the Christ Child.

In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and especially during the Christmas season, it is easy to overlook and take advantage of the ordinary. It is important, even in the busy holiday season, to pause and notice all the incredible ordinary things around us. You never know when God is sending you a message in the stars. In the words of the young, film philosopher, Ferris Bueller, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

*Prayer:*

*Dear God,*

*Help us to take time to notice all the wonderful things around us. Help us, even as we celebrate the gift that You gave us in the birth of Your Son, to remember Your words to us "Be still and know that I am God." In Your name, we pray. Amen*

Tyler Hays

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January 2, 2013

### Bearing Fruit

Isaiah 11:1-11

Fannie May and Ryburn Stancil were straight-laced and proper even by 1950's standards. He was pastor of Fieldale Baptist Church and she was his partner in ministry in the truest sense of the word. Although they looked like a boring couple, they had extensive influence on the young people in our congregation and in the community because each individual knew they cared and they were interested in the concerns of the person. Mrs. Stancil was the young people's Training Union leader, which met every Sunday evening, and we learned about and discussed church polity, church history, and how to live a Christian life. Mrs. Stancil was very straightforward in her advice as to how we should live our lives, placing special emphasis on the perception of others.

During their ministry, ten young people from our small church were pictured in the Religious Herald as having dedicated their lives to Christian ministry. I was not one of the ten, but I knew and admired all of them and wanted to emulate their dedication. When I left Fieldale to attend Bluefield Junior College, Mr. Stancil left to become the Bible professor there and Mrs. Stancil became the Dean of Women. It was somewhat worse than taking your parents to college with you, but they continued to be my mentor and the mentor of an extended number of young people. Although they had no children of their own, their quiet and dedicated righteousness bore fruit and spread throughout the land.

Julia Nixon

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January 3, 2013

## Joyful Service

Matthew 2:7-11

The first gift that the magi presented to the Christ Child was not gold, frankincense, or myrrh; it was nothing material. Rather, it was their act of worship; they knelt and paid him homage. In Frederick Buechner's book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Buechner sees that to worship God is to serve God.

Serving God can be done in one of two ways: by doing something God needs done or by doing things for God that you need done, but unless there is an element of joy and foolishness, the time would be better spent doing something else. Often the overt commercialism and consumerism of the season blind us to the real meaning of the coming of the Messiah. We become lost in the material, the 50% off and BOGO (buy one, get one) sales. Let us not forget to notice the star in the sky and let us not forget to include God in our lives and actions in joyful service to the one who was born king of the Jews.

*Prayer:*

*Light of all nations,*

*May I seek to serve you each day with joy and adoration.*

*-Amen*

Blake Traynham

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January 4, 2013

## Seeing is Believing?

John 14:6-14

We live in such a visual world! Technology is shifting our preferences from verbal and written communication to the video snapshots found on YouTube and other digital channels. Smartphones bring that digital world to our fingertips. When events happen all around the world, we have visual access almost immediately. We can see so many things so quickly. This amazing access, while interesting, can fill up our days and divert our attention. Does all of this "seeing" help or hinder our "believing?"

In today's scripture, Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Even his disciples, who were in his presence daily, could not grasp this concept. Philip says, "Lord, show us the father and we will be satisfied," and Jesus responds: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?...Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves."

Jesus asks us to believe that he and God are one and that through Him we see God the Father. Believing without seeing is the way to the truth and life Jesus promises. Opening our hearts and souls receptively and then "being still and knowing" that God is with us is the beginning of a stronger faith. Finding the stillness, and disciplining ourselves to meditate, receptively seeking God's presence is the challenge we face in our 24/7 digital world.

*Prayer:*

*As we celebrate God's gracious gift of Jesus Christ once again this Advent, let us remember to look within, to see with faithful eyes, believing that because of Jesus, called Emmanuel, "God With Us", we are not alone. We do not have to be afraid and our hearts do not have to be troubled. May the deep peace of Jesus Christ be with you each day of this new year. Amen*

Linda Schreiner

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January 5, 2013

A Thank You Note

John 15:9-16

The holiday season is coming to a close. The Christmas turkey and New Year's ham have long been eaten. Christmas decorations are being put away in the attic, safe until next December. Christmas cards that were filled with family newsletters and photos have been reviewed one last time, and tucked away for safekeeping. Space has been made on shelves or in closets for the gifts that were received from family and friends.

It was a wonderful Christmastime, and all that is left are memories – and the thank you notes. When I quit procrastinating and finally sit down to write the notes, I really enjoy myself. It gives me a chance to reflect on not only the gift, but the person and meaning behind the gift, and how much I cherish them all.

The devotional scripture today focuses on love. What greater gift of love could God have given us than his son, Jesus Christ? Please indulge me while I share my prayerful thank you note to God:

Dear God,

What can I say? Your gift to me of your son, Jesus Christ, is not just generous, it's overwhelming. Though I did not deserve it, your expression of love by giving him to me is the ultimate expression of love. Following in His path means following You. Loving Him means loving You. Jesus personifies love, which is the essence of your nature, and the perfection of mine. Thank you so much.

In loving gratitude,

Becky Spicer

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January 6, 2013

His Secret

Ephesians 3:1-12

The oft-sung Christmas song reminds us that there are twelve days in Christmas. The twelfth and final day of Christmas is January 6.

In the early Christian centuries this day, known as Epiphany, was a grander celebration than Christmas Day. Augustine described Epiphany as “a feast worthy of devout celebration.”

Epiphany means “manifestation” or “showing forth.” At Bethlehem, and in the weeks, months and years following, Jesus was made known to the world. Epiphany recalls three events in which Jesus is revealed—the message of Jesus’ birth to the Magi, the announcement of Jesus’ identity at his baptism, and Jesus’ miracle of turning water into wine at Cana.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul claims his calling is to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. He describes the Gospel as a “mystery” or “secret.”

What is this secret Paul is invited by God to announce? It is that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (3:6).

This is an astounding reality. God is not particular. God does not place people in classes or strata and shower a few with favored status. God offers to each of us full access to Divine promises. All of us have privileges to enjoy “the boundless riches of Christ” (3:8).

May this “secret” be unveiled to you more and more in the coming year.

*Prayer:*

*Lord Jesus, may the truth of your love for me, and for everyone else, grow in me day by day, until the boundless riches you have for me no longer seem like a secret. Then may I consider it a gift to share this secret with my friends, as Paul did long ago. Amen.*

Mike Clingenpeel



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