



RIVER ROAD CHURCH  
BAPTIST  
*+ thoughtful faith +*

## 2013 ADVENT DEVOTIONS

Written by members of  
RIVER ROAD CHURCH, BAPTIST  
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Editor: William P. Tuck

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### INTRODUCTION

The Advent/Christmas time is without question one of the busiest times of the year. It is filled with Christmas shopping, addressing Christmas cards, planning special trips and getting just the right gift for those we love, decorating the Christmas tree and the house, meal planning and cooking, visiting family and friends, and an endless lists of other activities and responsibilities. If we are not careful, we can soon lose sight of the major focus of this special season. The sacred can get lost in secular pursuits, the holy joy consumed by frivolity, worship supplanted by consumerism, and the worship of the One born on this day replaced by commercialism and frolicsome side streets. We all can enjoy the spirit of gift giving, the wonderful meals, the merriment of family and friends and the special joyous greetings and still focus on the celebration of the One whose birth we commemorate, Jesus, our Lord. But that is not always easy.

This is one of the reasons our church has provided an Advent website and booklet. In order to help our church families focus on the meaning of the Advent/Christmas season, this website or booklet will furnish each family with a devotional thought for each day of this sacred season. This devotional material, prepared by members of our church congregation, provides a resource that can be used for private devotions or a selection for each day can be read as a family devotion. You may want to use these readings with your Advent wreath as you light your special candle each day. If you have small children, you may want to have them introduce a few pieces of the manger set each day with the devotional time.

Advent is a time of preparation for the celebration of the birth of the Christ-child, God's Son. During this time of anticipation and waiting, I hope this website or booklet will afford you a special way to prepare your heart and that of your family for the celebration of Christ's birth. Please use this resource in your own way to make your Christmas celebration more meaningful.

Merry Christmas.

William Powell Tuck, Editor

### **The Way of the Lord**

Recently when we were in Italy, our tour guide told us that there was one distinguishing fact about Roman roads: They were always straight. Most of us have driven old, crooked, bumpy highways. Early in our marriage, we would frequently drive US 60 over the West Virginia mountains to visit family in Kentucky. Even though most of the drive was beautiful, we came to dread this trip, because usually at least one child would get carsick. Only those who have made this pilgrimage could understand our joy when I-64 and the WV Turnpike were finally completed!

Isaiah writes that the way of the Lord will be level, straight, and smooth. Mountains will be cut down and low places filled in. The text sounds like the blueprint for a new interstate highway system, but there are plenty of rough patches in our spiritual lives as well. Low places abound where there is hunger, oppression, and fear. There is crookedness and dishonesty all around us. The high and the mighty seem to be at the throats of the poor and defenseless. The world cries out in loneliness and despair. Will God hear the cries of His children?

There are some who believe that we can do nothing to prepare for God's coming. He will do it all. But Isaiah says that the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and we are called to prepare the way for Him. We all have a role to play, because we are His hands, we are His feet, and we are the ones who hear the cries of His people. He is calling us to do our part.

Preparing the way of the Lord does not happen without personal risk. Jesus says following Him involves taking up one's cross daily. The road ahead may not always be clear and straight, but we have the assurance that He is there, guiding and encouraging us all the way.

Rob and Bettina Sandford

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### **A Promise and a Hope**

Geopolitics was not invented last week. The making and breaking of international alliances were as much a part of the 8th century B.C. as the 21st century A.D.

King Ahaz of Judah vacillated between political ties with Assyria, Israel and Syria. He feared that Jerusalem would be invaded and he would be deposed. Isaiah told Ahaz to trust in God. Ahaz thought it wiser to trust in an alliance with mighty Assyria.

God gave Ahaz a second chance to obey, but Ahaz was unwilling to relinquish his own plan.

The Lord decided to act: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, a young woman is with child and will bear a son, and shall call him Immanuel [God is with us]" (Isaiah 7:14).

Human leaders are bound to disappoint. Human plans fail. Ahaz trusted in himself, and he and his people suffered the consequences of his willfulness.

God has purposes and plans too. God's plans take time to unfold, sometimes generations. Isaiah believed that God would send an ideal leader, a Messiah, who would

save the people. He longed for some sign, however small and fragile, that God was about to fulfill this promise. The promise of Immanuel gave hope to Isaiah and his people.

In Advent we remember the promise that God will come to be with us. We are not alone in a world of geopolitics. God is present. Over the weeks of Advent, may this promise grow within us and birth in us a hope that does not disappoint.

Mike Clingenpeel

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Isaiah 7:14

December 3, 2013

### **Christmas in July**

*Well then, the Lord will himself give you a sign: a young woman who is pregnant will have a son and will name him Immanuel.*

As I write this it's mid-July and another in a string of days with temperatures in the mid-90's. With the exception of a few ambitious retailers who are trying to stir up more business with "Christmas in July" sales, I doubt that very few of us are giving much thought to Christmas while we are sitting on the beach reading the latest bestseller.

However, a song from one of my *Celtic Women* CD's gave me pause to turn my thoughts to Christmas, even in the middle of summer. The refrain to "Green the Whole Year Round" is "Green the whole year 'round/Green the whole year 'round/The holly yew and the ivy tree/Are green the whole year round."

Hearing these lyrics made me think, why is it that we celebrate the presence of God with us so intently at Christmas, but we don't seem to retain that sense of peace, joy and wonder in the heat of the summer? This Advent it is my hope that we can know that God is with us every day.

*Prayer:* Dear God, may we rejoice in and be guided by your presence the whole year 'round.

Ken Lantz, Jr.

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Isaiah 9:2-5

December 4, 2013

### **Words of Hope for Tumultuous Times**

Writing the midst of a spiritually and politically tumultuous time, Isaiah doesn't say that the world is basically a good place and because of that everything will be OK. His faith is much more realistic because it is beaten out between the hammer and anvil of history and tempered in the fire of reality.

Isaiah's time was a time during which Israel was threatened by a revival of Assyrian military might and the resultant potential conquest and enslavement. In the midst of this time when Israel is "looking down the barrel" of Assyria's gun, Isaiah is a political realist: He acknowledges that Israel will be carried off into slavery. But, that is not the last word. For Israel is God's chosen and beloved. And, because of that God will

not abandon Israel, but will ultimately lead His people out of chaotic confusion into serenity and peace. At that time Isaiah says Israel's suffering will end. Her burdensome yoke will be lifted. The tools of her tormenters will be broken and Israel's will live in peace and tranquility, one with her God and His and their joy will abound.

What Isaiah promises is that the people to whom he speaks are God's chosen people and that God is possessed of "hesed," an unfailing love which is by definition a faithful love which shall not be frustrated by the world's sinfulness and its leaders' selfish, power-mad actions. These are powerful, profound, and faithful words for those who live today in a similarly political, economic, and cultural tumult. And who are thereby challenged similarly in their spirits.

Yet, in the midst of the tumult, there comes echoing down through the ages these words from Isaiah. Words that the church has always clung too, words that the church affirms are truer and more profound than are the crises in which we find ourselves. These are words that breathe life and hope, love and security, peace and confidence. They are the promise of better times. There can be no question that God will redeem us. The question is in what physical form shall God make manifest our deliverance? When shall we see that which will deliver us? And how shall we respond?

For that, you'll need to see Eleanor Nurney's mediation on Isaiah 9:6-7. Stay tuned. Details on December 24th.

Currie Carter

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Isaiah 60:1-3

December 5, 2013

### **"This Little Light of Mine"**

"This Little Light of Mine" is a favorite chorus. I sang it as a child and it ingrained in me the thought of lights shining even in times of darkness. Dark times come to all our lives, but our dependence on God can help us go on. Being a double amputee, I have experienced such dark times. Feelings of uselessness come, but the love of God brings light.

This love encourages us to continue to let our lights shine, especially in the darkness. Lights shine brighter in the darkness. This scripture states that even "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." God has something for all Christians to do: "Arise and shine."

*Prayer: Dear God, help us to rise above our circumstances in love to others and share our lights; so the glory of the Lord will be seen during this advent season.*

Joyce Parker

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Jeremiah 31: 31, 33-34

December 6, 2013

### **Anticipation and Redemption**

"The days are surely coming..." the passage begins. As we read these words today, the days *are* surely coming. The first week of Advent is drawing to a close, and the

anticipation is building. We know the magnificent gift that is coming, yet how easily our anticipation is distracted by competing expectations—by getting it all done and by the making of “picture perfect” holiday memories. How easily the distractions of this world can crowd out the gift of wonder!

Reading the words of the scripture in 2013, I consider how the promises of the text might have been received by those of Jeremiah’s day. We read that God will make a new covenant and write it—not on stone or any surface—but on our hearts, so that each of us may know God intimately, needing no intermediary and no introduction. And we are to be forgiven and our sins forgotten, though we don’t deserve it and can do nothing to make it so. Would these promises have sounded as wondrous then, to those who couldn’t have known the story or how the covenant would be wrought? And how easily do we lose sight of the wonder of that gift today, even in this holiday season, given all the distractions of the world around us, and even though we know the story so well?

In these busy days, I am grateful for these few minutes of daily reflection and study and for our many Advent traditions as we gather in worship and fellowship as a church family. Together, surely we cannot lose sight of the wonder of the gift to come.

*Prayer: Dear Lord, who could have anticipated such a gift...the gift of grace, come to us as a babe, as God—one of us? Let us not lose the wonder—those of us who know the “old, old story.” Be with us. Bless us. Forgive us. And even so...come, Lord Jesus.*

Karen Collier

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Micah 5:2, 4-5a

December 7, 2013

### **Typhoon Haiyan**

It was a no-brainer. If you sell Toyota cars, you have to drive the newest model. If you work at Brooks Brothers, you have to wear – well, you get the picture. So after a year of working at ChildFund, when a co-worker came to me and asked if my family wanted to sponsor a child in a third-world country, I knew what I had to do. I selected a beautiful little girl named Abegail from the Philippines. She just celebrated her 10th birthday on September 23. Abegail loves reading and singing, just like my daughter Laura Jane. They became instant pen pals. So now we had a new daughter on the other side of the world. What could be more fulfilling?

But at the moment, we do not know the fate of our “adopted” daughter. Typhoon Haiyan just ripped through her village. Is Abegail okay? Is her home intact? Is she trapped under the rubble or in a make-shift shelter or starving on the side of the road? We don’t even know if she’s alive, and all my connections at the place that pays my bills make no difference. We just have to wait, pray, and hope for the best like everybody else.

Advent is the time when we are supposed to prepare ourselves for the birth, once again, of Him who will set everything right. But all is certainly not “right” in our world. Not for Abegail and not for us. Jesus was born. He died on the cross to save us from ourselves. We are busy meeting deadlines, writing Christmas cards, responding to party invites, purchasing stocking stuffers and living hectic lives as always. But this world is still as broken as it was 2,000 years ago in the little town of Bethlehem.

So what of the prophecy? Micah says of the Promised One: “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”

Is the prophecy the promised birth/return of our Lord and Messiah just a nice historical memory of events that occurred long ago, meant to make us feel good about the little struggles of our everyday lives? Or do we hope indeed that the Christ will stop all pain, all suffering, all heartbreak, all meaningless deaths, and all strife that engulfs the world as we know it?

For the sake of Abigail, and all the other poor children at risk in the world, I hope and believe.

Matt Straw

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John 1:1-5

December 8, 2013

### **In the Beginning Was the Word...**

Ever notice from an airplane window the forests down below? The trees seem to be hundreds of small solid shapes. They appear from a distance that we might be able to glide down to them, and possibly make a soft landing on the treetops. But we know better, for instead of being solid, they actually are millions upon millions of paper-thin leaves supported by delicate structures of branches and limbs, none of which are capable of supporting an airplane. A distant first glance may not reveal an accurate understanding of what we are really seeing.

This is what John is laying out for us in these five verses in John 1. The Word, as John begins, is not what we might think, but actually he is referring to Jesus, who was there with God in the very beginning of eternity. This little baby in the manger is also not what he may appear to be. He is not just another adorable baby, but one who, even only days old, is actually older than creation. The spirit of this baby shared a relationship with his father, God, so sacred that they were as one – while also separate.

Jesus, as Word, was given the authority to be God’s agent over all creation. Everything which was created was orchestrated by Jesus. All life was created through Him. Later Word materialized as that little baby Jesus in the manger. He was and is the source of life, and that life is the light of all human kind. Darkness, a disguise of sin, surrounded the light, but it could not overcome the light. It never will.

The next time you see trees from a distance, think about these first five verses in John 1. Think about the real revelation of that the little baby in the manger, compared with what might have been lesser understood then and still may be today. May your imagining and remembering these thoughts help you celebrate John’s birth announcement of Word becoming flesh – to show us how to live.

C. Page Highfill

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### A Sin and a Shame

She was the quintessential high school cheerleader – blond, bright personality, and bouncy. She rode the school bus with me every day. Until one day she didn't. When people talked about it, they said it was “a sin and a shame.” She was pregnant, you see, and was sent away. She had committed a sin, and could not carry her pregnancy to term in our town.

Shame was a heavy burden in the early seventies, much different than it is now. In earlier centuries, the burden was worse. It was in such a time that Joseph faced a dilemma. A man of integrity, his betrothed was pregnant. He was not the father. He assumed she had sinned. He must have loved Mary, for he “did not want to expose her to public disgrace.” But if he stood by her, he would be even more shamed.

This “man of the law” was visited by an angel, and asked to stand by Mary. We regularly acknowledge the miracle of the virgin birth. We give short shrift to the blessing of Joseph standing by Mary and giving her shelter in a difficult situation. Joseph did what was right, despite the risk of both personal and public humiliation.

Joseph is a role model we should not forget. He listened to God, and followed through on what was asked. Do we do the same?

*Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to listen to your guidance and to follow it, even if you ask us to do difficult things. Amen*

Susan Rucker

### What Sort of Greeting

The Gospel of Luke provides us with perhaps the most well-known and well-loved account of the birth of Jesus. Matthew's lead up to Jesus' birth is a 42 generation genealogy and a dream conversation Joseph has with an angel. Luke's lead up is a series of visits between relatives as well as between angels and human beings, including one by the angel Gabriel to a young woman named Mary.

The first words out of the angel's mouth are, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” I can't really say I blame Mary for being a bit confused in response to the angel's words. Forget for a moment that this is an angel speaking to her; that doesn't seem to bother her too much (Luke says she's perplexed by his words, not his sudden appearance). She is being paid a compliment and a very choice one at that. She has just been told that she is enriched or endowed with grace. She has been chosen by the Lord for something extremely special.

When somebody you don't know greets you and pays you a compliment, why is our first response often one of suspicion? Maybe we think they are just trying to get something from us. Maybe we don't believe what they are saying about us is true. It can be hard sometimes to discern just where their words are coming from and why.

What sort of greeting do you offer to those who come across your path on a daily basis? Do you prepare the words you say or do you offer them in haste? Do you intend

them to build up the other person or to help you get something from them? What sort of greeting do you offer family, friend, or stranger?

Sheryl Johnson

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Luke 1:30-33

December 11, 2013

### **Favored by God**

The angel Gabriel is having a conversation with Mary. He has just appeared and told her she is highly favored by God and that the Lord is with her. The angel continues by telling her not to fear for she has found favor with God. I had always taken this to mean that being favored by God is a reason not to fear. Now as I think about it, I suspect the angel is saying the opposite: Do not be afraid even though you have found favor with God, because what I'm about to tell you is going to scare you to no end!

Mary was about to face a big change: motherhood. As if that wasn't enough, the expectations piled upon her child were set pretty high. She wasn't going to be the mother of a son but of a king, the heir to the throne of David, reigning over a kingdom that will never end.

I think about other characters in the Bible who were favored by God for some important task. Abraham left his homeland. Moses confronted the pharaoh. Esther challenged the king. The disciples followed Jesus. These are all reasons to be afraid as they took each of them out of the known and into the unknown. God asking you to do something likely is going to mean change, and change can be a scary proposition.

The world thinks of being favored as having an important job and a big house, having the good life. Even some Christians seem to confuse material blessings with God's favor. But God's favor means something quite different. It means God trusting you to do something for the Kingdom. How has God favored you?

Sheryl Johnson

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Luke 1:34-35, 37-38

December 12, 2013

### **Understandable Curiosity**

Mary's conversation with the angel is coming to an end. After hearing that she is going to conceive and bear a son, she is naturally curious as to how this is going to happen given her circumstances. She is given an answer in some detail. Most commentators contrast her response to that of Zechariah who is said to have doubted that a miraculous birth would happen for him and his wife. But I think Mary's curiosity bespeaks to at least a passing doubt in the plausibility of it all. Yet she seems satisfied with the angel's answer.

As Christians today, we have to work a bit harder to discern the will of God for our lives. We are not likely to have an angel come and visit and tell us exactly how God is going to use us. This isn't to say God doesn't send other messengers into our lives to help us discover and learn God's will for us. Sometimes the message comes from someone we know; occasionally it may come from an unusual source. And sometimes we may even find ourselves in the role of being God's messenger to somebody else.



And like Mary, even as we listen to what God is calling us to, we may be understandably curious just how it will come to be given our own circumstances. We may even experience some doubt and question the plausibility of it all. But God will walk alongside us until we are able to say like Mary, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

What messengers has God put into your life and what message do they bring? How do you satisfy your understandable curiosity regarding God’s will for your life at this time, in this place?

Sheryl Johnson

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Luke 1:46-50

December 13, 2013

### **Mary, Happy Forever!**

*46 Mary said, “My heart praises the Lord; 47 my soul is glad because of God my Savior, 48 for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! From now on all people will call me happy, 49 because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me. His name is holy; 50 from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honor him.*

While visiting her relative Elizabeth, Mary uttered the words above. These words compose the first verses of what has become known as the “Magnificat.” These words are brief but full of hope for one who is or feels lowly. First there is the mention of praising the Lord from the heart. Then Mary goes from feelings of the heart to the soul and she attributes the gladness of her soul to God as God has remembered her even though she is a lowly servant. She continues to state that because of what God has done for her will result in her eternal happiness in which all people will know about down through the ages.

By inference we conclude as Mary does that God will show mercy from one generation to another to those who honor God. As generations before us, may we honor God for eternity?

Henry Holland

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Luke 2:1-4

December 14, 2013

### **Joseph: A Fatherly Example**

Luke begins his account of the life and ministry of Jesus with the birth of John the Baptist and Gabriel’s visit to Mary. Joseph is mentioned only as a man to whom Mary was betrothed and who was a descendant of David.

In our Scripture passage for today, Luke continues the birth narrative from a more historical point of view, recounting facts which enable us to more closely pinpoint the actual time when the birth occurred. Again Luke mentions Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, but details are few. We learn only that he is from Nazareth and is traveling to Bethlehem with Mary because the government has decreed that all men must be

enrolled for taxing purposes at the place of their family ancestors and Joseph is of the house and lineage of David.

Other Bible passages also are sparse in their description of Joseph. I wish we knew more about him, and, if you think about it, perhaps we do. I see Joseph as a quiet, strong, protective person, capable of great patience and love. Why? Because I believe God would only have chosen this kind of person to serve as Jesus' earthly father. More telling is the fact that during Jesus' adult ministry, when he was asked to provide a model prayer for conversations with God, he began with the suggestion that God be addressed as our Heavenly Father. Had he experienced the characteristics in Joseph that we all seek in our fathers, both human and Heavenly?

*Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus - the pathway to our salvation. Give us the faith to follow Him toward a closer and deeper relationship with You. Amen.*

Dan Stevens

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Luke 2:5-7

December 15, 2013

### **Open the Doors**

During my college semester abroad in Angers, France, I had a week with no classes, and my dad took his first trip to Europe to visit me. We first spent several days in England with his brother who was living in London, and then we went to France so that I could show him around my town. Since my dad's return flight was leaving from Paris, we decided to end the week with a couple of days there, and we booked our train tickets from Angers to Paris. Unfortunately, this was before online hotel booking existed, and every hotel that I contacted was at capacity. The hotel workers explained that there was nowhere in Paris with available rooms, thanks to a large number of conventions and events that week. In a panic, we called the French family of my childhood pen pal. They were not available to house us, but they arranged for us to stay on the couches in the fellowship room of their small church in the Parisian suburbs. Their church took us in when there was no room at any inn in Paris.

Jesus was born in the stable of an inn when Mary and Joseph could find no other place to stay. Symbolically, even the place of His birth reflects the temporariness of his stay on earth, as stays in an inn are only of short duration. Matthew Henry's commentary points out that "an inn receives all comers, and so does Christ. He hangs out the banner of love for his sign, and whoever comes to him, he will in no wise cast out; only, unlike other inns, he welcomes those that come without money and without price."

May we, like the innkeeper in Bethlehem, open our doors for people to find a place to rest their weary souls. May we, the church, always reflect in our actions how Christ has opened the doors of heaven to us.

Jennifer West Freeman

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### The Angels' Message

It is significant that God chose “lowly” shepherds to be the first to receive the announcement of the birth of the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This is in keeping with the fact that the Savior came for “all people.”

The angels' message is also significant. First, “Be not afraid.” Christ's birth banishes fear. This message resonates throughout the Gospels. Second, the message is “good news.” It is the best news humankind has ever received. It means salvation from the bonds of sin. It means forgiveness for our guilt. Third, it is a message of “great joy.” In the words of Isaac Watts:

“Joy to the world!  
The Lord is come;  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,  
And heav'n and nature sing.”

*Prayer: Loving God, in a world heavy with the threat of war,  
we celebrate the Prince of Peace.  
In a time characterized by greed and selfishness,  
we rejoice in your selfless gift.  
In an age burdened by despair and lack of hope,  
we announce the advent of the Promised One.  
In a society self-defined by success,  
we encounter the suffering servant.  
In the midst of a people who have lost their direction,  
we seek the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.*

Frank Schwall

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### Manger Power

The amazing message of Christmas is that God wrapped his presence in human form and came uniquely into our world in a baby lying in a manger. This is the most exciting and amazing story the human race has ever heard. “And this will be a sign for you. You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” The baby Jesus entered the world in a humble and not a spectacular way. Jesus was born not in a palace but a stable. He came into a home not of wealth but poverty. He was born to parents not of great intellectual gifts with fame and prestige, but instead to a poor peasant family. His coming was hailed by shepherds, not kings. He was laid in a manger, not on a throne. At his birth there was no blast of trumpets; there were no clanging of cymbals, no roll of drums. There were no television cameras, no radio or news reporters. “How silently, how silently this wonderful gift was given.”

God's coming into the world was modest and unexpected. The thought is staggering that the omnipotent God of the universe chose the form of a baby as the

divine way of entering a particular time and place in human history. John wrote in his Gospel, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The original Greek states that “He tabernacled among us”...literally, “he pitched his tent with us.” Through the son we saw the glory and love of the Father. “The Incarnation was an act of sacrifice and of humiliation---real however voluntary,” wrote William Temple, the English theologian. God’s coming in a baby born in a manger reveals the power of humble, sacrificing love which embraces humanity as worthy of divine love and concern. This same “manger power” was seen throughout the ministry and sacrificial death of Jesus who proclaimed he had come to serve and to seek and save the lost.

At Christmas time we have the opportunity to affirm and express our gratitude for God’s marvelous grace and love.

*Prayer: Loving God, we kneel before your manger and thank you for such marvelous love and grace. May your divine love enable us to love others as you have loved us. Amen.*

Bill Tuck

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Luke 2:15-16

December 18, 2013

### **Unexpected Wonder**

This biblical passage challenges our preconceptions by suggesting more Good News than at first glance:

(1) The promised hope is revealed to humble workers performing servile functions, out in the lonely dark of a quiet summer night; so God reminds us that great moments of revelation are often shared first with those least valued by our human standards.

(2) Can we worship in the face of the unexpected? These simple folks apparently reported this “aurora” themselves, as the only witnesses to this luminous divine/ human encounter. They described the experience as one of wonder, a fragile human condition too soon relegated to childhood. “Wonder” offers us a mix of amazement, awe, marvel, and pause. The night sky was already a visual cornucopia of unexpected luminous events, yet these humble people were still alert to the “unusual in the usual”--thoroughly surprised by an experience that both scared them (v.9) and left them awestruck. Can we still be overcome by wonder—surprised beyond explanation—or do we always require “logic” and facts when facing the unknown?

(3) Like an unexamined burning bush in the desert, these servant people could well have decided not to investigate what they had heard. Their interest and willingness to “check into” the matter is not an automatic choice: I find myself wondering how many significant and startling discoveries I’ve missed along the way—because I chose not to “check” them out. Inquiry and curiosity may be one of the first steps in a pathway toward faith.

Daniel G. Bagby

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### The Power in Pondering

I'm struck by Mary's reaction in this passage. Here the shepherds have heard this amazing news from an angel of a Savior—the *Messiah*—being born in Bethlehem, and they go and see if what the angel has told them is true. So they start spreading word: the angel was right about the birth in a manger, so might the angel not also be right about that child being the Messiah? Good news, if so. Incredible news, in fact!

And yet Mary's reaction is something different. Rather than joining in the general amazement, she takes the news the shepherds share that an angel has said her newborn son is Messiah and Lord, and instead, she is described as treasuring all these words and pondering them in her heart. The Greek word translated as "treasured" means "to preserve (a thing from perishing or being lost)" or "to keep within one's self." And the word here translated as "pondering" means "to throw together, to bring together ... to converse ... to bring together in one's mind, confer with one's self."

My sense is that Mary is trying to add this new information to what must already be an incredible whirlwind of wonder and uncertainty and hope and fear at what she herself had been told by an angel in Luke 1: she had found favor with God, her son would be great, that he would be called the Son of the Most High, and that God would give him the throne of his ancestor David.

Really, Mary's reaction is pretty amazing in its own right—already we're seeing her transformation from an understandable kind of skepticism to one in which she says "All right, I may not understand what's going on, but I'll trust God in it." But the notable thing for me is that her faithfulness doesn't mean that she's stopped thinking: instead she takes this next round of angelic news and wrestles with it, seeing how it fits into her newly-shaped worldview.

In essence, we're watching her character grow in real time. Bear in mind, she didn't know how it turned out the way we do. That makes her thoughtful acceptance all the more powerful.

Eric Johnson

### Where is He? (Episode 1)

Like a favorite photo collage flashing detailed images, Matthew's Magi narrative conjures up familiar scenes – a baby's birth, wise men, a star, a journey, a ruthless ruler, an uneasy confrontation, a pervasive world view, bad directions, and an unending quest until its purpose is fulfilled. The text's two verses introduce all the characters and highlight the wise men's query that has echoed down the years, striking a chord in the heart of each of us, as it moves us to ask, too, "**Where Is He?**"

Who were the Magi? These wise men, members of a wide-spread Wisdom movement, donned multiple hats – instructors, philosophers, priests. Also astrologers, they showed some appreciation for a newly emerging science, astronomy. As their world, in expectation, awaited the birth of the Messiah, King of the Jews, so did they; although, not even these wise and holy men knew precisely when or where it might occur. Without "wi-fi", smart phones, satellite dishes, or digital global communication –

these men relied on the stars. Like us, they also claimed a thoughtful faith. Viewing the brilliant Star of the East as a divine guide, and reasoning the sign to be worthy of their trust, they left their home, possibly in Persia (about 1,000 miles from their destination), and began the four-month trek to the distant land of Palestine, seeking to answer the question: **“Where is He?” “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?”**

Unfortunately, their mental map did not coincide with the baby’s birthplace. Perhaps their Star (like our sometimes confusing GPS systems) did not communicate “recalculate” in time to re-direct them before their mistaken arrival in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. Unexpectedly finding themselves in the wrong place, these intelligent foreigners were forced to admit their mistake and, with humility, ask for help in re-directing their course.

Today’s text ends with the wise men’s dilemma, a dilemma we know well: mistakes made, wrong place, disappointment, goals postponed, the need to ask for help. The Magi, having not yet found the Child whom they sought, continued their search – as we continue ours....

*Tune in tomorrow for Episode Two (Matthew 2: 3-9).*

Libbie Geiger

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Matthew 2:3-9

December 21, 2013

### **Where is He? (Episode 2)**

When Herod the Great ruled Judea, these Magi, foreigners on a mission, reached Jerusalem and quickly discovered they were in the wrong place. Walking city streets, they acknowledged their plight to townsfolk they encountered, and asked for help. **“Where is He?” “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his Star in the East....”**

Then as now, news traveled fast. The wise men’s inquiry reached the ears of Herod. Although he had done much to build up the country, Herod was a cruel, power-hungry, ruthless man. He would do anything to protect his title, his authority, and the acclaim he had gained among not just his people but the Roman world. He would not be supplanted by a baby. The mere thought of a child born and destined to be king threw him into a jealous rage, though he veiled it. To learn more, he summoned the religious authorities of his day. In conference, Herod asked the identical question the wise men were asking – though with a far darker purpose. **“Where Is He?” Where, according to the Scriptures, should the Anointed One of God be born?”**

Enlightened by chief priests and scribes, the King secretly called the wise men to him and pumped them for as much information as he could glean. Only then did he answer their question, “Where Is He?” A wolf in sheep’s clothing, Herod directed them toward Bethlehem – but with a mandate: “Go,... make every effort to find ...the little child. When you have found him, send news to me, that I, too, may come and worship him.”

The Magi must have sensed pretense, hypocrisy, and hostility disguised as concern in Herod’s words. They later recognized his plan as a dangerous plot to divert them from their goal and manipulate them as accessories to murder. For now, however, they wisely chose to avoid confrontation. Instead, they listened calmly, and then

departed on the next leg of their journey, undistracted, still focused on their goal. What an example to follow....

*Tune in tomorrow for Episode Three (Matthew 2:10).*

Libbie Geiger

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Matthew 2:10

December 22, 2013

### **Where is He? (Episode 3)**

No one is born in a vacuum. Each of us enters the world with a dated historical backdrop and cultural setting, a pervasive world view, a uniquely personal environment. Consider the recent experience of Prince William and Princess Kate. Not just they but their nation and the world (including ourselves) waited in expectation. Frenzied paparazzi, talk show hosts, news headlines, and magazines publicly exposed every detail they could muster before the baby's birth. Then the moment arrived. Their baby boy was born. The announcement went global. And, before the little prince even had a name, he had a title – newest successor, third in line to the British throne -- a title universally acknowledged.

*Matthew's Magi* story resembles a valued verbal patchwork quilt, stitched with intricate symbolism, each square connecting a new sub-plot in present-tense to antiquity. Each detail depicts the baby's birth and identity as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Every detail theologically suggests that this baby's coming – his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection – has universal significance.

The Magi's journey continued until the star rested over the place where the young child was. As the Star proclaimed the birth announcement to the world, these foreigners in answer to their question, arrived at their destination and prepared to worship him. At that moment, the Magi became symbols of Christ's coming to redeem everyone, everywhere, Jews and Gentiles alike. Kneeling in awe, they were able at last to worship the Child whom they had sought so long -- the Child swaddled in thousands of years of Jewish lineage, tradition, prophecy, and expectation; the Child born with titles, "King of the Jews", "Messiah", "Anointed One of God"; the Child we call Jesus.

During this season, when we ask **Where Is He?**, may we be guided by **Magi Moments**...that **move us** beyond our doorstep and comfort zones, to embrace the world's people;...that **convince us** it's not too late to get back on track when lost, confused, or helplessly in the wrong place;

... that **enable us** to overcome and outsmart those whose cruel, manipulative tactics would distract and divert us from our purpose;

...that **encourage us** to recognize and follow our Star-signs when they appear -- a friend's outstretched hand, a family member's hug, a supportive listening ear, a new direction, when that is what's needed;

...that **renew** daily our spirit of reverence, preparing us for worship -- when we find Him.

Libbie Geiger

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**Magnificat**

Where is God at the beginning of this passage? Occupying himself with two obscure, humble women—one old and barren, one young and virginal. And Mary is so moved by this vision of God, the lover of the lowly, that she breaks out in song—the *Magnificat*.

Mary and Elizabeth are wonderful heroines. Luke loves the faith of these women and their lowliness and cheerful humility.

We are made part of God's story not by our merit but solely on the basis of his mercy. He is not for the arrogant who live without regard for him or for others; He is against those who use people to build their own lives instead of using their lives to build other people.

How should a believing community respond to this Song of Mary, the Magnificat? It should respond by faith in this story, readiness to play a role in it, humility to receive God's mercy and the compassion to extend it. Our City needs a community that believes this Song.

This is not about a leveling down; it is about a leveling *up*. God stoops down to us, to lift us up to himself in Christ.

*Prayer: God, where we are proud, break us. Make us into people who recognize our poverty, our humiliation, who hunger and thirst for you, and then who know what it is to be filled and lifted up by you, and to rejoice in God our Savior.*

Martha Lou Green

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**A Promise of Peace**

The prophecy of Isaiah offers hope to a nation of people experiencing constant struggles. Like us, their lives were a mixed bag of tragedy and celebration with all the mundane daily elements thrown in. Little did they know that it would be 700 years before the physical presence of peace would walk among them. Instilled with hope, they found peace and the will to carry on. 2000 years later, we know that the prophecy was fulfilled, and yet still we wait for peace as if it will ride in on a white horse and carry us off into the sunset away from all our troubles.

I urge you, stop waiting. Peace is yours. Peace lies right in the middle of all that life throws at you. Look to the past and learn from it, look to the future and feel hopeful because "authority rests on his shoulders" (9:6). But remember friends, peace exists in the present, in every sad, scary, exciting, horrible, mundane moment. Practice saying to yourself, "this moment, right now, is a wonderful moment. THIS moment is a gift from God." God's promise is alive and well, in you. Peace be with you.

Eleanor Nurney

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**God Lives**

*“And so that we’d behold it, the Virgin Mother kind, To show God’s love aright,  
she bore to us a Savior when half-spent was the night.”*

*~ Lo! How a Rose E’er Blooming*

God lives! The triumph and truth of Easter is also the triumph and truth of Christmas. At Easter, we celebrate that Christ rose from the dead. Today, and at each Christmas, we celebrate that before Christ died, Christ lived. Many, many years ago, in a filthy and forgotten place, Christ came to life and He came to our lives. Scriptures says he “made his dwelling among us.” Does that feel true for you in your daily life?

I’ll admit it: most days the Word is just a word to me. But on the days when I am filled with gratitude and joy, I recognize Christ manifest in my life. His “grace and truth” are extended to me through the forgiveness of others when I make mistakes, through the redemptive power of prayer, and, when I am at my best, through my attempts to love others in a Christ-like way. When we love one another, we are Christ in the flesh, his body alive and active in the world. That is the Good News! Praise God.

*Prayer: God, this Christmas and every day, make your dwelling in me so that I recognize your presence in the world and manifest your presence to others. Amen.*

Bailey Thomson

**Wise Enough**

Such powerful images of the Christmas story: The wise men arriving at a house, finding Mary and the child, bowing down, and offering Him their gifts. Joseph is not mentioned, but the presence of God the Father is felt.

Each December famous interpretations of this passage come to mind such as the many paintings entitled *The Adoration of the Magi*, the opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and the story “The Gift of the Magi.” This scripture, though, defies any season. Creating our own “mental masterpiece” enables us to contemplate its impact on our daily lives year round.

We are wise enough to recognize that the real *gift* is not the treasures of the visitors but the Christ Child Himself. We know “the rest of the story” of this human yet divine child who grew in wisdom and stature and carried out a miraculous ministry on Earth. His crucifixion and resurrection offer the gifts of salvation and hope, the essence of Christianity

We are wise, too, when we present “hearts of gold” in compassionate service or offer quiet benevolence or bold acts of courage that spread like incense to those in need. Myrrh’s connotation with death prepares us to be spiritually ready as earthly life expires. In our “journey” we also face “Herods” whose greed and power victimize the lives of many. Christians, though, require no dream to show what course is needed.

Our interpretations of this passage may not appear in museums, music, or anthologies but can be painted, played, or written within our souls.

*Prayer: Lord, give us wisdom to absorb the wonder of Your birth, the magnitude of Your ministry, and Your gift of salvation. Amen.*

Nancy Brown

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Psalm 148

December 27, 2013

### **Praise Be to God!**

In this season of celebrating Christ, this Psalm is the epitome of thinking bigger and bigger and bigger. It is as if you wanted to figure out where to start if you were trying to thank God for everything, only to find out it is much greater than you can imagine.

The verse “His name alone is exalted”- reminds us to back up, and remember it is not just listing things that we are thankful for that he has created or blessed us with, but it is back to where it all began...HIM.

Be thankful for The Almighty, The Omnipotent, The Father, The King of Kings....  
Praise be to God!

*Prayer: Lord, Thank you for being you. Thank you for caring enough to love us and to give so much to us. We love you too. Amen.*

Ashley Evans

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Romans 1:1-7

December 28, 2013

### **Spreading the Good News**

*1 From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus and an apostle chosen and called by God to preach his Good News. 2 The Good News was promised long ago by God through his prophets, as written in the Holy Scriptures. 3 It is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David; 4 as to his divine holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death. 5 Through him God gave me the privilege of being an apostle for the sake of Christ, in order to lead people of all nations to believe and obey. 6 This also includes you who are in Rome, whom God has called to belong to Jesus Christ. 7 And so I write to all of you in Rome whom God loves and has called to be his own people: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.*

The words above from the beginning of the book of Romans are like a preamble or resume of Paul's identity and his purpose in writing to the Christians in Rome. His own identity and mission are worthy for us today.

One should strive to be a servant in the spirit of Christ and be joyous to share the Good News to others. The Good News originated with God and was sustained by the

prophets. This Good News came to us by a descendant of David who demonstrated his divine power by being raised from the dead.

Because of him we can all strive to be apostles and include others in spreading this Good News by prayer, meditation, good works and by example.

May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Henry Holland

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Ephesians 1:1-14

December 29, 2013

### **God's Eternal Plan**

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, lays out for them how God has carried out his plan throughout history to bring salvation to humanity. He reminds them that he is an apostle for Christ, commissioned by him, to represent Christ in the world. He addresses them with two great Christian words—grace and peace, reminding them of the gift of God's love and the peace of God which gives one assurance no matter what the circumstances. He notes that God's plan was to adopt persons to himself through Jesus Christ, granting them all legitimate rights as part of God's family. This was brought about through the death of Christ on a cross which gave them deliverance and forgiveness of sins. Men and women could not free themselves from their own sins, but Christ had delivered them from them. This deliverance was a gift from God. The great mystery of the Gospel, according to Paul, was that Gentiles were included in God's grace as well as the Jews. The wideness of God's grace is a foretaste of the blessedness which all will experience in the heavenly realm one day.

Having focused on God's unique gift of the baby at Christmas as God's entrance into our world, our attention now turns to understand the salvation that God has brought about through the death of Christ. This was God's plan throughout eternity so that all could grasp the extent of God's unconditional love and grace. Christ did not give his life merely for the Jews but for all humanity. "There is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea," the hymn writer notes. You and I can be thankful that we are included in this amazing love, and should never forget that this love of God extends to all without reservation. Our faith is personal but never totally private. We are charged as Paul was to be an apostle to share this good news with others. In the New Year, in this Christmastide, should we not seek to find ways that we can share this great good news with others. It is not ours to hoard but to share. Will you undertake with me to find some way to tell another person about the love of Christ in the coming year?

*Prayer: God of grace and glory, thank you for such amazing love. Give me the courage and means of sharing this good news with others. Amen.*

Bill Tuck

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**Rest and Refocus**

In today's world, you've surely heard people tell you how busy they are, especially this time of the year. The shopping, decorating, food preparation, social events, and family gatherings are enough to make anyone exhausted.

It turns out that people can actually do more work if they take time out to rest. Fredrick Taylor demonstrated this while working as a scientific-management engineer with Bethlehem Steel Company. He observed that laboring men were loading ~12 tons of pig iron per man each day on freight cars and they were exhausted by noon. He made a scientific study and determined that these men should actually be loading 47 tons per day! Under Frederick's watchful eye and a stop watch, he instructed the workers when to pick up a 'pig' and walk and when to still down and rest. Sure enough, they worked ~26 minutes out of each hour and rested 34 minutes, but were able to accomplish four times as much work, all because they rested before they were tired.

As 2013 comes to a close, let us take time out to rest and refocus our efforts so that we can do more and be less exhausted. As Psalm 146 encourages us, let us make sure that our priorities are aligned with those of the kingdom of God. When we do things with God as our purpose, we will be filled with renewed energy and will be able to accomplish more. God will surely help us if only we let him.

Gregg Cothran

**New Year's Resolutions**

*3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*

Have you made your New Year's resolutions? I make at least one every year. It is a routine, but not a meaningful one. Why? All New Year's resolutions require change, and all humans (including me) are naturally change resistant.

Change management theory tells us that the "human side" of change is critical to making change happen. People must understand and embrace the challenge inherent in change. Change requires building an emotional case and commitment for different behavior, so that new behavior becomes the new normal.

But what if the change we need to think about this year is not changing our activities, but changing the "emotional case" for what we do? Our norm may be doing the right thing, but not for the right reason. Do we still have the passion for what we do? Do we still buy in to the "emotional case" for our behavior? This is a particularly relevant question for Christians and is what this scripture asks us to think about. We know we should come to church, participate in missions, and teach Sunday School – but do we do these things with passion for Jesus Christ? Do we do them to benefit ourselves, or the cause of the universal Church and its mission?

Maybe our New Year's resolution this year should not be to change our actions, but to change our hearts to be more attuned to the will of God. Who knows what we could accomplish if we follow through on this resolution!

*Prayer: Dear Lord, please help me to know your plan for my New Year's Resolutions. Amen.*

Susan Rucker

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9

January 1, 2014

### **Christmas All Year Long**

Today is New Year's Day. For many of us the signs of Christmas are out of sight until next year. The tree is bare and undecorated. Its balls and garlands are laid to rest in an attic box. Gone are the red bows and candles. Even the leftovers from the big Christmas dinner are eaten up save a few fruitcake crumbs and a little dried out ham. A few gifts need to be exchanged and somewhere some child is saying, "Aw, Mom do I really have to write Grandma a note thanking her for the sweater?" Unfortunately, the crèche is packed away for another year, too.

Many people confess that the days after Christmas evoke a sense of sadness and let down. For some they look forward to returning to the predictable routine of school and work. This is a good time to read the first few verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In one sentence he tells us to give thanks always to God for his grace given to us in Christ Jesus. His is the gift of all gifts. All the grace and love we ever know comes from Him. He will keep us secure to the end. Our response is to be one of gratitude. His grace should be active in us and flow through us to other people. We are not to be passive recipients. The real response of Christmas is to live our lives with joy and thanksgiving for God's gift to us all the days of the year.

Emily Tuck

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Titus 2:11-14

January 2, 2014

### **Boring Hypocrites**

"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desire not too strong, but too weak... We are far too easily pleased."

*From The Weight of Glory by C.S. Lewis*

This is the type of scripture that really irks me. Until recently, quite frankly, I would have skipped it completely, because it is the sort of scripture that can make Christians seem either boring or hypocritical, or at worst, like boring hypocrites.

Give up "ungodly living and worldly passions" to pursue Christ-like lives? Boring. Christ has made us a "pure people" jumping at the opportunity to serve others? Hypocritical. But boring and hypocritical hardly come close to the truth. Christ made us new, and as we continue to fall prey to unholy shortcomings, Christ commits to

finishing the work He started in us. He wants us to believe His promise that if we shun the superficial desires of our human lives, He will provide us with better desires that surpass any joy or fulfillment we could ever know or imagine. Not boring, because a Christ-like life is a great adventure of risk and victory. Not hypocritical, because our faith is a long, slow walk in the right direction.

Titus, a Gentile convert to the faith, was attracted to Christianity, not because he encountered perfect Christians, but because he was exposed to Christians whose obedience led to freedom. Will friends of yours who do not know Christ perceive him in your desires?

*Prayer: God, help me to belong to you alone. When my desires are too small, show me how to make them bigger!*

Bailey Thomson

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James 5:11

January 3, 2014

### **Stamina to Live Out Our Faith**

*Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance.*

Endurance – patience, stamina, staying power. Christine and I needed endurance to get to Christmas morning. Patience is not something our children have when they are anticipating the arrival of Santa and grandparents.

Although we are still in the season of Christmas in the church calendar, the holidays are essentially over - kids will be going back to school soon (for some, this means an empty house again), work beckons us back, and we settle back into the routine of life, including at church. In the church calendar, more than 60% is considered Ordinary Time. Our high from the celebration of 8 pound, 6 ounce newborn infant Jesus is followed by Ordinary Time – sounds a little boring.

Until we get to Easter, there isn't a newborn baby to get us excited about being followers of Jesus. After Easter, there isn't a risen Christ or the coming of the Holy Spirit to get us excited about our daily faith journey until Advent shows up again.

We need endurance (stamina) to live out our faith all throughout the year. God doesn't need Christmas Christians or Easter Christians or Sunday Christians - God needs us every day to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on Earth as it is in heaven. We must live our lives in a way that challenges the realities of the growing divide between the rich and the poor. We must live our lives in a way that makes evident the love and care that God has for all people. But we must endure.

May we be found faithful.

Michael Kellett

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### **Being Conscious of God**

It is early morning and the house is quiet. Snow has fallen all during the night and there is a hushed stillness in the air. Only the hoof prints of deer break the solid blanket of white and the palpable beauty of crispness in the air makes everything seem serene. A red cardinal sits on the snow-covered branches of the holly tree. I breathe deeply, wondering at the silence and feeling as if the world has stopped for just a few peaceful moments.

These moments, this wonder, this calm..... open my mind to the powerful message of silence and God feels very near.

And when, in summer I witness the crackling streaks of lightning over the water and hear the rolls of thunder, I breathe deeply wondering at the power and majesty of the atmosphere and feeling as if the world is shaking.

These moments, the power, the majesty....opens my mind to the forceful message of power and God feels very near

And, journeying through towering mountains and peaks of evergreens, I stop to survey the unfathomable beauty of the land. The air is clean and pure; the sunlight plays through the canyons. I breathe deeply, wondering at the force of creation and the significance of time.

These moments, the magnificence, the enormity...opens my mind to the enormity of life and God feels very near.

Today God, I want to be conscious; conscious of silence, of power and beauty and time. I will take time to know that You are always near.

Diana Mahoney

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### **The Pioneer of Salvation**

As we carry the wonder and mystery of Christmas with us into the New Year, we focus on the sacrifice which Jesus made for us through his suffering and death. To focus only on Jesus as a baby is to miss the greatness of his ministry and sacrificial death. The writer to the Hebrews calls Jesus “the pioneer of salvation” which was realized through his suffering and death. He became “perfect” through his suffering, the writer of Hebrews declares. His suffering blazed the trail to salvation for others, because he was the “unblemished” or sinless sacrifice who was designated for this purpose throughout eternity. It was through his suffering that Jesus fully identified with humanity. This identity with men and women enabled Jesus to understand and experience the fullness of being human through suffering. This identification with humanity was an assurance that Jesus was sympathetic and understanding of the suffering of men and women because he himself had suffered. He fully knows our needs, pains, sufferings, and temptations since he was tested as we are. Having gone through the “valley of the shadow of death,” he identifies with us and can offer support, comfort, guidance and assurance.

None of us escapes all difficulties, disappointments, pain, suffering, grief or death. They are all a part of life. However we can be assured when these trials come that we do not face them alone. Christ is present with us to help us meet whatever difficult

time we may encounter. As Christians who have experienced suffering and grief, we can also be vehicles for Christ to help minister to others in times of need. As a pastor, I found that the most helpful person to ask to minister to others during a difficult time in their lives was someone who had a similar experience. They could say to the other person or persons: "I understand what you are going through." And they could, because they had indeed been there.

*Prayer: Oh God, thank you that we do not have to face our burdens alone. Be ever near us in our special times of need. May we also help us bear their burdens. Amen.*

Bill Tuck

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Ephesians 3:1-13

January 6, 2014

### **For All Humankind**

One of the clear themes of the book of Ephesians is the inclusion of all persons in the love of God. This is clearly stated in Ephesians 1:13-14: "You who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... He has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." This message of the universal love of God in Jesus Christ is the highlight of today's focal passage as proclaimed in 3:6, "Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Jesus Christ through the gospel." The salvation of God is now offered to all; the gift of Christ is a gift offered for all humankind.

The proclamation of God's love for all humankind, for Jew and gentile alike, is demonstrated throughout the birth narratives of Jesus Christ. This theme is seen in the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:1-16 where 3 Gentile women, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, are named as ancestors of Christ. The birth of Christ takes place in Bethlehem because of a census ordered by the Roman government. The story of the wise men who paid homage to the baby Jesus is clearly a story of gentiles from an eastern nation far from the land of Israel. When Joseph comes to fear that Herod is out to kill the young baby Jesus, he takes his family to the land of Egypt where they are literally refugees on the run. The birth story as told by Matthew is clearly emphasizing the universal scope of the Christian message. The birth of Jesus Christ is played out on a stage encompassing the whole world.

As we celebrate the coming of Christ let us also celebrate the coming of Christ's love to all persons; the Christmas story is good news for all humankind.

*Prayer: O Lord, make our love for others as boundless and inclusive as your love for all humankind. May Christ be born again in us during this Christmas season so that we may see others, all others, as persons beloved by you. Amen.*

Thomas H. Graves