



RIVER ROAD CHURCH
BAPTIST
+ thoughtful faith +

2014 ADVENT DEVOTIONS

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

Editor: Sheryl Johnson
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INTRODUCTION

Advent is a time of preparation. It is easy to think of those preparations in terms of decorating the house, wrapping gifts, arranging to spend time with family, and all the other necessary planning that takes place to make the actual celebration of Christmas both enjoyable and meaningful for ourselves and our loved ones. When our actions come from a place of love, even the most mundane tasks can take on spiritual meaning. However, with the hustle and bustle of the season, it is easy for even the most enjoyable of these preparations to feel like obligations and requirements.

For several years, River Road Church, Baptist, has created a series of devotions for Advent to help us in our December journey that leads us to a baby in a manger. Written by lay persons and ministers who are part of our faith community, they are intended to help focus us each day on the true meaning of this season and help us keep our thoughts on what really matters. (They are posted daily on our website at www.rrcb.org/devotions.)

This year, we wanted to connect the written devotional resource to one created specifically for children. The Advent calendar you find on the reverse is designed for children and families to help them mark the days leading up to Christmas. (A PDF of this free resource is also on our website, www.rrcb.org/advent).

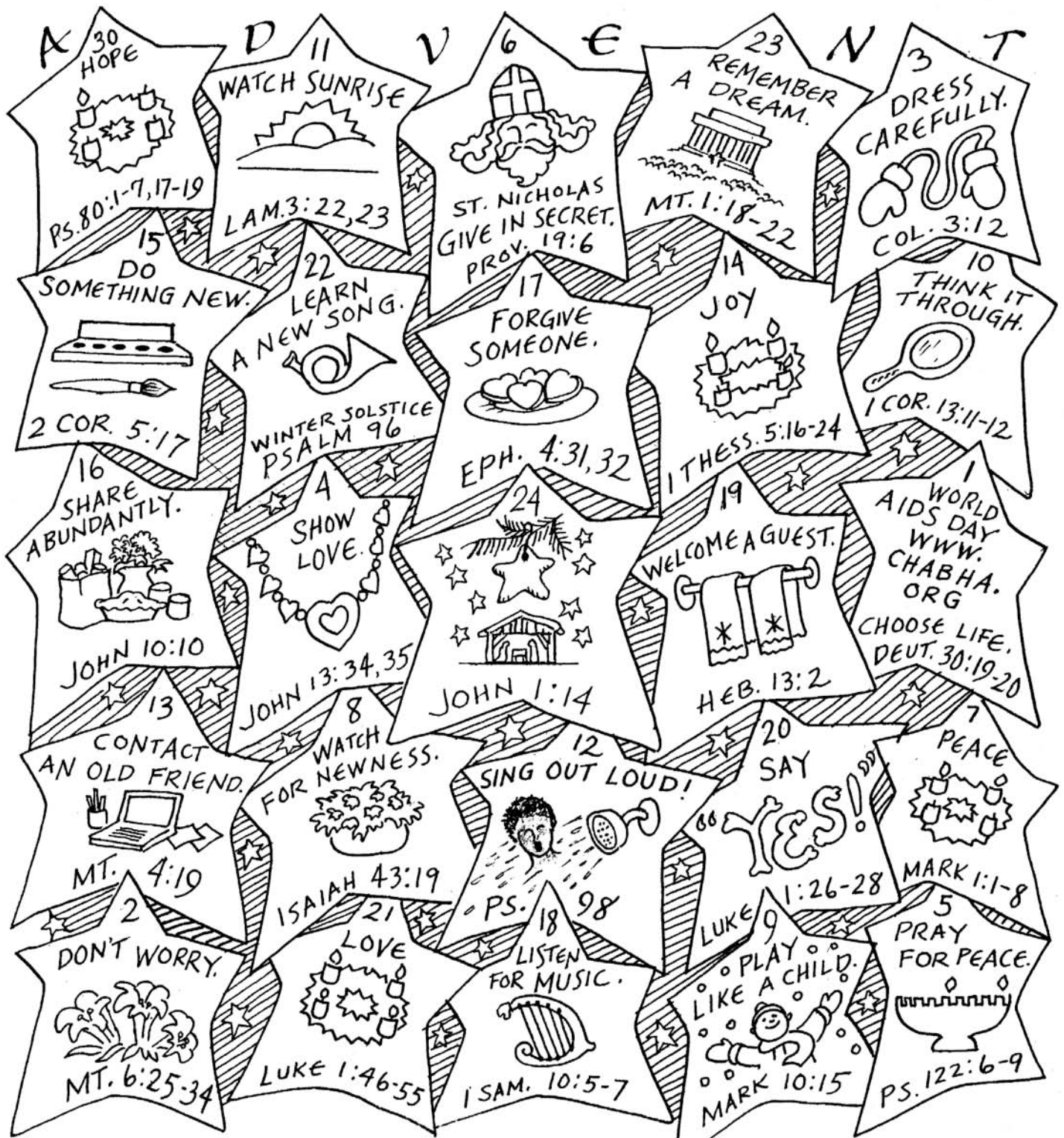
Beginning with November 30 and continuing through December 24, children can find the star for the day, (perhaps even color it!), read the scripture, and talk about it with their families. Each day also has a theme or suggested idea of something to do to help capture the spirit of the season. If your family uses an Advent wreath, you might use that time to reflect using this calendar resource.

The scriptures and themes of the calendar match those used for the written devotions. And while those are written by youth and adults with those ages in mind, the messages contained are certainly ones to share with children, too!

We hope these resources help you and your loved ones connect with the true Spirit of the season!

May hope, peace, joy, and love pervade your hearts and minds these Advent and Christmas seasons.

Sheryl Johnson
Interim Minister of Christian Education and Spiritual Formation



LOOK AND SEE THE STARS OF NIGHT- ANCIENT FIRES BURNING BRIGHT
 IN THEIR GLORY SOON BEHOLD, ONE FAR BRIGHTER THAN THE OLD.
 NEW SIGN IN THE SKY ABOVE, TELLING OF THE OLDEST LOVE
 WORD WHO FORMED ALL HEAV'N & EARTH, NOW MADE NEW IN HUMAN BIRTH.
 LOOK AND SEE EACH HOPE AND DREAM, BORN ANEW IN LOVE'S BRIGHT GLEAM
 STAR OF NEW CREATION'S MORN, LEAD US TO WHERE CHRIST IS BORN.

Finding Hope

When I was growing up, my mom's standard catch phrase was, "Prepare for the worst and hope for the best." As a child of the Depression, Mom always had examples to back up her claim against a frustrated and defiant teenage boy. I find myself repeating this phrase in my life today – at work, at home, and even in the mirror. Despite this, I have always felt a little unsettled by the phrase.

I think unsettled would be an understatement for God's people in Judah having seen the Northern Kingdom defeated by the armies of Assyria. I wonder if they were prepared for the worst? Yet, the people of Judah found hope in God to turn them back to the Lord. My problems seem to pale in comparison to theirs, but I still sometimes find myself dragged down, tired, and even weak in my faith. I need hope to sustain me. This is where the season of Advent is special for me.

Despite the commercialism, mania, and media blitz of our secular Christmas, I find hope. I find hope in the change of season – its touch, its taste, and its smell. I find hope in the year's closing and the second chance it brings. I find hope in the common kindnesses I give and receive more. I find hope in the great gift of God manifest. For in the Lord, I am restored.

Andy McAllister

Choose Life

As you may have noticed, my generation, dubbed "The Millennials" or those born between 1980 and 2000, are disengaged from the traditional church. I recently read an article which stated that one-third of Americans under thirty now claim to have "no religion." Christian morality is no longer the norm and is in fact considered strange by those outside of religious circles.

My generation has grown up in a time when companies compete to grab our attention through television or radio advertisements. Today, many people pay more attention to social media messaging such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, or are awaiting text messages instead of listening for a message from God. Rather than listening for God's voice and holding fast to the Lord, energy is being focused on other pursuits.

These verses in Deuteronomy lay out the simple message that God wants us to hear: "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him." (NIV) God went to great lengths in order to get our attention – God gave God's only son so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Prayer: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance during this Christmas season and always. Amen.

Emily Phillips

Don't Worry

Anyone who knows me knows that I have worrying down to perfection. My mind often races ahead to what might happen and how I am going to handle every contingency. It puts me in a position of trying to always keep everything under control. And yet, I am not in control.

Several years ago, one of my daily devotions suggested that when stress is high and the worries take over, try saying, "I trust you, Jesus." It is amazing how relaxing that can be. Try taking a deep breath and saying, "I trust you, Jesus."

God has not let me down yet. God has presented me with a beautiful new day for many years, has provided an abundance of all of the material things I need, has given me strength when grief was overwhelming. And God sent God's Son, a tiny little baby who would forgive my sins and take away any need to worry, even into eternity.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus. I trust you. There is no need to worry. Amen.

Mary Beth Scherer

Dress Carefully

Hand me down clothes are a blessing to many parents. I was always excited when my friends passed clothes down to my son. Hand me downs come from Jesus also. He wore these "clothes." Let's dress in the wardrobe God picked out for us.

I know what you're thinking. You want to pick out your own clothes. You don't want anyone else telling you what to wear. You haven't had anyone lay out your clothes for you since you were a little child. But remember—this isn't your mother commanding you to get dressed. This is God. You have to make the decision about whether or not you're going to put on these clothes.

New clothes (new to you) will make you feel differently. They can even make you act differently. There is the saying "Clothes make the person." Here are the clothes God hands down to us.

Put on **Caring**. This is kindness, compassion, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Put on **Forgiveness**. We are all fighting the same misunderstandings and grievances. We need to remember this and forgive each other.

Put on **Gratitude**. Be thankful every day for all we have.

Put on the **Word**. Be thankful for the Bible and its teachings.

Put on **Love**. It is not an accessory. It is not an afterthought. It is an attitude. You may be able to wear these other clothes without love, but eventually they will chafe on you so badly that you will have to get rid of them.

Put on **Peace**. Rest and security is necessary and God demonstrates this often.

Wear Hand Me Downs from God proudly.

Martha Lou Green

Show Love

*“It’s so easy to laugh. It’s so easy to hate. It takes strength to be gentle and kind.”
– Steven Patrick Morrissey*

The above quote is from a song by the 1980s band The Smiths. It was taped to the inside of my closet door when I was a teenager (along with pictures of The Cure, New Order, and various Far Side cartoons – the assorted flotsam cut from magazines that gave my teenage suburban life meaning). It is a quote I think of often, even today. To me, it is a summary of the message of John 13:34-35.

Jesus gives us a new commandment: to love one another. Not only that, but he tells us that he has demonstrated for us how to do this. I think this is because he realized how difficult it can be. Jesus did not experience the exact hurts and frustrations of life in 2014 (talking to Verizon, being stuck in traffic when you’re already late, gossipy moms, my child being dissed by a classmate at school...), but surely he saw how difficult it is for us humans to get along with each other – much less love each other – on a daily basis.

We know that we are supposed to be loving Christians on the macro scale. We do volunteer work; we donate to charity; we go to church. All of this is worthwhile, but it’s the micro, the quotidian, the daily living among other humans where “love each other” becomes difficult. It’s so easy to slip into impatience, anger, sniping, and insecurity. It takes strength that God gives us to love one another on a daily basis. It takes strength to be gentle and kind.

Sharon Seward

Pray for Peace

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” entreats the psalmist, meaning, “Pray for peace, for the whole kingdom of God.” Peace to all of us in our communities and to each of us individually.

Peace, to me, is so much at the core of Advent, that time of quiet preparation for the great joy that is about to come into the world.

I think of nations at war whose guns fall silent by mutual accord on holy days. I think of the bright star shining out of the eastern sky over slumbering sheep in silent fields.

I think of golden lamps of welcome bringing people home out of the darkness. I think of the whisper of snow dropping straight down from a still, low sky, snow that brings an extra silence to nature’s winter vespers. I think of shared meals and quiet laughter.

“Peace be within you,” entreats the psalmist, meaning, “Peace should be a part of your very being.” Find it individually, and find it in our communities.

The psalmist’s prayer is that these experiences of peace be not temporary, but instead, for our good, that they last forever.

Give in Secret

This is the season of giving. There are packages everywhere, all brightly wrapped and ribboned, just waiting to get into the hands of the recipients. All that time and effort in finding the gift, wrapping it, filling out the card and then waiting for the big pay off when they open the gifts and recognize you for all your hard work, isn't that wonderful? Doesn't it make you feel really good when you give and you get recognized for your altruistic behavior?

So why does Jesus teach us in Matthew, that "when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets," but rather "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret"?

In its purest form, anonymous giving is good for the spirit as the lack of recognition frees the giver from the need for payback. Taking the focus off the giver and putting it fully on the recipient also puts the focus on the cause.

Giving anonymously fits with our faith and beliefs. Giving becomes an act of worship. It lessens your importance because going nameless takes you off the donors list and keeps you from using your ego to build your spiritual status. You get the privilege of knowing you are valued for who you are and not what you give.

Is it always wrong for others to know you've given? No, giving either publicly or privately isn't a black or white issue. We read in Act 2 where Christians give of themselves to the needy. Charity "out loud" isn't all bad but Jesus did say: "when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets." In modern terms this means drop your check in the offering without coughing loudly; send your gift in the mail without drawing attention to yourself. Do it to love and serve others, not because you want to impress or to show what a good person you are.

If you give to receive praise and adulation, you chance missing out on God's much more important rewards – the building of your character, outwitting your ego and drawing closer to the One who made us.

Beth Stuhlman

Peace

I don't know how many times I have read this scripture, but I do know that this thought crosses my mind every time I read it. Ever since I can remember, I have gone to River Road Church, Baptist. When I walk into the doors, whether it's Wednesday nights, Sunday mornings, or Sunday nights with my youth group, I know that I am coming home.

Why do I call this place my home? Don't I already have a home with my bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room in it? River Road is my home because it is where I feel the closest to God. It takes away all of my fears, all of my worries, and is an escape from my daily chaotic life. It is where I was dedicated at three months old, where I have been

going to Sunday school since I was little, where I got baptized, and where I find my closest friends that I'll ever have.

A couple months ago I told my mom, "Every Sunday when I go to church, it is like a fresh start or a reset for the week." I have only been literally baptized once with water, but God has baptized me with the Holy Spirit every time I step foot in River Road Church. It's my home, it's my family, and it's where I find peace.

Everyone has a place like this or people in their lives that brings them this renewal of peace. It's important to once and while step back from our daily lives and go to this place of peace to get baptized once more.

Prayer: Dear Lord, even though sometimes we might not know it, or don't think we have time for it, let us find peace in our lives. Let us come to a place and be with people that we love to find that the Holy Spirit baptizes us time after time, and forever and ever. Amen.

Beth Rooney

Isaiah 43:19

December 8, 2014

Watch for Newness

Again and again the Scriptures remind the people of God to have hope. The terms "wilderness" and "barren desert" are often used to represent bad times or times when we may feel hopeless. God reminds them, and us, that the wilderness is no match for God. God makes a way through regardless.

God declares here that not only will God make a way, but God is about to do something new! "Stop brooding over days gone by" (verse 18). "I will provide water... and rivers in the barren desert" (verse 20).

Knowing now, as we do, that Christ was born for us, we can see that he is like a river provided in the desert. Through hope in Christ we can thrive, even while passing through wilderness. Nova! Good news!

Ann Hays

Mark 10:15

December 9, 2014

Play Like a Child

"We must receive the kingdom of God as little children; we must stand with simplicity, faith, humility and love to Christ and his grace, as little children to their parents, nurses, and teachers." – Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary

A child is less encumbered with the grown-up stuff that pushes us away from our relationship with God. A child is in awe of the beauty and magnificence of the surroundings of the world. We often are too busy to slow down and notice. The enthusiasm a child has for the newness and possibilities of each day is "Godlike." We often see a new day with apprehension or as a list of "to dos." The tender trust children

have for those that love and care for them is gentle and fundamental to their survival, yet we often think what we are given reflects our own accomplishments, rather than from God's grace and blessing.

The wonderment and the amazement of children when they are taught about God's love through the stories in the Bible should not fade away as we become adults. Bible stories and scripture are still amazing and wonderful each time we read them, meditate on them, and communicate with God about how we should use them.

The joy of service in our children and youth is an approach that is pure and righteous and how God has intended service to be. When we see the world through the eyes of a child, we are experiencing God's love for us in the beauty and importance that it is meant to be.

Marge Rusher

1 Corinthians 13:11-12

December 10, 2014

Think it Through

This well-known verse has the wonderful term "glass" instead of "mirror" as is found in many more modern Bible translations. Whether this is a reference to mica or primitive glass looked through, rather than a reflection in a mirror of polished metal, is a question for the scholars. We are left with a mental picture of the limitations of our physical world, and of our minds. Our perception of God is described as merely a glimpse at the divine, immeasurable One – not a perfect observation or understanding.

There are times for many of us, particularly in the Christmas season, when life does not match the Hallmark card, when we wonder why we are experiencing a crushing loss. We know we are not called to feel this way, but most of us have felt profound sadness at the first sound of the carols at least once in our lives. Perhaps this verse was intended to help explain this disparity in times when life is dark, painful, or confusing – the years when all is merry and bright, as well as the years when the quiet promise of Christ's birth breaks our hearts. We are called to embrace the incredible variety of human experience with God: a dance with an infinite being who moves with love into our fields of imperfect and finite vision.

Our best gift to ourselves this season may be to see ourselves as God's own, to allow ourselves to be welcomed home as God's children once again. Please pray that the acts of loving God and our neighbors will influence our vision this Advent, that we may be comfort and joy to those who need it most.

Catherine Franck

Lamentations 3:22-23

December 11, 2014

Watch the Sunrise

Whenever I have read this passage, the part that stands out to me more than anything is "new every morning; great is your faithfulness." This is encouraging in so many areas of my life. If my quiet times are infrequent – NEW EVERY MORNING. If I

am trying to eat healthier and mess up – NEW EVERY MORNING. If I got frustrated with the kids – NEW EVERY MORNING. It makes me feel like there is hope and things are not a total loss.

Tomorrow is a new day with new opportunities to try harder, do better. I have so many choices each and every day that if I would just take the time to remember and trust God's faithfulness, that will give me confidence in my future.

The way I like to think of God's faithfulness daily is to think of God, not just being there, not just loving me, but also holding my hand. Now that is a great feeling!

Prayer: Lord, Thank you for second chances. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for holding my hand, and please help me not to let go!! Amen

Ashley Evans

Psalm 98

December 12, 2014

Sing Out Loud!

This psalm tells us to sing a new song of praise to our God, for God has done marvelous things.

Many psalms tell of sadness, happiness, love, mercy, and judgment. But this psalm is one of praise. David tells us to sing a new song out loud of PRAISE. We sing of the power and majesty of our Lord. The personification of sea roaring, the floods clapping their hands, and the hills being joyful emphasizes that all nature should sing the praise of our Lord.

When I directed a choir many years ago, I had a man who sang in the choir who did not have a particularly good voice but he sang out loud. He made a joyful noise and all the choir loved him and needed him. He cheered us and kept us singing our best. He encouraged our praising of God.

When we hear the news of all the evil things going on in the world, we must sing even louder of the Lord coming back to judge with mercy, grace, and justice. Our lives are challenged many times to sing a new song.

Circumstances can change everything for us. In my case, the loss of my legs because of a heparin allergy changed my whole life and the lives of those close to me. We've all had to adjust and plan a different way. But we still sing a song of praise, for we know God is with us and will help us meet the challenges. We sing a new song to God. We depend on God and God has never left us. Family and friends encourage us, and we are happy in God, our Lord and Savior.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for the new song we sing. May we make a joyful noise, so others may hear and know that you are our Lord of mercy, grace, and justice. Amen.

Joyce Parker

Matthew 4:19

December 13, 2014

Contact an Old Friend

“Make new friends, but the keep the old, one is silver and the other is gold” is a line from a Girl Scout song that I learned as a child. It is so true: friends are treasures, and old ones are truly gold.

I have a dear friend who I have known since kindergarten. She is the kind of friend that even if you haven’t seen each other in a long time, you can still pick up where you left off as if no time has gone by. She is has a personality that makes you feel comfortable and she has the most entertaining stories. She will make you laugh until you cry.

I hadn’t seen my friend in awhile when she gave me a call back in September 2013. She called me because she had heard that my dad wasn’t doing well, and she wondered if there was any way she could help. She asked if she and her mom could visit my mom since my mom was probably lonely with my dad in the hospital or nursing home. They visited my mom on several occasions that month. My mom enjoyed those visits as they spent time sharing stories and laughter.

During the week of my father’s death and funeral, she helped our family in so many ways. She spent some of the evenings with my mom as the rest of us dealt with family obligations and funeral arrangements. She was with us during the visitations and funeral and became a rock for all of us to lean on. Her friendship is truly a gift from God. This reminds me to be a “fisher of people” and contact an old friend as you may be a gift from God to them.

Sandy Rooney

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 14, 2014

Joy

At a young age I was told “Jesus wept” is the shortest sentence in the Bible. But for brevity, no single verse can top 1 Thessalonians 5:16: “Rejoice always.”

Paul isn’t known for brevity. My English teachers might have marked his compositions with a red pencil for run on sentences, but not the conclusion to his first letter to the church at Thessalonica. Here he strings together a rat-a-tat-tat series of succinct admonitions of encouragement. One commentator calls them “a chain of jewels of good advice.”

We probably can’t escape the image of presents under the Christmas tree during Advent. So for today let’s take a clue from them. It is said, “The best gifts come in small packages.” 1 Thess. 5:16 is one of them: “Rejoice always.”

If things are going well for us, especially during this season of the year, that encouragement might seem like a simple matter. However, not everyone fits into the “ho-ho-ho” frame of mind. If problems, troubles, or sadness cloud our way, what do we do?

Back in the Baptist church I grew up in, one of the ladies’ Sunday School class was the Joy Class. A framed piece of embroidery hung on their wall:

Jesus
Others
Yourself

Advent offers a myriad of opportunities to focus on and worship Jesus: the special worship services here and throughout the community, the bookshelves and web sites bulging with Advent materials, this daily Advent devotional itself. Advent simply lends itself to focus on Jesus.

Similarly, opportunities to be of service to others abound this time of year. The number of potential recipients of our Christian concern, compassion, and cheer is limitless, as are the ways in which we can demonstrate them.

I have to think Paul would have appreciated those three words on the ladies' classroom wall. You see, when we focus on "J" and serve "O," "Y" takes care of itself.

Scott Leake

2 Corinthians 5:17

December 15, 2014

Do Something New

As I ponder this passage, the following words come to mind: forgiveness, beginnings, endings, closing out the old, starting new, fresh, clean, excitement, reflection, blessings, thankful, resolutions, serving, love.

I interpret this passage to mean that if you have Christ in your heart, you have new opportunities for life, love, blessings, and new beginnings. We can put the past behind us and start new each day. What a blessing!

I believe that this grace and love we are given by God is something that happens daily, not just at the start of the new year. I am very thankful for this daily gift to close out the old and pursue the new each day, living life to the fullest with God by my side.

Adds Parker Bradley:

To me, this verse means old times have passed, but we are in the present, so now is the time to act and share the love of Christ.

Bromby Bradley

John 10:10

December 16, 2014

Share Abundantly

As I write this, my father is in the hospital and seriously ill. Like the thief that comes in the night, it seems that overnight he has been robbed of both his physical and mental health. While I am saddened by his decline, at this Advent Season I find solace in knowing that Christ came to this world so that we might have abundant life. I know that when my father's earthly time is done, because of the promise of Christ he will experience a full life beyond the confines of his hospital bed.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son. At this Advent time we look forward to once again celebrating his holy birth. We thank you for Jesus and the opportunity we have to experience a full and eternal life through him. Amen.

Forgive Someone

Several years ago I found myself in a situation in which I was treated unfairly. In a big way. A stunningly, breathtakingly, life-changing way. At forty-something, I hadn't really had much experience with this sort of thing (I know, I've been lucky), and it threw me for a loop. For a while, I was beside myself with anger and indignation.

During that time, I heard a country song on the radio:

"So I listened to the preacher as he told me what to do

He said you can't go hating others who have done wrong to you.

Sometimes we get angry, but we must not condemn.

Let the good Lord do His job and you just pray for them.

I pray your brakes go out runnin' down a hill

I pray a flowerpot falls from a windowsill and knocks you in the head like I'd like to..."¹

Wait, what? That wasn't what I expected to hear! The irony of the lyrics made me laugh out loud, and I felt better than I had in a long time!

Still, there was nothing I could do to change my situation, and I knew that bitterness and revenge were not God's way. The only way for me to move forward would be to forgive. God gives us admonitions throughout the New Testament through Jesus and his disciples. I believe these are not just rules to take the fun out of life and to make things difficult, but that they are meant to protect us from all kinds of heartache.

In this instance, forgiving makes me a healthier, happier person. It is good for my blood pressure and all of the relationships in my life, especially my relationship with God.

It isn't easy, and I'm not always successful, but it's what God expects me to try to do. And if I need an irreverent laugh to get me through some days, I think God is o.k. with that, too!

Prayer: Dear God, Help me to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving of all those who cross my path. Amen.

Karen West

P.S. My husband would like me to mention that it wasn't him!

[1] Lyrics to "Pray for You" by Jaron Lowenstein

In September I attended the memorial service of one of my most influential professors at Hollins University, Professor Eric Trethewey. It was important for me to attend as I worked closely with him for the better part of three years. He was my honors' thesis advisor senior year and my professor for both Romantic Poetry and Modern Poetry.

Why had this grumpy, albeit brilliant, intimating professor made such a lasting impact? In September, I would have said that through his teaching, I gained a sense of self. After reflecting on this devotion and 1 Samuel, I would say that through poetry I found a way to worship God.

I share a world view with the romantic poets, Wordsworth in particular. I love the idea of an interconnectedness of the world. Through the lyrical, naturalist language of the romantic poets, I found a place to worship. The language of these poems is nourishment for my soul. It shows what I need to be spiritually sustained.

And then I took the moderns, the brutal foil to the beauty I find in Wordsworth, Shelly, Byron, and Keates. The rose colored glasses Wordsworth gave me were caustically stripped away by Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliott. (Thinking about them gives me anxiety.) They show what causes me to shut down, close off, become defensive.

Close study of the Romantics were my group of prophets. The spirit of the Lord did indeed come on me with power. I became a different person. What a gift! Thank you, Professor.

Miggie Mustian

Hebrews 13:2

December 19, 2014

Welcome a Guest

One of the ancient and widely-practiced customs was hospitality. Early in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Lot, and Manoah (Samson's father), each of whom entertained angels unaware. We find numerous examples in the early church. In our passage for today, the author encourages his readers to mutual love and hospitality.

Recently I prepared a partial list of the ministries of the Board of Missions. The list quickly numbered more than 20 items: feeding the homeless, helping provide a camp experience for underprivileged inner-city children, CARITAS, medical trips to Panama, building ramps for the disabled, working in the schools of depressed neighborhoods, encouraging and ministering to those on Indian reservations, reaching out to college students, Meals on Wheels, ESL, supporting the local food bank, providing food and clothes for the three Richmond Baptist Centers to distribute, preparing Thanksgiving boxes for needy families, visiting prisoners. Even this small portion of the list makes it clear that River Road Church is showing hospitality to strangers.

And of course, the Biblical writer tacks on, "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Again and again I hear members of our church talk about those "God-moments" and the personal blessings that happen in the midst of these various ministries. Entertaining angels? Perhaps.

Bob Shoemake

Say “Yes!”

Mary was a young, poor, citizen of Nazareth, a town located a long way from Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life and worship. These characteristics would make her seem to be unusable by God for a major task. Yet she was chosen as the instrument to bring the Messiah into the world. Mary did not ask for or seek this role in God’s plans.

You may feel that your ability, experience, or education make you an unlikely candidate for God’s service. Don’t limit God’s choices—God can use you if you trust the Lord. God shows God’s favor to those who are humble and receptive to God’s word.

If we say “No” to God’s call long enough, we stop hearing it. Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor explained it this way. “You can say ‘No’ to life, you can say ‘No’ to a miracle, but if you do, rest assured no angels will trouble you ever again” (p. 29, *Herald*, Sept./Oct. 2014).

We honor Mary because she said “**YES**” when God called. May we do likewise when our summons comes.

Kitty Davis

Love

My first vivid impression hearing Mary’s Magnificat and approaching some understanding of these powerful words was in the summer of 1989. My husband and I spent a month in Oxford, England. Each day at 6 o’clock we walked to Christ Church Cathedral to participate in Evensong.

It was a new and different type of worship service for us Baptists, but we soon became enthralled with the ritual. Each sung Psalm became our prayer for the day. Mary’s “Magnificat” and the prayer of Simeon, the “Nunc Dimittis,” were sung at each service. To this day I never hear these words from the first chapter of Luke that my mind doesn’t take me back to the lilting soprano voices of the boys choir singing in that grand cathedral.

These verses have such power and majesty as they unfold that one can get quite swept along with the beauty and blessing and fail to see the radical change that will unfold with the coming of the Messiah. These words spell out the revolution and the dramatic change society should experience:

“he has scattered the proud...”

“he has exalted those of low degree...”

“he has filled the hungry...”

“the rich he has sent away empty...”

It is easy in this season to focus only on the beauty and sweetness of the baby in Bethlehem, but the “Magnificat” calls us quickly to realize the change and commitment this baby will bring to all of us. The love that Jesus calls us to is not the usual sentimental love that seems easy and appealing but a revolutionary love that changes everything.

Emily Tuck

Psalm 96

December 22, 2014

Learn A New Song

Music has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Piano, singing, theater-all have shaped the person who I am today. Music speaks to the very core of my being, allowing me to fully be the person God has created me to be. But it wasn't too long ago that I found myself without a song to sing, without a note to hum. This was largely in part of the major transitions that have occurred in my life over the last two years. In the past when things got tough, I still had my music to lean on, to give me strength and guidance to help me through those dark hours. But lately, the music has fallen silent and it has been hard for me to find my voice. Will I ever find it again?

What if I am trying to sing an old song to a tune that doesn't make sense anymore? What if the words of my song are no longer relevant? What if it is time to sing a new song, making way for more exciting and wonderful things to occur?

But I cannot even begin to learn this new song if I don't first acknowledge the composer of this piece. As the psalmist says, God is worthy to be praised, and it is God who has given me a voice, who has given me the ability to be all I can be. It is now my turn to take this song and have the performance of a lifetime.

This Advent season, as we await the birth of the Christ child, let us all find our voices, and maybe even learn a new song or two that will allow us to bring the Kingdom of God here to earth as it is in heaven.

Christine Kellett

Matthew 1:18-22

December 23, 2014

Remembering a Dream

Most of us have big plans during this season. Some are looking forward to spending time with family, some are anticipating the exchange of gifts, and some are looking forward to big meals and football. What happens, though, when our best-laid plans are interrupted? A fight between family members, the wrong toy bought for your kids, weather problems, sickness, and many other things can interrupt our plans and steer us away from what we believe is important.

Joseph's plans were interrupted in a huge way. He went from planning the rest of his life together with Mary to planning their divorce. And then he had a dream. A dream that helped him understand what God wanted for him and his family.

In the midst of uncertainty and what must have seemed like a life turned completely upside down, Joseph listened to God. While not many of us receive the

specific advice from God that Joseph got, it can help us to remember that not even he knew what to do without God's help. In the midst of small and large interruptions in life, if we take the time to listen to God, to see things from a different perspective than our own, we can often learn more about ourselves and our relationship to God.

Will Thorne

John 1:14

December 24, 2014

Christmas Eve

In his Prologue, John paints a majestic picture of the Word and God. Some scholars believe that this prologue was most likely an early Christian hymn. It soars like music. It literally seems to sing. As the writer depicts the Word in grand pictures and images, our spirits are lifted by the splendor of his declarations about God and the Word. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh."

On Christmas Eve, we anticipate the celebration once again of the birth of Jesus. Jesus was a human being. The Gospel of John declares, "The Word became flesh." Flesh. The Word became a human being and dwelt among us. In the Greek, "dwelt among us" literally means "He pitched his tent among us" or "He tabernacled with us."

Raymond Brown, the New Testament scholar, observes that the Johannine concept of "pitching his tent" is rooted in the ancient Israelite view of God dwelling with God's people in the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle represented the localized presence of God with God's people. Ezekiel and other prophets predicted that one day God would make God's dwelling with God's people forever (Ezekiel 43:7). "When the Prologue proclaims that the Word made his dwelling among men and women, we are being told that the flesh of Jesus Christ is the new localization of God's presence on earth, and that Jesus is the replacement of the ancient Tabernacle." No longer will God dwell in tents or in the temple, but God tabernacles in Jesus Christ. Our understanding of the Incarnation begins by focusing on the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Let's prepare on this Christmas Eve to proclaim and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. Kneel before the mystery of the birth of the Incarnate One.

Bill Tuck

Luke 2:1-20

December 25, 2014

Christmas Day

Despite the late hour, sleep comes slowly to me following the midnight dismissal of our Christmas Eve service. The crowds of worshippers, the carols sung, scriptures heard, and hugs given and received energize me.

I am awake early on Christmas morning, brewing a cup of hot tea and waiting for our house to join me as I am warmed by gas logs.

I have never been able to sleep on Christmas morning. When I was a child it was because I was wide-eyed in anticipation of what lay beneath tissue paper and colored

ribbon. When I was a young adult it was because I could not wait to see how my wife or son would react to my gifts for them.

Sleep eludes me now because I am continuing to rediscover a deeper meaning for the day—with God there are new possibilities.

In his book *A Pilgrim People*, John Westerhoff, III expresses this sentiment: “At Christmas we experience the eternal promise of new possibilities. We are birthed again in our hearts and in our history, because of our faith that God has entered human history and become one of us.”

If you read this on Christmas morning, know that I will be sitting in my chair next to a warming fire, mug of tea in hand, pondering the possibilities of a world where we do not journey alone, a world filled with wonder and angels, a world invaded by a God who promises to make all things new. The sign of this hopeful promise is Jesus.

Prayer: Enliven our day with Your presence, O Christ, even as you filled the world with possibilities when You entered it on this day long ago. Be with me, Lord Jesus, and let me be with You as your faithful disciple, today and always. Amen.

Mike Clingenpeel