

# Waiting

St. Stephen's of the Valley 2017 Advent Devotional

With each passing year, the holiday season seems to come around much faster than the last. It's a slippery slope that quickly slides into frantically searching for the perfect gifts, planning gatherings for family and friends, and making sure all the decorations and light displays are just right. While this type of preparation is all well and good, our focus should be on the birth of the Christ Child. Jesus was God's gift to us all, one that is still with us each and every day. Therefore, we present this Advent devotional written by various members of St. Stephen's of the Valley. Christmas is perhaps the busiest time of the year, but we hope this devotional will fill your heart with peace and remind you why it's also the most wonderful time of the year.

To use this devotional, please open with prayer. There is a devotion written for each day of Advent, beginning on December 3rd. On each day, please read the scripture lesson at the top of each page, and then follow up with reading the devotion itself. Take your time to reflect on the Bible reading as well as the devotion itself. Conclude your devotion time in prayer.

As you read through this devotional, may God fully bless your Advent preparation in that you may be reminded of the greatest gift we could ever receive, born in a lowly manger in Bethlehem. Have a blessed and joyful Christmas celebration!

*Your brothers and sisters in Christ of  
St. Stephen's of the Valley Lutheran Church  
Palmdale, California  
Advent 2017*

December 3

## Please Read Isaiah 64:1-9

*“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.”*

-Isaiah 64:8

We live in a very incredible time. A time in which landing humans on another celestial body, the Moon, is taken for granted. A time in which diseases that affected large regions of the known world, the Black Plague for one, is essentially no more. A time in which our brokenness is revealed in dramatic ways: mass shootings and scandals seemingly coming to light every day. What one age or generation would call incredible or impossible is commonplace to another.

People of faith look toward God for the incredible. God is the one who does incredible things in the world. Isaiah 64 speaks of God coming down so mountains would quake and nations would tremble. God has and will again do such incredible things. We have difficulty experiencing the incredible from God because we want to explain how/why events happen. We want answers and believe that with enough thought and work, we will find them. Isaiah also knows this and realizes that way of thinking got Israel where they are right now...exiled to Babylon.

Israel trusted too much in their own abilities that they forgot about God's incredible promise to be with them for all time. We continue to trust that we are smart enough, good enough, and will work hard enough to find the answers to the tough questions of life, the universe, and everything in it. We cannot. God is the one who created us, which is incredible. God calls us to care for creation and each other, which is incredible. God has promised to be with us for all time (Emmanuel), which is incredible.

God is not done with us yet, hence why Isaiah states that, “we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand.” (64:8) With all of the incredible things that we have accomplished and all the incredible left to do, may Advent remind us of the promise of God; that we are not alone in experiencing the incredible, the birth of God’s son Jesus, who will be called Christ.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

## Please Read Micah 4:1-5

*“He shall judge between many peoples,  
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more...”*

-Micah 4:3

In the focus verse shown above, Micah is describing a world of peace, a wonderful future that is in store for the world. During the time Micah lived (between 740-700 B.C.), Israel was split into two nations, North and South, and he had seen brutal war break out between these two nations. On both sides there was religious corruption, idolatry, Baal worship, child sacrifice, magic and sorcery, along with other kinds of sin that destroyed families: dishonesty, bribery, injustice, and distrust. Yet, he is able to give one of the clearest predictions of the Messiah who would come to save Israel and of the tremendous future God is planning for the world, a world no longer in war.

It's been a couple thousand years since Micah's prediction of a peaceful world. However, there are still wars all over the world. In fact, all throughout history there's been one nation/country/state warring against another nation/country/state almost without ceasing. Evil and violence keep creeping in all around us: mass shootings, child and elder abuse, social injustice of all types, to name a few.

The mission and message of the prophets was to try to save us from idolatry and wickedness, to offer an image of what was to come and who was to come. Micah gave us a gift, this special insight of what God is planning, but it is without any timeline. As such, this presents us with a challenge of faith.

The human spirit is a mix of pride, confidence, arrogance, self-love, self-loathing, jealousy, perverseness, rebelliousness, impulsiveness, and a host of fears, weaknesses, and emotions.

We are all intent on gaining something, being first, or standing our ground. Which brings about dissensions and dissensions bring about fighting. Therefore, the question becomes, do we study to do good and to perform the duties of love towards our neighbors, or do we acknowledge our human imperfection and follow our own nature secure in the knowledge that God is going to bring peace to the world in spite of our humanness?

Philip Yancey wrote, “It takes an extra measure of faith to endure with patience and obedience the long hours or years that precede whatever future you know about in advance.” He then went on to say, “we can exploit God’s promises [or] we can live in a spirit of gratitude, secure enough in God’s love to follow him faithfully.”

Micah’s prediction of a Messiah was fulfilled 700 years later in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus. We don’t know when his prediction of a peaceful world will be fulfilled. It’s like a mountain range on the hazy horizon; we know it is there, but it difficult to determine how far away it is.

Micah 4:2 says, “...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” This passage seems to indicate that we need the words of our Lord to be in us before peace can be achieved in our world. During this Advent season perhaps we can daily seek the fruit of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23), for our community, our nation, our world, and ourselves.

-Sandra Lebo

December 5

## Please Read Psalm 80:1-7

*“Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.”*  
-Psalm 80:3

In Psalm 80, the Israelites were crying to God in the face of military defeat. Having been brought to their knees, they were once again seeking God's help. I am neither an historian nor a theologian. I would not pretend to know how much of their anguish was a direct result of their own actions and how much was divine intervention.

There are times in all our lives when sadness seems to completely overshadow all that is good around us. Any number of things can bring us to that point. The exact cause is not as important as the spiritual emptiness that can ensue. It is so easy to blame God when bad things happen. Especially if we have given into the misconception that “true” Christians, who pray devoutly, can be spared hard times. That just isn’t the case.

I’m not convinced God ever turns his back on us. I believe the reverse occurs. We get caught up in our earthly desires and turn our backs on him. He hasn’t gone anywhere. Like the father of the prodigal son, he is there to welcome us back with open arms if only we sincerely say, “Father I am sorry.” And while he will not necessarily fix the specific hard time we are going through, he will walk with us and help bear our load.

Some of my most peaceful times have been when I’m going through something quite difficult that becomes so much more than I can bear alone. It is during those times that I most strongly feel the warmth and love of God.

-Donna Wapner

December 6

## Please Read Micah 5:1-5a

*“And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.”*

-Micah 5:4-5a

When given this assignment, I have to say, I didn't know a lot about the prophet Micah. Correction, I knew *nothing* about the prophet Micah. What I have since found out is that his style is similar to the one of the prophet Isaiah. He is deeply sensitive to the social ills of his day, especially those that affected the small towns of his homeland. Micah's message fluctuates between doom and hope, much like Isaiah's.

So it's no real surprise that up until chapter 5, things aren't going so great. But here, Micah shifts gears a bit and talks about a shepherd who will be coming out of Bethlehem. In fact, the heading to chapter 5 in my Bible is “A Promised Ruler From Bethlehem”.

Hmm. Being Easter people, we can surmise that Micah means Jesus, but these people don't know that. Israel is in a lot of turmoil at the moment; they are not following the Law, and they are constantly in conflict with other nations.

Could this be you? Are you in turmoil? Are you constantly in conflict with others, or does it just feel like you are? Then reflect on the first half of verse 5, “...and he will be their peace.” Take a deep breath, and then exhale. Be still and ponder those words. Not *might be* their peace or *could be* their peace, but *will be* their peace. He (Jesus) is your peace.

In this time of busyness, slow down, thank God for sending His son, that child in the manger. He is your peace.

-Doretta Rapp

## Please Read Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

*“Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.”*

-Psalm 85:8

“I’ll get to that after I finish this.”

“I’ll fix that as soon as I am done with this project.”

“I’ll put that together as soon as you get me the last piece.”

How many times (this week) have I said that? I’d rather not count. *“I’ll get to it when I...”* You fill in the blank. My grandfather loved the phrase “round to it.” When he and my Gran retired to Oregon he found a cute little shop in town that sold “roundtoits”. They are little round wooden coins slightly bigger than a 50-cent piece. He bought one for each of us kids because he thought they were funny. Looking back on it he always made time for each of us kids. He never had to “get around to it”. I know he wasn’t always like that, so I’m thankful for the time he always gave us. He made it a priority whenever he could.

Grampa loved the holidays and having family around, even if he did grumble about all the decorations and the preparations. It’s funny how much grandkids can and will change a person. I know we had an impact on him.

I’m also amazed how much of an impact God has on people. Our Psalmist recalls in verses one and two how God showed favor and faithfulness to the people of Israel. *All the people!* There is a catch, though. Yup, there’s always a catch. Here’s the nitty-gritty: God issued a promise at the beginning of time. God said, “I am here. I always will be here. I will never leave. I claim you as my own and when I make a claim, I keep my hands in it.” God issues a covenant, a promise, to the people to be present. We, as God’s people, now have an opportunity to realize just what a promise this is, just how far this promise really goes. Once we see how deep God’s promise is, we grasp onto anything of God we can get

our hands on. We clamor for anything to show or demonstrate to anyone who will listen just how fantastic and mind-boggling this promise of faithfulness really is. We are invited into something more powerful than any earthly love or compassion we could experience. When we grab hold, and *we must grab hold*, of God's unfailing promise, we are escorted into a belonging that will never be severed. God says, "You are mine. You gave me your heart and in turn I give you mine." God never needs a "roundtoit" to love us. God never needs a little trinket or token to remember us. Those words are not in God's vocabulary. We are constantly remembered and accepted.

Grampa would have been near 90 years old by now. He's been gone for 19 years. I've told my kids about him and how much he loved me and our family. God loved him too, and now he's sharing "roundtoits" with God.

-Megan Hogstad

## Please Read Jeremiah 1:4-10

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*

-Jeremiah 1:5

We were all born with gifts and special talents. We spend a good chunk of our lives trying to figure how to use those unique gifts and talents to make a difference in the world. But sometimes—okay, most of the time—God has other plans for us.

Jeremiah is called by God to be “a prophet to the nations”, and the first thing he does is something we as humans immediately jump to. He starts making a list of reasons why he can’t become a prophet. He is too young. He doesn’t speak very well. And deep, down he is scared. Just like Jeremiah, we are quick to downplay our abilities and highlight our weaknesses. Surely, God will understand, right? Choose someone else. Choose *anyone* else.

Little did Jeremiah know that Moses tried the very same excuses in the book of Exodus, and they didn’t work on God then either. Both men doubted they had the competence to fulfill God’s plans. Both men were scared of the enormity of what God was asking them to do, and knew that the road ahead wasn’t going to be easy. But in the end they obeyed God despite their initial objections, and trusted Him to see them through to the end.

God calls on us to accomplish certain tasks, and the reason He does so is because He knows what we’re truly capable of and who we can become. He knew us before we were born, before we were even thought of. We have been given the promise of God’s purpose, and it because of that promise we shouldn’t be afraid of the path God has set before us.

Jeremiah’s time as a prophet wasn’t a walk in the park, and Moses had to endure many ups and downs in trying to free his people from Pharaoh’s grip. Even Jesus, who was also a prophet, had a tough time of changing hearts and minds. But before he was born in a manger, God had big plans for him, as He does for us all. We just have to choose to put our trust in Him.

-Jennifer Rapp

December 9

## Please Read Ezekiel 36:24-28

*“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”*

-Ezekiel 36:26

While I was preparing for the devotion, my brother sent me a story to read. The story touched me deeply, and I felt that it fit this Bible reading. I pray that it touches your heart as well.

### God Lives Under the Bed

I envy Kevin. My brother, Kevin, thinks God lives under his bed. At least, that's what I heard him say one night. He was praying out loud in his dark bedroom, and I stopped to listen.

“Are you there, God?” he said. “Where are you? Oh, I see. Under the bed.”

I giggled softly and tiptoed off to my own room. Kevin's unique perspectives are often a source of amusement. But that night something else lingered long after the humor. I realized for the first time the very different world Kevin lives in.

He was born 30 years ago, mentally disabled as a result of difficulties during labor. Apart from his size (he's 6-foot-2), there are few ways in which he is an adult. He reasons and communicates with the capabilities of a 7-year-old, and he always will.

He will probably always believe that God lives under his bed, that Santa Claus is the one who fills the space under our tree every Christmas, and that airplanes stay up in the sky because angels carry them.

I remember wondering if Kevin realizes he is different. Is he ever dissatisfied with his monotonous life? Up before dawn each day, off to work at a workshop for the disabled, home to walk our cocker spaniel, return to eat his favorite macaroni-and-cheese for dinner, and later to bed. The only variation in the entire scheme is laundry days, when he hovers excitedly over the washing ma-

chine like a mother with her newborn child.

He does not seem dissatisfied. He lopes out to the bus every morning at 7:05, eager for a day of simple work. He wrings his hands excitedly while the water boils on the stove before dinner, and he stays up late twice a week to gather our dirty laundry for his next day's laundry chores.

And Saturdays—oh, the bliss of Saturdays! That's the day my Dad takes Kevin to the airport where he has a soft drink, watches the planes land, and speculates loudly on the destination of each passenger inside.

"That one's goin' to Chi-car-go!" Kevin shouts as he claps his hands. His anticipation is so great he can hardly sleep on Friday nights.

And so goes his world of daily rituals and weekend field trips. He doesn't know what it means to be discontent. His life is simple. He will never know the entanglements of wealth or power, and he does not care what brand of clothing he wears or what kind of food he eats. His needs have always been met, and he never worries that one day they may not be.

His hands are diligent. Kevin is never happier than when he is working. When he unloads the dishwasher or vacuums the carpet, his heart is completely in it. He does not shrink from a job when it is begun and he does not leave a job until it is finished. But when his tasks are done, Kevin knows how to relax. He is not obsessed with his work or the work of others.

His heart is pure. He still believes everyone tells the truth, promises must be kept and when you are wrong, you apologize instead of argue. Free from pride and unconcerned with appearances, Kevin is not afraid to cry when he is hurt, angry or sorry. He is always transparent, always sincere.

And he trusts God. Not confined by intellectual reasoning, when he comes to God, he comes as a child.

Kevin seems to know God—to really be friends with Him—in a way that is difficult for an “educated” person to grasp. God is his closest companion.

In my moments of doubt and frustrations, I envy the security Kevin has in his simple faith. It is then that I am most willing

to admit that he has some divine knowledge that rises above my mortal questions. It is then I realize that perhaps he is not the one with the handicap—I am.

My obligations, my fear, my pride, my circumstances—they all become disabilities when I do not trust them to God's care. Who knows if Kevin comprehends things I can never learn? After all, he has spent his whole life in that kind of innocence, praying after dark and soaking up the goodness and love of God.

And one day, when the mysteries of heaven are opened, and we are all amazed at how close God really is to our hearts, I'll realize that God heard the simple prayers of a boy who believed that God lived under his bed.

Kevin won't be surprised at all.

After reading this story, please reflect on the focus verse for today, just as I did. I truly believe that God wants all of us to have a heart like Kevin's.

-Mike duBois

**Please Read Isaiah 40:1-11**

*“He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.”*

-Isaiah 40:11

Christmas is coming and everyone is preparing: decorating the house, shopping for and wrapping gifts, planning and attending parties, baking goodies, cooking for holiday meals, and the list goes on and on. For many people, Christmas is a frenzy of activity.

Christmas is coming, and Isaiah 40:1-11 reminds us what that really means: God is going to come to us, and to prepare for Jesus. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...” (40:3) There won’t be twinkling lights and parties. Jesus comes as we do, born to parents, loved by parents. The Lord God comes with might, but not leading an army. God is like a shepherd (40:11), he will feed us, he will gather us close in his arms, he will protect and gently lead us.

Christmas is coming. “The grass withers, the flower fades” (40:7), just as gifts become worn and decorations get returned to storage for another year. Take time out of your modern-day frenzy to remember that Jesus loves us with a mother’s love; he knows our hopes, dreams, and worries. Behold your God, embrace his love. Christ is coming!

-Debra Schneider

December 11

## Please Read Isaiah 26:7-15

*“O Lord, you will ordain peace for us,  
for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us.”*  
-Isaiah 26:12

What does peace mean to you? Do you have peace? Can you buy peace? If so, how much would you pay? Can someone steal your peace?

The Hebrew meaning of trust is to “lean on him”. Isaiah’s thought was to move from peace to God’s strength, and salvation was through trust. We must trust God and put our ultimate trust in him—and in him only. There *is* a perfect peace that the Lord will keep us in. Stay in the Lord. Our mind must be stayed, established, and steadfast. To have that perfect peace our minds cannot occasionally lean on him.

Last March I had a health scare. It was a long week in between tests and results. During that week I could not hear God speak to me. Not once! I prayed and talked to him daily, sometimes hourly. I knew he was there for me, but I could not hear him. In that waiting week, I went through every scenario I could imagine. I prepared myself with what could happen. None of it was good. *After* I received great news, I broke down. This was the only scenario I had *not* imagined. Took me a couple of days to realize I had leaned away from God, instead of leaning into him.

Peace results from mindful, intentional faithfulness. We let peace slip away when we depend on other people, ourselves, or our possessions to replace leaning into him.

God is the only true source of consistent peace. His spirit came to live in us. It is an everlasting peace. God gave us the Prince of Peace to be the blessings of peace.

In this Holy Season, may the peace of the Lord be with you—always.

-Diane Schaeffing

December 12

## Please Read Psalm 27

*“Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord!”*

-Psalm 27:14

This entire Psalm is a prayer praising the Lord that he will protect us from our enemies, guiding us to serve Him, leading us on a safe path in life and that God will not abandon us. We *must* trust in the Lord.

With that being said in our present world of high-tech gadgets that do everything except breathe for us (and even then we have machines that can do that for us if we need them to), it may be hard to trust and have faith. With all the natural disasters, mass shootings, protests becoming violent, all being broadcasted around the world in different forms of media, it's hard to have hope.

At this time of year, we tend to reflect on the year that we just lived. When we reflect, we need to praise God for *all* the good that happened as well as pray for understanding of the bad things that happened. From this point on, we need to reflect daily on what we have done (whether it's good or bad), *trust* God that He will guide us on the right path, put our *faith* in God and not in the “techy” things in life, and be happy!

-Lori Ann McLaren

December 13

**Please Read Malachi 2:10-3:1**

*“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”*

-Malachi 3:1

I am, intentionally, mostly ignorant about what's on the news these days. No TV, radio, newspapers, etc. I have enough of a challenge with depression without adding to it.

Yet I can't help but see how broken our country, and the rest of the world, actually is. All the anger and hate...it's no longer fashionable even to simply be polite.

Malachi's world was broken. The people were returning to their homeland after exile in Babylon. And once there, they adopted the gods of the local people who had moved in, even to the point of divorce. The same practices that sent them into exile in the first place. Like Pastor Chris said a few months ago: Don't you remember your history? Do you learn nothing?

The Advent season is a time of reflection and preparation. We look forward to Christmas to celebrate the birth of our Savior.

This has already happened 2,000 years ago. The messenger, John the Baptist, preceded the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, who promised He would come again. Where is the messenger preparing the way before His return?

We are the messengers.

-Gabe Gabriel

## Please Read Habakkuk 2:1-5

*“For there is still a vision for the appointed time;  
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;  
it will surely come, it will not delay.”*

-Habakkuk 2:3

We live in an age of instant gratification. When we want information on a topic, we no longer need to look in an encyclopedia or go to the library, we Google it. When we see something we want but have no money, we charge it. With this mentality, it's difficult to understand God's ways. He rarely responds to us instantly. He doesn't send us an instant message. Over and over again, God's people are asked to wait.

- Psalm 37:7 – “*Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him...*”
- Isaiah 40:31 – “*...but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*”
- Ecclesiastes 51:8 – “*Then I remembered your mercy, O Lord, and your kindness from of old, for you rescue those who wait for you and save them from the hand of their enemies.*”
- Acts 1:4 – “*While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.*”
- 1 Corinthians 1:7 – “*So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

We are promised rewards for waiting for the Lord...renewed strength, rescue from our enemies, the promise of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. That is just a sample. In spite of God's promise to reward the wait, I am impatient. I want to see God act now! Sometimes it's hard to keep praying for something when it doesn't seem like God is ever going to answer. I admit that I am afraid to pray for patience. Doing so may give God an invitation to make

me wait even longer.

But we are once again in the season of waiting, Advent. Jesus is about to be born. What does God want to reveal to me, to you, as we anticipate His birth? Am I going to squander this precious season of waiting on commercialism, or do I strive to know Jesus in a deeper way?

As I pondered how I would like to grow, the words from the song “Day By Day” from the musical Godspell came to mind. This is my prayer:

*Day by day, day by day,  
Oh dear Lord, three things I pray,  
To see thee more clearly,  
Love thee more dearly,  
Follow thee more nearly day by day.*

May we all have that prayer answered!

-Fern Jackson

## Please Read Psalm 126

*“May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.  
Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.”*

-Psalm 126:5, 6

When times are tough, when we are buried in tasks, when it is bottom of the ninth, two outs, and we are down one run, we need a pep talk! The psalmist sends us this message from Our God, our biggest cheerleader. God knows we are weary and burdened by life. Our commitments to others and ourselves feel endless...meetings, deadlines, car pools, and chores. We are so tired we could just cry!

But God wants us to know that present distress is not to be viewed as if it will last forever. When we are stirred to weep over our sins and burdens, we are also propelled into action! We have much work ahead of us as followers of Christ. We have duties to the church, the family, and the world. But the Lord cheers us on with this promise. If we push on with our labors in faith, He is pleased with our efforts, and we will be rewarded with intense joy.

-Dana Skinner

December 16

**Please Read Habakkuk 3:13-19**

*“Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails,  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold,  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.”*

-Habakkuk 3:17, 18

If you were to go to the Bible that you read most often and are the most comfortable with and open it to Habakkuk (which is very close to the end of the Old Testament), you might very well find that though many parts of that Bible are well-worn and even stained from the oils of your hands, you still have to carefully separate the pages so you can read the three chapters written by this “minor” prophet in the time just immediately preceding the Babylonian invasion of Judah, the southern kingdom, in 586 BC. “Hab” may be the last guy to speak for God before the disaster known as the Babylonian Exile of the Jews began. He does not rail against the people or demand that they repent and live by the will and the laws of Yahweh/God so they can be saved; the invasion, for him is a forgone event that is coming. What “Hab” *does* talk about is the trustworthiness of God, the goodness of God, and the necessity that the Jews keep faith with Him no matter how bleak situations may come to be in the future. “Hab” is a prophet of *faith* and *thankfulness*, and has absolute confidence that Yahweh/God has not and will not ever forsake His people, even when every possible piece of evidence in the condition of things indicates that He has!!

In these very few words, Hab says what has been said over and over by men and women who have a relationship with God through the years, that God is *great* and *good*—even *loving*—and

He is *always* working to bring all creation to the end for which He made it, *and* His people to the blessings for which He created them! Events and conditions may make that statement seem ludicrous and crazy, but it is the absolute truth, and the times when it is hardest to believe are the times when it is most true!

The Old Testament and the New Testament are filled with examples of sufferings and disasters that make faith in an invisible and inscrutable divine spirit seem impossible. But over and over again there is evidence that this Yahweh/God we have connected our lives to *is* loving, caring, present, powerful, forgiving, and purposeful such that often our greatest understanding, our most significant strengths, come from some of the darkest hours of our lives.

When life is going well, things are comfortably predictable, those we love are happy, our housing and food are in no danger, etc. It is pretty simple—even easy—to talk about our *faith* and confidence in God. Nobody in their right mind would choose to end all that and put him or herself in the middle of a disaster where his or her very survival was a real question mark. Nobody *wants* that! Hab’s message was for a people for whom *that* were unavoidably *coming*. Arguments as to whether God was sending the suffering, whether *punishment* for sin and disobedience was its purpose, whether there was any way to be “saved” were simply out of the question. Disaster was their destiny! That being the case, *would* the people keep their faith in Yahweh/God and all that they had been told and shown over hundreds of years, remembering His love, power, and constant presence with the people He had first led out of slavery in Egypt so long ago? That was—that is—the question, always, for them and for us today...right now...isn’t it?

My favorite image or symbol of the God Jesus spoke of and exemplified is the loving cupped hands of support and nurture. I know, *truly* know, that I have been held and cared for in those hands of a loving God. You know it too. I do not want an experience like Job’s when it comes to testing my relationship with God. I do not want to have to search for God in the destruction and disaster of war, or the terrible pain of physical suffering and illness. But I *do* want to have a faith in God that approaches that of Jesus

in the last days of His earthly life.

I *do* want to believe with the psalmist that “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4). I *do* want my faith to be victorious over my doubts even in the worst of circumstances. I do want to be a man that can always say, “Father, into your hands I commend my life and my soul” (Luke 23:46) and mean it! I *do* want to be just like Hab! Maybe you do too, now that you know where his book is in that Bible of yours!

-Father Jim Seipel

## Please Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners.”*

-Isaiah 61:1

Have you ever been burdened by sin? Not the usual level of regret for something you may have accidentally said or done, or failed to say or do. Not the sadness we all feel when someone does something harmful to us — something we didn't deserve. These are some of the negative effects of sin, whether our own or someone else's, and we've all felt those effects.

I'm speaking, rather, of the *burden* of sin. Deep dark sorrow. A feeling of depression and hopelessness. I'm certain we've all felt that too. Sin becomes a prison blocking out the light. Separating us from those who love us. Keeping us from the things we love to do.

Isaiah 61, verse 1 is a message that directly relates to the situation just described. Scholars agree that this verse applies to Isaiah being “set apart” or called to deliver the “good news” or gospel to those who are in poverty or physical distress. They also agree that Jesus Himself, in declaring His fulfillment of this scripture, is called to deliver those under the distress of sin.

The arrival of the Savior of all mankind, which we celebrate at Christmas, means that *all* may be released, not just from meek circumstances, broken-heartedness, or imprisonment in a physical sense, but from the prison of sin. Liberty from sin could only be delivered to us from Jesus, and his arrival into this world became the most significant Christmas present of all time.

Embrace this gift. It came to us wrapped in packaging of swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. This gift has your name on it. *That* is how much God loves you.

-David Smith

December 18

**Please Read Ephesians 6:10-17**

*“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.”*

-Ephesians 6:13

When I read the Armor of God passage in Ephesians, a picture of one of the Knights of the Round Table came to mind. They had so much armor covering all parts of their body that they could hardly move. These knights had to be lifted onto their horses with a pulley and rope. They were able to withstand many arrows and sword strikes, but overall they weren't very mobile.

Sometimes, it seems like we have a target on our back and the devil is throwing knives and flaming arrows of sin at us. When the devil attacks—and he always will—we need to be ready with the armor God given us. He gives us the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. These are not too heavy to wear or carry, so we can still fully move about doing God's will. Finally, he gives us the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's Holy Word.

With all the armor God gives us, we can stand against all the evil that the devil will throw at us. Have you put on your armor today?

-Jerry Boulett

December 19

**Please Read Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26**

*"I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;  
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.  
I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;  
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens."*

-Psalm 89:1, 2

Promises, promises! Is there anyone who hasn't experienced a broken promise? Not likely. The feeling of disappointment can be overwhelming, even crippling to some. We get so busy in our daily lives and may not think about God's promises of love, mercy, and faithfulness. Unlike humans, God is always full of love, mercy, and faithfulness. We may be quick to exclaim, "Thank God!" But, do we really think about how we are thanking and praising God? Our response to His love, mercy, and faithfulness is praise. We are to live our lives in praise to God for all his promises. He will never disappoint us. What does praise look like for you in your daily life?

-Joanne Hill

December 20

**Please Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

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

-1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

A Text Conversation with God

ME: Wow, those three commands you gave to the Thessalonians are were a tall order! Glad I didn't live in their time! How could you expect them to always be joyful, pray without ceasing, and be thankful for everything?

GOD: The truth is, I expect the same from you.

ME: You do? How's that?

GOD: I want you to be joyful always.

ME: Seriously Lord? How can I be joyful “always”? When a loved one is in the hospital, my kid is not performing well in school, my car broke down and I am short on funds to get it fixed, my spouse and I are at odds, I got a bad review at work...there's no way can I be joyful all the time.

GOD: My child, I know it is not easy for you, but just be in my presence. How can you not be joyful knowing that I love you beyond measure and my love surrounds you always? Be in the presence of others who are my followers. Support each other. Then you will know real joy.

GOD: I also want you to pray continually.

ME: Yeah, right. How am I supposed to do that? I have a husband, a family, friends, housework, yard work, and, oh yeah, that miser-

able commute to work, all making demands for my time! I don't have a moment to turn around, much less be praying all the time!

GOD: That is exactly why you need to talk to me. Slow down and let's chat. Tell me about your problems, worries, fears, and concerns. I assure you that I am able to handle all those big problems of yours and you can be at peace. But let's also chat about what is good in your life. A husband, family and friends that love you. A house and yard to maintain. A meaningful job.

Then you can make room in your life to pray for someone else to have my peace in their life.

GOD: And don't forget to give thanks in all circumstances.

ME: Oh sure! In all circumstances? What about when that girl crashed into me and totaled my car? Or when I miss seeing my grandson because they moved away? How about when my beloved in-laws passed away? I'm supposed to be thankful for all of that?

GOD: There is always a reason to be thankful, even when it doesn't seem like it. Remember that crash? You weren't injured, were you? What about the new start your grandchild will have, and you get to visit whenever you want? You received so much love from your in-laws that their memory and influence in your life will never be erased. You see, it's all about perspective. If you look for the good in every circumstance, you will find a reason to be thankful.

GOD: All of this is my will for you in Christ Jesus.

ME: And how am I supposed to know what your will is for me? Clearly, I haven't been very good at figuring out what you meant by being joyful, prayerful, and thankful!

GOD: My will for you isn't difficult to know. It's simple, really. I have given you the Holy Spirit to help you in your journey. It is your job to walk humbly and joyfully in my presence, pray con-

tinually for yourself and others, and find a way to be thankful for everything.

ME: Thanks God! I'm glad we had this talk!

-Cheryl duBois

## Please Read Matthew 1:18-25

*“But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’”*

-Matthew 1:20, 21

*Do not be afraid*—We don’t hear these words too much anymore. It seems that everywhere we turn there is something to be afraid of: mad men with the intent to kill without reason, threats of impending war, clashes of ideals, riots and climate change, storms and fires, kidnappings and murders. Oh, the list is so frightening that it seems like fear has become a part of life, and it has become increasingly easier to hide inside and be silent lest someone is offended, triggered, or acts on his or her anger and frustrations. Standing up for one’s beliefs these days is not only unpopular, but in some parts of the world can be deadly as well. It would seem that secular ideals are the norm and godly values have been rejected within mainstream society, and I am saddened and fearful of what our world has become.

Joseph was told by an angel to “not be afraid to take Mary as [his] wife”. I can’t even imagine the conflict he must have felt, as a righteous man, to risk becoming a subject of gossip and ridicule within his community by not divorcing Mary, and to follow what he was told as a fulfillment of (Old Testament) prophecy. He stood in faith.

Am I that brave? Can I stand tall in my faith in God and rejoice in the birth of our Savior? While the news blares stories of discontent, hatred, and violence, do I stand as an example of Christ’s love and peace? I am gratefully reminded to “not be afraid” to share the joy and peace of the Christmas season all year long.

-Margi Blair

December 22

**Please Read Luke 1:46-55**

*“And Mary said,  
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...’”  
-Luke 1:46, 47*

Earlier on in this chapter, Mary finds out from the angel Gabriel that she will have a child named Jesus, Son of God. Mary said, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34) The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” (1:35)

Mary was shocked and wondered why God chose her, a lowly servant, to handle the most important gift to mankind! The angel Gabriel reminded Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, could not have children and is now 6 months pregnant. He said this is the power of the Holy Spirit.

These verses tell me that no matter who we are, what we do, or what we have done, God has a plan for us. I can't even imagine what Mary is thinking during her pregnancy. This is something that I personally struggle with, because I myself am a control freak! I am constantly trying to take care of everyone and everything. I pray that God will take away my “control freak-ness”. We need to pray always and be filled with the Holy Spirit. We will not know when or how our prayers are answered, but the power of prayer is great!

-Lori Ann McLaren

## Please Read Luke 1:57-80

*“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”*  
-Luke 1:76

Advent is the season of preparing for the celebration of the birth of Christ. We often celebrate Advent by opening an Advent calendar daily, lighting an Advent wreath weekly, or decorating our houses. Originally, Advent was a time of fasting. Today, it is a time of feasting, parties, Christmas music (most of which is secular), and non-stop shopping. The notion of preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ is archaic to most.

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, spoke this verse from Luke at his son's circumcision. He recalls the promise of the Lord to save Israel from all enemies and send a savior. John fulfilled his father's prophecy by giving “knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins...” and “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. (Luke 1:77-80) Mark introduced John as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of a messenger being sent ahead of the Messiah. He was a voice crying in the wilderness, and used baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He said one who is greater would be coming to baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

Just as John prepared the Israelites to accept Jesus as their Messiah, we should prepare our hearts to do the same. In the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season (that now starts in September!) we should remember the “reason for the season”. Take time to do an advent devotional. Or open an Advent calendar with your kids. Thank God for sending his son and all the blessings he has bestowed on you. Open your heart to the Christ child who came to save us from our sins and live with our Father in Heaven forever.

-Deb Moisio

December 24

## Please Read Luke 2:1-14

*“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’”*

-Luke 2:10-12

Ever been scared? About to drift off into la-la-land, when the floor creeks and all of a sudden you're wide-awake! Daydreaming in the living room enjoying the warm sunshine, when a random bird crashes into the window! Or maybe you have a family member like my dad who loves to catch you off guard and yell just to watch you jump. You are minding your own business, doing what you are supposed to be doing, and in a moment you go from peace and contentment to trying to catch your breath and calm yourself down.

I wonder if it was the same for those shepherds living out in their fields. They were doing their job, keeping watch of their flocks when out of nowhere the angel of the Lord appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them. Fear, yes, I'm sure. But the angel reassured them that they were to have joy and not fear. The angel went on to tell of the arrival of the promised savior.

Did you catch that? The Lord showed up in the middle of their workday. It wasn't in the middle of a church service or a prayer meeting. It wasn't after the house had been cleaned and the dinner prepared waiting for guests to arrive. They were minding their own business, standing guard and watching over their flock at night. They were faithfully doing the work to which they had been called and he just showed up.

I think it's still true today. I believe that as we go about our daily lives, working at our jobs, washing the dishes or other seemingly mundane chores of life that God can and does just show up. He takes regular everyday moments to show up and remind us of His promises, to bring us joy, and to tell us not to fear.

The message told to the shepherds is the same to us today. Our Savior has come! Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace and goodwill to all men!

-Barbie Buckner













