

# Waiting

St. Stephen's of the Valley 2018 Advent Devotional

**A**s children, we used to spend this time of the year eagerly awaiting the arrival of Santa Claus, trying to stay up late to see him come down the chimney, yet ultimately failing to keep our eyes open as the hours grew later. And for some that tradition has faded, for others that spirit of Christmas is still alive and well. However, as children of God, shouldn't we also be awaiting the birth of the Christ Child with just as much excitement and anticipation? This present God gives us is eternal and everlasting, something far more precious and valuable than any trinket Santa could possibly bring. Therefore, we present this Advent devotional written by various members of St. Stephen's, to instill and remind you of the joy that came down from heaven and was laid in a manger.

To use this devotional, please open with prayer. There is a devotion written for each day of Advent, beginning on December 2nd. 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. Conclude your devotion time in prayer.

During this season of Advent, may you experience the same happiness and anticipation you felt as a child for the coming of the Christ Child. Santa may come once a year, but God is year-round, and He always brings us the best gifts.

*Your brothers and sisters in Christ of*  
St. Stephen's of the Valley Lutheran Church  
Palmdale, California  
Advent 2018

December 2

**Please Read Jeremiah 33:14-16**

*“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”*

-Jeremiah 33:15

The “Canticle of the Turning” (hymn #723) speaks in harsh times words of hope. We can see it all around us, the divisiveness and growing hate and violence. Jesus told his disciples this would happen; natural disasters, “wars and rumors of war.” (Mark 13: 5-8) We live in troubled times. Yet in all my readings of scripture, I can confidently say that nowhere is it written “and lo it came to stay.”

The world will turn, all this will pass. We can be instruments of a better way by “provok[ing] one another to love and good deeds.” (Hebrews 10: 24) It won’t be easy; the important goals never are. And we do have a strong ally whose birth we celebrate this season.

-Gabe Gabriel

December 3

## Please Read 2 Peter 3:1-18

*“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”*

-2 Peter 3:9

The realization crept up slowly and sat in the back of my mind for a long time. When it finally hit me, it exploded like a time bomb, but I wasn't the one who lit the fuse; someone less controlled did that for me. *Our time was done and we had to move.* Unhealthy relationships, fear of unknowns, and “what if’s” filled the empty spaces where love and kindness used to be. I didn't have a say in the choice to leave. I needed to be supportive, not judgmental. But I was angry, hurt, and frustrated. I finally found a job; not just a job though, a calling; somewhere I knew I belonged and now it was all being taken away because of fear, anxiety, and others' actions I could do nothing about. *Our time was done; we had to move.* My world felt like it was ending. Why would God give me these preschoolers to love, the teachers to work with, and a beloved friend, only to take them all away three years later? I was bitter and angry at having to give up something I cared so deeply about. Teaching preschool opened up a new world of possibilities and love I hadn't known existed. Why would God destroy such a beautiful part of my world?

I still don't know why all the heartache and change had to happen, but I do know that my world did not end; instead in changed. God *promises* (read continuous action) that as the world ends there will be light. Look through verses 9-12. God's words to us through the author of 2 Peter tell us the world will end and changes will happen, but we as Christians can be the light in those dark days. As God keeps His promises we are encouraged, even called, to shine the light of love in the darkness. I know that had I not walked through the heartache and change, I would not have been gifted with the friendships I have now. In the dark of what looked

like the end of my world, friends brought light into my life. They spoke God's promise of new life into my angry and frustrated heart. It was not what I would have chosen, but God's promises of light and new beginning is rarely in the time we think it should be. It is, however, the right time and God's promises are always at the perfect time. We need to look with our hearts, and not our eyes, to see the perfection of God's love and timing.

-Megan Hogstad

December 4

**Please Read 2 Samuel 7:18-29**

*“And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O Lord, became their God.”*

-2 Samuel 7:24

I have to confess that I have struggled with these Bible verses ever since they hit my email inbox. And I'm not ashamed to admit that I have read the verses to several people asking their opinion and looked up others' expert interpretations on the Internet. And I've prayed. So this is what I know: David is praying to God, not as someone who regards himself as a king, but as God's humble servant. Thanking God for all He has done and praising Him. One article said that this provides a pattern for our worship. Sound advice in my eyes.

As I have been pondering what I've read and, frankly re-read many times, one word keeps leaping out of the page: forever. God “established Your people as Your own *forever*”, “keep *forever* Your promise”, “with Your blessing the house of Your servant will be blessed *forever*.” Big word, “forever”. God made the Davidic Covenant promising that the messiah would come from the lineage of David and establish a kingdom that will endure forever. David prayed, “You have established your people Israel as your very own forever, and you, O Lord have become their God.” (NIV) It only took some 28 generations from David to Jesus. That could seem like forever, and the birth of our Savior would be the fulfillment of the covenant. Jesus is the “son of David” and will rule forever.

As we enter into this joyous season, I can't help but marvel at the many Christmases I've celebrated. To my grandchildren it must seem like “forever”, but in reality they are just a flash in time, nowhere near the forever God has promised. God's presence is in this world forever. It's a big word, but a very comforting one.

-Margi Blair

December 5

## Please Read Psalm 90

*“Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”*  
-Psalm 90: 1, 2

Often, I think that I am here, and God is there, in his home in Heaven. I'm sure my way of thinking stems from the fact that I cannot see Him, touch Him, or feel Him. Even though it is pounded into me that God is with me and the Holy Spirit is in me, it seems like an unrealistic, fairytale-like concept. Is it any wonder that an unbeliever may look at me with a skeptical eye?

Everything I am and project to others comes down to faith. Unbelievers watch me to see if I am any different than anyone else. The best way I can share my faith is by my words and actions. When I speak and respond in the way in which I am being nudged by God's Spirit, I am promoting His Kingdom. Unbelievers can see for themselves that Christians are different. Unfortunately, I don't always listen to His direction that well. I'm not proud of my failure to always be a good witness. I'm just grateful that God is not going to give up on me.

He is indeed my dwelling place forever.

No, I still can't see, touch, or feel Him, but, in fact, His Spirit is in me. When I allow Him to do so, He uses me to show Himself to others. When I accepted his gift of salvation through His grace, God promised He would be with me always, be my dwelling place. The idea of God being our dwelling place is reiterated again in Revelation 21 verse 3:

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
“Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will  
dwell with them. They will be his people,  
and God himself will be with them and be their God.”*

Father, help me to remember that you are always dwelling with me and in me. It is only when I rely on your power that I am able to share your love and grace with others. Keep me “plugged in” to you. Make me bold, and give me a sense of excitement about being your witness. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

-Fern Jackson

December 6

## **Please Read Malachi 3:5-12**

*“For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.”*

-Malachi 3:6

Malachi 3:5-12 is a series of statements from the Lord to his people. To us. He gives comfort, warning, instruction, promises, direction, and even a challenge to “Test me in this.” It’s a marvelous passage of scripture worth reading again and again. There is so much to learn!

But what the Lord says in verse 6 is perhaps the most reassuring sentence in all of scripture, at least to me. You see, as a human being I change with time and experience. I’m not the same person I was last year, or twenty years ago or 50 years ago. I’ve learned, sometimes the hard way, and adapted to my environment. I do things differently now. I’m sure it’s the same with you.

The potential problem with people changing is obvious: there is the opportunity to change for the better, or the worse. We probably all know individuals who have indeed changed, but not in ways that are beneficial to themselves or others. Maybe even we ourselves have gone down that road for a while.

But what about God? How does He change as we evolve and transform throughout our lives? Here’s the good news: He doesn’t. God Himself, in this verse, says, “I the Lord do not change.” What an amazing comfort that is! Our Heavenly Father is our rock. He is the one thing we can rely on when everything else fails. His promises to us are eternal. His love for us is endless. His word is reliable and everlasting. *That* gives me the courage and the freedom to change over the course of my lifetime and know, no matter what, He is constant and steady and always will be.

*Thank you, Lord, for being the same yesterday, today and tomorrow...*

-David Alan Smith

December 7

## Please Read Philippians 1:18-26

*“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”*

-Philippians 1:20, 21

Most situations in life are typically win-lose. When there is a disagreement or a conflict, usually in the end someone comes out the winner and someone comes out the loser. There are times in life where, regardless of the outcome, it is more like a lose-lose. But in the first chapter of Philippians, Paul describes the life of a Christian as win-win! In verse 20 and 21 Paul says, “I honestly expect and hope I will never do anything to be ashamed of. Whether I live or die, I always want to be as brave as I am now and bring honor to Christ. If I live, it will be for Christ, and if I die, I will gain even more.” (CEV)

While many Christians were being persecuted, Paul was sending a reassuring word. Having been bought with a price through the blood of Christ on the cross, as a Christian our Hope is in Him! That regardless of the persecution they were facing, being a Christian example, standing up for Christ, even if it meant dying for Christ, doing so was a *win!*

“He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.” This is a quote by Jim Elliott, a Wycliffe missionary who became a martyr at the age of 28 while serving in Ecuador. It’s not often today that we face persecution because we are “Christian”. It doesn’t take too long watching the world news to see oppression and tyranny in other parts of the world. Having been blessed to have been born and raised in the United States, at times I think it’s easy to take our freedoms for granted.

Please, give pause and reflect on verse 21. “If I live, it will be for *Christ*, and if I die, I will gain *even more*.”

Yes, rejoice in knowing that our assurance is that as Chris-

tians to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord. Truly heaven is the attainment of what we have lived for and believed in here on Earth, and that is only the beginning of eternity. Or as Paul says, "I will gain even more."

But, don't miss the challenge. Until that day comes, live for Christ. Until we attain our immortality, live as Christ. With every breath you take, with every word you speak, be Christ to a lost and dying world.

To *live*, for Christ!

To die, gain *even more*!

Now that's what I call a win-win!

-Barbie Buckner

December 8

**Please Read Luke 1:68-79**

*“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.”*

-Luke 1:76, 77

Have you ever been lost in the desert or forest and were looking for a way out, when you discovered a path where someone had been before and had created that way out? They had prepared a way for you to safely go home.

That is what John the Baptist was doing. He was letting people know that Jesus was coming to save them by paying the price for their sins.

Our Lord declares that John was more than a prophet; that is, he was a great preacher of righteousness who called aloud to the people to repent, that they might be forgiven, and he foretold that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

When John baptized Jesus and the heavens opened and God spoke, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17), he knew that the path he had been preparing had come to completion.

As we continue on the path to the manger this December, are we following the lead of one who cried out in the wilderness to prepare the way?

*Father, thank you for the gift of your son at Christmas. As we wait in this Advent time, let us never forget the cost of the gift that you have given us. May we be ready to receive it. In your son's name we pray, Amen.*

-Jerry Boulett

December 9

## **Please Read Baruch 5:1-9**

*“For God will lead Israel with joy,  
in the light of his glory,  
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.”*  
-Baruch 5:9

This book is one of seven Old Testament books known as the Deuterocanonical books, and they are not in the Protestant Canon. It was thought by the early Jewish church leaders that these books were not written in Hebrew, and for that reason they decided not to recognize them as part of the Scriptures. The early Christian Church continued to accept this version of the books, and Martin Luther adopted the same list of books and put the Deuterocanonical books in an appendix.

Baruch was Jeremiah’s secretary and this book is set at the time of exile, about 600 BC, when Jews had been deported to Babylon and still others had dispersed around the Mediterranean. The people probably felt powerless against the leaders in control during that time. When you feel powerless, you lose hope and become fearful.

The first verse depicts Jerusalem as a grieving parent mourning for her exiled children to come back, “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem”, and goes on to say, “put on forever the beauty of the glory from God”. The passage goes on to show “at the word of the Holy One” they would be gathered back because he remembered them, and how God ordered their passage back through the Arabian Desert be made safe. At His command there would be level ground and shady trees because God was with them. The passage ends with verse 9, which states, “For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.”

God will restore Jerusalem through His mercy and justice, and he wants us to act with justice and mercy as well. This is echoed in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, which tells us in part that “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... blessed are the merciful... blessed are the peacemakers”.

In Baruch we are reminded at this time of Advent, that if we feel powerless, lost, or distant from God that we should not fear because He remembers us and in His word we can find mercy and love and healing.

Advent is a time to quiet ourselves and reflect on the meaning of the Christ child coming into the world and to focus on our faith and what it means to live “in the light of his glory”. It is a season of hope; let God lead each of us so that we may be open to showing mercy, kindness, and peace to all those we meet.

-Sandra Lebo

December 10

**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

The chapter of Isaiah 40 is about comfort after a long road of hardship and loss. Turning towards God and realizing He is there through all our “ups and downs” and even if we turn away and walk down a different path, He is there. As we turn toward God’s arms and accept His comfort, hope can begin, and each step forward is stronger than the last, hope of a new beginning and hope of healing. He accepts and speaks to our heart.

Verse 11 speaks of being held closely and led with God’s love, acceptance, and comfort. During times of hardship, having someone’s arms around you to support and carry you through a difficult decision can give us strength.

Knowing He has His arms around us for comfort and support allows us, in turn, to help many others. Because we are accepted for who we are and where we come from, we can then reach out to others. It is through Him and with Him that we accept and comfort others, not only during the Christmas season, but also throughout the year.

-Bridgett Amis

December 11

**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

Christmas is coming! Are you making plans to celebrate with others? Are you eagerly anticipating the Good News? Are you anxiously awaiting the promises of God?

For some, this child-like excitement and optimistic spirit doesn't come naturally in a world filled with so much loss, grief, and disconnection. Oftentimes we stay focused on our own struggles because we feel responsible, or that there seems to be no end in sight. But despite all that, let us remember that our Redeemer lives! A seed has been planted.

Restoration and joy come from seeking the gifts of God. It's a season of hope and renewal; God is good, and his gracious and faithful acts can bring about blessings for us all to share. So surrender your doubts, worries, and challenges to God. Let him know that you remember all the times he has been there for you, and then rest in the promises of His Good News. It's time to celebrate!

Thanks be to God!

-Kelly Rickert

December 12

## **Please Read Luke 7:18-30**

*“And [Jesus] answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.’”*

-Luke 7:22, 23

The disciples of John the Baptist ran to Jesus with the question that is/was on everyone’s mind: Is Jesus *Him*, the one (the true messiah) that we have been waiting for all these years? It is a question that we wrestle with as well in the midst of our faith journey. As we see conflict, hatred, and injustice reign in our world, neighborhoods, and homes, we can hardly be faulted for asking that same question about Jesus.

There are so many voices crying out to state that this is the one to fix/solve all of our problems... a new item, way of thinking, program, etc. that will be the end all, be all solution to what ails us. The amount of ads we see this time of year that scream, “Pay attention to this!” is no more than other times of the year, but has more intensity with them as companies/workplaces desire to meet yearly goals.

Jesus does not come out and admit to being Him. What Jesus does state is not to hear his voice, but know what he has done...the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead raised, and the poor have good news (Luke 7:23). That is one heck of a resume. Would anyone *not* hire Jesus with that listed under previous experience? To put it another way, Jesus is asking in reply to John’s disciples (and us as well to be truthful), is “Is what I have done enough to earn your trust?”

For we who are post-Easter people, with Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension in our collective past, we are still called to prepare for His coming. Advent is a time to look with joy that Jesus will come again. As we answer His question of if He has

done enough to earn our trust, we look within ourselves to how Christ has worked in, with, and through us to prove who He is. Scripture tells us that we may not hear Jesus speak until He comes again. What we are invited into is taking hope that all He does for us shows His quality as the one whom we are waiting for. The one who does.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

December 13

## **Please Read Isaiah 12:2-6**

*“Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.”*

-Isaiah 12:2

From the time my mother first disappeared from sight (I was probably an infant) and was most likely just in the next room; I’ve been one to make a fuss and cry or pout or act out whenever I couldn’t talk to my mom. It wasn’t because I was spoiled. It was because I was afraid.

When I was nine months old, I tipped over a hot water vaporizer onto myself in my crib and got third-degree burns on my stomach and my left arm. I had to be in isolation in the hospital for over a month.

I can remember my mother leaving me in that crib, the door closing and seeing her through that little glass window in the door. I also remember screaming bloody murder for my mother, for her to hold me in her arms and comfort me.

For many years, until I was well into grade school I had a recurring nightmare about “the glove lady” sticking her hand through the wall to “get me”.

It was probably 30 years later while I was working as a Respiratory Therapist in Pediatrics that I realized that my nightmare had been a recurring event in real life. I saw a nurse reach into a child’s crib while he was sleeping. That child didn’t wake up. They usually didn’t. But that day I realized why I had the nightmares. It was because every time “the glove lady” reached in to me, it hurt terribly because of the burns, no matter what she did, but more so because of the constant debriding of my flesh.

Over the years of my work in the medical field, I gained understanding of why nurses need to act in the way they do, in order to accomplish their nursing. Often, it is really unpleasant or doesn’t

make any sense, but it has to be done. As a patient I've learned to endure and be patient. But whether I'm a patient or working with nursing and doctors, I've learned to trust.

Because Jesus has saved me, I can trust our Lord and Savior and not be afraid. For all the miracles and blessings in my life, including my salvation, I can know joy all day long. Not because of how the day is going, but because God is the same always, and I can draw on that.

Playing on the Worship Team is both a privilege and totally exhilarating. It is awesome to bring the joy I have for the Lord's presence in my life (24 hours a day, seven days a week) to music where I can sing about Him and shout His praise. He is a constant source of comfort and strength for me. I can easily say, "I will not be afraid, I will trust him."

-Valerie Phay

December 14

## **Please Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-15**

*“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”*

-2 Corinthians 9:8

Paul writes to the Corinthians to help the needy Christian believers. He requests that they commit to giving, and should go into Judea ahead of him to show their willingness to help. They should help because they want to, not out of obligation.

Verse eight states, “And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause.” (GNT) So what does this mean to me? Oh my goodness! Well, I give of my time; I always have and I always will. However, when it came to money, in the past, I would *not* give; I was always thinking that my family needed it more.

One day, when I was with a friend, my friend (who did not have much money himself), generously gave a total stranger in need some money. He said he had been very close to the same position himself. He willingly gave what he had to help someone in need, and never gave it a second thought.

I decided to start doing the same, to set a good example for my daughter. It became easier as time has gone on. I’ve always “heard” that “God will provide”. And then, when I became a church council member, serving God in this position, I continued to give my time and resources. I have been blessed and I am amazed that I always have “enough” for my family, my personal financial obligations, and to give back.

In this blessed time of year, we need to remember that the shepherds gave their time to travel to see the Christ Child, and the three wise men gave gifts. We also need to remember that we can give our time to help those believers in need - Supper at Six, Second Sunday Singers at the retirement home, etc. We can give of our time and talents with a group from our church, offering to fix things around our church, help-

ing with the children, assisting with communion, ushering, and so forth. We can pledge to give a little more in our offerings to help our church home stay open, aid our church in giving to the community, and feed us spiritually, as we are needy believers.

Basically, God will provide as long as we do our part to give.

-Lori Ann McLaren

December 15

**Please Read Amos 9:8-15**

*“I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,  
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.  
I will plant them upon their land,  
and they shall never again be plucked up  
out of the land that I have given them,  
says the Lord your God.”*  
-Amos 9:14, 15

Have you ever been trying to do something, but you keep running into problems? As soon as you fix one thing, something else is broken and needs your attention, and you never quite get on top of all of your responsibilities? It’s crazy to think that maybe God feels like that sometimes too, but with seven billion people in the world to take care of I think we would all begin to feel a little overwhelmed.

God’s love for humankind is unending, but that doesn’t mean we don’t disappoint him sometimes. The first half of this reading in Amos is very clearly condemnation of the way humans use and abuse their free will. We (the “sinful kingdom”) are set to be destroyed. At this time, around 750 BC, the people of Israel were spiritually barren. Sure, militarily and materially they were doing just fine, but their faith consisted of going through the motions without any sincerity. People haven’t changed much in the last three thousand years, have they?

The scary part about all this is that God has every right to destroy Israel, and all the power He would need to do it. We saw what happened with Noah. He keeps laying out ground rules and making covenants that humans just keep ignoring and abandoning. God is probably really fed up that every time he turns around we’ve gone and done something else. It’s taking your family to the grocery store: you are there for two items, but the kids keep getting distracted by colorful sugary cereals and it’s going to take you twice as long to finish your errands if Billy doesn’t *sit down in the cart right now!* What parent

wouldn't consider simply never involving their kids in errands again just so there is a break in the insanity?

Despite all of this, there is an immediate shift into forgiveness, redemption, and reconstruction in verse eleven. God will not totally destroy the descendants of Jacob. Instead, He will restore David's fallen shelter and repair its broken walls. Israel will finally have the home God has given, and they will never again be uprooted. Why would a parent do this after all the things we've done and destroyed? Because that parent loves us. He knows that as flawed as we are and with all the mistakes that we make, we are still their child.

So when it's our turn to be overwhelmed and have too many responsibilities to count and have things go wrong at every turn, we need to realize that this isn't God simply messing with our lives for the sake of it, or purposely trying to make things difficult. The tricky truth is those circumstances were probably going to happen no matter what. This is God using our circumstances to help us grow. We are the sieve whose contents are getting sorted. Yes, God is going to shake us, bang us around, and even destroy parts of us, but it is in order to remove the pieces that will not benefit us. It is only because He is going to rebuild us better than we ever were before.

-Carina McVeigh

December 16

## Please Read Luke 3:7-18

*“John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”*

-Luke 3:16

John the Baptist is a key figure in the very beginning story of Jesus’ ministry. We have all heard many times that his “job” was to fulfill the words of the Prophet Isaiah when he spoke about *preparing* the way for the Lord, and the whole *season* of Advent is about just that, *preparing* the way for the Lord Jesus Christ to enter again into our life and our heart. It is a significant task regardless of how many times we have done it because the complications, demands, explanations and rationalizations that we invent can truly make us blind to our own faults, and thus we clean the house of our soul and leave one or two rooms glaringly still untouched and unkempt.

John saw this in the people who had come out to see what he was up to, saw that they were thinking about something far *different* from what he was trying to talk about and get them to consider. The Messiah they thought was coming was a hero on a white stallion, figuratively speaking, who was going to rescue them from the Roman captivity and make them again the rulers of their own land. They wanted to be saved from the suffering of slavery, and he was talking about changing their *hearts* and *lives*, not their living circumstances. You can almost hear him yelling at them in frustration because they will not hear what he is saying. Luke says they were *expecting* God to do something – as if they *deserved* it – just because they were “the children of Abraham.” We get to see and experience a bit of the energy and anger of John, as he yells, “Don’t give me that ‘children of Abraham’ line God can make children of Abraham out of these *stones* if he wants; they are a dime a dozen!”

Some of the people hear John’s forceful words and ask him what he wants them to do, so he tells them about outward signs of

a change in their lives. Be honest, care about the poor, share, do not lie. But really, *that* kind of thing is *not* the point of what John is about, and he yells those fabulous, wonderful words, “I’m telling you! There is someone coming you can’t even imagine, and he is going to baptize you with fire and the Spirit of God!” It’s anybody’s guess whether the “fire” John is talking about is a refining fire or a destroying fire, but either way, it is not going to be a pleasant experience for those touched by it as far as he is concerned. *That* is why you must prepare, and preparing is *not* just cleaning up, it is really getting down to the base elements, the values and behaviors and habits of your life, and making changes in your consciousness in your very heart!

It is not just a hero that is coming, not a famous artist or leader, not just a member of royalty, not even a king. It is *God himself*, knocking on the door to your heart and wanting to be let in! Let that just sink in for a minute. God himself, incarnate, in human form! No wonder John was yelling!

And here’s the kicker: He’s coming again, to your heart, to *you*. Because God *still* so loves the world that He has sent His Son, *and* He wants to live in you! What in the world do you do to get ready for a gift like that?

Well, get to it!

-Father Jim Seipel

December 17

## **Please Read Hebrews 13:7-17**

*“ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”*

-Hebrews 13:16

As I studied this verse over the last few weeks, my mind kept thinking about a Bible study group I participated in a few years ago. It was a study of the book of James. Our study was centered around the theme of “walking the talk”. James emphasized the fact that good actions will come from those who are filled with the Spirit. We can have the knowledge, express ourselves with prayer and praise, and God is pleased with those sacrifices; however, genuine worship shows itself when it moves from our lips to our lives; deeds following words. In school we talk about “action verbs and state of being verbs”. Doing good would fall under the “action verbs” because there should be some kind of action when doing good deeds.

Upon further study I also realized that *love* is the umbrella to doing good. It has been my experience that without love, there will probably be little or no demonstration of good deeds. With those good deeds, God is well pleased. Just as a parent is pleased when their children do good, God is pleased when we sacrifice for others and do good deeds. God is pleased because our doing good aligns with His own nature. Isn't one of our Ten Commandments, “Love your neighbor as yourself”? We are to do good and share what we have. It appears to be easier to give at this time of year. After all, it's been called the “season of giving”. Wouldn't it be great if those thoughts and actions transcended throughout the year?

-Joanne Hill

December 18

**Please Read Acts 28:23-31**

*“Go to this people and say,  
You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.  
For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.”*  
-Acts 28:26, 27

In this passage from Acts, the Apostle Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and turned over to the Romans. Rome had no quarrel with him and allowed him to live by himself along with a guard. Paul called together local Jewish leaders, and being a former Pharisee, and an expert in the Law of Moses and the prophets, tried to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. Some believed and some didn’t, so Paul quoted from Isaiah the passage above. In Isaiah 6:9, Isaiah had just been called by the Lord to convince the Jews to turn away from sin and turn back to the Lord. This is a common theme throughout the Old Testament. God calls his people “stiff-necked” because they often forgot the covenant He had made with their ancestors. He sent prophet after prophet to bring them back to Him.

Today, people have again become “stiff-necked” and their eyes and ears are only focused on the secular side of Christmas. We wear ourselves out trying to find the perfect gift, or cook the perfect meal. We spend so much of our time decorating, shopping, and baking, that we lose sight of why we really celebrate Christmas. During Advent, we should prepare our hearts to receive Jesus through his birth. Read the Bible passages that predict His coming. Take time to listen to the words of Christmas Carols. Tell your children the Christmas story. Focus on Jesus! As God’s people, open your ears and eyes to the true joy that comes through knowing Jesus as Savior, and anticipating his coming again.

-Deb Moision

December 19

## Please Read Isaiah 11:1-9

*“The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.”*

-Isaiah 11:6

The heading to these verses in my Bible is “The Peaceful Kingdom”. I don’t know about you, but my life in general is anything but peaceful. There’s family stuff, work stuff, church stuff, and friend stuff, just to name a few things that keep me busy. Probably too busy.

I have to admit that the events of mid-November took its toll on me. The Thousand Oaks shooting that took so many lives, and finding out that my friend’s daughter was a friend of one of the victims. Fires breaking out the very same day, their destruction all over the news. Another friend lost her great-grandson to disease, but the bright side was this little four-year-old was an organ donor and would be helping several others with his gift of life. And finally to round out that never-ending day, a friend from my high school/college days lost her home in the Northern California fires, along with her dad. And that was only Thursday!

Honestly, I don’t know how people who don’t have relationship with God get through these kinds of days. I just don’t. The promise of a Peaceful Kingdom looks really good right about now. The imagery of predators and prey living together is a wonderful image. We *can* get along, with God’s help. We *can* get through the day, even the dark ones, with God’s help. But we have to wise enough to stop, pray, and let God do his thing. Did I say “we”? I meant “I”. I need to slow down enough, to be quiet and pray. Not that that is a quick fix, not by any stretch of the imagination, but it helps me. It helps me to say what it is that is bothering me out loud to God, as frustrated as I am, and know that He has heard me. I am confident that my prayer has been heard. That’s another promise that God has made with us: he hears our prayers.

Another aspect of this verse about the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, is that we are more alike than we are different. Christian artist Mandisa has a song called “We All Bleed the Same”, where she sings the following lyrics:

*“We all bleed the same.  
We’re all beautiful when we come together.”*

We’ve seen a lot of messages similar to this one on the news. Neighbors and strangers helping each other as the realization of devastation from the shooting and the fires is being played out. Those grieving their loss of a loved one and strangers showing up to grieve with them. We all hurt in our own way. Jesus came to heal us, to show us how to help in the healing process with others.

That baby we are waiting for, the Savior of the world, is our hope. Isn’t that what this Peaceful Kingdom is showing us, that there is hope in this world? Even when it seems dark, there is always hope.

-Doretta Rapp

December 20

**Please Read Colossians 1:15-20**

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”*

-Colossians 1:15,16

In this reading from Colossians, I was struck by verses 15 and 16. We have one God, but we have wrapped up in that one god is three parts, and Paul is writing about two of them. Christ, the visible image of God, and the invisible God. I envisioned these two talking together, trying to figure out what to do with these humans they created and the way they were living in their creation. They have reached down and saved us countless times, but then we go right back to doing it our way once again. So what they decide is that this time the visible image of God (Jesus) was going to join us in human form. Their plan would seem a little bit unorthodox, seeing that going in they knew how it would turn out, that Jesus has to die. But the plan worked! He built a small band of believers to carry out His mission in the world. Then he willingly gathered up all of our sins and went to the cross with them, reconciling them once and for all and saving us in the process. It is obvious to most of us that sin is still in the world, and as usual we still want to do it our way. But if we turn to Jesus and confess our sins, He will still take them from us with love and forgiveness. Amen.

-Mike duBois

December 21

## **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.” These words were spoken to Joseph by an angel. Usually if someone says this to you, you become even more scared. But not Joseph. He knew Mary’s baby was not his and she would face public ridicule. Joseph obeyed the angel and took Mary as his wife.

Joseph is described as an honest and hardworking man. He is often overlooked during the Christmas season, with Jesus and Mary receiving the attention. However, it was this quiet, simple man is whom God chose as the earthly father of Jesus.

Because Joseph was human, he must have had some anxiety and apprehension about the situation he was facing. However, God provides us direction in time of need. Just as Joseph did, we need to listen to God and take action. We all can learn from Joseph. When you listen to God and place matters in His hands, things will turn out all right for you, just as it did for Joseph. As Joseph found out, God has a way of taking unexpected situations and turning them into something wonderful. God always take care of us.

-Garrett Rickert

December 22

**Please Read Luke 1:26-38**

*“Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.”*

-Luke 1:38

The angel Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid. Pretty sure my first response would be... to be afraid. I can't imagine the shock upon hearing she was pregnant. I've got to give it to Mary asking, "How can this be?" She was very young (thought to be between the ages of 12-15), inexperienced and naive, but even she knew this was not how things worked. Or, she thought she did! After hearing that God has favor with her and she will have God's son, she radically changes from "How can this be?" to "Let it be." Wow! She accepts that God would make it so and that was enough for her. Not only is Mary going to be the mother of Jesus, she is also a role model to us for her faithfulness. Instead of her doubt that this is impossible, she believes that with God all things are possible.

What happens when we are faced with an unexpected or undesirable circumstance or situation? Do we respond in faith? The answer is found in the word of God. Let God be stronger than our doubts.

Christmas is a time of miracles. In this Christmas season, may our gifts be courage, faithfulness, and to always remember God is with us.

-Diane Schaeffing

December 23

**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

Sometimes tragic, unexplainable, unspeakable things happen in this world that leave us all wondering, “How could God allow this to happen?” Some people of faith pray harder and get closer to God after a tragedy. Some aren’t affected at all. Still others get angry with God, curse at him, and even stop believing.

Those who know I am a Christian will sometimes challenge me for an explanation as to why God allows these things to happen. To be honest, I can’t begin to explain it and I don’t understand it. I just continue to pray for those who are hurt and angry, hoping they will begin to heal and come back to God.

Young and afraid, Mary expresses profound faith in these verses. She knew her yet unborn son was coming to be Savior of the world. She knew the road ahead would be difficult. Yet her faith did not falter.

At a time in her culture when women were not well respected, the spirit of the Lord shone through Mary and she praised God for all he has done. This is truly a woman of profound faith.

I continue to be touched by people who go through difficult times and still praise God. For those who doubt and seek understanding, think of how much faith Mary had. Perhaps remembering her strength and faith will inspire us to continue on our Christian journey, even in the face of pain, fear, and doubt.

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

December 24

**Please Read Luke 2:1-14**

*“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

-Luke 2:7

Luke 2 is one of the most beloved stories in the bible, and I was excited that I got this reading for my devotion, at first. But then as I started to write, I began to realize that because of the familiarity of the story (thank you Linus, for telling this story with childlike wonder in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” for the last 50+ years), it would be difficult to tell this story in a different way, or quite frankly any better. It is “what Christmas is all about”. But as I pondered on this verse, the thing that struck me was the simplicity of the birth of Jesus. He is born in humble surroundings, wrapped in cloths, and put gently down in an animal trough. Not the welcome into the world that is “fit for a King”. But I believe that was God’s intention. It shows God’s concern for all people, regardless of their social status or vocation. He identifies with us, and gives His son to each and every one of us, a gift for all mankind. Maybe the fact that Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger represents serving. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) This reading is a reminder to me that I am here to serve as he served, quiet and humble, like the birth of a newborn King.

*Father – make us willing to be your servants, wherever you send us, even out of our comfort zones. Thank you for the birth of your Son, our Savior and the perfect example of a humble servant.  
Amen.*

-Dana Skinner

