



Advent Devotions 2021



Over the course of time since Jesus rose and the Church was established, people of faith saw fit to divide the calendar year into seasons for the Church. Just as the natural world has seasons marking time, so does the Church. The Church year is divided into 6 seasons, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Just like the regular calendar, each season has its own distinct properties. The focus of Advent is preparation. It is a time where we are preparing for the coming King. We aren't just preparing for the Savior to come as a baby, we are also preparing for the return of our King. We are preparing for the time when our Triumphant Savior, Jesus Christ, will come again to establish a new heaven and earth. My prayer for you during this Advent journey is that God would use these Advent devotions to prepare your heart as you await His coming again.

November 28, 2021-I Peter 1:18,19

"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."

Quite possibly, many of you have begun our Christmas shopping already. Maybe some of you braved the Black Friday shopping scene so as to get the "best deal" out there! Or, maybe there are some of you who wait until 7pm on Christmas Eve to get your shopping done and have to settle for what's left over. Whatever your shopping strategy, whoever you need or want to buy gifts for, remember as perfect or imperfect the gifts you are giving, they will break, wear out, or become obsolete. The only true, perfect, lasting gift is the one that comes from Him, eternal life through His death and resurrection. As you begin your Advent journey, let this be your guide as you prepare to celebrate the Coming King!

-Doug Weinrich

November 29, 2021-1 Thes 1:1-10

Advent is a time of darkness, when the world is waiting and long ago was waiting for God to send Light into the World. It is no accident that it comes during the darkest time of the year, when the days are the shortest and when we have the least amount of sunlight. It is easy to find ourselves searching for any sign of HOPE that we can find. I love that the first candle of Advent is the candle of HOPE.

The past two or so years have been very hard years for the world. Years of chaos and even darkness at times. A worldwide pandemic, earthquakes, hurricanes, riots, political wars, quarantine, and many many people losing their lives to COVID; just to name a few of the things bringing darkness. If ever there was a time that we needed to know that there was HOPE, this is it.

As Christians, we have the privilege of knowing that in the midst of all this darkness there is always HOPE because God is still in control. He can calm our hearts and fill us with the HOPE that is especially close at Advent when we are expectantly waiting for the gift of Christ to come and shine His light into this world that so desperately needs it.

One of my joys each week is taking Isaac the Comfort Dog out into the community. We never know who we might encounter on our visits; we trust that God knows who needs to pet Isaac, talk to us, and allow us to bring Hope and Joy into their world. It's our tiny way of spreading God's Hope into a dark world. This is what we Christians get to do, as we expectantly wait for Christ to Return! So today I pray that you will be filled with the HOPE of Christ and share that HOPE with someone you love or even with a stranger God puts in your path!

-Julie Blyckert

November 30, 2021-1 Thessalonians 2:4

"On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts."

When our son, Jacob, came to us and said he was going to ask Sarah to marry him, we were thrilled. It was months until he had the ring designed and the place chosen to "pop" the question. Our whole family was in on the plan! It was hard to keep this all from Sarah, but we did it. She was so surprised! We all felt like winners when she said YES!

It was a privilege that Jacob told us first. It showed he trusted us with his plan. It is a privilege that God trusts us with his plan too. His plan of redemption. His plan to send a savior. His plan of salvation for all. God has chosen you and me to be the ones to share his plan. This sure is astonishing. This verse even uses the word "approved" by God. He knows we will mess up; He knows that our words will be clumsy as we try to tell about His love, yet He still approved! Not will approve, or approves today, but approved. God has always known that the best way to share His plan is person to person, friend to friend, neighbor to neighbor.

So, share the Gospel in your Christmas card. Share it with the soccer parents. Share it with your family. We are not trying to please people, but to please God. He is pleased when others hear the Gospel and accept it as truth. God sees our hearts. He knows we are trying. Let His Holy Spirit do the work. It is humbling that God chooses us to be His messengers. But since this is His plan, it must be the best way to get His message out.

-Gail Neidhold

December 1-Luke 1:46-55

How many of you have heard a sermon about Mary, let alone study Mary's Song, "The Magnificat?" We confess our belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, but Mary fades into the background once our nativity sets are put away until next Christmas.

Did you ever wonder why Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus or why the shepherds were the first to announce Jesus' birth? Our Heavenly Father had a master plan from creation of the universe to eternity. He uses the most unlikely people to carry out His promises.

Mary was chosen because of her faith which was deeply rooted in Jewish history and tradition and her exemplary character. She was pure in heart and believed unquestionably in the truth of God's word. Mary acknowledged God's sovereignty and accepted that she was chosen for a special purpose and did not say, "no," to the challenges she knew she would face as a betrothed woman and a virgin. When you think of the people God chose to be involved in witnessing and telling the story of the birth of our Savior, they came from humble beginnings and joyfully spread the Good News.

Mary responded with "The Magnificat," which is a prayer/poem/hymn of praise found in Luke 1:46-55. Mary is primarily praising God for the blessing He has bestowed on her. It also reveals the moral, social, and economic themes of the Jewish people and their history in the Old Testament. It is sung in liturgical churches today as a part of Advent services.

We reiterate Mary's song of praise which magnifies the Lord and Jesus, our Savior. We rejoice with Mary in the greatness of our Lord. God looks at the heart of a person and not the outward manifestations of status, prestige, or wealth. And how do we respond? By having faith and trusting that our God has everything under control no matter what our circumstances, as did Mary.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we rejoice in your tender, loving care of your children and seek to proclaim your majesty and glorify your name as we prepare ourselves this Advent season for Christmas. Grant this Lord to us all. Amen

-Babbette Hess

Dec 2 - Luke 20:27-40

So, the six educationally full of themselves, cocky Seniors walked into my Sophomore level Pacific Northwest History class, to now take the class they had skipped as Sophomores in order to take A.P. World History. Now they had to make up this required course. They'd done well in both of their A.P. History courses, and just knew that this was going to be a piece of cake and really not at all worth their time. I mean, after all, what could this new (to this school) history teacher, teaching a "normal" Sophomore level history class, teach them that they didn't already know?

At the beginning of the semester, for these Seniors, it was far more important to make me look wrong and stupid than it was to actually learn something. These kids' plan was to spend a whole bunch of time attempting to trip me up with what, they felt, was a massive amount of knowledge they had compiled from the two history classes they had taken thus far in high school.

I feel that situation was pretty close to what Jesus found himself in Luke 20:27-40. Sure, we can look at these Sadducees and say "you silly silly people," don't you see that Jesus is in the big leagues and has wisdom and knowledge that you don't even come close to understanding? Stop attempting to trip him up with this absurd scenario. But that's only part of this isn't it?

Jesus wasn't just sent here to teach us about the Law. He was also sent to show us the much higher goals of His Father. In this passage, Jesus really starts to give us a peek into the eternal beauty of heaven and God's desire for us.

I don't know if these Sadducees opened their eyes and minds to Jesus. I do pray that, like my silly little Seniors ultimately did to me, we open our minds and eyes to Jesus.

-Clay Nelson

Dec 3-Luke 20:41-21:4

Jesus often rebuked the Pharisees and scribes. They made a big show of serving God and praying openly in the streets. They religiously followed the rules and mandated others to do the same, while criticizing all who fell short.

The problem with the Pharisees is that they turned God's law into dogmatic rules and regulations. Rules can't set anyone free, and worse, they can become a burden. Christ teaches us that we need to guard against the spirit of the Pharisees and scribes. We may not make a big show of our piety in the streets, but we may carry the spirit of the Pharisees and scribes in our hearts.

The spirit of the Pharisees and scribes is the spirit of self-righteousness, the feeling that you are better than others. Many Christians have fallen into this trap. They get up early to do devotions, serve in the church, tithe, have a wonderful family life, etc. They think that they must be doing the right things, so God has blessed them. In reality, the reason we are blessed is because of the Lord's grace. There is nothing of our actions we can boast about.

What is the condition of your heart? May God give us humble hearts so that we may accept people who are different from us. Let the acceptance and mercy of the Lord move within us, and let the home and church of God become the place where God's grace and love freely flow.

-Gary Hutchens

December 4th-1 Thess. 4:13-18

Do Not Be Uninformed

I do not like being left out of the loop. I am guessing that you don't either. None of us do! Our humanity is deeply rooted in relationships and in communities of belonging. Being part of and belonging to a community is important for every individual at some level. This is why we have sayings like: "Home is where the heart is," and "It takes a village to raise a child." We live and do life together; we want to be *informed*, not uninformed, about what is going on in the midst of our communities.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica (a city in northern Greece) that they too, ought not be uninformed. He desired that they would have information on something of great importance: about their loved ones who were asleep in death. Paul writes to the Thessalonians to inform them about the *hope* that they now have because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Paul informs them that they do not need to grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope, when their loved ones have died. Rather, in grieving the loss of their loved ones, the Thessalonians (and all followers of Jesus) had great hope! An everlasting hope! Paul writes, "For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him" (v.14). And in verse 16, "For the Lord Himself will come down from Heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead will rise first!"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do not be uninformed. The hope Jesus brings to you and me is that no matter how sick, or how broken, or how decrepit our bodies may get in this life, one day, because of *Jesus'* broken and decrepit body on Calvary and His glorious resurrection from the grave, our bodies and our souls will rise from the grave in the glory and perfection of Jesus Christ! This is ultimately why Jesus came to earth : that you might have life and have it to the full, that you might belong to Him, forever. Dear friend in Jesus, you are in the loop on this one! Will you bring someone else into the loop on it?

-Pastor Drew

December 5-Luke 7:28-35

Mourn and Rejoice in the Christmas Christ!

John the Baptist was more than a prophet in his day. He prepared the way for Jesus, the Messiah, to come and people came to him to be baptized and turn from their sins. Many people believed in who John was and his purpose except the Pharisees and experts in the law. The Pharisees thought John was a "demon" even though he followed the law and spoke truth. The Pharisees and experts in the law also rejected Jesus and his words because he was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners". The Pharisees were so worried about following the letter of the law they forgot why the law was given in the first place—to know God and to remain in relationship with Him and with one another. Jesus says to the Pharisees in verse 32, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry." The Pharisees had become dead inside without feeling and understanding. God's presence and power was evident in John the Baptist and Jesus our Savior but because of their own sinfulness the Pharisees could not see it.

As we continue on in this Advent season let us remember what Jesus' birth is all about. It is about God becoming man, experiencing what we experience in every way, yet he was without sin so that he might be the perfect and final sacrifice for our sin. God is calling us this Christmas to not be like the Pharisees, dead inside just going through the motions, but to be like Jesus, to sit with and be in relationship with one another. His Holy Spirit lives in the hearts of all who believe and because of that we can rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. In Luke 5:31 Jesus reminds us, "It is not healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Let us not become indifferent to one another; let us acknowledge our own sinfulness and the forgiveness we receive from Jesus so we can share that same love and forgiveness with those who need God's healing balm. This Advent may we rejoice and mourn with those around us as we reflect the light of the Christmas Christ.

-Maria Devenport

December 6-Isaiah 5: 8-23; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Luke 21: 20-28

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah delivers an uncomfortable proclamation in chapter 5 about the consequences of not following God's expectations. God has made the nation of Israel his vineyard and Isaiah reminds us of the impending woes and judgements. Isaiah isn't condemning God's people, but is describing the results of us not following him in our normal, everyday struggles of life. Throughout Isaiah's message of consequences, he gives us verse 16 that says the Lord will be exalted by his justice and show himself holy by his righteousness. Jesus, in his own words in Luke, also reminds us of the end times and the great distress for the non-believer of God's coming judgment. Both Isaiah and Jesus give us uncomfortable messages while providing us salvation through God's righteousness in His Son, Jesus Christ.

We can compare the message of struggles to the grapes in a vineyard that face the normal perils of frost, pests, molds, too much heat, too little heat, too much rain, or too little rain which occurs every growing season. Or we can correlate it with our own struggles of sin that we face every day and in each season of life. The vintner is continually watching the grapes to manage the growing practices for the varying weather, heat, pests, fungi, and circumstances to produce the best product possible given the uncontrollable and always changing conditions. We are simply grapes in God's great vineyard and we are molded by our life's experiences. Like the vintner, we need to change and adjust to our circumstances of life and changing life stages. With proper input and management, we can grow and improve our own fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Thessalonians that we can be prepared for the end times when Christ returns and our preparation is just a little taste of everlasting life. No one has said the journey would be easy and without trials and tribulations, but through a community of believers and encouragement with each other we can face today's challenges and be prepared for Christ's salvation in all its splendor.

Life is a journey following God's will, knowing we are forgiven, and a gracious opportunity to become Christ-like servant leaders for ourselves, families, friends, and the unsaved. This advent season reminds us of the promise of Jesus, who came as a baby in Bethlehem, faced similar challenges and pruning to become everyone's salvation.

-Herb and Barb Sanders

December 7-1 Thessalonians 5:23a & 24

"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through...The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

We were recently waiting on some "rapid" test results. As the situation and our waiting progressed, my frustration started to build. By the time we got the call that our daughter was cleared to go to class, my impatience was evident to our children.

I don't always appreciate the wait. Often, I want the wait to be over so I can move on with my day. As we waited for the test results, though, God was revealing an area of my life in which He is still working. My impatience was not of God, but God is faithful. God will sanctify me through and through. As I anticipate the work that God will do in my life, I am thankful that He is faithful to complete His work in me.

As we anticipate the coming of the King, we can share with family and friends the work that God is doing in our lives. By sharing the work that God is doing, we are sharing that God is faithful. God is faithful, and He will sanctify us through and through.

Father God, as we anticipate the coming of the King, help us to share about Your faithfulness. As we share the work You are doing to sanctify each of us, may all the glory go to You alone. Amen.

-Sarah Robbert

Dec. 8 - John 7:53-8:11

Jesus and the adulteress woman

This painting by the French Baroque artist Valentin de Boulogne is one of my all time favorites. It captures the moment when Jesus is writing in the sand after he has said, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." In the painting Jesus is looking right at the woman. He truly sees her, but at the same time He truly sees everyone else who is gathered there. He also truly sees each of us.

We all should be thankful when He sees us, He acts in the same way He did with the woman.

1st - He Loved her.

2nd - He saved her.

3rd - He told her to sin no more.

A prayer we should always keep in our hearts, "Lord please help us to act the same as You when we see other's sin."

Now for some homework -

Please take a look at the painting below. As you study it, please pray about how Christ would have us see our fellow person and just how we should act.



-Clay Nelson

December 9-Isaiah 7:1-9; 2nd Thessalonians 2:1-12

Standing firm in your faith. As I read and reread these verses, I tried to think of people past and present who stood firmly in their faith while facing horrible consequences for doing so. It makes me wonder, "How strong is MY faith? How firm do I stand in my faith when challenged?"

On April 9th 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was put to death by the Nazis for his Christian works and refusing to renounce his faith in Jesus.

Corrie Ten Boom never renounced her faith and instead was cast into a concentration camp for showing her love of God by hiding Jews so they would not be caught by the SS and thrown into death camps. Corrie's faith was so strong that she believed that the lice in her hair was a blessing for it kept the guards from molesting her.

Then there's the unquestioned display of faith shown by the victims of a mass murderer who stormed a Junior College classroom in Roseburg Oregon October 1st 2015. As the killer came into the classroom, he immediately shot the professor in the head, killing him instantly. He then lined the students up and going down the line he asked them their religion. When the first student responded that he was a Christian he was immediately shot and killed. What a remarkable display of a firmness of faith was shown when the second Christian, knowing what was going to happen, answered "Yes".

So, as I mentioned above, How strong is my faith? How firm do I stand in MY faith?

I don't know but I'm working on it! Are you?

-Josh Williams

December 10-Isaiah 7: 1 - 25

God's Sign: What's in the Name?

Have you ever been on a hiking trail or unfamiliar road and suddenly come upon a fork where you have to decide which direction to take? Or maybe you need to make a decision between two job opportunities or healthcare courses of treatment. It would sure be nice to have a sign from God to help you out, right?

Tucked into today's Scripture passage is a familiar verse we see often during Advent because it foretells something about the birth of Christ. "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." So what's the background of this verse?

King Ahaz of Judah had a choice to make when two of his neighboring kings hatched a plan to attack him and put someone else on his throne. God sent the prophet, Isaiah, to reassure Ahaz (a descendant of King David) to bolster his faith to trust in God's protection. God even invited Ahaz to ask for a sign to assure him that what Isaiah said was true. But Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. He had already decided he would ask for help from the king of Assyria rather than trust God's promise to defeat the threatening kings. The rest of the passage deals with the sign that God gives Ahaz anyway, starting with the virgin bearing a son named Immanuel and ending with the devastation the nation of Judah will sustain at the hands of the Assyrians.

We find out from the Gospel of Matthew (1: 23) that Immanuel means "God with us". Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this prophetic sign from God because he is God in human flesh, born of the virgin. We can trust God's words and signs because he backed them up with action. He sent His own son to be that sign, assuring us that God is with us. And Jesus' whole life, death on the cross and Resurrection are the signs to us that salvation and eternal life with God are to be found through Jesus alone. "God with us".

Thank you, Lord, for giving us such clear signs that salvation from sin and the way to eternal life with you are only through your Son, our Savior, Jesus.

-Carol Bisterfeldt

December 11-Galatians 4:28

"Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise."

Way back when I was just a tiny lil pup, the trainers at Lutheran Church Charities gave me this verse as I began my training. That training would bring me to my fur-ever home here at Redeemer and what a great home it is. They made a promise to me at the beginning of my training that they would put me with good people, and boy did they ever! Woof!

Jesus promises us that He will be with us and comfort us and as good as a comforter I am, Jesus is so much better! Jesus also promises that He will come again for us; instead of chasing our own tails (as fun as that is!), we can look to Him for assurance and hope!



Isaac Comfort Dog

December 12-Jude 17-25:

In this passage we get a great reminder, "Keep the Faith." What does this mean in our daily lives? What does keeping the faith look like? In this passage we see the people of God getting led astray. We see how outside influence infiltrates their hearts. We are reminded of whose we are and who we should put our trust in. I love the line, "Dear friends, build each other up in your most Holy Faith."

The greatest reminder we get from this passage is that God doesn't leave us alone in our struggles and trials. He gives us spiritual friends to walk alongside us through our trials and tribulations. Who is your spiritual friend? Are you someone's spiritual friend? Do you have someone that you are connecting with who is on your side and is encouraging you? My prayer is that we seek out people that will be on our side and will be for us and not against us.

Prayer: Lord, We pray for provision through tough times in our lives. We pray for a Spiritual friend to come alongside us and point us back to the promise that you have given us. God, thank you for what you have done for us and thank you for the plans you have for us. "Now all glory to God, who is able to keep you from falling away and will bring you with great joy into his glorious presence without a single fault. All glory to him who alone is God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are his before all time, and in the present, and beyond all time! Amen." Jude 24-25

-Luke Noll

December 13, 2021- Luke 22:39-53

A chiasm is a writing style that uses a writing pattern where the most important part is featured in the center. This writing style is used throughout the Bible – it's really quite exciting!

We see an example of this technique in today's reading in Verses 40 and 46, two bookends if you will, where Jesus tells the disciples to "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." The center verse, 42, (note old manuscripts don't have vs 43 & 44) has Jesus praying to God before he is betrayed, saying "Father if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." This is the gold nugget the readers are to discover!

Not **M**y **W**ill, **B**ut **Y**ours **B**e **D**one (NMW-BYBD)

Jesus knows what is ahead and would like an alternative ending as he prays "to have this cup taken from him" yet He is obedient to God's will and ultimately dies for us.

We too should seek God's will throughout our day. Make it a habit to pay attention to the interruptions that happen in your day and ask God, what do you want me to see? How can I help? You will likely be busy and in a hurry but give your time to listen – listen to God and listen to whomever is interrupting you, to see how God might use you in that moment.

SAINT TERESA OF AVILA said "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now."

Let's pray that we will not fall into the temptation of focusing on ourselves instead of those in need around us.

NMW-BYBD

Amen.

-John Blyckert

December 14-Isaiah 9:2

HOPE. In times of deep darkness, we all want hope. Hope that the darkness will go away. Hope that the darkness won't suck all the life out of us. Hope that there could be something better coming.

Jesus Christ is the source of true hope.

Hundreds of years before God sent His Son Jesus to be born as a baby on earth, Isaiah wrote these words of hope.

"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine." Isaiah 9:2

Isaiah's people were living in a land of deep darkness; perhaps they were feeling similar to how we can feel about our world today. Isaiah foretold of a time when the Messiah would come to be both a light and a deliverer. Christ Jesus would shine the light of truth into the hearts of people, offering a message of salvation and eternal life with God for those who believe.

We are all in darkness until Christ shines His truth on us. A life without Jesus means we remain stuck in darkness without any hope of being seen and rescued. A life with Jesus means we live in the light of His truth and His deep love. It means He sees the mess of our lives and the hurt of our sins, and He takes our hand and walks with us through the deep darkness into His eternal light.

Thank you Heavenly Father for the beautiful promise you made and kept to send us Jesus, the Light of the World!

-Michelle DeReu

Dec 15-Luke 7:28

Who would you say was the greatest man ever born? As a Christian, you might say, "Jesus Christ, of course!" What do you suppose Jesus would say if asked this question? Jesus actually did answer this. He told his disciples, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." Luke 7:28

John the Baptist was a very popular figure. People from all over the Judean countryside went out to listen to him preach. But they didn't just listen—they responded; they confessed their sins and were baptized!

For those whom John baptized, it marked their confession that they were sinners. When we admit we are sinners, we are laying aside our human pride and confessing the truth of what we really are. But we are not making that confession blindly. We are making it in the knowledge that God loves us unconditionally. Because we have the grace of God through Jesus Christ, we can entrust ourselves to Him fully and without reservation. Safe in His love, we can turn over to Him even the crushing burdens of our darkest sins and fears.

-Gary Hutchens

December 16 - Matthew 3:1-12

Some of my favorite things about Advent are all the preparations that go into getting ready for Christmas. Picking and decorating the tree, hanging lights, wrapping presents, baking goodies, and so many other events that help us prepare for Christmas morning. We countdown the days by lighting our Advent wreaths, reading special devotions or Scripture verses, and eating a chocolate from our calendars—each day reminding us we are one closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus.

In our reading today from Matthew 3:1-12, we read about the literal advent of Jesus coming onto the scene. John cries out (quoting Is. 40), "Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight" (v. 3). In his work in the desert, John prepares the hearts and minds of those who would soon hear the good news from Jesus. He even mentions it in verse 11, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I.... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The Kingdom of God was at hand, and John was getting them ready.

It can be confusing to prepare for the coming of someone who has already come—2,000 years ago. We can be easily distracted by all the stuff and activities of Christmas. But as followers of Jesus, we know the King will come again. We live in a new season of Advent—waiting for His second coming to bring us to eternal life with Him.

Let us not grow weary of waiting and preparing our hearts and minds for Jesus to come again.

-Ashley Bayless

December 17-Matthew 11:2-5

"When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. "

Poor John. He's in prison for calling out the King and his adulterous ways. Now he's on death row. He sends a note to Jesus asking if Jesus is really the Messiah. He's having some doubts. If Jesus was the Messiah, what's he waiting for? Get your cousin out of prison! Have we had the same doubts? When I am in the middle of hardships, I too wonder if Jesus is really Jesus or if I should look elsewhere for help. Maybe money will help me, or friends, or just plain grit.

Jesus answers John by telling him to look at the fruits of my work. I am doing what I was sent to do. However, John was hoping for a different kind of Messiah. He had written his own definition of Messiah and then wanted Jesus to fulfill those expectations. Jesus doesn't work like that. He did not come to take away my troubles. He did not come to fix all my hardships. He came so I could be made right with God. He came to fix my biggest problem: sin.

A few verses later in Matthew, Jesus says, "Among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared." I guess Jesus was ok with John's doubts. Maybe because John took his doubts straight to Jesus. Can I do that too? Can we? Yes, just tell Jesus you are struggling with doubts. Ask for your eyes to be opened to His realness. Watch for Him. Search for Him. These are the prayers He loves to answer.

Dear Jesus, help me to see you today. Give me eyes to see that You are who You say You are. Forgive my doubts. Forgive me for trying to make you into my own personal savior; here to make all my troubles disappear. Thank you for your patience with my unbelief. Come quickly. Amen

-Gail Neidhold

December 18-Isaiah 10:20-27

When we speak of the remnant, what are we talking about? Is this a group of people who are left over from a lost cause? Is this group a group of people that did what it took to survive? Or is this group a group of the faithful, the strong, the committed? We see in this passage that Israel had been through a time of hardship, slavery, and separation from what they always knew and loved. Their focus was on their captors and not on the one who had brought them out of Egypt. When we speak of the remnant, we speak of the group of people who "kept the faith". In the times of hardship and times of being outcast and exiled, they kept their eyes on their God, YAHWEH.

So are we in that time once again? Are we, as believers, in a time of hardship or separation? Where are our eyes focused? Where are our hearts and what do they desire? Connection? As we read through this passage, remember the promise that God had made to the Israelites. He promised to be with them to the very end of the age. So in times of hardship, separation, and quarantine, remember the promise that God has made to us. Remember, He is with us to the very end of the age.

Prayer: God, Thank you for your provision and guidance through hard times. Thank you for never leaving us and continuing to provide hope and a future. Keep our eyes focused on you and lead us to a place of peace and wholeness with you. In your name we pray. Amen.

-Luke Noll

December 19-Matthew 25

As I look at what has been going on in our country today it is very easy for me to get distracted. I become discouraged when I see some of my fellow Christian friends believing in what the world's leaders are feeding them. They have got caught up in the world's ideology not knowing that this very moment does not favor those people who follow Christ. There are so many crises happening all at once right now and it kind of makes me wonder are we getting close to Christ's second coming? Despite all these crises, so many are turning a blind eye to it. Many don't realize that they are being misled. We are definitely living in uncertain times for sure. So how strong is your faith in our Lord and Savior right now? Are you doing what is necessary in what God calls upon us in keeping His spirit? Will you be ready for Jesus's return? Will you be strong enough to endure through these uncertain times?

Jesus was telling his disciples in Matthew 24:36 that "No one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels of heaven, nor the son, but only the Father." He will come when we least expect it. This parable is referring to Jesus' return, but we do not know when that will be exactly. When you read the parable, the banquet referred to represents the Kingdom of Heaven, the bridegroom is Jesus, the lamp represents our bodies, and the oil represents God's precious spirit; the Holy Spirit which fills us in spiritual wisdom and knowledge.

Jesus is trying to teach us that shortly before his return, there will be Christians who have been so absent in their spiritual duties that they will not have enough of God's Spirit in order to endure to the end. The 5 virgins who lack God's spirit (oil) are those who tend to enjoy the benefits of the Christian community without the true love for Christ. Their focus is more on the passions of the world and not of Christ. All Christians should make sure they have the faith and are diligent enough in their spiritual lives not to be caught unprepared. Matthew 24:13 "He who stands firm to the end will be saved." We must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus at all times. The grace of God teaches us to say NO to the ungodliness and worldly passions.

So many people today are struggling right now, falling away from their faith. They need a reboot. Romans 12:2 "Do not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." The Holy Spirit requires us to continuously renew our mind so that our thoughts are influenced by the mind of Christ and not that of the world. Romans 8:9 tells us "You are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ." The good thing is that when God saved us, He placed his Holy Spirit in our hearts. Without the Holy Spirit, we are just empty lamps.

Therefore, we must live our lives in Christ, while we wait for the blessed hope, His coming, our salvation. We must all strive to take up more time in prayer and worship, so God can renew and strengthen our hearts, so we can endure.

God Bless,
Bill Hager

December 20-Isaiah 1:10-21

Sodom, Gomorrah, and Christmas?

The birth of Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of the world is only five days away! We are waiting in anticipation for His birth. What about the people in Isaiah's time, around 750 B.C.? Their relationship with God was much different before the coming of Jesus. God's relationship with his people, the Israelites, involved sacrifices, offerings, and a once a year Sin Offering by the High Priest for the forgiveness of the sins of God's people. They praised, thanked, and acknowledged God through festivals, celebrations, and feasts. All of the things they needed to do were written out in the words of Leviticus. It seemed simple enough. To have a relationship with God they followed the laws that said what needed to be done. The problem was they forgot about their relationship with God and began to go through the motions of the law simply to fulfill what was written.

In these verses from Isaiah God is calling his people out. He is comparing their behavior to Sodom and Gomorrah—two cities destroyed because of their sinfulness and wickedness. The Israelites have forgotten about their relationship with God and sought to satisfy their own sinful nature. The sacrifices and offerings had become meaningless. The festivals and assemblies became a way for them to go through the motions of what needed to be done and then twisted to satisfy their sinful nature. They had all but forgotten their relationship with God but Isaiah also speaks words of HOPE. Christmas hope!

Isaiah 1:18, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Crimson and scarlet are a deep red permanent dye, impossible to remove, like our sins. There is only one way to remove the stain of sin and that is with the perfect, ultimate sacrifice once and for all. When Jesus, God and man, was born on that first Christmas it was for the purpose of removing the stain of sin from the whole world. He bore the sins of the world in his body so that we might be made white as snow in God's presence.

What is our response this Christmas as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the perfect, ultimate sacrifice? The answer is in verse 17, "learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." God does not desire us to simply go through the motions of Christmas rituals but to live in relationship with him as we love one another. How can we love one another this Christmas?

-Maria Devenport

December 21-Exodus 15:2

"The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him."

These words are just a portion of the song that the Israelites sang right after they had crossed over the Red Sea on dry ground. Right after they had just experienced one of the biggest miracles ever, and they had just been delivered from the Ten Plagues! They don't just claim that Yahweh is their God. They also proclaim that Yahweh is their father's God as well. Yahweh is THE God of all time. He is the Rock, He is the Redeemer. He is and always will be. The God who has and will deliver His people.

Jesus has delivered us from our sin. He will once again come to redeem and restore creation for good! We get to wait in anticipation, knowing that there is a whole multitude of saints who have gone before us who have claimed Jesus as Lord just as we do. We are not alone in our waiting and anticipation. Jesus is our strength, defense, and salvation!

-Doug Weinrich

December 22-Isaiah 2:1-12 (ESV)

"I cannot wait 'till Christmas!" As a child I could not wait until Christmas. School would let out for vacation and the neighborhoods would light up with decorations. Just after the Thanksgiving break our family would head to church to put up the greenery that would smell so fresh and get me amped for Christmas. Christmas commercials begin. Carols on the radio. Then as if the anticipation could not become greater, the church placed a ring of candles in front for every kid to count each week until Christmas. It was the calendar countdown till Christmas that drove kids crazy. I am now a senior, but the truth is the child inside me still loves to experience the anticipation of the coming of Christmas.

Isaiah 2:2 "It shall come to pass..." Something is coming. The people can feel it. They see the signs. The Lord will build a house on the highest mountain. People that appear to have it all will be humbled. Those who are forever at war with one another will stop, weapons of war will be turned into gardening tools, tanks will be sold to feed the hungry, nations will be humbled, and the Lord will rise up. Love will come! It was promised in the words of Isaiah "It shall come to pass".

Fast forward 2,000 years, Linus and the writer Luke speak these words, "It came to pass". It was a very long wait. The Christ child arrives. The promise is kept. A new day dawns. Love in a manger. Love in our homes, our relationships, our hearts. We can stop counting the days because "it came to pass". Christ is here.

And now we start counting again. Counting the days, months, years for the day when Jesus comes again.

Prayer:

Come Lord Jesus. We can't wait! In your name we get excited and hope. Amen.

-Pastor Dave

December 23-2 Thessalonians 3:9

Be Imitators

When my oldest son was two years old, he and I would regularly make the long road trip together from Missouri to Iowa to visit my parents. On one trip, I recall audibly reacting to another driver—don't worry, it was clean—I exclaimed, "C'mon!" About an hour later, I braked suddenly (and safely) and from the backseat I heard a little voice exclaim with gusto, "C'mon!" before I could voice the words myself. Kids are great imitators! They often learn by observing and then doing what they have observed. Any parent, school teacher, or grandparent knows this well.

The scriptures call us to be good imitators, too. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, the apostle Paul exhorts the believers in the city of Corinth to: "Follow me as I follow the example of Christ." And in our scripture passage from today's devotion, Paul says to the believers in Thessalonica, "We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate" (2 Thess 3:9). In our modern world, sometimes imitating is seen as a bad thing; a lazy way out. I submit to you however, that imitating someone who is admirable and full of character is exactly the thing we ought to be doing! The author of Hebrews tells his hearers to drink-in the "great cloud of witnesses" that have gone before them; so that the listeners faith might be steadied and encouraged by the lives of those considered to be the "great cloud of witnesses." In Philippians 2, the believers in Philippi are asked by Paul to consider Jesus and His way of life, that they may be encouraged in the midst of their troubles and persecution. "In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Philip 2:5-8).

In these days leading up to the celebration of Jesus' birth, may you be encouraged by the Holy Spirit to imitate the One who emptied Himself, "became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood" (Jn 1:14, The Message). Before us today, in our very communities and even in some of our own households, are a lot of cruel and divisive words and sentiments that may just be vying for your time and energy to imitate; but you weren't redeemed and made to imitate that garbage. You were made to imitate Jesus and those who follow Him in Spirit and in truth.

"C'mon! What are you waiting for!? Let's imitate Jesus!"

Merry Christmas,
Pastor Drew