



Devotional Readings

For

Daily Reflection

Advent 2019

Giving to others is the highlight of the coming Advent season. We fret over what to purchase that will please our loved ones. We worry about our holiday decorations, food we will serve, and parties we will attend. In the rush of activities, I hope that you will take a few minutes each day to read and reflect about the greatest gift ever given, God's only Son. Reflection can be powerful for, as you go about your work, your mind will, without prompting, bring back thoughts and images. May your Advent days be filled with rewarding pictures. Note: These scripture passages are taken from the Common English Translation of the Bible and follow the Revised Common Lectionary of Vanderbilt Divinity Library. Other lectionaries from Christian denominations for the Advent season can be just as helpful in guiding your reading of the Bible, such as the Daily Readings for Advent 2019 from the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Also, if you prefer to look at other versions of the Bible, please do so as differences always prompt interesting comparisons.

Harold Frye, Ed.D.
Advent 2019

December 1 1st Day of Advent

Isaiah 2:5 “Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the Lord’s light.”

After we had settled into our current home, I got the great idea that installing outdoor lighting would enhance the place. I purchased a set of lights and placed them so that the front of the house would be illuminated at its architectural highlights. The light set included a timer that was controlled by a switch sensitive to light so that at dusk the lights would come on and at dawn they would go off. I didn’t think through the entire process before leaving the house one afternoon for a family outing. Upon our return, a neighbor come across the street to complain that my new light set had flickered like a strobe the entire time and was annoying him. What I didn’t realize was that the on/off switch hadn’t been properly placed so that it was reacting to being on then immediately reacting to the light by turning off and so on and so on. Rather than being a positive asset, my gift of light posed a big problem to others.

As we begin this Advent season and consider God’s gift, know that we walk in the light.

Dear God, help me to be mindful of Your gift. Amen.

December 2 2nd Day of Advent

Psalm 122:3 “Jerusalem is built like a city joined together in unity. That is where the tribes go up—the Lord’s tribes.”

Researchers Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright, describe in their book *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization* how groups of people who work together form cultures of similarity that drive their purposes forward. We often ask our Baker doctoral graduates what components of their programs should be protected. They always respond, “Never give up the cohort model.” After two years of coursework together, the bonds candidates form with one another are invaluable and often go with them far beyond graduation. The cohorts become their tribes.

An area megachurch, Church of the Resurrection, takes great care to form teams of 20 or so individuals who share the same interests. Their work together, done with passion, accomplishes far more than would be possible without the common bonds they share. In a sense, they are forming tribes.

The pilgrims sang with delight as they entered the gates of Jerusalem. David’s song spoke of the Lord’s tribes, the common bonds they shared. God’s gift to Her children becomes a unifying force for good.

God, You bring us together in tribes for a better world. Amen.

December 3 3rd Day of Advent

Romans 13:14 “Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t plan to indulge your selfish desires.”

“This is a black tie affair,” read the invitation. Time for us to pull the tux out of the back of the closet or get the evening dress out to see if it still meets current fashion trends. Even though the second decade of the 21st century’s clothing standards aren’t what they were twenty, thirty, or forty years ago, we all know which events most often call for “black tie.”

Paul’s writing to the Romans used a “black tie” metaphor to encourage them about what it meant to live a Christian life. Jesus, born as a baby who grew to be a teacher, is the example. Copying Him means to absorb His principles, to imitate Him, to copy His spirit, to become like Him.

Thank You, my heavenly Father, for Your gift. Amen.

December 4 4th Day of Advent

Matthew 24:40-41 “At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left.”

At an orientation I attended upon entering the doctoral program at the University of Kansas, the faculty member addressing the group said, “Take a good look at the person sitting next to you. One of you will graduate and the other will not. We are proud that we have a 50% completion rate.” She was right. I graduated, but the individual next to me dropped out before finishing. Little did I know that the national completion rate for doctoral degrees in educational administration was 50% and continues to hold steady decades later. When we began our program at Baker University, we vowed to improve that rate and stand now at 78% in a program that is rigorous.

Jesus spoke about the final moment, saying that no one knows when God will come, saving some to Heaven while letting others perish. He admonished His followers to “Stay Alert!” With all the added reminders that appear around us in this Advent season, be reminded that vigilance is still needed. Stay Alert!

Through my prayers to You, my Lord, help me to stay alert for that wonderful day. Amen.

December 5 5th Day of Advent

Matthew 24:42 “Therefore, stay alert!”

As part of our daily rituals within our Saigon compound, a duty roster was posted that included 4 soldiers who reported for guard duty each night. After inspection by a duty officer (and a bit of hazing, too), one soldier was excused while the other 3 determined which shifts they would cover. The site of duty was a simple, almost rustic guard “shack” at the compound’s front gate. The few times my name appeared on the duty roster, I managed to answer the questions asked and was excused; however, I recall the first time I stood guard. Following a 10:00 p.m. curfew on the streets, almost no traffic was seen. Around midnight, though, a slightly-built man walked slowly by my position, carrying a long pole on his shoulder from which a basket hung from each end. I watched him, wary as I was about someone being on the street, much less right in front of my guard shack. When the man reached a point directly in front of me, he carefully let the pole drop, the baskets resting on the gravel. My first thought, of course, was “this is it!” Should I shoot him? Should I challenge him to move on? Will an explosion come? Fortunately, he had no ill-fated mission to perform, for his next move was to drop his pants and relieve himself. He then picked up his pole and baskets and continued on his way. Needless to say, I, too, was relieved!

May I stay alert for You, Lord God. Amen.

December 6 6th Day of Advent

Romans 13:14 “...and don’t plan to indulge your selfish desires.”

The words above come from the Common English Bible. The New Living Translation states “...and don’t let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.” Plan or think? Selfish or evil? Indulge?

When I drive past a Dairy Queen, regardless of the season, I have a hard time not pulling into the drive-thru lane to purchase a Blizzard. I equate this with those I see in the Starbucks pickup line. I try to limit myself to no more than one a month, but even so, with all the other things I could spend money on, this one could certainly end...but the ice cream is so good!

Jesus entered the world as a fragile infant. We may have difficulty imagining His arrival accompanied by indulgences other than the gifts brought by wise men. Now, in the coming celebration of His birth, center your mind on God’s greatest gift, given without selfishness or evil desires.

I pray to You, my Father, that I can have the strength to put selfish desires aside. Amen.

December 7 7th Day of Advent

Psalm 18:20 “He restored me because of my innocence.”

As I was thinking about this passage from David and, knowing that David’s life wasn’t all roses in his actions toward others, my mind turned to another version of the same passage, this one from the King James Version. In that Bible, this verse replaces “because of my innocence” with “according to the cleanliness of my hands.” You have, most likely, held the hands of an infant. Those tiny hands are without blemish and are as clean as can be. They haven’t yet dug in the dirt or smeared finger paints across a paper. They haven’t yet turned a hostile action toward another nor have they been held in a sign of defiance or anger. Those hands are innocent.

As Advent progresses toward the birth of the Holy Child, we must rid ourselves of sinful acts that stain our souls and dirty our hands. Our preparation for the birth is to become innocent once again to approach the Innocent One.

May my soul be ready to meet You, my Savior. Amen.

December 8 8th Day of Advent

Isaiah 11:1 “A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse, a branch will sprout from his roots.”

Meanings are often conveyed through the use of metaphors. When I read this passage about the coming of the Messiah, my thoughts go to the movie “Karate Kid III” in which Mr. Miyagi’s devotion to nurturing bonsai trees leads Daniel and friend Jessica to rappel down a sheer rock wall to capture a tree to nurture. The danger and difficulty they experience heighten the adventure. Daniel demonstrates growth in understanding the life lessons of his teacher, Mr. Miyagi, as he later attaches a shoot to the stump of his bonsai tree.

Through the long and arduous history of God’s people, leaders continued to deliver the Israelites from disaster. The tree has been reduced to a stump, but new life in the form of a baby will come forth to lead the birth of Christianity. Prepare for the celebration of His arrival!

Dear God, Your gift lives in my heart. Amen.

December 9 9th Day of Advent

Psalm 72:19 "Bless God's glorious name forever; let His glory fill the earth!"

All praise to You, my God, my Savior, and my Redeemer.

"Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God's holy name,
Bless the Lord, my soul, who leads me into life."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSN586nUJXg>

Bless my Lord! Amen.

December 10 10th Day of Advent

Psalm 72:4 “Let the king bring justice to people who are poor; let him save the children of those who are needy.”

Dad always said, “Don’t mix religion and politics.” Without coming down on either side of our nation’s “crisis at the border,” what comes to mind when you see photos of people including young children being processed as they attempt to find safety in our country? If we don’t lift up the least, can we sleep without guilt?

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14).

Give me voice to help those in need. Amen.

December 11 11th Day of Advent

Romans 15:4 “Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures.”

What sustains you? Keeps you moving forward? In the face of challenges, losses, and crises, does the hope you hold on to begin to fade? When those times come, just as they did for early followers of Paul who wrote to them to reassure them that they would find strength in the scriptures, is that where you go for strength? Here we are in the midst of our celebration of the birth of the Christ, a time to rejoice. Consider that not all can endure. Not all are rejoicing as they are overcome by sadness, grief, and despair. Reach out to them with messages of hope.

My Father, Lord, let me be a servant to others. Amen.

December 12 12th Day of Advent

Matthew 3:1-2 “In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ‘Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!’”

How can one short scripture passage raise so many questions? We all know that John was born to Elizabeth 6 months before Jesus was born to Mary. We know that Elizabeth was beyond child-bearing years, but God carried out a promise. We know that John and Jesus likely grew up together as playmates and that John, as the older of the two, likely inspired Jesus as He matured. So, why did John appear in the desert? Why not in the center of the largest cities in Judea? Were those appearances practice runs? Was John trying out his message away from the din and chaos that is often seen in large cities? And John’s message challenged people to do a 180, to turn their lives around to live as God would wish them to live.

As believers and as followers of Christ, doesn’t it make sense to live as in Heaven right now while we are here on Earth? Millions upon millions upon millions of souls sing and praise God non-stop in Heaven and, at our own time, will be joined by believers to continue the litany of admiration.

Now is the time to do that 180, to turn away from sin and face God with all the praise that can be marshaled. What will you do today?

Dear God, give me the will to live a heavenly life now. Amen.

December 13 13th Day of Advent

Psalm 72:18 “Bless the Lord God, the God of Israel—the only one who does wondrous things.”

How often there has been conversation and debate regarding the alleged over-rewarding of youth, especially in sports. Participation trophies, ribbons, and medallions are handed out to everyone whether the team finished first or last. I’ve seen children showered with confetti, run through a gauntlet of parents and grandparents as conquering heroes after battle. I’ve seen children recognized with flower bouquets for taking part as a chorus member. The word “wondrous” may not have been levied at the child, but what message is received?

When David praises God, saying that only He is capable of doing wondrous things, absolutely anything, any act or any gesture made by woman or man, young or old, is trivial at best. God created the Universe and filled it with wondrous beauty. In less than two weeks, we will celebrate the birth of God’s greatest gift, His only Son, Jesus.

All else pales.

Your wondrous gifts are ours to praise. Amen.

December 14 14th Day of Advent

Isaiah 11:5 “Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist.”

As a veteran from an earlier conflict, I am continually amazed at the differences in equipment carried by soldiers. Back then, those headed into battle took as much ammunition with them as possible and, especially in the extreme heat or pouring rain, attempted to travel as light as possible. Today’s soldiers are outfitted with communication devices, cameras on their helmets, small arms, rifles, night vision equipment, first aid items, and more.

In the times of Isaiah, a fully dressed man would wear a girdle and a belt to gather robes and gowns tightly and securely. The metaphor in his prophecy is clear: the Messiah will be far different than a conquering, battle-ready king. If righteousness and faithfulness serve to secure His garments, what more could He need?

To be righteous and faithful to our God will bring victory.

Let me be all that You expect of me. Amen.

December 15 15th Day of Advent

Isaiah 35:5 “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened.”

Some time ago and before our children arrived, Carol volunteered at the Kansas State School for the Blind in Kansas City, Kansas. For the most part, her time was spent tutoring. On occasion, I accompanied her and spent time reading to small groups of children before bedtime. I had no previous experience with anyone who was visually handicapped, especially children. What I learned from these energetic kids was that what we consider a handicapping condition did not hinder characteristics of growing children. As most know, those that lack a particular sense make up for its absence through the uses of the other senses. Since these kids were still working to master reading by Braille, listening to my reading books to them was eagerly anticipated. I learned to describe in detail the artist's pictures in each book and could imagine the images my words painted in their minds.

Isaiah foretells of the coming of Christ. He lays out all that will be different and good because God will give His children this magnificent gift.

Praise You, my God, for Your boundless love. Amen.

December 16 16th Day of Advent

Psalm 146:9 “The Lord who protects immigrants, who helps orphans and widows, but who makes the way of the wicked twist and turn!”

I’ve reflected before in these writings about our 2006 mission trip that took us to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, where we witnessed firsthand the plight of those escaping violence and seeking a better life. One day, our group traveled to a location one kilometer south of the U.S./Mexico border where we encountered a group of individuals making their way north. We interviewed them, asking about their hopes and ambitions. Some admitted they had crossed the border before and some had been deported, but were willing to risk detention again. Our sponsor in Tucson had told us of the terrible loss of life, many times in the desert, of immigrants of all ages. One of the group who may have been their leader abruptly raised his hand in the air and the entire group vanished. What we learned later was that a signal had been received that the border patrol had left and it was safe to cross. We were left to debrief among ourselves what it must be like to want something so badly that there is willingness to risk one’s life.

The Psalm scripture above from the Common English Bible omits two words that are included in other versions: “among us.” The closest most will come to immigrants are not in encounters in the border region; rather, we may encounter immigrants in our communities. Keep in mind this verse: “The Lord...protects immigrants.”

We are all children of God. Amen.

December 17 17th Day of Advent

Luke 1:46 "Mary said, 'With all my heart I glorify the Lord!"

Your day will be enriched by John Michael Talbot's rendition of J.S. Bach's "Magnificat."

https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=yhs-adk-adk_sbnt&hsimp=yhs-adk_sbnt&hspart=adk&p=john+michael+talbot+magnificat#id=1&vid=afeefd6d7ab85f4656b5a27ae7cc955d&action=click

I glorify You, my Lord! Amen.

December 18 18th Day of Advent

James 5:7 “Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth.”

Patience isn't my virtue. Waiting can be agonizing. I can't relate to a farmer who waits patiently. My great grandfather was a farmer before entering the New York Militia in the Civil War. Upon suffering a wound that threatened amputation of his arm, he endured healing, demonstrating great patience as he sought the curative remedy of a cold stream. He was unable to see how he could return to farming without that arm. His patience was rewarded, though, and his effort was compensated.

What faith those early Christians must have had to wait for Christ, knowing that His coming would bring their salvation.

Wait patiently for the Lord.

Lord of all creation, I wait. Amen.

December 19 19th Day of Advent

Matthew 11:10 “He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I’m sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.”

Chances are you may not be familiar with the 1970 play, “Godspell,” that broke onto the scene looking every bit of that era on stage and in a movie version. The script relates several parables found in Jesus’ teaching, including one of John the Baptist’s message and work to spread the word of the coming Christ. If you watch this clip from the movie, you will see a modern-day (1970ish) version of followers responding to the sound of the ram’s horn leaving behind unimportant pieces of their lives to be baptized in a fountain. Enjoy!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1SiaCV26aQ>

The way is clear for You, my Savior. Amen.

December 20 20th Day of Advent

Matthew 11:10 “I’m sending My messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.”

Prepare Ye the way! The winter of 2018, by most memories, was a cruel and difficult one that didn’t seem to end when temperatures rose and seasons changed. The bane of all drivers—potholes—left their ugly and dangerous marks across the city. Repair crews had difficulty keeping up, much less the budgets of municipalities that were already stretched from sand and salt applications. But we expect good roads! We deserve good roads!

John the Baptist was spending a bit of time imprisoned when he sent word to Jesus. “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?” (v. 3) Rather convincingly, Jesus sent word back to John. “I am the One!”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHNpsz2zv34>

We now prepare to celebrate His birth, then His crucifixion, then His resurrection. Prepare.

Prepare my heart for You. Amen.

December 21 21st Day of Advent

Isaiah 35:6b “Waters will spring up in the desert, and streams in the wilderness.”

As a young boy, my family spent many summers visiting a favorite aunt and uncle in northern Texas. Times with them were always a joy, even though the land in that region was so different than what we were accustomed to back home in Kansas City. The air was hot and dry. The land was an endless stretch of red dirt that blew in the wind. Our entrepreneurial uncle decided one summer to plant grass in the yard. We traveled outside the city to a piece of land he owned where he harvested zoysia grass, a type of grass popular in Texas for its need for less water. Planted in clumps rather than in strips of sod, zoysia spreads by sending out runners, choking out weeds and other vegetation. After finishing with the hot and sweaty job of planting, there was always time to chase horned toads through the dirt.

The prophet Isaiah foretold of times when the arid and dry desert would become lush with water-sustaining life. The metaphor comparing water to Jesus is clear. He is coming to bring life to all who believe in Him.

I wait for You, my Lord. Sustain me with Your abundant grace. Amen.

December 22 22nd Day of Advent

Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name Him Immanuel.”

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud, and majesty and awe

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery

The lyrics are a bit different here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

December 23 23rd Day of Advent

Psalm 80:6 “You’ve put us at odds with our neighbors; our enemies make fun of us.”

One of my favorite researchers and writers is Patrick Lencioni. Among his books is *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* that relates the story of a team that doesn’t succeed in working together. Lencioni builds a 5-part model that begins with trust as the foundation. Interestingly, a synonym for trust is faith, a word found 336 times in the King James Version of the Bible. Lencioni purports that, when trust is strong, conflict among team members can be productive without destroying those at odds with one another.

The tribes of Joseph, centuries before the birth of Jesus, are divided and contentious with one another. After their exile in Egypt, they don’t trust one another and pray that God will unite them again. Their search for the “Promised Land” and the ensuing strife only adds to their distrust and agony. Their prayers become pleas to God for relief.

That relief comes centuries later in the form of a baby.

I trust You, my God. Amen.

December 24 Christmas Eve

Romans 1:1 “From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God’s good news.”

Here we are about to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. What are we doing reading about slaves? Just the word “slave” brings to mind all kinds of negative images of torment and evil. Pictures come into our minds of those who suffered at the hands of their masters. But Paul was writing to followers in Rome where slavery was a part of the culture, where slaves served their masters as part of the accepted culture. He willingly sublimates himself to Christ as his master, painting a picture for the Roman church of eager servitude.

The child whose birth we celebrate becomes our Master. When we accept Him as The One, He becomes first in our lives. We place Him above all else. He is the Savior.

Amen!

December 25 Christmas Day

Matthew 1:21 “She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”

“What should we name our new baby?” That question is, many times, perplexes many new parents. Not often these days does the offspring become “junior” or named for a favorite aunt. Gone for the time being are all those special names no one else considered until the child arrives at kindergarten to find there are three others with the same name. The sale of books has even dwindled as on-line helps even list names that are trending in the last 24 hours. Still, those kindergarten classes in five years will have multiples of both genders.

Joseph had it easy. Gabriel, the Archangel, provided the name of the new baby whose birth we celebrate today. His name is Jesus. Oh, and by the way, it will also be Emmanuel. Don’t forget Dayspring from on High, or Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace, the Christ, Lord, Savior, Creator and Sustainer, the Image of God, the Firstborn, the Beloved, the Alpha and Omega, Bridegroom, Shepherd, Head, Vine, Stone, Temple, Gardener, Jehovah, and on and on...in fact, more than 700 names and titles!

Listen to the William McDowell rendition of “There’s Just Something About That Name” and celebrate His birth!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YICIRDVnGVg>