

ON THE WAY TO BETHLEHEM

2024 Advent Devotions



GRACE COVENANT
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

ADVENT

We often hear that dedicating just a few minutes each day to pursuing a goal can lead to significant growth. This concept also applies to our spiritual lives. During Advent and Lent, as well as throughout the year, moments of reading and reflection can support personal development and renewal.

In this Advent season, these daily devotions are designed to encourage thoughtful engagement with God's word. Written from a layperson's perspective, these reflections are shared with love and hope. It is my wish that, through reading them, you may be inspired to think more deeply about God, pray more earnestly, and strengthen your connections with loved ones.

Based on the Common Lectionary of Year C, these devotions continue beyond Christmas into Christmastide and conclude at Epiphany. Each entry is accompanied by a piece of visual art and a musical selection, most of which can be found on YouTube.

I hope that taking a few minutes each day to reflect will brighten and enrich your experience of Advent.

—Harold Frye, Ed.D.

Sunday, December 1 by Kevin Johnson

Jeremiah 33:14-26 “The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.”

We are in Covenant with God.

It seems at times that our ability to find God and the meaning of our faith is so evasive that we just get tired and want to give up. What does God expect? Why are we in this faith boat anyway? It seems at times we are just paddling upstream against a steadily increasing current. Or even that we are in the boat without a paddle at all and the winds of fate are buffeting us about like a feather in a cyclone.

But God is in Covenant with us.

What is this covenant? What does it mean? In these verses God tells us that we are his, loved and guarded. That God will be always with us. That it would be easier to stop the sun from shining than it would be for God to break this covenant with us.

So God is in Covenant with us.

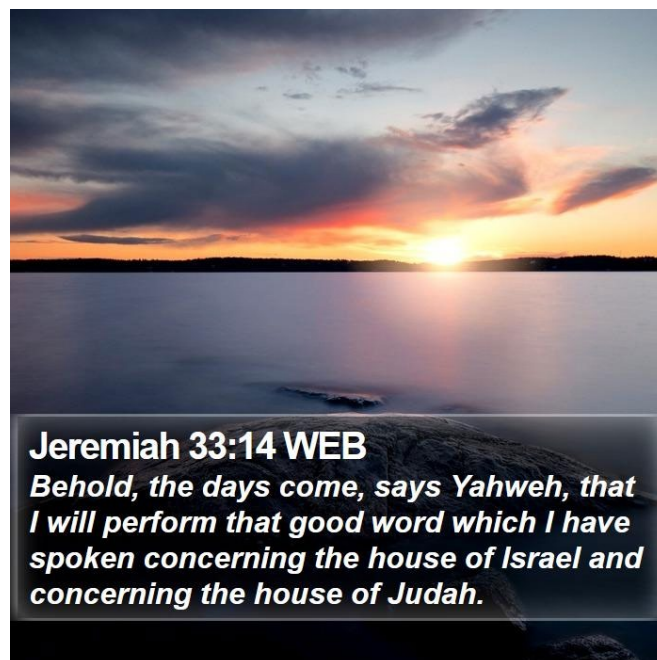
What is our part? What have we promised? What should we be doing? God says that his covenant with us is by grace. That we can as easily stop night from coming as to have God break this covenant with us. So it seems that there is nothing God expects of us. There is nothing we need do to fulfill this covenant.

Praise God who is in Covenant with us.

God is like an anchor in the storm. No matter how bad things may seem we are tethered to a love so great that no earthly force can separate us from God’s love. Our true home is found by understanding this. That no matter what we do we are fully loved by God. Our center is this love. God’s Grace fills us with this love. We just need to drop the baggage and embrace who we truly are: a beloved child of God.

Prayer: Dear loving creator, you are truly a rock on which I can build my life. Help me find you in your love and understand the strength and wholeness this will bring to me. Bless all of my loved ones with your deep love and grace. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hwr1SbE9UA>



Monday, December 2 by Kim Krueger

Psalm 25:1-10

A Journey of Trust

In Psalm 25:1-10, David offers a prayer of trust, seeking guidance and protection from God. “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust” (v. 1-2). As we enter the Advent season, a time of anticipation and waiting, David's words invite us to reflect on our own journey of faith.

Advent is a season of hope, where we look forward to the coming of Christ, both in celebration of His birth and in anticipation of His return. Yet, waiting can be difficult. We face uncertainties, and the road ahead can often seem unclear. Like David, we may find ourselves yearning for guidance, asking God to “make [His] ways known” to us (v. 4).

When I retired in December 2023, I wasn't sure what life outside the workforce would look like. Would our household finances hold up? Had we planned well enough? How would I embrace this new chapter? Would I end up filling my time without focusing on the health improvements I needed? I was exhausted and ready to stop. It had been a tough year—grieving my brother's death, managing his affairs as executor, and feeling the relentless stress of a job that was draining my energy and health. I needed to pause and surrender, trusting God to guide and support me as I moved forward.

Over the first five months, I allowed myself to decompress and absorb this new phase of life. God rekindled old friendships, led me toward healing in my grief, deepened my faith, and filled me with immense gratitude for His steadfast love.

This psalm reminds us that trust is foundational in our relationship with God. David's plea, “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation” (v. 5), resonates deeply during Advent. It is a call to surrender our own plans and embrace God's perfect will, trusting that His ways are “steadfast love and faithfulness” (v. 10).

As we light the Advent candles, may we lift our souls to the Lord, trusting in His guidance and love. Let us remember that the path may not always be easy, but God's presence is constant. In the waiting, in the yearning, and in the uncertainty, we find the opportunity to deepen our trust in Him, knowing that His promises are true and His love is unwavering.

<https://youtu.be/QS04WbSnxok?si=tgbnJhnZ-sLPvA4g>



Tuesday, December 3 by Andrew Frye

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

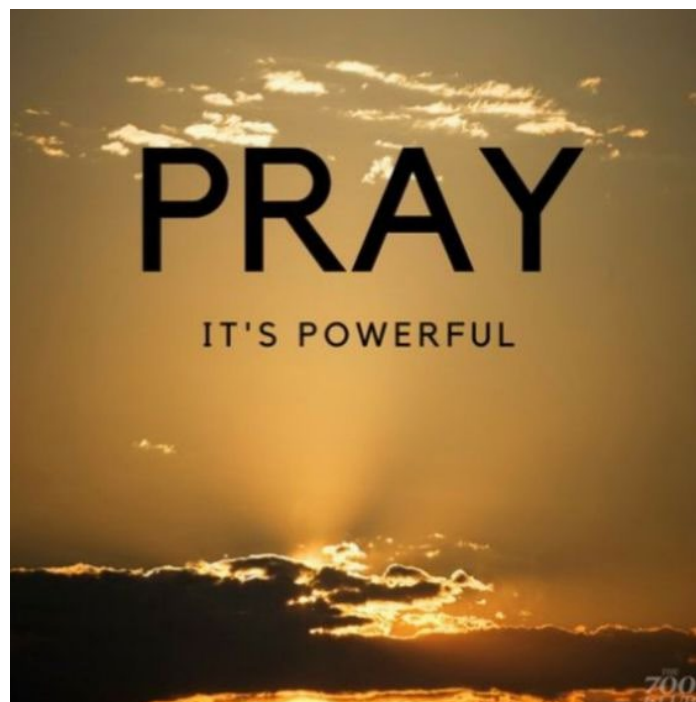
At the start of the semester, a culinary student came into my office to talk. For weeks, I had been checking in about his missing assignments, encouraging him to catch up. Because of this ongoing support, he finally opened up about his mental health struggles. He shared how anxiety and feelings of isolation were affecting his schoolwork and personal life.

As we talked, I listened with compassion and tried to understand what he was going through. We discussed using school counseling services and made a plan for regular check-ins. Now, in November, it's been heartwarming to see him slowly regain his confidence and feel like he belongs. This experience showed me how love and compassion can make a real difference in someone's life.

In today's scripture, Paul expresses deep gratitude for the Thessalonian believers. He feels joy as he reflects on their faith and prays for their growth. This reminds us how connected we are as members of the body of Christ.

Paul's joy comes not just from the faith of the Thessalonians but also from their strength in facing challenges. He understands their struggles and knows they might feel unsure about their faith. This recognition is powerful and encourages us to think about how we can support each other on our spiritual journeys. Just as Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, we can lift each other up and ask God to help fill the gaps in our faith.

Paul's prayer for love to grow and overflow is important in our world today. In a society that often feels divided, we are called to love one another and share that love with everyone. As we reflect on our lives, we should ask ourselves: How can we let our love overflow? Who in our lives could use our encouragement and support?



Wednesday, December 4 by Christine Caseres

Luke 21:28 “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

In the spring of 2022, I worked as a substitute teacher for the Olathe School district. While I have no memory of why I felt my day went bad, I have a clear memory of the anguish I felt because of it. I was entirely self-focused. It didn't occur to me to pray. Suddenly, I became aware of a silent intuitive voice that said, “look up.”

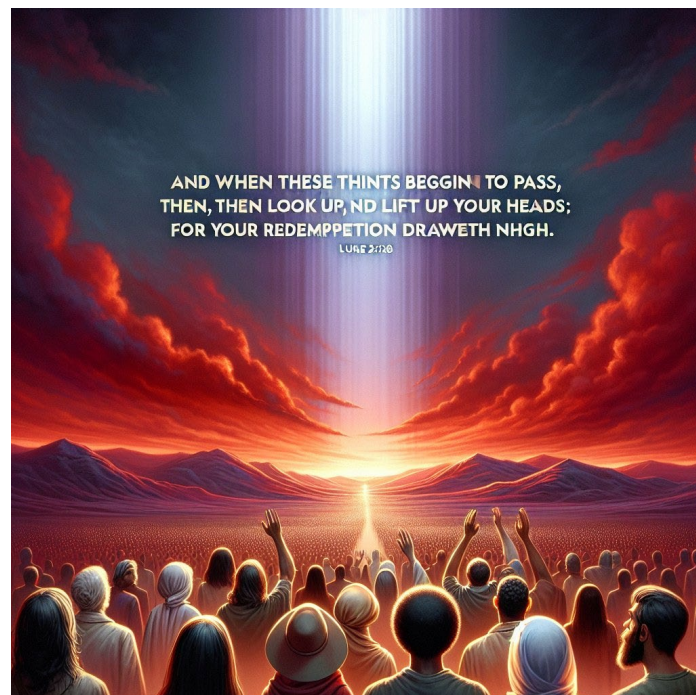
I started to pray, and a sense of peace began to replace the anguish. I thanked God for the opportunity to serve as a substitute. I pictured and prayed for every student I could remember. I thanked each teacher who helped me, especially with the technology in the classroom. As my focus shifted from an inward anguish to an outward gratitude, compassion and love of others, I realized, these are higher thoughts. I felt at peace.

In the passage of Luke 21: 25-36, we are told that as Earthly disasters begin to climax, the Lord is nearby. Because I connect the extreme disasters we face today with climate change, my thoughts are not about those enduring the disaster, but inward thoughts of shame of not doing enough to address this issue. Or negative thoughts of how society has not done enough despite the many warnings.

God says to me, “look up.” The Lord is nearby. I don't have to figure out what to do. God does not want me to spiral down to thoughts of shame. “Look up.”

Thank you, God for all those who are caring for the victims of disasters. How might I help? Thank you, God for all those who are giving their lives to address this societal problem of climate change. How might I help? And finally, thank you, God for the passionate, generous, devoted individuals, non-profits and governments that do exist and serve. May I express gratitude, appreciation and love. Shame and resentment are looking down emotions. “Look up.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5U4PY9D_Ok



Thursday, December 5 by Karen Wright

Jeremiah 33:14-26 “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 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. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

Recently, the Lenexa City Council voted against creating a homeless shelter and transitional housing project that would have helped ReStart in their efforts to address homelessness in Johnson County. There were many people who spoke in favor of the project both in terms of need and in terms of the location and the resources that it offered. However, there were many voices who opposed it. The “not in my backyard” came through loud and clear. These voices cited a fear of an increase in crime and the overtaxed Lenexa police department.

While I appreciate the issue of community safety, I also wonder how many of us have lost the sense of justice and righteousness that is talked about throughout the Old Testament. Justice was a way of life in the ancient world. It was a personal practice to care for the least of these. How are we called to care for the least of these in our current society? How might we be voices that can call this out to others?

By chapter 33 the people are going into Exile in Babylon and Jeremiah is in prison. The Word of the Lord comes to remind Jeremiah and the people that even though they have not been faithful to God, God will be faithful still. God promises a righteous branch will spring forth from the stump of Jesse showing God’s righteousness and faithfulness to the people.

As we enter into his Advent season, let us have hope. Let us lean into the promises of God that justice and righteousness will spring forth. We wait in hope for the light to drive out the darkness and despair around us.

Prayer: We wait and we watch. Come once again and be our righteousness. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYCUFAe03yc>



Friday, December 6 by Kevin Johnson

1 Thessalonians 3:11-12 “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”

Physicists note that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. I like to think love of those far away from us is an exception to that rule. Traveling on business years ago I read this in one of my bible studies and immediately thought of my wife Cheryl and little girl Katie at home so far away from me. I closed my eyes and sent my heartfelt love to them. The effect was immediate. I could also sense and feel their love for me.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes to the Christian church members in Thessalonica (a major Greek city in Macedonia) to lift them up as they are experiencing severe persecution. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to open their hearts further in the face of this persecution. To not only continue to build up their love for one another, but to love those persecuting them. To show that love to them. To let them know that being anchored in God’s love and sharing it across time and space is a powerful source of God’s grace.

Loving. Loving. Loving. How easy it is to decide to love. How difficult it is to drop the baggage that keeps us from doing so.

Prayer: Dear Loving God. Please blow the warming breath of your Holy Spirit which fills us with love into our hearts. Help us to slow down to notice the grace, mercy and peace with which this love can fill us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLLAcuS5i9o>



Saturday, December 7 by Karen Wright

Luke 21:29-34 “Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly.”

Every year, we begin Advent with the end of times. In the Gospels the texts are known as “The Little Apocalypse.” Every Advent we are told to be alert or be on guard. In Luke’s Gospel we also get the parable of the fig tree (which is different from other parables about fig trees in the other Gospels). This particular parable, we hear about leaves sprouting reminds us that summer is near. It is a sign, which we have seen before.

Jesus is saying the signs he speaks of will be reminders that the kingdom of God is near when we see the signs. In theological terms this is the now and not yet. We live in the world as it is, however we know a world filled with division, destruction, and deceit is not the world God intended for humanity. So we stomp our foot and declare that this is not it. And we roll up our sleeves and get ready to bring about the kingdom.

We need the reminder of the fig tree. Without the reminder of hope for what is to come, without the hope of the not yet, we get stuck in worrying about the now. We get caught up with the way the world is and the despair it causes. So this Advent, look for signs of hope, look for where God is doing a new thing, yet again.

Loving God, help us look for you in the unexpected places. Remind us that you will do a new thing once again. Amen.

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



Sunday, December 8 by Nancy Kalesz

Baruch 5:1-9 "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. For God will give you evermore the name, 'Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.'"

In our journey through Advent, we hear today from a prophet in a letter to the people in Jerusalem, who were in exile in Babylon. This letter has five parts: Confession of Sin, then Prayer of Deliverance, and finally a Petition to God; a Praise of Wisdom (which scholars say is that "Wisdom" is God's gift of the Torah) and ending with the An Assurance of Help.

(Fr. Michael Deas wrote the above, saying that today's scripture comes from the section in An Assurance of Help.

I read this book over and over, trying to understand what lesson we might take from these few chapters in a non-canonical book that most of us have never read before.

In researching the message, I feel I must paraphrase and quote the words from Fr. Michael Deas that enlightened me.)

"This message is for us too. In the midst of a disaster, I may be feeling dislocated, anxious, or alone."
"The season of Advent" (however) "is a gift of time where we can rest and once again hear God's message through his prophets and prepare to welcome the light of Christ" (back into our lives).

Read the entire book, "identify with our brothers and sisters across human history to see that God was at work in their lives and is indeed at work in "our lives too."

Peace to you all as we journey through Advent in both our corporate and private lives. I am grateful for this scripture today that opened up a non-canonical writing I had never read before. It brought grace and light to me. May it do so for you also.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJve2zig6iw>



Monday, December 9 by Harold Frye

Malachi 3:2 “For he will be like a refiner’s fire.”

You may be aware of the process of committing silver ore to extreme heat to separate the precious metal from the stone that surrounds it. Recently, I watched a TV series titled “Blown Away” that featured glass artists contesting with one another for prizes. I was somewhat familiar with the techniques that took sand from its natural state under 2200-degree heat to form glass. In that high heat state, the artists were able to manipulate the glass, bending it or shaping it into forms that would result in beautiful renderings of art.

So, Jesus is the artist. He can manipulate our lives by removing the impurities and bringing us to more meaningful and useful living. He can cause us to be less sinful and live lives in service for others. Just as the glass artist adds color to the work, Jesus adds purpose, enhancing not only ourselves, but to those around us.

Let Jesus into your heart and experience his refining love.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=172641487406149>



Tuesday, December 10 by Jo Randolph

Luke 1:68-79

On first reading this passage, I had to imagine a year of only being surrounded by the sounds around and the thoughts within without being able to talk it out or discuss it with others. What message is this passage trying to share with me? I put the leash on the dog, and we went out for our walk.

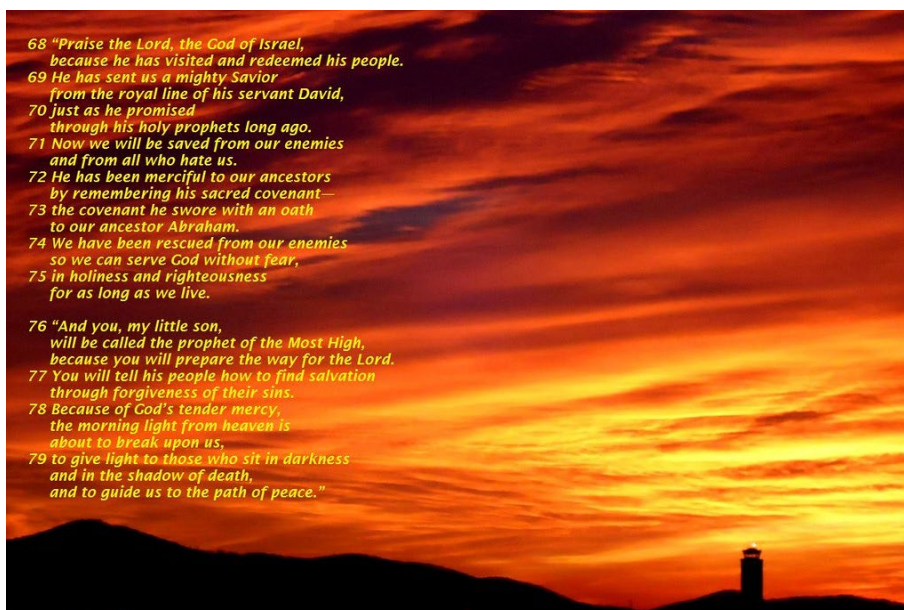
I did not grab my iPod or earphones to listen to my book or the news while we walked. Walking without the input of other voices to 'pay attention to' makes it interesting to listen to the sounds of everyday life in the neighborhood and how differently you learn about your neighborhood. How a small breeze rustles the leaves of trees, and you learn to identify trees from the rustle of their leaves. Listening to the animal sounds, squirrels scattering around the fallen leaves, birds chirping to one another, dogs barking and whining as we pass by, cars driving by, children laughing as they ride bikes home from school, sirens rushing to a site where a first responder is needed. So many sounds with so many aspects of the world living around us.

Returning home, my thoughts returned to this passage. What did waiting for his son's birth while being 'sentenced' to be mute have to do with Zechariah announcing the name of his child and opening his mouth to praise God, the one who muted him? As I thought of some of the things in my neighborhood I listened to and learned from on just my short walk; I imagined the number of things Zechariah heard and listened to over the 9 months before his son was to be circumcised and named.

So, although the story of Zechariah seems as though he was sentenced to silence – Zechariah was listening carefully to life around him, learning and understanding the actions of the Lord God of Israel, his deliverance of his people, the salvation from enemies, the words of the prophets and how it is a blessing on all. In our busy world these days, remaining calm and taking time to walk or sit in silence allows us to listen to God and hear the plan he has for us.

Dear God, remind us always to take time to pause, take a deep breath, and ponder this message of Zechariah's praise of God's time, listen carefully to the world around us, to see your faithfulness as the seasons change regularly, giving us hope and peace. As we await the birth of your son, and what you have planned for us, let us pray Blessed are you, Lord God of Israel.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=554186112069714>



Wednesday, December 11 by Cheryl Johnson

Philippians 1:3-11 “I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I’m thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it’s always a prayer full of joy. . . I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.”

I love this passage, especially the first verse. It makes me think about all the caring people whom I’ve met through Grace Covenant, whether as members or as people involved in other organizations that we interface with. People who reach out to others with a place to stay, cards, meals, transportation and listening ears. Modern-day saints in action.

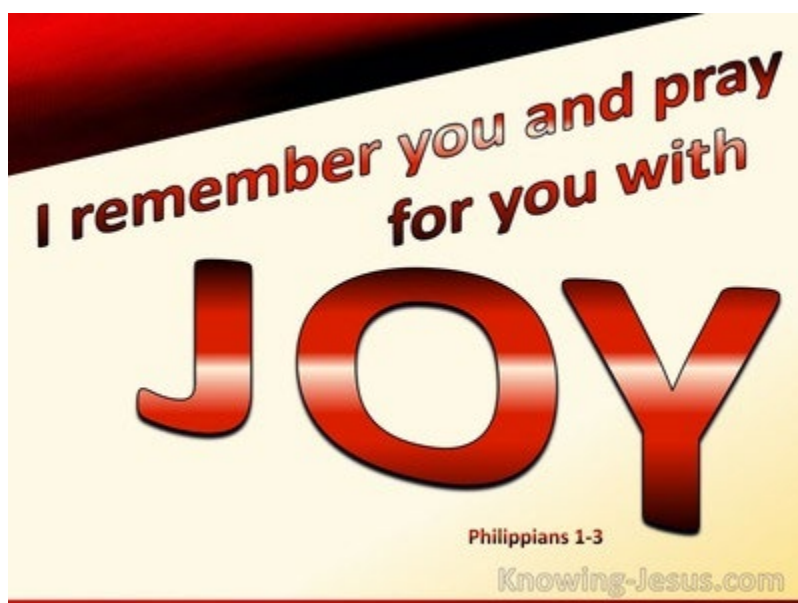
Paul wrote his letter to the church at Philippi around AD 62 while he was imprisoned in Rome for two years. When he was imprisoned, this church sent gifts to him. Since prisoners had to provide their own food at that time, I’m sure the physical reality of food or funds was very welcome. But I also think the knowledge that this church he’d founded a decade earlier was still going strong, that his earlier work was not in vain, would have been a real spiritual boost too.

Grace Covenant is preparing to celebrate its 40th anniversary next year. Like the church at Philippi, we’re still going strong, working hard to show God’s love to the world through various projects. As we look to the future, we can pray as Paul did in the passage above that we will “be able to decide what really matters.”

Dear God,

Thank you for the saints who laid the groundwork for your church and for the saints who are still working to keep it strong. Help us to look at what really matters and make the choices you would have us make. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqGQTCze9a4>



Thursday, December 12 by Don Wilson

Luke 3:1-6

As I read this passage concerning the ministry of John the Baptist, two words stand out to me: REPENT and PREPARE.

Repentance as mentioned in the New Testament is usually thought of as “to turn,” as we turn from sinfulness and turn toward God. It is sometimes viewed as to change one’s mind.

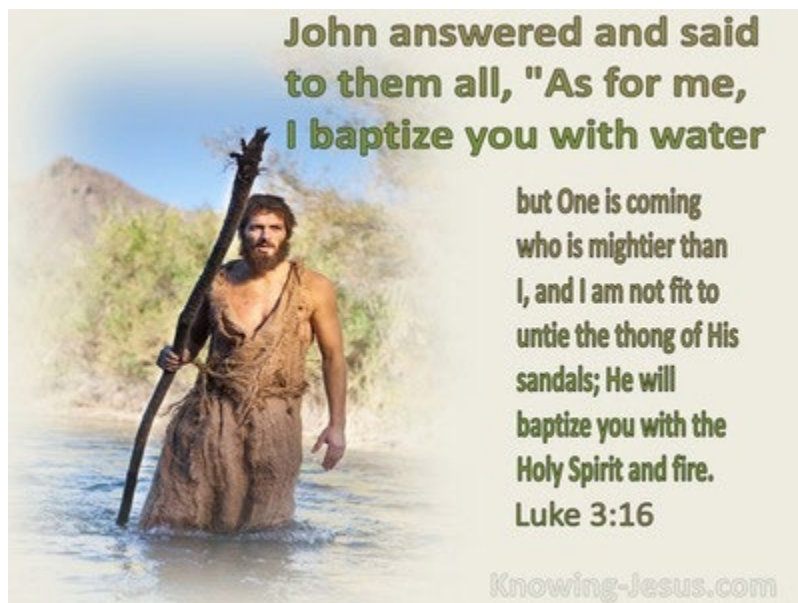
Prepare suggests such images as getting ready or clearing the way. One might even think of it as getting “psyched up” for that which is about to happen. In terms of Advent, it has been represented as preparing to receive the Christ child into our hearts and lives.

Both REPENTANCE and PREPARATION can remind us of the importance of prayer, meditation, and reflection. It is important to take some quiet time to reflect on what we need to turn from or turn toward...does the direction our life is taking suggest the need for change?

What should we be preparing for? Unfortunately, in Advent Season “preparation” gets swamped with shopping for Christmas. That is not a bad thing...unless it crowds out any time available for meditation or reflection.

John, borrowing from Isaiah’s words, is pointing us in the direction of recognizing that God is at work in ways that can transform our life. It’s important that we hear that “Voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=dnEZ60EQZEI>



Friday, December 13 by Nancy Kalesz

Romans 13:11-14

Paul writing to the Romans could very well be what he would say to the church today. How we practice our faith—i.e., traditions—standards of worship style, and the ever-present claims within the church universal of who is right and who is wrong in doctrine and practice. This was already alive and well in the new churches Paul was dealing with. Many of the same concerns exist in the Christian faith today.

And so, Romans 13:11 begins with “Wake up!” he told them. Don’t get stuck in your ways and stop trying to prove ownership of the faith over others. Verse 14 is really the Advent message we should adopt. Instead of all the one-upmanship, corruption of the faith, etc. We are reminded to put on the “armor of light.” Positivity, welcoming, etc., and the reminder to mirror our lives as the Lord Jesus taught us.

As you can probably guess, I struggle (for a variety of reasons) with Paul — but just think how all the churches he started were always in need of letters of instruction — to keep them on the right track.

The Advent message I share with you this day is that “God is light” — “God is good — kind — understanding — forgiving and welcoming to all.”

Jesus came to overcome the darkness in the world, and He brought light to us all — and the gift of making all things new.

On these days as we journey through Advent to the birth of our Lord, let us also embrace the gift of newness that is ever-present for all.

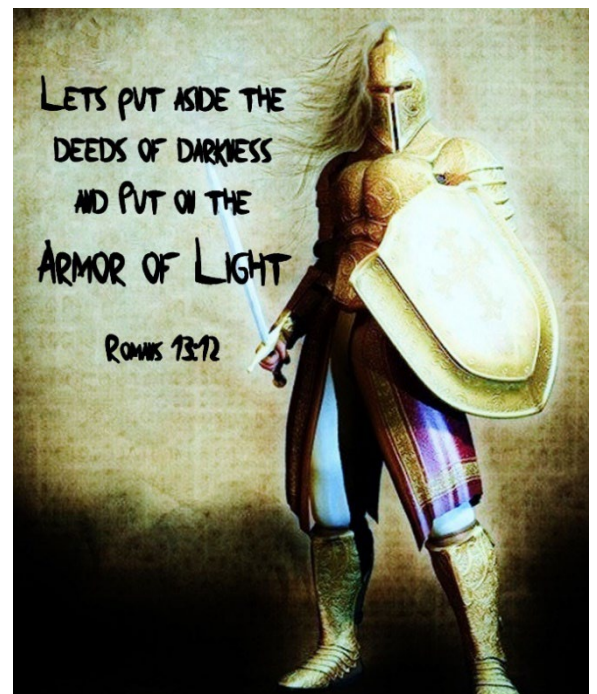
Dear God,

Help us not to get stuck or bogged down in worldly troubles—but to proclaim light to the world over the darkness. And as we approach the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the “light of the world,” let us claim for ourselves to be the light for others as well.

Christ makes all things new—then, now, and always.

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhMdCy1x-gw>



Saturday, December 14 by Kim Krueger

Psalm 122:1 “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”

As we move through the Advent season, Psalm 122 invites us into a journey of anticipation and joy.

The psalmist’s words resonate with the excitement of being in God’s presence, reminding us of the deep joy that comes when we gather together in worship. Advent is a time of waiting and preparation, but it is also a season filled with the anticipation of something greater—God’s promise fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

Reflecting on this Psalm, I am reminded of the times I have walked into church feeling the weight of the week’s burdens, only to be lifted by the collective worship of my Grace Covenant family. There is something sacred about joining others in the house of the Lord, where our individual journeys converge, and our hearts are aligned in purpose. I am greeted by friends who have been beside me through dark and joyful moments. I am embraced and seen for my authentic self. I am met with true love and friendship and it fills me with such gratitude. It sustains me throughout my week. It brings me peace.

Psalm 122 also speaks of the peace and security found in God’s presence. As we await the coming of Christ, we can find peace in knowing that God is with us, guiding us through the challenges of life. The call to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” is a call to seek peace in our own hearts and communities, trusting that God’s peace will reign in us.

This Advent, as we prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ’s birth, let us approach the house of the Lord with joy, seeking the peace and unity that only God can provide. May our journey to Bethlehem be filled with hope, peace, and the assurance of God’s steadfast love.

<https://youtu.be/LRKOWk6FW20?si=YwZ9ExFlciy6BfsZ>



Sunday, December 15 by Kevin Johnson

Zephaniah 3:14-20 "Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment; he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. At that time, I will gather you; at that time, I will bring you home."

Who is our enemy?

Our enemy is one who (or that which) seeks to harm us and to keep us from flourishing. To realize our true enemy, we must first identify our true goal in life. What is our enemy keeping us from flourishing at? This is not an easy thing to do.

To find our goal we need to go to our true home. That which always supports and sustains us. Surprisingly for us we soon discover that this true home does not exist in a "good job" or "nice home" or other stuff. Jesus brought the message that our true home lies in loving the LORD our God with all of our heart, with all of our soul and all of our mind. And to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So who or what is that enemy that is keeping me from accomplishing this? With deep introspection, we will soon find that that enemy is us. We hurt ourselves more than any outside influence.

How do we do this? We doubt. We doubt that falling into the spirit of God's love can sustain us. Instead, we think we must do it ourselves. We say, "Sure, God is love is strong. But I still have to live. I have to put food on the table. I have to work and struggle to survive in this world." And so we go about our day fighting this and fighting that and acquiring this and gaining that only to discover that all of that stuff is not sustainable. It quickly loses its luster to us. It soon goes away. And so we think we need to find another goal to chase.

Prayer: Dear loving God, please help us break this never ending, unfulfillable cycle. Help us to STOP and breathe. To breathe in your presence. To realize that love comes first and not as an afterthought. Fill our hearts with your love. Blow your breath on the embers in our hearts until the roaring fire of your loving spirit fills us and spills over out of us. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZYDYU4Oya4>



Monday, December 16 by Nelson Townsend

Isaiah 12: 2-6, with edits

2 Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The Lord... is my strength and my defense;

The Lord has become my salvation.”

3 With joy you will draw water

from the wells of salvation.

4 In that day you will say:

“Give praise to the Lord,

proclaim [God’s] name;

make known among the nations what [God] has done,

and proclaim that [God’s] name is exalted.

5 Sing to the Lord, for [God] has done glorious things;

let this be known to all the world.

6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,

for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

This passage from Isaiah always reminds me of “The First Song of Isaiah” by Jack Noble White, written in 1976, which I encountered for the first time in the late 90’s, shortly after arriving in Kansas City from graduate school, newly married, and singing in the choir at Grace Covenant.

That was a long time ago.

I remember as we practiced the first several times that the director had us replace any occurrence of a male pronoun with the appropriate form of “God.” At the time, I was a traditionalist, and I thought this editing was unnecessary.

Now, I have to admit that, once upon a one time, my default image of God was a man with long, flowing white hair, sitting on a throne, bathed in light. And that was hard to get over. However, over the years, I have grown accustomed to God as the incomprehensible, ineffable “great beyond,” who is closer than our breath.

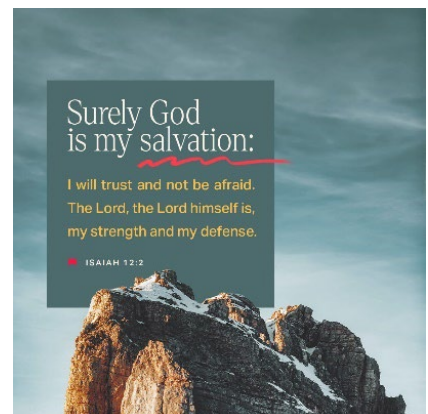
And, after many years of this practice of referring to God as “God,” I bristle when pronouns are used; though I hear Jesus immediately say, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.”

That edit and the experiences of my young adulthood subverted my fundamentalist upbringing. Slowly but surely, my language, my thinking, and my heart changed.

In what ways have songs changed how you understand God?

God, save us from our false-conceptions and help us praise your name.
Let it be.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=D74zE7sxp_8



Tuesday, December 17 by Cheryl Johnson

Philippians 4:4-7 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was under house arrest in Rome for two years. Knowing that, it’s amazing how often the words ‘joy’ and ‘contentment’ appear in this book.

As the person who sends out the prayer chain emails to the roughly 160 prayer warriors at Grace Covenant, I quote the sixth verse in this chapter often. Frequently, I hear back from someone whom we’ve been praying for, and they tell me how they felt lifted up and supported because they knew we were praying for them. Since I’m not tall and thin, we know that all prayers are not answered in the way we want them to be.

But Paul’s message is that contentment or joy is not based on circumstances. Things change all the time and current circumstances can change for the better or the worse in a heartbeat. True joy is based on a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Dear God,

Thank you for this day and the opportunities it gives us to show your love to the world. Help us to reach out to those in need and to be grateful for the many blessings you generously give us. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kSukYaUfMk>



Wednesday, December 18 by Eileen Thomson

Luke 3:7-18

In this passage John the Baptist speaks to the crowd telling them what they need to do to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. His words are a call to action that it is not enough to merely say that you are a believer but more importantly it is about what you do. He tells the crowd that if you have two shirts give one away. To the tax collector, he directs them to collect only what is fair and no more. To the soldier, he implores them to act justly without intimidation or false accusation. Each of these encounters focus on positive action that reflect treating all people with dignity and respect.

In reading the passage I wondered if I am like the crowd needing to share the excess that I have, or the tax collector needing reminders to not take more than is fair or am I like the soldier being cautioned to refrain from false accusation and intimidation. The truth is that in some ways, I am all of those. John the Baptist calls us to repent and gives us the opportunity to be transformed. It is a chance to look at ourselves and do better as we prepare the way for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=heC7SAoUIPg>



Thursday, December 19 by Karen Wright

Ezekiel 20:39-44 “But you, people of Israel, this is the Message of God, the Master, to you: Go ahead, serve your no-god idols! But later, you’ll think better of it and quit throwing filth and mud on me with your pagan offerings and no-god idols. For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, I, God, the Master, tell you that the entire people of Israel will worship me. I’ll receive them there with open arms. I’ll demand your best gifts and offerings, all your holy sacrifices. What’s more, I’ll receive you as the best kind of offerings when I bring you back from all the lands and countries in which you’ve been scattered. I’ll demonstrate in the eyes of the world that I am The Holy. When I return you to the land of Israel, the land that I solemnly promised with upraised arm to give to your parents, you’ll realize that I am God. Then and there you’ll remember all that you’ve done, the way you’ve lived that has made you so filthy—and you’ll loathe yourselves. But, dear Israel, you’ll also realize that I am God when I respond to you out of who I am, not by what I feel about the evil lives you’ve lived, the corrupt history you’ve compiled. Decree of God, the Master.” (The Message)

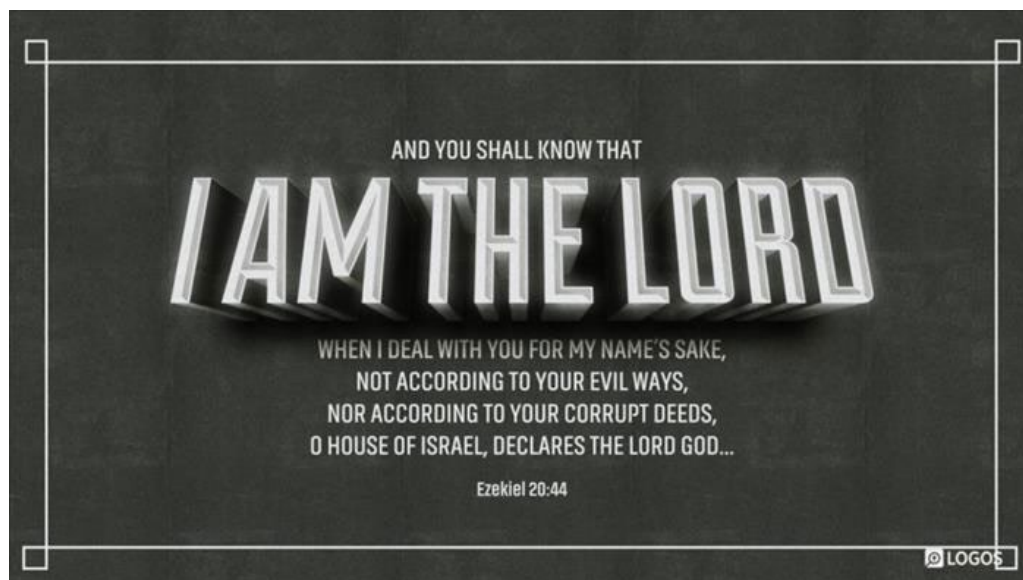
I have been known to say, “At least I am not one of those Christians.” And by that I mean close minded bullies who are never wrong about Scripture and interpretation or people who have caused others to walk away from faith. And yet, like just about everyone, I have my moments when I follow idols. It can be hard to do, particularly as the commercialization of Christmas keeps coming.

As Israel has chased idols, God reminds them that this was not the deal they made. To be the people of God meant they were supposed to set themselves apart, to be different than other people. But, they have fallen into the trap of being like those around them.

Yet in the midst of the devastating prophecy to Ezekiel, God reminds the people that they will be redeemed when they return to God. God responds out of love and righteousness, out of the character of who God is. We too can turn back to God and away from worldly idols and be redeemed.

God, help us to follow you and respond to others as you respond to us, with love. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlwogBoYiQ4>



Friday, December 20 by Nelson Townsend

Psalm 51: 7 “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

Well... that’s a tall order!

Honestly, I don’t even like thinking about my past iniquities and sins. So, I usually avoid it, relying on God’s grace, God’s undeserved favor. I have learned many lessons from my past mistakes, shortcomings, debts, trespasses, and sins... too numerous and too embarrassing to list here.

My past, O Lord, to your mercy; my present, to your love;
my future, to your providence. — St. Padre Pio

In my time at Grace Covenant, I have learned many things from our youth and young people. One of these is the phrase, “God loves you, no matter what.”

Initially, I thought “no matter what” was an unnecessary additive, but I have come to understand its significance. My mental hopping, skipping, and jumping goes like this: If God loves me no matter what, then God must love you no matter what. And if God loves other people no matter what, then God must love everyone no matter what.

And that, my friends, is a real humdinger!

One year, during Lent, I remember a sermon about loving your enemies. The gist was it is frequently easier to love our enemies on the other side of the globe than the enemies we encounter in our everyday life—in other words, our neighbors. We were challenged to bring to mind a person or people who constantly annoy us and, instead of directing hate and judgement at them, ask God to help us love them.

At the time, the people who most aggravated me were the drivers who merged from I-635 onto northbound I-35 from the left, every weekday, on my morning commute into downtown. Invariably, I would be in the left lane, at a stand-still, while the I-635 drivers zipped by in the merge lane until they came to the very end of it, slammed on their brakes, and then cut in, causing a cascade of brake lights to ripple back to me.

I did everything I could to tailgate the car in front of me, trying to box these drivers out, hoping they would merge before they passed me.

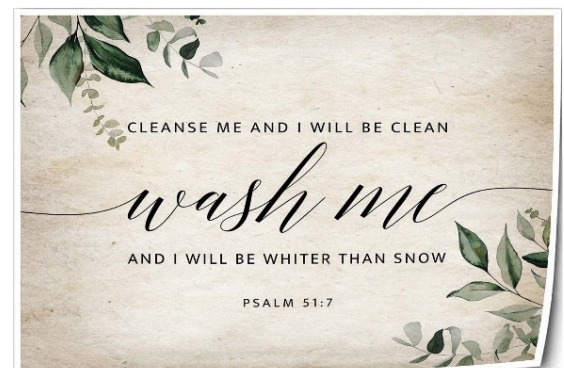
Honestly, my blood is boiling just thinking about it.

But I did what the pastor asked, and I tried to love them with God’s help. Soon, I actually started opening a car’s worth of space between me and the vehicle in front, inviting these drivers to merge into traffic.

It worked! Instead of riding the brake and accelerator, I just cruised slowly along. Frequently, I could let in one or two cars without ever touching my brakes! And I didn’t waste a lot of mental energy during the rest of the day rehashing the driver who cut me off as they merged.

God (and love) work in mysterious ways. Accept God’s forgiveness and mercy and share it.

God, help me live into your Grace. Let it be.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBdaX6heo3g>

Saturday, December 21 by Kevin Johnson

Titus 3:5 “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

The promise here is that we are already saved. All we need to do is turn towards God’s will in our day to day living. Not because God demands this of us, but because this is our natural way to find our true happiness.

What is God’s will? “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your soul and your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.”

We are called to love. Not because God tells us we have to love, but because we are by nature drawn down this path. We only fall away from God when we do not follow our natural desire to be one with God and one with God’s will.

But this sounds so easy. Why is it not easy? Because we look for shortcuts and often believe the promises of immediate satisfaction. We are afraid to suffer the deprivations that come when we deny ourselves things in this world. We ignore God’s voice inside us telling us that we are choosing incorrectly. We convince ourselves that we “need” or “deserve” these things.

How do we find healing. We hold our breath and open our hearts to the call. We allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, washing away our other temporal desires. Sometimes it is hard to slow down enough to do that, but we must in order to find the glory of the Kingdom of God here present with us now.

Prayer: God... Breath... God... Breath... Quiet my spinning mind and melt my hardened heart. Help me listen in the quiet to my natural desire to be with you. Blow the calming breath of the Holy Spirit across my restless soul and guide me to your presence. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYxFSISe7FA>



Sunday, December 22 by Kevin Johnson

Micah 5:2-5a “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

The wonder of old testament prophecy shines through in this passage from Micah which pinpoints the city from which the Messiah will emerge.

For me, this verse conjures the magic of our coming Christmas. When I hear it, I am ready to be steeped in the lore and love that Christmas brings each year. I have heard it often and so I know what comes next. The whole Christmas story opens in my heart and the wonder and joy of this time of year fills me with memories, family togetherness and love.

God’s love shines through in human traditions such as these. Especially as they set forth to honor Christ our Redeemer. God calls us into loving community and how better than to practice the Christmas traditions that make us one in God’s love itself. The decorations and music and parties and presents are all traditions meant to remind us that we all need each other desperately. That we are all members of the family of Christ and children of God.

I know sometimes it is hard to not think of these as distractions from the true meaning of Christmas. But I think perhaps the human need to follow old paths in order to come together is played out in each of these “distractions”.

Prayer: God bless the distractions to our good. Be with us as we celebrate the birth of your only begotten Son. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-JJtKxgbQ>



Monday, December 23 by Andrew Frye

Luke 1:46b-55

In this beautiful passage, Mary shares her heartfelt response to the amazing news of her pregnancy. Her song shows her joy and deep understanding of who God is and what He has done for us.

Mary starts by praising the Lord. This moment reminds us that worship is about recognizing God's greatness and being thankful for His blessings. She acknowledges her humble situation, showing us that God often works through those who seem unlikely or overlooked. In a world that often values status and wealth, Mary's words encourage us to be humble and trust in God's plans, no matter what we face.

As Mary continues, she talks about God's mercy and the great things He has done. This reminds us that God's love and justice reach beyond individual lives to entire generations. He uplifts the humble and provides for those in need. In our world today, where many people struggle and feel uncertain, it's comforting to know that God sees our challenges and is actively working for justice and mercy.

I have recently felt a bit like Mary, overwhelmed and uncertain in several roles I hold—hockey coach, Cubmaster, father, and teacher. Each role comes with its challenges, and some days it feels like I'm trying to do too much. As a coach, I want to inspire my players and teach them about the game and teamwork. As a Cubmaster, I want to create fun and meaningful experiences for our scouts. At home, I aim to be the father my sons need while balancing my time with them. And as a teacher, I want to make a positive impact on my students.

One particularly busy week, I really felt the pressure from all these responsibilities and was struggling to keep everything balanced. I decided to take a moment to pause and reflect. I realized I needed to lean on my faith for strength. At that moment, I could relate to Mary's humility and how she accepted her calling. Just like her, I understood that it's okay to feel overwhelmed and to ask for help.

This realization led me to reach out for support from other coaches, other Cub Scout leaders and parents, and my colleagues at school. Talking with them gave me encouragement and new perspectives. I remembered that we're all in this together. Like Mary, I was reminded that it's through our humility and connection with others that God's grace shines through.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsJ_DHBLOqg



Tuesday, December 24 by Stephen Wing

**Psalm 80:1-7 “Turn us again, O God of hosts,
and cause thy face to shine;
and we shall be saved. (verse 7, King James Version)
God-of-the-angel-armies, come back!
Smile your blessing smile;
That will be our salvation. (verse 7, The Message)”**

Those who study how we begin to understand God have discovered that, as children, our early ideas of God are linked to a significant, male adult.

So, my sense of God was of One who was always watching, waiting to see if I messed up —and then come at me as punisher. The most fearsome six words my mother could utter were, “Wait until your father comes home!”

Most of the time there was disappointment shadowing his face. I got good at reading my father’s face, so I would know if I needed to tip-toe around him.

And so it was with how I understood, and dealt with, God.

Imagine what a difference it would have made to see the brightness of a smile. A look of, “Way to go!”, rather than a, “Now you’re going to get it!” A, “Yes!” rather than a quick and non-negotiable, “No!”

There is that kind of smile on the face of our Advent God. In the coming of Jesus, God’s face is saying, “Look at me! Look at this smile! This is going to be great!”

Prayer: Lord, what I wouldn’t do, just to see you smile! Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= 2ZOfuO-z_o



Wednesday, December 25 by Stephen Wing

Psalm 96

“Take the news...of God’s wonders to one and all! (verse 3, The Message)

Pay attention to the verbs in Psalm 96:

Sing (verse 1)

Shout (verse 2)

Take the news (verse 3)

Everyone join in (verse 7)

Get out the message (verse 10)

Let’s hear it (verse 11)

Applause (verse 11)”

All of what God is doing isn’t just a show. We aren’t just sitting as an audience watching a performance, then get up and wander our way home. Christmas isn’t just a pageant, with bathrobed children that we watch and smile about Ho, Hum.

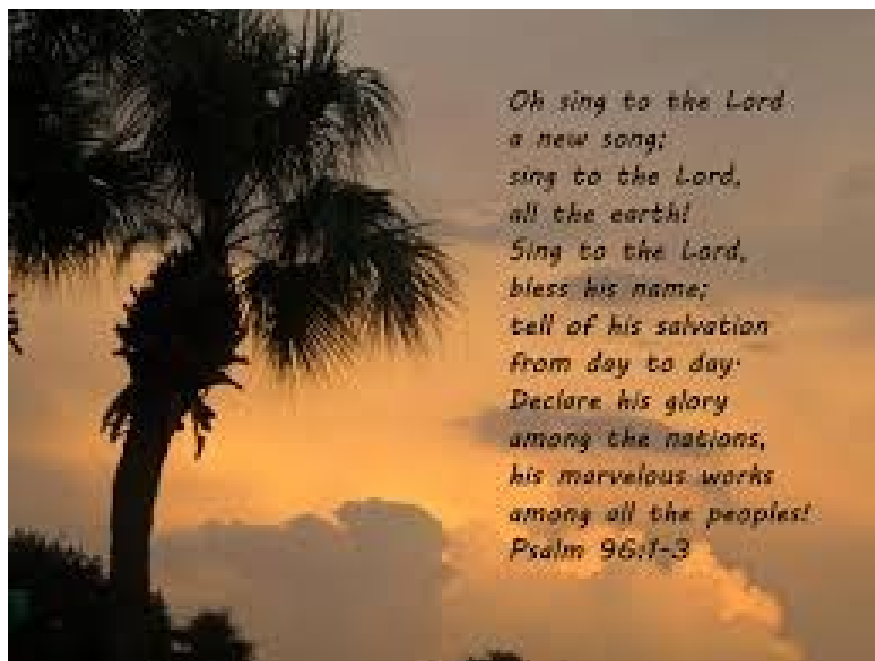
What we have seen God do, what we are seeing God doing, this day, this Christmas day, needs a response. And the best response is to tell others what we have seen. Our experiences of God are not just for ourselves, but so that we can “take the news” to others.

One character in a story said to another, “If it isn’t working for you, why are you trying to sell it to me?” That is so true about our Christmas faith and experience of God. We show “it’s working” by being enthusiastic tellers, just like the shepherds who heard the angels chorus and joined in the singing.

Prayer: Lord, I have mistakenly told myself that you and I have this private thing going on. But now I realize I have so much to tell! I’m going to open my mouth, so I can let it all out!

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=KCQ3ehcC15U>



Thursday, December 26 by Barbara Douglas

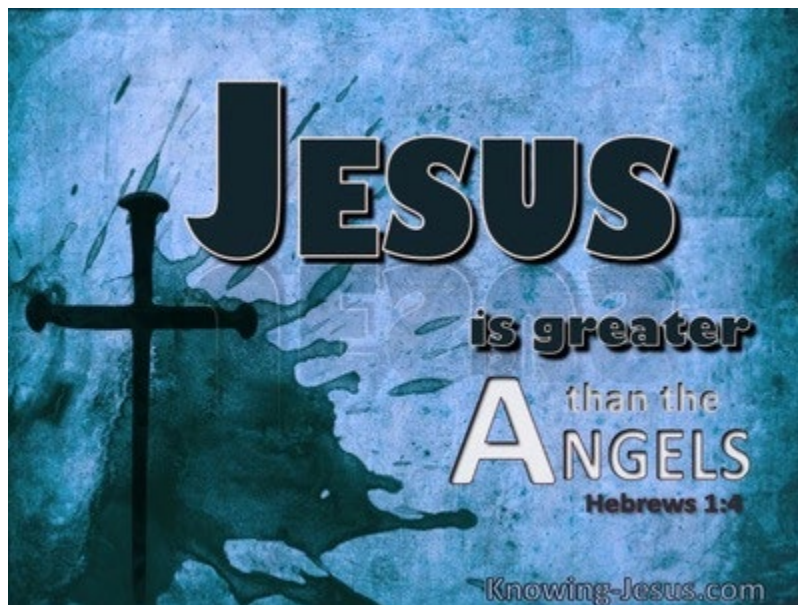
Hebrews 1:1-4

These beginning verses in Hebrews were, according to some scholars, written for possibly second-generation Christian Hebrews who were likely going through persecution from both Romans and Jews. It was not easy living into this “new” Christianity. People needed to be reassured that Jesus was truly the Messiah and living as Christians was the true way of life.

The verses state: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His SON, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So He became as much superior to the angels as the name He has inherited is superior to theirs.”

These are valuable words for us today as they were for the Hebrews of old. It is not easy living in our world today. How do we model our lives as Christians as Jesus would have us? It is imperative that we believe and understand that Jesus as Savior Messiah is all we need. No need to pray to angels or any other entity but directly to Jesus as one with God. Jesus is the true salvation for living. These verses reassure us of the true life, death and resurrection of Jesus as Lord. We believe it is through Him that our sins are forgiven. We will live into Him as he is our example and Savior. He loved with his whole being and we should try and do the same.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNzL_WitknI



Friday, December 27 by Jane Knoche

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 “Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy girded with a linen ephod. And his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, ‘The Lord give you children by this woman for the loan which she lent to the Lord’; so then they would return to their home. The boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.”

As I write today’s devotion it is October 31st. I’ve already been to my morning workout and seen Spider-Man, the Royals catcher Salvy, and a clown standing on its hand in an inflatable suit. Yes, people have put on costumes as adults and definitely the kids will have their costumes on tonight. And at the end of the night the costumes will come off. They won’t be Spider-Man, or Salvy or a clown. Today’s scripture for advent talks about a little boy Samuel who was born to very old Hannah who was blessed with a child after much prayer before the Temple of the Lord. She dedicated this child to the Lord and they took him to the temple after he was weaned. Once a year they made the journey to the temple for a celebration and Hannah brought a new linen outfit for Him.

Little Samuel wears the robe his mother makes each year and puts on a linen ephod (a religious ‘apron like cloth worn on the chest’ when a priest or ruler wanted to question God). Day in and day out he wants to be a priest, and he looks like a little priest.

When I wear my square dance clothing outside of the dance, often I am asked about it as a costume. I say it’s not a costume, it’s an outfit. I wear it because this clothing has a purpose, and that purpose is to do modern square dancing. To me a costume is something you put on to be something or someone else like Santa Claus or Spiderman. Then when you take it off, you’re just back to who you were before. When you put on an outfit you put it on to do a task or achieve an outcome as the job warrants. Think of a police officer, a road construction worker, or even a baseball catcher. If our Halloween costume reflects who we might want to portray for a day, what would an outfit look like to help us with our walk with God? Would it be what we wear? Would it be the cross around our neck? Is it a tangible object seen by others? Take this day to ponder what your outfit is. Rejoice in it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLAOK7PsGSM>



Saturday, December 28 by Stephen Wing

Psalm 148 “Praise the LORD!” (verse 1, King James Version)

This word, “praise,” is an amazing word in the Bible. From its Hebrew language roots, there are a list of meanings as long as my legs.

There are two of those meanings that caught my attention. The first of those is “to be absolutely clear in sound.” There are some sounds we hear that aren’t quite clear. We aren’t sure what we are hearing. It’s muffled. It’s distorted. It’s distant. But when we are hearing praise of God—when we are giving praise to God—it must be absolutely clear and unmistakable.

The other way “praise” is used that I thought was amazing, describes being “clamorously foolish.” I like that. What a great image. Paul wrote the same thing to the Corinthian Christians: that Jesus, and faith in Jesus, appears to many to be foolishness. But to we who are being saved, He is everything and it makes perfect sense. And so we let our praise of God turn into “clamorous foolishness”—we praise, unashamed, the Savior.

Prayer: Lord, it’s time to dance my praise! I know, I know, it might look silly. But I can’t stop myself! Amen.

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



Sunday, December 29 by Cheryl Johnson

Colossians 3:12-17 “Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

This passage sounds similar to the passage in Galatians where the fruits of the spirit are listed. It’s interesting how different parts of a passage stand out to you when you read it at different times in your life. Today, verse 13 stood out for me. “Forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you.” This reminded me of a series of sermons Fred Holbrook preached on the different parts of the Lord’s Prayer.

By my rough calculations, when I heard Fred’s sermon, I had prayed the Lord’s Prayer more than 17,000 times. Until Fred drew our attention to the phrase “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” I hadn’t thought about the second part of that phrase. That the same level of forgiveness we grant to others will be applied to us. Gulp. So, I can’t wrap myself in justifiable anger at someone’s ill treatment of me and harden my heart against them all while expecting God to overlook my bad behavior? Rats.

Studies have shown that holding on to grudges becomes a burden but forgiving them does more for the forgiver than the forgivee. So, as Paul says, clothe yourselves in love.

Dear God,

Thank you for forgiving us, even when we haven’t earned it. Help us to show your love to the people we meet and to be good examples of what it means to follow you. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4S4YQJmnYk>



Monday, December 30 by Barbara Douglas

Luke 2:41-52

This is the story of “The Boy Jesus at the Temple”

Every year Mary and Joseph and their family made the journey to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.

This was the year that Jesus was 12 years old. In their culture, Jesus would be considered on the brink of being an adult and probably didn't spend a lot of time with his parents on the journey as they would be traveling caravan style with many other family members. It was the custom for women and children to be at the front of the caravan group with the men in the back, so Jesus could have been in either one of these groups.

It was after this feast when returning home that after a day of traveling, Mary and Joseph discovered Jesus was not with them. Gracious....as a parent can you imagine traveling a day and then realizing your child was missing? This story has always made my heart hurt for Mary! As a mother I can only imagine what panic she must have felt.

Granted Jesus was not a small child but still at only 12 (about a sixth grader today) would he be able to find them or survive in a big city alone? Yes, panic must have struck them deeply. And then it still took them three more days to find him! Finding him in the temple must have been a huge relief but also very confusing.

Here was their child listening and asking questions of the leaders of their religion. Confusing but also mesmerizing to human parents. Relief at finding him, but also some indignation that Jesus would treat his parents in such a disrespectful way. (I fear I would have been pretty angry as well!).

Then Jesus simply asked them, “Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I would be in my Father's house?” How could they have possibly understood? This was their precious child, and they were frantic for his safety. Even knowing that this was the special child that God had entrusted to them, they couldn't yet conceive what his earthly mission would be or entail. As the story closes, Jesus does go back with his parents and lives with them for 18 more years. And we are told he grew “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” No wonder that Mary treasured all those things in her heart.

How often do we underestimate the power and love available to us through Jesus as our Lord and Savior? Our humanness sometimes limits us in perceiving what God wants for us and has in store for our lives.

Let us grow our faith in ways that enable us to live out our purpose.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ_IKP98zno



Tuesday, December 31 by Dave Pack

Revelation 21: 1-4 – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (CEB)

The Book of Revelation is usually attributed to the Apostle John, being written while he was a prisoner on the Island of Patmos. It conveys a series of symbolic visions he experienced, for example, Jesus envisioned as a bloody lamb. I have had little exposure to the Book of Revelation, thinking through some period in my life the title used the plural “Revelations.” Revelation passages do not seem to frequently make it into the lectionary. You can find a concise summary of this last book of the Bible at evergrowingchristians.com/book-of-revelation-summary-by-chapter.

On this New Year’s Eve Day, the passage above describes the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth – a new heaven, a new earth, a New Jerusalem. It is a hopeful vision of a future with God dwelling with humankind, no tears, no death, no pain – a happy and blessed new time.

Does everyone get into New Jerusalem? No. As recorded in Revelation 21:27, only those “who are registered in the Lamb’s scroll of life.” The scroll contains the names of those who will be granted eternal salvation, that is, have repented of their sins, accepted Jesus Christ, and have God’s spirit within them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPS4yI6mVFM>



Wednesday, January 1 by Barbara Douglas

Numbers 6:22-27

“THE PRIESTLY BLESSING”

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites.’

“The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the Lord lift up his countenance toward you and grant you his peace.””

This blessing has been set in many different ways. I remember it as a blessing said by pastors at the end of each service as a benediction. It has been the text for many music compositions.

It truly touches the heart as the words are so meaningful. What a reassurance that the Lord is always going to be there for us and in the midst of our crazy busy lives He still will grant us His peace. Peace amid the storms in our lives can seem an impossibility. But we have this blessing as a reassurance that in Him we will be blessed and have graciousness given to us. Above all, the Lord will grant us His peace.

Precious words for the beginning of a new year. Thanks be to God!

The Lord is good. The Lord is good always! Amen and Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jkd1YWIjTY>



Thursday, January 2 by Stephen Wing

Psalm 8 “Why do you bother with us?

Why take a second look our way?” (verse 4, The Message)

Almost always, when I’m reading the news, I have to just stop. I can’t read anymore. Like today (August 26), as I write this: the war in Gaza; Russia/Ukraine war; gunmen killing dozens in Pakistan; political election mudslinging; youth detention center abuse; hackers stealing Social Security data; and Taylor Swift having to cancel some of her Eras tour in Europe! I can only take so much!

Then I imagined God reading the news. I’m just reading a fraction of it all. There is so much more mayhem and human atrocity that doesn’t even make it to the news feeds I read. But God gets it all, sees it all, “reads” it all. What must God think? How does God take it—day in and day out, reading about our human inhumanity? (*Big sigh*)

Why does God bother with us?

Why take a second look our way?

God could just be God and remain above it all, aloof from it all. Let us go our way and self-destruct. Instead, the amazing thing is, God decided to see what living a human life is like, first hand. In Jesus, God came down. So we can’t say, “God doesn’t understand what we’re going through.” The story of Advent is God’s answer to that statement: God knows, not because God is God, but because God is Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, you know, don’t you? You know how hard it is to be a human being. Please don’t give up on us. Keep showing us, in Jesus, how we can be. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRtyrIH8UBs>



Friday, January 3 by Karen Wright

Galatians 4: 4-7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! [b] Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.

As we begin the New Year and we turn toward Epiphany, it is wise for us to remember that we are children of God. The phrase “child of God” always makes me think of one of my dear departed ministry mentors. The Rev. Dr. Ray Dykes served at my home church as what is now called a bridge pastor. He had been a parish associate for years before the head of staff left for another call. Ray filled the gap between Glenn’s departure and the arrival of our interim.

Ray helped shape my sense of pastoral ministry. His manner and presence in worship were authentic and he brought energy to worship. One of my favorite things about this 6 foot 3-inch man from Tennessee was his greeting. In a boisterous voice he would give you a handshake or a hug and ask “How are you, you warm and wonderful child of God?” His face would light up and so would mine with this greeting.

I can’t help but wonder if Paul had a greeting like this with those members of the early churches. Reminding people that we are all the children of God and that we have been adopted into the faith by God. That is Good News!

Loving Parent, you welcome us home, you enfold us in your arms. Remind us always that we are your children. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jW2Blfr-3j8>



Saturday, January 4 by Harold Frye

Matthew 25:45 “And he will answer, I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.” (New Living Translation)

Panhandlers seem to be everywhere these days. At almost every intersection, there they are with their ragged cardboard signs. Some say “Anything helps.” Some say “My children are hungry.” A few park their young child’s stroller nearby as they ply the drivers. At times, I am caught by their seemingly pitiful state and lower my window to offer a dollar. At other times, I avoid eye contact and hope that the light will turn green soon. When I don’t contribute, my mind rationalizes that my contributions to our church’s mission efforts will surely satisfy Jesus. But then again...

As I have spent significant time volunteering with the Renewed Hope Food Pantry Bus, I have yet to see a single client who wants to be living in that way, to be accepting food for themselves and their families from a charity. As they step onto the bus and make their way down the bus aisle, few clients make sustained eye contact or smile. They seem to have taken a major hit to their pride. Who wouldn’t?

Matthew 25 calls us to action. There are so many ways to respond. Donate useable clothing. Help with projects that bring food to the hungry.

Refuse to help him? It’s a persistent problem.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls9Y-KfnFPQ>



Sunday, January 5 by Stephen Wing

Psalm 147:12-20

Worship God...

Praise your God. (verse 12, The Message)

Psalm 147 seems to follow a pattern like a dialogue. The psalmist makes a statement, almost a command: "Worship God!" And then the people respond with a question: "Why? Why should we worship God? Why should we praise God?" And then the psalmist responds with three reasons why they should worship God:

God protects.

God provides.

God is in control of everything.

Those are three qualities the psalmist understands the people need from God. Those qualities speak to our basic human fears: Are we safe? Will we survive? What about the chaos? Everything about the way we live out our lives, both the good and the bad, is in response to those fears.

On our own, we cannot insure our safety or the safety of those we love. On our own, we cannot get out of this alive. On our own, we cannot beat back the chaos that comes at us on a daily basis.

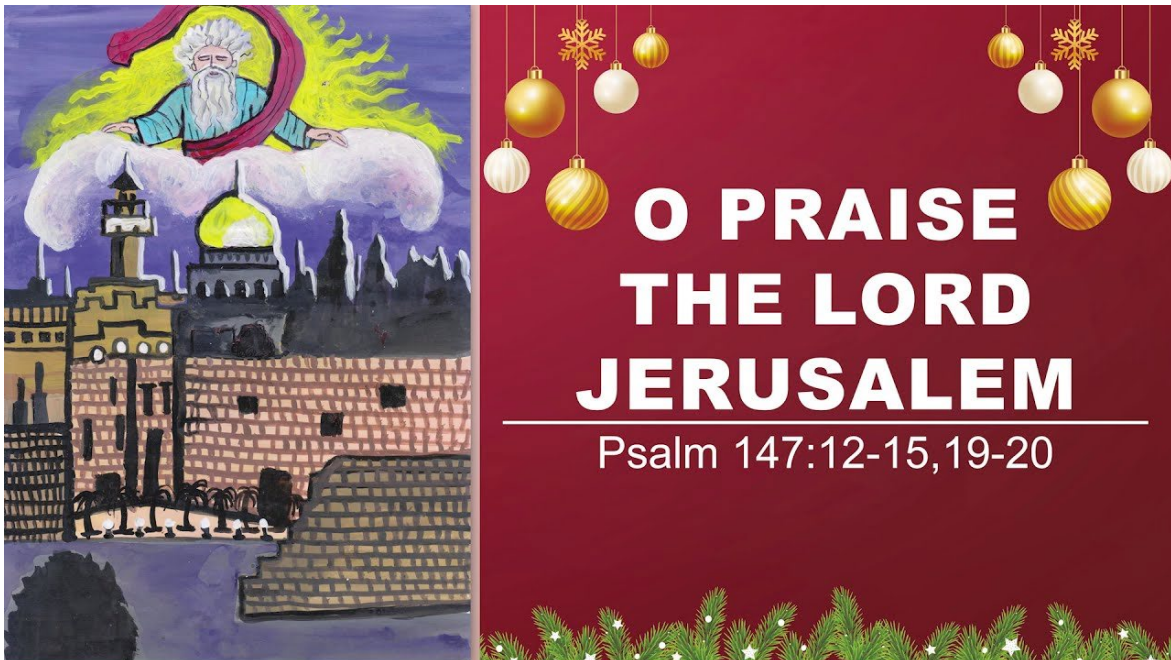
The psalmist knows we need Another to stand with us against our basic human fears.

Another who protects. Another who provides. Another who is in control of everything.

Another who, because of that, deserves our worship and praise.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for being bigger than our fears. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBwe7xUKqCU>



Monday, January 6 by Christine Caseres

Psalm 72:12 "For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help."

Have you ever tried to help someone before they asked you and your assistance was not welcomed? Do you give advice and wonder why someone feels offended by it? As I read carefully about how God helps I'm amazed that God is not codependent. God waits to be asked. God wants to be asked. God requires us to ask.

Once my daughter Jennifer was sharing a problem with me and I immediately moved into finding the best solution. As I spoke with enthusiasm, she became silent and withdrawn. After speaking, I'm embarrassed to tell you how amazed I was at my own solution. I paused. Her response to me was to say, "I'm sitting here trying not to be offended." She didn't want my solution. She only wanted me to listen. I was able to apologize to her.

There is a quote I heard that says, "Unsolicited advice is a form of criticism." I've learn to say , "Do you want suggests by me or do you just want me to listen?" I'm surprised by how often people only want me to listen. God is like that too. "Knock and the door will open. Ask and it shall be received." He doesn't force Himself onto us.

I wish I could say I no longer give unsolicited advice. What I do, is notice that rushing to save someone rarely goes well. I may be able to see their mistakes at a distance, but I actually don't know what is going on and my advice then is inappropriate and, because it is unsolicited, will end up hurting instead of helping.

What then are we to do about the poor, the afflicted, those suffering from disasters? It is not like they can ask me directly for help. For me, I ask God to guide my actions. He alone knows the true situation and what my neighbor needs. When I operate from guidance from God rather than my own desire to fix a problem, I often find my assistance welcomed and appreciated. When I feel guided to help and ignore it or talk myself out of it, I always regret it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tH2uZKFVMNs>





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