

The Presbyterian Church of Falling Spring
Advent Devotional
2018

Dear Friends,

Andy and Laura grew up with completely different experiences of celebrating Christmas. Andy's family did not put up decorations until as close to Christmas as possible. There were no carols playing in the car or lights on the tree until the week of Christmas. Laura's traditions included putting up the tree the day after her birthday, which is Dec. 4, playing carols and decorating the house as early as she could get away with it! Though very different, it was paramount in both of our families to celebrate the Presence of Jesus Christ, born on that long ago night for our salvation. It is the Presence of Christ that brings meaning to the lights, the music, the gifts, all of our beloved traditions. Otherwise, they're just empty gestures.

This year, now maybe more than ever, we need to recognize and celebrate the Presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Advent is the perfect reminder that we need his Presence to drive out the darkness and division that we encounter in this world. Cutting through the noise, cutting through the darkness, are the words of John saying, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." That glory promotes unity, promotes love, promotes peace and promises everlasting life.

May your family be blessed by these devotions, written by members of the PCFS family, relating to the Advent theme: "The Best Present: God's Presence". It is our prayer that as you are busy during this holiday season doing things like getting presents, that you will take time to feel the presence of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, in your life. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

~ Andy and Laura Hart

The Celebration of Advent

In the Christian calendar the year begins with Advent. The Advent celebration begins four Sundays before Christmas. This year it begins on December 3. The word Advent literally means “coming.” It refers to the dimensions of the coming of Christ: Christ *has come* into our lives in newness and power; Christ *will come* in fulfillment of hope for a new world of peace among all people.

Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation. The meaning and joy of Christmas cannot be grasped hurriedly. The wisdom of Advent is that it gives us the time we need to prepare ourselves and to grow into the joy of Christmas.

Advent is a time for new planning, new attitudes and new inspiration for Christian families. Advent is one of the best times of the year. It is a time when families can draw closer together in their anticipation and celebration of God’s gift to the world - His Son the Christ.

Advent Symbols

The use of symbols in the Advent season may be one of the reasons for its increased observance in our time. Purple or Royal Blue is the color which represents Advent. It is a royal color, even as Advent is a royal season, celebrating the royal lineage of Christ as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). Purple/Royal Blue is also the color of humility and penitence, setting the mood for the coming of the King, who humbled Himself “taking the very nature of a servant” and became obedient “even unto death” (Phil. 2:7-8).

Christmas

The Christmas liturgical season begins on the day we observe as the birth of Jesus, Christmas Day. This date is symbolic and comes five days after the winter solstice which means we celebrate the coming of the “light of the world” (John 8:12) just after the darkest part of the solar year. The Christmas season lasts for twelve days and ends with Epiphany. Epiphany commemorates the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God by the visit of the three wise men. The liturgical color of the season of Christmas is white.

December 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 139:1-10

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

*² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.*

*³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.*

*⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.*

*⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

*⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

*¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

By the time you are reading this devotion, I am probably thinking about presents for the kids and Laura. Perhaps I already went out and bought some (well, miracles do

occur). My guess is I am sick of ads on TV for presents and dealing with twice the mail in the box. However, as I think about Christmases in the past, I can't remember many presents I got. I remember a game, my dog, and some golf woods, but that is it. Presents come and go.

However, as we read in Psalm 139, unlike previous Christmas presents, God's presence is with us all of the time. We are never alone! When we wake up in the morning, God is there. When we are at work, God is there. When we are awoken in the night because of a strange sound, God is there. God also knows what we are dealing with, and is there for us. I love the question in the Psalm, where can I go from your Spirit? The answer is nowhere.

The Hart family prays that you will have a blessed Advent Season.

Prayer:

Precious God, be with all those who are reading these words. May they be blessed. Amen

~Rev. Dr. Andy Hart

Family Advent Activity: Make a paper prayer chain to count down the days to Christmas! Cut out 22 strips of paper and as a family, discuss those you want to pray for over the Christmas season: friends, family members, classmates, missionaries, areas of the world, etc. Write one name on each strip of paper. Staple or tape the strips of paper together to make a paper chain. Each day tear off a strip and as a family, pray for whomever is on that day's paper.

December 3, 2018

Isaiah 41:13

“For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Do not fear, I will help you.”

Being scared into an embrace is a common trope in movies, sitcoms, and the like. Dating-age protagonists are often seen taking love interests to scary movies or haunted houses, trying to instigate a frightened leap into their arms. Similarly, I’d venture to guess we’ve all even seen home movies of children being frightened by a Halloween mask or a Canadian goose and running to mommy or daddy. As entertaining as all these examples may be, they help illustrate a commonly-held human reaction: when overwhelmingly or suddenly frightened, we seek out protection from whom we perceive to be our strongest ally.

The irony is how often we lose sight of who is our strongest ally throughout every day and every situation. Maybe it’s because we lack the physical reminder of having our God stand beside us in corporeal form? Maybe we insist on seeking our ultimate protection in either things or people because they often reciprocate with short-term gratification? And speaking of “short term”, maybe it’s because we lack the patience to pray for and wait for God’s saving grace?

I love Christmas and almost everything associated with it, whether they be Christian or secular by nature. But one thing I caution myself about this year, just as fervently as I caution you, is to avoid putting an inordinate amount of

faith in those earthly things we often rely on during this season. It's important for all to remember that "the Holidays" aren't automatically joyful for even those brothers and sisters we see in a pew every Sunday. Memories of lost loved ones or expectations of happiness can be heavy burdens. And the Advent season does not in and of itself bring happiness or security. Therefore, let's pray:

"Dear Heavenly Father, this advent season, draw me close to you; take me by my right hand; quiet my mind and allow me to reach for you first, above all else. Let the celebration of the birth of your Son - our Savior and *the* ultimate protector - cement in my mind who is worthy of my first step when life's horrors become too much. And when, in my best times, I trust in you as I fully should, shine through me so that others may see where true Christian trust lies."

~Harrison Brink

December 4, 2018

John 3:16

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

This is one of the most famous and memorable verses in the Bible. Most of us learned it in Sunday School as a child. Over the years, this verse has meant more and more to me. The incredible love that God has shown me has been a life-changer--knowing that he is with me during my struggles is priceless. But His love isn't just for me, but it is for the world. He gave his only son--his only son! For you and for

me. Could I do that? Could you? For people you don't even know or even like? God's love in this act is unimaginable!

I think of Romans 5:6, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

During this Advent season, let us try to understand more and more the incredible sacrifice that was made by God to show His love for His people...for you and for me.

Prayer:

Dear Loving Father, thank you so much for your unrelenting love for us. Allow us to truly understand and show that type of love in our everyday lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

~Michael Spencer

December 5, 2018

Psalm 52:9

"I will thank you forever, because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim^[a] your name, for it is good."

My life has been incredibly blessed. I have never had to face any real hardship, and I thank God each day for all of the blessings He has given me. About a year ago, Brian was having some health issues. He had seen several doctors, and they weren't giving us any good news. I remember thinking, "Maybe my blessings have run out." It was a really difficult time for both of us. I felt myself becoming angry with God that the first hardship I would have to face was possibly losing my husband.

It was a conversation with my mom that changed my thinking. She looked me in the eye and said, "God's blessings never run out." Even in difficult times, God sends His blessings. They may be small, and they may be hard to find, but they never run out. Praise Him each day for the blessings, big and small, that He grants.

Father God, thank You for Your abundant, never-ending blessings. Thank You for a warm home, healthy food to eat, and the relationships You have blessed me with. I pray that I can trust Your plan and see Your blessings each day. Amen.

~Katie Truesdale

December 6, 2018

Psalm 36:5-9

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

This verse is about giving all the glory to God for everything in my life. I have grown up in a family that has always taught me to love God and to turn everything over to him. I know that in the bad times, and the good times, he will get us through as long as we love him and love others. This verse just tells me to continue to love him, and I will always be ok. This year I will try to remember the importance of his presence over gifts as that is the actual present.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please let us have your presence in our everyday, but especially during the holiday season, Amen.

~Taylor Daynard

December 7, 2018

Psalm 19:1

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament^[a] proclaims his handiwork”

Have you ever had an urge to be creative, make something creative, or do something creative? I know I have! My creativity might involve going to a fabric store, perusing and touching the plethora of beautiful fabrics, deciding what to make, and buying all the items I need. Once I get home, I need to use scissors, straight pins, fabric, thread, and my sewing machine. When I make a mistake, out comes my ripper to undo and redo. When I finally finish, I

usually have something very pretty to wear, a unique costume, or curtains for my windows. I am excited and delighted, but my creativeness has no comparison to God's creation.

Psalm 19:1 talks about the heavens God created, declaring His glory and John 1:14 talks about the glory of God's one and only Son, Jesus. Glory signifies magnificence, splendor, honor, and grandeur. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all present at creation. Genesis 1:1 states, "In the beginning, God created.....". The Latin word for create is defined as producing or forming something out of nothing. The sun and moon, oceans and rivers, plains and mountains, plants and animals, man and woman were brought into existence (created) by our glorious, triune God. All His creation shouts and proclaims His glory. Everything we feel, touch, taste, smell, or see declares God as the creator and shouts to proclaim His glory. Romans 1:20 tells us that God's eternal, divine nature and power are evident in our world, His creation, and we are without excuse to recognize our Creator. And yet, history records countless episodes of man's denial of God and His creation. Because of man's sinful state, the Word (Jesus) was sent in flesh and blood that we might see God's glory through Him. During this Advent season, may we remember God's glorious creation as we look out our windows and ponder the beauty we see. But most of all, let us remember the glory of his Son, Jesus, who came as a helpless baby to experience everything we do as humans but as a sinless, perfect servant who shed His blood to cover our sins that we might be sinless in God's eyes to live in eternity with Him. At this Christmas season of celebration, may we remember to ask for forgiveness each day for our sins that we might be seen as perfect in God's eyes. As we read and

ingest the entirety of Psalm 19, may our Creator open our eyes to his glory!

Prayer:

Our glorious, Heavenly Father, as we are busy bustling around during this Christmas season, remind us of the glory that shone at the birth of your incarnate Son. May we recognize His sacrifice on Calvary's cross that began at His birth as you set in motion the plan for our salvation. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit we pray, Amen.

~Rita Hillwig

December 8, 2018

2 Corinthians 9:15

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

The holiday season is associated with gifts. Whether it's giving or receiving, everyone loves gifts. When I was a kid, I couldn't wait for Christmas to see what I would receive.

If I think back through the years, things like video games, football jerseys, and shoes stand out. If we had the time, I could stand up here and describe for you several gifts that I've received over the years. I have a weird ability to remember mundane details from as long as 30 years ago.

I'll never forget my turquoise and white Reebok Pump sneakers, or my Art Monk Redskins jersey (No, I'm not actually a Redskins fan).

I'm sure each of you could think back to gifts you've received and also describes them in great detail.

But, has there ever been a gift you've received that was so awesome you just couldn't describe it? That's exactly what 2nd Corinthians tells us.

Whether we think we deserve it or not, we are all lucky. God has given us a gift that no-one, not even someone as detail-oriented as me, can describe. In my work as a sports writer, I could tell you every play that happened in the last Penn State game, but I have no idea how to truly put into words this gift that God has given us.

The gift of eternal life in heaven is so awesome, that there truly are no words. No adjectives or superlatives could ever do enough to fully describe God's gift to us.

There is no better gift than the ability to spend eternity with our savior.

As I go through this holiday season, I'll be blessed with many gifts, but I need to keep my focus on the one that I know is being prepared for me when this life is over.

~Barry Leonard

December 9, 2018

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

*² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

³ A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

*⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*

*⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

*⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;^[a]
lift up your voice with strength,*

*O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[b]
 lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 "Here is your God!"*

*¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him;
 his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.*

*¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Route 81 looms large in Franklin County daily conversation. The traffic; the traffic jams, the trucks that inundate us with water during rainstorms; the length of time it takes to cover a short distance; the back-up at exits; etc. Should the road be widened? Will that bring less traffic---or more? Trucks--and cars--are essential to the economy, and most drivers are well-skilled; but cellphones, texting, excessively high or low speeds, substance use, and the occasional impetuous deer can surprise even the best driver and lead to trouble or catastrophe.

Isaiah 40 calls God's people to travel a different kind of highway: *"Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* The prophet articulates a message God has commanded his angels to convey. For the words of Isaiah 40:1-2 are spoken to the Heavenly Council of archangels and angels, the Divine Court, to whom God says "Comfort, comfort ye my people"... God's people, whose temple was destroyed, most of whom were exiled to Babylon, many of whom became slaves, whose plight is heartrendingly lamented in Psalm 137: *"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"* They ache with the pain of separation from their land and their Temple, even as they still find solace in their book, the Scriptures, now read regularly in their homes and in a new institutional framework, the synagogue, designed

for prayer, communal study, and fellowship.

As they languish, repenting of their sins of idolatry---their worship of false gods, their violations of and disregard for God's law given at Sinai, their blatant devotion to luxury and self-indulgence fueled by their oppression of the poor--
-Isaiah's voice rings loud and clear *"Get up to a high mountain, O herald of good news to Zion...Raise your voice with power, O herald of joy to Jerusalem--- Announce to the cities of Judah: 'Behold your God!'"*

God will lead you home! The assurance of the merciful, forgiving presence of the one, true God is your hope! The omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, compassionate God who has created the universe will build you a superhighway to Zion not made with macadam or concrete, whose roadbed will be smoothed by the One whose Spirit hovered over the waters bringing order out of chaos, causing the waters to recede, fashioning the mountains.

When kings or queens of the ancient Near East achieved decisive imperial victory, they customarily built new roads on which the victors returned to their capitols in triumphant procession, with captives and treasure. In Isaiah, there is much imagery that draws on the Exodus: God leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, demonstrating that the idols of Egypt---and the epitome of earthly authority, the Pharaoh--- were subject to the God of Israel, The Holy One, the God of Love, the God of perfect justice. Only God could forgive sins, restore unity and harmony with Him, defeat the power of evil and death, and bring resurrection life.

In a recapitulation of the Exodus, Cyrus of Persia, 700 years later, will defeat the Babylonians, release the people of Israel, guarantee them safe passage, and---though he is a Gentile---recognize the ultimate authority of the God of Israel and allow the rebuilding of the Temple and restoration of the Land.

When John the Baptist announces that the kingdom of God is among you, his central theme is the Road of Return. The presence of the living God incarnate in Jesus Christ will lead us on the ultimate road to glory. The One who brings the world back to God---the Messiah, anointed by God, Son of David, Son of Man is here to lead us from the false idols of life, the misuse of the gifts God has given us into the joy of unity with Him and service to Him.

Unlike the emperors who traversed the ancient victory roads displaying military might and exercising political power, Jesus triumphs by and through perfect union with the Holy Spirit. In Him, God's power is made perfect through the "weakness" of loving sacrifice. Defeating sin, death and the seemingly intractable power of evil, God's triumphant entry culminates in the cross, where his blood is shed to cleanse us from sin that we may be citizens of the New Jerusalem.

John the Baptist announces that the Heavenly City and its restored Garden of Eden are both a future and present reality. We are already on the Victory Road. Satan has been defeated---and knows it. He is thrashing out to destroy even as his power is fading. John is the new Elijah, precursor to the Messiah. His words are in the present tense continuing in Greek---the Kingdom of God is here right now and we are partners with God in perfecting it. He is the Good Shepherd and we are his flock whom he is guiding and upholding, even as we suffer with him, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal bodies."

The journey home on God's highway---simultaneously earthly and heavenly---has its pain and severe trials. But the outcome is certain. By God's grace we will all be united in joy, praise, holiness, and true Shalom at a time known only to God.

~Rev. Dr. William Harter

Family Advent Activity: Build a Nativity. Instead of the glitz and glam of Christmas decorations, especially gingerbread houses, think about the humble stable that Jesus was born in. Recreate his birthplace using graham crackers, gingerbread, legos, playdough, paper, rocks—whatever inspires you. How different does this look than the decorations we see everywhere?

December 10, 2018

Psalm 16:11

“You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;

in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Sometimes, when we try to forge our own path, we notice things may get difficult. When you sit back and pray about your decision you realize that you may not be doing what God had intended for you. Once you surrender and put all your faith in God showing you the way, the path becomes clear.

When I was going through a rough patch in my job I wanted to make a change, but didn't know if it was the right thing to do. I was feeling stressed. I didn't have a plan of where I was going to go. I felt pulled to go back into the field I love, working with Children. I remember one evening I prayed for God to help guide me to where I was

needed. After I had finished my prayer I felt lighter. I felt the weight of the world being lifted off my shoulder. About a day later I saw a post stating the church was looking for someone to work in their nursery. There it was, my answered prayer. I found myself working with children again. It felt right. God had shown me where I was needed, after I surrendered to him and put myself at his mercy. I feel too often we think we know how our life is supposed to go and when time gets tough we get angry, instead of taking the time to ask God to show us the way.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we ask that you show us our true paths in life to take. That we find happiness in your presences. In your name we pray, Amen.

~Cindy Olson

December 11, 2018

Isaiah 7:14

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman^[a] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

800 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah wrote this prophesy, promising a savior from a miracle birth. Without getting into the details of why a virgin birth is a miracle, just understand that it's pretty amazing. However, how did God know about Jesus's birth 800 years beforehand? Well,

he's an all-knowing and all-powerful God, of course! But if God knows everything that has and will happen, how do we have free will?

The omnipotence vs. free will debate has plagued Christians for years. If God knows everything, then our free will is just a meaningless facade, right? It's a little more complicated than that. I heard an analogy that helped me understand this concept better. Imagine God as a father and we are his daughter. If the father leaves his daughter alone with a cookie jar, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that she'll take a cookie from the jar. The father did not make his daughter take a cookie, he didn't use some invisible power to force her to take the cookie, the father just knows his daughter so well, he can predict her actions. God works the same way. He knows every single minute detail of all our lives and uses that knowledge to be able to predict every action with perfect accuracy. This paradigm shift preserves God's omnipotence while still allowing for one of God's greatest gifts, free will. Our free will allows us to be who we are. God gives us the ability to do what we want whenever we want to. Granted, in our free will, we make mistakes, and we have to use God's greatest gift to be forgiven of those sins: Jesus. Jesus's prophesied birth, his perfect life, his death, and resurrection were God's gift to all of us. By Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, we have been forgiven for the mistakes we have and will make. The truest gift in this Christmas season is not anything found underneath a tree, but is the free will allowed by God, saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you so much for the choice you've given me in my life. Thank you for caring and knowing every part

of me. Thank you for giving your son to die on a cross so that I can live.

~Wes Meyer

December 12, 2018

2 Corinthians 3:18

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit”

Last Christmas my grandson Noah opened a package containing the Disney Cars Transporter called Rusty. He stood up holding the transporter, eyes and mouth wide open, and shaking. He was so thrilled he couldn't speak. We all recognized he was extremely overjoyed with this gift. Now picture the same scenario but Noah is wearing a veil and his expressions are masked. This would make it more difficult for us to see any reflection of joy, and we may even misunderstand the true intent of his expressions (we may have thought he was having a seizure). Our face and expressions are windows to our hearts/souls and when they are masked, it is difficult for others to understand us clearly.

This verse has never been on my radar for Advent, so when this reading was assigned to me, I was curious to see what I

had missed all of these years. This is a perfect verse for Easter, Pentecost, or Transfiguration Sunday, but Advent? I had some learning to do.

Throughout his letter, we read Paul's message to remove the veil and be clear and clean with their message of the Gospel while being consistent with their reflection of the Lord for the Glory of God. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 3:16 that the veil is taken away when we turn to the Lord. Therefore, Christians no longer have veils masking their reflection of the Lord. I would be remiss if I didn't mention various Bible versions use the word Beholding in place of Reflection. This changes the meaning a little, but both are outward expressions of Reflecting the Lord. Reflective is active expression while Beholding is passive expression.

We need to allow the reflection of the Lord to shine through us as though every moment is like Noah opening his Christmas gift. In other words, it needs to be obvious to others we are reflecting the Lord for the Glory of God.

God's Presence is our focus this Advent and this verse is all about God's Presence. Paul is telling us in this verse that as Christians we need to be clear and clean with our reflection of the Lord for God's Glory. We long to see this expression in each other, and we need to reflect the glory of the Lord for those who are hurting, in doubt, being lured away, and facing distractions.

This is a perfect Advent verse!

Prayer:

As Christians our veils have been removed, but we sometimes allow the craziness of our lives to place an

artificial veil over us, masking the exuberance we have in our hearts knowing you Lord. Through this Advent season, allow us to reflect your love for ourselves and others allowing all to celebrate and bring Glory to you. Amen.

~Cheri Kearney

December 13, 2018

Acts 2:28

*“You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your
presence.”*

Acts 2:28 has explained that God is the path to life and that his presence fills us with joy. It shows that God, the creator of all life, His presence is more important than all of the Christmas presents you have ever gotten throughout your entire lifetime. Sometimes the best way to compare two things is to first think about your life without one, then think about your life without the other. First, think about your life without presents. You would have everything you need but no surprises. Now think about your life without the presence of God. You would have no joy, but most importantly, you would not even have a life without God. I remember one Christmas I really wanted a certain Star Wars Lego set. Every time we went to Target, I begged my parents for that gloriously big Lego set! So imagine my happiness when I found that Lego set under the Christmas tree on Christmas morning! But that happiness was

temporary. After I finished building the Legos, I got bored with it. The joy from God's presence is not temporary; it is eternal. That is why the presence of God is so much more important than presents.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for never leaving my side and always being present in my life. Please help me to seek out your presence and find joy in it during this Christmas season and every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

~Sam Kinton

December 14, 2018

Psalm 21:6

*"You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence."*

Realizing our many blessings is a list we, as Christians, can make very readily on any given day. Blessings are not always positive, though that is what we would like. But, if all blessings were positive how would we, could we learn and grow in Christ as we live through this "gift of life" that we have so graciously been given. Don't we learn best by making a mistake, usually one that we don't ever forget. Is not that mistake and the learning that follows a blessing. Christians are blessed, not "lucky". Luck has nothing to do with a Christian life.

To feel the joy in the presence of God is the most calming feeling there is. Be still and feel the joy of His presence. This can be done anywhere, anytime – in a deep breath, a sunrise, a sunset, the smile on a loved ones face, a pain that suddenly goes away, a surprise text from a child or grandchild. His joy and His presence is here for us to feel always.

Once on a Christmas Eve I walked out of the PCFS Candlelight Service and felt a light snow touch my face as I walked to my car. It was a true blessing and the very real feeling of joy in His presence. I remember this night, of many years ago, like it was yesterday. I pray I will always remember it.

Prayer:

My dear heavenly Father, I thank you for your unending blessings. I pray for your guidance so that I do not overlook or miss any of your gracious gifts for they all fit and flow into the life path that you have set out for me. I rejoice in the joy of Your presence, in the feel of Your presence in my life and I thank You for always being with me.

I pray through your Son, my Lord and my Savior, as I praise and glorify Your holy name. Amen.

~Ellen Palmer

December 15, 2018

2 Corinthians 4:6

“For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

My life has been incredibly blessed. I have never had to face any real hardship, and I thank God each day for all of the blessings He has given me. About a year ago, Brian was having some health issues. He had seen several doctors, and they weren't giving us any good news. I remember thinking, “Maybe my blessings have run out.” It was a really difficult time for both of us. I felt myself becoming angry with God that the first hardship I would have to face was possibly losing my husband.

It was a conversation with my mom that changed my thinking. She looked me in the eye and said, “God's blessings never run out.” Even in difficult times, God sends His blessings. They may be small, and they may be hard to find, but they never run out. Praise Him each day for the blessings, big and small, that He grants.

Prayer:

Father God, thank You for Your abundant, never-ending blessings. Thank You for a warm home, healthy food to eat, and the relationships You have blessed me with. I pray that I can trust Your plan and see Your blessings each day. Amen.

~Katie Truesdale

December 18, 2018

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;^[a]
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.*

*9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations*

This passage of scripture declares that as God's servants we are called by the spirit of God to proclaim the good news. God's word promises that He will transform the hearts and minds of those who believe in Him. The good news is that there is hope and healing for the brokenhearted, and that there is freedom from those in bondage. The good news is that there will be joy instead of sorrow, and that there will be a spirit of praise instead of a spirit of defeat.

God's plan of redemption prepares us for His service. He promises to reward us with an everlasting covenant and to bless us. We will have every reason to praise God.

As someone who has a strong heritage of those that have made their livelihood by cultivating the land; I particularly like the later part of verse 3 "They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor," as well as verse 11 "For as the soil makes the

sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.” I believe that the good news is planted in the hearts of those that are receptive by the servants of God. The good news, like a seed, needs to be tended and encouraged to grow in the heart of the believer, so that we may become a display of His splendor.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we ask for you to plant seeds of healing, freedom, joy and praise in our hearts this day; that they may grow into a display of God’s splendor and that we may become spirit filled servants. We thank you, God for the ultimate good news, the birth of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus. Amen.

~Eric Poe

Family Advent Activity: Put those Christmas cards to use. This week, each day, randomly pick one of the Christmas cards that you have received. As a family, pray for whomever sent you that card. Pray especially that they feel the presence of Jesus Christ this Christmas season.

December 17, 2018

Psalm 41:12

*“But you have upheld me because of my integrity,
and set me in your presence forever.”*

From time to time I have days where I become my biggest critic. I focus on how much I straying from God's path and not doing enough to further his kingdom. I get a hopeless feeling on these days that I will never be worthy enough to be in the presence of the Lord for eternity. The ray of hope on those days is scripture like Psalm 41:12 that reminds me of the mind blowing fact that God takes my measly bit of integrity and faith and continually blesses me for it, even though I continually sin. What????

The beauty is that in this cycle I go from feeling worthless to hopeful and loved and it makes me want to serve him more. Redemption! Grace! HE IS AMAZING!! It reminded me of Ephesians 2:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not through yourselves, it is a gift from God, not by works so that no one can boast." Faith in Jesus Christ and following his teachings is what will give us the integrity that will put us in His presence forever.

Prayer:

Holy God Thank You for Your Son, Jesus, who through His sacrifice made it possible for us to be in Your eternal kingdom. May we, the Body of Christ, increase our numbers so that the integrity of Christ is spread and all followers are able to be in Your Holy Presence forever.

~Karrie Fisher

December 18, 2018

Luke 2:17-20

“When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

The story of the birth of Jesus is one that most of us could recite from memory. I am reminded in these verses of the people who were anxiously anticipating Christ's birth. As a child, Christmas meant something different to me and my brothers...it was about a Christmas tree, Santa, visiting family and most of all presents. We were so very excited Christmas morning to see all the wonderfully wrapped gifts placed under the tree. While we were eager to open the presents, it was the anticipation of gifts that meant so much more.

After presents were hurriedly opened and toys played with, we would travel to our grandparents' house for a family dinner. We would always take a few of our most prized Christmas gifts to “show and tell”, just as the shepherds did with the gift of Jesus' birth.

Today, I too am excited to tell of Jesus' birth and his sacrifice for all of us. God bestowed upon us the finest gift we will ever receive and it is our turn to “Go Tell It On the Mountain”.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, at this festive season I pray that the real meaning of Christmas will not be missed, and that the precious truth that was given to the shepherds and sung by the angels will become a reality in the hearts and lives of many people this year.

~Bryan Lucas

December 19, 2018

Psalm 46:10-11

*“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”*

*¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.”*

In this day and age quiet moments are rare and it can be difficult to find stillness. Take a few minutes today to quietly consider the Lord. Try not to be distracted – just be still and meditate on the person of Jesus Christ and all that He has done for you. Think about His birth, His infancy, and the light that is rising over our dark and broken world. Think about His death, His sacrifice, and the gift of life He extends to you. Meditate on His resurrection, His power over darkness and death. Bask in His presence and in the stillness seek His face. Think about His coming, the day you will see Him face to face. Take a moment and just be

quiet before Him. Think about Jesus and take confidence in Him.

Prayer:

Father God, I am waiting here for You. Meet me in the silence. Meet me in this moment. Meet me in and through Your Son our Lord and Savior and by Your Spirit.

~Terry Mader

December 20, 2018

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^[a] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.”²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;^[b] and he named him Jesus.”

How can Mary be pregnant if she is a virgin? How did that happen? It happened because of the Holy Spirit. So, what does that mean for me? It means I can be healed and blessed. I can be saved from evil and sin. I can be forgiven from my sins.

Prayer:

God we thank you for the Holy Spirit giving us strength, wisdom, and healing.

~Ryan Lightfoot

December 21, 2018

Luke 1:26-38

“ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”^[a]²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.³⁰ The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.³² He will be great,

and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”^[b] 35 The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.”

young
fearful
innocent

overwhelming news heralds into the heart a tremendous weight

in the midst of this
still resounding into our present place and time

The Lord is with you!

You are favored!

You are blessed!

The Holy Spirit will come on you!

The power of the Highest will overshadow you!

trembling
faithful How, oh how can this be?

There is nothing God cannot do!

Where is your heart at its most vulnerable? tender?
breakable?

Into this place enters The Lord Is With You! Into these
broken places echoes “You are favored!”

Won't you welcome His presence coming on you? Entering
in? Bringing life to that unawakened place, guarded with
trembling and fear. Oh, be faithful to the One who
promised faithfully to be with you! Open yourself to the
favor and promise of Christ Jesus - on you, in you, with
you! What delightful, awe-inspiring prepositions - ON, IN,
WITH! The Mightiest, Highest One makes our tiny places
His home!

Prayer:

Oh, precious Savior, may we be open to You and may Your
Presence be upon us, as it was with Mary, for there is
nothing God cannot do. Amen.

~Bekii Kisamore

December 22, 2018

Luke 1:39-45

*“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a
Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered
the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When
Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her
womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy*

Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

For a woman, there is nothing quite like the moment one realizes they are carrying a child. It is a defining, paramount moment. As the mother of three, I am definitely guilty of experiencing “mom brain” on a regular basis—forgetting to turn in permission slips or put milk back in the refrigerator—but the memory of exactly where I was, who I was with, what I was wearing and how I felt the moment I learned I was pregnant is permanently etched into my brain.

I felt humbled and overjoyed by my pregnancies. I was in a loving and committed marriage. I had the support of my family and countless friends. Every member of my female tribe rallied around me and loved me and my baby. I was showered with every gift a tiny baby girl could ever need or want. Yet, with all of that love and support, I would often lie awake at night, resting my hand on my growing belly and feel overwhelmed.

Mary was an unwed, young girl facing humiliation, shame, shunning or worse when given the news that she was carrying the Son of God in her womb. The fear, confusion and shock that Mary must have felt must have been incredibly overwhelming. So Mary did what women do—

she turned to her tribe--her older, trusted relative Elizabeth who was expecting her own miracle child. And how much comfort Mary must have felt by the blessings, kindness and love that Elizabeth showed her in her time of fearful wonder.

The story could have gone a lot differently, had Elizabeth denounced Mary in her seemingly wayward state. But the game changer here was the presence of the Holy Spirit. “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” and joy and blessings were poured out, loudly, even! These huge, miraculous events—difficult for our mortal minds to fully comprehend—can only be received as amazing truth through the work of the Holy Spirit.

What a lesson for us. There is so much we do not understand and it is so easy to allow ourselves to judge that which our mortal minds do not comprehend. But, what if we allowed the Holy Spirit to be the game changer in us? What blessings, what love, what joy might be poured out of us?

Prayer:

God, give me the faith of Mary, to walk your path, even if I don't understand it. Give me the openness of Elizabeth to be filled, and taken over by the Holy Spirit. Use me a vessel for your love and your blessings. Amen.

~Tressa Bellows

December 23,2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:46b-55

“And Mary^[a] said,

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his
servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

*50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

*51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
hearts.*

*52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

*53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

*54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,*

*55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

Wow! What a praise song! To fully appreciate The Magnificat, let's rewind a page or two. Following a surprise visit from the angel Gabriel, Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. Upon Mary's greeting, baby John gives Elizabeth a good kick. Elizabeth, filled with

the Holy Spirit, loudly confirms God's promise - Mary is indeed carrying the Savior of the World!

Mary's beautiful song tells of the magnificence and holiness of God. (SIDE NOTE: It is compelling how similar her song is to Hannah's prayer of praise, found in 1 Samuel 2. Teenage Mary must have been profoundly influenced by her intimate knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures!)

She also expresses how God looks with favor on the lowly, a recurring theme in Scripture:

- "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5)
- "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matthew 5:3)
- "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:10)
- "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (2 Samuel 7:18)
- "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed." (Matthew 8:8)

Elizabeth and Mary are, by the world's standards, two lowly women, yet they are about to witness the birth of three of the most important decades in history! Their sons would lead the charge.

In today's age of self-importance and self-promotion, we would do well to remember that God is not impressed by the things so often extolled in our world. It's difficult to look up when you think you're at the top.

Ask yourself: Where do I need a good dose of humility?

Prayer:

For today's prayer, sincerely pray the words of The Magnificat, found above.

~Brad Hill

Family Advent Activity: Tell the story. Ask your children to tell you the Christmas story. Encourage their creativity in finding a way to share it with you. Use drama, music, costumes, props. Or create it in story book or art form. Let them use their dolls or action figures to act it out. Take note of the details that are important to them. Make a video so you can share their telling with grandparents and friends.

December 24, 2018

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-14

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”^[a]
¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven,
the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to
Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,
which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ So they went
with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child*

lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Today is my favorite day of the year. The anticipation of joy, the holiness of the silent night, the hushed giggles of preparations of surprises for tomorrow, the light and laughter of friends and family gathered together fills my heart.

As we read the scripture for the day today, that holy night would have been very different. A long journey ending in an uncomfortable birth with a manger for a baby's bed....A cold night watching over the herd with a holy visitation announcing “Good news of great joy...A Savior is born....Glory to God in the highest!” What a shock it had to have been to have been visited by the Holy Host of Angels from heaven!

And what was their response? Let us go. Let us find the One and see this thing which has happened.....And Mary pondered all of these things in her heart.

They believed. Mary, from the first moment, believed the words of the angel that visited her. The shepherds believed what they had heard and seen from the angels. They believed enough to “hurry” to Bethlehem, to change their lives in following where God was leading them and telling

them to go. They believed the message of good news of great joy.

Today, the message of the angels to us is the same: good news of great joy to *all* people! The message of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior that has been born this night all those years ago brings the same hope and light and joy to us as it did to those who were present then. Jesus Christ is the Hope that we are all longing for. He is the Joy. He is Love. He is Truth. He is Messiah and Lord of all. This is the good news that the angels sang about that night and is the same good news that we sing about today. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth good will toward men!”

This holy Christmas eve, let us take time to reflect and remember. Let us hold fast to the Hope of heaven. Let us celebrate with great joy the birth of the Savior, born for you and for me, for the salvation of the world. And while we reflect and hold fast and celebrate, worship and adore, His Presence will guide us as we “hurry” and see where God is at work in us and in the world and where He is being born anew in each of us this day.

May the glory of the Lord shine round about you and yours this day and forevermore.

~Rev. Laura Hart

December 25, 2018

Christmas Day

John 1:14

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,^[a] full of grace and truth.”

Well today is Christmas Day. Merry Christmas, my friends. I am sure you are opening presents, getting in a car to go see friends or family, or cooking for a blessed Christmas dinner. I am probably half asleep, and doing what I can to assemble some toy. The words some assembly required strikes fear in my heart.

I pray that you will step back from the festivities to reflect on what happened today. For today, the word that spoke at creation, the word that formed the beautiful vistas we see like the Grand Canyon became flesh and dwelt among us. Wow. What an awesome God we have who was not satisfied with remaining distant, but entered into relationships with us personally.

Friends, Merry Christmas from our family to yours. Christ has come! And one day will come gain.

~Rev. Dr. Andy Hart

This Year's Advent Memories:

