



Unexpected
and Mysterious
is the touch of God's Grace



Advent Devotional 2017





Advent 2017

Unexpected and Mysterious

“Unexpected and mysterious is the gentle word of grace. Ever-loving and sustaining is the peace of God’s embrace.”

(Unexpected and Mysterious, ELW 258)

If scripture tells us anything it is that God has always broken into this world in unexpected and even mysterious ways. And what way is more unexpected than to have a baby born to a young woman who was from an unimportant family in an unimportant city? This Advent season, as we prepare our lives to remember again how God broke into our world through the birth of Jesus, we will be exploring the theme “Unexpected and Mysterious” as we focus on the words of the Prophet Isaiah. We hope that you will join us as we witness together God continuing to break into our lives in unexpected and mysterious ways.

Sundays:

Dec. 3: Unexpected Arrivals

Dec. 10: Mysterious Comfort

Dec. 17: Unexpected Freedom – Jazz Cantata (all worship times)

Dec. 24: Mysterious Good News (One unified worship at 9:50am)

Join us every Wednesday during Advent at 7pm. We will gather for worship followed by cookies and cocoa. Special music will be provided by Lord of Life musicians through out the season. Each week we will hear about different characters from the Advent story and see how God broke into their lives.

Wednesdays (Starting Nov. 29):

Nov. 29: Isaiah

Dec. 6: Elizabeth and Zachariah

Dec. 13: Mary

Dec. 20: Joseph

All are welcome!

Lord of Life Lutheran Church
3801 S. Panther Creek Drive, The Woodlands TX
LordofLifeOnline.org

Advent & Christmas 2017

All are welcome. Please join us!

Advent Candles and Wreath

Each week, beginning on December 3, we light a candle marking our journey toward the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago and in our hearts anew each day. This year, sermons will focus on the prophecies of Isaiah.

Handel's Messiah

Presented by Woodlands Symphony Orchestra and Chorale. Monday, Dec. 4th (7:00pm). Free admission. First Baptist Church, The Woodlands. Get tickets at woodlandssymphony.org/index.php/season/handelsmessiah/

Upbring Foster Family Christmas Party

Help us support foster parents in Texas when we host a Christmas party for Upbring families (formerly Lutheran Social Services) Saturday, Dec. 9th (11am).

Fundraiser Breakfast

Benefitting the senior citizens at Harvestwood through a free-will offering. Sponsored by Lord of Life's Men's Bible Study. Sunday, Dec. 10 during worship (9:30-12:30pm)

Harvestwood Christmas Party

Bring holiday cheer, gifts and song to senior citizens at Harvestwood Apartments Saturday, Dec. 16 (2 pm).

Advent to Christmas: Cantata

Jazz cantata all three worship times: 8:30, 9:50 and 11am. Sunday, Dec. 17.

Service of Remembrance

Bring your grief, your loss, your pain to Christ and receive consolation and anointing for healing. Sunday, Dec. 17, (6 pm).

Advent 4 Sunday Worship

One unified Sunday morning worship at 9:50, Sunday, Dec. 24.

Christmas Eve Worship Services Sunday, Dec. 24

Family Worship 4 pm featuring Children of Lord of Life
Jazz Worship 6 pm featuring the Lord of Life Jazz Band
Traditional Worship 8 pm featuring Choir & Brass
Traditional Worship 11 pm featuring Brass & Soloist

New Year's Eve Worship

Sunday morning worship at 8:30, 9:50 and 11am with a hymn sing. Sunday, Dec. 31.

The First Week in Advent

HYMN

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art, dear desire of ev'ry nation, joy of ev'ry longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a king;
born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.

Tune: JEFFERSON – Other tunes are noted in the index

A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Lord Jesus,
we do not lack any spiritual gift as we wait for your coming.
Keep us awake and help us use our gifts
to serve those who look for the dawn of your justice and mercy. *Amen*

TABLE PRAYER

Maranatha!
Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; let these gifts to us be blest.
Keep us always in your sight; be our joy, our hearts' delight.
Amen

BLESSING OF THE MANGER SCENE

Use this blessing when figures are added to the manger scene.

O Lord our God,
with Mary and Joseph,
angels and shepherds,
and the animals in the stable,
we gather around your Son, born for us.
Bless us with your holy presence
and inspire us to help those who have no place to dwell.
Be with us that we might share Christ's love with all the world,
for he is our light and salvation.
Glory in heaven and peace on earth,
now and forever.
Amen



The First Week in Advent

ADVENT PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

God in the night
God at my right
God all the day
God with me stay
God in my heart
Never depart
God with thy might
Keep us in light
Through this dark night.
Amen

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

*The lighting of the wreath may begin Advent prayer in the home.
Use this blessing when lighting the first candle.*

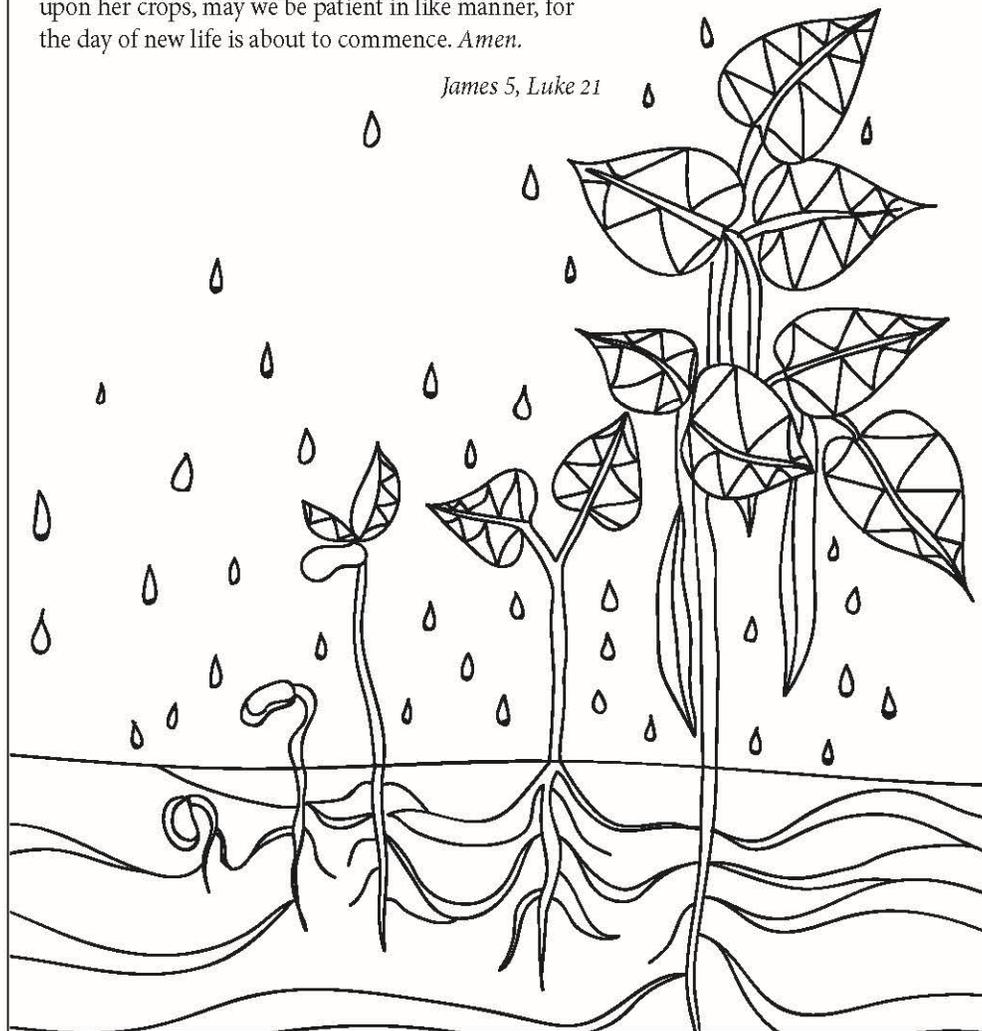
Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
You call all nations to walk in your light
and to seek your ways of justice and peace,
for the night is past, and the dawn of your coming is near.
Bless us as we light the first candle of this wreath.
Rouse us from sleep,
that we may be ready to greet our Lord when he comes
and welcome him into our hearts and homes,
for he is our light and our salvation.
Blessed be God forever.



New Life Is Teeming

Like a farmer who is patient with early and late rains upon her crops, may we be patient in like manner, for the day of new life is about to commence. *Amen.*

James 5, Luke 21



From *Coloring Advent: An Adult Coloring Book for the Journey to Bethlehem*, available at www.ChalicePress.com or 1-800-366-3383.

December 3

**“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”
Isaiah 64:1-9**

“All I want for Christmas is...”

Several years ago, that was the title of a radio show series Emily and I did on The FISH, Milwaukee’s contemporary Christian radio station, to help Evangelical Christians, who had never heard of it, understand the season of Advent. There were three shows in the series “All I want for Christmas is...” and we filled in the blank as we explained the value of Advent as a spiritual practice. Here were the shows –

All I want for Christmas is... Peace in my Family!
All I want for Christmas is... Peace in the world!
All I want for Christmas is... Peace in myself!

And we teased the listening audience by suggesting that we weren’t asking for enough for Christmas, and maybe these three things were what should be at the top of our Christmas lists. When we raise our sights beyond the details of all our Christmas wish list items, aren’t these the things we really and truly want? Are those things too much to ask for? That’s the cry of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, from his place as a leader of the people of Israel in exile, wondering “Is it too much to ask, God to give peace in my family, peace in the world, or at least, if I can’t have those things, peace in myself? Hello....God?... Are you still there? ... God, things are so bad around here, why don’t you open the heavens and at least give us a sign that you are still there!”

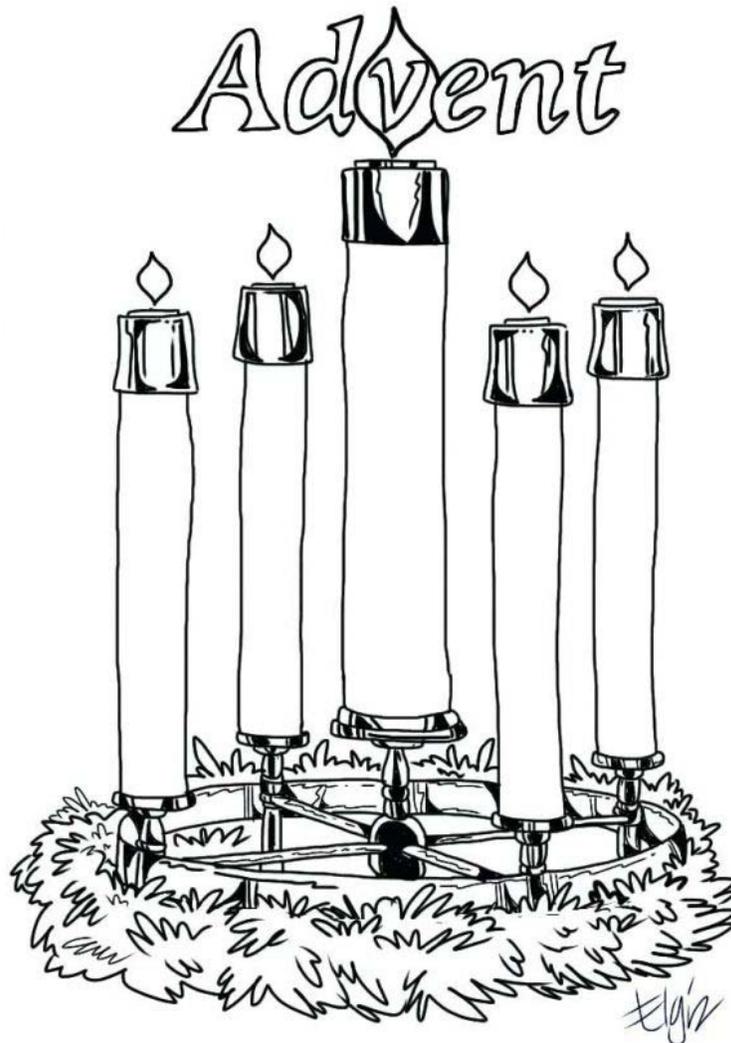
And after his outburst, the answer Isaiah got was this ... “Ok God – I get it – it’s not you who isn’t there, it’s us who have hung up the phone, who aren’t there – we are the ones who have deleted you from the ‘favorites’ on our cell phones. We, not you God, have faded away. Our sins, like the wind, have taken us away from you...”

We have forgotten who we are Lord. YOU are the potter, we are just the clay, we are all the work of YOUR hands. During this fresh - start season of Advent, where we have gotten off track, Lord, restore us to our true relationship with you.

December 3 continued...

And God answers Isaiah, and us, in the next chapter – “Here I am, Here I am.” And what do you know? God shows up, unexpected and mysterious, in the flesh, more than willing to fill the deeper longings of our hearts that really do belong on our Christmas wish lists...

Submitted by Pastor Gary Heath



Advent Devotional 2017

December 4

Psalm 80 verses 1-7

Restore us, O God. There are so many reasons that Christians today might also echo this prayer. We have done so many things to cause God to be angry with us over the centuries and still do even now. In-fighting and threats, among families, cities, countries, and various communities of all kinds. My thoughts, as I meditate on this passage keep coming back to the 500th anniversary of the major and, at that time, permanent seeming split among members of the Christian (Catholic) church. Other splits followed, and Christians alienated each other to the point of violence. The gulf widened more and more. The distance between Christian groups looks very daunting, but things are changing. People are starting to actually listen to each other and stretch hands out and, miraculously we are starting to touch each other and realize that we are not as far apart as we appear to be. As we celebrate the Reformation this year, Catholics and Lutherans are combining celebration services, planning common social events, and discussing ways to reconcile our differences. Other faith communities are doing this as well. I also see a growing movement, among cities, and even nations, of communication and reconciliation. Yes, I know that all is not like heaven yet. There is still a long way to go, but the tide is turning. I see a miracle in progress. God is answering that prayer, "Restore us O Lord". Oh God, bring all of your children together. It is happening. God is in control and He is the Lord of the Impossible.

With a full and grateful heart I send up my prayers of thanksgiving for allowing me to be alive to watch as pieces of the miracle fall into place . Someday all of God's children will again be one family, restored.

Submitted by Judy Frappier

December 5

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

How would you like to hear you have won the lottery and all of your needs will be met, from now until you die? Wouldn't we all love to receive that news?

Of course, hopefully you are not wanting for any physical need like a home, food, or toiletries. But *spiritual* needs are even more important! Guess what: God's grace (His undeserved blessing and forgiveness) extended through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is better than any lottery – it is complete assurance that all of our spiritual needs are met, in every way. Thanks be to God!

Once again: God provides for all of our needs through Jesus. What does it mean that if you accept God's forgiveness and grace through Christ, He has already *gifted* you with spiritual gifts? It means we have been “enriched in every way” and “do not lack any spiritual gifts” – news as unexpected as winning the lottery!

Maybe you don't feel like *you* possess spiritual gifts. You might expect them in someone you perceive as more pious, or maybe in a professional religious role: “Sure, the pastor has spiritual gifts. But *me*, gifted?!” Sometimes, we can't get through one day without arguing with a spouse, yelling at the kids, or becoming frustrated at work. Maybe you don't remember to pray regularly or you don't open your Bible outside of church. Many of us could surely stand to improve in these areas.

But even so, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God has already bestowed spiritual gifts on you. He promises us this in His Word. These can include teaching, leadership, wisdom, giving, and others. They are at your fingertips for the claiming.

Start claiming your gifts by praying right now: “Lord, thank you for your grace and your gifts. Thank you for your faithfulness. Forgive me for my inaction and apathy. Help me this week to open my eyes to your Word and see my own spiritual gifts that you have given me. Give me strength to *want* to pursue these gifts and develop them so that, through Christ's love and your abundant blessings, I may serve others in your name. Amen.”

Wanting more already? Take the Spiritual Gifts Assessment Test on our church website LordofLifeOnline.org to learn about your own gifts, or check out Romans 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12:4-10, and 1 Pet. 4:8-11.

Submitted by Nicole Puig-Herg

December 6

Mark 13:24-37

³⁵ Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.”

In an age in which we can determine not only what route to take from Lord of Life Church, The Woodlands, to Saint Paul’s Church, Brenham, but how long each of several routes will take, and, while driving, we can monitor the route for heavy traffic, speed traps, and alternate routes, Jesus warns us that our spiritual walk of faith is anything but that certain.

Three times Jesus warns the “doorkeeper” (read TSA agent at the airport) to be *absolutely* alert (“watch”). The home-owner will come home, most likely when everyone is asleep, ”except YOU, O doorkeeper ... and everybody else in the house.”

Jesus began this story asserting that *even He* did not know when God would end the world-as-we-know-it. The Master *empowers* his people to do what needs to be done. There will be an appropriate time to call Everything to an End and to evaluate the totality of our life in Creation and community. So no sleeping on the job, especially after 2,000 years!

Faith means that we not only believe that there will be a Judgement, but we believe in the Judge who will see beyond the methods and motives of our lives to the attitudes and actions which generate what we feel and do while we wait for that Judgement. God’s grace in Word-and-Sacrament not only forgives us when we fall asleep, but empowers us to be purposefully, particularly, and faith-fully awake as we wait. So Watch!¹

Submitted by J. Jeffrey Jetto

¹The word for Faith-fully Awake Watcher is “Gregory”!

Psalm 85: 8-13

December 7

“Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.”

Dorothy Day once said, “my strength returns to me with my cup of coffee and the reading of the Psalms.”

The Psalms - these prayers and hymns that have been used by the Hebrew people to express their relationship with God, cover the whole human range of emotion from joy to anger, hope to despair. Psalm 85 is definitely on the “hope” side – this is one of the psalms that helps my strength return to me.

And Lord knows we could use some strength right now. It is hard to be “up” when there are so many things that can pull us down – the massacre at the church in Sutherland Springs, the never-ending conflicts in the Middle East, masses of refugees, divisive politics, floods - to say nothing of our personal struggles and disappointments.

And yet there were similar situations in the Middle East at the time these very Psalms were sung and prayed. Small wonder that these words of vision can seep into our souls – an unexpected and mysterious source of strength.

And for me it has become a strengthening independent of knowing exactly how it will work out. I've spent a lot of energy over the years worrying – trying to figure how to make things work out, and then expending tons of energy trying to make it so. I now realize the more concrete my expectations of how things will turn out, the more disappointed I am when things don't go as “they should”. And I have also realized, first grudgingly and now with wonder, that when it doesn't – it turns out fine, or better than fine. So now I am, with the help of prayer and guidance, getting comfortable being energized by a sense of expectancy instead of expectation – not knowing exactly how things will work out, but confident that they will.

I close asking you to prayerfully consider these words of Julian of Norwich – a part of my daily prayer cycle:

He did not say:
You will not be troubled,
You will not be belaboured,
You will not be disquieted;

But He said:
You will not be overcome.
God wants us to pay attention to these words,
and always be strong in faithful trust,
in well-being and in woe,
For He loves us and delights in us,
And so He wishes us to love Him and
delight in Him and trust greatly in Him,
And ALL will be well.

Also, a good cup of coffee doesn't hurt.

Submitted by Susan Ruch



Advent Devotional 2017

December 8

Jeremiah 1: 4- 10

After reading today's scripture passage, I began to recall people who have touched my life. Childhood friendships were fun but may have lasted briefly. Other encounters with class-mates endured through the school terms. More mature associations were established with neighbors or amicable coworkers all within different seasons of my life.

The most solid permanent ties have been with my siblings. With whom else have I consistently shared my development, infancy to rebellious teens, young adults to empty nesters, all the joy and sorrow? We have strong bonds through our shared backgrounds.

Yet even with these very tangible ties, the Lord is telling me through the scripture He knows me best. He has known me even before conception! The Creator of all things, is aware of my inner most thoughts. He knows my proudest accomplishments and my greatest fears. God is summoning me. He has ordained ME a prophet! Who am I to refuse? I can dole out a litany of excuses for not taking on certain tasks others may ask of me. I don't have the time, lack of experience, insufficient education, scarce financial resources on and on. My self-perceived inadequacies do not hinder God. All that needs to be completed He will see it through. I am his tool and He will bring it to pass.

I may not see immediate results of my labors, but with the grace of God, roots will grow deep and become a strong foundation to further the kingdom. No more excuses. Use me Lord to plant and nurture the seeds of faith.

Submitted by Cathy Novogoratz



December 9

Ezekiel 36: 24-28

As I have been reading different versions of Ezekiel 36 over the past week, I woke this morning with my own little “ah-ha” moment. But that will have to wait.

For the first week, I was struck with all the “I WILL” statements in the passage. There are seven in these particular verses, PLUS the last of “I WILL BE YOUR GOD!” the ultimate proclamation of our omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God. There is no reason to doubt the great I AM! What a great comfort.

He acknowledges our need for His action. We have hearts of stone, we are unclean. Some versions use the word filthy! Yuck. We are scattered, worship idols and are disobedient.

Then He tells us I WILL gather you to the land I gave you, cleanse you, give you a new heart of flesh, put a new spirit within you. All I hear in these declarations is a God who loves us, understands us, is patient with us and never will forsake us.

He wants nothing more than to be our God, and He WILL return and restore us. So this morning, what was my ah-ha moment? This is our Baptism! This is the sprinkling of the water and removing our heart of stone and giving us a heart of flesh. We are always reminded of the waters of creation, the waters of destruction and the waters of redemption at our baptisms, but I will now always think of this sprinkling as a reminder of Ezekiel 36. Our “own land” is not a geographical place, but WITH the great I AM!

Dear Lord, thank you for being, creating and giving us your love. Thank you for protecting us and restoring us. We have great comfort in knowing YOU continue to remind us of your love, as we witness baptisms within our congregation. Amen.

Submitted by Annette Haut

The Second Week in Advent

HYMN

When the King shall come again all his pow'r revealing,
splendor shall announce his reign, life and joy and healing;
earth no longer in decay, hope no more frustrated;
this is God's redemption day longingly awaited.

In the desert trees take root fresh from his creation;
plants and flow'rs and sweetest fruit join the celebration;
rivers spring up from the earth, barren lands adorning;
valleys, this is your new birth, mountains, greet the morning!

Strengthen feeble hands and knees, fainting hearts, be cheerful!
God who comes for such as these seeks and saves the fearful;
deaf ears, hear the silent tongues sing away their weeping;
blind eyes, see the lifeless ones walking, running, leaping.

Tune: GAUDEAMUS PARITER (Come, you faithful, raise the strain)

A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

God our shepherd, gather us as lambs in your arms.
Forgive our sins so that we may rejoice in you coming. *Amen*

TABLE PRAYER

Marantha!
Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; let these gifts to us be blest.
May there be a goodly share on every table everywhere.
Amen

ADVENT PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

Use this prayer with hands open and palms up.

Here I wait in quiet hope
that you will come,
water the field of my heart,
and make your love blossom.
Amen



The Second Week in Advent

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

Use this blessing when lighting the first two candles of the Advent wreath.

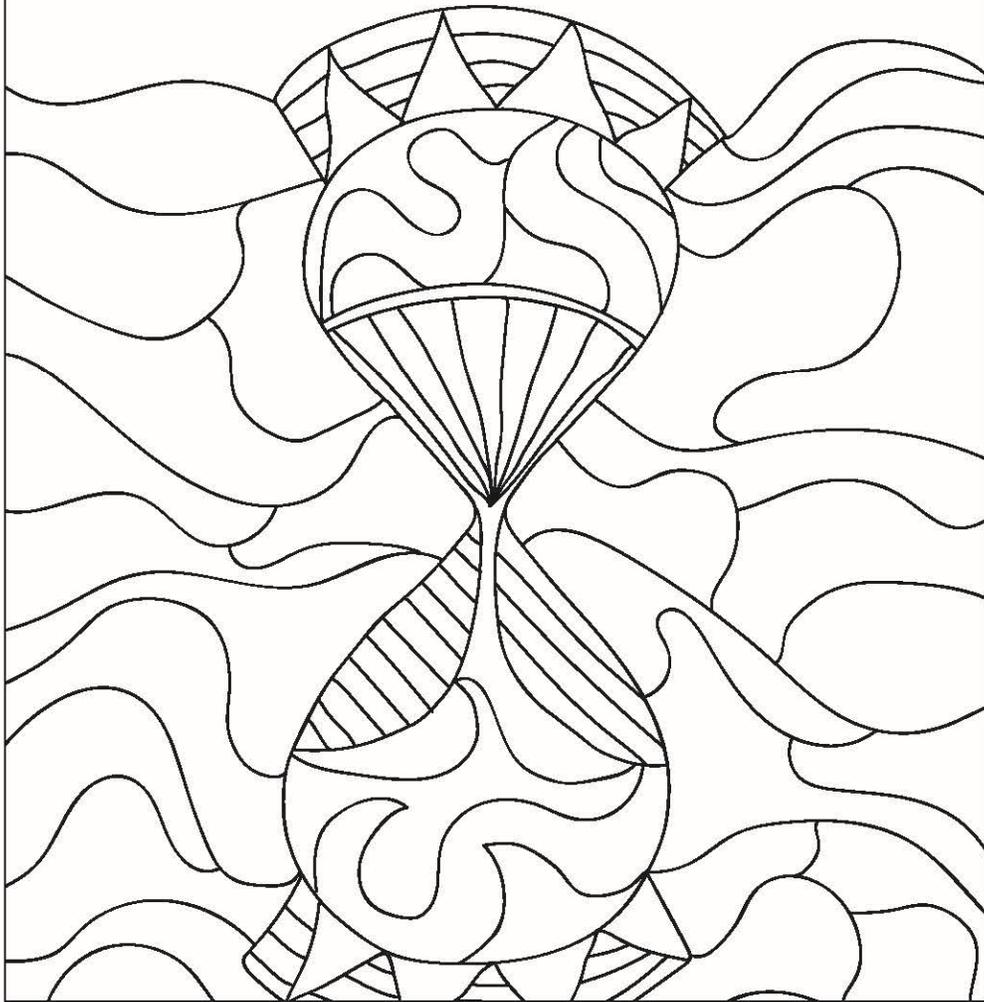
Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
John the Baptist calls all people to prepare the Lord's way
for the kingdom of heaven is near.
Bless us as we light the candles on this wreath.
Baptize us with the fire of your Spirit,
that we may be a light shining in the darkness
welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us,
for he is our light and our salvation.
Blessed be God forever.



The Secret

The mysteries of long ago, the mysteries of the present, and the mysteries of the future converge in our story of God's entrance into the world. The secret is about to be known as we begin this journey of Advent.

Romans 16



From *Coloring Advent: An Adult Coloring Book for the Journey to Bethlehem*, available at www.ChalicePress.com or 1-800-366-3383.

December 10

Mark 1:1-8

Mark 1:1-8

“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Mark begins his gospel not with the annunciation to Mary, not with Joseph having to make a tough decision, not even with baby Jesus in the manger with shepherds and angels and all. Nope, Mark begins his gospel with Isaiah and Malachi and John – with those who come before Jesus and prepare the way.

This is comforting to me for a number of reasons. None of these folks were particularly comfortable to be around at least some of the time. John seems not to be a comfortable person to be around a lot of the time. He comes preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He wears rough clothes, eats weird foods and probably sleeps in the open a lot of the time. I suspect he smells unpleasant. John speaks truth to power, like Malachi and Isaiah before him, and that is never comfortable. But it is comforting. It is comforting because we all know we need to repent and be forgiven, but sometimes it takes someone else to move us to repent and to accept God’s forgiveness. It is comforting because we all do things that are weird to other people but that weirdness may be just what God needs to reach someone. It is comforting because sometimes we all have to speak to truth to power.

But what is most comforting to me is that the gospel of Jesus begins with those who came before him, who prepared the way – and that might be any one of us. You or I might be the one who comes into someone’s life to prepare the way for God. We might be in someone else’s wilderness pointing the way to God and forgiveness of sin, making the path straight so the Lord can come right to them. Someone was “Isaiah” or “Malachi” or “John” for you. And you are Isaiah or Malachi or John for someone else. I wonder who.

Submitted by Rev. Tammy Fincher

December 11

Isaiah 40:1-11

The phone rang.
“Mom has been in a car accident.”

Silence, fear, and disbelief coursed through my veins. The adrenaline kicked in while it reverberated in my head through the where, when and how –what can I do to fix this? I was powerless to change this unexpected, life changing event. Being 419 miles to the north of me and 333 miles to the south of my closest family, no one could get there quickly. Five hours later, she passed away. Alone.

In a matter of hours, I found myself on a journey through the unfamiliar. My guide and my support had left me to ramble in the desert of my pregnancy only four months along. This unexpected event shook and tested my faith like nothing I had ever experienced leaving me forsaken and forgotten by God – or so I perceived.

As I look back at the moments, days and even years following, I can see God’s message of “Comfort, comfort my people...” (Isaiah 40:1) Given my husband, my sisters, family and numerous friends, He never left me alone to wander, but rather held me during that journey. Through the noise of grief, I could not hear God’s healing promise found in verses 3-11. I could not hear his message of hope and steadfast love telling me of the future gift, one far greater than my comprehension.

If had shut out the cacophony of sadness, anger, and blame screaming in my soul, I might have heard him pronounce the gift to come. Lost in the subtleties of the precious life I carried, his grace was hidden from me. I don’t pretend to understand the magnitude of God’s gift of his only son, but I do know it was given in love; for in five months after the tragedy, I held my own child. As I looked into the face of that amazing miracle, I saw the face of God’s unconditional love for me. “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart...” (Isaiah 40:11)

Praise the God of my salvation and grace. Through my journey he never left me alone, but rather held my hand loving me.

Submitted by Vicky Roberts

Luke 1 46-55*December 12*

Has someone ever taken credit for the work you've done or perhaps have you taken more credit for an accomplishment than you deserve? In this "look at me" social media world, gloating about one's accomplishments is often celebrated, leading some to exaggerate their accomplishments or take credit for the accomplishments of others.

In Luke 1 46-55 Mary, after having been informed by the Angel Gabriel that she had been chosen to give birth to the Messiah, gave praise to God for this great and wonderful thing that he had done for her. Verse 49 "For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name." Knowing that she was to carry the Messiah, rather than being boastful which would be very understandable; Mary stayed humble and praised God for the blessing he was bestowing upon the whole World for generations to come by way of his son, Jesus Christ. Verse 50 "And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation." The humility that Mary displayed stands in stark contrast to the self-aggrandizing too often encountered in modern society.

All that we are and all that we do are made possible through God. We are capable of remarkable things thru him who has created us and blessed each of us with a multitude of gifts. Use of these gifts should not be done for the purpose of bringing attention to oneself but rather to bring glory to God. For it is God who should receive praise for the accomplishment we achieve; without him our accomplishments would not be possible.

Recalling one's Baptism: "..., let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."
Matthew 5:16

Submitted by Steve Mills

December 13

Luke 1:5-17- The Lord is Gracious

Luke 1:17 "It is he who will go *as a forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke tells us that Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous in the sight of God, keeping not just the letter of the Law but also faith in their hearts. Sadly, it seemed, children were not to be a part of God's plan for the two of them. They had grown old without conceiving a child. Still, their faith and service toward God was steadfast.

God's plan had not yet been fully revealed to Zacharias and Elizabeth, however. As Zacharias fulfilled his priestly duty of burning incense in the temple, perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime honor for a priest at that time, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him that he and Elizabeth would soon have a son. They would name their son John, which means, "the Lord is gracious." John would lead many people of Israel back to God, and, "TURN THE HEARTS OF FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN," to prepare the way of the Lord. This news of God's unexpected, mysterious grace in the form of a child was so shocking to Zacharias that he did not believe the news!

Of course, Gabriel's news was true, and the child born to Zacharias and Elizabeth became John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepared Israel for the coming of Jesus by turning attitudes away from sin and toward God. John sought to soften hardened hearts, and encourage trust and faith in the lord. He taught us that real preparation for the coming of Lord happens in the hearts and minds of each one of us; it is an inside job. In this advent season, as we decorate our houses and buy gifts for friends and family, we strive to heed John's guidance to share with our neighbors in need of food and clothing from hearts full of love and grace (Luke 3:11). For it is grace that has so freely been given to us by God through Jesus Christ, and grace we are free to give away to our fellow man. Prepare ye the way of the Lord!

Submitted by Kevin McHenna

December 14

Habakkuk 2: 1-4

Habakkuk's words along with those of Daniel, Zephaniah, Ezekiel and Obadiah appear to Israel during the conquering dominating power of the Babylonian Empire under King Nebuchadnezzar II in the 6th century BC.

In the midst of God's seeming abandonment of Israel, the prophet Habakkuk announces that as the watchman in the night he is watching and waiting to see what the Lord will say that he can share with a people struggling under violence and injustice. The Lord tells Habakkuk that when the answer comes it is to be written down and then proclaimed by messengers who have read it.

The message is to WAIT! Wait for God's appointed time. The assurance of the fulfillment is in trusting God. Have you ever had to hear that message?

The righteousness and justice desired and sought by the nation, God tells Habakkuk, will be seen by a people whose faith and trust is in the righteousness of God. "Trusting in themselves, their lives are crooked," God says of Babylon. Power, position and accomplishments lead to boasting and arrogance and greed that are never satisfied as seen in the conquering spirit of Babylon. "The righteous will live by faith." (vs. 4) The truth written and proclaimed in this infamous verse of Habakkuk 2:4 is repeated and proclaimed throughout God's covenantal life with all creation. See Genesis 15:6, John 3:36, Romans 1:17, and Hebrews 10:35ff.

After a long list of the injustices practiced by Babylon, Habakkuk writes, "But the LORD is in his holy Temple. Let all the earth be silent before him." (Habakkuk 2:20).

In our time of Advent waiting, we say, "Come Lord Jesus." You are, by faith, God's intervention in this world to overcome intolerance, violence and injustice.

Submitted by Dawn R. Jetto

December 15

Philippians 3:12-16

When I first read this verse, the words that stood out to me were “goal to win the prize” in verse 14. When I did I had to read the verse over again because I wasn’t exactly sure what Paul meant by winning the prize. What was the prize? What was God saying when he called me? But then I kept going and read “and if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you”. What I think Paul is trying to say is that even though you may not understand something that someone may be saying to you and why they say it doesn’t mean it’s wrong. For example, if my mom told me to go and make my bed, I never understood why because I knew that night I would mess it up again. But now, I have learned to appreciate a clean bed and how it looks. Paul also talks in the beginning that we should stop looking at our past and look to our future. I for one know I struggle with this personally and I wish I knew of this verse when I was younger. Letting go of the hard things in life can be a tough thing to do, but letting God take the wheel and asking him for help can make a world of a difference. The common phrase of “Let go and let God” really goes hand in hand with the verse because Paul is telling us that God is the one that takes hold of the problem when we let go of it. Paul even admits that he hasn’t even taken hold of Jesus’ hand when he gives it to him. Letting go of the control and giving it to Jesus is so important in someone’s faith journey. Back to what I said at the beginning about winning a prize, I think the prize is finally letting go and taking God’s hand. Once you make the decision to let go and let God, everything will become clear, according to Paul at least. One of my favorite songs is “How he loves us” by Shane & Shane and there is a line that says “We are his portion and he is our prize” and I never really thought a lot about this verse until I read what Paul wrote and came to the realization that letting go means so much to God and us. So, what are some things of the past that you and your family can let go of, maybe some old grudges or fears that God can take a hold of?

Submitted by Lara Kuper

December 16

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John – Witness of the Light - coming to us as God’s messenger - messenger of the Light.

“Who are you? Who are you?”, the fingers of the Levites and priests pointing.

“Who are you? Who ARE you?! WHO ARE YOU?!” – words like stones being thrown.

They needed an answer - the answer to please the ones who sent them.

“WHO ARE YOU?!”

“I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’”

“Why dare to baptize if you are NOT the Christ?! NOT Elijah; not even a prophet?!”

“I baptize with water, but beyond me - among you - it is HE!

The Light of the world.

There He stands – the one you don’t know.”

Submitted by Debra Hayden



The Third Week in Advent

HYMN

Hark, the glad sound! The Savior comes, the Savior promised long;
Let ev'ry heart prepare a throne and ev'ry voice a song.

He comes the pris'ners to release, in Satan's bondage held.
The gates of brass before him burst, te iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to sure,
And with the reassures of his grace to'enrich the humble poor.

Tune: CHESTERFIELD – Other tunes are noted in the index

A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Lord Jesus, you continue to do great things for us.
Give us your gift of peace as we await your coming.
Amen

ADVENT PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

Use this prayer and follow the actions as you are able.

Open my eyes to see your light.
Open my hands to receive your bread.
Open my ears to hear your word.
Open my mouth to speak your love.

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

Use this blessing when lighting the three candles of Advent wreath.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
Your prophets spoke of a day when the desert would blossom
and waters would break forth in the wilderness.
Bless us as we light the candles on this wreath.
Strengthen our hearts
as we prepare for the coming of the Lord.
May he give water to all who thirst,
for he is our light and our salvation.
Blessed be God forever.



The Third Week in Advent

TABLE PRAYER

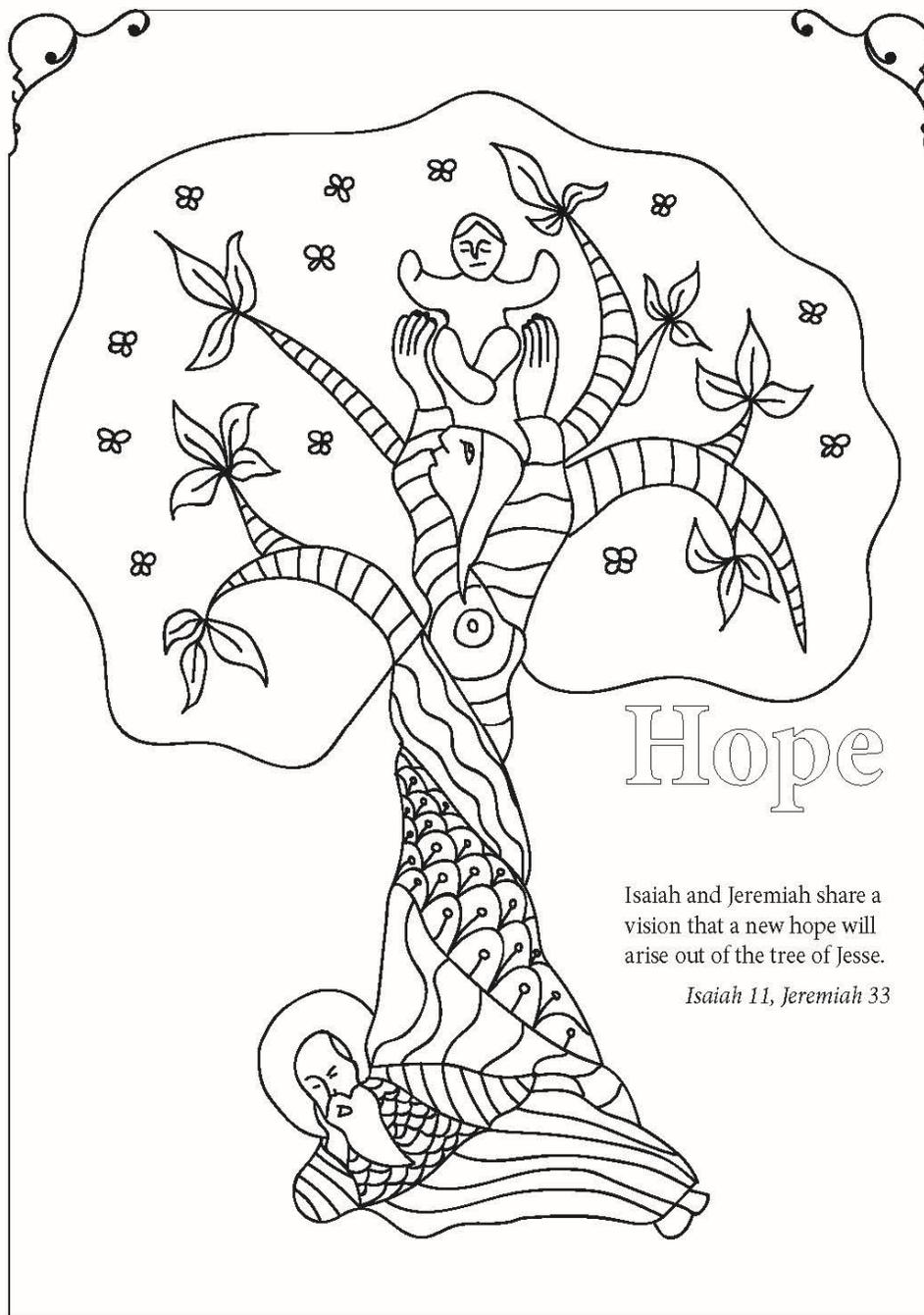
Maranatha!

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; let these gifts to us be blest.

Guide us on the servant's way; lead us to your dawning day.

Amen





Hope

Isaiah and Jeremiah share a vision that a new hope will arise out of the tree of Jesse.

Isaiah 11, Jeremiah 33



From *Coloring Advent: An Adult Coloring Book for the Journey to Bethlehem*, available at www.ChalicePress.com or 1-800-366-3383.

December 17

Isaiah 61:1-4

Growing up, the lead up to Christmas was always a time of wonder, excitement, and reverence. I remember being amazed while driving around looking at Christmas lights and the jubilation of unwrapping a new Lego set. Now as I've grown older, I've realized this time of year doesn't convey the same emotions for all as it did for me as a child. Many in our community are spending this time worried about their finances, afflicted by loneliness and depression, and aren't feeling very merry this holiday season. Thankfully, the message and hope found in the birth of Jesus is there for us all, even (especially) when we are in the midst of anger, anxiety, and despair. This passage in Isaiah reminds us that the mission of Jesus isn't to give us momentary comfort and happiness, but to provide lasting freedom, healing, and light for all. We can all be reminded that Jesus can replace mourning with dancing and despair with praise. While we may still feel sadness, isolation, and fear this holiday season (or in this lifetime), but because of Jesus, those things never have the last word in our lives or in this world.

What are things you worry about during the holidays? What are some ways you can reach out to others who may be sad during the holidays?

Submitted by Patrick Nazaroff



Advent Devotional 2017

December 18

Psalm 126

Living in senior housing makes one very aware of balance and obstacles in one's way. We wear a chain holding an alarm button. If we fall the staff knows where we are and will send help.

Fortunately, we do not need an alarm to ask the Lord for help. We keep in step with God, holding His hand for strength and balance. We do this while singing "God Songs". Thank you for your stories, God, that bless our lives through the scriptures.

Psalm 126 verses 1-3 reads: "It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when God returned Zion's exiles. We laughed, we sang. We couldn't believe our good fortune. We were the talk of the nations—"God was wonderful to them!" God is wonderful to us, we are one happy people. (The Message).

"And now, God, do it again—bring rains to our drought-stricken lives; So those who planted their crops in despair will shout hurrahs at the harvest, so those who went off with heavy hearts will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing." Psalm 126:v.4 – 6.

Since we are still recovering from Hurricane Harvey it is pretty obvious that we are not talking about physical rain here. Rather we recognize the spiritual drought in our hearts and lives. But we are now in Advent! the special time we have set apart to bring our needs to the Lord. We know we have sinned and come short of the Glory of God. We are called now to repent and know that God will forgive us and bring us back into His welcoming arms.

And so we practice our relationship with the Lord. We send our songs of Joy to Him through the ages.

Lord, hold us by your hand. Shield us from the rocks and hard places in our lives. Welcome us as we come with our armloads of blessing.

Submitted by Naomi Fackler

December 19

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of

God in Christ for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, “but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound” and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

At the time of Paul, Thessalonica was a beautiful little town. Because of its location, it soon became a bustling city. It was with water on one side, with a high hill nearby, and a view of the plains on the other side of the hill. Sounds a little like our location. It was a fast growing and popular area to live at that time. Paul came there to teach about the new religion that was founded by Jesus’ birth and death. There were already many sects here and many worshiped their political leaders of the time. Paul’s purpose was to assist this new church. He encouraged them to always to do two things in particular:

(a) to give thanks to God, and (b) to pray steadfastly. He wanted them to abound in all Christian virtues and Jesus’ gift of the Lord.

Some had entered this faith not understanding that God’s way was a *new* way of life. They needed fuller experience to fully understand and believe. He encouraged them to daily acknowledge God in prayer and faithfulness. Don’t fall away. This requires discipline in both internal and external habits and commitment to our Lord.

Yes, it’s a busy time. It is easy to fall away and forget that this is the time of Jesus birth. Hold fast to what you believe. Remember your Lord in all that you do. Rejoice with joy, constancy in prayer and thanksgiving. This is the Christian way of life. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you throughout this season. Prepare the way of our Lord.

Submitted by Sandy DeSelms

December 20

Psalms 1-4; 19-26

Dependability is defined as capable of being depended on; worthy of trust; reliable.

OK.

That appears to describe our Amazon Prime accounts and Facebook pages! Doesn't it? Not really. Amazon's Alexa has trouble answering most questions and our Facebook 'friends' are fair-weather at best.

Hmmm. Think!! This shouldn't be tough to answer, right?

What is truly dependable in our lives?

Our car? An air conditioner? weight control, the weatherman, our favorite sports team, a long trip with others, flowers from a spouse, Christmas dinner, a New Year's resolution, a microphone for a crowd? an HOA meeting, making a flight, catching a train, review of a film, lawn fertilizer, a safe return, a tv commercial ad, family peace, our mainstream media, a politician...an on-time arrival?!

Anything?

Just one: THE DEPENDABILITY OF GOD. To heal, love, lift, grace, bless and keep you.

Ethan the Ezrahite, while saddened by the state of affairs, uses this royal psalm to praise the Lord's faithful covenant with David, which involved God's dependable promise to establish David's descendants on the throne.

To Depend on Him Absolutely...Is To Live Free Unexpectedly!

A SIMPLE DEVOTIONAL PRAYER: *Dear Lord, we ask for your guidance to show us the path to depend on you, first. In this world of chaos and strong opinion...we know your wisdom surpasses all things mortal and earthly. May your mighty hands lift our hearts and minds and souls to an upper plateau, just above the clouds, where your Light shines the way to your Grace.*

Submitted by Billy & Nicki Forester

December 21

Luke 1: 26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

This is one of my favorite Advent readings. This is the moment when Mary learns that she will be the mother of God's Son. She is startled by angel Gabriel's greeting and it is then foretold that she will become pregnant, not with just any child, but with God's Son. Can you imagine? I remember being pregnant with my first child. There were so many mixed emotions and questions. I remember being excited and then anxious, trying to soak in as much information as I could so that I would have a healthy pregnancy and child. I can only imagine what Mary was feeling. Not only was she going to be pregnant, but pregnant with God's Son. No pressure! Right? I am in awe of her calm response, she asks how this is even possible when she is a virgin. Angel Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will come over her and a child will be born. Then Mary says yes, I am the servant of the Lord and I will do what God wants. Wow!

How many times have we been given opportunities from God that we question? None of them as great as carrying God's only Son, but yet, we stop and question if this is the right thing. Mary did the exact opposite. She said yes immediately! Mary had no idea the exact implications this would have on her and Joseph, but she said yes anyway. This was God's will, not her own. My hope is that we all become more like Mary, that we place our full trust in God. We don't know what tomorrow may look like, but we know that we have an ever-present God who loves, protects and guides us. May we continue to seek the will of God in our lives, so that we will find the peace and joy waiting for us in the manger.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for choosing Mary to be the mother of Jesus. Please help us remember to live our lives according to your will. Prepare our hearts to move closer to you as we await the birth of your Son in the days to come. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Katie Phillips

December 22

Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1:39-45 reminds me of “love your neighbor as yourself”.

I used to work at Sesame, a hospitality school for disadvantaged children in Vietnam. My job was to promote and raise funds for the school by bringing in clients to its in-house restaurant.

At the end of our first year we took the kids out to celebrate. On the way to a local restaurant, the kids suddenly formed up in a formation around me. When we walked inside, one of the girls stepped back and kept her distance from all of us. It took about 10 minutes for them to loosen up and give me an explanation. They explained that they were trying to protect *me* from the gang members that were constantly trying to pull them back to their past lives. The girl who had kept her distance used to be a prostitute in the area and she didn't want people to look down on *me*, so she decided to step back!

I had so much I wanted to tell them. I wanted to tell them they were valuable, they were a living miracle, that other people would not define them – but I couldn't say a thing. I couldn't tell how long the silence lasted. For the first time, in front of my students, I realized how small I was. In that moment, I needed them more than they needed me. They gave me a group hug and I realized then how warmth, care, protection, and acts of kindness, could touch somebody's heart.

It reminds me of when Elizabeth greeted Mary. Elizabeth could have looked the other way, ignored Mary, or even looked to punish this unwed pregnant teen who claimed to be a virgin. But Elizabeth greets her with warmth, care, support and love. Did Elizabeth fully understand how much Mary was helping her as well, by bringing Jesus into the world? Treat others with kindness. You've never known what they are going through. Helping others can go both ways. When you think you're helping others, it could be that they're helping you as much or more at the same time.

Submitted by Ahn Jorgenson

December 23

Luke 1: 46-55

It's not all that long ago that the floodwaters from Hurricane Harvey receded leaving behind despair and destruction. This historic event touched the lives of a great many residents of Southeastern Texas. Whether seeing one's own home and irreplaceable momentous lost to the flood waters, witnessing the vast destruction thru news accounts or volunteering to help those in need all Southeastern Texans have been touched in some way by the tragedy known as Hurricane Harvey. In the face of this historic tragedy the media publicized innumerable stories about the strength of the human spirit and the good of humanity demonstrated by the multitude of selfless acts carried out by ordinary people motivated by the power of the Holy Spirit to come to the aide of those in need.

In Psalm 27 King David writes of his resolute confidence in the awesome power of God and his trust in the protection God affords him. Verse 1 "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Verse 3 "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. Psalm 27 calls out to each of us challenging us to place our troubles at the feet of the Lord. To not despair but rather to rejoice in knowing that God is bigger than any problem we may face.

Just as Harvey survivors witnessed the power of God's love for his children so to may you; as you face your own "Harvey" be it drowning in debt, grief or despair or being challenged daily by a seemingly ceaseless torrent of misfortune and bad news.

Take refuge in the Lord. Surrender your troubles to the Lord. Know that the Lord will rescue you, often thru unexpected means; be it in the middle of the night via a National Guard boat, the helping hands of others or an unexpected windfall or uplifting words or music. "...for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!" Matthew 6:8

No problem is too big for the Lord our God. Learn to; Lean on the Lord!

Submitted by Steve Mills



December 24: Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” (Luke 2:14)

The angels’ song is so familiar to most of us that the words wrap around us like a warm blanket providing comfort, peace, and memories of Christmases past. But when was the last time we stopped to sing with the angels rather than simply listen to their song?

I don’t know about your experiences but the weeks leading up to Christmas don’t always bring out the best in me. There’s the lines in every single store and the traffic in every parking lot. There’s the hustle and bustle to get to every party, pageant, and concert. There’s the stress of buying gifts, wrapping gifts, and shipping gifts. Everyone wants more of your time and there’s not always time to give. And so, for many Christmas Eve’s now I have made it to this day to hear the angels’ song and have let the words surround me and remove the stress and the frustration and bring me back to the center. Like Charlie Brown I cry out, “Can anyone tell me the true meaning of Christmas!” and the angels’ response comes as beautifully as Linus’ famous speech, “Glory to God in the highest heaven!”

This is a good enough response I suppose, to be reminded of the true meaning of Christmas and to let my stress and frustration dissolve. But this year I want to strive for something more. This year I want to join the angels’ song. I want to lift my voice in true praise of the God who sent a son to live among us so that we might have true life. Today, as you come to worship, as you light your candles, as you hear the brass and the organ, as you go to the parties, as you make final preparations for the morning, I invite you to take a moment and join your voice with the angels who surround us, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

Submitted by Pastor David Bauser

The Fourth Week in Advent

HYMN

*During the final days of Advent, December 17-23,
an O-Antiphon is sung each day.*

A PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.
Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us, that we may be saved.
Amen

ADVENT PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

*Whether you put an angel on the Christmas tree or over the bed, use
this prayer in the last days of Advent and during Christmastime:*

Angel sent by God to guide me,
be my light and walk beside me;
be my guardian and protect me
on the paths of life direct me.

TABLE PRAYER

Maranatha!
Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; let these gifts to us be blest.
Deep within us come to dwell that we might all your goodness tell.
Amen

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

Use this prayer when lighting the four candles of the Advent wreath.
Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
In your Son, Emmanuel,
you have shown us your light
and saved us from the power of sin.
Bless us as we light the candles on this wreath.
Increase our longing for your presence,
that at the celebration of your Son's birth
his Spirit might dwell anew in our midst,
for he is our light and our salvation.
Blessed be God forever.



Christmas Eve

HYMN

Your little ones, dear Lord are we, and come your lowly bed to see;
enlighten ev'ry soul and mind, that we the way to you may find.

With songs we hasten you to greet, and kiss the ground before your feet.
Oh, blessed hour, oh, sweetest night that gave you birth, our soul's de-
light.

Oh, draw us wholly to you, Lord, and to us all your grace accord;
true faith and love to us impart, that we may hold you in our heart.

Until at last we too proclaim, with all your saints, your glorious name;
In paradise our songs renew, and praise you as the angels do.

Tune: HERR KOMMER DINE ARME SMAA –

Other tunes are noted in the index

A PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS

Almighty God,
You enlighten the darkness with the true Light.
In the days ahead, help us walk in Christ's light,
and on the last day awaken us to the brightness of his glory.
Amen

CHRISTMAS PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care
and fit us for heaven to live with you there.

TABLE PRAYER

With joy and gladness we feast upon your love, O God.
You have come among us in Jesus, your Son,
and your presence now graces this table.
May Christ dwell in us that we might bear his love to all the world,
for he is Lord forever and ever.
Amen

LIGHTING THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Use this prayer when you first illumine the tree or when you gather at the tree.

God our Creator,
we praise you for this Christmas tree.
It is sign of your everlasting, evergreen presence.
It is sign of the reign of heaven,
sheltering the creatures of the earth under its open arms.
It is a sign of the cross,
shining with the light of your grace and mercy.

Gracious God,
Let your blessing come upon us
as we illumine this tree.
Send us your Son,
the tender shoot of Jesse,
Who brings us light and life.

May all who stand in its light
eagerly welcome the true Light which never fades.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen

Holding Christ

CHRISTMAS EVE

Jesus is born, Cloud enfleshed, in
 a manger. Mary loved her baby,
 and knew that God loved her.

Luke 2



From *Coloring Advent: An Adult Coloring Book
 for the Journey to Bethlehem*, available at
 www.ChalicePress.com or 1-800-366-3383.

Christmas Day

HYMN

What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary!

Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners hear the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary!

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh; come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings; let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise the song on high, the virgin sings her lullaby;
Joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary!

Tune: GREENSLEEVES

A PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

Lord God,
may your Word become flesh through our lives
so that others may see him in our love for each other,
our service to the needy, and our care for the little ones of this earth.
Amen

TABLE PRAYER

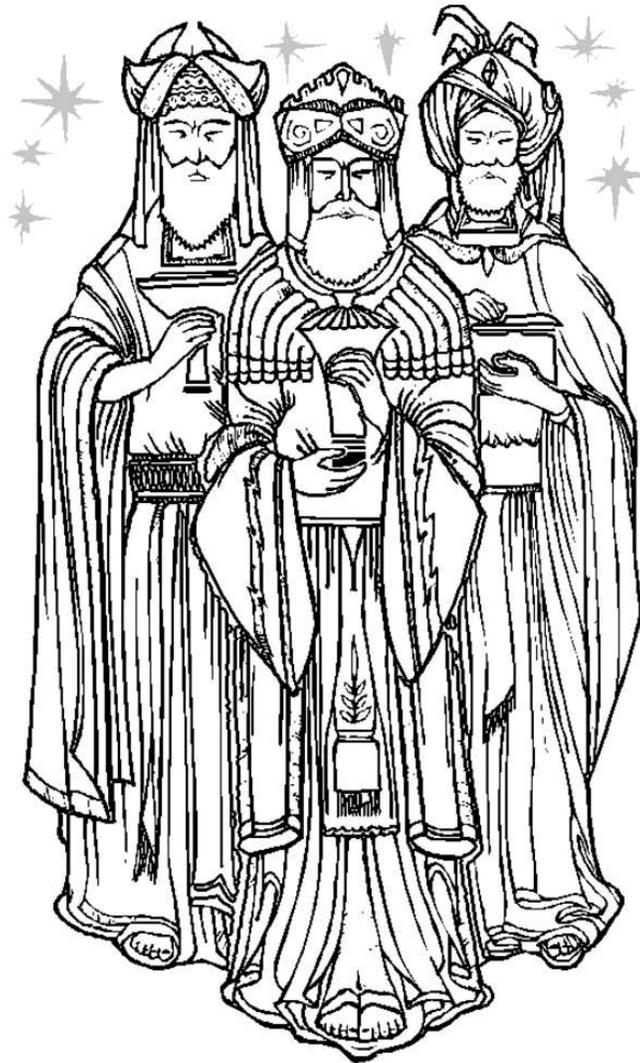
With shepherds and angels, we sing:
Glory to God and peace to all people on earth.
With Mary and Joseph we praise you, O God,
for Christ, the Word made flesh.
With joyful hearts we offer you thanks
for the gifts that grace this table.
Strengthen us with this food
that we may be witnesses to the light shining in darkness.
We ask this in the name of our Savior, Christ the Lord.
Amen



CHRISTMAS PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

Here is the stable
where Jesus was born
and was laid in the manger
that first Christmas morn.

And Mary and Joseph
and cattle and sheep
smiled down on the baby
and watched him, asleep.





December 25

The Witness of John

John 1: 1-14

There came a man sent from God whose name was JOHN.

JOHN – the surprise and delight of the couple who had long given up on holding a child of their own.

JOHN – declared by a father’s lips stilled by God, “HIS NAME IS JOHN!”

JOHN – a man of lonely places, feasting on wild things - a man listening to God’s voice on the wind, the earth, the water – God’s voice, written in his heart.

JOHN – guarding in his very being the leap of recognition and joy before he himself was even born - finally declaring, “The Light – the True Light of the world – JESUS – has come!”

“I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’”

Pouring water over bruised and soiled spirits, his heart alert to the Life that caused him to dance in his mother’s womb - FINALLY, finally seeing for himself - the Coming - Jesus coming – “BEHOLD the LAMB of GOD who takes away the sin of the World!”

Submitted by Debra Hayden



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