

*'Twas the Night Before Christmas...*



**St. Paul's 2018 Advent Devotional**

*Written by Staff and Members of Our Church*

# Introduction

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*“’Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house...”*

Like you I’m sure, I remember those words from childhood. The power of the Christmas story is that it connects to us at our most child-like level — a place of vulnerable trust in the God who gives us hope.

That’s our “theme” for this Advent-Christmas season. To help “prepare the way of the Lord,” members and staff of our church have written daily devotional entries connecting those wonderfully rich Christmas passages to our daily walk of faith.

We invite you into that journey to the manger...to prepare your heart for God’s greatest gift.

Peace and Love,  
*Pastor David and Pastor Paul*

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# Day 1

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## Isaiah 40:9-11

*O Zion, messenger of good news, shout from the mountaintops! Shout it louder, O Jerusalem. Shout, and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah, "Your God is coming!"*

*Yes, the Sovereign Lord is coming in power. He will rule with a powerful arm. See, he brings his reward with him as he comes. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart.*

*He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.*

"It's a girl!!!" My friend was so excited at the birth of his daughter he couldn't help but shout it through the phone. I was on the other end of the phone line, beaming from ear to ear, as I imagined him bouncing off the walls with joy. He and his wife had tried for five years to have a child but were repeatedly frustrated by news of infertility. After 22 hours of labor, his wife delivered a brand new baby girl.

Good news is hard to keep to yourself. The ironic thing about Christmas time is that the world is actually listening for that message of hope that the Baby Jesus promises. Christmas is a reminder that God hasn't forgotten us, that God cares about us, that God "holds us close to His heart," that God "is coming." Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Isaiah could see the day coming... and he couldn't help but shout the good news for all to hear.

As Christmas is coming for you, what good news about God's Son do you want to "shout from the mountaintops"?

*Heavenly Father, would You give me an opportunity today to get so excited about the Christmas message of Jesus' birth that I can't help but tell someone else about it? Thank You, Lord. Amen.*

# Day 2

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## Psalm 89:1-4

*I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.*

*You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.*

What a comfort it is to know the steadfast love of God. In a world full of broken promises and "tit for tat," our Savior Jesus Christ remains firm. As humans, we tend to love if it is returned in the way we see fit. Promises only last as long as they are convenient and we often seek excuses to justify breaking them.

We are blessed beyond measure to know that our salvation through the Savior does not rely on **our** ability to love steadfastly or unblemished faithfulness, but rather on our Savior's, whose undying love and ultimate faithfulness to die on a cross for you and me passes all human understanding. This Christmas season, we strive to be more like Jesus, and though we will ultimately fall short, we thank him for his example and ultimate sacrifice.

*Dear Lord, thank you for your unconditional love and your sacrifice on the cross. Though we all fall short, help us to grow in our faithfulness and seek to live more like the example you set forth for us. We love you Lord and await your coming! Amen.*

# Day 3

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## Isaiah 11:1-10

I was juggling a bowl of broccoli and a plate of raw chicken when I heard the five o'clock local news broadcast begin. Dinner prep was well underway in the kitchen while the TV was on in the adjoining family room. The headlines at the opening of the newscast were grim, and I immediately thought of the three sets of small ears playing in a nearby room. They didn't need to hear the details of the latest homicide and drug raid. I ran to the living room, found the universal remote and nearly punched the power button. Silence filled the room, and the screen went black. The chaos of the outside world was kept at bay for the moment. Isaiah prophesied in the kingdom of Judah about 700 years before Jesus's birth, and it is his prophecies that provide the clearest picture of the Messiah in the Old Testament. This clear and present message was absolutely necessary for what was a very chaotic time in the history of a nation that had turned its back to God. Through His prophet, God hoped his chosen people would once again return to Him.

The language in the book of Isaiah might seem odd to us in 2018, but there is a message that still rings true. Further, it is a message that can bring us assurance in even the chaotic times we live in today. The people of Judah in 600 BC did not yet know who the Messiah would be, and they lived in a fractured, contentious culture that was separated from God's presence. Those who heard Isaiah's prophecy may have found great comfort in knowing one day Jesus would come to restore a fractured and broken nation.

The good news for us in 2018 is that we know who Jesus is. While chaos might find us at every turn, we have a "banner" that we all can rally around as the Christmas season approaches. Jesus came to Earth to restore all of God's people, and He has restored you too. May you be blessed this Advent season, and may righteousness and faithfulness of our Lord bring you peace.

# Day 4

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## Micah 5:2-3

These very famous verses of Micah are spoken, repeated, sung, prayed and celebrated in every church, in every country, in every time since Jesus Christ was born in the town the prophet Micah mentions in these verses. Matthew 2:6 directly references this Christmas staple, with Herod's priests and scribes telling the wise men about the birthplace of the expected Messiah. For Micah's original readers, however, he is explaining to the people here that while hope might be seated with the kings of Israel, it is because it springs from something much, much older, "... whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

Bethlehem was already known as the City of David, and despite this title, it was one of the smallest and seemingly insignificant places in Israel. It is not the place the Jewish world would expect lightning to strike twice, but according to Micah, this exact thing would happen. Micah's message served a dual purpose for the readers. First, God had not forgotten his covenant promise to the first son to come out of Bethlehem and to the nation, King David. Even at their lowest and most humiliated point, which can be read in Micah 5:1, God is faithful regardless of how weak they may feel in their own eyes. Second, what is coming next is even more powerful and holds more magnificent splendor. It's more glorious than a king, as even Micah doesn't use the word "king." A king would be familiar to Micah's readers, but instead, Micah instead calls this person a "ruler" to show how different he would be.

This whole passage always summarizes Christmas for me because it is known and recognized by God's friends and enemies. The wise men, coming to give gifts to Jesus at his birth, learn about this passage in the royal court of King Herod, a man that will try to kill Jesus. In other words, this event is not something that will be hidden under a rock, because even the enemies of God know this Micah passage and know that this beautiful thing is going to happen. It's so great that it can't be hidden! God pulls unequaled greatness from the unexpected, smallest and weakest places and people.

# Day 5

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## Zechariah 6:9-14

There are no shortcuts in verses like these to understanding exactly how Christmas can be related. We know the Old Testament speaks of the coming Christ all the time, but it is not always easy to see how with the titles, symbolism, and perhaps worst of all, the Old Testament names we are expected to recognize, understand and pronounce! The only thing we can do is pray and look at how these verses connect to the whole to try and glimpse the intention of the author. Summaries are lovely in these situations, so I won't leave you hanging: Zechariah is to crown Joshua with a crown of gold and silver brought from Babylon, and after, there will be peace between a priest and the king sitting on the throne.

This entire act symbolically and prophetically tells Zechariah's original readers of a greater priest that is coming. In Israel, the priesthood and the position of the king were kept separate. The priest *never* wore a crown or sat upon a throne, and likewise, the king *never* performed the actions of the priest. And yet, here we read about a crown placed on the head of Joshua, and *not* Zerubbabel who the original readers might expect in this passage, pointing forward to the one who should be both king and priest. And, we may gloss over and miss the importance of this line: "...he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne." By sitting, this king has ended his work and assumed his role of ruling forever. This shows us the coming Jesus Christ, who finishes the work of atonement not with disappearing, but with ruling his Church, his kingdom, and the entire universe.

But, Jesus is not alone at the throne. Zechariah also writes, "There shall be a priest by his throne..." This line, for my money, the strangest and most important piece of this passage. Who is this priest that stands by God's throne? Why would a priest-king need a priest at all? Zechariah is describing something new here. As God sits on the throne, the identity of the priest next to him is humanity. Us, working alongside greatness. Jesus' arrival results in fixing the separation that starts with the actions of Adam and Eve and lifts us into a position we could never have imagined we would hold in God's kingdom.



# Day 6

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## Psalm 77:6

*“At night, I remember my songs;  
I meditate in my heart, and my spirit ponders.”*

When I have moments – or seasons – of anxiety, that anxiety is always worse at night. There’s something about the nighttime that makes us feel more isolated, more alone with our fears. Unknowns seem more unknown at night; what-ifs seem more threatening at night; loneliness seems more claustrophobic at night. The darkness of anxiety wants to overtake the light of hope in us – and night time is the time when it knows it has a better chance at succeeding. When morning comes, the light dispels our darkness – and the dark shadows of our animated anxiety are exposed for what they are. Nighttime, therefore, is the time when we need, as the Psalmist states, to “remember our songs.”

In Psalm 77, the writer lyrically presents a raw, honest portrait of a person feeling the absence of God’s Presence and needing the gentle reassurance that all will be well. “In the night,” when anxiety is always heightened, he “remembers” his songs. His songs can read as laments – as many of the Psalms do, but singing those songs has a powerful effect that can counter the painful times when it feels like God is absent.

The Apostle John reminds us during this Advent season: He writes, *“in Him [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”* (John 1:4-5). There is no darkness, no anxiety that can overcome the Light of Christ in you.

When we’re facing anxiety in the night, it’s important to sing. Doing so allows our heart to express its trust in God... even in the dark.

*God, with my whole heart I praise You. Even in my darkest moments, I choose to trust You. Help me to remember my songs in the night... and the God who is the Singer of my songs. Amen.*



# Day 7

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## John 1:9-13

How different would this world be if we were all rewarded for doing a lousy job? Imagine your child's teacher getting her yearly raise, even if she only taught her kindergarten class only half the alphabet this year. Might it be bizarre to win an Olympic medal if you threw the javelin half the distance as the latest world record? How many of us would willingly provide our business to a local dentist who had a reputation for drilling out cavities but not refilling the teeth? All a bit amusing to think about but we know that's not how this world works. We must strive for that raise, labor harder and achieve greater things than the last athlete and provide quality skilled work consistently to receive an outstanding reputation that draws clients. That's how we earn the rewards of the world.

But thankfully, God's ways are far different. God created the world and gave us life, and he does not require that we earn our reward. Many times in the Old Testament God asks his people over and over to believe in Him, love Him, trust His ways, follow His laws. Time after time, people failed to fulfill His requests. But in place of punishment, God sent His Son down to be born amongst us. The birth of Christ gave us another opportunity not to disappoint Him. However, many ignored Christ's existence. Worse yet, there were those that wished death for him. Even a non-parent would have to cringe at the idea of a child's life being taken!

*Dear Lord, Even though we've done a lousy job of showing our appreciation for all You have done for us, we see the swift gavel of God has not swung. For instead, You have blessed us with the reward of daily forgiveness, constant hope and much support throughout our walk...and through the happiest of seasons, may we remember the promise of the ultimate gift of your love, a story that extends to the promise of heaven! So as we gather to celebrate this season, let us love one another as You have chosen to love us, through a love that is grace giving and full of forgiveness daily. Amen.*

# Day 8

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## Mark 1:1-4

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way. A voice of one calling in the desert...”*

We know from scripture that the messenger was John the Baptist and that his job was to tell people about the righteousness of God and to baptize them as visible and tangible evidence of repentance of their sins when they wanted to follow God and to prepare for the coming of the promised Christ. John’s preaching seems like a formidable task, and it was, and yet we see in verse 5 that follows that “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”

For most of us, speaking before large crowds of people is something we don’t normally do. Even speaking to mid-sized or small groups might be a stretch. So let’s move on to the one-on-one scenario. Talking to someone, maybe a total stranger, about the love Christ has for us will put us waaaaay out of our comfort zone. Maybe we could focus on how we show the evidence of Christ’s love for us by being helpful to a neighbor, welcoming a new neighbor with a fresh-baked plate of cookies, buying someone a cup of coffee, offering a kind word, etc. Seeing their reaction may open a door for discussion about Christ’s love. We can prepare the way by planting the seed of God’s love for us and hopefully watching it grow into full acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior of our lives.

*Lord, let both our words and actions show our love for you and your love for us, and may both lead others to know you.*

# Day 9

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## Luke 1:5-13

Zechariah's fear and surprise were grounded and reasonable. For nearly 400 years at this point, since the prophet Malachi, God's people have had no direct communication. Luke takes time to describe Zechariah and Elizabeth in similar terms to Job, "both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." But, only after telling us of the couple's righteousness does Luke tell us that they have no children. Barrenness was typically seen as a sign of divine punishment, as the Bible frequently tells us that children are a blessing from the Lord.

This information leads us to two very, very important inferences. First, God has opened the lines of communication for the first time in nearly 400 years, so something important is happening. Second, Elizabeth's history of barrenness was a result of God's plans and had nothing to do with the couple. Luke is inviting us not only to experience the wonder at what God is doing but also to experience the pathos of this narrative opening. Their pain and shame at their circumstances, all at once, is being revealed as part of God's ultimate plan before their eyes in these opening passages.

Have you ever waited 400 years to hear from your spouse, or parents, or loved ones? Of course not. That's longer than the age of our country. When it appears as if God is not answering us, we need to remember that God's plan is not one that enacts itself with a snap of the fingers. God works nearly every example of salvation and miracle in a way that takes time; sometimes it takes many years. God works things for good, and we must trust him, especially because as hard as this work might have been for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Have you ever stopped to consider, though, that God's upcoming work on the cross was going to be harder?

He did not forget Zechariah and Elizabeth, and he has not forgotten you.

# Day 10

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## Luke 1:14-17

This angel's remarks to Zechariah escalate with every new verse compared to the initial greeting that was offered. When the angel first speaks to Zechariah, he gives him great news that neither was expecting: they will have a son. But, what kind of son will they have? The shocking truth is that John is going to have the spirit and power of the mighty prophet Elijah! He is going to turn the hearts of parents to their children – something mentioned specifically by God's last prophet Malachi in the absolute, final verse before the 400-year silence leading to this point! He is going to bring even those who have been disobedient to God to see reason! But, all of this is predicated on the fact that he is making a people prepared for the Lord.

All the great things that God has done and does do through his servants, even and especially through his most dedicated and powerful servants, is directed towards Himself. It is not for Zechariah's benefit, although Zechariah does benefit. It is not for Elizabeth's advantage, though Elizabeth does gain from it. It certainly is not for John's benefit, because life without wine and other forms of alcohol was extraordinarily difficult in the times of the New Testament. John's life will be separated, in a way, from the rest of the celebrations and joys typical of this world and dedicated instead to a specific task. And while the people benefit, they benefit not because they are ready for the Lord, but because the Lord *is* coming. Every blessing from God works for the benefit of the Lord who is coming.

A life dedicated to God's service will look different and special to a world that doesn't expect God, but our gifts are always something that should be used to benefit God. But the best thing we can do with our gifts and talents is to pray, and ask God how he intends us to use them for his benefit. Have you done this? Has it ever felt like those gifts weren't appreciated by the world or even by other Christians? It shouldn't matter; God values them. There may be times when others don't see the benefit and also work against us to get our efforts redirected. If your gifts point others to the source, God will bless that calling and effort.

# Day 11

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## Luke 1:18-25

*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

I had been praying for a long time for a grandchild, and God finally gave us a miracle! Oliver William arrived in this world on July 11, 2018. Words cannot express the joy you feel when you see your child become a parent for the first time. Seeing my son and my daughter-in-law become parents has brought us closer as a family.

I'll never forget the first time I held Oliver. How precious and fragile he was. I knew at that moment that I would always be there for him, would be the best "Meme" that I can. This journey of being a grandparent is a beautiful chapter that God has written for me, and I am very grateful. I can only guess how Zechariah and his wife felt when they became parents. Imagine you desire a child for years, but are unable to have one. Now you are older, and God comes to you and tells you are going to be a father. It's no wonder that Zechariah questioned the angel. But we need to trust in God and know that he has a plan for us.

*Blessed Father, we pray that our grandchildren and children will come to know you and trust in you. May they seek your guidance in everything they do and may Jesus' love shine through them. Amen.*

# Day 12

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Luke 1:39-45

***“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”***

Twas the night before Christmas the world was a mess.  
The children were sleeping wanting more not less.  
The children hoped to rise to see all their gifts,  
What if they rose and there was a shift...  
Instead of focusing on gifts we focused on above  
And the reason for the season that is filled with such love!  
God blessed us with his most perfect son!  
We thought it was amazing, but he was not done!  
He sent his son to help us along  
Realizing Jesus had to be mentally strong.  
As days turned to weeks and weeks to years  
I'm sure his many efforts must have caused him tears.  
It is time to step up and show that we care  
For the son that he gave us ... let's start with a prayer.  
Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to see  
The importance of you for them and for me.  
Help us to tell the world about you  
And the amazing love you offer no matter what we do.  
This beautiful boy you sacrificed for us

It's time we appreciate and make a huge fuss.  
Let's shout from the mountain tops... The Messiah is here!  
How do we know this the angel did appear.  
The angels, wise men, and shepherds were thrilled  
To see that our world could finally be fulfilled!  
Let's all be excited and happy as they  
And follow the one they chose to obey.  
When you wake this Christmas morn  
The first thing to say is ....  
“Thank God Jesus was born!”

# Day 13

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## Luke 1:46-56 (The Magnificat)

*“And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (Luke 1: 46-47)*

### **We Need To Be More Like Mary**

God gave Mary a gift that no one else will ever be able to experience. She had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Yet, Mary sees herself as a sinner, just like everyone else. She sees her smallness, both in the eyes of the world and in God’s eyes.

Her words tell us that she feels totally unworthy to be chosen by God. In spite of feeling unworthy, her soul overflows with the knowledge of the great things God has done for her. She is humbled. She is totally enveloped in His love and grace and the privilege of carrying the Savior of the world!

We need to seek that same humility, not our own glory. Laboring for the Lord and not expecting any credit ourselves will truly lead us along the path to greatness in God’s kingdom. God shows mercy to those who don’t deserve it. He chooses the lowly over the proud.

Are we willing to humble ourselves in order for God to be glorified?

We should be.

*Lord, God, help us to see more of you and less of ourselves. Amen.*



# Day 14

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## Luke 1:57-66

Luke's entire narrative starts even before the birth of Jesus, and that's because God's plan for salvation begins before the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us in these verses that John the Baptist's miraculous birth is one of a promise kept and faith honored. Zechariah did not initially believe Gabriel, and as a result had been without a voice for months at this point, but with Zechariah agreeing that the child must be named John, we see faith rewarded. Zechariah no longer has room to doubt. God is moving; something is happening. Since the prophet Malachi, nearly 400 years ago at this point in the story, the Israelites have had no prophet. They have seen bloodshed and have experienced some intense suffering akin to the time of the Judges.

Now, God is acting in a way that even everyday people understand; it is undeniable by the witnesses. And these ordinary people ask the critical question, "What then will this child become?" Zechariah answers in verse 76 with, "And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High." John is Israel's first prophet in nearly 400 years. God has re-established contact with His people. Prophets tell the message that God gives them, and we know John's message is that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Even when God seems to reward our faith and efforts, it's important to remember that something lies beyond that is even greater. Zechariah is likely thrilled that he not only has a son, but he also has his voice back! Those two things alone would be a reason to sing for joy. However, it's easy to get caught up in the moment of the small win and miss the bigger picture. We cannot stop there, and neither does Zechariah. As great as that joy is, the most crucial part of this birth is not the son they've always dreamed of or the recovery of Zechariah's voice. Instead, Zechariah immediately sings praises to God that he is indeed working through his people with a prophet like the times of old, which Zechariah acknowledges in the next few verses. The real joy is knowing that something is coming that will change the way Israel and the world will interact with God. It isn't there yet, but there is something even better just in the distance. The next victory is still coming, and it is the greatest.

# Day 15

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## Luke 1:67-80

I remember the childhood excitement leading up to Christmas. It was still at the point when Christmas prep started after Thanksgiving. Yes, back in the day when Santa Claus arrived at the department store at the end of the Thanksgiving parade. What that arrival meant was that the TV Christmas specials would be airing soon. Some of my favorites were Rudolph, Frosty, Grinch, and Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town. The other thing I couldn't wait to get was the Sears Catalog. Oh, how I enjoyed going through and circling the things I wanted for Christmas, that Schwinn bike with a banana seat, a new Erector Set...

...and of course, Pong.

Okay, let's face it, most of the childhood excitement came from the presents Christmas morning. Singing about Rudolph and Heat Miser only reinforced the idea that Santa was coming soon to deliver those presents.

That is what is happening here.

This passage is labeled “Zechariah's Song” in many translations as this was very likely sung. The first section is about Jesus and the second John the Baptist. So it is a song sung by the children of God about the greatest gift of all and the guy who is coming to tell about that gift.

It's the first Christmas Carol.

*Thank you, God, for the greatest gift you could have ever given us.  
Please restore that childlike excitement.*

# Day 16

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## Isaiah 9:2-7

In today's world, many of us live in darkness. We live with fear. We live with depression. We feel lost and hopeless that we will not find our way. Maybe you've experienced that feeling yourself, or know someone else who has. In these verses, God gives us hope in dark times. The promise of a child who will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Just look at what those words mean.

**Wonderful** - miraculous, marvelous, that which excites, or calls forth wonder. Jesus is awe-inspiring.

**Counselor** - advisor, a person who rules or governs wisely. Jesus has the wisdom of God.

**Mighty God** - powerful warrior. Jesus is God himself.

**Everlasting Father** - always and forever, Jesus cares for us, His children.

**Prince of Peace** - Jesus brings peace and fulfillment to a broken world.

Jesus is the light in our time of darkness. We have our awesome advisor. We have a powerful warrior at our side. We have a Father who continually cares for us. We have a peacemaker whose love never fades. All we need to do is accept his love for us and let His light lead the way.

When we are feeling lost in darkness. We need to look to the light of Jesus. We need to turn to God's miraculous gift. For to us, a child is born, to us, a son is given.

*God, thank you for the awesome gift of your son, Jesus. In times of darkness, help me to put my faith and trust in His counsel...and choose to follow His light. Amen.*

# Day 17

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## Matthew 1:18-25

A few years ago, I spoke at my previous church about this very subject – Joseph. I called him “the forgotten man.” Joseph was a humble man. He was not a rich man. He was a carpenter. Joseph represents all of those of you who make your living by your hands--a laborer. Who would have thought that the Son of God would have been born into a family such as that? And we all know that it certainly was not what the Jewish people anticipated. They were looking for a “king.” Someone who wore purple robes – well you know.

What I found was a very simple man – but by my standards, Joseph was one of the most righteous men who ever lived. Now when most modern Christians think of a “righteous man,” they think of things like being a good husband, a patient father, a trusted and successful employee who lives a good clean life – you know as the old saying goes --- doesn’t “smoke, drink, chew or run with those who do.”

Matthew says that *because* -- let me repeat that – BECAUSE Joseph was a righteous man, he chose not to disgrace and shame Mary publically, even though (according to his knowledge at the time) she deserved it. **Wow!** Let that sink in for a few moments. **How many Christian men do you think today would react the same way that Joseph did if they were standing in his shoes?**

Joseph wasn’t vindictive -- He didn’t justify in his mind the act of bringing public disgrace upon Mary. Instead, he took the high road and put her away privately, lest she face public humiliation and shame. Here in this “forgotten” man, we find a wonderful definition of righteousness. Righteousness, as I see it in this lesson is to react like Jesus, living completely void of self-righteousness

*Our heavenly Father, during this Advent, remind us of Joseph. May his example show us a new way of living. Amen.*

# Day 18

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## Luke 2:6-7

*“So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

I don't think it is a coincidence that I was provided this verse while doing an event with students where we were getting clothing for the Helping Hands ministry at Grace UMC in Harrisburg. It got me thinking about how much need there is out there “because there is no room” and how reassuring it is that our next generation cares enough to “make room” for those in need.

Two thousand years removed from this event brings up visions of a neon “no vacancy” sign flickering outside a motel along the highway or possibly turning to our cell phone to find “no results found” on hotels.com; however, the word *kataluma* (translated “inn” in this passage from Luke) is also used for “upper room” in Mark 14:14, so it is likely that Mary and Joseph were simply not having luck finding room in anyone's house and no way to turn to social media to see if anyone else can spare a sofa for them to crash on. How often is this the challenge, needs that we simply don't know about.

I'm impressed by the student's awareness of the needs of the people we are serving in Harrisburg and the willingness to do what they can to help. Back in Bethlehem, it would have only taken one person thinking “wow, that young woman looks like she can give birth any time now, I hope she has a place to stay” then taking the time to find out and help for this story to change to “And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and put Him in a new outfit, and laid Him in a comfy bassinet, because someone cared enough to ask.”

*Heavenly Father, open my eyes to the needs around me  
and open my heart to make room to fill that need.*

# Day 19

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## Luke 2:8-20

*In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

...

*So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.*

What a great time to be a shepherd in Bethlehem. When Babies are born today, we see our social media pages flooded with the good news! Thanks to social media we are able to rejoice with the family miles, and miles away! However, Mary and Joseph were in a lonely stable greeted by complete strangers. Instead of being flooded by congratulation reactions on Facebook, the sky was lit up by angelic beings shouting, and praising the birth.

The message of the arrival of the Messiah and Savior demanded the highest of praise; the Angels broke out in worshipful praise. Praise to the one who was bringing light to the darkness of the world. As the night continued, I can just see these overjoyed shepherds running into the night, overjoyed by the experience they were just a part of. I can also see the sky continuously being ignited with glory beyond our wildest imaginations. The king has come, and in his humble way, he was greeted.

# Day 20

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## Luke 2:13-14

*“At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.”*

Some of my fondest memories growing up as a child were large family gatherings around the holidays with plenty of food, family, and fellowship. With much of the family having the gift of music, we would break out the Christmas carol book and sing the night away, most of us on key, many in harmony. When it came to the chorus of Angels We Have Heard on High, the house typically filled with sound that enchantingly echoes through my Christmas memories.

As I read Luke 2:13-14 I can’t help but think that this memory is a small sliver of what is humanly possible to image that night may have been like for the shepherds in the fields. I picture the dark of night sky illuminating in lights that mirror the great aurora borealis, with a song that takes our breath away. Once the angelic praise of God is through, still quiet peace that comes upon us would be equally magnificent, leaving us speechless. How could the shepherds not look towards the heavens in awe of God and his mightiness? How could they not run towards the manger and seek his face?

*Dear Lord, Although we are years past the birth of Christ, may our wonder and awe this holiday season not dim. May we look around today and see the many ways you have blessed every one of us throughout this year. May we find extra moments within the hustle and bustle of our week to sing your praise, through kindness, patience, and love towards others. May we know Your peace, through many of our tomorrows.*  
*Amen.*



# Day 21

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## Luke 2:13-14

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

In a day and age where we have access to so much, right there at our fingertips, do we seek God as we should? When Jesus was born, there were no planes, trains, or automobiles. The wise men traveled from afar, and they most likely walked or rode an animal. It was probably a journey that was very uncomfortable, yet their burning desire to worship the Savior led them through any obstacle.

Today we have Bibles, even Bible apps so that we can learn more about Jesus, and yet our personal relationship with God still sometimes falls to the wayside. He gave us the gifts of intercession and prayer so that we could talk to him anytime and cultivate a personal relationship with Him. The next time you pick up your Bible (or your computer) imagine what a journey the wise men encountered just to seek our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Is it really too difficult for us to seek the Lord on a daily basis in 2018?

*Lord, give us the yearning to grow closer to you. Help us to seek you and put those desires into action. Thank you for giving us many resources to learn more about you. Let us use them to please and honor you. We want to have the heart of the wise men on the night Jesus was born. Give us the courage to share our knowledge of you with others this holiday season. We love you, Jesus. Amen.*

# Day 22

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## Isaiah 7:10-14

*Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!"*

*Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?"*

*"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel..."*

As we are building towards the miraculous event of the coming of Christ, it reminds me of when I was a kid, and I could hardly wait for Christmas morning! I'm sure we can all put ourselves in that stage of childlike wonder as we patiently, but urgently wait till the morning where we run downstairs and see what good ole St. Nick has brought us.

It is remarkable to think that given the name Emmanuel (meaning "God with us"), we can look at our small blips of life and know that He is with us. I can add myself to the collective group that God was speaking about. We have been chosen for Emanuel! Just like as a child we waited for our toys under the tree, Isaiah writes about the great want of the coming of Emanuel.

# Day 23

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## Romans 15:4-13

*For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.*

...

*Again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." And again, "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, And let all the peoples praise Him." Again Isaiah says, "There shall come the root of Jesse, And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, In Him shall the Gentiles hope." Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

I feel like every year right after Thanksgiving, maybe even the very minute the clock strikes 12:00, all of the Christmas decorations come up. There are even rumors that some people put up Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving! There is something about the magical time where we can sit back and take in the Christmas season.

The idea of Advent is translated as the celebration of the coming of Christ. The first one which was celebrated during the Christmas season is the first coming, but as believers, we are able to be a part of waiting for his second coming. When we look at Advent, we look at the hope that gives us! It's a hope that we are able to share, and during the Christmas season, we can relish in his first coming together.

When Paul was speaking to the Gentiles about how we should be filled with hope, he meant that we were supposed to share hope with others. So, I challenge you this Christmas season. Let it be a time where we can share hope with one another of the *second* coming of Christ. As a Baby Jesus came to give hope to the world, and now we have that hope to share with everyone we meet!

# Day 24

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## Jeremiah 33:14-16

“The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people...”

Poor Charlie Brown. Lucy promises to hold the football and every time she pulls it away at the last second and Charlie goes flying and ends up on his backside. This is not a one-time occurrence. This happens time and time again. Broken promise after broken promise. After a while, you would think Charlie Brown would have learned his lesson.

Have you experienced a broken promise? Have you continued to put your trust in someone or something, only to end up disappointed time and again? After a while, our response mechanism changes, and we begin to build up walls to protect us because asking someone to fulfill a promise is an act of trust, which at times can leave us quite vulnerable to be hurt.

Have you ever been the one to break a promise? I remember when I was 16-years old and I got my driver's license. My parents trusted me with a car, under the promise that I would drive safely. A few weeks after getting my license, I broke that promise as I barreled down a two-lane country road as I raced against another. Thankfully no one was hurt, but after that, my parents' trust in me was broken for a time, and I was grounded from driving. When a promise is broken, it usually cuts both ways. Broken promises. Life is full of them. Some are small; others are big. Some we forget about, others cut deep and leave scars.

What if I told you there was someone who never broke nor breaks a promise. Would you believe me? God is the ultimate promise-keeper. Throughout the Bible, there are examples of God fulfilling His promises. Making Abraham into a great nation? Check. Protecting Noah and his family during the flood? Check. Helping Moses lead the Israelites out of captivity? Check.

# Day 24 (continued)

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## Jeremiah 33:14-16

The good promise that Jeremiah writes about blows the other promises out of the water. The good promise starts with the birth of Jesus. With the birth of Jesus, the old promise, or covenant, was thrown out because it was obsolete [Hebrews 8:13]. Instead, God makes a new covenant for all people of all nations [Luke 22:20]. Here is the best part about this new promise or covenant, it is free to all who want it. Nothing is asked for in return but believing. That's it. That is the Gospel. That is the Good News!

If you're new to all of this, feel free to skip the next paragraph and go to the end. If you're a Christian or Christ-Follower, there is no skipping to the end. Unfortunately, for Christ-Followers "there ain't no such thing as a free lunch." As followers of Christ, we have an obligation living under this new covenant. It is simple but extremely difficult to carry out. We, as Christ-Followers, are called to love those God also loves. This means the entire world.

In a situation, and you are unsure of what to say or do, ask yourself a simple question, **"What does love require of me?"** The answer is living out the "one-anothers" of Jesus' teachings in 1 John 4:11-12: Forgive one another, submit to one another, accept one another, restore one another, care for one another, bear with one another, encourage one another, carry one another's burden...

So, during this Advent Season, let us remember why we celebrate. What starts in a manger, finishes on a cross. The good promise of God is fulfilled because He loves us so much that He sends His Only Son to die for us and whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life.

# Day 25

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## John 3:16-17

Birthdays are super special in our home. The days leading up to a birthday in our house are filled with anticipation. Usually, a trip to the store or a point and click on Amazon assures that the person being celebrated has something special to open at the restaurant of his or her choice. With our little family gathered while singing Happy Birthday, and making a scene of how happy we are to have the birthday boy or girl as part of our family unit, we can't help but look forward to the next opportunity to celebrate. Christmas is no different when it comes to the anticipation of the celebration God's Son and His birth. Just as in our family birthday celebrations we take it up a notch for celebrating the greatest gift of all. We begin decorating early, playing all the seasonal music, finding those special gifts to share with others, and remembering the traditions that have evolved over the years.

I asked my son the other day what his favorite Christmas gift had been. Of course, being very philosophical, his response was "God's love." He knew I was writing an advent devotion. I smiled thinking, well that hit the nail on the head. I asked again saying "I love that and you're right that is the best Christmas gift. Could you tell me if what your favorite gift that a family member or friend gave you?" His response surprised me as I was expecting something Nerf, electronic, or Lego. No, he simply said "You know that train set Grandpa Bob gave me? That's my favorite Christmas gift." Really? I thought of that little train set. It was a very basic set with four cars and a battery-powered engine. Incidentally, that was the last gift from his Great Grandpa Bob before he passed away to join our Heavenly Father. The gift, a last connection with a man who even in his short time of knowing my son, and only seeing him a handful of moments, had made an impression on him.

*Jesus was only on this earth for a short period of time and gave us more than a train set, he was born to save us. His birth is a celebration that the prophecies of a savior being born came to pass in the joy of Christmas, and it's just the beginning. Easter is on its way! May the Joy of Christmas and the hope it brings fill you with the anticipation of Easter.*

# Day 26

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## John 14:6

*Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life.  
No one can come to the Father except through me."*

I'm directionally challenged. I used to carry a map atlas in my car wherever I would go, but now, without GPS – or my wife – I find it's so easy to get turned around. Which way is East? How do I know if I'm heading North?

But I married well! My wife has an innate compass inside her mind. She always seems to know which direction we need to go regardless of whether or not she is familiar with the area where we're travelling. I know that whenever I need her to, my wife will tell me where to go! Often she'll say, "I don't know exactly where we are, but I *know* we need to be going in *that* direction. So turn here."

In the Upper Room, hours before His arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus spent some pretty intimate time with His closest friends, preparing them for His upcoming trials. "Don't let your hearts be troubled," Jesus told them; "I'm going to prepare a place for you... You know the way to where I am going" (John 14:1-4). Thomas, one of the disciples that had direction problems like me asked Him, "We have no idea where you're going, so how can we know the way?" That's when Jesus downloaded His GPS directions: "I am the way...No one can come to the Father except through me."

If we really believe that, then Christmas is about so much more than giving gifts, singing songs, and watching Christmas movies; it's a directional indicator telling us where to go. Perhaps it's time to take someone with us too.

*Jesus, thanks for being clear about how to get to God. Give me the courage to follow Your directions explicitly. Amen.*