

ADVENT DEVOTIONS – 2009

University United Methodist Church

940 E. Colton Avenue

Redlands, CA 92373

November 29

Psalms 25:4-5, 8-10, 14

***When Jesus comes, we will be filled with knowledge
and understanding of the Lord.***

Genesis is properly described as the book of the beginning. It tells us that God created Adam and Eve. He also made a beautiful place for them to live, called the Garden of Eden. Every evening, God used to come down to talk to them. They got their instructions directly from God, warning them what to do and what not to do. They obeyed God and were happy. But, when Satan entered into their lives everything changed. They committed the very first sin, the sin of disobedience. Their sin became the cause of separation between them and their God. They could no longer stay in the Garden of Eden and they could no more hear the voice of God in the cool of the day. But, God's love for them never diminished. He wanted them to come back to him. Just like a loving father, who pleads to his children to return to him, God sent prophets, his messengers to plead to his people on his behalf. But, all their efforts failed because of the stubbornness of man and the interference of Satan in their lives. So sin increased in the world.

Among the prophets of the old, Malachi was the last one. Then, in the New Testament, there is a new hope and understanding for all mankind. God sent his son into this world. It became a time for rejoicing. The wise men rejoiced, when they found "The King of the Jews." The shepherds rejoiced because they found their long awaited Messiah. We, Christians rejoiced because we have found our Savior.

Jesus came to reveal God to us. Man always had a strong desire to see his creator. His disciple asked him, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long and yet you don't know me, Philip. He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9). Jesus is the son of God, the God incarnate, the God himself.

Jesus came to tell us that God loves us. Our God is not like other gods and deities, sitting on their thrones and watching what happens to us humans. He is with us in our sorrows, pains and sufferings and willing to help us. He cried with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother and brought him back to life. Jesus had compassion for the widow, who had lost her only son and raised him to life.

Recently, I read a book titled "Lord of the Valleys" by Florence Bulle. The author is a disabled woman. She wrote about the reality of the presence of Jesus in her life and how he helped her to tackle her problems. Many of us, who are reading this, can also witness the presence of Jesus in their own lives based on their experiences. Jesus came to die for us. God paid a heavy price in order to take us back. The only thing that remains for us to do is to believe in him and be saved and have eternal life. A life with God. We, Christians have every reason to rejoice, not only on Christmas Day but all the days of our lives because our savior, the Lord Jesus Christ is with us in this life and the life to come.

Merry Christmas to all! Sharon Beecham

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November 30

Matthew 8:5-11

"The Humble and Great Joined Together in the Kingdom Of God"

Our Lord the Christ expects all with faith to enter the Gates of Heaven, that God is the God of all, our brethren are from all. Faith is

what connects us all, no matter what culture, race, sex, body type or
..... .

Gerald Moody

Matthew 8:5-11

Matthew 8:5-11 (King James Version)

⁵And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him,

⁶And saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.

⁷And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him.

⁸The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.

⁹For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.

¹⁰When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.

¹¹And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.

- **My editorial extracts on John Gill's Exposition of Matthew 8:11**

And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west...

On occasion of the faith of the centurion, who was a Gentile, our Lord ... suggests, that what was seen in that man now, would be fulfilled in great numbers of them in a little time: that many of them from the several parts of the world, from the rising of the sun to the setting of it, from the four points of the heaven, east, west, north, and south, as

in and from the four corners of the earth, should come and believe in him;

and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.

signifying, that as the Gospel would be preached in a short time to all nations, many among them would believe in him, that the faith of Old and New Testament saints, Jews and Gentiles, is the same; their blessings the same, and so their eternal happiness; they have the same God and Father, the same Mediator and Redeemer, are actuated and influenced by the same Spirit, partake of the same grace, and shall share the same glory.

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December 1

Isaiah 11

The Branch from Jesse

- 1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD -
- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
- 4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
- 5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
- 6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,

- the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
- 7** The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
- 8** The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
- 9** They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.
- 10** In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the
peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be
glorious.

Have you ever watched a toddler? They are so unafraid of anything. Strangers, danger, nothing scares them. That can many times be scary for the adults who watch them. My heart has been in my throat on many occasions, let me tell you, but I try not to let my emotions show for fear that they would scare the child. And yet somehow, as we grow, we learn fear. Not the kind of fear that the scripture is talking about. Not the respect, but we learn terror. We learn that change is bad, and so when opportunities come we run. When we are faced with sickness or things we cannot control, we panic. When we are asked to stretch ourselves, we whine and ask God to pick someone else. The good news is that we aren't the first of God's children to do this, and we won't be the last.

I remember, as a child, just knowing things. When I was four I remember informing my pastor that God spoke every language. I remember him smiling at me with joy and patting me on the head and saying, yes, yes he does. He was the one pastor who understood a child's mind, and encouraged it. I moved many times and went to many different churches. Once in awhile things popped into my head, or a

question would burn in me, but I learned not to ask my Sunday School teacher or my pastor, because of reactions I had received. I remember one instance when I just had to ask for prayer for a young girl I heard read about in the *Inquirer*. I know, now, that the *Inquirer* isn't an actual fact filled paper, but as a young child the story I read really made me sad, and I felt that girl needed prayer! I was told that the story wasn't real, and that they wanted real prayer requests. For me, that was a real request. So I stopped sharing. I had one other pastor that encouraged me to think, and search, and question. But then I met some pastors and church people that shoved things at me and told me I wasn't a real Christian if I didn't believe or do what they wanted. I became confused.

Even today, many issues have come up in the conference, and neither my views nor my feelings are ever the popular view. My views are never judgmental, or mean, but not popular. So I don't talk about what I think because I have seen what happens to others when they do. And people, it isn't pretty.

Then I met a pastor of a small church. She held her services on Wednesday, so I started going. I listened to her teachings, and talked with her and I learned. I learned so much. And then she shared with me that it was she that was learning from me. She began to ask me to lead her in devotions. She asked me questions and listened to my answers. All the things that were popping into my head were now being listened to. They came flooding out of me from a source that could only be God. I discovered gifts I didn't know I had, and then I, again, got scared. What would my Methodist friends think? I shut down again. My friend encouraged me to keep learning, and to keep seeking others who believed like me. When I did, I discovered others that believed the way I did. I began to teach adults at Ashram. Friends who are pastors and bible teachers began asking me questions, and being a little shocked at how profound my answers were. And my friend kept encouraging, and I kept opening up, especially in my

devotions. I have been approached again and again after a devotion I wrote, and sometimes when I read them in the book, I can't believe it came out of me.

But now my friend is leaving, and a part of me is scared that without her encouragement, I will become quiet again. I know there will be others that will encourage me, but fear still rears its ugly head. I want to be as brave as a child.

Listen to our children. Many times they say things that we laugh at, but listen. They have things to say. They will pray for anything, no matter how silly we think it is. They have an understanding that is unique, and we need to feed that and let it grow within them. I often wonder where I would be if I had been encouraged more as a small child by the adults in the churches I went to while growing up. I wonder where many adults would be if they were encouraged as small children. Maybe that is why God will use a child. A child would never ask why, they would just say, "Yes Lord." May we all be like little children and say, "Yes Lord."

Berta Rickman

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December 2

Psalm 23:1-6

My earliest memory of this Psalm was on the night of September 11, 2001. Bush in his address to the nation was trying to comfort the American people. He closed his speech by saying that we could catch the people that did this. Then he quoted Psalms 23:4 "Though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil for you are with me."

Nine months later I encountered this Psalm again. On May 24, 2002 my great grandma Esther passed. I drove back to North Dakota for the funeral. My great grandma was 92 years old and a devoted Catholic. She attended church every Sunday and when she could no longer get to the church she'd stay home and watch Mass on TV. When Mass was on, the rest of the world didn't matter. She'd frequently

ignore the phone and door making comments like "don't people know that this is the Lord's time. "

Then everyone who could make it back met with the Father at the church she attended to plan the service. He presented us with the readings that she had picked out. He wanted one of the great grandkids to read this Psalm at the service. None of my cousins volunteered so I did. I told the Father that I would be crying my eyes out but that I would do it.

The day of the service arrived. It was a beautiful service. People told stories about what they remembered about her. I sat in the pew crying. Then it was my turn. The tears dried up as I walked to the lectern as poised as I could and confidently read these words:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

my whole life long.

As I returned to my pew the tears began to fall. On the drive back to California I was able to reflect on the words that I read and the events that had taken place. I believe that they were her last message for me, the lesson she wanted me to carry forward for the rest of my days. It's a Psalm that takes you out of this world and into a world of comfort and serenity.

Jerry Marie Transue

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December 3, 2009

Isaiah 26:1-6

Security lies in knowing that God's ways are trustworthy and His paths are right.

"Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal." v. 4

Verse four of today's reading especially reflects the theme that we can be secure in God. The theme for today reminds us that we can trust the way and the paths of God to be the right ones for us. It is comforting to know that whatever happens, God is eternal and has a plan for us. Unfortunately it often seems very difficult for us to hear God's voice or be sure of the path to which he is calling us. In times of hardship and struggle it can be very easy to question if we are accurately listening to God's voice. When we face hard times we generally don't have confidence that we were going God's way until we come to the peace or joy of the place on the other side of the struggle. Religion is often a paradoxical contrast to the ways of the world. Our faith tells us to trust in God and the strength found in the Lord above our own strength or abilities. During the busy rush of the secular and commercial holiday season, Advent calls us to take time to listen for the silence and wait on the message of the star. If we can capture the stillness of Advent and wait on what God brings, we may gain confidence in our ability to discern the way God urges us to go.

Prayer: Lord our lives are so busy and dominated by what others value. Help us to learn the patience of the wise men who traveled far on faith in a star. Help us to practice the humility of the shepherds and the love of your son, Jesus. Amen

Kristin Wintergerst

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December 4, 2009

Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14

Faith lights our way to a God who makes himself present in the flesh.

“One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.” v. 4

This whole psalm is full of beautiful imagery, but I was caught especially by the fourth verse from today’s reading. In considering the suggested verses from the psalm and the theme for the day I was struck by the role of the church as the house of the Lord today. Being a part of a congregation gives us the opportunity to experience a God present in flesh. Our church family becomes “Jesus with skin on” for us, making God more physically present in our lives through the actions of others. We as a congregation make such a God available to each other and to those we come in contact with outside our church. We are known for our welcoming spirit and we are becoming more known for our outreach as well. In these ways we make the beauty of the Lord visible for others.

Prayer: Lord, in this Christmas season help us to be your physical presence in the world to all those we come into contact with. May we welcome others to your family with the hospitality your son demonstrated. Amen.

Kristin Wintergerst

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December 5

Matthew 9:35, 10:1, 5-8

Freely you have received, freely give.

Matthew 9:35 - Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

10:1 - He called the twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness.

10:5-8 - ⁽⁵⁾ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁽⁶⁾ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁽⁷⁾ As you go, preach the message: "The kingdom of heaven is near." ⁽⁸⁾ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." (Life Application Bible)

Let us pray: Gracious and glorious God, everything I have is yours, for I have received all that I have as a blessing from you. Lord I ask that I be freed to give as freely to others. Amen.

I have had a pretty treacherous few years and yet I am still here with you. Many of the difficulties have passed and others are still with me. I'm blessed to have a wife that keeps me on track and counsels me regularly (more than I should require at my age).

The direction of my life at this point is to make a concerted effort to be a disciple of Jesus. Abiding by the "big 5" we have been hearing about for the last year. 1. Communal worship, 2. Reading of Holy Scripture, 3. Prayer, 4. Cluster group, 5. Acts of good work. The first three are pretty routine. The last two require some special attention.

I have been attending a group for several years and it has offered several layers of discipleship, some deep and spiritual, some light hearted sharing, often I'm the one being the student and on occasion being the disciple of Jesus offering support and sharing my life experiences. I am hopeful that others who are seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus will participate. I feel the call to ask others to come.

It is a difficult thing for me to hear God's calling for me in the future. Sometimes I feel like I'm petrified, unable to go forward or back, and not knowing which way I should go. Wanting to stop some things and afraid of the others I have chosen. What I know, is that all that I am is a gift from God, freely given. So to not respond with action and a focus on discipleship is to hoard God's gift for myself. I must share the good news of God's salvation and my walk with Jesus my Lord. God is so good to me; blessing me daily with a loving wife and family with three strong and healthy grandsons. Friends that will help when called and even that will still call on me even with my limitations.

Today, **as you go, preach the message: "The kingdom of heaven is near. 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."** Amen.

David Center

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December 6

Luke 3:2-3 (NRSV)

²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ...

The Word of God

Throughout the Bible, the Word of God comes to certain people who speak for God as prophets, kings, and to Moses in

the wilderness. It seems that this Word is not only the message of God's will, but somehow through the messenger incarnates the power of God on earth. Moses, kings, and the prophets were mighty men and women of God who moved Israel into new chapters of their corporate life together. Elijah spoke against the corruption of the kingdom with powerful signs and wonders. We all know about Moses' plagues upon Egypt ... and now the Word of God comes to John son of Zechariah.

And what is God's Word given by this prophet in the wilderness? Repent and you will have your sins forgiven. What?

No "Get ready for God is about to do something incredible to the Romans" or even "keep up your hope, for the Messiah is coming to save us all" ... not one word of the wrath of God visited upon the enemy. "Repent, be baptized, and your sins will be forgiven." God did something new starting with John.

The fire and brimstone were the past, this is the present, where God enters every human heart and makes people new from the inside out. It's easy to send the horrors of "Shock and Awe" on people, but it's much harder to change hearts and minds. "How silently, how silently this wondrous gift is given. How God imparts to human hearts the wonders of His heaven."

The Christmas season is where we once again perk up our ears to what God is doing. We listen through the shopping rush for the Spirit to speak to our hearts a Word of Grace. I pray that you will not look at the razzle dazzle of false gods and messiahs this season, but listen to the still small voice of God speaking to your heart, "Repent, and be forgiven."

Pastor Glenn Hoskins

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December 7

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah 35:5-6 (NRSV) ⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

Get Ready!

Have you ever seen the desert bloom? It is a remarkable sight! One day everything is brown, dusty, and seemingly lifeless. Then after a great rainstorm or snow, the desert explodes with color in grasses, flowers, and lichens covering the rocks and the ground! After living in Victorville for many years, I can attest to the beauty of the blooming desert.

That is what Isaiah is referring to when he talks about Israel and God's restoration of His people. Today is the day of dust, brown, and lifeless toil as slaves and exiles in the wilderness of Persia. But one day...one day God will restore Jerusalem, the Temple will be rebuilt, and our land given back to us. That will be the day of pools of water, reds and yellow flowers bursting forth in blossoms; life will come to us again!

Advent is a time of waiting ... sometimes waiting in the lifeless desert of suffering, separation, and pain. Sometimes we wait for a new tomorrow, a new economy, something to shake loose in our life so that we can breathe again. I pray that you will hear the hope that Isaiah offers ... one day God will reveal what God is doing in your life; one day restoration and new life will begin ... one day soon. The hope we lift up as a disciple of Jesus is that God *is* redeeming us, recreating us, and making all things new ... even resurrection and everlasting life. Keep the faith, lift up the hope, and always look to Jesus who is our Light in the darkness, and our water in the desert.

Pastor Glenn Hoskins

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December 8

Isaiah 40:5-9

**When you know God is with you, your world changes
for the better.**

(5)The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (6)The voice said, "Cry Out!" and he said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flowering of the field. (7)The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. (8)The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. (9) O Zion, you who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

I'm not sure I understand all that Isaiah has to say but I get that if people stay focused on God he will not let them down in good times and in bad times. He will be there with them to walk the road, whatever road that may be and to carry them when they need to be lifted up. This past year has been a pretty rough one for the Kline family; first Bowie with her stomach issues and ultimate gall bladder removal, then Mike with his degenerative hip disease and total hip replacement on the right side and then me with breast cancer, mastectomy and chemo treatments. When we were going through the majority of this I really did feel like Job in a lot of ways, in fact we made jokes about it in the nursery a lot. At least joking helped me get through some of the stress that was hanging around constantly. I am honestly surprised at how well we have held up against the constant bombardment in this household and I am surprised at how well my faith has stayed reasonably stable also. Don't get me wrong I have had my

moments of panic and pity parties especially in the middle of the night when I don't understand why us and why so much. I have always heard that God never gives you more than you can handle but at this point I really wish he didn't trust me so much!

I was talking to some friends on the internet breast cancer site that I have joined and believe me we all are able to help each other get by on bad days when the doldrums hit because someone on that site has already gone through what you are going through or you have been through what someone else is just finding out and we all help each other a lot by keeping our spirits up. Some are very religious and some are not at all but we all are there for each other when we need it. Anyway I was speaking to this one lady and she said when she can't sleep at night she has her conversations with God at that time. It keeps her focused and not so panicky and so I started having my conversations with God. They started at night when I couldn't sleep and they progressed to when I was lying down to go to sleep at night and now we have conversation during the day a lot too. My conversations started with the whys and help me understand this and eventually progressed to the thank yous for everything I have and not the things I don't have.

I have learned to be thankful for the things in my life that are good and kind like my family and how wonderful they are when it comes to sharing everything we have with each other, such as money from Bo when she gets her paychecks and spends them on groceries for everyone instead of buying something for herself. I am thankful for both of my boys who constantly check in to make sure we are doing okay; I know they would do anything they could do to help us. I am thankful that God allowed Mike's surgery to go so well and get him back on his feet so quickly; I call him my miracle child as he was healed so fast. I am thankful for the friends I have at church and they way they allow me to vent at them when I'm not dealing with my situation. They don't judge me for being upset and they get me back on track with God.

God uses them to be my listeners when I am down. There have been a special three people at church who have been by my side a lot, taking me places, talking to me when I'm down, and listening to my ideas for helping other people. They have been my special guardian angels and I will always appreciate them for being God's children. I am thankful for all the church members who brought food to the house when I didn't feel up to cooking. I am thankful for all the prayers coming from people from church and both Ashrams that I have attended and my mother's church. I feel like I get prayers from all over the country. I am thankful that most of my friends have stood by me and are still friends when some around me have given me up as a lost cause and won't speak to me anymore as though I were contagious all of a sudden or they don't know what to say to me. It hurts that there are those few who have deserted me but God has put ten new friends in my way for the ones who are no longer there.

I have learned to be thankful for small things and big things, for my home humble though it may be, food on the table, enough money to get the bills paid (it always shows up just when I think it won't), the fact that my chemo side effects aren't so hard to deal with, the fact that the chemo needles go in the first time without having to be poked and prodded until it makes me cry, the fact that the cancer was no where else in my body after the mastectomies, and the fact that God is always there for me when I need him in good times and in bad times. My life is better because God is with me and will never desert me even in my lowest of times; in fact he has carried me a lot lately and I AM THANKFUL MOST OF ALL FOR HIM.

Prayer; God Father, please allow us all to have conversations with you on a daily basis whether it is in the middle of the night when we can't sleep or during the day when things are buzzing too quickly around us. Allow us to make the time to tell you all the things we are thankful for and to count our blessings even in the

*dark times when we don't feel we have many. In Jesus name,
Amen.*

Carole Kline

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December 9

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

This passage was challenging for me. Right now I am in a place in life that is challenging for me. My career is difficult. While I am grateful to have a job in this economy, I am feeling burdened and anxious. It seems like more is wanted than I can give, even when I am giving it my best and spending more time on it than I want. Therefore, I am not in the mood to take up any more yokes or burdens ... no matter how easy and light they may be.

Yet Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." This must be true. So it is up to me and God's grace working in me to see the truth in it.

Here is what I know. There are moments of grace, many every day. The yoke is God's grace that shines in and through everything. All I have to do is take note and appreciate it.

Today, there was a beautiful pink sunrise. This weekend my husband, son and I took a hike to Jenks Lake. The fall colors were gorgeous and the lake serene as it reflected the colors and sky. When I take a walk in the morning, the sunlight on flowers and trees is translucent and mystical ... almost like God singing beauty into the day.

There is the beauty of people of faith. University United Methodist Church has so many people of deep faith. Their friendship serves as a guide and inspiration.

In this passage, God is saying, "Do not worry. Pay attention to Me. It will be all right. All is well. All will be well." The yoke is one of attention, gratitude, caring, love and gentle beauty. The yoke may even make my job easier as I trust God and trust it will all work out ... one way or another. The yoke of worry and stress that I so naturally take up is not helpful in any case. Meanwhile, there are beauty and love in the moments of every day. What a shame it would be to miss them!

The serenity prayer is a good one for today:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking as He did this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

Sharon Guiles

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December 10

Psalm 145:1, 9-13

I will exalt you, my God the King: I will praise your name for ever and ever. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O Lord; your saints will extol you. They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all men may know your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion

endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. Psalms 145:1, 9-13

The stated topic for this devotion was "This Advent share gifts that cannot be wrapped in paper and boxes." Reading the passage from Psalms 145 that goes with the topic made we think about how I offer (or don't!) God's kingdom to those I know. If we are members of His kingdom, then we can invite others to join us. In fact, we're called to do exactly that. Like many of you who are reading this, I get nervous when I think about making that kind of offer. I realize it is a gift that is not wrapped in paper and boxes, but how do I offer it? During this Advent season I'll pray about this and make an effort to be conscious in my offering. I think of Barbara Graham who always makes sure that we know the "reason for the season." Can I (we) do a better job at making it plain why we celebrate Christmas? Can I (we) be bold enough to include something about Christ in the cards and gifts I give to those who are not members of the church (You guys are easy!!). "The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made." This Advent I'll try to join my faithfulness to His. Want to join me?

Bob Denham

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December 11

Matthew 11:16-19

16 "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 17 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.' 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners.'" But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

Man, so many emotions. Society has a part in dictating what we are supposed to feel. If we are at a funeral, we are expected to cry.

But what if you are at a funeral and remember something about the person that is so funny that you can't be sad? It sucks when a loved one dies, and it's ok to say it. And it's also ok to remember that person and laugh yourself silly. For example, I miss Muriel Wells a lot. There is a twinge in my heart every time I come to church and do not see her, but, when I think of her antics during the time I knew her, I burst into joyous laughter. Both emotions are ok.

At Christmas, we are supposed to feel jolly and bright. What if Christmas has a tragic experience attached to it? Or what if family is so far away, it's just a lonely time for someone?

My least favorite, and biggest struggle I have, is being told when I should forgive. You can't expect someone to have forgiveness in their heart if they are not ready. We all have heard we need to forgive, but there are some hurts that are so unfathomable that forgiveness seems impossible. I have seen so many dig in their heels at that point. I, myself, have dug in my heels.

These are the times the masks come out. People will hide behind them so that they are deemed acceptable in society. But we as family members of God are called to accept each other where we are. When we do, and let God deal with the person's heart, the masks are stripped away safely. We need to give each other permission not to cry, not to laugh, not to forgive if their heart isn't at that place. When God works on us, we become authentic. When I was left to forgive in my own time, I did it fully and learned that the one I was angry with was also hurting, and together we allowed God to heal both of us. And that's the way it should be.

Prayer: Father help us let you work not only on the world, but especially on us. Amen.

Berta Rickman

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December 12

Matthew 17:9-13 (NRSV)

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." ¹⁰And the disciples asked him, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" ¹¹He replied, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; ¹²but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands." ¹³Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Get Ready!

Advent is traditionally a mini-Lent where the Church had a singular focus on preparing mind, heart, and spirit for the Second Coming of Jesus. Advent is a time of getting ready for Jesus. However, during the holidays we focus on the first Christmas with the decorations, the tree, the crèche, and the lights. Sometimes it can be confusing as to what exactly we are supposed to be focusing on, listening for, and doing during Advent.

The disciples of Jesus were just as confused as to what was going to happen with the restoration of Israel. For the most part only scribes could read and write in Jesus' day, so they were the ones that interpreted the Word of the Lord that said Elijah would return before the Messiah came to restore Israel.

However, if Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ (in Greek), then why did Elijah not come? Here is part of the kernel of the argument that Jews made to Christians in Matthew's day. Matthew and Jesus' answer is that Elijah did come, not in a blaze of fire from heaven, but in spirit through John the Baptist. Therefore, Jesus is the Messiah who came to restore Israel, but in a new way God provided for all humanity through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Here we are in the 21st century and in the Advent season wondering what the Second Coming of Jesus will be like? Will there be a blaze of fire from heaven, angels trumpeting their praise, and loved ones rising from the dead? What will the new heaven and earth be like? All of these questions have been asked for centuries. Countless books and movies have been created about the Advent of Jesus, and still we wonder and still we wait.

What are we to do? Listen to John the Baptist's words: "Prepare the Way of the Lord by repenting of your sins and being washed in the water of baptism." Get ready by coming to worship every Sunday this Advent season, participate in cluster group, pray, study the scripture, and do all the good you can for others. In these means of grace, we focus on Christ for whom we are getting ready to see one day. Are you ready?

Pastor Glenn Hoskins

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December 13, 2009

Please read Luke 3: 10-18

There are various charities and organizations to which we like to donate our money, time, and/or talents as we are able. Personally, I have not always been in a position financially to donate to others, but I have been able to spend time or share my talents in art or teaching in a way that was beneficial to those who needed help. In the back of my mind would be the Bible verse, "who so ever did it to the least of these has done it unto me." I would feel a sense of contribution and a hope that perhaps Jesus was smiling at me. Then there came the day that I needed help.

I was working at Montgomery Wards in San Bernardino as a detail clerk in their automotive department. I had little money, my weekly paycheck was meager, and I was trying to

support my household on it. About mid week, I had finished a busy day of paperwork and parts sorting and started for home at five o'clock in my silver 1963 Chevy Nova. The evening light was dusky, rush hour traffic had begun, and my thirty year old car was fraught with problems. My gas gauge read a quarter of a tank. "Good," I thought, "That will get me home. I'm off on Thursday, and I'll get paid on Friday and will put more gas in the tank." However, as I sat at the left turn light at Fourth Street and G, the car suddenly shuddered and died as though it was out of gas. I knew the engine was not the problem, so I wondered if the gas gauge was not working properly. Then the light turned green. In desperation and dismay, I got out of the car and began to try pushing it in a left turn and make it to the ARCO station one block south. The car was so heavy and I was really struggling with all of the strength I had to push it. It must have been obvious that I was having trouble, but nobody appeared to be coming to help me. My heart sank and I kept trying to push the car and turn the wheel, without power steering since the car had died, and complete the left turn. As the light changed to yellow and I felt even more urgency to move the car the rest of the way out of the intersection, I felt it suddenly lunge forward more easily. I glanced back and noticed to my great relief that a homeless man in his probably mid forties had come out of nowhere and had begun pushing the car. With his help, we made it down the street, around the bend, up the driveway and over to a gasoline pump. I told him that I was so very thankful that he had come to help me. I wished I could pay him, but I knew the three dollars I had would have to go into the gas tank instead. He didn't stay, though. Once we had made it to the gas pump, he just turned around with a wave good-bye, and headed north back up the street and disappeared around the bend. I knew he had little or nothing, but he was the one who came to help me when no one else

would. To this day, I wish that I could have had enough money to repay him for his generosity and compassion when I was the one in great need. I try to ease my regret by thinking that Jesus probably smiled at him that evening.

Years later, as I became able to contribute financially to charities and organizations, I remembered the man who had helped me. My guess was that he was headed north and over one street to the San Bernardino City Mission where hot meals and a Bible message were given to those who were homeless and in great need. I have been contributing to that mission regularly in the hope that somehow I can help him and others like him, too. Perhaps Jesus is smiling at us again.

With deep gratitude for His birth,

Cindy Rechelluul-Grossman

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December 14

Matthew 21:23-27

Scripture tells us that God sent John to baptize, and Jesus was sent to teach, preach and to save us from our sins by dying on the cross. Jesus did everything God had asked of him while He was here on earth. We have been given the opportunity to continue his work here on earth. We aren't all able to preach, or teach, but we are able to "Do what Jesus would do." We can behave in a way that demonstrates Jesus living in us. Being there for a friend in a time of need. Providing a meal for someone who, otherwise, would have none. Basically, stepping up and doing. In any of these we can see Jesus, continuing God's work here on earth.

I pray Lord, that I may continue to be your instrument here and to look for Jesus in the works and words of others and give thanks and praise for all. Amen.

God, thank you for helping me recognize Jesus in words and actions.

Rich Radford

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December 15

Matthew 21:28-32

May Your Christmas Begin Today

Once upon a time I was a child counting the days, longing for the dawning of Christmas Day. Lately I've been asking, "Again already? How can I ever get ready in time?" Jesus had a birthday, but our early church fathers had no idea when it was. December 25th was like any other day, maybe even better, for it marked the raucous festival to a pagan deity. Before converts became Christians they routinely attended such revelry, like everyone else there. But to continue following the custom would make a Christian an easy prey to temptation. The early church fathers set forth a forced choice in choosing December 25. If I do this, I cannot do that. I may behave like a Christian or a pagan. I cannot do both.

What if a pastor of a New Orleans church were to propose postponing Lenten Services to coincide with the Mardi Gras carnival? He wouldn't dare. Some pillar of his church surely would pull him aside to remind him, "If we follow the usual flow of events here, we can have it both ways. That's how we've always done it." The fearless pastor may reply, "Have you noticed how our traditional practice serves to 'have your cake and eat it too?'"

A psalmist prays, "Keep me from presumptuous sinning," lest I indulge myself and put my faith in jeopardy, **presuming** I can repent at my leisure. Shall I sow wild oats as if there were no harvest coming? Sort of like, "Lord save me, but not yet," as if God were withholding some good thing from me.

The father of two sons presented each of them with a forced choice. See Matthew 21:28. **A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go to work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not.'** Most parents sympathize with the father of the rebellious son. But this father was also his son's employer. How old is this son? Has he left home to build a life of his own?

To talk about a story is to move from the story as told to a level **outside** the story. Just as we recognize speakers and listeners within the story, we find speakers and listeners **outside** the story. As we read or hear the story today we do so from a level outside the story. This is literary analysis. Does it frighten you? It shouldn't. Doesn't it help to know that Jesus presents a parable? When I wrote my little book on the *Parables of Jesus*, I got so involved with interactions between a father and each of his two sons, together with the father's frustration at getting such poor result, that I almost forgot this excellent story was a parable. A parable is not just any old story. Try writing one sometime and you'll see what rare creativity parables require. Parables are terse and to the point. They call to mind everyone's everyday experience, bringing us into the story. Again, we are outside the story but the story comes into us. Read on and see if it isn't so.

Having been turned down by the first son, **the father went to the second (son) and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go.** Note how gracious the second son seems, as dutifully he agrees to work in the vineyard, but he didn't go. Did he dread opposing father to his face? Jesus cuts through diverting speculation. Jesus asks his listeners, **which of these two (sons) did the will of his father? They said the first.** In the face of the choice Jesus forced upon them, how could they say anything else? But in so saying they accused themselves. Jesus pulled the rug out from beneath them. They find themselves on the wrong side.

Reading the text centuries later, a few, secure in their assumptions, fail to grasp that the story includes them too. Historical analysis drives the point home as Jesus confronts the target audience before him, saying **I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.**

Parables are tailor-made for the sake of the Lord's target, in this case the scribes and the Pharisees. The few who heard him recognized themselves as the second son who told his father, "yes, Lord. I'll do as you ask" and then went on as approved sons, as if words alone were sufficient unto themselves without the follow through. Like moderns who act as if mouthing traditional beliefs about Christ were the same as believing in Christ. Doctrine, even correct doctrine, saves no one. Not our doing anyway. It's the Lord's miracle, not our achievement.

Let us consider the first son, the rebellious one whose instant reaction was to defy his father. "I'm not going to do it. You can't make me!" But a little while later he realizes how he's hurt his father, opposing him when his father reaches out, asking him to join him in completing the task at hand. Not an unreasonable request, and his father didn't push him. He gave him plenty of space. Willingly given service shows love and gratitude, a welcome gift any parent values above all else. The bond has been sealed.

When the Holy Spirit of Christ confronts you, and you recognize how far you've fallen short, you'll react as Isaiah did in the temple, **Woe is me, for I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and live in the midst of a people of unclean lips and mine eyes have seen the Lord of hosts.** Or as Jacob did when he fled from his home because of the outrageous way he'd treated his father and his brother. Awakening from his dream he said, **"The Lord is here and I didn't know it."** Or as Simon Peter did when the cock crowed, and the Lord

turned and looked upon Peter and Peter remembered how the Lord had warned him and he went out and wept bitterly. Or in Eden's garden as the Lord asks every Adam and every Eve, **Where are you?** As He has done with the tax collector and the prostitutes, the Heavenly Father of prodigal sons and daughters welcomes you home.

In his home synagogue at Nazareth Jesus unfolded the scroll and read from the prophet Isaiah, **The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he had anointed me to preach good news to the poor, and has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.** He made his intentions known, as he added; **today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.** This was not the sort of fulfillment they were looking for. They pushed Jesus toward a cliff, but he walked back through the midst of them. It was a harbinger of the cross to come. The greed of the powerful knows no limit and runs rough shod over the weak and helpless. They oppose God himself in the person of his Son, and persist in cruel exploitation rather than accept what God has intended for us all. Let us drop our pretensions, for the best foot forward is not enough. Beware of confusing reputation with character. We are no better than the socially disapproved, the deviants and criminals that plague our world. The Lord loves all his children, even the ones we don't like very much. Even those who assume they're a bit superior.

When we acknowledge who we are, and accept his acceptance of us, and reach out to the suffering, as our Lord has shown us, then we join the descendants of the first son in the parable of Jesus. We don't need to wait till Christmas for Christ to come. He has already come. Baby Jesus was born into this life that God may be present with us. Jesus told Nicodemus that being born from above, that is, of the Spirit, brings one into the community of God. It's something that God does for us. When it happens and our lives continue reaffirming it, Christ has come. We're in the midst of the Christmas season, and now

is a good time for us to open ourselves to the coming of the Lord into our lives.

Don Miller

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December 16

Luke 7:18-23

Neighbors

In the neighborhood I grew up in, I knew all the families that lived on my block. In the 1940's and 1950's, people stayed in their homes for a lifetime. Today is another story.

I currently live in a "senior" mobile home park. We are a melting pot of various nationalities and religious beliefs. We have a monthly catered/potluck dinner in which we meet and greet our neighbors.

At this time, we hear who is ill or needs help doing normal routine chores. We also discover the ones that are very quiet. They do not volunteer for anything and are available to assist ones that can no longer drive.

My mother always says, "do not judge a book by its cover." We are an enclosed park and we have the regular exercisers walking the perimeter of the park twice to do one mile. Very often they would encourage someone that is depressed to walk with them.

Yes, I see God in these people. I just have to take a step back sometimes and look at these grumpy and sometimes aloof neighbors as God's children.

Linda L. Smith

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FAMILY

"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac ... and Isaac the father of ... and ... and ... and ... Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ." Matthew 1:1-2a, 16

I always find the two listings of Jesus' ancestry to be very interesting in their intent. Matthew was writing to the Jews, so it was important that the line be traced through Joseph back to Abraham, signifying the beginning of the Hebrew nation. Luke wrote his gospel with the Gentiles in mind, so he traced the lineage of Jesus through Mary back to Adam, to emphasize that Jesus was the Savior of all people. It is also significant that both the lines include King David, which gives Jesus the legal or royal designation as well. The 2000 years of family listed in these 16 verses of genealogy were crammed with people who covered the spectrum of good and evil, heroes and ne'r-do-wells ... but each one had a part in bringing the Son of God into this world.

How important in your life is family? Who do you tell stories about when your family gathers for a holiday meal? Even the ones you have no memory of, or the ones who are merely names from your childhood, they all have played a part in who you are.

When Bob's mom died, we found her daily prayer list tucked under her Bible on the kitchen table. She prayed for every member of the family—her brothers and sisters, her kids and their spouses, the grandkids, great-grandkids—everyone! Not even divorce removed you from being included in Mom's daily prayers. Once a member, always a member.... With Mom's death, Bob took over that prayer list and several more generations have been added in the past 10 years. Some of these relatives we've never met, but every day their names are

being spoken and their lives lifted up for a blessing from the One who drew us all together as family.

Prayer: God of all people, thank you for ALL the family units that I have experienced over the years—drawn together through bloodlines or adoption, faith-based or work-centered, or simply a small group of people with a common passion. These comprise my "family" and I praise you for Your perfect plan. Help me fulfill my own role in bringing the Son of God into this world. Amen

Stephanie Denham

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December 18

Matthew 1:18-25

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about..."

While we consider the Christmas story anew this year, how do we find a refreshing message this year? When we are new to the Christian walk we often find excitement and joy in the events that lead to the birth of Jesus. Year after year the story is retold. This is still true today even after generations of change, translations from one language to another, traditions that have stayed with us and some that have gone away. Somehow the story enriches our soul, often with new meanings as we mature in Christ.

This passage looks at the roll of Jesus' "step father" Joseph and his choice to obey the commands from an angel he encountered in a dream. Perhaps we can relate to this role, found on the sidelines, supporting what is not your own flesh and blood, a mystery child that was conceived by God's Holy Spirit. And, if this was not difficult enough, Joseph was visited by an angel of God only after making the decision to divorce a soon to be wife quietly. Did you see this fact, Joseph had made up his mind to put an end to his involvement in the whole situation. As we read, if it were not for the divine intervention

of an angel and Joseph's change of heart, the "step father" would have left.

We are not told anything deeper about Joseph's feelings and not much more about his life. But we do know that he listened to the call to stay, to take Mary to be his wife, to help support and raise Jesus like his own son, to protect them during the years that followed Jesus' birth and certainly more than what is recorded. As for this passage, the final word is that Joseph "gave him the name of Jesus."

When we inherit events in life, how do we respond? Are we going to quietly divorce ourselves from the situation or will we find divine power and inspiration to accept the challenge? This year, let's be open to receive these events with a new heart and explore where God's Holy Spirit directs us. The journey ahead can be life changing in ways we never imagined!

Respectfully submitted,

Bert Roark

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December 19

Luke 1:5-7 (NRSV)

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

In God's Time

After Jackie and I were married, we decided in a short time that we would like to have children. For three years we tried to get pregnant, and then Sara blessed our lives. Many couples try for much longer without any children to show for it. Zechariah and Elizabeth tried for many years to have children to no avail, and in a patriarchal

society, Elizabeth carried the shame for not being a good enough wife. Thankfully, we don't think like that anymore in our country, but for many couples God seems to be absent from this part of their dreams. When will their miracle happen?

Perhaps you aren't fervently praying for children but for a job, or a house, or food on the table. And month after month goes by with no answer, no miracle, no blessing from God. Is God sleeping? Is God on vacation? Where is God when we are in desperate need? Some people answer these questions with the glib response of "Perhaps this isn't God's time yet." As if God is on some sort of different timetable as the rest of humanity and God has everything that will ever happen on videotape in heaven ... our lives haven't gotten to that point in the tape yet.

Where is God in the midst of great need? I don't have a simple answer because I'm not God. When I have desperate problems, I too question along with the rest of us. Nevertheless, I know by experience that God has never left my family or me. We struggled through our problems, and most of the time came out the other side. Maybe the Footsteps poem is right and Jesus carried us, but most of the time it seems that we were dragged out of the pit of despair and hopelessness.

You see, the question is not "Where is God?" but rather "Where is our trust and faith in God our Maker?" Life is full of heartbreaking tragedies that threaten to destroy our core belief in our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer who promises to never leave us or forsake us. In this Advent season, I pray as we wait for the coming of Christ symbolically in the Christmas story and in reality as we await His return that we will find hope. Hope is what we can never lose, or everything will be lost forever. Hope is what keeps us going even in the darkest pit. Hope is what God extends to you and me today.

Pastor Glenn Hoskins

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December 20

Isaiah 7:10-14

***What do you need from God this year?
Ask and have faith. You will be cared for.***

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test." Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." Isaiah 7:10-14

The prophet Isaiah writing nearly 600 years before the birth of Christ was able to see across the centuries and gave us an amazing accurate picture of the birth of the savior.

God has always used signs to get attention and deliver His message to the people. When I was in the college I had an English professor. She never opened her mouth to speak to the students whenever she wanted their attention. She always carried a pencil and she would just tap the pencil on the desk a couple of times. That's all. All 45 students would look in that direction and the professor would have eye contact with each one of them. Tapping on the desk was a sign to get attention. In the birth of Christ we have a sign from God.

But the very birth of Christ is a sign of God's power. It is supernatural. A virgin will give birth to a son. God became man. The birth of Christ is a miraculous one. God came as a man and dwelt amongst us.

Secondly Christ's birth is a sign of God's love towards us. He is called Immanuel, which means "God with us"

Thirdly it is a sign of God's faithfulness. God is always faithful to His words. Some of us have a tendency to read a Bible portion whenever we are in trouble or when we feel we have lost hope in life. Those are God's promises. If we have faith in Him those promises will be kept. My wife, Mary, has a routine habit. That is, whenever she leaves home she would go to our bedroom and take a drop of blessed anointed oil and put it on her forehead. She has faith in it. She told me numerous times how much God is with her.

Another thing I get from this portion is that Christ's birth is a gift from God. It is a personal gift for each one of us. Remember that the angels said, "I will bring good news of great joy to all people." Do we believe in it? Is this Christmas a time of joy and good news or misery and worry? Due to the commercialism connected with Christmas we naturally get worried. We forget the good news that is joy to the world.

Let me go back to the title. What do I need from God this year? Whatever I ask I must have faith in Him like my wife who has faith that the blessed anointed oil will protect her from all evils. I will ask that the University United Methodist Church will grow in spirit. I will ask that the church's efforts to fulfill the cluster ministry will be realized.

Prayer: Dear merciful God, I pray that this Christmas season will be a joyful season to all. I ask that you be with us because you are Immanuel. God Bless.

David Nesamony

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December 21

Psalm 33:2-21

Singing hymns of joy.

We all have our favorite hymn or hymns that we love to sing. We all make a joyful noise when we sing them, even if we can't carry a tune

in a bucket. God hears us and enjoys it, no matter what. We are all his children and we all have our gifts to sing to him.

But, do we make a joyful noise to God when we are not singing? Our actions are a beautiful hymn to others around us and to God. Are we living our lives in the ways our favorite hymn would have us claim? Do others see our faith and love of God in what we do every day?

This year as we have prepared and continue to prepare for the birthday of Jesus, may he come into our hearts anew. Allow yourself to be a "joyful noise" to God in every aspect of your life.

Liz Roark

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December 22

Luke 1:46-56

“Faith was manifested in a woman who saw blessings in unusual events.”

I volunteered for this devotion, because of the title. Sometimes, I think, God lights my path with what appears to be coincidences, but might be His guiding hand. In my case, the light appears only occasionally and I'm not always sure it's Him. But, this scripture is about Mary and for her God's angel appeared very clearly, early in life. The angel's appearance was definitely an unusual event. Israel hadn't seen much visible evidence of God's presence for the prior few hundred years, and they'd been hard years. Mary's pretty sure this angel spoke to her, but some confirmation would be nice. And, in this scripture, Elizabeth provides it: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

⁴⁶And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

- ⁴⁸for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.
⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers."
⁵⁶Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then
returned home.

The story of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth is only told by Luke. There is speculation about who Luke's source may have been. Maybe it was Mary herself. There's a tradition that Mary was with John at Ephesus and Luke may have visited them there. John, the only disciple who witnessed the crucifixion, was entrusted with Mary's care. Mary, whose soul had been pierced by what had happened to her son. What was her attitude after that, I wonder. The Lord's leading had become less clear. It would have been easy for her son's death to be followed by depression and discouragement. It doesn't seem as if the world's powers have been brought low. Followers of "the way" are just a little sect, subject to persecution. But maybe Mary was also a witness to the

resurrection, or believed those who were. So, she could still speak as she first did, soon after the angel first appeared.

Submitted by, Janice Moody

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December 23

Malachi 3:1-4 (NRSV)

¹See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Dad's Coming Home

As a kid, when my mother would say "Dad's coming home" I would tremble in my shoes. I would pick up the house, do all the chores I was supposed to get done, and be sitting doing my homework when my dad walked through the door. Why? It's a delightful thing to see my father, but at the same time a fearful thing if I was not doing what I was supposed to be doing.

That's what this passage in Malachi reminds me of when he talks about the messenger of the Lord coming to Jerusalem. "Joy to the World!" and at the same time "This is not going to be fun". The priests were in the Temple doing their jobs, but the prophet says that they are not doing them right in the eyes of God. Therefore, a reckoning, a

cleaning house is going to happen so that Israel will get on the right track again.

Jesus describes himself coming back like a thief in the night, a rich man who comes home early and finds his servants asleep, and at the end of these warnings Jesus says, "Keep awake!" But it's so easy to be lulled to sleep by the ebb and flow of coming to church, going into the world, coming to church, going into the world ... with no expectation of change.

I like the Advent season because it reminds you and me to wake up! Let's be about doing what God has called us to do! Summer is over, fall is gone, the New Year is upon us and many are eager to hear the gospel message of grace. Jesus is coming back soon and time is running out before he gets here ... will we be found faithful and growing or hopeless and declining?

Pastor Glenn Hoskins

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December 24

Psalm 89:1-4, 27-29

God's love for you is unbeatable and unending.

Have heroes and others you counted on broken their promises and let you down? Do unfairness, cruelty and chaos seem to have the upper hand in the world you know? Do you sometimes wonder if God is unreliable like all the rest?

Through the years, remember the disappointments: Buddy Holly's plane crashes; the Beatles break up. Visionary leaders are assassinated; politicians are exposed as pious frauds. Admired church leaders turn out to be thieves, wife beaters, adulterers and atheists. Friends and loved ones betray or abandon us. We suffer academic and financial

failure, robbery, slander, and broken relationships. Is there any promise we can believe?

Our Psalmist for today says that although people are unreliable, God can always be counted on. Psalm 89 is the very last Psalm in Book 3, so it is at a “seam”. The key Psalms were located at the “seams” between the 5 books of Psalms, so this was one of those very important key Psalms. It consists of an Introduction (vs. 1-4) that sums up the main points, followed by the Body in 3 parts—Part 1 (vs. 5-18), about God’s wonderful nature, Part 2 (vs. 19-37), about King David’s dynasty, which illustrates God’s nature, and Part 3 (vs. 38-52), about a crisis that calls into question everything previously said.

The Psalmist Ethan begins the first half of his Introduction (vs. 1-2) singing exuberant praise about how great God is. He is thrilled. He brags. He uses the language of passionate love songs—“I will sing ... forever”, “to all generations.” God is great because of his “Great Love”—love that is characterized by “Faithfulness”, which means it stands firm and lasts forever. God’s love is unbeatable and unending; it will never let you down.

The second part of the Introduction (vs. 3-4) recalls that God expressed his faithful love on earth by making and swearing a covenant with King David about his rule. David’s rule would become a powerful, persisting, ruling dynasty—“a line established forever”, “a throne made firm through all generations”. God’s power and his character of faithful love, coupled with his making a binding contract and ratifying it with an oath, make clear the limitless depth and duration of God’s commitment to this plan.

This covenant was so exciting because of the kind of king that David was—one who, like God, was committed to justice

and decency, who was humble and cared about his subjects, who listened to and responded to God. David was the ideal leader—charismatic, athletic, artistic and likeable. He was militarily and politically strong, thereby securing peace and prosperity.

Part 1 of the main body of this Psalm expands the first half of the Introduction. God is so great that he exceeds all others, even in the heavenly realm, where the heavenly beings in council praise and fear him. First are described his “wonders” (vs. 5-13). He is awesome and mighty, he created both the earth and the heavenly realm and rules over this creation and over the nations. Second is described his character (vs. 14-18). His rule is founded on righteousness and justice, love and faithfulness. His mighty power expresses his internal character, and at heart God is faithful— it is his nature.

Part 2 expands the second half of the Introduction. First it tells the story of God’s commitment to the founding and long-term preservation of David’s dynasty (vs. 19-26). Then in vs. 27-29 it powerfully makes the central conclusion: David is God’s favorite, the most exalted of all earth’s rulers. God will maintain his love to David forever; he will keep his contract with him—a permanent commitment, never to be broken or to fail; David’s dynasty will be established forever—it will rule “as long as the heavens endure.”

Part 2 concludes with the question, what if David’s successors are unfaithful to God? It answers, God will punish them but never take away his love, never violate the contract, never go back on his word and be unfaithful. He has sworn once for all time. If he had left room in the contract to back out of the deal, he would have been lying to David. No, God will ensure that David’s dynasty remains established and rules forever.

The Israelites clung to this assurance for hundreds of years, confident that David's dynasty would stay in power in Jerusalem, despite all threats of the expanding world empires. Then came the shattering fall of Jerusalem and exile. It was probably then Ethan wrote Part 3 of this Psalm, with its painful cry, "You have removed the covenant" (vs. 39) and "O Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?" (vs. 49) The Psalmist believes God is faithful, but emotionally feels God hasn't kept his promise, and intellectually sees a situation where it is impossible to imagine how God could now keep that promise. So he ends the Psalm admitting that there is a crisis that calls into question everything he just said, with no solution in sight.

But God acted and the Jews returned from exile. They again believed God's promise and were sustained by the hope that David's dynasty would rise again. In the days of Roman conquest many believed David's descendents would restore a powerful and just kingly rule. As people longed for God to send the ideal Davidic king, hopes were raised by the birth of each son, and then by the works and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who many came to proclaim as the descendent of David, the one anointed to be kingly ruler.

After hopes rose to a fever pitch, hopes were dashed by Jesus' rejection and cruel execution, as if in the presence of great goodness, evil has the final word. But then hope and confidence were resurrected as Jesus mysteriously reappeared, conquering the ultimate evil death. Now believers realized that the worst that nature and humanity could do could not frustrate the unstoppable, unchanging intent of God. Life and history were now full of amazing possibilities. Since God is more powerful than any other force, and since his goals for mankind are unchangeable and unbeatable, and since there was now proof that, through Jesus, God had kept his promise

and restored a David-like rule to the entire world, they realized that under his rule they could begin realizing the defeat of all faces of evil and the unfolding of all their God-given human potential. That is why, each Christmas, we Christians celebrate that God has kept this ancient promise by sending Jesus, the ideal son of David, to rule his people and establish God's great love forever.

It is good news that a rule like King David's is what God unwaveringly wants for our world. And it is good news that in every generation when disappointed people of faith are at low points, unable to see God's intended rule in their world and unable to see over the horizon where life will be better, God faithfully remains in relationship with them.

Because of Jesus, we can be as excited as the Psalmist to realize that the God who underlies all existence, who creates and rules with power so awesome that nothing can prevail against him, is also driven by an unchanging passion for justice and an unbeatable, never-ending love for us. As St. Paul said, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 12:31) If at Christmas God gave his son, he will certainly along with this great gift "graciously give us all things." (12:32) "Neither death nor life ... neither the present nor the future, nor any power ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (12:38, 39).

Tonight as we celebrate the birth of our David-like king, we can hear the distant sounds of praise echoing down through the ages from that advent night so long ago, "Glory to God in the highest!" As persons on whom God's favor rests, our hearts at peace with God and the future, let us join both the psalmist and angels with exuberant praise, "I will sing of the Lord's great love forever!"

David Bryson

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December 25

Isaiah 9:1-6 (NRSV)

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Merry Christmas?

By the time you are reading this ... you have made it through this book all the way through the season of Christmas, congratulations and job well done! For some of you this is a time of great joy, of family and friends gathering, a time of driving to houses far away and sharing presents and food.

However, for others in our congregation and our community ... Christmas is a time of gloom, depression, loneliness, and heartache. Maybe your spouse died around Christmas and you are struggling with their memory and all

of the stress of the holiday. Maybe you are alone as a single woman or man without family or friends to share some joy. Perhaps, you may be struggling to have children or your children have died tragically, so this time of Santa Claus and emphasis on kids is acutely sad. For those of our congregation and community who struggle through a blue Christmas every year, I want to tell you that you are not alone ... there is a God who walks with you through the valley. There is the Church who loves and cares for you very much, though sometimes we are so caught up in the magic of Christmas that we close our ears and eyes to you.

The scriptures for today are borne out of suffering, struggle and pain in the deep darkness of exile. The prophet Isaiah is saying, "Our lives may be in the garbage right now, but one day ... one day things will be better, a light will shine, all we have to do is keep hope alive, for that day approaches soon." There is something inspiring about lifting up the hope of the promises of God. Immanuel, God is with us, we are not alone!

So if you have a joyous Christmas on the mountaintop, praise God! Merry Christmas! However, if you have a blue Christmas, praise God! One day soon ... healing will come into your life, and I pray that day is today. Keep the hope alive!
Pastor Glenn Hoskins