



# IN EXCELSIS DEO

## ADVENT 2024

**Sunday, December 1**

**Read: Thessalonians 3:9-13**

As we transition from a season of giving thanks to a season of hope, we are mindful of the thanks we have given for our blessings and at the same time we look forward to the hope of new life in God. We know that God made the way for us as we attained the blessings for which we have just given thanks.

Were you more thankful for the “things” that God blessed you with, or the people that God put in your life? Hopefully, you spent Thanksgiving with your loved ones and will also spend Christmas with your loved ones and that will be the greatest blessing of the holiday season. Even if that weird uncle made some off-color jokes, or if your daughter burned the rolls, or if you are sure your siblings will get you some gift that you don’t really care for, the people in our family and Christian community are the greatest blessings we have. God put them in our lives as a blessing for us and has promised that he will make the way clear for us to be with them again. Just as our predecessors made that way for us, and we responded in faith, we are making that same way for those that will come after us.

We thank God for the paths that were made for us and we thank God that we can help make the same paths for the next generation of Christians. God has been faithful in making the way for us and we have hope that God’s providence will make the way for those to come. The road will rise to meet us; the wind will be at our back; the sun will shine upon us; the rain will fall softly on our fields until we meet again. And God will hold us all in the palm of his hand.

Jacob Best

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**Monday, December 2**

**Read: Mark 1:1-8**

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet. “**See I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice of one crying out in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.**” John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.” He proclaimed, “One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Preparing for Christmas is always a hectic, but an enjoyable time. Decorating the Christmas tree, putting lights on and around the house, placing decorations in the house, buying and wrapping gifts, and listening to the carols we play only once a year. We are preparing for a great event. Although Christmas comes each year it is always met with expectations. In the devotion today, we read where John the Baptist was preparing for the Advent (arrival of someone very special) of Jesus who would begin his ministry of love and forgiveness. As we begin our Advent journey, we are reminded that preparation is key. John’s voice cries out in the wilderness, calling us to prepare the way for the Lord. In this season of anticipation, we are invited to reflect on our own hearts and lives. Take time to reflect on the follow-

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ing questions as you prepare your Advent Journey.

**Questions for Reflection:**

What are the paths in your life that need straightening out to make room for Jesus?

What sins or habits do you need to confess and repent to prepare your heart for Christ's coming?

How can you make space for the Holy Spirit to work in your life this Advent season?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord,

As I begin this Advent journey, help me to prepare my heart and life for your coming. May my path be straight, and my spirit be open to your work. I confess my sins and ask for forgiveness. Baptize me with your Holy Spirit, that I may be filled with joy, hope, and love. Amen.

Pat Davis

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**Tuesday, December 3**

**Read: Psalm 131**

**Reflection:**

As we enter the Advent season, a time of anticipation and preparation, Psalm 131 offers us a model of humility, trust, and peace. In this brief yet profound passage, David speaks of a heart that has let go of pride and ambition, choosing instead to rest in God's presence with the simplicity and trust of a child.

During the holiday season, our lives often become overwhelmed with the busyness of buying gifts, attending gatherings, preparing for the arrival of family or guests, and hosting Christmas festivities. Amidst this whirlwind, we can also find ourselves burdened by the weight of the world's great problems—issues that are too complex or overwhelming for us to resolve on our own. Yet, David reminds us not to fret over these matters but to rest in the Lord's care, trusting that He is in control.

In a world often filled with noise, complexity, and challenges, this psalm invites us to quiet our souls and release the need to have all the answers. Like a weaned child who no longer frets or demands but simply rests in the loving care of its mother, we too are called to find contentment in God's presence. Advent is a time to set aside our striving, to release our need to solve every problem, and to embrace the peace that comes from trusting in God's timing and goodness.

As we light the Advent candles, each flame represents hope, peace, joy, and love—the same qualities that David embodies in this psalm. His message to Israel, and to us, is simple yet powerful: "Put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore." In this season of

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waiting, may we find our hope renewed as we rest in the quiet assurance that God is with us, Emmanuel.

**Prayer:**

Lord, in this Advent season, help us to quiet our hearts and minds, letting go of pride, worry, and the weight of the world's great problems. Teach us to trust in Your wisdom and to find contentment in Your presence, just as a child rests in the arms of its mother. May our hope be firmly placed in You, both now and forevermore. Amen.

**Questions for Contemplation:**

How can you cultivate a heart of humility and contentment during this Advent season? What steps can you take to quiet your soul, release your concerns, and place your hope fully in the Lord?

Katy Stark

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**Wednesday, December 4**

**Read: Isaiah 26:7-10**

When reading our bible, we always should remember that the people in that period had to deal with many problems unfamiliar to us. For example, in the Old Testament period, traveling across country was a very difficult problem. We can get into our cars and travel comfortably hundreds of miles away in a matter of hours. Those ancient people had to walk or ride an animal through places we would consider to be a wilderness. For them to have a clear, level, and unobstructed path to travel was rare. For the writer of Isaiah to say that “the way of the righteous was smooth” would resonate with his readers in ways with which we simply cannot identify.

Still, we get the message. The lives of the righteous are not free from problems and challenges, but they are able to face them with a faith and trust that God is always with them to guide and comfort. There is a longing in their hearts night and day to sense God’s presence and know His way.

Even though the wicked are shown the same grace, they choose their way and have none of God’s assurance of a “smooth” path. Their paths are through a spiritual wilderness.

Our prayers today should include gratitude for God’s presence and His path. They should include our requests for His help to walk in righteousness. And, we should pray that others will find His way as well.

Dr. Roger Sullivan

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**Thursday, December 5**

**Read: Isaiah 40:1-5**

A junior-high crush figuring in an Advent meditation? Well, sometimes.

When I was in ninth grade, a new family moved to town and joined our church. I met their son who was a year older than I, and who was studying to be a concert pianist. Up to that point I was mostly familiar with country music and hymns and I idolized people who were expert performers of those. But then I heard Dennis play the crashing chords of Chopin and Beethoven and I fell, hard. I was in love.

Dennis was not. But he stayed friendly and I lived with hope. Our church had a Hammond H electronic organ that Dennis knew how to play. When I expressed interest, he offered to teach me to play it. That meant sessions alone with Dennis? Sign me up. To the first lesson he brought his copy of Handel's Messiah. I had never heard it, but I was soon playing the first recitative, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people! Saith your God!"

As our lessons progressed, my crush remained unrequited, but Dennis sparked in me a love for the "Messiah." It uses many passages from the book of Isaiah, but that soaring promise of tender love, "Comfort ye my people, saith your God!" is still my favorite. I am grateful I became familiar with it at a young age.

Today's passage is from the "second part" of Isaiah that begins with chapter 40. The Jewish people have long been living in exile, away from home, away from a temple where they could worship their God. Then, unexpectedly, King Cyrus the Great is allowing the Jewish people to return home. A messenger is proclaiming "Comfort! There will be a straight highway on level

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ground" and "The glory of the Lord will be revealed!" Handel wrote some of his greatest music to go with these joyous promises.

We are addressing these verses during Advent because the gospel writers in Jesus' time saw these verses as foreshadowing John the Baptist as messenger and Jesus as the Messiah, the glory of the Lord.

Have comfort! Jesus is coming, saith your God!

Pat Parish

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**Friday, December 6**

**Read: Isaiah 40:6-11**

Advent is traditionally used by Christians as a time to prepare for the Nativity of Christ. The name comes from the Latin word “adventus” meaning coming or arrival. One of the first mentions of the coming of our Savior is found in the book of Isaiah 40: 6-11. It was written in the 8th century BCE, making the Advent period for the first coming of Christ about 800 years long. I can just imagine how large an Advent wreath with 800 candles on it would be.

The book of Isaiah is so significant that it is referenced in the book of Acts and all of the Gospels. Some religious scholars even call it the 5th Gospel. This particular book of the Bible has always given me comfort.

I love arts and crafts and Christmas crafts are my absolute favorite. It is one of my ways to help prepare for Jesus’ birthday. This year I plan on making comfort bags and giving them to people who can use a little comfort. Maybe you would like to do the same. You can use a small bag of any type, paper, fabric or burlap. Decorate it by using green felt or construction paper and cutting it to look like grass. You can also draw it on. Add it to the lower edge of your bag’s front. Draw or glue on an artificial poinsettia to the front and put the word comfort near the top edge of the bag. Inside include a printout of Isaiah 40: 6-11 as well as a copy of a playlist of songs based on Isaiah. Include three or four items your recipient might find comforting. These can be tailored for the age and likes of the recipient. They can include a snack or treat, stickers, a small toy, ornament, fluffy socks, a home baked treat or anything else, just use your imagination. The items can all be handmade or purchased. This is intended to be small gift from the

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heart. As you construct the bags reflect on what brings you comfort as you prepare for Christmas. You can end with the following prayer:

“Lord, show me the desert, the wasteland, within me, and let me trust that you will bring new life and build a path to you, within me.”

You can pick up an instruction sheet with everything already printed out for you.

Wendy Gilley

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**Saturday, December 7**

**Read: Luke 12:35-38**

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas season is decorating the tree. Why? Well, once the tree is up, it feels like a visual official start to the Christmas season. It's the first thing I like to do when preparing for the season. But what does the tree prepare for? The tree is decorated all season, WAITING for the presents to be placed under it and then opened on Christmas morning. The Christmas tree serves as a protector for all of the presents it collects until it is time for the presents to be unveiled on the long-awaited morning of Christmas day.

How do we prepare ourselves for the long-awaited gift of Jesus' birth on Christmas morning? We decorate and adorn ourselves by our devotion to Christ through service to others. But how can we serve and become more Christ-like as we wait? Think of ways you can spend time serving the church community, your neighborhood, the food bank, or even a toy drive.

In Luke 12:35-38, we are told to adorn ourselves for service and keep our light so that when our master makes His appearance, we are ready and waiting to serve.

How can you prepare to serve our master this Christmas season?

In what ways can you ensure that your heart is fixed with service as we enter the Christmas season?

What about during all of the family events when you are just absolutely ready for your presents? How can you serve those around you so that you are prepared to serve just as Christ would when He arrives?

No matter how you prepare for Christ's birth on Christmas morning, remember that we are always pre-

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paring for His return throughout the year. Find ways to serve not just during this Advent season when we emphasize service, but all year long.

Nicole Patton

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**Sunday, December 8**

**Read: Malachi 3:1-4**

I know we all have had “one of those days”, sometimes it seems like it turns into weeks, and more. August of 2016 was ‘the year’ to experience for our family. Returning home from the joyous occasion of celebrating our son’s wedding to the disbelief of evacuating our home of nearly thirty years. Leaving a home that had been the location of many milestone celebrations such as birthdays, seasonal family gatherings, parents 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, youth sleepovers, and most of all, the home where we felt safe and looked forward to many more years of family gatherings.

But from deep inside came the desire to move forward, to rebuild, to not look at loss, but to polish what was left, treasure our memories with greater intensity and move forward with love and hope. We could see the light. The Lord had blessed us with the hope, peace, love and joy in the coming of enormous support from our family and friends.

Our cup truly runs over as we celebrate the arrival of Jesus and prepare for the coming of the light that God brings to us.

We pray that this advent season is one of renewed hope, health, and joy for all.

Debbie and Dave Hurlbert

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**Monday, December 9**

**Read: Luke 1:18-20**

Looking back on my near 75 years, it's easy to see so many of them have been spent waiting. That's what life is, for the most part. We wait to grow up, find the love of our life, have children and, that most prized blessing of all, have grandchildren.

One of the first things I'll never forget waiting for anxiously was as a young teen. It was 1965 and The Beatles were coming to Houston. My best friend and I were huge fans. We lived and breathed "the Fab Four." Early that year, her dad asked if we'd like to go. It was a dream come true, but there was one big hurdle, my very protective mom. I'd never even spent the night at a sleepover. She always said, "You have a bed, and you belong in it." It was the happiest day when she gave her permission.

Then came the wait. With each 24 hours, I marked off yet another day on my calendar.

Sure enough on August 18, my girlfriend's family pulled up in their sedan to whisk me away. And just as her dad had promised, we were going to what would be an unforgettable concert.

But that's not always the way life is. There are often days, weeks, months and years that pass on our calendars without God answering our prayers. We wait, like Zechariah and his wife, and we try to be patient. As time passes, it gets harder. Here's when faith comes in. Zechariah's had begun to wane. When the angel told him he'd finally have a son, he doubted, partly because of his and his wife's advanced ages. While God still granted him the blessing, Zechariah was struck dumb for nine months.



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We all know what Zechariah should have said at the angel's news -- a hearty "Thanks to God the wait is over." That's a lesson for us all. Praise God for everything he does for us, no matter when.

Madelyn Lamb

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**Tuesday December 10**

**Read: Isaiah 40:27-31**

I just read this morning about the danger in not giving ourselves permission to rest. We always have to be busy being "productive". During this time of the year, this sacred time of the year, we sometimes find ourselves busier than is spiritually, physically or emotionally healthy.

The writer of Isaiah seems to be reminding us of God's nature in relationship to rest and waiting. God always sees and meets us where we are on our journey. We are never hidden from his vision. His power and strength are often passed on to us, however, through times of rest and reflection. We can move forward in and through the difficult times of life only because of His strength found when we rest and wait on Him to direct and strengthen us. God's strength never fails. He never becomes weary in being present for his children.

The challenge for us during the Advent season and throughout the year is knowing when to rest and wait. Waiting is difficult for me. Fortunately, I have individuals in my life who will tell me when I need to say no and when I need to be still. Sometimes I listen to them and am the better for having done so. I have learned that a quiet day at home reading, resting, or catching up on the regular chores of life revives my spirit and gives me energy for the difficult days.

So, this year, say no when your schedule is too full for one more event or activity. Say yes to reading that book on your shelf or listening to great music. Say no to spending beyond your budget. Say yes to quietly giving to a favorite charity or a family who needs help. Say no to activities that do not bring significant meaning to your

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life. Say yes to an activity that brings you closer together as a family or nourishes your soul. We all have the same number of hours in a day. It's the way we choose to spend those hours that makes the difference.

Say yes to waiting on God.....You never know what may happen!

Rhonda Lewis

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**Wednesday, December 11**

**Read: Luke 1:5-17**

In this passage, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the temple and tells Zechariah that he will be a father in his old age. Zechariah and Elizabeth were an elderly, devout Jewish couple. Zechariah was a well-educated priest, and Elizabeth was descended from Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were models of righteousness before God, but they were also barren. At this time, barrenness was viewed as a rebuke from God. There are clear parallels here of Abraham and Sarah's story: another devoted, barren couple, who also heard the unbelievable news that they would have a child who would usher in a new promise from God. As an educated priest, Zechariah would have known the Old Testament passages about Abraham and Sarah. Zechariah also knew the passages from Isaiah that promised a Messiah. Imagine Zechariah hearing that his son would be John the Baptist, the one to prepare the way for Christ! Within the backdrop of Zechariah in the temple, burning incense to God as a holy tradition, the angel brings a promise that God is doing a new thing. A promise that is generations old will now be fulfilled, and this promise will change the future of humankind.

How can this passage prepare our hearts for Christmas as we welcome the Christ child? God is faithful yesterday and today in such profound ways that we can barely imagine. The angel tells Zechariah that God has heard his prayers. Zechariah and Elizabeth had most likely given up hope decades earlier that they would have a child, let alone a child who would lead people to the Messiah. But God makes a way where it seems impossible to us. God keeps creating and mak-

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ing new beginnings in our own lives and in our relationships. Let us come to the manger in stillness and in awe, thankful for the transformative, mysterious love of God that can still surprise and change us.

Stephanie Ezell

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**Thursday, December 12**

**Read: Luke 1:21-25**

The angel Gabriel had been ‘busy’ delivering messages ... Prior to the verses we read here, Zechariah had been ‘on duty’ in the temple praying to God, specifically, praying for a son, when the angel Gabriel appeared stating “your prayer has been heard, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will call him John.” However, most likely due to he and his wife being of an ‘older age’, doubt clouded Zechariah’s belief of the angel’s message. As a result of his doubt, the angel made Zechariah mute – that is, until the day of his son’s birth. The people waiting for Zechariah to exit the sanctuary were the first to experience his muteness yet somehow, those people understood that, while Zechariah had been in the church, he had seen something special, something great, something unexpected – a vision! We read in the verses that the wife, Elizabeth, did indeed conceive and give birth to a son (John). Although disgraced during her time of pregnancy, Elizabeth knew in her heart that this birth was a gift from God and, her belief and understanding of this gift, removed any disgrace she held in her heart. Contrary to Zechariah’s doubt, Elizabeth had none. The message of Gabriel to Zechariah was “your prayer has been heard ...” and the message which Gabriel will extend next will be to Mary and Joseph ... “you have found favor with God ...” From our Biblical scriptures we all know the name of the son which Mary bore – something special, something great, something unexpected! Sometimes we all need to remove doubt from our hearts and believe in the surprise of the unexpected.

Dr. Lori Bade

**Friday, December 13**

**Read: Romans 8:18-25**

Paul writes from personal experiences of suffering. Besides all the dangers, toils and hardships he faced during his ministry, he had a physical condition he describes as “a thorn in his side”.

Several months ago, I was told by my cardiologist that my echogram showed that I have another leaking heart valve, and I need to have a procedure called TVAR (transcatheter Aortic Valve Replacement). I reluctantly proceeded to have the preliminary tests in preparation for surgery scheduled for June 15, 2024. However, I was warned that my insurance company could possibly deny paying for the expensive procedure. Sure enough, surgery was denied, and appeals began.

Four months have passed, and another surgery date is scheduled for mid-January. Will I be denied again? The anxiety and distress of waiting would be unbearable if not for the hope Paul described in these scriptures. Should complications during surgery or complications from no surgery take my life? All the waiting and anxiety give way to the joy of promised salvation. “We sorrow and we suffer but not as those who have no hope”. Romans 8:18– says “Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory He will give us later.

The message we receive in Isaiah 60:20 is “When the time is right, I the Lord, will make it happen. Sleep in peace tonight. For I am with you through this.”

Betty Lou Nunneley

**Saturday, December 14**

**Read: Galatians 5:2-6– The Message**

I suspect you would never intend this, but this is what happens. When you attempt to live by your own religious plans and projects, you are cut off from Christ, you fall out of grace. Meanwhile we expectantly wait for a satisfying relationship with the Spirit. For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love.

By the Grace of God we have made it through another year (well almost, still a couple of weeks left.) We’ve made it not because of our own devices or selfish intentions, but because God has brought us through another contentious year.

Think about the last 4 years for a moment... there have been personal struggles, church struggles, struggles in our city, our state and definitely within our Nation. Remember the Covid days, the anxiety and the fear we had? Maybe that time wasn’t all bad... people walking/riding bikes in the neighborhoods, kids playing in the yard on a rope swing, and parents sitting in the yard having a cold beverage, playing with the kids and finally meeting their neighbors in the community... wait a minute, maybe that was just our house?

Some things we had to let go of for a while, the 8-5 work days, morning and afternoon commutes, meeting as a community of faith, some of our religious and family traditions. To think how miserable we thought we were then?

Perhaps, during this time, perhaps we reconnected to some things that we were missing, perhaps we realized what it meant to miss some things we were so

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connected to. Were the examples of love more prevalent then, than the last couple of years?

During Advent, we should be mindful of God's grace and love for his children. Without grace, where would be? Without love, who would we be? This Advent glorify God for the grace and love so freely given to us.

Bobby Rayburn

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**Sunday, December 15**

**Read: Zephaniah 3:14-20**

Christmas should be a time of joy, right? It should be about celebrating the birth of the Christ child. But the reality is that our world is filled with fear and anxiety, and many people are just not experiencing the "true joy" of the season. There are worries about the economy, inflation, wars and conflicts around the world, homelessness, and the threat of attacks upon our country by our enemies. And additionally, some people are facing personal issues of family problems, serious illness, loss of job, financial stress or other overwhelming issues. Add to that the stress of the holidays, such as shopping, gift wrapping, decorating, family visits, cooking, and getting ready for and attending parties. It's a wonder any of us can feel any joy at all during this time!

So how do we celebrate the season in the midst of all of our problems?

A lot of people associate "joy" with "happiness." We tend to believe that we are "joyful" when we are happy. When we are anxious and afraid, it is very hard for us to be joyful. But we shouldn't measure our joy by our circumstances. Instead, as Christians we should be joyful *in spite* of our circumstances. God doesn't promise us that our lives will always be a bed of roses. We will have our challenges, as well as our successes. But God did promise us that He will always be with us, no matter what happens. The key to true "joy" is in how we handle our negative circumstances.

During this time of Advent, there are two focal points for our joy. First, we should be joyful because of the *past*. We look back to when God sent His Son to

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be born on Christmas. God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to be with us, to teach us about His love, and to be sacrificed for our sins so that we can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. One of our popular Christmas carols, ***Hark, the Herald Angels Sing***, illustrates Jesus' sacrifice for us with the words "*God and Sinners reconciled.*"

Second, we should be joyful because of the *future*. Yes, we are very aware of the presence of evil in our world today, and the fact that there will always be evil, no matter what we do. But we can rejoice because of God's promise that He will return to us. His Kingdom will come, He will triumph over evil, and we will live with Him in peace and joy forever!

Because of the *past* and the *future*, we can joyfully live in the uncertainty of the present between the birth of Jesus and the coming of our Lord again.

We can celebrate Advent and praise God not ***because*** of our circumstances, but ***in spite*** of them! As Christians, we can be joyful because our situation here on Earth is temporary. When our Lord returns, we will no longer be a suffering people. We will be singing and dancing joyfully in the presence of God!

Janelle Teekel

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**Monday, December 16**

**Read: Luke 1:26-33**

God wants me to do what?!

Can you just imagine? You are, or you have, a girl between 12 and 16 years old. This girl was born into a family of faith that worshipped God and had faith in God herself. I could be wrong, but I would imagine that most, not all, of our church family also grew up in a home that worshipped God. I did, and I have faith in God, but I still would have been very bewildered and quite upset if an angel appeared to me and told me I would have a baby even though I was a virgin! Even though it meant I was highly favored by God, I would have still been in quite a tizzy wondering how to tell my parents and how those parents would react. I sometimes wonder if Mary didn't also have some panicky moments – these verses tell us she was greatly troubled at Gabriel's words. And she was troubled **BEFORE** he told her about the conceiving and having a baby thing!

We know the outcome without reading ahead in the chapter. We know she had an unexpected visit from an angel and was troubled at his words, but she had faith in God and accepted the situation Gabriel described.

I'd also venture to say that none of us has had a task that was as complex as the one Mary was given. But none of us needs to do such a thing quite as complex – God already sent his Son. We do need, however, to accept the tasks that God sends our way to demonstrate our faith and trust in God.

Susan Bujol

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**Tuesday, December 17**

**Read: Job 33:29-33**

Think back to a time where you experienced stress, condemnation, anger, or fear. Think back to a time when you experienced pain. Think back to a time when you felt alone.

Everyone has endured these emotions. Hardships like these are a part of life! And while it may be hard to get through those times, it is important to remember that the Lord has a plan.

Job 33 reminds us that God communicates with us in many ways. Affliction is one of them. The troubles we face on a daily basis can serve as a reminder to trust in God. He knows what he is doing; he is testing our faith.

These struggles may not always come from God, but they can always bring us closer to him. Over the past few months, I have struggled with self-image and confidence. I often think that I'm not pretty enough, smart enough, talented enough, or good enough. I will beat myself up if I'm not perfect. I still do this on a regular basis, but not as severely as I did. This is because I turned to God to help. I started completing weekly devotionals that taught me to see myself through his image, trust in his plan, ask for and accept forgiveness, and forgive myself. I started to pray more and remember to include him in all aspects of my life, not just at church. My personal struggles helped to improve my relationship with God.

Next time you feel stressed, condemned, angry, scared, hurt, or alone- pray! Use those feelings as motivation. Pray for them! Ask questions, ask for understanding, ask for forgiveness. If you don't know what to say, wait for a sign to tell you that it's ok. He will show

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you one with time. Use your hardship to drive you to become closer to the Lord!

Ila Best

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**Wednesday, December 18**

**Read: 1 Samuel 3:1-0**

The story of Samuel is one of my favorites. So much so, that when we collaborated with a community group in Slovakia to design an early childhood education center for Roma children, I suggested naming it The Samuel Center.

One detail I always strive to understand more deeply from this passage is that, while Eli's sight is failing, he is the one who sees most clearly what young Samuel is experiencing. The one who cannot see and doesn't hear God's voice, is nevertheless the one who realizes that it is God calling Samuel. Samuel -- blessed with youth and potential -- is ironically the one at risk of missing the divine moment.

At this stage of my life, I resonate more with Eli than with Samuel. I have already seen the glory of God in profound ways. The founding and continuation of The Samuel Center, which I mentioned earlier, is one such example. Another is being with thousands of believers at an outdoor pavilion in Nigeria as we celebrated Jesus, witnessing God's glory during worship among diverse cultures. Or hearing Broadmoor's choir lift the spirits of the entire congregation with an anthem and handbells.

Samuel needed Eli's guidance to fully understand God's call. Eli and Samuel together comprehended what God was doing, each limited in different ways but enriched by one another. The young and the old, the experienced and the novice, encountered God's glory together in community.

Today, consider those in your community: the children who speak candidly during Sunday's children's

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sermon and the saints whose quiet wisdom comes from decades of walking with Jesus. By living in community together in God's presence, how can you experience God's glory?

Shane McNary, GRF Coordinator



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**Thursday, December 19**

**Read: 1 Samuel 3:11-18**

I think I must've read this scripture ten times in an attempt to find that illuminating, warm, soul-cleansing feeling that often accompanies reading the Bible. Reading this passage, I never felt any of that. Instead, it was a sobering reminder of the grim reality of the toll of sin (something I often tend to avoid reading or even thinking about). However, about the ninth time I read it, I found something new: immense gratitude.

At first, this passage from 1 Samuel made me extremely uncomfortable. It wasn't about divine forgiveness, clean slates, being born again, or the glories of the resurrection which are the cornerstone of Jesus' Gospel and the foundation of Christianity. This passage is about God deeming a sin so severe that it can never "be atoned by sacrifice or offering."

No atonement possible for sin... that is possibly the most terrifying concept that I could imagine. Yet, that is the daily reality for the most people in our world, about 70% of the population.

I cannot imagine living without knowing Jesus, without grace, without forgiveness. I can only feel immense gratitude that I was raised in a Christian family, wherein forgiveness and grace were taught to me from the very beginning. I cannot remember a time in my life where I did not know the good news!

As Christmas approaches, I am reminded that it is not an ordinary day. It is not a day about presents, food, or fun. It is the day God gave humanity its greatest treasure. This is the day in which God loved the world so much, that "He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." This is the day that divine for-

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giveness came into our world to save us all. Isn't that something worth sharing?

Ask yourself, when was the last time you shared this good news with a friend, a neighbor, a coworker? There is no better time to share this great news with those around you! Go, tell it on the mountain over the hills, and everywhere that Jesus Christ is born!

-Kyle Melton

**Friday, December 20**

**Read: Mark 9:2-8**

### **THE TRANSFIGURATION**

Advent is a time of great anticipation. We are looking forward to something important: the celebration of the birth of the Christchild. The Jewish faithful in the first century were anticipating this event as foretold by the prophets. However, the appearance of the Angel to the shepherds was a mystery to them, but they readily accepted the message that the Savior was born that night, and they rejoiced with the heavenly host. (Luke 2:8-14).

At the transfiguration of Christ the three disciples were faced with another event cloaked in mystery. When Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus to the top of the mountain to pray they were suddenly confronted with the glorified form of Jesus. They had only known Jesus in his human form, but now they saw him transfigured into his glorified form and accompanied by Moses and Elijah. Just as the appearance of the Angel and the heavenly host had frightened the shepherds at his birth, the sudden appearance of the radiant Jesus in dazzling white clothing and in the presence of the two major prophets of old, frightened the three disciples. Even Peter, who was rarely at a loss for words, is described as so frightened that “he did not know what to say.” Then the voice of God came from the cloud, identified Jesus as his son, and ordered the disciples to “listen to him.” In his glorified form they had seen a preview of Jesus’ coming glory and enthronement as “the King of Kings.”

As we anticipate his birth we should remember his coming glory as announced by God himself to the three disciples as they gazed upon his glorified form.

The mystery of the transfiguration gives to us assurance of his coming diety. What greater gift could we possibly receive as we celebrate his birth this Christmas.

Chuck Morgan

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**Saturday, December 21**

**Read: John 10:1-6**

Jesus is our protector. He keeps us safe until God comes for us. People who try to sneak in are up to no good. The only way to get into the “pen” (the sheep pen from the store) is through Jesus or God so the only way to get to heaven is through them. If you praise God you will be able to get to heaven. The pen is God’s love, where we are protected in Jesus’s embrace. When evils of the world try to attack Jesus’s love keeps us safe from evils no matter what form they take. Jesus keeps us safe but God controls the world. We are safe from the evils of the world because of God. God will always protect us from evil even when evil strikes back. God protects us from people who will do us harm. When Satan tries to harm us God is here to protect us. We need to not strike back because God does it for us. When God comes for us we follow because we know his voice. When following God we know we are safe because God is too powerful, he wins every battle. We know that God will always win in the end.

JB Best, Quinn Duvall, Addie Foster, Yazmin Williams

Children’s Sunday School Class

Supervised by : Katie Gilley and Sherry Patton

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**Sunday, December 22**

**Read: Luke 1:39-45**

Mary learns from the angel that she will give birth to the Son of God and decides to travel to see Elizabeth, the one person who might understand what she is dealing with. Elizabeth is also miraculously pregnant. When Elizabeth saw young Mary, her son John immediately leaped in her womb. She was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out, “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*” Elizabeth not only prophesies, but blesses. Mary was seeking someone to accept her and love her.

When God created Adam and Eve, he immediately blessed them. God created us to bless us. To love us. He wanted a relationship with us built on love and filled with grace and mercy. With everything going on in our world, we sometimes forget that we are blessed by God. Jesus was born into this broken world to remind us of God’s desire to bless us. As he was born to bless us, he also died to bless us. His whole mission was to bless the world, and it is our purpose and mission to continue his work and bless others. When Elizabeth welcomed Mary, she practiced the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus showed and that we should also show others. In this we see that Elizabeth’s blessing, for herself, for Mary, and for anyone who hears God’s promise and believes it, will be blessed. Just open the door, offer a blessing and let God do the rest.

Pam Morgan

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**Monday, December 23**

**Read: Luke 1:38**

These are two simple, and yet powerful, sentences - 'I am the Lord's servant' and 'May your word be fulfilled'. Mary acted on her faith in the Lord. She did not ask questions or ask for explanations or request a delay. She simply said "Yes, Lord, thine will be done". Her trust in and commitment to the Lord's will changed humanity. Our trust in and commitment to the Lord might not change humanity, but what changes might come about if we have more trust in and commitment to the Lord's will?

Dr. Carol Wicks

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**Tuesday, December 24**

**Read: Hebrews 10:5-10**

Christians from all denominations celebrate Advent in different ways but all focus on the anticipation of waiting for the arrival of Jesus.

The word that stands out to me in these verses is sacrifice. Jesus came to earth to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings were required by law before Jesus. We are made holy through the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was the child of a heavenly Father, so He broke the genetic cycle of sin before He was born. In the Old Testament a sacrificial lamb had to be without blemish (birth defect) or spot (something picked up along the way). When Christ came to earth, He was doing the will of God in becoming the sacrifice for sin.

Florence Davis

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**Wednesday, December 25**

**Read: Malachi 5:2-5**

**Already. Not yet.**

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.  
Micah 5:2

The prophet Micah delivered his messages in a time of chaos and war. The northern kingdom, Israel, had been sacked by the power army of Assyria, and Judah would get the same treatment just over a century later. Writing about the conditions in his own world, he promised there would come a day when a shepherd-king would arise out of Bethlehem, one that would deliver peace. The peace he had in mind included calming the chaos and war in his world. About 700 years later, Christians re-read Micah's prophecy and understood it to have been fulfilled by Jesus. Of course, they would have to change some of Micah's expectations, for chaos and war are still alive and well.

Nevertheless, this is the hope we seek each and every Christmas, for one to calm the chaos and fears, to end the wars, to heal divisions, and to restore our faith. In seminary, we spoke about living in the "already/not yet." That is, Jesus has begun healing, but a healed world is not yet. Jesus was prophesied to calm the chaos and end the wars – some have been, but others not yet. Jesus preached, "Blessed are the poor;" but the

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eradication of poverty is not yet. This is why we keep celebrating Christmas, and then Easter, and then Christmas: because while we know it has happened, there is a real sense that fulfillment is not yet. Jesus did it . . . Jesus will do it. You see? It's the present we need help with.

And so, we will do this all over again next year, until the past and future meet in the present. That is the hope we raised each time we say or sing on this day, "Merry Christmas. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all."

Dr. Leonard Ezell

## Reflections

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