



ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο

Word Made Flesh

ADVENT 2021

Word Made Flesh

A gentle stirring in the night, deep within the maiden's womb.

An overshadowing.

In a world unseen by mortal eyes, a knitting together:

Bone, sinews, eternal Spirit.

That which was from the beginning, eternally begotten, timeless...

now conceived.

Supernatural hand withdrawn; nature accommodates.

Cells divide and divide again.

Blastocyst becomes embryo and embryo a fetus. A quickening.

Messiah, cradled within the holy virgin.

Day gives way to day, week to week. A young soul magnifies the

Lord and rejoices in God her Savior. He who created all things,

who fills the universe...grows.

Fateful day approaches.

A decree, a census, a journey to ancestral lands. The allotment of

Judah, Bethlehem Ephrathah—"House of bread." Home of kings.

It begins. Birth pangs, fear, shrieks in the night.

Shepherds tend their flocks. Angelic choirs assemble.

Stillness—a quiet before the storm shattered by an infant's cry.

Life and immortality.

A light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Jesus, son of Mary. Word made flesh.

WHAT IS ADVENT?

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *advenio*, “to come to.” It is a period of great anticipation—a time of preparation for the joyful celebration of Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem. In Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25. It is thought that the original intent behind four weeks of preparation for Christ’s birth was to symbolize the four ways in which Jesus enters our world: first in the incarnation at Bethlehem, second at his arrival in the hearts of newborn believers, third at his death and resurrection, and fourth and finally at his second Advent, when he returns to consummate human history.

Advent has been celebrated by Christ-followers for many centuries, although today it is mostly acknowledged—particularly within the Protestant tradition—with blank stares. In place of a season of hopeful expectation, preparation, and waiting, many have substituted shopping, busyness, parties, and materialism. From a season of hope we now have a season of loneliness, poor stewardship, and the highest suicide rates in the calendar year. Not all things change for the better over time.

FEASTING AND FASTING

In days gone by Advent was known as a “little Lent.” As such, Advent is best marked by setting aside time for prayer, fasting as the Lord leads, and preparing our hearts for the day in which we will celebrate the greatest moment in human history: the Incarnation—the moment in time when Emmanuel, God with us, entered space and time to make a way for us to the Father. Fasting reminds us that temporary things do not ultimately satisfy, and helps us to remember that when we do feast on Christmas Day (and after), it is a celebration that should be taken with thanksgiving. In the early church, all great feasts were preceded by a time of fasting, which made the feast itself more joyful.

ADVENT DEVOTIONS

My prayer is that this Advent devotional will help you and your family prepare for the coming of Christ this season. Devotions have played a vital role in our family. With our children now grown, we look back on the many memories we share of our family devotions and readings at bedtime. I realize the difficulties inherent in trying to have consistent devotions, particularly as a family, but their value cannot be overstated. There are, genuinely, very few practices you will ever take up concerning your children that are more important than spending time with them, praying with them, discussing Scripture with them, and teaching them. Perhaps you will consider using this guide for one month to supplement your devotion time, or maybe, if you have never practiced daily devotions for yourself or your family, you will find that having a ready-made devotional will help you get started on the practice.

USING THE ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

There are no set rules for devotions. My suggestion is that you set aside a time each day when you will have at least fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time for prayer, reading, and discussion. Pray that God will meet you in your time of study and for hearts and minds that are attentive. Read the Scripture passage for the day, then consider the non-scriptural text I have provided. Remember to contemplate what the passage says and means; do not just read it to get it read. The word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12)—allow it the opportunity to speak to you. If you have older children, I suggest taking turns each day with the reading of Scripture. For my family, all of this generally took place prior to bedtime, but every family is different, so you may find that the morning or during a mealtime is better for you. Try to find a time, if possible, when you are not rushed.

Remember, a devotional is a guide, not a taskmaster. You may decide to spend more than fifteen minutes together, and you may decide to read additional passages of Scripture that come to mind, or to discuss other matters pertinent to you or your family. Each family or individual is unique, so do your devotion in a way that works best for you.

For this Advent devotional I have included not only a reflection on Scripture but also an “Advent Prayer.” The prayer is provided only as a possible way to pray as it relates to the text for the day. The prayer is, obviously, only a suggestion. I offer it as a help to those who may be new to this whole devotional thing and struggle with what to pray about. You are certainly free to ignore my prayer and pray spontaneously on your own. Keep in mind, however, that praying prepared prayers is not wrong. The Psalter (the book of Psalms) is in many ways prepared prayers for the people of Israel (and us) to recite to God.

This year our Advent preaching theme is “Word Made Flesh.” The love of God was made manifest to us in the Incarnation, when God wrapped himself in human flesh in the Person of his Son and dwelt among us. The greatest event in human history and the ultimate good news for all humanity was the coming of the Anointed One—the Messiah. It was he who would offer the hope of salvation to a world lost and reeling from its own self-destructive impulses. In Jesus, the Light of the world, love came to us in grace and truth. The “Word” of God was made flesh, and in his coming darkness was dispelled and God’s love made known to us. I hope you will bask in this historical reality and in the hope that it brings to us in 2021 and beyond.

God’s richest blessings to you this Advent season,
Pastor Jym

DAILY READINGS FOR ADVENT 2021

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday (11/28):	John 1:14
Monday (11/29):	Genesis 3:8-15
Tuesday (11/30):	Psalm 36:7-9
Wednesday (12/1):	Isaiah 9:1-2
Thursday (12/2):	2 Samuel 7:12-16
Friday (12/3):	Deuteronomy 18:18
Saturday (12/4):	Zechariah 9:9

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday (12/5):	2 Timothy 3:10-12
Monday (12/6):	Genesis 22:6-8
Tuesday (12/7):	John 13:25-30
Wednesday (12/8):	Jeremiah 23:5-6
Thursday (12/9):	Exodus 12:21-27
Friday (12/10):	Micah 5:2
Saturday (12/11):	Malachi 4:5-6

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday (12/12):	Genesis 50:15-20
Monday (12/13):	Genesis 12:1-3
Tuesday (12/14):	Haggai 2:6-7
Wednesday (12/15):	Isaiah 53:4-6
Thursday (12/16):	Hebrews 2:14-15
Friday (12/17):	Malachi 3:1-2
Saturday (12/18):	Luke 4:18-19

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday (12/19):	Matthew 2:18
Monday (12/20):	1 John 2:7-9
Tuesday (12/21):	Isaiah 7:14
Wednesday (12/22):	Jeremiah 2:5-7, 13
Thursday (12/23):	Romans 8:19-21
Christmas Eve:	Galatians 4:4-7

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28

Word Made Flesh

John 1:14 - And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And so it begins. Here we are at the onset of Advent 2021. Today we begin a celebration that is born out in an act of anticipation. We prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ into our world, a past event historically that we recapitulate, as it were, in our spiritual lives in order to reorient ourselves to the joy that that event brought to our world, and continues to bring to all of those who have come to know Christ as Lord and Savior.

That event is known to us as the Incarnation, when God, in the Person of the Son, became man. The eternal Word of God took on flesh and dwelt among us for a season in history. He “tabernacled” with us, in biblical language and imagery, making his home with us and living life as a Jewish man who went by the name of Jesus of Nazareth. It marks the greatest single event in human history, or as the English poet John Donne so eloquently said, “Twas much, that man was made like God before, but that God was made like man—much more!”

This Jesus of Nazareth was known to make some fairly dramatic statements during his ministry years (e.g. Matt. 5:28; Luke 14:26; John 10:30). Here, in our text for today, the apostle John, the author of this Gospel and a disciple of Jesus, makes a rather dramatic statement of his own. He tells us that Jesus shares the Father’s glory and that he, in fact, comes from the Father. Whether it is Jesus speaking or one of the biblical writers, the New Testament is never short on shocking statements.

To a first-century Jew (to any practicing Jew for that matter) this is nothing short of crazy talk. The only God and the Holy One of Israel, the Word of the Father, took on flesh at the Father’s bidding and made his home with us. Hence, Jesus is not merely a prophet of God who delivers his word, he is *the* Word! The messenger is the message.

Old Testament prophets up to John the Baptist proclaimed God’s word; Jesus *is* that Word. They proclaimed God’s truth; Jesus *is* the Truth. They proclaimed life in God; Jesus *is* the Life. He is the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father unless they come through him (John 14:6). Yes, Jesus is a prophet. Christians, Jews, and Muslims agree on that. What only Christians proclaim is

the reality that he is so much more. He is the Word of God made flesh. He was with the Father, he returned to the Father, and he reigns now at the Father's right hand. He is our great God and Savior (Titus 2:13). The entire narrative of the Old Testament was pointing to this momentous event. Even so, Christ's birth caught everyone flat-footed. The Jewish nation was anticipating a conquering king. What they received instead, at this Christ's first Advent, was a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. An innocent child huddled close to his mother, vulnerable and needing every care that all infants need. This is how God chose to save the world, and it is wondrous in our sight!

Here is the full sonnet from John Donne that I previously quoted in part. See if Donne's words do not strike at the heart of that which makes the Incarnation so beautiful...

*Would Thou love God as he thee?
Then digest my soul this wholesome meditation.
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on in heaven,
Doth make his temple in thy breast.
The Father, having begotten a Son most blest,
And still begetting—for he ne're begun—
Hath deigned to choose thee by adoption,
Co-heir to his glory, and Sabbath's endless rest.*

*And as a robbed man, which by search doth find
his stolen goods sold, must loose or by them again,
The Son of glory came down, and was slain.
Us whom he had made and Satan stolen, to unbind.
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,
But that God was made like man—much more!*

Advent Prayer

Father in heaven, you are glorious and filled with lovingkindness. Both of these attributes are in full display in the Incarnation. I give you thanks this Advent season for the rescue plan you enacted and put into motion in eternity past, which came to pass in Bethlehem so many years ago. Thank you for sending your Son to live out this plan, and to bring it to fruition. Our world will never be the same. Take hold of me over these next four weeks, that I may increase in Christlikeness, and that the wonder of this season will not be lost on me.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29

The Conquering Offspring

Genesis 3:8–15 - *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”*

What better way to follow up a discussion on the Incarnation than to move backward in history to the first pronouncement in all of Scripture of the hope that would displace the curse of the Fall. Adam, as the covenantal head of the first human couple, is sought out by God in the garden in which he and his companion have been placed to work and to rule. God calls out to Adam, not because he was incapable of finding him (he already knew what had transpired), but to hear directly from him that for which Adam must ultimately take responsibility. He is hiding, ashamed and afraid, and admits that the knowledge of his nakedness has come from a sinful act, an act for which he is quick to blame his wife. Eve, in turn, admits to an act of defiance, but only after laying the blame upon a snake, of all things.

The sin now confessed (albeit in a roundabout way), the Judge of the universe is ready to announce his verdict and the penalty. The serpent (Satan) is adjudicated first—he will remain a beast, loathed and deadly, humbled by his punishment, but ever ready, (along with his offspring) to lash out at the offspring of the couple whom he had tempted into sin. But who are these offspring, and how will this enmity be played out?

I think it is fair to say that most Christians, when asked where the gospel is revealed in the Bible, respond “in the Gospels.” Although that answer is certainly true, it is not the whole story. The gospel is actually revealed from the very beginning of Scripture, here in Genesis chapter three. Genesis 3:14–15 is

known as the *protoevangelium*. That's a fancy word that means "the first gospel." The text informs us that Satan would indeed "bruise" the offspring of the woman (Jesus), but the wound would not ultimately be deadly—a bruise to the heel. In turn, however, Jesus would bruise (or crush) Satan with a death blow to the head. The New Testament tells us that this blow would come at the cross, a seeming victory for evil that was, in the wisdom of God, the final blow to death. Jesus' victory at the cross would forever end death's mastery over the fallen human race and the natural world that fell with them. "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:54–55)

The offspring of the woman is the hope for all humanity. "Gospel" means "good news," and the good news comes early in the history of humanity. The serpent and his offspring (all those who war against the gospel) will ultimately be defeated—true. But this is more than a simple story of good triumphing over evil. Granted, it is the first such story, duplicated countless times throughout the ages in novels, poems and sonnets. It eclipses, however, as the dawn eclipses the retreating night, even the best of tales.

The primary goal of Scripture is to reveal to us our God. It is God's revelation of himself to the pinnacle of his creation; human beings. The *protoevangelium* reveals to us a plan, enacted in eternity past, to remedy an event that was anticipated, dare we say even initiated, by God the creator. It is an early shadow of the reality that we are privileged to know in our generation. Jesus, the son of a woman, is the conquering offspring. He is the Dayspring, and he dispels the darkness with unapproachable light.

Advent Prayer

Father, prepare my heart to receive you in a special way this Advent season. Focus my attention and sharpen my senses to your work in my life. Fill my heart with the light of faith. As I look forward to the Advent of Christ, revealed through the prophets and now made known to us. Call me, as deep calls to deep, to a closer walk with you. Thank you for your plan of salvation, a plan that included me. Let this Advent season renew my hope in you.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30

Light Illuminating Light

Psalm 36:7-9 - How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.

Have you ever been in a location that was truly pitch-black?

When you think of the word “dark,” what sort of mental images does your mind conjure? We all have a different perspective on what we think the word “dark” really means, because we have had different experiences in our lives by which we base those mental images. Tripping over furniture at night. Finding yourself deep in the woods and realizing that the dark is pressing in around you as the sun sets. Waking up to the sound of thunder and realizing that the power is off and your flashlight is in the next room. Life can get a little sketchy when the light goes out. Scientists tell us that we cannot actually accomplish absolute darkness, because even in very cold, very dark places (like deep space), photons still exist (absolute darkness = no photons emitted). Those photons keep the darkness from being absolute. But on a less geeky note, have you ever been in a cave and turned off your headlamp? You do not need a scientist to tell you then that it is dark, and nobody genuinely cares about photons when their light goes out in a cave.

Light illuminates, and humans feel most comfortable in illuminated places. We like to know what is going on around us. Although I have known many children who fear the dark (I was one of them), I have yet to find one who fears the light. Swimming in the ocean has its risks, but most people willingly do so when they get the chance. The number of those willing to do so drops appreciably when you ask them to swim in the ocean at night. It is just a little bit creepier in the dark. We like to see what we are stepping, or jumping, or sliding into.

God made light (see Genesis 1:3). In the beginning there was a void (read absolute dark). Darkness lay “over” the face of the deep, the Scripture tell us. It appears that God started with water, and over that water darkness hung like a curtain. That is, it hung there until God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Into our dark world for the very first time came light, and that light has been with us ever since. It is one of the many good things about God’s creation. The Psalmist in our text for today tells us that light is part of the steadfast love of God. God’s people take refuge in

the shade of his “wings” (because light also brings heat, and we like to be spared from that at times as well). We feast on God’s abundance and drink from the river of his delights. In God’s light we actually see...light. His light illuminates so that we can see, physically and spiritually.

In John chapter 9 Jesus is confronted by the religious rulers of his day in response to his healing of a man who was born blind. When the man miraculously received his sight (we are not told if the man asked to be healed or if Jesus simply decided to heal him) people were perplexed, including the man’s own parents. It seems people were not healed of blindness in those days any more frequently than they are today. The man, however, knew he had been healed (he could see, after all). The religious rulers demanded to know how the man had been healed, and the man truthfully told them that Jesus had healed him—but he did not know where Jesus had gone off to. Since the man could not help them, they cursed him and threw him out of their presence (clearly very loving religious leaders). Finally, Jesus himself found the man and asked him point blank if he believed in the Son of Man (the Messiah). The man simply said “Who is he sir? Tell me so that I may believe him.” Jesus told him, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” The once blind man rightly responded by worshipping Jesus. Jesus then said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” The religious rulers were indignant. “What, do you say that *we* are blind?” they asked. To which Jesus replied (I paraphrase here), “Yep, you’re blind.”

There is a spiritual blindness that has come over many in our world. What they need is light to see. What they need is Jesus. Only in his light do people truly see light (2 Cor. 3:14). In Jesus there lies a fountain of life for those who will open spiritual eyes and see. May I say to you, dear reader, what may sound offensive to you if you have not yet responded to Jesus in faith? You are blind, my friend. It is not entirely your doing. Your enemy (Satan) has blinded your eyes so that you cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). Ask God to open your blind eyes. He will be pleased to do so.

Advent Prayer

Lord God, let me see light. Illuminate my path this Advent season. Open my eyes to see you and to respond to you appropriately. Reveal your light to me so that I may walk on straight paths and not stumble.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1

The Light Has Dawned

Isaiah 9:1-2 - But there will be no gloom for her who was 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 has made 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 dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

“We are told to let our light shine, and if it does, we will not need to tell anybody that it does. Lighthouses do not fire cannons to draw attention to their shining—they just shine.” - Dwight L. Moody

Today is the fourth day of Advent. We are anticipating the arrival of Messiah into our world as a human child. That birth was prophesied numerous times over the course of Old Testament history, as will be demonstrated during our devotions this Advent season. The prophet Isaiah, through the Holy Spirit, saw that a time would come when the little-thought-of land of Zebulun and Naphtali, along the Jordan River, would see a great light. Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of Israel that inherited this territory during the occupation of the Promised Land. It was the northernmost territory of Israel, and as such, it suffered first when foreign invaders attacked Israel from the north via the Fertile Crescent, a swath of green and productive land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arab deserts. Isaiah, although living 700 years prior to the birth of Messiah, speaks in the past tense, seeing the future events as being so sure to take place that one might speak of them as past episodes in the history of Israel.

The small region of Galilee lay in the land of Naphtali and Zebulun, bordering the Sea of Galilee with the Jordan River flowing out of it to the south. From here Jesus the Messiah would launch a mission, primarily to the Jews, that would soon reach to the uttermost parts of the world. Thus Galilee would no longer be an obscure region tucked away in darkness, but would instead become “Galilee of the nations,” where the Light of the world would illuminate our lives. Every nation, indeed every person, is without light when Jesus is not shining in their lives. Jesus tells us the verdict is like this: “The Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). One of the primary tasks of the church (the people of God) is to expose the world to that Light. Though no one likes to have light shone on their dark deeds, those to

whom God is making himself known welcome the exposure, painful though it is, because it leads to great joy and peace through confession and repentance and new life. If you have come to know Jesus as Lord, you now welcome his penetrating light into your life because it is part of the painful process that the Bible calls “sanctification,” and it makes you more like Christ himself. The Light has dawned upon you, and it is now glorious in your sight.

There are many who live around you today who do not know the light of Christ. They live in darkness, even though they may be smarter than you, or wealthier than you, or more important in the eyes of the world than you. They live right in your midst—your home, your workplace, your neighborhood. They shop with you, work with you, eat with you, maybe even go to church with you. Will you commit yourself to pray for at least one person that you know and could influence in a positive way who does not know the light of Christ? Pray for them daily through Advent. Is that possible for you? As you pray, ask God if he might open a door for you to care for them with the love of Christ, and so demonstrate the light of Christ to them by your actions. Do this as one act that you will take through the Advent season this year. See what God might do in response.

Advent Prayer

Christ as a light, illumine and guide me, Christ as a shield overshadow me. Christ under me, Christ over me, Christ beside me on my left and my right. This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all powerful. Be in the heart of each to whom I speak, in the mouth of each who speak to me. Christ as a light, Christ as a shield, Christ beside me, on my left and my right.

-Prayer of St. Patrick

Father, be a light to me as I celebrate the coming of the Light this Advent season. Shine your light into my life, rooting out the sin and lack of desire to know you that lies within. Fill me with the light of Christ, and help me to shine the light of Jesus into the lives of others. I pray for _____ today, that they might know you, that you might soften their heart so that they can see you. Keep them on my mind through this season; keep me faithful to pray for them daily. Thank you for taking away our darkness.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2

The Never-ending Kingdom

2 Samuel 7:12–16 - When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

Most people love stories concerning kings and kingdoms, knights and castles and the gathering of armies for military campaigns. Not everyone, of course, but most. The people of Israel shared a love for their king of kings—David. God also shared that love. David was his special one, the man after his own heart, the flawed yet faithful shepherd whom God elevated to the throne. Here, in our text for today, we see God laying out the Davidic Covenant, the promise to David that after his death a son would sit on his throne. Beyond this promise God also promises him something that could only be fulfilled in the perfect son of David—Jesus the Messiah—an everlasting kingdom with a descendant of David sitting on its throne.

Have you ever wished for something that you thought would be wonderful, only to find out later that your wish was actually only a fraction of what would come to pass in reality? Like a young girl dreaming of being cast in an off-Broadway play when, without her knowledge, the talent judges in the casting department are in the process of making her their next Hollywood star. Abraham Lincoln hoped to be a U.S. senator. Twice he tried and lost both elections, only to eventually be swept into the White House.

King David was nearing the end of his life. It was his great ambition to build a temple for God. Here was David, living in a beautiful palace, and the Ark of the Covenant sat in a tent. David was appalled at this apparent lack of reverence for God, and he set out to make things right before he died. But God had other plans. Instead of David building God a house, God would build a “house” or kingdom for David, and not just an enduring kingdom that would outlive his memory—no, it would be an everlasting kingdom.

Like all kings, David wanted a son to succeed him, and that would happen in grand fashion. God would ensure that his son Solomon

would follow after him, but more than that...much more than that, a future son would ascend the throne and never relinquish it. God had one-upped David in a significant way, much to David's pleasure. God did not need a house to live in because he is not like other gods. What God desired instead was to bring forth a king like none other who would rule his people with justice and truth. Hebrews 1:5 tells us that the fulfillment of this desire, and his promise to David, was accomplished in his own Son from eternity, and the son of David by descent—Jesus of Nazareth. When Nathan the prophet shared with David God's response to his desire to build a temple, David must have been thinking, "Well, yeah, that does sound better than what I had in mind." God's plans always do.

What do you have in your mind that you will do for God? Whatever it might be, by all means do it if it is in line with Scripture. But keep in mind that you will never out-give God. "What do you have that you have not received?" Paul asks the believers in ancient Corinth. "And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not?" David's desire was not sinful, it was simply not in keeping with God's will. A temple would be built, this we know, only not by the hand of David, but by David's son Solomon.

God is a great giver, but he actually needs nothing from us. What we give him we give because it is owed, not because it enhances him in any way or improves him by any measure. We give glory to him because he is worthy of glory. We give honor to him because he is most honorable. We give him obedience because he is omnipotent and sovereign. God gives because he owns everything, and he is gracious. We give only because we are those to whom much has been given. Do you want to give God something today? Give him the honor that is due to him, and surrender to his Son, the king who sits on David's throne forever. Give him lordship in your life. You owe it to him, and you will be the one who gets the prize.

Advent Prayer

Father, you have established an everlasting kingdom and your Son sits on its throne. Better is one day in his courts than a thousand elsewhere. Let me enter your courts today. Draw me to you through your Son. Thank you for being a great giver. Everything I have is from you and I thank you for it today. Show me how I may become a better giver this Advent season. Make me a giver Lord, and not just a taker.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3

The Final Prophet

Deuteronomy 18:18 - "I will rise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

During the first Advent, before Jesus had initiated his ministry, John the Baptist (his forerunner and the prophet designated to usher in the ministry of Messiah) was attracting great crowds to the Judean wilderness where he was preaching and baptizing. The Gospel of John tells us that the leaders of the Jews sent a delegation to speak with John to inquire about his background and intentions. They came wanting to know specifically if John was the expected Messiah. John's answer to them was an explicit "no." Therefore, they enquired further asking, "What then? Are you Elijah?" Jews were anticipating the return of Elijah the prophet prior to the Messiah's arrival, based on a mistaken literal interpretation of Malachi 4:5. John's answer was again "no." Their next question pertains to our passage for today. "Are you the Prophet?" they asked. In other words, they were aware of the very passage you read for today. God had promised to send his people a prophet like Moses, whom they must listen to and obey. Surely a man of John's stature and following must be the Prophet at least, if he were not the Messiah nor Elijah returned to earth again. But again they were wrong. John's answer was definitive, he was not the Prophet.

It seems that in Jesus' ministry years there were many questions concerning who, in fact, he was. And while everyone seemed willing to attribute to him great miracles and saving acts, most could not come to grips with the idea that he might indeed be the Prophet of Deuteronomy 18. Jesus was a great prophet and a great man, but *the* Prophet, *the* Messiah? How could that be? What the people seemed willing to acknowledge about John, to whom zero miraculous acts are attributed, they were generally unwilling to acknowledge about Jesus, who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. Some people are physically blind, many people are spiritually blind, in Jesus' day and our own.

We human beings are by nature a fairly hard-headed lot. In fact, the more enlightened we believe we are the more likely we are to dismiss spiritual things. The natural world obeys God at every turn, submitting to both his natural laws and, on the rare occasion

when God speaks into creation, his miraculous acts as well. The spirit realm bears no doubts concerning what God is about. Holy angels joyfully believe and submit to him, while fallen angels do the same, albeit with great bitterness and fear (Mark 5:1–13; James 2:19). We are the only part of God’s universe that does not seem to get it, even though we represent the apex of God’s creation. We are neither confined to natural laws nor to instinct, although both play a part in our lives. We think, we reason, we remember, we apply lessons, and yet so many of us still refuse to believe. God promises a coming prophet that will speak for him. Jesus arrives and fulfills that expectation perfectly. He supports the claim with amazing acts never before seen in such abundance from one man, yet the majority turn a blind eye, both in his day and our own. St. Paul is right when he informs us that “the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). There is an enemy at work in this blindness, but we certainly do not make it particularly difficult for him.

Not everyone missed it. Acts 3:22 and 7:37 tell us that some got it and rightly attributed the fulfillment of the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18:18 to Jesus the Messiah. What about you? Do you see in Jesus a prophet, not unlike Moses, who speaks the very words of God? Do you see him as not only *the* Prophet, but more than a prophet, the very Son of God? Such is the teaching of the New Testament. Jesus has come in fulfillment of prophecy to turn the hearts of those who will listen back to the Father and to a hope for salvation from sin and everlasting life. Sounds too good to be true. A little too neat and simple. But do not fool yourself. Many have missed it, and many continue to miss it even today. Open the eyes of your heart this Advent season and embrace the truth. Join with all creation in acknowledging not only the lordship of Jesus Christ in creation, but his lordship in your life as well.

Advent Prayer

Father, open my eyes to your truth. Give to me great faith and a heart that believes. When I give way to doubt, draw me back to you and your word. Help me in my disbelief today and every day. “I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering. To be like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10–11).

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4

The Coming King

Zechariah 9:9 - Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

“Zion” is another name used in the Old Testament for the collective people of Israel. It is also the name of the hill upon which the temple stood in Jerusalem, the site of Abraham’s almost sacrifice of Isaac. It designated the heart of the nation. Zechariah the prophet, about 500 years before Christ, informs the “daughter of Zion and Jerusalem” (again a euphemism for all the people of Israel) that the day will come when they will rejoice to see their king ride into the city as their ancestors had seen him in days gone by. Both the gospels of Matthew and John inform us that this prophecy is realized as Jesus of Nazareth rides into Jerusalem at the Triumphal Entry, the beginning of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus’ earthly life.

Luke tells us that as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, the crowds shouted in unrestrained voices, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” When the rulers of Jerusalem and the religious leaders heard this, they said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” They could not bear hearing people call Jesus the King, for that title was reserved for the coming Messiah. Jesus refused and told the leaders, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” All creation, not just the people of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, was made to give praise and worship to the King who is the creator of all. If people will not shout out their praise to Jesus, the rocks and trees—the very earth itself—will. How much more you and me? Stop your reading now and offer praise to God through his Son Jesus. He is most worthy of it.

The people of Jesus’ day expected him to take up an earthly throne and reign in Jerusalem, throwing off the unbearable yoke of the hated Romans. We know Jesus on this side of the cross, and we know he did so much more. He died upon a cross, rose again, and took up his eternal crown, throwing off the yoke of death itself. Indeed, he came with salvation, for he is the only one who can save us from our sins. No other king, prophet, priest, or self-proclaimed god has the power to do anything to you, or for you, after your death. Only Jesus reserves that power and honor, for only Jesus is an eternal King. Rejoice in him, for he has conquered death!

Our passage for today is part of the reason the people of Jerusalem were so happy to see Jesus riding into their city. Zechariah's prophecy pointed to a day when the Jews would see their long-awaited king entering the Holy City. In fact, Jesus himself knew this prophecy and took steps to see to it that it was fulfilled (Matt. 21:1-5). Although a donkey was the typical beast of burden ridden by nobility in Old Testament times, the horse had become the symbol of power and might by Jesus' time, ridden by the great emperors of Rome and their grand soldiers. By entering the city in this manner, Jesus showed his humility and yet demonstrated his nobility. Jesus rarely overpowered people, but he always left his mark. Righteousness was his trademark, a righteousness that at times became intense and made people uncomfortable. When asked to demonstrate signs and wonders for show, he refused, and when given the opportunity to save himself by force, he humbly submitted to the cross. Jesus is a humble king, an oxymoron in the eyes of the world, but exactly what that very same world needs so desperately. Consider asking God to teach you more about humility today. What would your life look like if you practiced the presence of Christ daily, and submitted more and more to him in humility?

Advent Prayer

Jesus, I praise you this day, for you are my King! I rejoice in you and lift up your name. You are worthy of praise and adoration, for you are glorious and you sit on an eternal throne. Blessed are you, who came in the name of the Lord, and now sit at the right hand of the Father in heaven, full of glory. I ask you to teach me humility today, and I acknowledge that this is a dangerous prayer, for being taught humility often means being brought low. Do what is necessary in my life to teach me to practice the humility that you demonstrated every day of your life, but none more so than on the day of your death. I love you, Lord, for what you have done for me. Father, thank you for sending your Son, righteous and having salvation. Thank you for saving me.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5

Beauty for Ashes

2 Timothy 3:10–12 - You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

We want to avoid suffering, sin, death, ashes. But we live in a world crushed and broken and torn, a world God Himself visited to redeem. We receive his poured out life, and being allowed the high privilege of suffering with him, may then pour ourselves out for others. **-Elisabeth Elliot**

In January of 1956 the world heard the news that five American missionaries had been speared to death by the very people they had sought to save in the Ecuadorian jungle. The tribe was known as the Aucas, and the missionaries as the Auca Five.

Not many missionaries make headlines, but these five men did. Their work among the Aucas had only begun. No one had heard the gospel, and only sporadic contact had been made between the missionaries and the people they hoped to see saved. The Bible was not translated into the Auca language by any of the Auca Five, and a church had not been built. The only mission station that had been established was a small hut on a beach where a plane could land and bring gifts to the tribe. By almost any definition of the word, the mission to the Aucas had not yet been successful. But the deaths of these five men were not in vain.

Rachel Saint, sister to one of the slain men, had been studying the Auca language with an Auca woman named Dayuma. Dayuma had fled the tribe years earlier due to all the killing and chaos she had witnessed. In 1957 Rachel brought Dayuma to the United States to live with her and to do intensive language study. Eventually, she became the first Auca convert. During that time, Elisabeth Elliot, wife of one of the slain missionaries, had met two Auca women in a fishing village and was able to persuade them to join her at her mission station, where she too began a concentrated study in the Auca language. When Dayuma returned to Ecuador with Rachel Saint, all three Auca women returned to their tribe. Three weeks later the women returned to the mission station with the news that the Auca leaders wanted to meet the women missionaries. In October of 1958 Rachel, Elisabeth, and Elisabeth's daughter went to live in the Auca village. Over the next few months Dayuma and the missionaries shared their faith

with the Aucas, and one by one they gave their lives to the Lord. Eventually all five men who had murdered the missionaries were converted and became leaders of the Auca church.

It is a story almost too amazing to believe—a living case of truth being stranger than fiction. Five missionaries murdered, their work carried on by their families until the very men who murdered them come to know the Lord and lead others to Christ. It is a story not only about bravery and dedication to the cause of Christ, but a story about how redemption changes everything. In a land where the gospel had not yet penetrated, the effects of the Fall were in complete operation and control. Death and murder reigned. There was no peace and no hope that rises from it. Into that darkness came the gospel, yet it was initially rejected and attacked, as it always seems to be. However, because some believers were willing to give up their own comfort and safety so that others could hear and believe, the gospel gained a foothold. Not without a price, of course. Five men who loved Jesus as much or more than any of us, who had done nothing wrong, had to suffer the pain of death in order for the gospel to spring to life. Where those men fell, others took up the call and the gospel went forth, leading to redemption and new life for a tribe of human beings who had only known a pagan world of hopelessness and savagery.

The Advent of Jesus brought with it the hope of redemption and peace with God. Love came down to us, it is true, but it did not bring us the hope of peace in this world. On the contrary, Jesus told his disciples that he did not come to bring peace to the world, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). As followers of Jesus, we must expect that we too will struggle in this world, since we are truly strangers and aliens in it. But the struggle is worth it, and the suffering we bear may be the very means by which others will come to know peace with God.

On June 11, 1992, the Aucas finally received the New Testament in their own heart language. It was a day of celebration, born on the wings of suffering and sacrifice.

Advent Prayer

Father, I thank you that you have redeemed me. Now I pray that you will use me as a means by which others will know redemption. Give me courage to suffer with Jesus and to pour myself out for others, whether that be at home or abroad. Let me be one who shines the light of Jesus wherever I go.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6

God Himself Will Provide

Genesis 22:6–8 - And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

Genesis 22 tells us the remarkable, and somewhat perplexing, story of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. God had promised Abraham that he would have descendants that would be so numerous that to count them would be akin to counting the stars in the sky. Those descendants, God promised, would come through his son Isaac. And yet here in Genesis 22 God tells Abraham that he is to sacrifice Isaac as an offering. How can this be? God is not a God who demands human sacrifice—he abhors it as an abomination. Why now? Why Isaac?

The text tells us that Abraham obeyed God, which is again perplexing. He seems to obey without any question, which makes us wonder about his sanity or his love for Isaac, or both. He simply gets up early the next morning, saddles his donkey, awakens Isaac and heads for the land of Moriah for his appointment with God and Isaac's last day on earth. We get a hint at the reason for Abraham's quickness to obey from the New Testament book of Hebrews. There we find out that Abraham believed God could raise the dead. So do I—you probably do too—but still...sacrifice your child?

Part of the good news in this story is that it turns out God does not let Abraham sacrifice Isaac. God really can raise the dead, he just will not have to do that for Isaac. He will, however, have to do it for his own Son, who is prefigured (foretold in action) in this event, as is God's plan for providing redemption for humankind. As you may already know, at the crucial moment, when Abraham has proved his faith in God (and Isaac, it seems, has proved his faith in his father by allowing himself to be bound for sacrifice), God intervenes. His angel calls out to Abraham to stop, and then a ram, caught in a nearby thicket, is offered as a substitute sacrifice. The text tells us that Isaac is not only Abraham's only son of the promise, but that Abraham loves him dearly. God also has an only Son, a Son whom he loves dearly. Isaac was saved by God—Jesus

was not. Isaac asked his father where the lamb was for the sacrifice, and Abraham replied prophetically, “God will provide for himself a lamb.” Indeed he has. Jesus, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” as John the Baptist described him, has been provided by the Father. An only Son, a perfect sacrifice, willingly laid down on the altar for all those who would receive him. Prefigured in this event so many years before on Mount Moriah, where a thousand years later God would direct that the temple be built, and two thousand years later Jesus would walk.

Why then? Why Isaac? Because God had a plan, enacted in eternity past and in many ways initiated in the life of Abraham, the patriarch of the Jews. From Isaac, the child of promise, a people would emerge. They would be a people who would bless all the peoples of the earth, as we will see in a future devotion. The greatest blessing to come from them would be their Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. This act between Abraham and Isaac was but an early shadow of the grand drama that would one day be played out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Advent Prayer

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise. I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.
-Psalm 138

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7

The Great Betrayal

John 13:25–30 - So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it? [who will betray you]” Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly...” So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

On December 7th, 1941 (“Pearl Harbor Day”), Japanese dive bombers attacked the sleepy U.S. Naval Pacific Fleet, resting mostly at anchor, at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. That brazen secret attack, coming in the early morning hours with no declaration of war and no prior notice, crippled the Pacific Fleet and killed over 2,400 American servicemen and civilians. The betrayal was so great that previous U.S. domestic support for non-intervention into the building wars in Europe and Asia disappeared virtually overnight. America declared war on Japan the following day. It was “a day that will live in infamy.”

There appears to be something innate in human nature that despises betrayal. We seem to have a built-in bitterness toward anyone who would harm someone that has no reason to assume that they are about to be betrayed. In the military, spies are summarily shot during wartime. During peacetime they generally garner intense media coverage when they are found out. No one likes a person who gains affection or allegiance, and then betrays it to the harm of that person or nation.

The greatest betrayal that has ever occurred in human history took place during Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples. Judas Iscariot, a disciple of Jesus and friend to eleven other men who were Christ-followers, after at least two years of travel and ministry with Jesus, betrayed him to what would be his eventual tormentors and murderers for the price of a slave (thirty pieces of silver). And he accomplished the act, the Bible tells us, with a kiss. Yet the Scriptures do not tell us why he did it. It is likely he had lost confidence in Jesus as the Messiah—that he had hoped for more from the Messiah than teaching, miracles, humility and service. Judas had made his decision to betray Jesus not the evening of the Passover meal but earlier in the week, Matthew’s Gospel tells us. He went to the Jewish religious rulers and asked them, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” They agreed on the compensation, and then Judas spent the following days looking for an

opportunity to hand Jesus over to them. It surprised every one of his friends. It surprised everyone except Jesus.

Judas was not only a betrayer, he was also a thief. In fact, it appears that the final straw that pushed him toward betrayal was an event late in Jesus' ministry in which Jesus allowed himself to be anointed (by a woman, no less) with expensive perfume when (in Judas' mind) it should have been sold and given to Jesus so that he could utilize the funds to care for the poor. In so doing it would allow Judas, who kept the money bag for Jesus and his band of followers and who actually cared little for the poor, access to the money for his own greedy use (see John 12:4–6). Those who will betray a friend are always mixed up in other ways as well. A willingness to betray is never their only fault.

We do not like Judas. We do not like what Japan did to our nation. We do not like Benedict Arnold, the most famous betrayer in American history (Arnold was a major general during the American Revolution who turned over the American military base at West Point to the British and then defected to their side). We do not like what they have done, and rightfully so. It is wrong to betray a friend. And that, my friends, is what I have done and so have you. We have betrayed our Savior, Jesus Christ. He made us, he died to save us even though he knows our sinful nature, and we have too often chosen others over him. It is sad and wrong. But, thanks be to God, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1–3). Betrayers that we are, we are made clean by the very one we have betrayed. God is good! While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Rejoice in that great truth today!

Advent Prayer

On this day, Jesus, I thank you for your saving work in my life. Keep me from every betrayal. Soften my heart toward you, yet make it strong against faithlessness and cowardice. Implant in me a desire to serve you faithfully and fully. Help me to finish this race well.

“O king of grief! (a title strange, but true, to thee of all kings only due). O king of wounds! How shall I grieve for thee, who in all grief saved me!”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8

The Righteous Branch

Jeremiah 23:5–6 - “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

Today we continue on a similar theme from a previous devotion—Jesus as righteous King, full of wisdom and reigning on the throne of his father David. This prophecy from Jeremiah foresees a day when a “Branch” or descendant of David will take up the kingly crown and rule in such a way as to bring peace, safety, and even salvation to his people. The reigning king on the throne in Jeremiah’s day was Zedekiah, which when translated means “the LORD is my righteousness.” But Zedekiah had failed as king and was decidedly not righteous, so God declared his intent to raise up a new king to fulfill his purpose, a king who would truly demonstrate that the Lord himself, and his appointed king, is righteous. This was the hope of Israel. This is also, ultimately, our hope as well.

So many Christians are often downcast, embroiled in sin and fearful for the future. We cannot find a way to forgive ourselves, so we assume that God cannot forgive us either. But this is simply not true. Yes, our nature is corrupt and our hearts are bent toward evil, but Christ is our righteousness. “God made him who had no sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:21). We hide in Christ. We are covered by Christ. We are healed by Christ. He is our Lord and he is righteousness personified. However unworthy you may feel, indeed, however unworthy you may actually be, you are safe in Christ if he is your righteousness. This, of course, is not a license to sin, but it would never be considered as such by anyone who was truly living a life hidden in Christ and turning to him for salvation. Believers would never consider that the one who is our righteousness provides for us a free ticket to a lifestyle of depravity. God forbid! It is only the self-righteous and the peripheral inquirer who could view Jesus in such a way. No, if you feel condemnation for your sin and it leads you to sorrow and repentance, then you are truly Christ’s and he is truly yours. The authentic follower of Christ says, “Though I am truly steeped in

sin and struggle daily with a life of self-gratification, Christ is my righteousness. I live for him alone; I rest on him solely for my salvation. I will strive for perfection in spite of myself and rejoice in gratitude that God has provided for me a mediator and friend.” Such a view of life gives one great confidence. Not over-confidence, mind you, or pride, but confidence that God is truly for us and has not only promised us a righteous king to lead us but has delivered that to us in Jesus his Son.

When I was a child we used to sing a song on a regular basis in our home parish that repeated these words: “If God is for us, who can be against, if the Spirit of God has set us free.” The song went on to say, “Nothing can take us from his love, poured out in Jesus his Son.” Those are absolutely beautiful words based on Romans 8:31, and wonderfully true. The Scriptures declare to us that those who are in Christ will remain with him until the end. You will struggle with sin, friends, let there be no doubt. Therefore struggle with all your might. Learn to hate your sin. Fight it; fight against your own desires that lead you astray. Fight against the prevailing pattern of our world and its tilt toward evil. Fight against your enemy, the devil, who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Fight, but do so knowing that your fight is won not by might, not by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord. “Strive for perfection,” the apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth, and then followed that with, “Comfort one another.” We need that comfort because perfection is elusive on this side of heaven and genuine followers of Christ want it now. Rest in the assurance that you are perfected in Christ, the Branch of David in whom we dwell securely. If you have come to know Jesus Christ as Lord, you are safe in his righteous and capable arms this day. Hide in those arms.

Advent Prayer

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.” And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. - Psalm 32

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9

Christ - Our Passover Lamb

Exodus 12:21–27 - Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down. Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshiped.

It was early spring in Egypt, and much angst among both the Egyptians and their Hebrew slaves hung heavy in the air. God had visited the land with nine awe-inspiring and destructive demonstrations of his power as a sign to the Egyptians and their Pharaoh that they must set his people free from bondage. While the people were impressed, the reigning king of Egypt remained hardened. The land had been stripped bare—the Egyptian economy left in ruins. Crops had been destroyed, livestock lost, and the Egyptian people left cowering in fear. God had made a distinction between Egypt and Israel. While Egyptian livestock lay strewn across the land, the Hebrew livestock were grazing peacefully. When darkness covered the land of Egypt, light shown among the camps of the Israelites. Still Pharaoh refused to let them go. He was not about to let free labor walk away so easily.

Finally, God told Moses, “Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here.” That plague, the most deadly and painful for Egypt, would become so important to the history of the Jews that the month of its execution would now mark the beginning of their calendar year. It would become a perpetual memorial for the people and would pre-figure the most important event in human history. On the tenth day of the month God told Moses to inform his people to clear their homes completely of any leaven (used for baking) and to take into their homes a lamb without blemish, care for it until the fourteenth day of the month, and then kill it at twilight and eat it, being careful not to break a single bone in its body. Some of the blood of the lamb was to be placed on the two doorposts and the lintel of their homes as a sign of the sacrifice and their

obedience to the Lord. At midnight on the fourteenth day of the month, God visited death upon the firstborn sons in the whole of Egypt, excluding only the homes of the Hebrews who showed on their doorposts the blood of the lamb. “Passover” is what God called it; the day in which the angel of the Lord spared the Jews while wreaking anguish and pain upon the Egyptians. The angel of death performed his deadly task, yet mercifully passed over the homes of the Jews. It is horrible to think about. The cries of sadness and anger must have been heard across the land that fateful day. Pharaoh relented, and God’s people departed the land.

More than a thousand years later, in the land that the Jews occupied forty years after their exodus from Egypt, Jesus was born in Nazareth. He would be raised by his parents, inaugurate a three-year ministry after being baptized in the Jordan River, and would preach the gospel of the kingdom of God among his people—the Jews. He would be treated as both criminal and hero by the people, eventually arrested and convicted by the religious authorities, and slaughtered via a Roman cross on a hill outside the gates of the ancient city of Jerusalem. He would be spotless, the Bible tells us—without sin—and while his blood would flow profusely, not a bone in his body would be broken. Some thirty years later the apostle Paul would write to the church in Corinth: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Christ, your Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for you. For this very reason he was born into our world, for it was God’s express will to crush him, to pour out his wrath upon the sin which his Son would fully absorb on the cross (Isaiah 53:6,10; Acts 4:27-28). And it was the Son’s express will to submit to this plan. And so, like a lamb led to the slaughter, he fulfilled his Father’s will (Isaiah 53:4-7; Phil. 2:5-11). If you know Christ today, this is your salvation. Rejoice in it!

Advent Prayer

Father, may I have this in mind this Advent season; that Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Thank you, Lord, for the blood of the Lamb.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10

A Very Old Promise

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

The city of Bethlehem offered very little by way of distinction, neither did the district of Ephrathah in Micah the prophet's day. Not much had changed over the eight centuries between his day and the day of Jesus. It was a backwater city in Micah's day and remained one in Jesus' time. A small city among the ancestral inheritance of Judah, its claim to fame would have remained as the hometown of King David had not one singular event taken place there—the birth of Messiah. Not a bad claim to fame when you think of it, birthplace to two kings. Certainly beats being the home of the world's largest ball of twine, or the birthplace of the kazoo. Regional officials everywhere are forever looking for something important to mark their region so as to stake their claim and bring in tourists. My home state claims to be “The Land of Lincoln,” even though Abraham Lincoln was not born there and did not die there. He did, however, live there for some time, and he is buried there. Oh well, you take what you can get. I guess when you are buried somewhere, you can certainly call that “your land.”

Bethlehem has no problem drawing visitors today, although it still remains a relatively small city. Jesus' family did not stay there long. Joseph, the man who helped raise Jesus (although not his biological father), traveled there with his pregnant wife Mary to take part in a census. Her time came due when they arrived and Jesus was born like your average peasant, most likely in a hovel or a cave-like stable for animals. There, the one who would be ruler in Israel took his first earthly breath as the incarnate Son of God. There he would be nursed, and there he would leave his mark on a famous and yet amazingly obscure village. Everything would change for Bethlehem, and everything would change for the world. His coming forth was from old, and not just old like eight hundred years earlier in Micah's day. Old like from the time of King David. Old like from the dawn of time. Jesus, the one greater than David who would sit on his throne, was born in the same city as his famous ancestor, and his birth in that historic family line was both predicted and anticipated.

So what? So Jesus was born in Bethlehem and it had been predicted a very long time prior to his birth. What does that mean

to us? Well, for starters it means that God's purposes and plans come to pass even when the mention of them may have been hundreds of years in the past. God does not forget his word or his promises, even when we do. He did not forget his promise to David to raise up one of his offspring and give him his throne—and give it to him forever. God knows the future like he knows the past, and he can be trusted to accomplish all that he has said he will accomplish. What else does it mean to us? It means we should both marvel and rejoice at God's purposes from of old. Long ago Jesus entered our world and set into action a plan to save those he has known from eternity past. God's plan of salvation is of old, just as the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem was from ancient days. As C. H. Spurgeon said, "Has he from everlasting been going forth to save me, and will he lose me now?" No, certainly not. Your salvation is of old, and God's promises are true. He will not fail to save you now, nor to hold you until that final day. You may think that you weary God, but can the Ancient of Days be wearied by you? Your sin and my sin are not irrelevant, and we should never treat it as such, but will it turn his affection away from one whom he has loved for so long? Never! You are precious to God, and he has and will deal with your sin through Christ. God is holding on to you, the one he has known for so long, and he will not let you go. Let your soul take comfort today in the truth that, as you pursue God, you will find that he is pursuing you, and has been long before you knew it to be true.

In this joyful season we often sing the familiar refrain "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie..." If you know Christ today, are you lying still? Are you assured of your salvation? If you have truly given yourself to Christ, if you are trusting in him for your salvation, if you have seen the fruit of repentance in your life and have placed your hope in him, you should be. Jesus has given us his word. We are held in the palm of his hand, and nothing, and no one, can snatch us out of that sacred and secure place.

Advent Prayer

Father, you love your people with an everlasting love. What you promise you bring to fulfillment, whether it be prophecies of future birthplaces or the securing of your chosen ones for eternity. Let me rest in your promise today that you will finish that which you have begun in me through your Son Jesus. Call me to yourself today and let me be immersed in your love. You have known me from before time, and I rejoice to know that you will know me when time gives way to eternity.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11

In the Spirit of Elijah

Malachi 4:5–6 - Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

The people of Israel were awaiting their Messiah, and awaiting the harbinger of Messiah's appearance: none other than the great prophet Elijah. He had left the earth without dying (2 Kings 2), and now they awaited his return in fulfillment of the prophet Malachi's words in our devotional passage for today.

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, but it does not appear that he met him until both were grown men. As a prophet of God, John had come to realize that he was preparing the way for Messiah (Isaiah 40:3–5; John 1:23). He met Jesus at the Jordan River on what, by all appearances, seems to have been a typical day in his ministry. Jesus appeared to him seeking to be baptized. John tried to deny him, declaring that it was he who needed baptizing at the hands of Jesus, but Jesus insisted—in order to “fulfill all righteousness” he said. The recorded words between John and Jesus are few, but when John saw the Holy Spirit descend and remain on Jesus in the form of a dove, he knew that the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was in his presence.

John's life can be compared to a blazing meteor. Short, brilliant, and powerful. He died a young man, even by the standards of his day. We know nothing of him other than a brief description of the events surrounding his mother and father's lives near the time of his birth, until he appears in the Judean wilderness crying out with the voice of a prophet, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight paths for him.” He was bold and brash, fearless and righteous. He did not hesitate to address King Herod himself and warn him concerning his adulteries. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were no match for him, and the people loved him. He was given every opportunity to exalt himself, yet in each instance he refused, preferring rather to decrease in the eyes of his contemporaries so that Jesus might increase in their eyes. There can be little doubt that in his own mind he was prepared to throw himself behind Jesus' cause as one of his disciples when the time was right, but that time never came. Instead, he fulfilled his purpose, inaugurated Jesus' ministry by baptizing him, and was then

arrested (and beheaded soon after). A tragic end to an explosive life; a life lived in absolute devotion to the Father's will.

To many John was just a short footnote in the annals of our world. To Jesus he was much more. To Jesus, John was the greatest man who ever lived that was born in the natural order of things. He was "more than a prophet" (see Matthew 11:7–11). John's joy came not from usurping power, or from gathering a following of disciples, or from establishing kingdoms in his name. Had he wanted to do so, he had all the qualities that would have made that possible. No, his joy came from fulfilling his call in his lifetime. His joy came from encountering his Savior, however briefly it may have been. No doubt he deserved more from a human point of view, but his joy was complete by having the unparalleled privilege of preparing the way for Messiah.

Where do you find your joy? What are you pursuing with the belief that it will bring you peace and fulfillment? If it is anything short of Jesus it will prove futile in the end. A life lived for Jesus, even briefly, is worth a thousand lives lived for the pleasures of this fleeting world. John's joy is stamped in eternity and for ten thousand ages he will reap it. How long will your joy last? The Bible tells us that the laughter of fools is like the crackling of dry branches in the fire (Eccl. 7:6). Joyful for the moment, but then the moment is gone. Jesus, the joy of John's life, offers you laughter that will know no end. Will you allow him to increase in your life this Advent season, even as you decrease? Will you make way in your heart today for him to reign as king? As the psalmist reminds us so beautifully, one day in his courts is better than a thousand elsewhere (Ps. 84:10).

Advent Prayer

Jesus, let me know the joy of following you this Advent season. Keep my eyes fixed on you, the Author and Perfecter of my faith. For the joy set before you, you endured the cross, scorning its shame, so that you might sit at your Father's right hand forever in glory (Heb. 12:2). Father, your ways are beyond my ways, seeing from beginning to end. Help me to trust in your word, in your promises, and in the hope of my salvation, and not in the enticements of this world. Do not let me fall away from you. Keep me in the palm of your hand. Help me to persevere, to run the race with joy and endurance. I want to find my joy in you.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12

Meant for Good

Genesis 50:15–20 - When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servant of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

The Old Testament and the law it introduced were "a shadow of things to come" (Heb. 10:1). The story of Joseph demonstrates that well. Joseph, although a true historical figure, was a "type" or "shadow" of Christ in the Old Testament. In other words, his life and actions and the results from them pointed to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would fulfill completely and permanently that to which the life and story of Joseph could only point.

The story of Joseph ranks high among my favorite stories of the Old Testament. Odds are, if you know the story, it ranks high for you as well. For me, it competes neck and neck with the story of Prince Jonathan and his good friend, David son of Jesse, from the book of 1 Samuel. It has many of the same elements of the story of the man Joseph prefigures: forgiveness, joy, disappointment, patience, betrayal. But to me the clearest single point is sovereignty—God's sovereignty. I know what you are probably thinking: "Pastor Jym sure loves that word." It is true, I do love that word, but really, is there any other way to describe the story of Joseph or the story of Jesus than to declare that God was in control? From beginning to end God is watching over and directing the events in both men's lives. By the end of Joseph's story, after violence, slavery, imprisonment, and eventual vindication, Joseph can say, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." The same is true of the life of Jesus. What men intended for evil, God intended for good. For the violent act that brought Jesus to his death is the very same act that brought salvation to many, and was a triumph for Jesus. Both stories bring to light the fact that, for those called by God, we are never outside of his activity in our lives to bring about his good purposes.

The story of Joseph is the story of a young man who has to endure thirteen years of deprivation and shame because it served God's purposes. It is one thing for a preacher to tell you that God is working out his plan in your life when you are struggling physically, mentally, or spiritually. A "hang in there" at that point can often sound disingenuous and even uncaring. It is an entirely different lesson when someone who has been through those very trials tells you the same thing. Joseph lived those trials and still believed God was in control. We always seem to believe that God is in control when things are going well. Can we believe it when God has chosen to take us through the valley of despair?

Jesus went through the valley. His life demonstrated definitively God's purpose through suffering in a way that Joseph's life could only prefigure—the perfect God/Man who, through no sin or fault of his own, willingly laid down his life so that God's purpose might be fulfilled—to bring about the perfect sacrifice for sin so that sinners might become saints. God was working everything toward the good in Jesus' life—our good—as he was doing in the life of Joseph as well. We want to believe it, but it is hard to swallow when things are going poorly. We simply cannot see things as God sees them (from beginning to end) and therefore, everything looks forlorn to us in the midst of trials. It so often sounds trite when we quote Romans 8:28 to others in the midst of their pain, and we should be careful not to wield it like a club, but the simple fact of the matter is that God is working good in the lives of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. We may not see it in our lifetime, but that does not make it any less true.

For non-believers, this is the epitome of ignorance and false hope. For believers, it is the power of God in our lives. Now we see only as if through clouded glass. Then, in eternity, we shall see face to face. What a glorious day that will be.

Advent Prayer

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. Kept in heaven for us, who by faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3–5). Father, I want to trust you in good times and bad. To believe that you are working for good in my life. Help me to see through my own desperation to your truth.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13

All the Families of the Earth

Genesis 12:1–3 - Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

A comedian who was popular when I was growing up made a very good living running punch lines off a single phrase; “I gotta tell ya’, I get no respect, no respect at all...” That is a phrase which Abram could likely use as well if he were around today.

Abram (soon to be known as Abraham) was the oldest of his father Terah’s sons. He was raised in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of Babylon. For reasons unknown to us (but known to God) Abram is called by God to leave his home and his family and journey to the land of Canaan, where God will bless him and all his many descendants. And he does it! While living with his wife and nephew in Haran, Abram packs his things and moves, leaving behind his identity, his father’s family, and his home to obey a God that has promised to bless him if he will obey. God underscores the importance of this trust by taking from Abram almost every form of human support known in his day. He set out on a one way trip to an unknown land in obedience to a God he did not yet know. The amount of courage and faith this would take is largely ignored today. Ask yourself, would you do it? If you honestly believed that God had told you to leave everything and move to a distant country, without explanation, would you not question your motives, your hearing, and maybe even your sanity? How about your family and friends, what would they think of you? Maybe God showed something to Abram to prove his existence and his power, something which the Bible does not record. It is possible, and yet, it is also possible that he did not; that Abram had only as much information as we are told about in Scripture. Either way, he was a man of great faith, and I gotta tell ya’, he really doesn’t get much respect.

So Abram moves to Canaan, where God has promised to make his name great and to bless him so that his descendants will in turn bless the nations. Here is an interesting point that we should consider. Abram’s wife Sarai (soon to be known as Sarah—lots of extra names in the Bible!) is barren. She had no children, and had

no hope of having children, and yet God speaks of Abram's many descendants. Abram is looking forward to a future hope, apparently believing that God will do something about Sarai's barrenness, which he in fact does. So Abram, a great man of faith, would become a father of many nations, and in Abram the families of the earth would be blessed. Eventually, Sarai would conceive and give birth to Isaac, who would be the father of Jacob, who would father the sons who would comprise the twelve tribes of Israel. Finally, in the fullness of time, a son would be born to Abram, in a manner of speaking, who would bless the nations in a way that Abram could see only as the shadow of a distant hope.

The New Testament begins with the gospel of Matthew, and the gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy that starts with Abram and leads to Jesus Christ, the great offspring of the great man of faith through whom God would bless the nations. Abram's direct descendants, the people of Israel, never fulfilled the promise to bless the nations, save for a few recorded instances in the Old Testament where non-Jewish men and women were blessed by a Jew. But now, in Jesus Christ, the nations of the earth have truly been blessed. "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also" (Rom. 3:29). In Christ the nations of the earth are blessed by the Jewish Messiah, the promised offspring of Abram. This Advent season we renew our anticipation for the coming of Messiah, the hope not only of Israel, but of America, Great Britain, China, Kenya, and every nation that has ever existed or will exist. We are blessed through the blessing given to Abram so many years ago. It is right for us to honor Abram, but even more right for us to honor his offspring, Jesus the Messiah. In him the families of the earth may know the blessing of eternal life.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen (1 Tim. 1:17).

Advent Prayer

Father, I thank you for the fulfilled promise to Abram, that through him the families of the earth would be blessed. I am a recipient of that blessing, and I rejoice today in the hope I now know in your son Jesus. Today, make me a giver of that same blessing. As I have received, so now I choose to bless others through Jesus. As you have blessed me, let me bless others today.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14

The Desired of Nations

Haggai 2:6-7 - "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD Almighty.'"

Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation. This always baffled me a bit as a child growing up in the Roman Catholic Church. When the priest introduced the season on the first Sunday of Advent by talking about our preparation and anticipation, it seemed odd to me to be preparing for and anticipating an event that we knew had already unfolded. Jesus has come, after a thousand years of anticipation; the Messiah was born and lived and ministered and died. Why the anticipation now? Here is the answer.

We anticipate and prepare in the Advent season in at least two ways. First, we invite God to reveal himself to us in a deeper way through his son Jesus during this season. We can do this anytime, of course, but being human and therefore naturally lazy, most of us are helped by setting aside a specific season of our year to focus more intently. Although religious holidays in our culture have been profoundly secularized, their original intent was to do just that; sharpen our focus for a day or short period of time so as to keep us from becoming dull in our spiritual lives. It is highly symbolic, and yet as Advent, or Christmas, or Lent, or Resurrection Sunday approaches, we simply awaken our minds and our hearts to the significance of that day or season and ask God to take us deeper into our faith and into our relationship with Christ. We prepare not for his physical arrival, but for his spiritual arrival in our hearts. Second, Advent is not merely a time to look back, it is also a time to look forward. Advent is a season to prepare not only spiritually for Jesus' arrival in our hearts, but for his arrival in the clouds, at his second Advent. The Scriptures remind us often that Christ will indeed return physically (as he arrived physically), not as a babe this time, but as a king. We are encouraged to prayerfully anticipate that day and to be found ready. Do we not as Christians believe the ancient creed: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again"? We should, and Advent helps us in that anticipation, as does our text for today's devotion.

More than once in Scripture God reminds us that he has shaken the nations in the past and will do so again with the arrival of Messiah, at both his first and second Advents (Hab. 3:6; Joel 3:16; Matt. 24:30; Heb. 12:26-27). Our text for today invites us to anticipate Christ's second Advent, when the riches of the nations will fill the heavenly temple (which, incidentally, is revealed not as a structure, but as God himself and the "Lamb," Jesus Christ). The nations will bring their splendor (or their "treasures") into it. This is the desired of nations. Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer and man of God, saw in today's verse Christ's first Advent: "Come," he wrote, "Desire of Nations come, and fix in us thy humble home" in *Hark, the Herald, Angels Sing*. Although the sentiment is beautiful and profoundly compelling, our text for today is likely not speaking of Christ's incarnation during that first Advent, but rather his exaltation in Heaven. The English Standard Version translates the second part of this text this way: "And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory..." God will indeed fill his "house" with glory, and the treasures of all the nations will flow into it. This is a future event, built upon the reality of a past event, the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus knew glory with the Father before his incarnation, he glorified the Father in the incarnation, and God will glorify his Son irrefutably at his second Advent.

Revelation 21 helps us round out our text for today. Speaking of the New Jerusalem, our eternal home, it tells us: "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their treasures into it." What a glorious day that will be, when Jesus has returned at his second Advent and set things right, ushering in an eternal kingdom. So yes, "Come Desire of Nations come, fix in us thy humble home!" Jesus is indeed our treasure, and all that God has given to us in Christ we will lay back at his feet. He has come, he has shaken the earth and its kingdoms, and he will do so yet again when he returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. Even so, *Maranatha*, come quickly Lord!

Advent Prayer

Jesus, come into my life this Advent season. Show yourself to me anew. Plant deeply within me a desire for you; to know you and to make you known. I also pray for your quick return. I want to be found ready, Lord. Use this day, and this season, to draw me to yourself. Arrive in my heart afresh today.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15

The Sin-Eater

Isaiah 53:4-6 - Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

British folklore speaks of the sin-eater, a man who would arrive at a home where a death had taken place and for a price of six-pence eat a ceremonial meal of bread and beer, consuming them on behalf of the deceased and thus taking upon himself the sin of the dead with an incantation and an offering of exchange. The hope was that in so doing, the dead could rest in peace and would have no reason to haunt the living. The tale makes for good campfire lore, but it holds no truth. Jesus said, “What can a man give in exchange for his soul?” There is no man or woman, living or dead, who can exchange their merit for your sin. “It is appointed for man to die once,” the Bible tells us, “and then the judgment.” A hope resting on the appeal of a man or woman who will speak to God on our behalf, whether it be priest, prophet or potentate, is a hope that will surely fail. There has always been and will only be one sin-eating Savior, the God-Man Jesus Christ, and Isaiah the prophet tells us about him in our passage for today.

The concept of propitiation or substitution for sin holds little appeal today, even among many evangelicals. A God who demands justice, even sacrifice, in order for sin to be dealt with is a monster in some eyes. No, better to say that a God of love simply looks past our sin, or better yet, does not recognize sin because sin does not exist. This is a more palatable God. God exchanges his own Son for human souls? God pours out his wrath against sin on his own beloved, turning away from him at his greatest hour of need? Is not this more akin to the gods we read about in legend? “If God is like this, then he is not worthy of our praise or adoration, but only our spite or, at best, our pity” is the pithy, educated response we get today. Be that as it may, the Bible speaks clearly in both Testaments of God’s wrath against sin and the necessity of sacrifice in order for it to be atoned for—no place more clearly than here in our text for today from the prophet Isaiah. Here we see clearly the substitutionary nature of Christ’s suffering and death on behalf of those he loved. “He was pierced.” For what? “For our transgressions.” “He was crushed.” Why? “For our iniquities.” The punishment that was ours to bear, and ours alone, was placed upon him, and by the wounds that he suffered we are

made whole. All of us, you and me, have by our own choosing walked away, to do unto ourselves what we want to have done. We are like wandering sheep, ignorant and blithely walking toward our own destruction. Yet God, in his love and justice, has laid on his Son (a Son who would be known as the “Good Shepherd”) the sin of all those who have turned to him for hope and restoration. Stricken by God indeed, smitten by him and afflicted, all for the sins of someone else. This is the definition of substitutionary sacrifice, a term that, although rarely spoken of today, speaks the painful truth of what is required for sinners to become saints. C. H. Spurgeon reminds us, “How strange that where misery was concentrated, mercy reigned: where sorrow reached her climax, weary souls find rest.” Strange to our ears, but not strange to Scripture; it is the clarion call of salvation from Genesis to Revelation.

How will you respond to such news? What happens in your heart when you hear the gospel condensed to one sentence in Second Corinthians 5:21? “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Does your heart rejoice at such news? Do you fall down on your knees and cry out, “Thank you God for saving a sinner like me!” or do you balk at the notion? “My sin? And what sin do I have that is any worse than the next person’s? What kind of God is this, that he would cause one to suffer who did not deserve the suffering?” If this is your response, where will you turn to be set free?

Maybe you do not feel you need freedom. So be it. The day will bring everything to light, and that day is coming for all of us. Maybe you feel grateful for a Savior who willingly laid down his life for your sin, but believe your sin to be too gross, too graphic, and too frequent to be forgiven. This is simply not true. “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and purify us from all ungodliness” (1 John 1:9). The word “all” there is wonderfully universal; it means “every sinful act.” We all need a sin-eater, friends, and he has come to take up your sins and to carry your sorrows. Call on his name today.

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time...” (Eph. 1:7-10).

Advent Prayer

Father, I accept the sacrifice of Jesus for my sin, a sacrifice that is acceptable to you. Save me from myself, I pray. Free me today.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16

Free From Accusation

Hebrews 2:14–15 - Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Our passage for today brings together the purpose for Jesus' Advent from both the beginning of his ministry and the end. The Incarnation is about God the Son taking on flesh and submitting himself to the frailties of human existence and the horrors of human death. In so doing, he brought about the hope we now have—a hope that our slavery to the fear of death need have mastery over us no longer. Jesus' crucifixion dealt a death blow to the devil, who holds in his hands the power of fear and death.

The Gospel of John begins by telling us that those who put their trust in Jesus, those who believe in his name, have been given the right to be called “children of God.” In other words, we become the spiritual offspring of our Savior—Jesus. This is a truth foretold in Isaiah 8:18 and 53:10. Therefore, the “children” in our passage for today are those who have come to place their hope in Jesus. This tells us that Jesus came to save his children, and to do so, it was necessary for him to be like them—to share in their humanity. This demonstrates the great humility of our Savior, that though he was in fact found in the form of God (i.e. he is God), he did not grasp hold of that equality in such a way as to refuse to take upon himself the saving mission. Instead he “made himself nothing,” Philippians 2:7 tells us, and took on the form of a servant that he might be born in the likeness of men.

Jesus' rescue mission had as a goal the specific application of salvation to his children, those who would believe in his name. Now it is absolutely true that “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son” (John 3:16), but the Scriptures also tell us that his mission was to “gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:52). And so it appears that God's intention was to offer Christ to everyone, and yet to effect in particular the salvation of his children, those who have placed their faith in his Son (John 17:3; 1 Tim. 4:10). Therefore, when our passage for today speaks of the “children” for whom the Savior would put on flesh and blood to save, it is referring back to v. 13, the passage just prior to our reading for today, which says,

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.” He came to save his people.

The Bible makes it clear that Jesus has existed throughout eternity as the second Person of the Godhead, and that through his agency all things were created (Col. 1:16). Because God cannot die to save sinners, Jesus—the God-Man—did that very thing. He was born to die. We celebrate Christmas each year because we celebrate Good Friday every year. Jesus was sent on a mission, a mission he took on willingly, with great compassion for his creation and in perfect obedience to the Father. He submitted to death, and not just any death, but death on the cross, as the apostle Paul reminds us in Philippians 2. His purpose, our passage for today tells us, was to deliver his children who were bound to death under the rule of Satan and to free them from both the fear and penalty of death. He did so by covering our sin with his shed blood and removing the wrath of God from our lives. Satan no longer has dominion over us and no grounds for accusation. “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies, who is he that condemns?” (Rom. 8:33). He justifies now not via some arbitrary edict that is not bound in reality, but through the physical sacrifice of Jesus (Col. 1:20–21). Our enemy is the great accuser of all those for whom Christ’s death has taken away all fear. He continues to accuse, but God has turned a deaf ear to him. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Our enemy is a prowling lion, looking for someone to devour. For God’s children, his bark is now worse than his bite. He has become the great hound of hell whose teeth have been plucked out. Our sin is his greatest weapon, and that weapon has been stripped from him. He cannot accuse us anymore, which is one of the great blessings of the gospel that we have come to believe. “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

Advent Prayer

Father, I am thankful that in Jesus the light of the gospel has dawned. Your word tells us that he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. But he bore our grief and pain in his flesh on the cross, washing away our sin by his blood. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and by his wounds we are healed. I am thankful today that Jesus did that for me, and in doing so, gave me the right to be called a child of God. Take away, dear Lord, my fear of death.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17

A Sudden Appearance

Malachi 3:1–2 - Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But 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.

The role of the coming Messiah (“the Lord whom you seek”) in Malachi’s prophecy for today is twofold. First, he will follow up on the ministry of his messenger (revealed in the New Testament to be John the Baptist—Matt. 11:7–19) who prepared the way for Jesus by calling the people to repentance and baptizing them as a sign of their return to God. He followed up on John’s ministry by calling sinners to repentance and showing them the way to live a righteous life. As John himself had declared, he (John) could only baptize with water, but Jesus would baptize with fire and with the Holy Spirit. Hence, he is like a refiner’s fire, which is used to burn away the dross from the gold, leaving only the valuable element behind. Jesus pointed out the sin in people’s lives, not out of anger or hatred, but out of a loving desire to see them purified and at peace. Second, he became like a fullers’ soap to others, judging them for their lack of repentance and hardness of heart. Fullers’ soap was made of lye and was a harsh treatment applied to clothing to remove dirt and stains. When the washing was over, the clothing would be laid over rocks and then wrung and beaten until clean. The Messiah’s ministry was a cleansing ministry.

Although Jesus’ ministry in Galilee and Judea was well known in those regions for over two years, he in many ways flew “under the radar,” moving about regularly and leaving areas where he was becoming too popular. Although the crowds were large, Jesus preferred a ministry geared toward teaching his disciples in quieter locations, and when the crowds became boisterous or overly demanding, he simply moved on. That all changed “suddenly” when Jesus appeared at the temple to inaugurate the last week of his life and ministry (known as “Passion Week”). Jesus approached Jerusalem riding on a donkey, in fulfillment of prophecy, to the cheers of the crowds who cried out, “Hosanna to the son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Matthew tells us in his Gospel that when Jesus entered the city through the gates, the “whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’” Jesus then entered the temple of the Lord and immediately began his cleansing activity, driving out money changers and those selling birds and animals for sacrifice, thus

purifying his temple. The blind and the lame came to him and were healed, and even children were crying out their praises to him. The whole city was in an uproar because the One the people had been seeking their whole lives, the “Lord,” the “messenger of the covenant,” had finally arrived, and a thousand years of pent-up expectations were being released.

I still remember the excitement of my newfound faith. God revealed Christ to me in 1979. That’s a long time ago. Back then they called a new Christian’s excitement “being on fire for the Lord.” It was actually a fairly good descriptor. Like the people of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, I had been anticipating something, looking for hope, notwithstanding my loving family and pleasant small-town surroundings. Something was missing in my life. And then, by the kindness and mercy of God, Jesus appeared suddenly to me and my life was changed. God quickly began a work in me (like a refiner’s fire) and I began to see immediate results. Although time has dimmed the excitement, the fire still burns in me, more than four decades later.

How about you? Did God move suddenly upon you, or did you come to acknowledge his presence and lordship early on through the upbringing of Christian parents? There is no shame in that; in fact, it is something to rejoice in. God did not have to use the fullers’ soap on you, but was gentle and persistent until your young mind accepted the universal truth that God is Lord over his creation. But now, like me, you may need to examine yourself to make your calling and election sure. Jesus lost many “fans” during his ministry; some undoubtedly became those clamoring for his execution. They got caught up in the initial excitement of his appearing, but when he began his work of purifying they wanted none of it. We are a demanding people, always seeking a new batch of excitement from God, never satisfied with his ongoing presence and cleansing in our lives. May God give us grace to remove that hypocrisy and be constant in our devotion to him, that when Jesus appears suddenly again, we may be found ready and waiting.

Advent Prayer

Lord, in my life be glorified this day. Come to me and cleanse me of my lack of desire for you. Appear to me this Advent season and burn away the dross, setting my heart on fire for you. You have said; “Seek my face.” My heart says to you, “Your face, LORD, do I seek” (Ps. 27:8).

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18

The Year of the Lord's Favor

Luke 4:18–19 - The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus was feeling strong. He had recently inaugurated the start of his official ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan River and then, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he journeyed into the Judean wilderness for a 40-day fast from food as a preparatory step to the start of his ministry. While in the wilderness he was met by his adversary, Satan, who tempted him three times to take a shortcut to the fulfillment of that ministry. After successfully defending himself against the devil (by the use of Scripture), he returned to the region of Galilee, to his hometown of Nazareth, and there, “in the power of the Spirit,” he went into the Jewish synagogue for a Sabbath day’s worship. Luke tells us in his Gospel that Jesus was honored with the Scripture reading for that particular service, and having been handed the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, he read from the passage that is our devotional text for today (Luke quotes Jesus reading from Isaiah 61:1–2).

The text you read for today is the Messiah’s mission statement. As always, the prophecy from Isaiah had a context and fulfillment of its own in Isaiah’s day—most likely the impending freedom that Israel would one day experience from the oppression of the Babylonians—but it is clearly the words of the messianic servant, whom Isaiah has quoted before in his prophecy. In other words, this is a messianic passage, or a passage of Old Testament Scripture that points to the person and work of the promised Messiah. Jesus himself recognized this fact, for Luke tells us that when he had finished his reading for that Sabbath day he handed the scroll of Isaiah back to the synagogue attendant and sat down, with all the eyes of the congregation fixed upon him. He then said to them, much to their chagrin, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” His hometown crowd did not respond well to his proclamation that the day of the Messiah had arrived. They rewarded his honesty by driving him out of town to a nearby cliff with the intention of throwing him off. Luke tells us, however, that Jesus simply walked through the crowd and on his way. Jesus would lay down his life for the sin of the world, but in God’s timing, not the timing of a few furious townspeople.

We are now living in the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus was not speaking of a calendar year, but a season—an age, if you will—when the gospel message of salvation through Christ alone will be proclaimed to all who will listen. His quote from Isaiah has as its backdrop the Jewish year of Jubilee, when all debts were canceled, slaves set free, and properties returned to their original owners. It was a year of celebration. Jesus, however, announces an age of proclamation. As the apostle Paul would say later, “I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, today is the day of salvation!” The time will come, and is now hastening upon us, when the proclamation will cease and the judgment begins. Jesus left off the tail end of Isaiah's thought in the passage he read, which reads in full: “to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor *and the day of vengeance of our God...*” He left it off because that was not to come in his day, but in a future day. In his day, and in our day, all enjoy the Lord's favor, Jew and Gentile alike.

We have spoken enough over the past few days in this devotional about sin and judgment; let us this day enjoy the Lord's favor. Jesus came to set captives free, to bind up the brokenhearted, to give sight to the physically and spiritually blind. We could all use some of that, right? What has you in bondage today? In what area of your life do you need your eyes opened to reality? How might Jesus soothe your heart on this day? If you know Christ, God has favored you in this season. If you happen to be reading this devotional and you do not know peace with God, then know that the desire of his heart is to favor you, to open your eyes to the reality of life everlasting and hope for today and tomorrow. This is the reason that Jesus came. Isaiah showed us the early shadow; Jesus proclaims to us the present reality.

In Jesus' “high priestly prayer,” recorded for us in John 17, he prays thus to the Father: *The hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* And so the hour has come upon us friends. We live in a day of jubilee. The Lord's favor is upon us.

Advent Prayer

Father, favor me with your presence today. Open my eyes so that I can see through a heart of faith. Make your light shine into my darkness. Give me the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Bind up my heart and make it yours, and use me today as a living example of the favor of God.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19

The Slaughter of the Innocents

Matthew 2:18 - A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.

One of the great tragedies of living in a fallen world is not only our sin, but other people's sin. The amount of collateral damage caused by other people's sin in our lives, and our sin in their lives, is at times staggering. Consider how many families have been devastated since the invention of the automobile when people combine the volatile mix of alcohol with their driving. By no fault of their own, children, parents, and spouses have been taken from many lives because some person felt they had a right to drink and drive. How many children grow up in broken homes because a parent has decided that faithfulness is not worth pursuing? How many nations have been destroyed by one despotic ruler? A question we might rightfully ask those whose destructive lifestyles collide with our lives is; "How much is your sin going to cost me?"

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was a momentous, earth-shattering, time-altering, intensely anticipated event. It is worth rejoicing over, which is what we do during this Advent season. But it was not good news to everyone. King Herod, ruler over Palestine during Jesus' formative years, got wind of the event and was determined to put an end to his young life before it could interfere with his own plans for a long-lasting dynasty. Matthew tells us in his gospel that when Herod heard that traveling Magi from the east were in Palestine looking for "the one who is born king of the Jews," he inquired of the teachers of the law as to where the Messiah was prophesied to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him, quoting from Micah 5:2. Herod then called the Magi to report to him when they had found the boy, feigning that he too wished to go and worship him. When the Magi found Jesus some time later, his mother and father were living in a home (not in the stable, as per the traditional Christmas story), and they worshiped Jesus as Messiah there. Having been warned in a dream not to report to Herod, they left for their home countries. Joseph and Mary also received an angelic visit warning them to flee to Egypt, because the king was searching for the child. Herod, realizing that the Magi were not returning to him, flew into a rage and ordered that all the male children in and around the vicinity of Bethlehem two years old and under be put to the sword. This violent man was an absolute monarch, and sadly, his orders were carried out.

Thus, Matthew informs his readers, the prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled—Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they were no more. Ramah was a small village five miles from the city of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah’s day the city lay upon the path via which the Jewish captives (resulting from the Babylonian invasion of 605-586 BCE) would have travelled on the road to exile. “Rachel” was a personification for the nation of Israel, and Israel’s mourning was great in Jeremiah’s day after the fall of Jerusalem, as it was in Jesus’ early days after the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem.

And so one man’s power-hungry attempt to hold on to his puny kingdom led to a tragic loss of life, intense sorrow, and Satan’s first attempt to thwart the ministry of Messiah. The plan failed, but not without a massive amount of terror. Sin is devastating, even when it is not our own sin. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, and sometimes justice is denied to us in this world. Not all wrongs are made right in the land of the living, but God has promised us that a day is coming when righteousness will shine like the noonday sun, and perfect justice will be known. What is ailing this world will one day be made right. In the meantime, even the long-awaited joyful news of the birth of Messiah brought with it pain and suffering for some. Suffering cannot always be attributed to our own sin. So it is in our world. Our hope lies not in the mistaken notion that nothing bad happens to good people, but that nothing happens to any of us of which God is not in control, and has not already ordained to take place. Yes, even events that we find tragic. We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

The good news of the gospel is good partly because the bad news of life in this fallen world is at times so bad. But a new day is dawning, and the break of that day was the Incarnation of the Son of God. The morning mist is dispersing, the sun is peaking over the mountains and the warmth of that day is drawing near.

Advent Prayer

Father, give me a heart that trusts in you, even in the face of tragedy and personal loss. When other people’s sin causes grief in my life, help me to respond faithfully, and wake me up to the reality of how my sin effects others. Keep me faithful to you, and keep my eyes on you even when things do not go my way.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20

After Darkness...Light!

1 John 2:7-9 - Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

“The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining,” said John the apostle. And he was absolutely right. Darkness passes away in our lives because the curse of the fall is broken in Jesus the Messiah, and the hope of redemption abounds. In Advent, we look back with anticipation and celebrate that reality. But we must at least stop to ponder the truth that for redemption to take place, for spiritual darkness to become spiritual light, the Son of God had to die on a cross.

The light of Jesus did not shine simply due to his Advent. Messiah had arrived and the light was “among us” as Jesus performed his earthly ministry, to be sure. Part of the gospel story itself tells us that Jesus “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37). Jesus was the Light, and so his works were works filled with light. The light broke in among us in Jesus of Nazareth. But the light of hope in the gospel could only shine fully as a result of Jesus’ Passion (his agony on the cross). The cross is where hope was born for us, not the manger. The manger was but a means to the cross. The poet John Donne said it this way: *The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs but Christ was born a martyr. He found Golgotha, where he was crucified, even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then the straws were almost as sharp as the thorns after, and the manger as uneasy at first as the cross at last. His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas day and his Good Friday but the evening and morning of the same day.*

When the reformer John Calvin came to Geneva, Switzerland in 1536, he intended to stay only a short time. Calvin wanted to be a writer, but God had other plans for him. Geneva in 1536 was a fun-loving town, full of laziness, immorality, and all the vices common to human pleasure. The Reformation had just taken hold there, and the Bishop of the city church had been dismissed. A fiery reformer by the name of Guillaume Farel had been preaching

in the old church. Hearing that John Calvin was in town, he went to him and begged that he would stay and help reform the city. Calvin said “no.” Farel resorted to a different approach; he demanded that Calvin stay in the name of Christ. The city was in darkness, and Calvin was God’s answer to bring the light. Calvin relented, and over the next twenty-eight years, under the preaching, teaching and leadership of Calvin, Farel, and Theodore Beza, Geneva became a new city and a beacon of hope during the Reformation. After countless years in darkness, light had dawned.

Has the light dawned for you? Today, take a few moments and remember that Jesus died for you. I know that likely is not a new concept for you, but we tend to ignore the cross and embrace the manger at this time of year. There is no need to be morose about it—the cross is our joy! Nevertheless, it was a brutal reality for Jesus to consider his whole life, and then to endure at the end. Remember this bit about redemption from our passage for today as well; because the light is now shining in our lives, there is no longer any room for hatred. A demonstration of love to our brothers and sisters is a demonstration of our connection to the light. When we live this way we do not stumble, for the light is in our lives. When our lives are filled with bitterness and hatred we clearly demonstrate that the true light is not abiding in us. John tells us to love one another because Jesus tells us to love one another. This is no new commandment. Because we have the light of life living in us, we must shine forth that light. The newness of the commandment lies in the reality that we have now seen that light in Jesus. We love because he first loved us.

The psalmist tells us that in God there is found a fountain of life. It is in his light that we see light (Ps. 36). We are not originators of light, only reflectors. We see light in Christ, we fill it up to the brim, and then we let it overflow into the lives of those around us.

Advent Prayer

Father, I pray that the light of Jesus would shine in my own life. Your word reminds me that if I claim to have fellowship with him yet I walk in the darkness, I lie and the truth is not in me. I do not want to be a liar, nor do I want to be self-deceived. If I walk in the light, as you are in the light, I have fellowship with other believers and the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin. That is my desire, Lord. Work in me, so that the darkness in my own life consistently passes away while the light of Christ in me shines brighter day by day.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21

God's Sign—Immanuel

Isaiah 7:14 - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Matthew, in his Gospel, tells us that this passage from Isaiah, written some 700 years prior to Matthew's time, prophesies the birth of Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 1:23). He goes on to translate the name of this child for us: "Immanuel" means "God with us." But questions arise when we look at this prophecy, since God speaking through Isaiah seems to interpret it as a sign that will be fulfilled in his the prophet's own lifetime when he says later, "For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted." It therefore seems likely that this sign is fulfilled first in the birth of Isaiah's own son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Yep, it is a funny name meaning "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens." It is a short-term fulfillment, demonstrated in the destruction of Damascus and Samaria, enemies of Israel, whose cities would be destroyed and whose spoil would be carried away before Isaiah's child was able to speak. This was the partial fulfillment of the prophecy, but the greater, fuller fulfillment awaited the day when Immanuel, God with us, would come as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (see Isa. 9:6).

God gives a sign to Isaiah, but he does not leave him hanging. Isaiah and the king of Israel at the time, Ahaz, are being threatened by two kings, and they are seeking relief. God tells Ahaz that Israel will not be deserted, that he will rescue them. He offers Ahaz the opportunity to ask him for any sign he might wish to demonstrate that God's promise is true, since Ahaz has already put his trust in deliverance not in the Lord but in the mighty Assyrians, whose favor he has purchased with a large payment of gold. Ahaz refuses, hypocritically placing his virtue above the Lord's by quoting Scripture and insinuating that he would never put the Lord to the test. In response, God offers a sign of his own choosing, the birth of a son to a young maiden (Isaiah's wife) who will not be more than a few years old before God's deliverance is demonstrated. But God has a bigger picture in mind here. His consummate sign will be the birth of a child to a virgin, and this child will not only deliver relief from the kings of this world but relief from our two greatest enemies, sin and death. He will be no ordinary child, but will in fact be God dwelling with us. He will

save us from our sins.

What sign are you looking for from God today? Do you have a lack of trust in God like King Ahaz of Israel? Do his promises sound less convincing than your own strategies for success? God's sign to you is the same sign he promised Ahaz, a child born to a virgin who would be to you—who can be to you—God with you. Ahaz was afforded a simple fulfillment in his own lifetime, but his ultimate gift would also be that same child. You and I have the pleasure of knowing that gift now, not 700 years in our future. God's sign to you is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and can be immediately applied.

We celebrate in this Advent season the child who was born to us, whose name is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We await him, even though we may already know him, by seeking to know him more and more. "To know him, and yet still be looking for him, is the soul's paradox of love," A. W. Tozer tells us. He means this: It seems nonsensical to look for what you have already found. This truth notwithstanding, we are encouraged by God to continue to seek Christ even though we now know him, for we can never plumb the depths of his love, his grace, his truth, etc. We seek him, the child born of the virgin some 2,000 years ago, who now, for most of you reading this devotional, already resides in your heart and soul. But surely that is not enough. To know him is to love him and to want to know more of him. Isaiah and Ahaz saw the early shadow; you and I see him as he is. Now we must seek to know him more intimately, more personally, more fully.

Lord Jesus, make thyself to me a living bright reality. More precious to faith's vision keen, than any outward object seen. More near, more intimately nigh, than even the sweetest earthly tie.
- Charlotte Elliot

Advent Prayer

Father, let me know the joy of following you this Advent season. Keep my eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of my faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, so that he might sit at your right hand forever in glory (Heb. 12:2). Your ways are beyond my ways, seeing from eternity past to endless future. Help me to trust in your word, your promises, and the hope of my salvation, and not in the enticements of this world. Set my heart firmly on you, and place in me a deep desire to know your Son more each day.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22

Broken Cisterns

Jeremiah 2:5-7, 13 - "What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?' I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce...My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

It is significant that we are described as being slightly lower than the angels rather than being slightly higher than the beasts. Our place and privilege is to be a mediating figure, but to be one who looks up rather than down. When we sever the tie that binds us to God and try to cast off God's rule, we do not rise up to take God's place, as we desire to do, but rather sink to a more bestial level.

-James Montgomery Boice

The fall has caused us to become bent creatures. The old fable of King Midas tells us that everything the king touched turned to gold. However, the perceived blessing proved, over time, to be a curse instead. Sharing his golden touch was a joy at the onset, until he realized that it was taking from him the very things he loved the most. The fall (see Genesis chapter 3) made us something we were never meant to be; scrutinizers of the works and gifts of God. Instead of accepting them with thanksgiving and adoration, we tend instead toward judgment and comparison. In the end, we prefer our own self-reliance over dependence upon God, even if the end product is laughable when held up to the beauty of what is offered. We want to give it our own touch, even when our touch has proven to turn blessings into curses.

You can hear the pain in this message from God through the prophet Jeremiah. God is offering his people living water that will never run dry. You can probably picture it in your mind's eye; a bubbling fountain of pure, cool water that is not only refreshing to taste, but healthy and life-giving as well. Instead, the people have walked away from the fountain, grabbed pick axes and shovels, and begun to dig out of the hard earth holes in which to form cisterns that will hold only putrid, stagnate water. Cisterns that will ultimately crack and fail. But that is the water they prefer! Why? Because it is the work of their own hands, and they do not owe anyone anything for it. If we do it our way, no one has the right to correct us, no one has the right to have any expectations of us. We become totally self-sufficient, or so we think. And so, as we grow sick from drinking polluted, putrid water, or cry out in

thirst because the very system we created for ourselves cannot actually sustain us, we curse God and die. This, when all along the offer is held out to us from a loving Father to come and drink to our heart's delight. *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost"* (Isaiah 55:1). This is a picture of you and me if we have grown hard-hearted and slapped the hand away that reaches out to offer us help. This is a picture of the fall.

You likely know that it does not have to be this way. The fall corrupted us totally, but not absolutely. We do not have to forsake God, and we do not have to do it our way. Your way and my way leads to death; it always has and always will. But if you walk in the fullness of the Spirit today, placing your hope in God, the fountain of living water, you will find relief from the fall. How do you do this? You remind yourself regularly that God is your source of hope and life—not your job, not your boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, your looks, your bank account, or your level of popularity. The Bible tells us that when we are weak, God is strong. Not the other way around. Yes, work hard at school, your job, your marriage, your friendships, but always remember that everything you have is a gift from God; even your trials. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, but always remember, it is God who works in you, to will and to act according to his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12–13). The more you rely on him, the more your reliance becomes a way of life, and the more he will work in and through you for his glory.

We need God, my friends, this is indeed a fact. It is not that we cannot live without him, but that we cannot live well without him. By "well" I do not mean healthy, or wealthy, or happy. I mean "well" in the biblical sense: Whole, at peace, wise, contented, reconciled and redeemed. Live well.

Advent Prayer

Father, help me to remember today that it is in you that I live and move and have my being. Take my thoughts captive, and bend them toward you. I want to not only trust in you, but to rely upon you as well. I have tried to make my own way and always find myself worse off in the end. I fall upon your mercy and grace today. Remind me that you are my great sustainer, and without you I can do nothing of lasting value. Teach me to trust you. Teach me to find my hope and purpose in you. Do not let me rely upon my own strength today to sustain me, but rather upon your power, your grace, your life giving water.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23

Eager Expectation

Romans 8:19-21 - *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it. In hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*

Nature is mortal; we shall outlive her. When all the suns and nebulae have passed away, each one of you will still be alive. Nature is only the image, the symbol. . .we are summoned to pass in through nature, beyond her, into the splendor she fitfully reflects. -C.S. Lewis

I look out my study window as I write this devotion and see the beauty of a late-fall evening. The moon lays on her back in her waning crescent phase, a sliver of light barely holding back the new moon. As I open the window the crisp air rushes in, with just a hint of old leaves on its waves. The sky is clear, stars peek through the false light of downtown Indianapolis, but I can imagine without much difficulty what it might have looked like before the discovery of electricity. Bursting forth in brilliant hues of light and color. God's creation is beyond splendid, even in its fallen state.

Creation, like you and me, awaits the approaching consummation: the good news that it will be reclaimed, renewed, and reborn. We are in a better state today than nature, since we know the effects of the glorious gospel revealed fully in Jesus Christ. We have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved. Creation, on the other hand, waits. The work of Jesus on the cross broke the curse of sin and death for us, but creation must await his second Advent for its renewal. And, in a somewhat common literary device employed in Scripture, creation is given human qualities. The apostle Paul tells us that it "waits in eager expectation," that it is "frustrated," not because it chooses to be, but because God makes it that way. We look forward, "beyond nature," as C.S. Lewis would say, to a renewed and rejoicing nature that has been liberated from its bondage to the cycle of the fall; a bondage to decay (we know this as the "law of entropy" or the "2nd law of thermodynamics"). We are not looking forward to an eternity on some distant planet, or in another dimension of time, but to an eternity in a new heaven and a new earth, reborn from the old and returned to her original glory, with no hint of the death and decay that once marked her (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

What is the creation waiting for according to Paul in Romans 8:19?

It awaits the day when the sons of God will be revealed. Who are the “sons of God?” If we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, we know that the sons of God are you and me—if we are led by the Spirit of God and redeemed through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:14; Galatians 4:4–7). Creation waits for those who have been born again through the hope of the gospel to be fully revealed when God makes all things new and we receive our resurrected bodies. Then, and only then, will creation know her new glory.

Way back in Genesis 3:17 we see creation take on its curse. It was not cursed because it did anything wrong—how could it? It was cursed because Adam (and Eve by association), the image-bearer of God and the steward of his creation, sinned. As a result of that catastrophic sin, creation “fell” with Adam, Eve, and their progeny. “Cursed is the ground *because of you*” were the words of God to Adam. On that day creation began to “groan, as in the pains of childbirth,” awaiting the day when it would be set free from its bondage (Romans 8:22). We may assume that part of that groaning is revealed to us through earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and other natural disasters. Weeds and thistles mark it too. Creation is not for us, but that will not always be the case.

Nevertheless, even here we see the hope of the gospel. Genesis 3:18–19 tells us that the ground “will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.” It will be hard work (judgment), even so, it will bring us life (gospel).

The good news is always waiting under the curse. And the good news is waiting in your life as well, friends. Advent is the preeminent time of year to remind us of this joyful fact. The angel Gabriel told Joseph to name Mary’s son “Jesus,” for he will save his people from their sins. Sin is the result of the curse, but God has provided an answer for it. “Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” we are told in Romans 5. Here lies the answer. Here is grace lurking not only under the curse but triumphing over it. And it is all due to Christ’s Advent. It is all due to Jesus.

Advent Prayer

Father, Thank you for the beauty of this planet in which you have placed us. Thank you even more for conquering death and the curse through your Son. Thank you for a gospel that triumphs!

CHRISTMAS EVE - FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24

Love Came Down

Galatians 4:4–7 - But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, an heir through God.

The Christian message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of reconciliation with God, hope of glory—because at the Father’s will Jesus became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later he might hang on a cross.
-J.I. Packer

The battle for the salvation of men and women was quickened at Bethlehem. Yes, Jesus had to endure much over the next thirty years, but the plan of God set into motion could not be thwarted. Satan tried to disrupt the plan first by Joseph’s hesitancy to wed Mary. Then he tried to provide no lodging for the family in Bethlehem, and then he tried the direct approach, dispatching him permanently through the hand of Herod. Finally, he attacked him in his ministry, trying to murder him numerous times at the hands of men, tempting him to circumvent God’s plan in the wilderness (Luke 4), and finally betraying him through Judas and nailing him to the cross with the help of the Jews and the Romans. None of his attempts were successful in the end. Every obstacle thrown at Jesus was used by God for the glory of Christ. He was in every sense of the word the triumphant child.

Take a moment to remember this Christmas Eve that what we are celebrating took place “when the fullness of time had come.” Jesus arrived not a moment too soon nor a moment too late; he was punctual to the hour. The time had come for human beings to be reconciled to their Creator. The prophecy of Genesis 3:15 was being fulfilled. The effects of the fall were about to be confronted head on by the Christ child. The creation would submit to him, the demonic realm would be confronted by him, human depravity and suffering would be eased by him, and death would be conquered by him. Mankind’s slavery to sin would be addressed, the purchase price for their freedom paid in full, and reconciliation with the Father secured. All of this came to pass due to the Father’s great love for his people. In Jesus Christ love truly came down to all of us.

The hope for peace between humankind and the Father is firmly

set. The Advent of Jesus made it secure, and nothing will ever come between us and God again if we have placed our hope in his Son. God does not change like shifting shadows. Jesus came, the writer of Hebrews tells us, once for all, and entered the holy place not by the blood of goats and calves but by his own blood, thus securing for us reconciliation with God and an eternal redemption. This is hard for us to imagine because we live in a world of constant change. We ourselves are constantly changing; physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually. But God does not change. He does not experience our insecurities nor our weak natures that are prone to a constant rising and falling. The Bible tells us that he is immutable—never given over to change—and we can be glad for that, because it tells us that we never have to wonder if Advent will have to be repeated, or if God will change his mind and shuffle the board, leaving us wondering how we might find peace with him again. C. H. Spurgeon said: “Consider what you owe to his immutability. Though you have changed a thousand times, he has not changed once.” Therefore, the Advent of Christ happens once, in the fullness of time. The death of Jesus was a one time transaction, which is why Jesus was able to rightfully proclaim from the cross—“It is finished!” Advent is the beginning of the end for the creation as we know it, for the effects of the fall, and for our alienation from God.

This Christmas Eve celebrate the coming of Christ, our reconciliation to the Father, and our adoption making us “sons” by committing yourself to him anew. Make it your goal to follow after him with a renewed zeal and faithfulness in 2022. Contemplate what his birth means for you. Christ came to save us from our sin and to bring us into communion with the Father as his heirs. He was also born a king and a ruler. Will he truly rule in your heart this coming year? Will he rule in your life regardless of the cost? Will he rule in your life even if no one else follows with you? Will he rule in your life even if you should face death this year? Take time today to commit your entire life to him. Finish out the year 2021 and usher in 2022 in peace with God.

A Christmas Eve Prayer

Father, with Advent 2021 now behind me, I pray that you would glorify yourself by making me more like your Son this coming year. Thank you for the Advent of Jesus. His name means “he saves” and I am thankful that he has saved me. I am thankful too for all that you have given me in this world for my enjoyment and satisfaction. May I be happy at the blessing of being called your child—loved by you, loving others, forgiven and forgiving because of the Advent of Jesus the Messiah.

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

- HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And thought how as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Till ringing, singing on its way
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men.”

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

LATIN HYMN - 12TH CENTURY

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of Hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine Advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight

O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height
In ancient times did'st give the law
In cloud and majesty and awe

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

Notes

Notes

*Lo, twas' once a silent night
Whence shepherds wakeful watched
Angelic hosts rejoiced
And with glad news took flight.*

*A newborn's birth proclaimed
God now sets things aright
Could but our hearts believe
Faith would give way to sight.*

- J. Gregory