



2018 Advent Devotions

Grace Lutheran Church, Tampa

Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room

Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room has been published for the last 16 years by the Christian Education department of Grace Lutheran Church of Carrollwood. Mary Ann Hamilton, member and then Council Chairperson for Christian Education, proposed that we publish our Advent book with thoughtful devotions from the people of Grace.

The booklet has seen some changes in format and distribution methods, but the purpose remains the same: to share the love of Christ with others as we journey through the Advent season.

Thank you to all those who shared their thoughts and prayers in this booklet. Through the years, your devotions and prayers have touched us and enriched our preparation for Christmas. Thanks also to Jeffrey and Nadine Anderson for editing and formatting the booklet.

We hope that you, our family and friends, enjoy these writings and that they enrich your prayer time during Advent. The devotions will be posted on our website at www.gracetampa.org and sent daily to people who receive our e-newsletters. They will also be posted to our Facebook page—Grace Lutheran Tampa.

Blessings to you and your family,

Deacon Nadine Anderson
Director of Christian Education

**Our mission is: to Know Christ
and to make Christ Known**

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The Rev. John S. Hillmer, Sr. Pastor

December 2

“ . . . When Jesus mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid . . .” Mathew 1: 18- 20

Have you ever considered how tough it must have been for Mary and Joseph to try to convince their friends and families that they were innocent of any poor behavior and that Mary's expected child had been conceived mysteriously? There probably had been plenty of people in town gossiping about how Joseph, who should have known better, had been deceived by a pretty girl and was being forced into marriage.

However, the story doesn't stop there! It seems that after many hours spent on his knees, an exhausted Joseph finally gave up what little control he thought he had and fell asleep. It was only then that he received a visit from a mystical being who assured him that his virgin bride-to-be would give birth to a child whom he was to love and nurture to fulfill a promise made by God centuries before. Although Joseph was a man of his time and had probably considered severing his relationship with Mary after learning of her pregnancy, God gave him the strength and wisdom to put his disbelief and fears on hold, ignore his friends' snickers, and take Mary as his wife.

A short time later, the couple must have been horrified to learn that, despite her advanced pregnancy, they were mandated by the Romans to travel to Joseph's ancestral home in Bethlehem, a small town about 100 miles from their home, to take a census. One hundred miles today might take less than two hours by car or bus on paved roads with gas stations and motels sprinkled along the way. But it probably took them a week or so to travel by foot and donkey on poorly defined, mountainous roads and, to make

matters worse, since there was no internet or computerized reservation system at that time, the weary couple was forced to beg for places to rest along the way. Adding to their tension was the fear that the baby would be born on the back of a donkey or alongside the road - which was why hay in a stable began to look quite appealing.

We all know the rest of the story: the baby was born in that stable. But far more important is the message that it was God who made it all come together through just ordinary people. And because of their faith and obedience to God's will, we are assured that we, too always have God's love and support – no matter what our crisis might be. During those times when we might forget that promise, we only need to remember the example set by Joseph and Mary all those years ago, who listened to the assurances delivered by angels, shepherds and wise men and, despite it being the scariest time of their lives, continued to walk in faith – a simple walk which changed the world forever.

Dear Lord, Help us to remember that even in the most stressful of times, you are there - guiding and loving us. Amen.

Judy Copeland

December 3

Our Hope Is Christmas

I look out my window and see a world in disarray. Disaster, calamity, destruction, and hatred abound. Where is the hope in all of this? We feel hopeless and lost. Lost in the darkness. Lost in the doubts. Lost in the fears. Lost to the world. We are the downtrodden. We are the weak. We are the sparrow. We are hurting, and the pain goes deep. A pain so deep we can barely stand it. Where is the hope in all of this? Why should we keep going?

In this day of wildfires, random shootings, discord, and hatred we need HOPE. The HOPE that comes from Jesus in the manger to Jesus on the cross. But where is this hope now? I cannot see it. I

cannot feel it. How can it be there? All I see and feel is pain, darkness, and despair. Where is the hope now?

The HOPE is here. We must look deep within to find it, but it is here all the same. It has always been here. We forget. We push it aside. But we must remember.

We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone. Psalm 33:20-23

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"
Jeremiah 29:11

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Isaiah 40:31

My HOPE is in Christmas. My HOPE is in Jesus. My HOPE is in us!

Dear Lord, Renew us with the hope found only in you so that we might share that hope with others. Amen.

Susan Nieland

December 4

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors. Luke 2:13,14

With my warped sense of humor, I cannot help but wonder if the members of this heavenly host each joined in as Tom Lehrer once said, "Each in their own key." The Psalmist has told us to make a joyful noise, not to be quiet if you are unsure of the tune.

As a teenager, I sang in the only choir at First Lutheran Church of Gray Manor. I lived in a community of workers from the Sparrows Point Steel Plant and Ship Yard which was owned by

Bethlehem Steel. Most people worked shift work as the plants operated 24 hours a day seven days a week. Thus an adult choir was impossible. One gentleman in the congregation took the psalmist to heart and would sing every hymn as loud as he could in a terrible monotone. In frustration one day I said rather loudly that I wished he would just keep quiet instead of ruining the music. The Choir Director / Organist, Miriam "Mom" Woolbert gave me the chewing out that I so richly deserved and told me that to God's ears his singing was more beautiful than any of ours in the choir.

As Paul Harvey would say to introduce the last item in his newscast, here is the rest of the story. Four years ago this past June at my sister Debbie's memorial service a 93-year-old Mr. Leo DeStefano was present. I opened the service with a medley of two of my sister's favorite songs. Nieces and nephews of Debbie also participated musically. The choir was made up of members of the Sweet Adelines chapter of which Debbie was a member. After the service as we shared a meal at a reception, I overheard Mr. DeStefano proudly tell the director of the Sweet Adelines that he was the reason that Debbie and many of us who grew up in that congregation learned to sing so well. His words, "They had to, so they could drown out my awful voice."

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the ability to speak and sing to your glory. Thank you for the rich musical history of our church and the opportunity to gather together in praise to you. May we never lose sight of the fact that every voice joined in praise to you is beautiful to your ears. Amen.

Allen Cheek

December 5

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which

transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7

In the fast-paced and sometimes scary world we live in, I love this message in Philippians because the message gives us a bit of a game plan for reducing anxiety, as we prepare the birth of Christ.

Rejoice. And then rejoice again. Rejoice always. I rejoice every time I have the opportunity to worship our Lord in word and sacrament. The word read and proclaimed, to taste the bread and wine, his body and blood and to dip my fingers in the baptismal waters and touch my forehead to remember my baptism. Such joy knowing that God loves me and you and watches over us. Find joy in prayer. Find joy in God's creation. Find God in the people we meet.

Be kind. Sometimes in the rush of life, we forget the power of a smile, a helpful hand, a kind word. Having to use a walker, I receive so many acts of kindness as strangers open doors for me or greet me with well wishes. The power of a small act of kindness. Find joy and kindness where you didn't expect to find it.

Be thankful. This Advent I am very thankful for the birth of our great-grandchild Aubree Elizabeth. Life goes on, and I thank God for this blessing and His blessings for our families and ourselves. A deep breath, a whispered thanks could help us prepare for Christmas.

Let's rejoice, be kind, be thankful and pray that we find our way to the peace of Jesus Christ this Advent.

Dear Lord, Thank you for all the joys you vividly make known to us in so many ways this Advent Season. Help us to remember your Son Jesus is the reason for the season. Amen.

Peace and joy
Anita Hans

December 6

Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth, and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. Jeremiah 33:14-16

In childhood, the season of Advent is lost on most of us. When I was a child, I had little regard for Advent. To me, it was the time before Christmas when we would light candles on a wreath, by the altar, in church on Sunday. Each week a new candle was lit, marking the four weeks leading to Christmas. Those four weeks were unbearably long! I have to admit that I was more into the commercial side of Christmas than the faith-based side back then. It's true! What kid isn't? I will also admit that my excitement grew as we finally lit that fourth candle. It meant Christmas, presents, and Santa were close at hand!

I remember seeing a commercial for Heinz Ketchup that was playing in the '70s. It showed an inverted bottle of Heinz Ketchup, pointed at a pile of French fries. To illustrate the thick nature of the ketchup, the contents barely oozed from the mouth of the bottle and slowly descended to the fries below. All this was happening while the popular song, "Anticipation," by Carly Simon, played in the background. It was a very effective commercial, emphasizing that good things come to those who wait, and of course Heinz Ketchup was to be considered a good thing.

Though I couldn't appreciate waiting for anything as a child, as I grew older I came to understand the significance of delayed gratification, the benefits of waiting and the beauty of anticipation. That's what Advent is all about – anticipating the grandest event in all of recorded history; waiting for the birth of a tiny child, born in Bethlehem, who would go on to become the savior of the world. What could be more worthy of waiting than that?

Dear Lord, We are blessed by your love and your gift of Christ Jesus as our Savior. Help us to remember that Advent is a time for us to anticipate what is to happen and to ponder the wondrous joys of Christmas as God becomes man to save us from our sinning ways. Let us be inspired by that great love so that we may love one another and bring peace to the world. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Bob Barry

December 7

Daily Trials...Eternal Triumph

"Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7

Have you noticed? Life sometimes throws us curves. As seasoned citizens, life seems more complicated than it did twenty, even ten years ago.

As many family members, friends, and neighbors die we are reminded that we have far fewer days on earth ahead of us than behind. Our monthly calendars display more doctor visits, dental appointments and prescription reorders than in our youth. We have our doctors on Speed Dial. Decisions become harder to make, uncertainty creeps into our minds, along with expanding waistlines and thinning hair -- all attempting to "rattle" us.

Daily trials? Sure. Eternal triumph? Certainly! With the coming of Christ and his ever-present Spirit, we have been given an internal peace that enables us to walk toward heaven with confident calm. With daily life crashing in on us, it is sometimes difficult to remain focused and relaxed; but the Bible is filled with promises and encouragement. Isn't it comforting to know that He will never leave us? Jesus has assured us numerous times to "not be afraid, for He is with us."

"Heavenly Father, thank you for all the promises you have given us, for reminding us every day to be still and know that you are God. Thank you for never leaving us, especially in our darkest hours. Mostly, thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ so that we may have eternal life. Amen."

Anita Meints

December 8

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. Matthew 2:10

The beauty of the heavens and the twinkling stars play an important role in the wonder and glory of the Christmas story. The shepherds in the fields on that starry night heard the news of Christ's birth from the angels. The Wise Men were guided to the manger by a star.

Several years ago I found myself feeling sad that my three precious great nephews live out of state, and my husband and I missed them. One clear night while out on a run, I looked up at the beautiful clear Carrollwood sky and realized I was blessed to be looking at the same sky as my family. I have told them all since that night that when we miss each other just look to the skies and feel the closeness God has given us through His beautiful world.

Christmas also can be a time of sadness if one is separated from a family member either by distance or death. Take a moment to look to the skies as the Shepherds, and Wise Men did so long ago and feel comfort. Rejoice, cherish Christmas memories and take a moment, "to wish upon a Star."

Heavenly Father, thank you for starry nights, Christmas joy and treasured friends and family. Thank you also for our Grace family who surrounds each of us with love. Amen.

Charlotte Hunter

December 9

Un-clutter and Prepare

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed... Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:18

While thinking upon this year's theme "Let every heart prepare him room," my thoughts drifted back through time and distance to when I was a student in a Lutheran day school – late 1950's. During the Advent season, "Hark the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes" was commonly sung. To me, it is a well-remembered vestige of preparing for Christmas. It focuses on preparation.

This hymn is not recent nor modern. It was written almost 300 years ago by the minister and evangelist Bishop Thomas Haweis. Bishop Haweis lived his spiritual life split between the Church of England and the Free Church of England. While a student at Oxford, he organized a prayer group which was seen as a successor to the Wesleys' "Holy Club." Later in his life, he oversaw the Connexion, a collection of 120 chapels, which was the origin of the Free Church of England. Haweis was also one of the founding members of the London Missionary Society.

At age 58, when undoubtedly very embroiled in the religious controversy of his day, Bishop Haweis penned "Hark, the Glad Sound!" I speculate and imagine that this hymn reflects his yearning for the good news brought by Advent. In his very cluttered world of spiritual debate, conflict, and chaos, Bishop Haweis stripped less significant issues from his mind to focus on the arrival of the Prince of Peace.

"Hark the Glad Sound" has never been a popular carol and has been largely lost to history in many Christian churches. Almost uniquely, the Lutheran church in America has embraced this British hymn and regularly sings it each Advent season. "Hark the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes" can be found in the ELW (Evangelical Lutheran Worship), #239. As Christians and

Lutherans, we thank Bishop Haweis for this inspirational hymn, a treasure of sacred music.

Dear Father, May we all, like Bishop Thomas Haweis, unclutter our minds this Advent season and prepare our hearts for the arrival of your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

David Stuckwisch

December 10

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Thessalonians 5:16-23

Having an open heart to God isn't always easy. The world gets in the way, we get busy, and we push him to the back burner, where he slowly becomes cold. We begin to lose focus on what is good, quenching the spirit that lives within us. We are tempted by the darkness in the world and the promises of happiness. Happiness is fleeting, it is a moment filled with warmth and excitement but can end in an instant. God implores us to seek peace instead as it holds deeper meaning and cannot be taken away. When you are at peace, you are not only happy but feel safe and protected. With the coming of Jesus open your heart to peace instead of happiness. If you do, His coming will rejuvenate your mind body and soul.

Dear Lord, Grant us peace that surpasses all understanding.
Amen.

Alexandra R. Schmidt

December 11

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:8-10

As the shepherds felt fear when they first saw the light at the time of the birth of our Lord, I have felt a lot of fear in my life this year. Two of my fears were when, my daughter-in-law, Diana's cancer returned so quickly after her third series of chemo, and the other being Jim's hip replacement surgery. Also, and including myself, many people I know and others I've read have shown fear and sadness this year. It has been due to the immense loss of kindness, courtesy, manners, acceptance, and love that appear to be in our lives and the world today.

As prayers are being said, the "good news of great joy that is for all the people" is always there for us. I know that when I'm feeling my lowest, the Lord will send someone to support me, emotionally or physically – whichever is needed. Or, through prayer, I will hear his answer. He is helping me to see how important it is to make sure the change in the fear starts with me.

I saved this prayer that was written in the church program earlier this year because I love it and it is one that can be said daily to bring about a change in this unhappy and fearful Country and World.

My prayer is from St. Francis:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is

in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Jerralynne Duncan

December 12

Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke 2:6-7

There seem to be too many times lately when there's not a lot of "extra" room in my heart. There are plenty of good things (I am richly blessed) - love for my God, family, friends, music, sports, cooking, naps. But there's lots of heartache in there taking up space too - health, money concerns, politics, anxiety about retirement and my "day job."

So that means I have to be willing to move some of this heartache **stuff** out of there to make room. I remember in Stephen Covey's book - *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* - he describes our lives being made up of two circles - a circle of **concern** (outer circle) and a circle of **influence** (smaller, inner circle). He says (I'm paraphrasing) that the key to a happy life is making the distance between those two circles as small as possible. In other words - you should manage your concerns to only include the things that you have control over. That made a lot of sense to me - but it is way easier said than done.

I also remember the opening of M. Scott Peck's book - *The Road Less Travelled*. "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult - once we truly understand and accept it - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

I think these guys are on to something, but it won't be easy. There's actually plenty of room in my heart, once I get rid of all the junk. Taking control is one of the keys – getting rid of those anxious thoughts that I can't do anything about. And also being exceptionally grateful every day for a myriad of blessings – that when thoughtfully considered, will push out the junk and make way for the Messiah. Come on in Jesus – as turns out, there's plenty of room for you.

Dear Lord, Help us to clear the clutter from our lives and focus on that which is of ultimate importance. Help us to make room for you in our hearts. Amen.

Jim Sawyers

December 13

"...Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." Luke 2:19-20

For about four years, Joan Beeman (our first faith community nurse) and I "shared" the mother of a member who was in a nursing home. By that, I mean that we coordinated visits (I would say "took turns," but Joan visited her at least 2-3 times more often than I did, especially after I started seminary). The woman's many maladies included eye problems, so we generally offered to read scripture as part of our visits. She almost always requested a particular passage, even preferring it over the Gospel reading assigned by the lectionary when we brought her communion. The woman might start the visit "down in the dumps" but would perk-up each time she heard Luke's version of the birth of Christ being read. Over time, Joan and I realized we could cryptically refer to the woman as "Luke 2" when catching-up with each other about who had visited last and who planned to see her next. This time of year, I find myself remembering "Luke 2" and praying for others who are not able to come to worship anymore.

Anointed one, bless people who quietly “ponder” the significance of Christ’s birth as well as those festively “glorifying and praising” Him. Help us remember to make time for those who cannot worship with us in person, and take advantage of opportunities to bring them to us through technology or send us to them through a card, call, or visit. Amen.

Lois Sorensen

December 14

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. ... There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because He first loved us. ... For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.
1 John 4:16-21

This election year of 2018 has been very difficult for most of us. We are currently a deeply divided country, with each of the partisan sides saying ugly, hurtful and often untruthful things about the “other.” We were inundated with negative ads on TV and in our mailboxes until we just threw out the mail and turned off the TV. Thankfully it is over now, and we have the daunting task of binding up our wounds and trying to become one country again.

In this divisive environment, it can be difficult for us to prepare room in our hearts for Jesus’ coming. We are too filled with resentments, hurt feelings, maybe despair over the direction our beloved country is going, and so forth, to look beyond to the birth of our Savior. **But have we ever needed Jesus’ message more?!** If we can find room in our hearts to experience Jesus’ love and then show it to all around us, maybe we can begin to heal. If we can truly love our brothers and sisters as God has loved us, it will be less likely that we will demonize those who think differently than we do.

Many people are driven by fear these days – fear of the “other,” fear of losing jobs, fear of change in ways they don’t understand, and so forth. But as the above verses describe, God’s perfect love drives out fear and allows us to love one another. For me, looking beyond surface differences to the unity of all creation in God is a real challenge. This Advent season I intend to work hard on opening my heart to receive the immeasurable gift of the birth of Jesus and the related gift of love for all people. I invite all God’s people to join in this difficult but rewarding way of living – to love one another as God has loved us.

Dear God, Thank you for sending us the gift of your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live in love with all your creation. Open our hearts to receive this gift and to express it in our daily lives. In Jesus name, Amen

Mickey Castor

December 15

Love Letters

It is written in the rosy sky of sunrise
It plays out as autumn turns green to gold and rust
You can hear it in the sweet timbre of a child’s voice
It is felt in the warm sands of summer
In the bursting new life of spring
Scrawled in the russet sky of sunset
Postcards of love
From our Heavenly Father
Joyfully sent

We hear it in the wind sweeping through the oaks and palms
Through camphor and pine
We see it in every diamond sun-sparkled ocean ripple
It is splashed across the star riven night sky
We breathe it in the cold mountain-top air
As we stand awed and silent at the vistas spread before us

Our Heavenly Father's love letters to us
Joyfully sent

And the pain
The scars that we carry
Divorce
Death
Ostracism
Poverty
Disappointment
Loss
Sadness
Every scar
A love letter sent
Yes
A love letter sent
For without the trials
We would never know our strengths
Every scar
A testament
That through Faith
He has never failed us
Never

As each scar came
We prayed for deliverance
For an easier way
A release from hard circumstance
Ever forgetting that the One
Who
Daily
Hourly
Gifts us with postcards of love
Sent His ONLY Son
Who endured
Shunning
Shaming
The slashing sting of words and whip

Excruciating pain piercing hands and feet
And when darkness blocked out day
On Calvary
He hung
Painfully lingering
Never complaining
Never asking for an easier way

How dare we ask then?
For an easier life
A less painful way

Our scars like our Savior's
Are signs of trials turned to triumph
Lives resurrected in strength through pain
Lives resurrected through FAITH
Forged upon The One who loves us like no other

We see it in the starlight of a silent night
We see it in the shepherds' awe
Smell it in warmly scented manger straw
We see it in The Child
The Son
Our gift

Jesus
Our love letter joyfully sent
From a God
Who loves us in spite of ourselves
No one
Loves us like He does
No one!

Debra Pedonti

December 16

He came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" Luke 1:28–30

Mary was just a regular human being. We see her freaked-out, afraid in the presence of the angel Gabriel. We see her expressing real doubts—"How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34)—like any regular person would ask. And I am sure she was wondering, "What lies ahead in my future?"

Anytime special events occur in our life we wonder what lies ahead. Graduation new employment, marriage, the birth of a child, illness, death of a loved one—Now what? What lies ahead? Mary found favor with God but what would lie ahead for her? How would her betrothed Joseph react? Not very well at first. Mary found favor with God but could she have even imagined she and Joseph would journey to Bethlehem and there give birth to her baby in a barn. Mary found favor with God, but it didn't mean this Son she would give birth to wouldn't be hated, rejected, beaten and crucified before her very eyes.

But here's all that matters. We see her finding "favor with God." And finding favor with God makes everything else okay. Whatever she would face in the future

And that is true for you and me

Though our Baptism we have received God's grace-God's favor. Looking to the future, finding favor with God, doesn't mean everything becomes wonderfully rosy and bright. But here's what it does mean. It means God Almighty has laid His hand upon your life and mine, that he loves you and me, and He is going to use us for His eternal purposes whatever that may be.

It means having ongoing hope—hope that you and I can overcome all the obstacles we are facing now and in the future "Do not be afraid . . . for you have found favor with God."

Lord, As Mary learned, your favor and your grace are not always easy. There are bumps in the road, but your favor is good. Help us put all our hope in the only right place, you, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Peace,
Pr. Richard

December 17

The Journey

"Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, He it is that doth go with thee; He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee." Deuteronomy 31:6

I, the grandson, am in my senior year of high school, and each day I inch closer to the biggest change, at least so far, in my life. After graduation, I will say goodbye to friends and have to make decisions which will affect the rest of my life. Coming from a person who stresses about as much as a billionaire living in the Bahamas, I can say the upcoming change is very scary in some respects. While I certainly wish I could stay a carefree highschooler forever, that is unfortunately not the way the world works, and I must soon choose my path in life.

I, the grandmother, have already lived through and navigated the changes my grandson is preparing to go through. While I may have already gone through the many changes and faced the many decisions my grandson will make, I still have many concerning my future. No matter what age, we all continually exercise the freedom of free will, and experience the challenges thereby entailed. It is simply a fact of life that we must continually make choices concerning our immediate and distant futures. And while self-determination is beautiful, it is also very scary, and we need a helping hand from time to time.

Thankfully, we have just that. While God does not control our every step and does not determine our only path in life, surely, he is there as a safety net for when we fall. Perhaps that is all we

need, the knowledge that such a perfect being has such pure love for us, to give us renewed hope. For as long as we never forget, we can never be truly lost, never be truly alone, and never be forsaken. The road ahead for some may be harrowing, but we must have faith that the Father Almighty is attached to our very soul, and in that faith, our future is guaranteed.

Thank you, God, for Your eternal love, and eternal life. Amen.

Rocco Cardinale, grandson
Dorothea Pihl, grandmother

December 18

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

In my house, we do a lot to prepare for Christmas. We decorate our Christmas tree, I help my dad put lights around our house, and we wrap presents that we have carefully selected for each other. The list goes on and on...like it does in most of our homes.

But how much time do we take to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus? How much time do we spend in prayer? Reading the Bible? Serving others?

If you don't, you can start today. The scripture I chose talks about Mary, who had been expecting and preparing for the birth of her son, Jesus! On her journey to Bethlehem, the time came to give birth. However, the place where they were was not prepared for her - or Jesus. There was no room at the inn, and so he was birthed in a manger. It is our job now to prepare a 'room' for him this Advent season.

Advent is the time for waiting, anticipating, and preparing a 'room' for Jesus.

Dear God, Help me to remember to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Help me to be prepared for the coming of the Christ. I know that I'm excited, but I also want to be ready and prepared in my heart. Amen.

Hannah Carrier

December 19

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. Luke 1:38

Waiting. . . Waiting. . . And waiting some more. Waiting is hard. Recently during one of my journey's across the state, I sat in my car on I-75 amidst construction with my GPS crying out, "Watch out. Crash ahead." As the clock ticked, my window of "extra time" became a window of tardiness, and my anxiety level rolled from nil to intense to defeat. I wanted to be in control! I wanted to be on time! As Henry Nowen would say, I was in the desert between where I was and where I wanted to be. I wanted to be proactive, but I felt powerless. Finally, I made a phone call to the Call Committee and settled into the wait. Now fully present in the moment, I prayed for those involved in the accident. My prayers gradually shifted to the Call Committee that I would be meeting and their waiting. Waiting for God to show them the way, to reveal their next pastor. Waiting in hope. My thoughts then went to Mary and her total submission to God's will and to the wait. Waiting in hope.

During my time in the car, this time of waiting, my thoughts had shifted from my wants to reflections on hope. Thus is the season Advent. Advent is not about our wants, but the anticipation and hope of what God wants for us. He gives us the gift of love, his Son, Jesus. (Epilogue: When I arrived at the Call Committee meeting, I was only 15 minutes late. They welcomed me with the words, "Have a seat. We just finished our devotion and prayer, and now we are now ready for you!" 😊)

Dear Lord, be with us in our waiting and fill us with hope. Amen.

Connie Schmucker

December 20

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD God is my strength and my might; He has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known His deeds among the nations; proclaim that His name is exalted.

Sing praises to the LORD, for He has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. — Isaiah 12: 2-6

Sing praises! Give thanks to God for His great gifts, and His greatest gift of all: His Son, Jesus!

Go and make disciples of all nations, telling of all that He has done through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord! We are called not to be spectators in the Church, but to be participants of the Church in furthering the Kingdom of God.

But how?

Not with your own might and will, but with the POWER of the Holy Spirit. Not with your own understanding, but with the TRUTH given to us by Jesus — the Way the Truth and the Life! We are Christ's ambassadors to the world around us, so our words (written and spoken) and our actions are to be saturated in LOVE and sprinkled with salt. This is the season when hearts are softened, and kindness and generosity are celebrated by all people: this is YOUR opportunity to be the Church and to make Christ truly known!

Gracious Lord, May your presence be known through our words and actions this season and always. Amen.

Lisa Watson

December 21

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:17-18

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Luke 10:27

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-35

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we see things that we never noticed before. A few weeks ago in our Advent study on "Christmas: The Real Story," one of our questions had to do with the "command to 'love your neighbor as yourself'" which is traditionally referred to as "the golden rule." We looked up the above verses and compared them noting the increasing implications for serving our neighbors.

In Leviticus, God says we are not to take revenge on others but love others as we love ourselves. In the Luke passage Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. But in John, Jesus tells us to love others as HE loves us. That moves the bar a bit higher, doesn't it? How are we to love like he loves?

Jesus loves everyone. He loved the criminal who hung next to him on the cross. He loved the Samaritan woman at the well. He loved the harlot, Rahab. He loved Peter who denied him three times. Jesus loved them all and he asks us to love as he did – to feed the poor, give shelter to those in need, to care for the sick -to follow him and the example he set for us.

During Advent we remember that Love came down at Christmas to dwell with us and to dwell in us so that we might love others as he loves us.

Dear Jesus, Fill our hearts with your love and let that love overflow to all those we encounter. Amen.

Nadine Anderson

December 22

The Christmas Ham

This story is about a young mother preparing the family's traditional Christmas ham dinner. She was using family-heritage recipes and was especially attentive to the ham preparation. She bought the appropriate size ham suggested by her mother. Before she put it in the pan, she cut off a predetermined portion of the ham, threw it out, and carefully prepared the remainder.

Her son, fascinated with the culinary construct, questioned the disposal of the chunk of ham, "Mommy, why did you cut off that piece of ham and throw it away?" "Well son, that's what my mom did. I don't know why, but that is what she always did and so will I. Why don't you call Grandma and ask her?" she replied.

The boy called, and his Grandmother responded,. "Well, I really don't know the reason. Your great-grandmother did it too! That's why I did it. Why don't you call her and ask?"

He phoned his great-grandmother and posed the same question. "Well, sonny, why did you ask?" After he told her about the ham preparation tactic he witnessed and is now investigating, he was greeted with tremendous laughter! After she calmed from her fit of hilarity, she informed him, "Dear, I cut off a chunk to get the ham to fit in my pan!"

Tradition is a part of many of our preparation plans. Family traditions, cultural traditions, and even religious traditions are often executed without reflection of the original intent of their execution. Holiday "auto-pilot" kicks in and the next thing you know, it's Christmas!

Advent, however, is a time for us to prepare our hearts and minds for the gift of Christ. It is hard not to get caught up in the busyness of the season, and its modern traditions. Lists are thoughtfully considered and constructed before all of the shopping, traveling, cooking, eating, and exchanging. All of these take time, and before you know it, all four candles of the Advent Wreath are burning.

The focused intent of our relationship with Christ and the celebration of his birth and what that really means to us have priority over traditions. As in any relationship, communication is key. If we are so busy, how can we hear the “voice of one calling in the wilderness”?

Mark 1:1-3 states: The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” — a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’

To prepare, the prioritization and allotment of time on our calendars to listen for the messenger, to be silent and still long enough to receive the blessings yet to come becomes all too necessary. The wasted chunk of ham may resemble the time that trivial societal priorities take away with our conscious awareness with Christ. Let us prepare ourselves in spirit for the season of celebrating the most precious gift, Jesus Christ.

Dear Lord, Be with me now in mind and spirit as I make more time to prepare myself to receive the love you give to me. Keep me awake to the sound of the one calling in the wilderness and help me to make my paths straight for you. Thank you for your blessings and your grace. In Christ’s Holy name, Amen.

David Vickers

December 23

What does Christmas Mean to Me?

Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Romans 12:10

Christmas is again upon us, and it means so many things for so many people. For some, Christmas might be the sparkling lights around the house and a well-decorated tree. For others, Christmas signifies a time to be thankful for everything in our lives.

For me, Christmas is about love and happiness. My memories of Christmas in Finland are of family reunions, time for family bonding, and renewal of friendships. It is time to show gratitude and love, to share and make others happy. And most importantly, it is time to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In addition to the festivities: Opening presents, eating a lot, and having fun. Closeness, feeling love and spending time with each other.

Christmas is about making new memories and remembering what is truly important in your life. This is what makes Christmas so meaningful and special for me.

Dear Lord, May each of us be filled with peace, joy and love.
Amen

Ellinoora Riskala

December 24

“Door 24”

Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory. Psalm 24:9-10

If you practice the tradition of using an Advent Calendar, you know that the 24th Door is the night of Christmas Eve. Most of the Advent Calendars that I've used through the years shows a depiction of Jesus in the manger, the night of his Birth.

The Night of Heaven and Earth

“Heaven comes to earth” in the birth of Jesus. The line between the worlds becomes blurred. Or IS there a “line”?

Perhaps this holy time of year shows us what is always true: that heaven embraces and inhabits the earth, spilling over into this present reality. God approaches us, not as an unknowable stranger (or as an untouchable fire) but as one who comes ‘wearing what we wear’ – the flesh & blood of humanity.

How do we find and welcome the Christ in whom earth and heaven meet?

Christmas offers a microcosm of what we're called to in the Christian life. These days invite us to dwell on the stories that help us know where we came from and what we're about. As we listen, we are challenged to enter the deep familiarity of these stories that have been given to us. At the same time, these oh-so-familiar words urge us to see how the Christmas narrative continues to unfold in our world and to recognize when holy ones enter into our midst. They may come bearing good news of great joy, or in desperate need of hospitality, or offering a gift that only they could bring.

In this season, in any season, will we recognize them? Will we have the eyes to see how the story of the incarnation, the gift of Emmanuel, God-with-us, continues to play out in places both

foreign and familiar? Will we open the doors of our hearts, to make room for God's Love to be born? (Note: this is why Psalm 24 is an Advent Psalm: "Lift up your heads O gates. Be lifted up O Everlasting doors..." *In the ancient world, gates were opened upward; not by swinging side-to-side* "...that the King of Glory may come in.")

As we draw near to Christmas Day, may we find something to comfort us and something to challenge us as we enter the story again; yes as the story enters us. May we, with the angels, have cause to sing of glory and peace. Blessings!

Pr. John Hillmer