

Why an Advent Devotional?

Here is our first Advent Devotional: a home-grown collection of our own stories with devotions, meant to encourage us all—families and individuals—to take time at home to remember what Christ's birth means. There are many ways that we can devote ourselves to God; some of these practices may speak to your spirit more than others, and that's ok. Our differences help us grow.

We all desire to have authentic spiritual experiences with God. An Advent devotional booklet is a wonderful resource that can help us be present to life and to God in new ways. Advent gives us an opportunity to engage our minds with all five senses to more fully experience God.

Why not invest a little of your time in slowing your breath, quieting your mind and calming your heart during this busy season, by praying and reading an authentic experience of the Divine in your midst?

As a church family, we will walk and pray together through the Advent stories written in this booklet. Our sincere hope and prayer for you in this season is that your heart would be drawn to behold the beauty of Jesus as you reflect on ways to renew your hope in Christ and strive to deepen your appreciation of God's reconciling gift to us of God's beloved son.

Advent is a season devoted to preparation, a time to ready our hearts for the birth of Christ. Devotion takes practice. Advent is the perfect time to practice our worship and work on our relationship with God. Jesus is coming. Let's practice welcoming him into our hearts as we worship together through this collection of Advent devotions.

May these devotions anchor our hope in the One who is coming to us with good news and great joy!

Peace & Grace,
Pastor Eddie

Luke 21:25-36

Sunday, December 2

BE PREPARED!

I usually find the readings for the First Sunday of Advent a downer. They're not what I expect—no stories about Baby Jesus in the manger, shepherds in the fields, choirs of angels, or Wise Men. Instead, we get warned about the end of the world, with advice to be prepared, be on the lookout, get ready. Try putting that on a Hallmark card!

Except that it's really the point. My son Nate is in his mid-30s now, but I still remember the days before his birth. As first time parents, his mom and I were constantly looking for signs. We didn't know much, but we knew that when the big day came, our lives would all change forever. We had no clue how different it would be, of course: we just knew it would be different.

It's reassuring, as another Advent begins, to remember that God already knows how the story ends, has promised to be with us until we get there, and given us advice we can rely on: pay attention! Be prepared. All we have to do is try to follow that advice, day by day.

Lord, we don't know where we're going. And we don't know what it'll be like when we arrive. But you've promised never to leave or abandon us. Help us find you now, so Christmas doesn't take us by surprise, this year!

Jerry Custer

Isaiah 1:1-9

2 Peter 3:1-10

Luke 21:25-36

Luke 20:1–8

Monday, December 3

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Our reading today in Luke presents us with a confrontation, which isn't the usual way we think of starting Advent. Jesus is teaching out in public, and is clearly popular with the people. And then the most highly regarded and powerful religious experts decide they need to publicly rebuke and humiliate Jesus.

They challenge Jesus about the source of his authority in His teaching and healing. Authority is central to the leaders' identity and role in society, and they need to "flex some political muscle" to maintain it. Jesus turns their question around, asking them to answer by what authority John baptized. After lengthy debate amongst themselves, they could not bear to answer with their own words and take any position. They chose to dodge the question for fear of their authority being tarnished.

"By what authority" is a central question for each of us to consider too. Words matter to us today as well, and beliefs that drive our actions may matter even more. In honoring Jesus' authority, our real beliefs reveal themselves in how we spend our time, our talent and our treasure.

Lord Jesus, as we begin our Advent journey, we wrestle with finding words that we own to describe what we believe. Thank you that your authority over us draws us into the adventure of love and service to others.

Karl Cressman

Isaiah 1:10–20

1 Thess. 1:1–10

Luke 20:1–8

1 Thessalonians 2:1–12

Tuesday, December 4

THE TRUE TEST OF FAITH

Being a believer in the faith requires not just believing but living and doing the faith, even in the face of suffering for it, knowing that God is with us at all times. Paul's message to the persecuted Thessalonians is one of hope, courage and comfort. Although they suffer, he says they should find comfort knowing that God is with us always and has assured us of ultimate victory in the face of pain and suffering for our faith.

For almost eight years I served on the Presbytery's Pastoral Response Team, helping congregations heal after pastoral removal due to sexual or other misconduct. The betrayal of trust by a clergy person is a powerful test of faith. In leading small group sessions with members of those congregations, I experienced the difficulty of helping them to deal with the pain, anger, and other emotions resulting from pastoral betrayal of trust and still find strength in their faith. It is in the tests we face as Christians that we discover the nature of our own faith.

As we enter this season of joyful anticipation of Christ's birth, we must also remember the gift his life represents. Paul comforted the faithful with the God's assurance of victory over danger and adversity, and this should be our strength through the sacrifice of the gift of Christ.

Gather us or scatter us, O Lord, according to your will. Build us a Church with open hands and open doors which takes the world seriously, ready to work, suffer and bleed for it. Bless us as we begin this time of anticipation. Confirm in us the truth by which we rightly live, confront us with the truth from which we wrongly turn. We ask not for what we want but what you know we need, as we offer our service and selves for you and to you through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Larry Gage

Isaiah 1:21–31

1 Thessalonians 2:1–12

Luke 20:9–18

Matthew 25:1–13

Wednesday, December 5

KEEP YOUR LAMPS TRIMMED AND BURNING!

After reading this parable, one wonders how it applies to Advent, since it Jesus telling the story. The story is a warning to be ready for Christ's return to earth, not his birth. Aren't we supposed to be ready for Christ's birth during Advent? Of course, we know when Christ will be born and the circumstances of his birth. But those who were waiting for the birth of a Savior did not know when, how or where this would happen. It was a frightening time. They were told to be prepared, be ready, but, for what?

As children, my brother and I looked forward to receiving the Advent calendars from our Sunday school. Every day we opened a door to a new bible verse. We knew we had to read each verse so we would be prepared for the following Sunday's discussion. We were learning to be prepared, a good lesson for the future.

The anthem *Keep Your Lamps* is based on this parable. Words of warning to followers of Jesus: "Children, don't get weary 'til your work is done. Christians, journey soon be over. The time is drawing nigh." As those who prepared for Christ's birth, we must prepare for Christ's return. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning!

Jesus, help us focus on you during this busy season. May we be aware of the joy you bring into our lives. We place our hope in you as we prepare to celebrate your birth.

Anne and Rick Fuller

Isaiah 54:1–10

1 Thess. 2:1–12

Matthew 25:1–13

Isaiah 2:5-22

Thursday, December 6

HUMBLED BY ...

What parallels exist between the Isaiah text and our world today! The warnings against arrogance and lack of compassion are relevant now. When we're angry at the situation, it's easy to assume others are the problem, but this overlooks the arrogance in our personal judgment.

At 18, I attended a birthday party with guys who had known each other since childhood. The birthday boy had secured some alcohol. I was late, but my friend had saved some of the contraband for me. A few drinks in, he said he'd finish whatever I didn't. I didn't want it, but to protect my friend, I finished the concoction. By morning, I was sick as a dog.

This wasn't the last time I tried to "protect" others from what I thought were bad choices, but eventually I realized people had to make their own choices and live with the consequences to learn and grow. Importantly, I realized that it was arrogant of me to think I knew better than those I tried to protect.

God offers us guidelines, but ultimately allows us to make our choices. As we prepare for Christmas, let's be alert to arrogance and judgment, for the rough places will be made plain, the high places brought low... [and] "the arrogant will be humiliated.

Lord, give us humility to allow others make their choices that we may learn even from those very different from us, so we need not make all the mistakes ourselves.

Craig S. Aue

Isaiah 2:5-22

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Luke 20:27-40

Luke 20:14–21:4

Friday, December 7

GIFT GIVING

Christmas is stressful. Trying to choose a perfect gift for loved ones can be exhausting. I've gone through several iterations of gift giving, including:

buy lavish gifts for each recipient; buy modest gifts for each recipient; buy a book for each recipient; and now buy everyone the same gift (such as a favorite book or Michigan cherry preserves).

In my head, I know that my gift isn't a perfect reflection of my love for the recipient. Hopefully, those I love know that I love them whether I get them a gift or not! Part of the difficulty of gift giving is that we really don't need anything! Sure, there are some things we might like, enjoy, even covet, but most of us have everything we want that can be bought.

In a column I read years ago, Miroslav Volf wrote about "One-way giving." We give within our own circles. Although it is a ritual filled with love and a foretaste of the love and generosity of the kingdom to come, it is directed inward. He asked, "What if we gave as much to those outside our circle of intimates as we give to those within our circle at Christmas?"

Be generous. We already received the gift of Jesus the Christ.

Loving God, thank you for the gifts you daily bestow. Help us be generous in body and spirit throughout this season as we prepare our hearts for the gift of your Son.

SarahBeth Simonds

Isaiah 3:1–4:1

1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Luke 20:41–21:4

Luke 21:5–19

Saturday, December 8

SIGNS AND WONDERS

“God, just give me a sign and I’ll know what to do. I’ll understand. I’ll do your will. Then I’ll know for sure.” It seems that we’re all looking for reassurance from God. We want to know ... need to know ... must know.

While living in Israel, I met my future husband, Alon, and on our first date I was smitten. I kept my head enough to remember to keep God in the equation and prayed, “Show me that he loves you.” At the end of our date, without telling me beforehand, Alon drove us to the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem to pray. We didn’t know it at the time, but we both prayed about our budding relationship. Years later when I asked Alon why he had chosen to go to the Western Wall, he said, “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

So often we can be looking for great signs and confirmations from God that we are doing the right thing, making the right choice. But sometimes it is in the patient quietness of keeping God in every equation, day by day, that shines a light onto our path.

Lord, help us realize that we don’t need great signs and wonders to know you are constantly working in and through us in all we say and do. Calm our doubts and fears and our need to know, as we patiently listen and watch for the quiet signs of your gentle leading.

Colleen Tavor

Isaiah 4:2–6

1 Thess. 4:13–18

Luke 21:5–19

Isaiah 5:1–7

Sunday, December 9

WILD GRAPES IN GOD’S VINEYARD

The prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem, was an advisor to four of Judah’s kings, a poet and religious man who pleaded with God’s people for a renewed faith in God.

This Advent reading speaks about the vineyard that God had made for His people, “on a fertile hill-side,” where all the stones of the soil had been removed and a watch-tower built from the stones. It was there that God looked for “grapes” but found only “wild grapes.” So, God decides that He will “leave it derelict;” that God had “looked for justice and found it denied, for righteousness but heard cries of distress.”

It is sometimes hard for me to reconcile this “Old Testament God,” who gets so frustrated with us, when Jesus and His Father are so patient and loving, asking us to forgive, “seventy times seven.” But then, I think that even God tires of my “wild grape” living that takes me so far away from being fair and just to everyone, especially those who have hurt me.

I have to remind myself to treat others, all others, as I would like to be treated, with patience and understanding. And when I take that moment to breathe and remember, I act in ways that renew my faith in God in His son, Jesus, and in me.

Holy God, help us to breathe and remember that Your ways are always The Way for us. And in our right actions, we allow the Christ Child to be born in us, again, this Advent. Amen.

Pam Jusino

Isaiah 5:1–7

2 Peter 3:11–18

Luke 7:28–35

1 Thessalonians 5:9

Monday, December 10

WHERE TRUE JOY IS FOUND

Today's texts are a warning: pay attention, avoid complacency, live in sober and thoughtful ways. While our world sees this season as a time to shop and party, Isaiah reminds those who have great wealth that it will be taken away. His prophecy warns those whose party and brawl with no regard for God, that the arrogant will be humbled.

As I think about texts like these, I know that many hear them as justification for seeing God trying to rob us of joy, so they stay away from the Church. But God isn't trying to steal our joy! Instead, God wants to remind us where true joy is found!

If we live life as a party, we miss the joy of deep and strong relationships with people who care for us and for whom we care. Joy is found in giving. If we live life as though only we matter, there will be a price to pay. But as Paul reminds us, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation." Christ said, "I have come that you may have joy, and that your joy may be complete."

Have fun this season, but don't lose sight of the true source of our joy.

In this season of darkness, Lord, may we find the true light of Your presence, know the joy of living humbly, and share the gift of Your presence with all people.

Craig S. Aue

Isaiah 5:8–17

1 Thess. 5:1–11

Luke 21:29–38

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

Tuesday, December 11

PREPARING FOR LOVE

Preparing for Christmas can be all consuming. There are Christmas cards to send, a house to decorate, holiday goodies to bake, presents to buy and wrap, extra activities at church, school or work to attend, and the list goes on and on. By the time “the big day,” arrives, our peace and good-will towards others have gone right out the window.

I should know. I used to be THAT person. Everything had to be exactly perfect for everyone in my family. Cookies, presents, cards, decorations – you name it, I had it all done before the 24th. I was so stressed out trying to make Christmas “perfect.” This, I thought, was what it meant to be prepared for Christmas. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

While hanging decorations and baking cookies are fun, the real state of preparedness is what Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians, and to us. We must be more like those who serve the Lord. We are urged to live in peace, encourage each other, help the weak ones and have patience with each other. We are to forgive each other and not bear ill-will to those who hurt us. We are to do good works for everyone.

Lord, guide us to best ready our hearts to receive your son this Christmas. Instead of preparing for things, help us to prepare for love.

Anonymous

Isaiah 5:18-25

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

Luke 21:29-38

Isaiah 6:1-3

Wednesday, December 12

IMPERFECT IS STILL OK

John's reading tells of Jesus calling out the elders who want to stone the adultress, that no one is without sin. Thessalonians speaks of the good works of the Thessalonian church and woe to those who afflict them.

Isaiah 6:1:3 speaks of the power and majesty of the Lord... verses 4-8 speak of Isaiah's dismay that he is a sinner, living among sinners, and is unclean to behold such grandeur ... and his humility and fear lead a seraph to press a coal from the altar to his lips, cleansing them and him. "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" "Here I am; send me!"

You don't have to be perfect to serve God. Many times, I feel inadequate to speak or act as I am no better than the others, and worse than some. We think God expects perfection, and He won't turn it down! But God recognizes imperfection; that is trying is OK also. The purpose of Jesus coming into the world is to absorb our imperfection.

I think we just have to keep trying. As the seraph cleansed the repentant Isaiah, and Jesus turned the elders back and told the woman to go and sin no more, I need to focus on what I can do and how I do it and try to do what I can to be acceptable in God's sight.

Help me remember I don't have to be perfect, and neither do others. We just have to try, accept each other and help each other the best we can.

Irwin and Lesley Moyna

Isaiah 6:1-3

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

John 7:53-8: 1-12

2 Thessalonians 2:1 –12

Thursday, December 13

THE POWER OF PATIENCE

Jesus' second coming dominates 2 Thessalonians. Church members are excited by false reports that the last days before his return are already at hand. Paul denies these rumors and emphasizes that very difficult events will take place before Jesus will come again. Although the Thessalonians have shown that their faith is growing and their love for one another is increasing even during their suffering, Paul cautions them to wait things out. Jesus will be revealed when his time comes.

Be patient! All of us have heard this admonition throughout our lives from parents, teachers, bosses, partners, and even children. We have said it ourselves many times. When I think about the patience I wish I'd shown, I reflect on my role as a stepmother. When I married my husband, he had three children. I knew very little about parenting, but I was ready to have an instant happy family. I thought that if I was kind to them, they would love me and our new blended family from the beginning. But it was more complicated than that. It took several years of adjustments and ups and downs. Now, over thirty years later, my relationships with my "bonus children" (the new term) and their children are strong. Thinking back, I wish I had been more patient from the beginning and not in such a rush to have things perfect right away.

Lord, help me to be patient. Not everything can be resolved immediately. Often it takes time, growth, and prayer for your will to be revealed.

Sue Carlson

Isaiah 7:1–9

2 Thess. 2:1–12

Luke 22:1–13

2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

Friday, December 14

HAVE FAITH

We were perplexed by the scripture passages suggested for today.

Isaiah does mention a boy to be named Emmanuel. Whether or not this was a prophecy about Jesus is hard to determine. Advent is a curious time to be thinking about the Last Supper, or is it? Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is not about Christ's birth. The common thread was the need to put our faith and trust in God. Christ's birth gave us the promise of life after death and the forgiveness of sin.

Faith in God has played a major role throughout our married life. We have overcome several adversities in our almost fifty years together. Times were very rough for us between late November of last year and May of this year. Without our faith in Christ and God's everlasting love and our church family, we might not have overcome our obstacles.

This season we ponder the coming good news of the birth of Jesus and the glad tidings which followed His birth. Jesus taught his followers to put their faith in God. Those who believed in God would have everlasting life! What a concept!

Lord, give us grace and faith to understand the good news of our Lord's coming and the love He provides us.

Bill and Mary Kinney

Isaiah 7:10–25

2 Thess. 2:13–3:5

Luke 22:14–30

Luke 22:31-38

Saturday, December 15

JESUS WALKS LIFE'S JOURNEY WITH US

This passage in Luke foretells Peter's denials of Jesus along with Jesus' foretelling of his own death—not very Advent-like at first blush. Yet all life begins with birth and ends in death that leads to eternal life in Jesus. Along the way, Jesus walks with us every step of the way.

I am a worrier. I always have been, and I probably always will be. But the disciples, when asked by Jesus (verse 35f.) if they ever lacked anything, had to admit that indeed they lacked nothing. And so it is with us. We are blessed. We are blessed to have a family, and a church family, who loves us. We are blessed to be alive! Born eleven weeks prematurely, I was given a 50% chance of survival, yet I survived and have thrived. Cerebral palsy and other medical issues have given me insight and empathy into others' challenges I might not otherwise have.

Jesus walks faithfully with us on our life's journey, through all the peaks and valleys. In living out our faith, we bless others through our Christian caring—a kind word, a thoughtful note, a phone call, a visit. Won't you walk with others on their life's journey, as Jesus walks with us?

Lord, Thank you for walking this journey with us. Walk with us this Advent season, as we walk with those who yearn to feel Your presence.

Joshua Archey

Isaiah 8:1-15

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Luke 22:31-38

Isaiah 13:1–13

Sunday, December 16

OUT OF THIS HOUSE!

In Hebrews Paul tells us to put away the fearsome God of Mt. Sinai and embrace Jesus, the loving God of Mt. Zion. God shows us that He loves us. Yet we continue to fear.

In a world filled with displaced people, we are reminded of Dayana, a young doctor in a small town in Cuba, a country of rigid and unforgiving rules. For years her heart had called to her to escape the controlled and hopeless life of this communist country. One spring day in 2011, the moment came when Dayana would change her life forever. She turned toward hope and freedom. Leaving all she knew behind, with no idea if she could ever return, she slipped away with a small suitcase. Less than a week later, over 2300 miles away, her luggage and ID were stolen. Lost and alone, her prayers for help were answered. She found a home, a family and unconditional love.

Now a US citizen, new homeowner and expectant mother, Dayana helps us remember to trust in God who asks us to step out of our fear-filled houses and move to His love-filled home. God knows what it means to say, “Out of this house! I have a better home waiting for you. Trust Me.”

Father, as we face fears and the unknown, help us know that You are there walking beside us, as you walked with Mary and with Dayana. You know the path and will lead us from a place of fear to a place of love filled with angels and, best of all, your Son, Jesus.

Paul and Lorrie McVey

Isaiah 13:1–13

Hebrews 12:18–29

John 3:23–30

Luke 22:39–53

Monday, December 17

THE BIRTH OF A SPECIAL BABY

“May grace and peace be yours in abundance.” 1st Peter

For me, Advent is a time to prepare for the birthday celebration of our savior, Jesus Christ. I see it as a special time, a time set apart to reflect on my belief and faith in God.

We get to relive, in a positive way, one of the greatest of all miracles—the birth of a baby. And in this case, not any baby, but rather a special baby whose birth changed the world forever, a baby who became a teacher who preached that we should be known for our love for one another.

My faith is reinforced during Advent by the reminders of this special birth, as recounted through the gospel stories. Just as we celebrate birthdays for family and friends, the birth of this special baby is always a day for the whole world to stop for a peaceful moment to embrace the love of a baby... a true gift from God.

As Pastor Eddie says, may it be the same for you as it is for me. That is my prayer for each of us, and all of us, this Advent season.

Tom Neal

Isaiah 8:16–9:1

2 Peter 1:1–11

Luke 22:39–53

Psalm 23

Tuesday, December 18

A SOLDIER'S PSALM

As a young man, I was drafted into the Army, and sent to Vietnam. In my year there, every verse of Psalm 23 grew to have deep meaning to me.

A song of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. I learned that my own survival was beyond the luck of the draw. I had to trust God because life or death was not under my control.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. Fields of green surrounded us in Vietnam; in rare moments we could lie down and rest. But only the Lord could make it a safe rest.

He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. In Vietnam, I literally feared for my soul. In that primeval place, God blessed my soul and showed me the path to come home.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff - they comfort me. In Vietnam, "the valley of the shadow of death" wasn't a metaphor. I walked it. Only God could take away the constant fear that resided there.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. You have to eat C Rations to appreciate "a table being set before me." In that grim world, only God could make me feel that "my cup overflows."

May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. On returning home to my family and my beautiful wife Sally, I was thankful for so many blessings. It is my obligation and my privilege to be a "Soldier of the Lord" now.

Rob Kirsten

Isaiah 11:1-9

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 3:16-21

Isaiah 11:10–16

Wednesday, December 19

WAITING ...

During Advent, we wait for the Christ child, which speaks to us about the present and the future. The presence of God in Christ is the reality that gives meaning to our lives. The expectation of his coming prepares us for the future day where the promise of Christ becomes real.

As a child in Sunday school, we made Advent wreathes out of Styrofoam with candles jammed into it with a few pieces of cheesy plastic holly. This paltry wreath sat proudly on the dining room table next to the beautiful Advent wreath my mother made, and this became the essence of waiting. Every Advent Sunday night we would do our own celebration, following a booklet that I still have from 1960. And on Christmas morning we would light the Christ candle as we three children tried not keep glancing at all the presents on the tree. Now that was waiting!

Why all the waiting? Waiting reminds us that this is God's story, and God's promises. We wait by working, where our hearts and hands and homes become instruments of hope and healing; a waiting where we learn to love God. We are invited to slow down, to steady our hearts in a season that has become centered on materialism, and instead reorient ourselves to seek the beauty of Christ in our heart and soul.

Dear Lord, we wait for you. Please give us the courage to choose joy with patience and love. Guide us through this beautiful time of expectation.

Laurel Scott

Isaiah 11:10–16

Revelation 20:1–10

John 5:30–47

Isaiah 2:28:- 22

Thursday, December 20

PAY ATTENTION! BE PREPARED!

Two of today's readings warn of future dire consequences with a follow up description of glory to come. The angel Gabriel brings a message of joy to Zechariah, which he doubts: he and his aged wife, Elizabeth, have found favor with the Lord and will have a child they will name John. Gabriel rebukes Zechariah for his disbelief and tells him he will remain mute until the birth of John.

We don't always believe good news when it appears. We tried for years to have children with failure after failure. Then we heard that we were pregnant ... again. It took awhile for Leslie to accept it, and it really didn't sink in for me until our child was born. That didn't stop us from preparing a room, beds, rocking chairs and all the trimmings. We hoped and planned for the best even with some doubt from previous failing.

We need to be open to the good news and opportunities. God doesn't always make it easy or obvious. God already knows how the story ends but we have to keep reading and take the clues and act on them as they come. Pay attention! Be prepared!

Lord, you test us at times. You expect the best of us, and want the best for us, but you don't always make it easy. We may stumble and fall if we miss a clue or direction, but you will always be there to help us rise again if we look for your outstretched hand.

Irwin and Leslie Moyna
Isaiah 28:9-22
Revelation 20:11-21:8
Luke 1:5-2

Luke 1:26–38

Friday, December 21

OBEDIENCE!

In this passage from Luke, the birth of Jesus is foretold by the archangel Gabriel. And we think about a frightened, young girl hearing about an unbelievable future for her - and the world!

Can you imagine an angel announcing that you've been selected by God to be the mother of the "Son of the Most High?" That must have been terrifying and hard to understand. Mary could have ignored Gabriel and chosen not to listen, but her devotion and trust in God led her to listen to the angel's message and obey. How could she ignore Gabriel's words? "For nothing is impossible with God."

We have a 12 year old dog, Shea, who has what we call "selective hearing;" she normally does not obey the commands to "come" or "stay," even if it's for her own good and safety. It can be SO frustrating! But we still love her. Is God frustrated with us when we fail to listen and obey? Never!! His abiding love for us is boundless, and we can be assured that even if we fail to follow His will, He continues to love and care for us. He gave us the greatest gift of His Son as proof of His faithfulness.

Mary replies that she is the Lord's servant; can we also answer in the same way? Can we pledge to obey God and try to do His will?

Dear Lord, let our ears and hearts be open to hear Your word and make us eager to respond as Your loving, faithful children.

Mary Carson

Isaiah 29:9–24

Revelation 21:9–21

Luke 1:26–38

Luke 1:39–56

Saturday, December 22

THE LORD SHALL FULFILL!

How wonderful it would be to have God speak to us. How wonderful it would be for the mother of our Lord to appear on our doorstep and to receive a sign that she is the chosen one – that it would fulfill what the Lord had spoken to us.

Do we know what God our Savior has in store for us? What fulfillment of the Lord's promise is for us? Oh, how we pray that the Lord should speak to us and guide us definitively to His will for us. Each night I pray for His guidance so that I can be sure that I am living his plan for me. Alas, perhaps it is his will that I discern God's purpose for me. Would he trust me with such an important task? Would I trust myself?

We must trust in the Lord for he has trust in us. He has fulfilled his promises and we must do the same. How? The Ten Commandments are our guideposts – if we follow them, then surely we are fulfilling our promise. And I will continue to pray each night that he helps show me the way – for I know there will always be more to learn about how to serve.

Benevolent God, I am open to your teachings and guidance. Show me how to fulfill my purpose and help me to serve you. Direct me to do your will so that others will be blessed with your abiding love and grace.

Karen (Stewart) Spica

Isaiah 31:1–9

Revelation 21:22–22:5

Luke 1:39–56

Luke 1:57–66

Sunday, December 23

THE JOY OF MYSTERY

When I was about 10, my mother decided that she wanted to give our Christmas tree a "theme." Our Thanksgiving to New Year's Day home had become something of a menagerie of colors and an awkward blend of secular and sacred. There was Jesus, Mary and Joseph ... only a stone's throw from the Lionel steam engine and one artificial tree limb away from Santa Claus holding a surfboard.

In an effort to "streamline" the season, Mom came up with the idea of wrapping all our gifts in white tissue paper. No more a Jackson Pollack mound of cardboard and ribbon: every gift under the tree would be swaddled in a gentle plain ivory. From a distance, the Davis Family Room looked more like a failed attempt at building an igloo, with scores of blocks awkwardly piled one on top of the other.

True enough — there was uniformity...and if you valued a uniform hue, our home was the place to be that season. But for all the serenity made possible by monochrome, the wrapping paper was sheer, and so it was possible to clearly see the package contents. By the time Christmas morning arrived, my brother and I already knew what Santa had brought us. We never complained, but our faces betrayed us, and it was clear that mortgaging a sense of unknown anticipation in exchange for a picture postcard sense of perfection wasn't worth it. It became known as "The White Christmas," and today is something we all laugh about.

The best gift I received that year didn't come in a package. It came in the form of a memory made, and a lesson learned.

There's comfort in consistency, and there's joy in mystery.

Chris Davis

Isaiah 33:17–22

Revelation 22:6–11, 18–20

Luke 1:57–66

Isaiah 35:1–10

Monday, December 24

SEEING CLEARLY

The promise of Christmas isn't just of a baby born, or even the salvation offered through Jesus.

God promises a better world. We live in hope for that better world and as Christians we should work for it.

The most important thing to remember is that we need to pursue God's definition of a better world. We must be careful to not be led astray by human definitions of a better world. When Isaiah spoke of those who face retribution, he could have been speaking of those who were selling their idea of a better world rather than God's.

In Amos 5:14, we are cautioned "Seek good, not evil, that you may live."

While we must prudently be alert for the evil of those who demand we let them do our thinking for us, we must also always be looking for the good in others.

Lord, open my heart to see the good,
and open my eyes to see the evil,
and open my mind to tell the difference.

Let me see what is before me
and not what I wish was before me.

Bill Draper

Isaiah 35:1–10

Revelation 22:12–17, 21

Luke 1:6–80

Luke 2:1-14

Tuesday, December 25

LIGHT OF THE WORLD!

Jesus – Immanuel, God with Us – arrives on a dark night far from home in a makeshift birthing room. God chooses to announce his arrival to shepherds, in a pasture filled with light as angels sing of his wondrous birth. On earth, nothing will ever be the same.

In a world that feels increasingly dark, how reassuring is the news that light has come and continues to radiate in lowly, unexpected places.

A dear friend reminds me that God's love-light shines as brightly today as it did that night so long ago, shimmering "in each of the hundreds of thousands of good deeds occurring every moment in our world... a listening ear, a hug given, a word of comfort spoken, a card sent, a prayer offered, a carol sung. And I give thanks for the good works of the thousands of people in the world who believe as I do in the Light that always conquers the Darkness."*

God, you are our Sun, our Ray and our Warmth. Shine through us and help us to be beacons of your light in the Christmas season and beyond. Thank you for coming into our world to be our Redeemer, the hope of our future and the light to our path, illuminating the way.

Deb Jackson Lum

*Luann Tennant Coyne

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Psalm 96:1-13

Luke 2: 1-14