



FROM
BONITA
TO BETHLEHEM

2017 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
BONITA SPRINGS



Advent is a season of anticipation. We celebrate and remember the birth of our Savior, and eagerly await the return of Jesus Christ. Today, we are so wrapped up and distracted by life, it can be difficult to enter the story of the Incarnation and to unwrap the greatest gift the world has ever received. This is why we at First Church have created our own devotional entitled *From Bonita to Bethlehem*. Through the original contributions of various leaders of the church, staff members, and elders, we hope to take you on an intimate journey—away from the hustle and bustle of the holiday season to the site of the manger where Jesus was born. Our hope and prayer is that you will be uplifted spiritually as you take time each day to reflect on the Scriptures, to spend time in prayer, and to read the devotions from our church family.

Christian Education Ministry

First Presbyterian Church of Bonita Springs

DECEMBER 3 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

BRAD ROGERS

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NIV)

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.
Yet you, LORD, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.*

CONTINUED

■ Try to recall the longest trip that you have ever taken and how, after all the planning, you set off with eager anticipation of the arrival at your destination. Can you remember the butterflies in your core as you approached the culmination of the journey?

Today, we embark on a 4-week journey together through Advent. We've set off toward Bethlehem, to the Manger where God would "rend the heavens and come down," just as the prophet Isaiah foretold. This destination is the culmination of God's long-awaited plan through which He would bring restoration to His people, deal a deathblow to sin, and establish His kingdom forever. As we journey to the manger, we recall that God journeyed from Heaven to Earth to accomplish this eternal plan. Can you imagine, after an eternity of planning, the eager anticipation that the heavens must have experienced awaiting the moment of Christ's incarnation?

The hardest part of any journey is waiting to arrive at the end. "Are we there yet?" we call from the backseat. The truth is, as Christians, we never fully arrive at becoming the people God is molding us to be. We enter this journey knowing that the clay of our lives hasn't yet been completely sculpted by the Potter's hands. However, the good news of God's rending of the heavens and coming to earth is that when we wait upon God, we can be confident that God will complete His work in us.

PRAYER

Holy and Gracious God, we thank You for rending the heavens and coming down, for journeying from heaven to earth to save us. Through the incarnation, You demonstrated that there is no distance that could keep us from Your great love, nothing that could keep Your purposes from being fulfilled. Mold us and make us according to Your purposes throughout this Advent journey toward the birth of Your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 4 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

JANICE CROLEY

Psalm 27:14 (NKJV)

*Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart:
wait, I say, on the LORD!*

David wrote these words as his testimony as well as the command of God. Through his many trials and tribulations, David never lost faith in the Lord's promise. David, although a sinner, had a holy, humble confidence, and committed himself to the grace of God. By the grace of God, he persevered in his duties. This faith and trust that David had in the Lord gave him the courage to use his God-given skills. It was faith that moved David to prepare himself as he took his sling and carefully chose the stones he would use to defeat Goliath. David cast himself upon the mercy and grace of God, determined to preserve his integrity and hope in God. God knew David's true character, just as God knows the true character of every man. God knows the thoughts and intents of every heart.

But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31, NKJV)

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, we know we are sinners but we also know the love You have for us. Show us the way of surrender, so that, like David, we too will have the courage to trust in You. Give us a greater desire for Your glory than for our happiness. Fill us with joy and anticipation, as we surrender to Your plans and timing. We know everything You design is good. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

DECEMBER 5 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

PAUL SPINKA

Romans 13:11 (NIV)

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The Message says it this way:

But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God.

■ ■ ■ What time is it? No need to check your watch or iPhone. The time is now!

There is no time like the present. Don't delay until tomorrow. It might just be too late.

In 1 Corinthians 7:29, Paul says, "What I mean, brothers [and sisters], is that the time is short." All three passages are saying not to let outside distractions get in the way of our reaching out to grab God's gift of grace. It is our gift of salvation through His Son's sacrifice on the cross. If we have not yet done so, now is the time to set our life's priorities. Put God first, family second, other people third, and then all the rest. We can never do this too soon. If we wait, we may be too late.

We must not get caught up in day-to-day events, happenings, and obligations or we will lose sight of our heavenly goal which comes through God's gift of grace. Eternal salvation is our ultimate blessing from God. To keep us focused on that goal, we need to take inventory of the blessings of God which we have already enjoyed. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God." Author Squire Rushnell refers to these earthly blessings in his book as "when God winks at you."

Take some time, be still, sit back, and think about the many times God has winked at you. Thinking about past blessings will help you focus on His presence and on the day when He will return.

DECEMBER 6 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

DOUG MEHLE

Romans 5:8 (NIV)

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

■ ■ This is one of the many times the New Testament tells of, and reminds us of, the good news: We are saved by grace (unearned, undeserved favor from God) through faith (complete trust).

As we often recite (from 1 John 1:8), “If we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves.” God sent Jesus Christ to die for us, not because we are good enough, but because He loves us.

The powerful verse from the Gospel of John tells us, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

God’s grace is referenced in the Bible over 50 times, from Psalm 45:2, “...and your lips have been anointed with grace,” through to 2 Peter 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

God’s grace is given to us. It must be received by us through faith in His promised eternal reward.

DECEMBER 7 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

MIKE GREENE

Luke 4:14-16 (TLB)

Then Jesus returned to Galilee, full of the Holy Spirit's power. Soon he became well known throughout all that region for his sermons in the synagogues; everyone praised him. When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on Saturday, and stood up to read the Scriptures.

 From this passage we can see that Jesus has begun His ministry and is now returning to His roots, His hometown of Nazareth. How will He be received? Here everyone remembers His growing up. They remember His father Joseph and mother Mary. This is where He learned His so-called earthly trade (carpentry).

I find myself wondering whether there was anything unusual or remarkable about Him as a youth. Did He stand out in any way? Was there a clue for His neighbors to identify who He was or what He would mean to the world? From the response in the synagogue that day, the answer seemed to be, “Apparently not.”

This is what happened at Jesus’ homecoming. He entered the synagogue and stood up to read from the scrolls. He began by reading from Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the suffering and afflicted. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to announce liberty to captives, and to open the eyes of the blind. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of God’s favor to them has come...”

But Jesus didn't read the rest of the story. He started with verse one, but only got halfway through verse two. Why did He do that? What He read paints a picture of divine mercy. The portion of Isaiah 61:3-11 that He omitted feeds the Jews' expectations of a vengeful Lord, a warrior Messiah, a conquering King. So, why didn't Jesus complete Isaiah 61? I believe it was because Jesus fully understood that His role in the first coming was as a servant Lord who, with His life, would buy us the forgiveness we need to have a relationship with Him. Was Isaiah wrong in his prophecy? No. Jesus knew that the divine judgment He omitted from the passages of Isaiah would take place in His second coming when He assumed the role of a messianic judge.

After this reading from the scrolls and before returning to His seat, Jesus said, "The Scripture you've heard has been fulfilled this very day!" (Luke 4:21) While the congregants were amazed at His comment and had generally spoken well of Him, Jesus knew that He would soon be saying, "No prophet is accepted in his own hometown." Clearly with that statement (Luke 4:24), Jesus was telling the congregants who He was and why He had come. Unfortunately, they didn't understand, and even took offense by becoming violent when He alluded to the fact that God cares for and is there for everyone, not just the Jews. Sadly, because of their clouded views and their expectations regarding the Messiah, many Jews totally missed the greatest experience of their lives: a direct, up-front, and personal relationship with the greatest man who ever lived, Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Please join me in praying that the Jews, along with countless others, will finally realize what Jesus Christ offers for all of us, and they will run to Him with open arms. What a wonderful world it would be!

DECEMBER 8 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

JOHN CARDWELL

John 3:36 (NLT)

And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment.

■ ■ ■ How should we respond to the message of Jesus' birth?

- We should first believe in the good news.
- After believing, we should be thankful and tell others.
- Finally, we should glorify and praise God.

God Himself came down to rescue us from death and destruction. He came to save us from sin. That was His rescue mission for the world. It is the Good News for our salvation and we should be glad. He came to earth as a man, was born in a manger, lived a perfect life, and died for us so that we might have life. Wow, isn't that amazing!

The shepherds found Him, they believed, and they told others the Good News. They returned from Bethlehem, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, just as they had witnessed it.

Our response should be the same when we hear the Good News of Jesus—He came to save us, restore our relationship with God, and make peace for us. We should respond swiftly just as did the shepherds: believe, tell others, and praise Him. Those who believe the story of the birth and of Jesus' gospel message should tell others. Our hope is in the Lord—that is the message! We should respond in kind.

When I think about “glorifying and praising God,” two things come to mind: beauty and duty. When something is beautiful we admire, adore, and are captured by it. God has made all things beautiful, hasn't He?

Duty entails service. When we glorify and praise God we are not doing it for ourselves but in service to the Lord; our service should be selfless. Think of how we can serve God selflessly and, at the same time, glorify Him. Think about following His commandments. In today's world that can be challenging, but think of the reward, the room He has prepared for you and me in heaven. Commit to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30-31). He alone gives us hope for the future.

Finally, tell others! There are lots of ways to do that. We all have different gifts to bring forward. Some of us are good speakers, some are good teachers, some are good leaders, while still others are good servants. No matter our gift, our kindness and love are on display for all the world to see. When we give selflessly, neither expecting nor wanting anything in return, we glorify and praise God.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, let us receive the Good News announcement that You came for all of us. You will come to all who humble their hearts before You. Whoever we are, whatever we do, and wherever we are from, You accept us as we are. Open our hearts and let us rejoice in Your coming... Praise God. Amen.

DECEMBER 9 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

NELSON ROBBINS

Isaiah 40:31 (NLT)

But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.

They will soar high on wings like eagles.

They will run and not grow weary.

They will walk and not faint.

 The Book of Isaiah is the first of the writings of the prophets in the Bible and the author, Isaiah, is considered to be the greatest prophet.

The first half of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 1-39), “Words of Judgement,” contains scathing denunciations and pronouncements as he calls Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations to repent of their sins. The last 27 chapters (40-66), “Words of Comfort,” however, are filled with consolation and hope as Isaiah unfolds God’s promise of future blessings through His Messiah.

Even the strongest people get tired at times, but God’s power and strength never diminish. Trusting in the Lord is the patient expectation that God will fulfill His promises in His Word, and strengthen us to rise above life’s difficulties.

- Do you believe God loves you and wants the best for you?
- Can you relax, confident that His purposes are right?
- Are you convinced that He has the power to control all of life—and your life as well?

Though your faith may be struggling or weak, accept His provisions and care for you. You will soar on wings like an eagle, if you believe God loves you and wants the best for you!

DECEMBER 10 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

STEVEN GRANT

Mark 1:1-3 (ESV)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

*“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”...

█ Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not begin his gospel with a genealogy, but rather by revealing a connection between the Old and New Testaments. There was an expectation that the prophet Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah as reflected in Malachi 4:5. In our Christian Bibles, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and the consensus of many scholars is that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the gospels to be written, so it is appropriate that Mark would begin his testimony with the appearance of the one whom Jesus later identified, “He is Elijah who is to come” (Matthew 11:14).

John’s proclamation is a composite reference to Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. Mark singles out Isaiah for special mention as he quotes John the Baptist. In Isaiah chapter 40, the prophet delivers a message of God’s saving love. Isaiah begins with:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the LORD’s hand

double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2)

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These hopeful and comforting words are precious for the Advent season, because just as Isaiah promised manifestations of God's saving love and power, John, using the same language, announces that God was intervening into human history to fulfill His promise of salvation through the Messiah who was now among them.

Jesus promised us that He would be "with us always to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). No matter what challenge you may face in this life, just like the Israelites of Isaiah's day and of John's day, God's Word to us is one of comfort, strength, and salvation. Let nothing interfere with the Lord's coming into your heart, blessing your soul, and uplifting your spirit. Prepare His way by dispensing with any obstacle that stands in His way, such as misplaced priorities, bitterness, stubborn angers, and any number of idols that take Jesus' place in our lives.

The season of Advent is meant to be a time of preparation; an opportunity to make Jesus' path straight to our hearts. The Gospel is "good news." This is something you will want to hear once again, or perhaps even for the first time. It is a message you will want to embrace, worthy of a lifetime commitment.

Do you hear John's cry in the wilderness? Take heed! The greatest of blessings will be yours!

DECEMBER 11 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

LYNN HEINOLD

Psalm 40:1 (NLT)

I waited patiently for the LORD to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry.

■ Psalm 40, written by King David, praises the benefits he received by waiting patiently for God's response to his prayers. David was anointed to become king when he was 16, but he waited patiently until he was 30, while Saul was trying to kill him, to become king of the Israelites.

Jesus also waited patiently upon God on the night He was betrayed, in the Garden of Gethsemane, during the mock trial, and during His agony on the cross. He waited patiently until He could cry, "It is finished!"

Jesus' words and actions model for us the behavior God wants us to have in patiently waiting. To wait patiently is to look forward in expectation without complaining through difficult times. In prayerfully asking God's direction and help, our spirits are brightened in knowing that He sets our path and walks with us; we need only wait to discern His will.

In this Advent season, we are reminded of Simeon who waited patiently for the coming Messiah. Simeon was an elderly, righteous man who lived in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. On the day Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to present Him to the Lord, Simeon was directed to be there. Simeon held Jesus, and praised God for having fulfilled His promise. Simeon had waited patiently.

The days leading to Christmas become very busy with all the tasks to be done: decorating, shopping, food preparation, etc. We should set apart a portion of each day for "waiting patiently," listening for God's will for each of us, reflecting on God's gift of Grace, and rejoicing in the birth of our Savior!

JUDY GRAHAM

Isaiah 40:1-5 (NIV)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

 In this passage, Isaiah prophesies the role of John the Baptist. He will be the “voice of one calling in the wilderness” of Judea. He will “prepare the way” for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

In that time, when a ruler travelled, much work was done to “prepare the way for the Lord.” This meant major road repairs: all the “mountains” or the bumps in the roads were leveled off and the “valleys,” the ruts and potholes, were filled in to “make way for the coming of the king.” A herald would run ahead of the king’s party to announce his coming, crying out publicly and emphatically.

In this sense, John the Baptist was Jesus’ herald and his message of the coming salvation was an urgent one. He cried out in order to get the people’s attention: “make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” But the desert he referred to was not made up of sand and tumbleweed. Instead, John was referring to our unsaved human hearts as spiritual deserts, dry and arid; full of rough places, and as hard as rocks.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to enter our desert hearts, they become lush, healthy, and brimming with life. Any obstacles (mountains and valleys that impede our walk with the Lord) are smoothed away and our salvation is assured.

PRAYER

Oh Jesus, I accept You as my personal Lord and Savior. I receive You as my Lord, my Christ, my Friend. Fill me, Father, with Your Holy Spirit, that I may serve You faithfully all the days of my life. Help me make a smooth and level road in the desert of my heart as a path directly to You. You are my Lord, and in the Name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 13 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

JACK WALLACE

Ephesians 2:4-10 (NKJV)

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

■ ■ As we participate in the traditional Advent season, we look forward to the celebration of the birth of Christ, Christmas. We traditionally begin the season with the lighting of the first candle on the Advent wreath and continue lighting additional candles until the fifth and final Advent candle is lit on Christmas Eve. All of these celebrations offer an acknowledgement of our thanks to God for the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Through our faith in Him, we have been saved from judgment for our sins.

In the passage from Paul's letter above, he reminds us that God loves us so much that He gave us the greatest gift of all, the gift of salvation! Paul reminds us that God planned for us and expects us to spend our lives helping others. We can fulfill this obligation in part through our support of the many missions and missionaries sponsored through our church.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for loving us and for the grace You have shown us through the gifts of forgiveness of our sins and eternal salvation by our simple act of trusting in Your Son as our Savior. Help us to be mindful of the needs of our Christian brothers and sisters who work tirelessly to bring others to a belief in You, spreading Your Word around the world to save them so that they might enter Your eternal kingdom. We offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen!

DECEMBER 14 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

CARL JOHANSEN

Matthew 16:13-18 (NLT)

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” “Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Then he asked them, “But who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”

■ Jesus chose to deliver a sort of “graduation speech” to His disciples at Caesarea Philippi. They had been following Him for two and a half to three years at this point. Since Caesarea Philippi is about twenty-five miles north of Capernaum, I imagine the disciples thought this was going to be a sort of vacation away from the crowds, but it was just the opposite.

Entering the area, they passed the pagan Gate of Hades. As Jesus and the disciples continued walking, they passed the ancient Canaanite sanctuary to Baal, followed by the Greek and Roman sanctuaries built to worship Pan. It was here Jesus said, as He pointed to the false gods, “Who do the people say I am?” It was at this time that Jesus chose to reveal who He was and His plans to build a church.

Jesus presented a clear challenge with His words at Caesarea Philippi: I am the true living God and My church will never die as these false gods do.

PRAYER

Loving Father, You so loved the world that You sent us Your only Son that we might believe in Him and have eternal life. May we encounter Jesus Christ anew this day and live the Good News with joy. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit, help us to boldly go out to the whole world and proclaim our faith with confidence. Amen.

LIN RHODE

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

■ This is one of the most familiar and often quoted passages of Scripture. Proverbs urges us to forsake our own understanding as we seek God's direction.

We are told **positively** to trust the Lord, and **negatively** not to trust our own understanding. These two things are mutually exclusive. In other words, if we trust in the Lord, we cannot also depend upon our own ability to understand everything God is doing.

Most of us have a deep desire to understand, but in so many areas we must acknowledge that we cannot understand. We must accept God's ways, even when we cannot comprehend them. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" teaches us it is the Lord in whom we are to trust, not ourselves or our plans, nor the world's wisdom. We trust in the Lord because He and He alone is truly trustworthy, and His plans for us are perfect and purposeful.

Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us why we often do not understand what God is doing: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." God sees the whole picture, while we see only our tiny corner of it. To trust in the Lord means we cannot place our own right to understand above His right to direct our lives the way He sees fit. Our limited minds can set us up for spiritual disappointment.

Whatever difficulties you may be facing now—health, financial, emotional, relational—God can see a path you may not know about. Trust the Lord and keep moving in faith, even if you do not see a way. He will make a way. Be patient; the Lord knows what He is doing and what is best for you. He can see the end result. All of the "whys" will one day be made clear in the light of God's love.

But for now, we are learning to trust in the Lord. Put Him first.

PRAYER

Lord, the Good News is that nothing is impossible for You. My understanding is limited, but You know what is best. Teach me to trust in Your ways and not my own. Help me to see life's difficulties from Your perspective; may I always remember Your promises to me with a thankful heart.

DECEMBER 16 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

STEVIE JOSLIN

Colossians 1:15-20 (NIV)

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

PEACE

How often have we longed for peace and quiet?

- Peace within
- Peace at home
- Peace at work
- Peace in our country
- Peace in the world

During this Advent season, we rejoice that God sent His son, Jesus (fully God and fully human) to teach and show us how we may experience the ultimate divine peace. God created all of us in His image. When we have Christ in our life, we have all of God in human form. As we grow closer in our relationship with our Creator God, we will experience this peace and wholeness. Christ's death, His ultimate sacrifice, provided a way for every believer to come to God. In the Beatitudes, Jesus reminds us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."

PRAYER

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Amen. (ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI)

DECEMBER 17 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

JUNE BARROW

John 1:6-8; 19-27 (NIV)

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us." John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

 In these verses, we learn a great deal about who John the Baptist was and who Jesus is. John had been baptizing, which was a sign of repentance, a cleansing to make people ready to receive the coming Messiah. We learn by John's repeated assertions that he was not the Messiah. He was not the prophet Elijah (a reference to Malachi 4:5-6) nor was he a prophet. He was a messenger, a forerunner, and his job was to introduce Jesus. He was specially sent by God for this very purpose. John was a witness—that is, one who makes a commitment to stand on what he knows to be true and then to tell the truth.

From His first words, we see that Jesus is the Way, not only for the Jewish people but for all of us. He came "that all might believe in Him." The Old Testament hints at this and John the Baptist declared it. This marvelous, once-for-all salvation that opens up God's love and mercy and peace was for the people in John's day and for all the rest of us, too.

PRAYER

Oh King Lord, what words can we say to thank You for the gift of Jesus, the gift of our salvation, the gift of being loved, and forgiven, and at peace with You? Artists paint masterpieces; poets write great hymns. We can add only our own humble thanks and praise for the wonderful plan for our salvation You had even before creation—the great gift of Jesus. In His lovely Name we pray, Amen.

DECEMBER 18 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

G.R. HOUCK

Titus 2:13 (CEB)

At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

 In the preceding 12 verses, Paul gives instructions on how to live godly lives in the present world. However, while we focus on living in the here and now, we must keep in mind that we are eternal beings. As Christ's followers, we are looking forward to the time when Jesus will return. To give us more assurance of the promise of His return, we can look back on the many prophecies already fulfilled.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the promise of a coming Messiah is clearly given hundreds of years before Jesus was born. It is clear that Jesus Christ is the only One who walked on earth that fulfilled these prophecies. In fact, from Genesis to Malachi, there are over 300 specific references proclaiming the coming of the Messiah with details about His virgin birth in Bethlehem and His lineage from King David.

The crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus was also clearly prophesied. In the familiar verses of Isaiah 53, written in 700 BC, we are provided with many details about His death. Prophetically, Psalm 22 is amazing since it predicted numerous separate elements about Jesus' crucifixion a thousand years before He was crucified. Some examples are: His hands and feet will be pierced through, His bones will not be broken and they will cast lots for His clothing.

His resurrection was predicted in Psalm 16:1: "...God will not let His Holy One see decay..." In 1 Corinthians 15:4-6 we read: "He [Jesus] was buried, and three days later he was raised from the dead and appeared to more than 500 of the brothers."

As His birth, death, and resurrection were clearly predicted, so is His return. We can live with the assurance that He will come again. On the very day Jesus ascended to His Father, His future return was promised (Acts 1:11). This is our blessed hope.

So, during Advent Season do not neglect to see the whole picture of who the baby Jesus is. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Anticipate His return and live every day as if it were your last one. If you do not have your "ticket" for the coming event, do not wait.

DECEMBER 19 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

DAVE NICHOLS

Acts 4:12 (NLT)

There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.

■ Christ was born for our salvation! What a wonderful message to reflect upon this Advent Season. The theological definition of salvation is “deliverance from the power or penalty of sin; redemption.”

Peter and John were preaching to the crowd when the church leaders, captain of the Temple guard, and the Sadducees arrested them for teaching that through Jesus there is a resurrection of the dead. Their bold message has been carried down through the years, and because of the grace that has been bestowed on us, we must boldly proclaim the mighty acts of God: especially raising Christ from the dead.

We may think we can be saved by being good, obeying the law, being religious, being sincere, or by buying our salvation. Salvation has been given to us through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection; we must now decide what to do with it! He offers us forgiveness of our sins and a lifestyle that, if followed, will help us live our lives to the fullest.

Salvation is mentioned 140 times in the Bible. Here are some passages you might like to reflect upon:

Genesis 49:18 (MEV)

I wait for your salvation, O LORD.

Psalms 96:2 (MEV)

Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; declare his salvation from day to day.

Habakkuk 3:18 (MEV)

Yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Isaiah 12:2 (MEV)

*Certainly God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the LORD
God is my strength and my song; he also has become my salvation.*

We will receive salvation by grace, through faith, and only through Christ.

DECEMBER 20 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

DAVID MUSTIAN

2 Timothy 1:9 (NIV)

He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time...

 In this selection, Paul is writing (from prison in Rome) to his dear friend Timothy who is in Ephesus. He is reminding Timothy of the call both he and Timothy had received from God to carry the true message of salvation to all nonbelievers, especially the Gentiles. This message, given during the first century, applies to us today. It is a message that describes the most wonderful gift imaginable. The gift is freely given to all who will receive it and is made possible by God in heaven who recognized the need to save us from our sins against Him. You see, the Bible tells us that “we have all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23). Also, we find “that the wages of sin is death but the gift from God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). There is something we must do to make this gift real in us. We must **receive** it, **open** it, and **apply** it to our daily lives. The most precious gift means nothing to the recipient if it isn’t accepted, opened, and used for its intended purpose.

Paul reminds Timothy that they were saved and called into a relationship with God by His grace alone. It was not the result of anything they had done. Simply put, they didn’t deserve it, nor do we! In Jeremiah 1:5, we are reminded that we are all called by name before we are born. God calls each of us for a specific purpose. We must accept God’s saving grace and seek to discern His purpose for our lives. Whatever that purpose, we are called to open our hearts, to receive His free gift of grace, and to be the salt and light of His Kingdom in this world, as we learn in chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew.

Have you opened your gift of grace?

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for Your love and grace. Thank You for Your free gift of salvation. Please help me to discern Your purpose in my life and give me strength and wisdom to be the salt and light in Your earthly Kingdom. In Jesus’ name.

DECEMBER 21 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

KEN BALDWIN

Luke 24:46-49 (NLT)

And he said, "Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' You are witnesses of all these things. And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven."

 The good news of the resurrection begins with the birth of Jesus in the sleepy little village of Bethlehem. The angels sang with joy at the coming of the Messiah as predicted in the Old Testament centuries before (Isaiah 53:3-9; 7:14; Ezekiel 37:12; Zechariah 9:9; Micah 5:2). In the New Testament, it is told in Luke 24:26 by Jesus.

This small child grew to manhood, lived a life of love for mankind, performed miracles, eventually faced the cruelty and anger of a hostile world, and paid the price for our sins with His life. Through His grace, He offers eternal life for each of us, a gift we don't deserve and cannot earn. It is a gift, given freely and without conditions, to those who believe in Him.

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to His disciples so when He was no longer with them, they would be guided and empowered to be Christ's hands and feet on earth.

The Holy Spirit works in our lives today as well, giving us understanding of God's Word and insight to put His Word into action.

In this Advent Season, we celebrate the birth of our Savior and the life He lived, with all the joy and/or anticipation of the gift of Salvation made possible by His ultimate sacrifice.

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, in this season of joy and celebration, help us to be guided by the Holy Spirit and focus on the ultimate goal: salvation from sin. We are full of gratitude for Your love and guidance. Help us to keep the meaning of Christmas in our lives all year, so we can be witnesses of Your love to all whom we encounter. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

ED GONZALEZ

1 Thessalonians 4:1 (AMP)

Finally, believers, we ask and admonish you in the Lord Jesus, that you follow the instruction that you received from us about how you ought to walk and please God (just as you are actually doing) and that you excel even more and more [pursuing a life of purpose and living in a way that expresses gratitude to God for your salvation].

As children, we found Christmas to be a time full of magical wonder. As adults, we often forget; we get busy, we are consumed with cares, and we often grow callous. But if we stop and reflect, we will find greater wonders than our hearts could ever have conceived of as children. Think about it—Almighty God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, loves you and me so much that He left heaven, divested Himself of all His power and privilege, and took on human form. He came as a helpless babe, lived a sinless life, fulfilled the law and gave Himself for us as the “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (from John 1:29). Speaking of this amazing plan, the Apostle Paul wrote that it is “the mystery kept secret since the world began” (Romans 16:25b).

I remember when I first heard this amazing, almost too-good-to-be-true news, that God wasn't angry with me. In fact, He loved me and made this incredible journey to make sure I could be with Him! Instinctively, I knew that such news required a response from me. I knew that accepting Jesus as my Savior was a life-changing decision! Furthermore, this decision would not just alter my future; it would dramatically change the way I lived my daily life.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, first commends them for their response to the Gospel. They are living in a way that expresses their gratitude to God for their Salvation. They are so in love with the Lord that they are seeking to walk in a way that will please Him. Paul encourages them to “excel even more and more” in their life of gratitude. Why is this important?

I once learned in a marriage seminar that if you are not drawing closer in your marriage relationship each day, you are drifting apart. The same can be said of our relationship with the Lord.

This Advent Season, let us determine that we will respond to the immeasurable love of our amazing God by excelling, “pursuing a life of purpose and living in a way that expresses gratitude to God for your salvation,” drawing ever closer in this love relationship with our God!

TOM BUNT

Philippians 4:4-9, 12-13 (NRSV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry 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 surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

 Our perspective on God is critical to how we view everything else in our life. When Paul says that we should rejoice in the Lord always, we tend to think of all the good things—but what Paul is saying is that we should also rejoice even when things are not going well. When we realize what God has done for us, everything else gets put into a new perspective. We live in a fallen world which causes us to worry, be stressed, get angry, and feel out of control. Paul is calling the Philippians to attitudes of joy and reason. Even while he was in prison, he was thinking of them and trying to encourage them. The joy that Paul is talking about is not based on circumstances but on a deep contentment in the Lord.

It is so hard to be content when life is coming at us from all sides. So many times, we try to live life on our own power, strength, and joy. But God says, “I love you, and I know what you are going through, and I want to help you!”

We must trust the Lord in ALL circumstances of our lives. True joy only comes from knowing who God is and how much He loves us.

PRAYER

Dad, please help me to trust You in all areas of my life, so that I may find true peace and joy. Help me to never forget what You have done and are doing in my life! Amen!

JOHN MCWILLIAMS

Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

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

■ He came on purpose with a purpose! Many people today, even many who call themselves Christians, will tell you that Jesus came to earth mainly to show us how to live. They will tell you that His purpose was to set an example of love for all to follow. To some degree that's correct.

However, above all, Jesus' ultimate purpose in coming was to do what was necessary to make it possible for you and me to go to heaven. The Bible tells us clearly in Romans 3:23 that all of us, without exception, have sinned. We have all broken God's laws, and in Romans 6:23 God tells us the penalty for doing that. He declares that the "wages" of sin is eternal torment in hell. Consider for a moment what "wages" are. Wages are what we earn for something we've done.

In this case the “wages” of our sin, is eternal agony, and separation from God in hell. Sinning against God isn’t a small spiritual misdemeanor. Rather, it’s a spiritual capital crime, punishable by having to spend eternity in hell.

Yet people say that God is forgiving and loving. Therefore, He would never send anyone to hell. That is partially right. As someone once said, “God never sends anyone to hell. Hell is a place where people choose to go, as a result of failing to choose God’s rescue plan.” The only rescue plan is Jesus. His very name means “Rescuer.” He came on purpose, with the purpose of doing what was necessary to rescue us from those “wages” we otherwise deserve. He was born in a manger, and 33 years later purposely went to the Cross. There, while hanging in agony, God had His Son undergo and experience what it would be like for you and me to spend eternity in hell. Isaiah 53:6 puts it perfectly: “All of us were like sheep that had wandered off. We had each gone our own way, but the LORD gave Him the punishment we deserved.”

Here’s the bottom line. If you would like to go to heaven, you first have to admit that you don’t deserve to go there. In fact, because of your sins, you deserve to go to hell. If you feel you deserve to go, based on how good you’ve been, you are deceiving yourself. If there were another way for us to get to heaven, what Jesus did on the cross was worthless. You have to ask yourself why God would put His Son through that, unless it was absolutely necessary to save you and me.

Christmas is a joyful time to celebrate the coming of the Savior: the One who did what was necessary to save you and me from hell. Praise be to God for His great gift of salvation through His Son. Have a blessed Christmas!

DECEMBER 25 | FROM BONITA TO BETHLEHEM

DOUG PRATT

John 1:9-14 (NIV)

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

 Today's passage ends with the staggering truth theologians have labeled “the Incarnation”: God actually became flesh, He actually took on our human nature and lived among us for a while. His work was so thorough and complete that people didn't even recognize Him as anyone special—in effect, He traveled among us incognito or in disguise. It was only through the miracles He worked or through the words He spoke that people with discerning eyes could see that Jesus was more than just a carpenter from Nazareth.

One of the favorite legends from the Middle Ages was the story of the king or nobleman who went incognito. It is found in various versions in the folklore of many European countries.

Though details differed, the heart of the story was essentially the same. A person of high or lofty status would put on the clothing of commoners and mingle among them. In some variations, a compassionate king dons a disguise to find out what life is really like for his subjects so that he can help them; in other variations, a prince dresses up as a peasant in order to seek a bride. All of these stories held fascination for people who lived in a very class-conscious society. The separation between the rich and powerful and the poor and needy was rigid and unbridgeable. But the wonderful fantasy, cherished and passed down from generation to generation of ordinary people was the thought of how wonderful it would be if the high and mighty actually cared enough about us to lower themselves to be among us.

This fairy tale actually came true on Christmas. And the specifics of it were far more incredible, unthinkable, and astounding than any of the medieval folk tales had contemplated.

The great King of all the universe did indeed come down and mingle among His subjects. He didn't just cast aside royal robes and put on peasant rags; He went all the way, taking on our very flesh and blood. He didn't walk quietly through our streets for a few days or weeks, but spent decades among us. He didn't just listen to our problems, He felt them personally. His purpose was not just to bring us love and concern, but to form a personal relationship of intimacy and companionship with each of us.

That is why **The Incarnation** continues to amaze and astound us. Leaving His royal palace and its luxuries and privileges to be born a helpless baby in a stable; to walk the dusty roads of the Middle East; and ultimately to die on a cruel cross—all for us! No wonder we are prompted, when we understand the significance of the Incarnation, to worship Him!



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