



NO VACANCY

MAKE ROOM

Advent at LifePoint

2023

Make Room

Your life is not like my life. No two lives are the same.
Yet here is a story of my life, which began in the simplest of ways.
My father, hands rough with labor, my mother, beautiful yet shamed.
Swept up in events long expected, from these I derived my new name.

My story, an enigma of sorts, moon-lit in a hovel begins.
There a young woman lays sleeping, in a world full awash in its sins.
To a glorious one she awakens—he said that her world must change.
“Favored one” was the name which he called her—stay with me—here the
story gets strange. Untouched by a man, one life became two, a new life
appeared on the stage.

I am that life, I tell you, I said that this story is strange. Although I arrived at
that moment, there is none that can sum up my days. My father, he too met
an angel, “Aha! Likely story” you say? What if I told you I knew them, in fact,
that I gave them their names? The angel as he became spirit, my father when
he was but clay, their lives owed to me as Creator, the story gets stranger with
age.

Some ruler (these sort can be brazen), had a whim that his people he’d know.
To ancient homes each was summoned, so my father made ready to go. My
mother (I’ve heard) said, “you’re crazy!” But soon on a donkey she rode. The
trek was a long one consider, my mother called nowhere her home. Swelled
in hope, breast, and belly, she labored, the time for my advent had come.
Frantic search undertaken for shelter, but alas, only mocking and scorn.

“No room” was the welcome that evening, twas’ a shocking strike to the face.
As I entered the world I had woven, there was none that would spare me a
place. I say “none” but that’s not the whole story, there were some that made
room for a lad. In a cave near the town there was welcome, sheep and goats
offered us their own pad.

My story is one that’s repeated, every day in this world. “Make room” is my
cry to each person, but “no room” is the banner unfurled. But to those who
believe in my story, to those whom I know each by name. These I claim for
my own as dear children, I carry their sorrow and shame.

Here ends my own little story. Pray friend, take it to heart.
Make room in your own sacred story, it was I who gave you your start.
Broken lives, noisy but empty, are made whole by the life that I gave.
Open up and find life in my welcome, it was you that I came here to save.

- J. Gregory

What is Advent?

Outside of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, Advent is rarely celebrated in our day. In place of a season of hopeful expectation, preparation, and waiting, many have substituted shopping, busyness, parties, and materialism. What was once a season of hope has morphed into a season of loneliness, poor stewardship, and the highest suicide rates in the calendar year. Not all things change for the better.

Advent is a period of preparation, extending over four Sundays leading to Christmas. The word “advent” comes from the Latin *advenio*, “to come to,” and thus refers to the coming of Christ. Of course, what we have in mind is the coming of Christ during that first Advent, but it also refers to the anticipation of the coming of Christ the King at his second Advent, when Jesus will return and make his home with us forever.

No one is actually certain as to when the practice of recognizing Advent began. In the early centuries of the church it almost certainly arose as a result of an agreement on the date of Christmas. Once December 25 became Christmas Day on the church calendar, it became the focus for the later half of the Christian calendar, a perfect balance to Resurrection Sunday in the first half. In this way, Advent was observed much like Lent, both were seen as preparation for the feast day approaching on the horizon.

The first written evidence of Advent is found in Western Europe (Hispania and Gaul). The earliest official mention of Advent practices comes from writings of the Council of Saragossa in AD 380.

Feasting and Fasting

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

The gospel was revealed to us in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

“Gospel” means “good news,” and the ultimate good news for all humanity prior to Jesus’ Advent was the coming of the Anointed One — the Messiah. It was he who would offer the hope of salvation to a world lost and reeling from its own self-destructive impulses. The world was changed forever by the Advent of Christ. That change took place one person at a time. My prayer is that we will all be impacted again this Advent season by the incarnation, and that we will encounter Christ anew through our devotions, corporate worship, and Christian fellowship.

Using the Advent Devotional

There are no concrete rules for devotions. My suggestion is that you set aside a time each day when you will have at least fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time for prayer, reading, and discussion. Pray that God will meet you in your time of study and for a heart and mind that are attentive. Read the Scripture passage for the day, then consider the non-scriptural text I have provided. Remember to consider what the passage says and means; do not just read it to get it read. The word of God is living and active; allow it the opportunity to speak to you. If you have older children, I suggest taking turns each day with the reading of Scripture. For my family all of this generally took place prior to bedtime, but every family is different, so you may find that the morning or during a mealtime is better for yours. Try to find a time, if possible, when you are not rushed. If you are single, consider doing a devotion each day during Advent with a friend with whom you can share openly, or ask God to meet you uniquely during your time alone with him.

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

Our theme for Advent this year is “Make Room: An Advent Reflection.” We will focus on the many ways in which Jesus was both rejected and invited in during his Advent, and the many ways we tend to reject him as well. Our goal will be a positive one—to discover how we might invite the living Christ into our lives this Advent season and beyond.

Advent Devotions

My prayer is that this Advent devotional will help you and your family prepare for the coming of Christ this season. Devotions have played a vital role in our family. With our children now grown, we look back on the many memories we share of family devotions and readings at bedtime. I realize the difficulties inherent in trying to have consistent devotions, particularly as a family, but their value cannot be overstated. Maybe you will consider using this guide for one month to supplement your devotion time, or maybe, if you have never had daily devotions for yourself or your family, you will find that having a ready-made devotional will help you get started on the practice. In either case, my hope is that the humble thoughts I provide in this devotional will be a blessing to all who read it.

Blessings to you this Advent season!
Pastor Jym

Daily Readings for Advent 2023

First Week of Advent

Sunday (12/3):	No Room
Monday (12/4):	A Psalm of Repentance
Tuesday (12/5):	Save Us Lord!
Wednesday (12/6):	When Jesus Enters In
Thursday (12/7):	Ready to be Revealed
Friday (12/8):	Fulfilled in Your Hearing
Saturday (12/9):	The Beginning and the Firstborn

Second Week of Advent

Sunday (12/10):	A Delight To Do God's Will
Monday (12/11):	A Sudden Appearance
Tuesday (12/12):	The Lion from the Tribe of Judah
Wednesday (12/13):	The Door To Freedom
Thursday (12/14):	A Reunion...of Sorts
Friday (12/15):	The King of Glory
Saturday (12/16):	A Faintly Burning Wick

Third Week of Advent

Sunday (12/17):	The Drama of Christ's Passion
Monday (12/18):	Running with the Devil
Tuesday (12/19):	A Song of Basic Reality
Wednesday (12/20):	Concerning the Light
Thursday (12/21):	A Lament
Friday (12/22):	From Humility to Exaltation
Saturday (12/23):	The Grand Miracle

Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday (12/24):	Magnificat
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3 December

No Room

Luke 2:4-7 - And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

“Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” Jesus said to a man who told him that he was willing to follow him anywhere he went. The apostle John tells us in his gospel that “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). The prophet Isaiah confirmed this seven centuries prior to the incarnation when he said of the coming suffering servant, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3).

At the greatest moment in the history of humankind people could find no place for the birth of their Messiah. Bethlehem was packed with families returning for the census and the keeper of the inn had either no desire or no ability to find lodging for the pregnant teenager. God, who condescended to become man in the Person of the Son—the maker of the heavens and the earth, the great unmoved mover, the one who placed the stars in the heavens and called them each by name—was left without a place to be ushered into our world. His mother, burdened with the heaviness of labor, and his father, seeking desperately for a place to shelter his anguished wife, sought temporary shelter in a hovel reserved for livestock. A feeding trough became Jesus’ first home. Hardly a grand entrance, and the welcome never improved much for Jesus over the course of his life.

Had Mary appeared in Bethlehem that night sporting a halo, with angels ushering those around her to a respectable distance and shining brightly with the eminence of the Christ she bore, the people of Bethlehem would have gladly received her. But this is not the way of God. Humility marked the path of Jesus throughout his life, and he bore it out patiently and faithfully. When human rulers enter a city they do so with great fanfare, security details, and those who run before them shouting “Make way for the king!” Jesus’ parents went instead to the stable obediently and, one may assume, with gratefulness for a place to simply be. Humans had no room for Christ, but the livestock

accommodated. Creation willingly bends to the call of its master, even when humans, the stewards of creation, may not.

As Jesus grew from infant to boy and then from boy to man, he sought a place among his people and found that he was rarely invited in. His townspeople questioned his legitimacy, his brothers (and likely his sisters as well) refused to believe in him. The Jewish rulers despised him while others sought to kill him. He was indeed a man of sorrows. Not everyone, of course, fell in with this lot. There were outliers, a chosen few who heard him and believed; who saw and were amazed. They made room for Jesus and followed him all the way to the cross. Almost all had their moments of cowardice, of course, it is one of the marks of our humanity, but some opened not only their lives and their homes to him but their hearts as well. *But to those who did receive him, those who believed in his name, he gave the right to be called 'children of God.'* *Children born not of nature, nor of a human decision, nor of a husband's will, but born of God* (John 1:12-13). And so it remains today. Many are called, but few are chosen. Many are asked to invite Jesus to enter in, few respond to that invitation.

What about you? Is Jesus welcome in your home? Recently I read of a family whose son, a fighter pilot, was killed during active duty. The death notice his parents placed in the funeral service bulletin stated that anyone who had ever known their son would be sure of a welcome at their home. To this day (many years later) the father and mother go on taking strangers into their home, reminded each time of their deceased boy through his friends.

In a very real sense, each of us was born two-thousand years too late to offer Jesus, by way of Mary and Joseph, a place in our home. But we can offer Jesus a place in our lives. By "believing in his name," we become his brothers and sisters, his children, his home. He knocks, and we open the door. This is the spiritual invitation we must all consider this Advent season. But we may also invite Jesus in and give him place in a physical manner. We do this by seeing Jesus in friends and strangers alike, in all those with whom we come into contact. "In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me" are his words to all of us who know him even today. You were not born too late to welcome Jesus, you were born at the exact moment that God intended. Open your door to him and to those who bear his image.

Advent Action

Invite Jesus into your life today. Open up to him anew. Start Advent 2023 with the gift of hospitality to your Savior.

4 December

A Psalm of Repentance

***Psalm 51:1-12** - Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

The Scriptures share with us the circumstances that prompted this heart cry of repentance and hope from the lips of King David. *To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba* is the title to this great penitential psalm. The sad story behind this psalm is related to us in 2 Samuel chapters 11-12. The story tells us a few things about David, and if we consider it closely, about ourselves as well. David was a godly man whose heart's desire was to please the Lord. But he was human and thus capable of great duplicity. When the opportunity presented itself for David to quench the idolatrous lust that lurked in his heart, as it does in every human heart, he capitalized on the moment. He leveraged his power as king to assault Bathsheba and then send her on her way. It was a sinful tendency that would later be shared by his son (see 2 Samuel 13). When Bathsheba reported to David via emissaries that she was now pregnant, David concocted a scheme to rid himself of the responsibility. The failure of that scheme did not lead David to repentance; rather, it led him to murder. Only after being confronted by God through the prophet Nathan did David come to his senses. The damage had been done, however, and David (although repentant and forgiven) would suffer the consequences, along with his family and the nation of Israel, for the rest of his life.

Sin always brings with it collateral damage. Although it is first and foremost committed against God, others are often impacted as it spreads like an infectious plague, devouring everything in its

path. When confronted with his sin David offered no excuses: “I have sinned against the Lord” was his reply to Nathan’s accusation. He accepted his guilt and then responded properly in respect to Bathsheba. He did what all of us should do in such circumstances, he repented and then made things as right as he could possibly make them. His psalm reminds us what a heart broken by sin sounds like, and his hope for cleansing and forgiveness is made possible not by the sacrifice of animals or even penance, but only by the blood of Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb of God who died for David’s sin and for my sin and for your sin. Jesus’ incarnation made possible his crucifixion, and his crucifixion made possible his resurrection, and his resurrection made possible our redemption. “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:55-57).

An Examination of Conscience

Take this second day/evening of Advent to examine yourself.

PRAYER: Father, as I come before you, please come to my assistance. Holy Spirit, bring to my remembrance the sin that drives a wedge between us.

EXAMINATION:

1. Quiet your mind and focus your thoughts on God. You will benefit from reading Psalm 130 and 131.
2. Review your thought patterns and your way of life.
3. Reflect on the biblical principles of godly and ungodly living (Gal. 5:19-24). How do you see yourself in light of these principles?
4. Reflect on the Scripture’s call for us to bear all things, believe all things, hope in all things, endure all things. Are you practicing these Christian virtues of love and faithfulness?
5. Reflect on Jesus’ words to “love your neighbor as yourself.”
6. Ask yourself: How have I failed to love others in thought, word, or action? Am I embittered toward God or man in any way? Am I a prisoner to fear, anxiety, worry, guilt, shame, or hatred toward myself or others? Am I living wholly for God, or do I hold back in order to leave room for secret sin?
7. Have you made ready for the Lord’s return? Will he find you awake or asleep? (Mark 13:35-37)
8. Confess your sin (1 John 1:9). Thank God for his forgiveness.

PRAYER: Jesus, you came to call people to faith. Cleanse me and use me as an instrument for your glory. Have mercy on me. Thank you for shedding your blood for me. I joyfully invite you into my life and desire to live in obedience to you. Amen.

5 December

Save Us Lord!

Psalm 107:28-32: Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Have you ever been in distress? That's a laughable question, right? Of course you have. We all feel distress in our lives, including those who would say that life is very good. We do not live in Eden. Every single attempt at building a utopian society in our world has failed, even notable attempts on a small scale. David Koresh tried one in Waco, Texas. George and Sophia Ripley's Brook Farm in Massachusetts in the mid-19th century ended in failure. The Shaker movement in Great Britain (and America) in the 18th century lasted a hundred years or more, but came crashing down. The transcendentalist poet Henry David Thoreau described his utopian dream in his book *On Walden Pond* (or simply *Walden*). His experiment failed, but spurred later attempts at utopian societies, most notably in the "hippie" movement of the mid-20th century. Even Henry Ford, the notable automobile manufacturer and assembly line guru, tried to build a society free from human ills, underwriting and erecting a small city in the Brazilian forest. Today nothing remains but dilapidated buildings and a few ethnically diverse descendants.

No, we do not live in Eden. We live in a fallen world. A brief look at the morning headlines any day of the year drives that reality home quickly. Jesus was born into this fallen world, and as the incarnate Son of God he did much in his limited time and scope on this earth to alleviate the distress associated with that. People cried out to Jesus and he heard them. Lepers whose bodies were rotting away, the blind and the lame who had no future in that culture, widows in their distress and parents whose children were dying. Women whose lifestyle or illness kept them on the margins of society and sinners who needed forgiveness all fell at his feet and begged for relief. And relief is what they found. Temporary relief for all of them, eternal relief for some of them. And that is what most of us are looking for, right? We're looking for relief. We feel the crushing weight of this world. We sense the evil or disaster that often awaits us or those we love, and we cry out.

The psalmist today reminds us that the coming Messiah would be one who could, and would, deliver us from that distress. When the waters rage and the deep recesses of our world entangle us, we find him in the midst of the storm. Jesus' disciples found this to be true in a literal manner. The apostle Matthew records for us in his Gospel an account in the lives of the disciples when Jesus demonstrated his sea-calming touch. The disciples were on the Sea of Galilee, making their way to the region of the Gadarenes on the opposite side of that great inland lake. Jesus was with them, exhausted and sleeping. Suddenly a squall arose causing the boat they were riding in to be nearly swamped by the waves, and Jesus slept on. Finally they woke him and cried out, "Save us, Lord: we are perishing!" Jesus rose, rebuked the waves and the wind, and a great calm ensued. The disciples were rightfully in awe. "What sort of man is this," they asked each other, "that even the winds and sea obey him?"

Jesus is to be obeyed. Nature already knows this, but it is a lesson we need to learn. First, because he is sovereign over his creation. Second, because obeying him brings life, and life more abundant and free. Jesus came to relieve our distress, yes, but more importantly, he came to set us free. On the lake that day the disciples were saved from a passing storm. In their relationship with Jesus, however, they were saved from death, the greatest distress known to humankind. Knowing Jesus often diminishes the storms of life. His steadfast love is new every morning. More importantly, knowing Jesus sets us free from our bondage. The distress of this life becomes momentary and passing while Jesus leads us to an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. We learn to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). We obey Jesus like the wind and the waves, and he calms our distress. We cry out to him and he hears us. His works truly are wondrous. If you have learned this lesson in life you rightfully extol him already in the "congregation of the people." If you have not, it would be a lesson worth learning today. Cry out to Jesus in your trouble—seek the great deliverer. He stands ready to respond to your cry, "Save us, Lord: we are perishing!"

Advent Action

Read Matthew 11:25-30. Take some time to consider the burdens in your life. Will you give them to Jesus? Consider writing them down and check them off as you intentionally give them away.

6 December

When Jesus Enters In

John 1:1-5: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

When I was a young teenager I would occasionally lay awake at night pondering some of the deep matters of life. Where did it all begin? How will it end? How long is eternity? Those thoughts, which at that time in my life were unanswerable for me (they remain mostly unanswerable today), would give me quite a fright. I can still remember many nights tossing and turning, swallowing back a deep emptiness in my stomach and feeling like a very tiny speck in a vast universe. Thankfully, those thoughts do not haunt me anymore. Do they haunt you?

Creation begins and ends with God. More specifically, creation begins and ends with the Son of God. Jesus is a great Savior; he is also a great Creator, and wrapped up in the mystery of the Godhead lies an understanding that God's creative nature is acted out through the agency of his Son. We know life in and through Jesus, for he is the deep source of all things, animate and inanimate, worldly and other worldly (Col. 1:15-20).

You and I live in a world where human beings often attribute life to multiple other creators. Idols made by the hands of men or gods created in the human mind to explain the unexplainable. Mythical beings who fight for control of different elements of creation (wind, earth, sun, sea, fire) or, likely the most popular challenger to divine creation these days in the western world, random chance. Although these alternatives to biblical truth may provide some answers, they do not provide hope. The hope for creation lies not in theories but in the gospel, the good news that he who created us and the world we inhabit has offered us peace. This creation we inhabit is moving steadily toward re-creation—the restoration of harmony between Creator and creation. Life and light are hovering on the horizon. Harmony will only be realized via Jesus' second Advent, when the Son of God, who took on flesh and dwelt among us (only to die at the hands of men) returns to set things right. Squabbling titans, impotent gods, beakers in labs, multiverses, nor random chance can ever offer us equal hope to that which has been

fully and ultimately realized in Jesus Christ.

In the beginning Jesus, the Word of God, who was with God and is God, set into motion a creation that, although good in its original design, was spoiled by sin. Sin entered through humans who were created in God's own image and honored with rational thought and an everlasting spirit. When sin entered into this beautiful picture the greatest rescue operation ever known to mankind was jump-started. The Creator, in time, would enter creation, and would disarm the powers and authorities of the unseen world, making a public spectacle of them at the cross (Col. 2:15). He would play by his own rules, submit to his own laws, and would taste death on behalf of the pinnacle of his creation—human beings. As F.W. Pitt so eloquently put it, "The Maker of the universe, as man, for man, was made a curse. The claims of law which he had made, unto the uttermost, he paid." Jesus did not take any short cuts, although they were offered to him in the wilderness of testing by Satan himself (Luke 4:1-13). He obeyed every law of God and fulfilled them in the process. The light shone in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it. Creation was regained and would never be lost again.

John's hymn of creation is our great song of hope. My childhood fears were not laid to rest by my mother's gentle hugs and words of encouragement on the mornings following my dark nights of the soul (although they were tender and well meant). They were not assuaged by my science teachers nor the priests of my parish. My fears were finally alleviated when I came to know Christ. Hope sprung up and my fear was laid low. Now, like the psalmist, I (and you) can say: "My heart is not lifted up, O Lord. My eyes are not proud. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul. Like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Ps. 131:1-2).

Perfect love casts out fear. You need not fear the great questions of our existence. Creation, life, death, eternity, and a thousand other questions are answered in Jesus, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He is life and light. Still and quiet your soul today. Heed Jesus' own words, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36).

Advent Prayer

Father, I set my hope on you today. Jesus, you are the great Creator, and in you I put my trust. Cast out all fear in me. Amen.

7 December

Ready To Be Revealed

1 Peter 1:3-5 - *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

Believers in Peter's day, needed all the hope that they could get. Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia were regions that Peter was addressing in this, his first epistle. These regions now make up most of modern Turkey which borders the Black Sea. It is a region that is almost entirely under the bondage of Islam today, but in Peter's day it lay on the northern frontier of the Roman Empire and the gospel of Jesus Christ had made headway among the people who called that region home. Because the area was under Roman rule, it was subject to the occasional outbursts of persecution that occurred in the middle part of the first century. These "pogroms" had as their purpose the taming of all illegitimate religions that dared to stand up to Rome, its Caesar, and their pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Peter is well aware that the brothers and sisters in Christ he is addressing are under great pressure. "You have been grieved by various trials," he acknowledges in chapter one. This reality notwithstanding, Peter continually holds out hope in this letter. Trials and persecution are no match for the imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance to which followers of Jesus look forward. These trials, properly understood and born by the believer, will result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (presumably both in the present, as he is revealed in the life of the persecuted and conflicted believer, and in the future, when Jesus returns at his second Advent). As amazing as it may sound to modern ears, trials are ordained for good use by God in the lives of his people. Hence Peter's poem of praise to God as he introduces the subject of suffering and persecution in this letter.

Virtually no one remembers the name Amanda Smith today, but in the middle part of the 19th century she was a household name in Maryland. Amanda was born into slavery in 1837. Her father worked tirelessly to free his children, making brooms by hand and sleeping on average only four hours a day. Over time his work

ethic paid off, and he managed to purchase the freedom of his entire family. He was also a devout Christ-follower who shared his faith with his children. Amanda, in turn, came to trust in Christ at an early age. She soon found work as a free kitchen laborer and was highly respected for both her cooking and her scrub work. Following her father's work ethic, she often scrubbed twelve hours a day followed by eight hours of cooking. She wrote that when she would feel overcome by fatigue she would lay her head on a window ledge and sleep until the weakness passed. Methodist revivals were sweeping through Maryland at that time, and her occasional attendance at these holiness meetings profoundly affected her. Somehow she found time to share her faith, and her ability to speak the truth in Christ gained notice. Eventually, she began to accept invitations to speak at gatherings throughout the American South. Her work spread to England and then to Africa. Toward the end of Amanda's life she began taking into her care homeless children, leading to the founding of an orphanage near Chicago. From the ashes of slavery God raised up a woman of faith who would teach and encourage thousands.

Amanda's life brings into focus what Peter had in mind when he wrote to these struggling believers on the fringes of the Roman Empire. In the midst of their struggles, Peter reminded them of the hope embodied in the promised return of Christ. "...Preparing your minds for action," he prodded them, "and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Our brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us have set an example for us to follow. Our ultimate hope, however, lies fully in the fact that God is guarding our salvation in heaven and we look forward, along with the believers in Peter's day, in Amanda Smith's day, and our own day, to its final revelation when Jesus returns.

The salvation you know in Christ (if you have come to place your trust in him) has been only partially revealed. There is more to come. Now we see as through a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face. Set your hope fully on this grace, and you may sing out each new morning "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Advent Action

Make a list of the trials that God has brought you through. Some may be current and the outcomes are not yet known. How has he used your trials to strengthen and encourage you? Do you believe he will remain faithful to you through them all?

8 December

Fulfilled in Your Hearing

Luke 4:16-21 - And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

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

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

When Jesus stood up on that fateful day in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth and took his turn reading the Scriptures, all eyes were upon him. Clearly there was talk concerning Jesus, the hometown boy who was rising to the level of a popular young prophet, but was making some startling personal claims to boot. What would he read today? Ah, the prophecy of Isaiah, one that Messiah himself would fulfill when he arrived; surely no connection here to this local carpenter's son. But when he finished his reading for the day and quietly took his seat, he uttered his provocative words: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What could he possibly mean? Was he actually implying that Messiah was here, in their midst? That his prophetic ministry was inaugurated on this very day? That the year of God's favor had come in the person and work of this man who sat before them? This man who had been born under suspicious circumstances in a stable in the remote village of Bethlehem? This common laborer? Never! His fellow Nazarites, family and neighbors who knew them well, were filled with rage. They rose up to drive him out of their sacred synagogue and to cast him over the hill upon which the town was built. Friends, do not give ear to the mistaken comments of people today who claim that Jesus came only to speak of love. His provocative statement on this day was meant to evoke a response, and that response was murder. Nazareth had room for a peasant, but not for a king.

The conventional understanding of this particular passage from Isaiah sixty-one, the one understood by the majority of Jewish scholars prior to and contemporary with Jesus, was that this was a messianic promise—it would be fulfilled when Messiah took his place in our world. It is a "servant song" from Isaiah, in that it

speaks of the time when the Lord's servant would come and set things right for the Jewish remnant. The fact that Jesus read the prophecy was of no concern. All good Jews awaited the arrival of Messiah with expectation. The problem lay in Jesus' statement that his reading inaugurated this great day, and that by implication, he was the anticipated fulfillment of all the servant songs of Isaiah. The men in the synagogue caught the gist of Jesus' meaning perfectly, which is why they were prepared to execute Jesus immediately on grounds of blasphemy. No one could claim to be Messiah unless he truly was, and this lowly carpenter from their hometown certainly did not fit with the expectations of the Jewish authorities. His death would be warranted and welcomed, a good done on behalf of the nation of Israel and, indirectly, on behalf of Jesus himself, deluded man that he must be. It would be a mercy killing, approved by God himself. But it was not to be so, Jesus simply passed through the crowd and went on his way.

Jesus was not solely intent on speaking provocative words—the Advent of Messiah was the advent of a ministry of reconciliation. He preached the gospel. He set at liberty many men and women who were oppressed by sickness, disease, physical ailments, demonic influence, and other manifestations of sin. He gave light to numerous people afflicted with blindness. He lived out the prophecy of Isaiah as no human prophet could have ever hoped to do. Most importantly, the gospel he preached provided hope to people, and it was no false hope. It was a gospel that was akin to living water welling up inside leading to everlasting life. It quenched the spiritual thirst of those who drank from his well. His ministry continues to this very day via the outpouring of his Spirit, who has been sent by the Father and the Son to continue this good work until Jesus returns to ultimately and gloriously bring it to completion. It is a servant song that has brought new life to countless millions.

Advent Action

People's minds were closed to Jesus in his hometown. They watched him grow up. How could he be Messiah? Their common sense was offended and most refused to believe (including Jesus' own family, who would not come to believe until after his resurrection). Today, consider the provocative claims of Jesus. He made incredible claims. Included in them were the claims to be equal to the Father and to be the judge of the living and the dead. Were they true or false claims? If false, you may safely ignore them. If true, what does that mean for you today? How will you now live if Jesus is indeed who he claimed to be?

9 December

The Beginning and the Firstborn

Colossians 1:15-18 - He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And 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, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

This masterful prose from the pen of the apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit speaks of who Jesus is, incarnate and pre-incarnate. The babe from the stable we worship this season has always existed. In fact, all things exist because of him and for him. There does not exist, nor has there ever existed, a babe in her mother's arms, a single nation, a sovereign king or queen, a mountain, molecule, or galaxy that is not the result of the creative work of God the Son. You exist because of Jesus. Everything exists because of Jesus.

God declares his glory principally in two books: the Bible and creation. *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard* (Ps. 19:1-3). Creation came forth as a work of the Son of God to declare the glory of God and to point to his existence and his majesty. You and I are part of that creation and therefore our goal in life is to declare the glory of God and to point to his handiwork as something good, which he has already declared it to be.

Now, does this cause you to wonder about your purpose in life? Should God's primary interest not be in people? What is this talk of bringing someone else glory? What about our worth? What about our purpose in life? Conventional wisdom tells us that this is very demeaning and unhealthy, emotionally and psychologically. Surely our goal in life is to discover who we are and to aspire to be all that we can be; to put our free will to use for some noble purpose; to reach our maximum potential or, as Dr. Maslow would say, to be "self-actualized." This God of the apostle Paul's, glory hog that he is, would rob us of our joy and freedom and force us to bow before him for his own glory. Who wants that kind of god? We seem to forget quite freely and easily that if God exists, and if he is the Creator, what we think does not

amount to a hill of beans. “I am that I am,” God says of himself. He simply is. And if it were his pleasure to make us walk in circles all day chanting “God is great, God is great,” that is exactly what we would do.

Here is where the gospel reaches into our story. God is indeed God, and he could have created us to do whatever he wanted, but in his grace and wisdom he simply offers to us the very best that can possibly be offered—himself. There is no higher value than God. There is no greater goal than God. There is no better place in the universe than in his presence. There is no higher calling than his calling. Our maximum potential is reached when we acknowledge him. To know him is to know the truth about ourselves. To bring glory to that which is most glorious is the best of all possible outcomes for all human beings. Some (many to be sure) reject that outcome. But to all who do receive him, to all who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God. (John 1:12-13).

We look to creation and we see the glory of God. We look to humans living out their full potential through a relationship with Jesus the Creator and we see the glory of God. Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity and the Creator of all that we see and do not see, becomes Jesus the man. In the ultimate plot twist, a creation that has been corrupted and the humans that did the corrupting are redeemed and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). He is raised from the dead, the first to be resurrected, which gives us great hope for our own resurrection. Not only can our lives now bring glory to God, but our eternity is secured as well. We will live in that eternity doing the best thing that can possibly be done—bringing glory and honor to God (lived out, we are promised in the Bible, in wonderful, meaningful activity, not playing a harp on a cloud). Jesus is indeed the preeminent one! We were created purposefully and gloriously. Make room for him today my friends. Your best life is not wrapped up in you, but in him!

Advent Prayer

Father, you are the Creator of all things, and you brought creation to pass in and through your Son. Open my eyes to this reality today. Teach me to find my purpose in you. I surrender my life to you. You gave it to me, and now I willingly return it. Be glorified in me in this day that I may behold your glory as I gaze upon all that you have made. Lord, show yourself to me that I may seek all my fulfillment in you. Amen.

10 December

A Delight To Do God's Will

***Psalm 40:6-10** - In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.*

For the ancient Jews, adherence to the law of Moses was everything. The books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy spell out, in precise detail, how God's chosen people were to come before him and how they were to behave as those whom God had set apart from other nations. A portion of those instructions included the appropriate sacrifices, at the appropriate times, on the appropriate days, that would allow the people to continue in a state of harmony with their holy God. From the time of Moses to just beyond the time of Jesus (AD 70 to be exact, when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed) the people of Israel brought their sacrifices before the Lord on a daily basis (excepting periods when their exile from the land precluded such sacrifices). These rituals and sacrifices were a vital part of the warp and woof of life in Israel. They provided, it was commonly understood, remittance from sin for people individually and corporately.

In our text for today, King David provides a corrective to the idea that a sacrifice in and of itself accomplished anything. Sacrifices and offerings devoid of repentance and a desire to know and please God were meaningless. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews utilizes part of this text and applies it directly to the Advent of Christ. He states: *Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book" (Hebrews 10:5-7).* The writer quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where the translators understood the phrase from our verse for today "you have given me an open ear" (literally: "ears you have dug for me") as a metaphor for the creation of a physical body. And so this psalm of David demonstrates that David not only understood that animal sacrifices were not sufficient to cleanse human beings from

sin, but also that a Savior would come in the future who would do the will of God with delight, and would take away sins effectively. In so doing, Jesus by his incarnation and sacrificial death did away with the old sacrificial order and inaugurated a new order. He did so by making believers in Christ free from sin forever via his physical death on the cross.

Remember, the songbook of Israel (the Psalms) is the songbook of Jesus the Messiah. The Psalms point to Jesus and they are often put directly into the mouth of Jesus by the New Testament authors. The Scriptures are God's book, and they reveal God to us. Therefore when the Scriptures speak, God speaks. The Advent of Jesus brought physically to this world the Son of God wrapped in human flesh. In that flesh Jesus, by a single offering, has perfected for all time those who are being set apart by God (Heb. 10:14). Jesus did so by fulfilling completely all that the sacrificial system foreshadowed. He did so by delighting in the will of his Father and submitting to that will perfectly, thus becoming the perfect sacrifice. What had to be done repeatedly for over a thousand years as a mere shadow was accomplished completely and perfectly by Jesus in a one-time act. Now, as Jesus said so emphatically on the cross, "It is finished!"

The law of God was written on Jesus' heart. Incidentally, the Scriptures inform us that now, on this side of the cross, God's law may be written on our hearts as well. Such a blessing leads us to delight in pleasing God in spite of our human tendencies to reject the good and cling to what is evil. Those of us who have come to know Christ by faith are no longer subject to our own weaknesses (spiritually speaking), but are being renewed day by day into the image of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Here's how one anonymous poet put it: *Complete in thee, no work of mine, could take the place, dear Lord of thine. Thy blood hath pardon bought for me, and I am now complete in thee. Yea justified, O blessed thought, and sanctified, salvation wrought. Thy blood hath pardon bought for me, and glorified I too shall be.*

Advent Action

Maybe you have found yourself trying to appease God by your own acts of sacrifice or penance. As worthy as this seems, it is not what God requires of you. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for all your sin. God has called you to place your trust in Christ, to seek him in repentance (an acknowledgment and repudiation of sin) and to find your peace in him alone. Seek him tonight for the very first time, or give him thanks anew for his free gift of forgiveness.

11 December

A Sudden Appearance

Malachi 3:1-2 - Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.

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

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

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

I still remember the excitement of my new-found faith. God revealed Christ to me in 1979. That's a long time ago. Back then they called a new Christian's excitement "being on fire for the Lord." It was actually a pretty good description. I too had been anticipating something—looking for hope in spite of my loving family and pleasant small-town surroundings. Jesus appeared suddenly to me and my life was changed. God quickly began a work in me, like a refiner's fire, and I saw immediate results. Although time has dimmed the excitement, the fire still burns steadily in me over forty-years later. How about you? Did God move suddenly upon you, or did you come to acknowledge his presence and lordship early on through the upbringing of Christian parents? There is no shame in that. In fact, it is something to rejoice in. God did not have to use the fullers' soap on you, but was gentle and persistent until your young mind accepted the universal truth that God is Lord over his creation. But now, like me, it may behoove you to examine yourself. Are you in the faith? Is Christ Lord of your life? Has your faith remained steady?

Jesus lost many fans during his ministry. Some undoubtedly became those who eventually clamored for his execution. They got caught up in the initial excitement of his appearing, but when he began his work of purifying they wanted none of it. We are a demanding people, always seeking a new batch of excitement from God, rarely satisfied with his ongoing grace and sanctifying presence in our lives. May God give us grace to remove that hypocrisy and be constant in our devotion to him, that when Jesus appears suddenly again we may be found ready and waiting, having made room in our lives for our Savior through faith.

Advent Prayer

Lord Jesus, in my life be glorified this day. Come to me and cleanse me of my lack of desire for you. Appear to me this Advent season and burn away the dross, setting my heart on fire for you. Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and renew a steadfast spirit in me. Amen.

12 December

The Lion of the Tribe of Judah

Genesis 49:9-10 - *Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*

As Jacob, the great patriarch of the Jewish nation, was approaching his last day on earth, he gathered his sons around him to give them a final blessing. As with many of the deathbed blessings recorded for us in Scripture, there is a prophetic and predictive element to it. It comes to us in the form of a prophetic song or poem. He speaks to his sons of things “that shall happen to you in days to come.” The “you” he speaks of is collective. In other words, not just what will happen to each of the twelve men, but what awaits their descendants—the tribes they represent as a namesake. As Jacob begins to bless each son, he does so in birth order. Reuben, the firstborn, loses his preeminence because of an immoral and insulting act perpetrated against his father. In like manner, Simeon and Levi and their descendants are singled out for curses rather than blessings because of their violent histories. Then comes Judah, fourth in the line of birth, but first in preeminence among his brothers due to his past courageous acts and the future of his tribe, from which the great kingdom of David will rise followed by the even greater kingdom of Jesus the Messiah. Judah is a lion's cub, and the scepter (the symbol of power and royalty) shall not depart from his tribe. Hence, Jesus is known as the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah.” Matthew's opening genealogy in his Gospel demonstrates the royal blood that flowed through Jesus' veins as a member of the tribe of Judah and a descendant of King David.

Jesus was the last and greatest king of Israel. No monarch from the royal line has taken up the throne in Jerusalem because Jesus has and continues to sit on that throne (figuratively) from the day of his birth until the present day, and will remain on the throne for all eternity. “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom...I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:12-13). This was the promise of God to David, fulfilled in the life of his descendant, Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament book of Revelation pulls back the veil for us briefly and gives us a glimpse

of what may be a future event in the heavenly kingdom, when the Lord will reveal a scroll with seven seals securing it. As the apostle John (the one describing the event) looks on, he sees that there is no one in heaven, on earth, or below the earth who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seven seals. He weeps bitterly because the contents of the scroll will remain secret forever. Then a mighty angel tells him, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5). Here the shadow becomes for us a present reality. Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, has conquered death and the grave and hell itself. He is king over creation, and he is worthy to receive glory and honor and power and praise forever and ever, as demonstrated for us in Revelation chapter five. The scepter has not departed from Judah.

The lesson for us today? If you know Jesus as Lord, you are heir to a king. That isn't just fancy fairytale talk, it is a biblical fact (see Romans 8:14-17). You have been adopted into the family of God and as such you are co-heir with Christ himself. The king to whom we are heirs sent his only Son to us, who reminded his followers that the servant is not above the master. Our king and master wears a crown, but his hands and feet are pierced. We like the crown part, and we talk about it with great exuberance, but we often dismiss the suffering and pain that he also endured. We are co-heirs with a king who came to serve, not to be served. Yes, live like a child of the king. You are not a spiritual pauper; you will inherit an eternal kingdom. But do not strut like a rooster in his pen. “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you had not?” (1 Cor. 4:7) Our spiritual inheritance should give us great hope and confidence, but it should never produce pride within us. As Amy Carmichael, the great missionary to India, wrote: *No wound, no scar? But as the master shall the servant be. And pierced are the hands that follow me. Yet thine are whole. Can he have followed far, who has no wound, no scar?*

Advent Prayer

Father, help me to understand the biblical balance of living as your child while acting like your Son, Jesus. Help me to resist the false words I hear from our enemy that I am worthless and unlovable. I am your child; let me live with that knowledge with humility today, and to do it in a way that gives me not only great self-worth, but even greater hope in the worthiness of my Savior. Amen.

13 December

The Door To Freedom

Jonah 2:9 - Salvation belongs to the LORD!

This statement by Jonah may very well be the central verse in all the Bible. The New Testament tells us that when Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, found out that she was pregnant, he decided to divorce her quietly so as not to put her to shame (betrothals in Jesus' day required a divorce to end the arranged contract). But while he was considering how to go about doing this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream telling him to take Mary as his wife without fear, for her child was conceived of the Holy Spirit. The name he is to give to the son that she bears must be "Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Jonah's statement comes as the concluding stanza of a prophecy he composed from the belly of a great fish. It was true for him then, but the child in Mary's womb would fulfil this statement from Jonah in a manner in which he could only see as a shadow.

Certainly Jonah always knew that salvation comes from the Lord, but it was being pressed home to him in a dramatic way by his present circumstances. Yet there is hope in Jonah's words. From the belly of that fish he saw a day when he would once again bring sacrifices to the Lord, when the vows that he made would be fulfilled. God was still Jonah's source of joy and salvation. The people to whom God was sending Jonah, the Ninevites, would soon also know about God's salvation from the lips of Jonah himself. God was not asking Jonah to go and proclaim his salvation, he was telling him to go, just as God was telling Joseph to take Mary as his wife. Both men were faced with undesirable circumstances, but both men had a role to play in declaring the salvation of the Lord. Nevertheless, it took some convincing for both of them. Their freedom was constrained by God, but it was, in fact, the constraint that actually made true happiness and freedom possible.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: *A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes...and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.* We are all seeking happiness, and as human beings created in the image of God, we generally find that happiness by knowing a sense of freedom. Blaise Pascal, the amazing

mathematician/philosopher/theologian who lived in the 17th century, said this about happiness: *All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of going to war and others avoiding it is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of man, even those who hang themselves.* The problem with us human beings does not lie with happiness itself, or our pursuit of it. Our problem lies in the means by which we pursue it. When sin entered the world, human beings were fractured. Then and there, Adam, and all humans since him, exchanged the glory of the infinite Creator for the things that he created (Rom. 1:23). Now, our bend toward happiness outside of a relationship with Christ is to seek pleasures and joys in fleeting trifles. In truth, God created for us to experience joys that will last forever and completely satisfy our needy hearts. Ultimately, our happiness is posited in our freedom, a freedom our world tells us we will only find by separating ourselves from the bonds of our Creator. But the Bible tells us that freedom is actually found only in a relationship with the Father through his Son, who came to save us. God does not abhor freedom. He created the inward draw toward it, and offers it to us freely—"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). Pascal summed it up this way: *There was once in mankind a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent to help with what he does not obtain in things present...but these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.* Pascal calls this emptiness within us a "God-shaped vacuum." The only joys with which the world offers to fill the vacuum are temporary pleasures that will never suffice. Adam's sin and arrogance (the Fall) has wreaked havoc on our souls, but Jesus came to set us free from our prison, to show us the salvation that comes from the Lord, and to offer us true freedom and true happiness.

Advent Action

Jonah spoke of his deliverance. The incarnation opens the door to everyone's deliverance. Where will you seek your happiness today? There is an infinite abyss in all of us that can only be filled by God. He made us that way. I suspect you already know this is true by experience. Let your life line up with your experience today, seek happiness and deliverance in Christ the Lord. The door to your freedom can only be opened from the outside.

14 December

A Reunion...of Sorts

Revelation 1:17-18 - *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."*

John and Jesus were friends—likely cousins as well. In all probability they grew up at least acquainted with each other. It may be one of the factors why he (along with his brother James) was so ready to jump out of his father's boat and join the ministry of Jesus when called to be his disciple. During Jesus' three-year ministry, John was by his side.

Given this reality, it may seem strange to see John falling down as though dead when he meets Jesus again in the book of Revelation. Admittedly, things have changed. Jesus has been resurrected and ascended to heaven for approximately sixty years, and John has been plugging along as a missionary and teacher all that time. John is almost assuredly the last of the surviving twelve disciples by the time he receives a vision while in exile on the remote island of Patmos. He was sent there by the Roman government, possibly as a demonstration of their mercy, for they did not kill him outright for his faith and teachings in an outlawed religion. Rome had already put many of the faithful to the sword, watched them be torn to pieces by wild animals for sport, or flat out crucified them, but John was sent into exile. He was an old man now, and for a short period Rome had turned its attention away from outright attacks on Christianity. In the ebb and flow of state-sponsored persecution of Christianity, John was arrested during a slow season. Therefore, his life was spared and he was exiled to a lonely island in the Aegean Sea. It was here that he met Jesus again after a long period of absence from him physically.

During the years they spent together in ministry, John and Jesus grew close. John was with him at his Transfiguration, and he was given an honored seat at the Last Supper, reclining back on the bosom of his friend. They, along with the other eleven disciples, spent countless hours together eating, sleeping, and traveling in a close-knit community. Of Jesus' approximately 120 followers during his earthly ministry, the twelve were singled out to receive the bulk of his time and training. Of the twelve, Peter, James, and

John were singled out for the closest training. It appears, however, that John held the highest honor. In fact, a rumor surfaced after the resurrection that John might not die until Jesus returned, based on a conversation between Peter and Jesus about Peter's approaching death (John 21:22). John cleared up this rumor in his own gospel account, but nevertheless, people knew that Jesus and John were very close.

And so, many years later, John meets his old friend Jesus in a vision on the Lord's Day. You can imagine what your reaction would be to seeing an old friend again after so many years. But as we already discussed, things are different now. Jesus' love for John has not changed, but he is no longer veiled in the incarnation; he is the risen Savior. Jesus meets John this time in his resurrected state, as the Glorious One, and there are no happy hugs, renewed banter, or inside jokes. John sees his old friend and falls down at his feet in worship and adoration as if he were collapsing in death. This time John sees one who appears "like a son of man." His feet are like bronze glowing in a furnace, his voice like the sound of rushing waters, with eyes like blazing fire, holding seven stars in his right hand with a double edged sword protruding from his mouth. His face is like the sun shining in its brilliance. John is awestruck with this encounter with Jesus, his friend and teacher, now revealed as he is, the Son of the Living God.

This encounter is post-incarnation. It is neither prophetic nor poetic. Yet the incarnation of Jesus led not only to John's vision of the risen Christ but to this song that is sung by the twenty-four elders who sit on thrones before God: *The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever! We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign...* (Rev. 11:15-17).

Friend, please do not fall into the delusion of those who proclaim that Jesus is your pal, your co-pilot, or a doting daddy who winks at sin. He loves you and died for you, and he sticks closer to you than a brother, but he is God, and he is glorious. He was, and he is, and he is to come!

Advent Prayer

My Lord, I want to know Jesus as a friend, but forbid that I should see him as anything less than God. I desire a close, intimate relationship with you Jesus, but keep me mindful of your glory. I worship you today and proclaim you as Lord of my life. Amen.

15 December

The King of Glory

***Psalm 24:7-10** - Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory!*

Here is a beautiful song of response that paints a picture. Our reading for today tells us of a time when the people of Jerusalem were awaiting the arrival of the Lord, who was enshrined between the golden cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, to enter into the sanctuary city and dwell among them. The procession bringing the Ark into the city, led by the Levites and priests along with the singers and trumpeters, asks to be granted entry, and a song of response is repeated like a holy cadence. As the processional approaches the age-old gates of the city, the Levites call out, “Open the ancient doors; the King is approaching!” The city gatekeepers respond, “Who is this king that you speak of?” The response comes back, “He is your King, the King of glory, mighty in battle! Open the gates for your King!” God, the King of Israel, accompanies the Ark in his invisible glory.

Although this psalm is written in an old-covenant context, and therefore refers to the LORD (*Yahweh*), it has application for us today. God has revealed himself fully in his Son Jesus (John 14:9; Heb. 1:3). Jesus is a king because his Father is a king, and he reigns with supreme authority because he is the creator of this kingdom and his Father has given it over to him (Matt. 28:18; Col. 1:15-22). Countless millions today ask the same question about God that is rhetorically asked at the gates of Jerusalem in our reading for today: “Who is this King?” The answer, the Bible tells us, is Jesus, the eternal Word of the Father, whose kingship did not begin in Bethlehem because it has been his for all eternity. He reflects the Father’s glory, and he has been reflecting it throughout the ages.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is the “firstborn” over all creation. This term does not mean that he was the first being created by God. If this were true, it would mean that Jesus’ honor is highest in God’s creation due to his birth order among other created beings, as some early heresies proclaimed. “Firstborn” means that Jesus is the preeminent one by virtue of who he is, not by virtue of his order in creation, since all things were created by him and he had no beginning. He has always existed as the only begotten of

the Father. One who is himself created cannot be the creator of all things, for that would be a logical fallacy. So when we ask, "Who is this King of Glory?" the answer has always been, "The God of heaven and earth who has now revealed himself to us in the Person of his Son." Without Jesus, all creation falls out of existence.

There is a beautiful Jewish folksong that I sang as a young boy in the church tradition in which I was raised which is based on our psalm for today. It goes like this: *The King of glory comes, the nation rejoices. Open the gates before him, lift up your voices. Who is this King of glory, what shall we call him? He is Emmanuel the promised of ages. In all of Galilee, in city and village, he goes among his people curing their illness. He gave his life for us the pledge of salvation. He took upon himself the sin of the nations. He conquered sin and death he truly has risen. And he will share with us his heavenly vision.* This song rejoices in the reality that the king the ancient Jews welcomed into the city of Jerusalem symbolically in the Ark of the Covenant is actually the God/Man that we celebrate in the incarnation this Advent. The whole of the Old Testament Scriptures point to Jesus Christ. What the ancient Jews could not see because it was hidden to them by God in shadows and typology, we now see revealed. It was a mystery kept hidden in ages past, now revealed through Jesus Christ and the apostles he commissioned to teach us this great truth (Acts 1:1-3; Eph. 1:9; Col. 1:25-27).

What was once a part of an elaborate procession is now part of our story of salvation. As the gatekeepers did at the ancient gates of Jerusalem, we now do symbolically in our own lives. We open the gates before him. We place our hope and trust in Jesus, the King of glory, and our hearts are laid bare before him. He enters in and takes his place, not on the throne of a capital city, but on the throne of our lives. In so doing he is established as king, his rightful honor, and we are blessed by his abiding with us. The apostle Paul described this as "Christ in us, the hope of glory!" What will your response be to the question, "Who is this King of Glory?" Your answer is the most important response you will make in your entire life. Make room for Jesus!

Advent Prayer

Lord, today I acknowledge you as king of my life. I submit my will to you and ask you to reign supreme over my thoughts, actions, judgments, joys, fears, sorrows, hopes, and expectations. You are the King of glory and your offer of salvation is a gift that I receive with humility and thanksgiving. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

16 December

A Faintly Burning Wick

Isaiah 42:1-4 - Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Jesus' ministry encompassed many purposes. He came to save his people from their sins. He came to establish a new covenant in his blood. He came to destroy the work of the devil and to offer himself up as a ransom for many. He also cared for human beings in a way that no one else has done, or has the capabilities to do. His ministry was about truth and grace, and that always leads to justice. This does not mean that his only purpose was to make human lives collectively better through social action. That wasn't the case at all. If one could summarize Jesus' ministry into one brief statement, maybe the best way to do so would be to quote the Gospel of Luke, where we are told that Jesus came to "seek and save the lost." That seeking and saving was accomplished in a multitude of ways. Jesus was not an activist in any modern sense. He did not agitate against Roman rule, or slavery, or the mistreatment of women, or abortion, or infanticide, or any other societal evil. However, his treatment of people of all classes and his call for them to place their hope in him naturally led to better social systems and paved the way for a more just society. All one needs to do is to look at Judeo-Christian culture over the past 2,000 years to see that, with few exceptions, the Christian ethic leads societies toward justice, not away from it. Long before the Advent of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah told us that the Messiah would quietly go about the task of loving people in such a way that he would not only save them from their sins but from the collective sins of society as well. Jesus is not just our personal hope; he's the hope of the world.

Today we turn again to the "servant songs" of Isaiah. Here we are told that the coming servant of the Lord will demonstrate a gentleness and charity that will ultimately lead to justice for the nations. Now to be clear, Jesus did not usher in a utopian society in his short lifetime on earth. He told his disciples matter-of-factly that his ministry was a ministry that would more often lead to strife than to peace. He told them, "Do not think that I have come

to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). This may sound contradictory to Isaiah’s prophecy about the coming Messiah, but it is actually in harmony with it. Jesus demonstrated amazing gentleness in his ministry, caring for the sick, the demonized, the elderly, and children. He reached out a hand to sinners who had lost their way. He offered them not only peace with others, but more importantly, peace with God. Ask the question “Is Jesus kind?” to any blind man or woman who walked away from Jesus seeing and they would use their new-found eyesight to stare at you incredulously. Ask any lost sinner who has sought out Jesus for mercy if he is compassionate and they will quickly answer in the affirmative. We are told that “he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). All this is true, but it is also true that to come to embrace Jesus the Savior as Lord of one’s life is to invite the bitterness of the world. Jesus was full of grace, but he was also full of truth, and our fallen world despises those who have the audacity to say that there remains a difference between good and evil; right and wrong. The Messiah was gentle and caring to those who needed his care the most, but the truth he taught cut sinners deeply. Strife naturally follows in the wake of such truth-telling, which is why even a gentle Savior like Jesus, who cared for so many people, was eventually led to the slaughter. The peaceful Savior found no peace in our fallen world; he was instead “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3).

We are called to be imitators of Christ. To do so means there must be a gentleness about us. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). This is the life of Christ. When we live like this, the truth we tell in the name of Christ (as bitter at first pass as it might be to sinners) is far more acceptable. Or, as William Cowper so eloquently said, “...the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.” Be like Jesus. Faithfully bring forth justice, speak the truth in love, and do not muddy the gospel waters with hard-hearted responses to human needs.

Advent Action

Think about your own actions as a follower of Christ. Could it be said of you that “a faintly burning wick he/she will not quench?” Sin is a wasting condition that not only destroys lives but creates a sense of apathy toward others. Live today looking outward more than inward. Live like a follower of Christ should live today. Ask God to put in you a heart of compassion for others, to look at those with whom you come into contact today through the eyes of Jesus.

17 December

The Drama of Christ's Passion

Zechariah 11:12-13: *I told them, "If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it." So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter (NIV 1984).*

One of the great twists in the Christian story is the betrayal of the main character—Jesus. Although the spectacle of betrayal for the hero or heroine of a tale is familiar to us now, having been utilized by authors a thousand times over through the interceding years since the time of Christ, it remains a shocker because there was so little to be gained by turning Jesus over to the religious rulers. There was no crown to be won, nobody was saved because of the betrayal, and only an insurrectionist by the name of Barabbas was set free. Jesus had no office that became vacant at his death and no conniving spouse was lurking in the background. Judas gained nothing but thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave in ancient Israel. He did not get rich, nor did he gain freedom or notoriety. He was a dupe, a cheap fix for the Jewish ruling authority who sought to arrest Jesus and put him to death.

As with almost all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the life and times of Messiah, Zechariah's prophecy had a meaning and purpose for his day as well. It speaks of the impotent leaders of the people of Israel in his day. It tells of a time when Israel will be handed over to outsiders who will oppress them because they have rejected the true shepherd/king that God has given them. The worthy king is renounced, and the people and the land suffer as a result. All of this is ultimately fulfilled in the days of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who came to shepherd his people. Rejected like the shepherd of Zechariah's day, Jesus does not willfully break covenant with the people but is instead purchased like a slave who will be led to the slaughter. The instrument of his rejection is Judas Iscariot, one of his own disciples, who demonstrates his callousness for Jesus by the bargain price he accepts for his betrayal. Matthew's Gospel tells us the final fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy took place when Judas attempted to return to the Pharisees the fee for his treachery. When he realized his error, he returned to the temple and threw the silver on the temple floor, then went out and hanged himself. The Jewish leaders,

acknowledging that this was “blood money,” refused (in their hypocritical manner) to return it to the sacred treasury and instead used it to buy the potter’s field (Matt. 27:3-10).

A classic story of betrayal and death—Jesus is the man in white, Judas the man in black, and the Jewish leaders are the sinister movers and shakers behind the scenes. The rest of the disciples are the painfully frightened friends who will not stand up for their leader. Pontius Pilate takes his role as the man caught in the middle. Unwilling and too cowardly to take a stand of his own, he acquiesces to the crowd and passes the death sentence. The players are now all in their places and the scene fades to black as it narrows in on the agonized face of Jesus. A real tear-jerker. Thankfully, by the grace of God the story does not end there, for although the “man in white” does go to the gallows, he is gloriously resurrected to life three days later. What appeared as a great victory for the accusers of Jesus and for Satan himself is shown to be a triumph for Christ, putting to shame all the powers of darkness arrayed against him (Col. 2:15).

And where are you in this drama? At what price have you betrayed your Savior? You have, have you not, time and time again? “I’ll do better, Jesus, I promise” have been the words on your lips countless times. And yet, inevitably, the betrayal comes again. And what will you do? Will you throw up your arms in defeat and walk away in shame? It doesn’t have to be that way. You may remember that there were two betrayers in Jesus’ life that last night in the garden: Judas, who killed himself, and Peter, who, in spite of his cowardice, held fast to Jesus and found in him a forgiving friend. One felt sorry for himself and died, the other felt sorry for his sin and lived. Heaven will be full of cowards and betrayers who have known the forgiveness of Christ. Why not be one of them?

Advent Action

Today, make a conscious effort to think before you act. Ask yourself, “How would I respond to this situation if I truly loved Christ and put him before everything?” We have told Jesus that we will give all for him; consider what that might look like today in your interaction with others, be they family, friends, co-workers, or fellow students. Love God enough to obey him regardless of the outcome for you. Demonstrate your loyalty to Christ by living as he has called you to live. When failures arise (and they will) seek forgiveness through Christ. Live a life of repentance, not a life of regret.

18 December

Running with the Devil

Proverbs 28:1: The wicked flee when no one pursues.

Josef Mengele is one of the most infamous figures of the Jewish Holocaust. His service as a medical doctor at Auschwitz and the unethical and horrific medical experiments he conducted there made him the most widely sought after war criminal for postwar “Nazi hunters.” He proudly accepted the moniker his Jewish victims gave him, “the angel of death.” His life in hiding from 1945 until his death by drowning in Brazil in 1979 has come to represent the international failure to bring the perpetrators of Nazi crimes to justice. Although Mengele avoided human justice for almost thirty-five years, he was a hunted man. His was a life on the run, punctuated by narrow escapes and frequent international moves. He was a wicked man, and he lived life like a cornered animal, fleeing even when his pursuers were nowhere to be found.

The Scriptures remind us that God cannot be hoodwinked. People reap what they sow, often in this life, always in the life to come. Those who sow to their own pleasures reap the corruption that inevitably follows. Those who sow to the glory of God reap eternal life. This is a very predictable and observable pattern in our world, one many choose to ignore to their own grief. It is written in neon lighting on virtually every news website and tabloid paper as it relates to the “elite” and “beautiful ones” in our culture. Lives of glitz and grandeur on the outside, but behind the scenes, drug addictions, broken marriages, endless lawsuits and the constant merry-go-round of public disgraces. There are outliers, of course, but they are just that...outliers. On the opposite side are those who live lives of quiet submission to the truths found in Scripture. Rarely publicized and frequently dismissed, but more often than not, men and women who are deeply content and free from the self-made nuisances of life.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record for us the wilderness temptation of Christ. After Jesus inaugurated his ministry by being baptized by John the Baptist, the Scriptures tell us that he was “led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil.” Satan did not lure an unsuspecting Jesus into the desert, Jesus went out in obedience to the Father. There was a purpose in this time of tempting. Here, Jesus proved himself to be the greater Adam. Where the first Adam failed in his time of trial, the second proved faithful. As a second analogy, the people of Israel were tried in the wilderness for forty-years and proved faithless. They

failed in their test of obedience. Jesus, the true Israel, by contrast, passed his test of obedience during his forty-day sojourn away from the company of friends and in the stronghold of his enemy. As such, Jesus serves as our loadstar, guiding us to resist the devil so that he flees from us (James 4:7).

Jesus' earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, did some fleeing of their own at one difficult point in their lives. Having been warned in a dream by an angel to flee because King Herod was seeking their child's life, they left the confines of Bethlehem and went into Egypt. In so doing they were not demonstrating their sinfulness, rather, their obedience was displayed. There they remained until God called them back to Israel after the death of the man who would willingly kill children before he would give up his earthly throne. Sometimes the wicked flee, and sometimes their wickedness causes the righteous to flee.

Advent is a season of preparation. The goal is to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus. Where so many refuse to grant Jesus a place in their lives, we who love him are called to make room. One manner in which we may prepare the way for him is to do some spiritual spring cleaning. Rather than fleeing from his presence and avoiding the scrutiny of his gaze, we are called to approach him in repentance and faith. We are called to come to him, as weary pilgrims, and find our rest in his presence, abiding in him and drawing our strength from he who declared himself to be a spring of living water and the bread of heaven. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," he exhorts us, "for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-30).

There is no rest for the wicked. Theirs is a life of misery that ends in death and judgment. Josef Mengele escaped human justice only to fall into the hands of a truly righteous judge. He took nothing away from life but the invoice which declared his wickedness. He spent the bulk of his life running like a coward from those who would bring him to justice. Surely, his was a life of misery.

Are you running away friends? Stop it now. There is no end to it. You will undo yourself in all that you're doing. Run to Jesus, and you will never have need to run again.

Advent Prayer

Father, today I run to you. Let me find peace and rest in your embrace. Be my hiding place. Gaze into the secrets of my soul, cleanse my impurity, and set me high upon the rock of your love. Amen.

19 December

A Song of Basic Reality

Revelation 7:10: *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

Our passage for today echoes a passage from the Old Testament prophet Jonah, found in Jonah 2:9: “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” There is nothing unusual about that; the Bible is a seamless whole. Written over approximately 1,500 years by forty or so authors, it shares a narrative that remains consistent throughout, one that points to Jesus from Genesis to Revelation.

The scene from our Scripture reading today takes place in the apostle John’s vision of the throne room of God. Six of seven mysterious seals have been opened. The breaking of the sixth seal initiates a cataclysm on the earth. The sun and moon are darkened as if draped in blood, stars fall from their cosmic orbits, and the sky itself recedes like a scroll being rolled up. All those, great and small, of the earth seek refuge among the caves of the mountains in order to hide themselves from the great wrath of the Lamb of God. Then, strangely, in a new or subsequent vision, 144,000 servants of God are sealed with a mark on their foreheads, all from the tribes of Israel. Now John sees a great innumerable multitude from all the nations standing before the Lamb of God, showing no signs of the trials they have endured. They are neither bruised nor threadbare from their struggles; rather, they are clothed in white robes. Holding palm branches used as expressions of great gladness and joy, they praise him who has won a great victory, not by force of arms, but rather through a voluntary death.

Notice here that salvation is ascribed to God (as it is in Jonah 2:9) for, truth be told, the entire work of redemption is God’s work from beginning to end (cf., Luke 3:6; Acts 28:28; Titus 2:11). He who sits upon the throne is God, from everlasting to everlasting, and no one, be it celestial being or earthly human, comes before him except by his grace. But the “Lamb” is also exalted in this cry within the heavenly vision. It accents Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross; a truth declared clearly later in John’s vision when an elder explains the splendor of the apparel of the multitude who stand before the throne: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Both verbs here are in the past tense (the Greek aorist if you care to know), which demonstrates the completed work of Christ on their behalf.

Sin has been dealt with decisively and it is now a thing of the past. The conclusion of the opening of the sixth seal is described this way: “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17).

Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36). He provided multiple reasons as to why he appeared. They ranged from the magnificent to the downright frightening. In his own words Jesus told us that he came to do his Father’s will, to bring fire on the earth, to set a family against each other, to give sight to the blind and blindness to those with sight (spiritually and physically, it seems in context), to make it possible for us to have life more abundant and free, and to be a light so that we might see. He also said that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. Once again we see that the incarnation we celebrate during Advent was much more in the making than just a sweet child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger next to a teenage mother who was still a virgin. That is a beautiful sight, and something truly to behold in our imaginations, but more glorious still, it leads to John’s singular vision and the great cry of those from every tribe, tongue, and nation who will one day sing out “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

“Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again” is the great affirmation of the church. In this season of reflection we rejoice in the past, we stand firm in the present, and we anticipate the future. The babe in the manger grew up. He lived, died, rose again and ascended to the right hand of the Father. He is coming back, and when he does those who have known him and confessed his name will sing a new song. It will be a song of basic reality, one that has been true from eternity past and will remain true into eternity future. Salvation is a work of God, brought forth in time through the Christ-child who is the Lamb, and celebrated by his people forever and ever. Amen.

Advent Action

Today, reflect on your own salvation. Do you remember the day you were born into a new life? What led to it? Talk about it if you are reading this devotional as a group. Can’t remember? Too young or too long ago? Rejoice that you do not remember a day when you could not sing your own song of salvation. Take time to thank God again for this great, unmerited gift. It is a joy that you will never grow tired of reflecting upon, or shouting about.

20 December

Concerning the Light

Isaiah 9:1-2: But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

It is said that Advent is a season of light, and that is a true statement. Jesus said that he is the Light of the world. John the Baptist came to bear witness to that light. The apostle John said that light has come into the world, and the darkness has not overcome it. Jesus' birth was prophesied numerous times over the course of Old Testament history, as I have tried to demonstrate during our devotions this Advent season. The prophet Isaiah, through the ministration of the Holy Spirit, saw that a time would come when the little-thought-of land of Zebulun and Naphtali, along the Jordan River, would see a great light. Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of Israel that inherited this territory after the occupation of the Promised Land. It was the northernmost territory of Israel, and as such, suffered first when foreign invaders attacked the nation from the north via the Fertile Crescent, a swath of lush and productive land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian deserts. Isaiah, although living 700 years prior to the birth of Messiah, speaks in past and present tenses, seeing future events as being so sure to take place that one might speak of them as past episodes in the history of Israel.

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

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

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

Advent Prayer

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

- A Song of St. Patrick

Father, be a light to me as I celebrate the coming of the Light into my world. Shine your light into my life, rooting out the sin and lack of desire to know you that lies within. Fill me with the light of Christ, and help me to shine his light into the lives of others. I pray for _____ today, that he/she might know you, that you might soften his/her heart so that he/she can see you. Keep him/her on my mind this Advent season; keep me faithful to pray for him/her regularly. Thank you for taking away my darkness and shining light into my world. Shine your light into my friend’s life as well, I pray. Amen.

21 December

A Lament

Psalm 22:9-11: *Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help.*

The twenty-second Psalm is a psalm of King David, but in reality it is a psalm of the Messiah. Jesus quoted the opening stanza to this psalm just prior to his death on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" They are the words of David, taken up by the Messiah who would be born in his line. Whether or not David knew he was speaking of the future Messiah is unknown, but it is clear that he was also speaking of his own life. As an earthly king, he knew trouble and disappointment, betrayal and life-threatening circumstances. Although most of David's problems in life were self-inflicted, he understood the pain and confusion that accompanies times when it seems as if God has all but abandoned you. He speaks in our passage for today of feeling close to God from his early childhood and knowing that there had never been a day in his life when God was not only his maker, but his sustainer as well. David shares the anguish in the feeling that there is a chasm between him and his God, and he pleads to him: "Be not far from me."

One might say that distance from God was an issue for many of the Old Testament saints. They did not like feeling alienated from him or wondering if the quietness they were experiencing in their relationship was going to be permanent. Job, the suffering saint, felt this break with God keenly. He lost all that he owned and was suffering great physical anguish, but as one reads through the book that bears his name it becomes clear that what he misses most is his close walk with God. Job can bear up under almost any strain, but the thought that God is disappointed in him and is demonstrating that disappointment by distancing himself from him cries for help are almost unbearable. The prophet Jeremiah lamented the fact that God did not seem to be listening to his prayers, and the Psalms are filled with the cries of God's people desperate for his intervention in their lives and the life of Israel. Psalm 22 starts this way: *Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.* David had known sweet fellowship with the Father as a young shepherd in the fields—in the quiet times of contemplation in which he enjoyed God's fellowship in the natural world around him that declared

God's glories (Ps. 19:1-6; 23:1-3). He could not bear separation from God, as he confessed without shame in Psalm 51:11-12: *Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me* (NIV 1984).

Like his ancestor before him, Jesus felt this separation from the Father as well. While on the cross, bearing your sin and mine, he knew that a wedge had been driven between them and he cried out in anguish, having never known such loneliness before. The words he chose were the words of King David, uttered so many centuries before; the words of a king who was also a prophet. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, David penned the words of Psalm 22 that speak so clearly of the death that Messiah would die in order to give life to those of us who know him. Both David and Jesus knew the close companionship of God the Father. From childhood they had trusted in him—David in the fields, Jesus in the carpenter's shop. They had both been God's man from their earliest days when they drew all their nourishment from their mother. Incidentally, it was not the bond that is formed in the process of nursing that creates such tenderness and love between mother and child that they missed; it was the bond that they had once known with God that, now taken away, caused them to cry out.

Do you feel this distance? Do you lament that it has come about? Do you find yourself groaning through the day and restless in the night? Take time to be still for a few moments and read all of Psalm 22 today. Let it take you through the cries of desperation and the description of the death of Christ as he hung on that cross. Feel the searing pain, hear the taunts and jeers of the crowd. Read through to verse 22 and begin to feel the upward movement of this song as it leads you to praise and worship, as it did for both David and Jesus before you. God will not always be distant. Life is not always about pain and loss. Soon you will look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage! (Ps. 27:13-14) The darkness may tarry for a night, but the dawn brings with it light, and there you will know the fellowship and presence of the Lord once more. God will never let the righteous fall!

Advent Prayer

Father, be not far from me today. Teach me to wait upon you, and renew a right spirit in me. As I draw near to you, draw near to me. Do not be distant from me. Cleanse me of any sin that may be creating a distance between us. Be gracious to me and show me your mercy. Then I will praise you and I will glory in your presence. Amen.

22 December

From Humility to Exaltation

***Psalm 8:3-8** - When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

The Psalms are the songbook of Israel. They are filled with words of wisdom, poems of rapturous delight, laments that purge the soul before God in grief and sorrow, songs of praise and exultation, historical narratives and corporate remembrances set to poetic meter, prophetic utterances looking to a future fulfillment, and prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, contrition, and supplication. The songbook includes imprecatory psalms (which call down God's justice and wrath upon the wicked), hymns and doxologies, liturgies that teach us how to worship, and royal psalms that celebrate both the coronation and good works of King David and the line of kings that followed his reign. Some royal psalms envision God as king, or compare him to earthly kings, but today we see one of the messianic/praise psalms that points to the coming of God's Son, King Jesus.

How often do you consider what took place in the incarnation? Not your typical question, to be sure. If you are reading this devotional as a nonbeliever, your answer is almost assuredly "rarely if ever." But if you are a follower of Jesus you should think about this great event in God's redemptive plan frequently, and during Advent it should be the focus of your devotional thoughts. What do you see when you look at the heavens? The moon and the stars which God has arrayed in our night sky? Does viewing them make you feel small or mighty? Your answer likely indicates whom your thoughts are often fixed upon. To look up at the heavens for the writers of sacred Scripture was to look down upon oneself.

This psalm speaks first of Israel's covenantal relationship to God. It was the people of Israel's song. But it also speaks of humankind in more general terms. All of us, not just Jews, see the glory of God displayed in the heavens and know the reality of being created lower than angelic beings. What is humankind that God is

mindful of us? This is a legitimate question that all men and women should rightfully ask. The answer, to the glory of God, is beautiful—although we are dust, he has chosen to set his affections upon us—to love us and to desire our salvation.

Ultimately, this is a messianic psalm. It speaks of the ideal Israelite, the ideal human, fulfilled in the coming of Messiah. Philippians 2:5-11 expresses this idea clearly. Jesus of Nazareth who, though in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, abased himself, becoming like a servant to those who are rightfully his subjects. This Jesus, now in human form, humbled himself and in obedience to the Father submitted himself to death, even the ignoble death of a common criminal—death on a cross. Therefore he who was made for a little while lower than the angels (as Psalm 8 reminds us), has now been highly exalted by God and bestowed with a name that is above every name, a name before which all creation, in heaven and on earth, must now bow down and confess “Jesus is Lord!”

The writer of Hebrews clearly places Jesus as the subject of this psalm. In some sense, all of Scripture points to Jesus, but Psalm 8 does so explicitly. We may rightfully place ourselves in the equation since the psalm speaks in general of God’s creation. Nevertheless, Jesus is the true focus. Hebrews 2:8-9 reminds us that: *At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.* Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Second Person of the Trinity, not only became one of us (as if that were not enough) but in humiliation “tasted” death for us.

Psalm 8 reminds us that God was “mindful” of us. But it surely goes much deeper than that, does it not? His name is majestic not only because he formed our universe, not only because he created us and placed us in this world, but because in Jesus he became one of us. Jesus was made lower for a time so that he might save us. God’s name is majestic indeed!

Advent Prayer

Father, as the psalmist sang this great hymn of worship to you in bygone ages, I now sing it to you in my present heart. Your name is majestic, and the name of Jesus is to be blessed and praised. I am humbled by the exalted status you have bestowed upon me through Jesus your Son, and I give you thanks. Amen.

23 December

The Grand Miracle

Philippians 2:5-8 - *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,*

*Who, though he was in the form of God
did not count equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.*

God became man. A unique concept among the world's major religions. And, let's be clear, if we believe the biblical revelation to be true, then all other religions, major or minor, must be the result of human wishes and ingenuity. The incarnation is the great miracle of this world's history. C.S. Lewis called it the "Grand Miracle." He dubbed it the *leit-motif* (the recurrent theme) of nature. In other words, it is the law of nature itself that no person or being can exist solely by themselves. Everything and everyone needs a "first source" or "primary mover" in order to exist. We are indebted, everyone of us, to God. When it comes to salvation, we need God to enter our world. In the incarnation we receive the concept of vicariousness (one person profiting by the work of another person), for the incarnation leads to the crucifixion, and the crucifixion leads to the resurrection, and the resurrection leads to life. Jesus' combined work at Calvary and beyond leads to our redemption, forgiveness, and the hope of everlasting life.

For all of this to take place, the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, became man. He who was in the form of God did not count his equality with God as something to be held onto tenaciously. Rather, he made himself nothing, taking the role of a servant, and was born in human likeness. It is the greatest act of humility our world has ever known. Here is how John Donne, the great English poet, describes it:

*Wilt thou love God as he thee? Then digest, my
soul, this wholesome meditation.
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on in heaven,
hath made his temple in thy breast.
The Father having begot a Son most blest, and
still begetting - for he ne're begun -*

*Hath deigned to choose thee by adoption,
co-heir to his glory, and sabbath's endless rest.
And as a robbed man, who by search doth find
his stolen stuff sold, must lose or buy it again,
the Son of glory came down, and was slain.
Us, whom he had made and Satan stolen, to unbind.
'Twas much, that man was made like God before.
But that God was made like man, much more!*

Here lies the greatest mystery in all of Christendom, “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). The divine Son became a Jewish man. Almighty God wrapped himself in a human body and appeared to us as a helpless babe. Not a superhuman baby, but a mere baby, unable to do anything for himself, needing to be held, changed, nursed, and educated. As J.I. Packer has said; “Here there was no illusion or deception, the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation.”

In our devotional text for today the apostle Paul likely quotes an early Christian hymn. Our brothers and sisters in Christ who went before us sang about the incarnation as we sing about the incarnation today in a multitude of Christmas hymns. True, many of the carols we sing are inane, recounting silly stories of a fattened saint distributing gifts or of the proclaimed ubiquitous “spirit” of Christmas. But some are not. Some originated as deep meditations on the wonder, mystery, and beauty of the incarnation. The haunting and majestic *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is hardly a hymn devoid of meaning or deep devotion, and there are many such hymns that we sing this time of year that express equal depth and beauty. The wonder of the incarnation has not been so diluted as to be forgotten. Many of us remember, and many of us rejoice. Many of us give praise to God this season of the year for wonders that never cease to amaze. This is good and proper. Have this in mind among yourselves today friends—the glory of the incarnation is yours in Christ Jesus. Grasp it tightly, rejoice in it deeply and intentionally, and never let it go!

Advent Action

Take a few moments and ponder the incarnation. How has the reality of that Grand Miracle impacted you? Have you considered all that Christ willingly laid aside in order to secure your salvation? Have you considered deeply the reality that in the manger at Bethlehem laid none other than the eternal Word of God? Meditate on this great reality today. Ponder it anew.

Christmas Eve

Magnificat

Luke 1:46-55: *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoice in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me
blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."*

Mary had received amazing news. Unbelievable news. She had been visited by an angel (not an everyday occurrence) with news of an impending birth. She was betrothed to a man named Joseph, but they had not yet been married. Therefore, Mary was a virgin. If all of this was not strange enough, Mary, she had been told, would be the mother of this soon-to-be child. When she questioned the angel about the oddity he was announcing, she received the somewhat cryptic reply, "The Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Mysteries never cease.

Upon hearing this news, Mary gathered her things and in haste went into the hill country of Judah and showed up at the door of her relative Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child in her own womb (John the Baptist) leaped for joy. All of this led to Mary's song of praise. We now know it as the *Magnificat*, from the Latin *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* ("My soul magnifies the Lord"). It is also known as the *Canticle of Mary*.

Mystery is a vital part of the Christian story. Incarnation, virgin birth, transfiguration, miracle, resurrection, glorification—Christianity is fraught with mystery. Mystery is, in a nutshell,

stories played out in Scripture or events in the life of Christ, or promises made to God's people, that are recounted to us and are meant to be believed. Some of these stories seem logical to us while others do not. But modern Christians tend to trust in therapy more than mystery, a reality made clear in many worship services today that employ entertainment, pop psychology, or self-help rather than the deep and resonating word of God to usher people into the presence of the Lord. This is deemed necessary because of the profound skepticism of our age. If we cannot describe it, quantify it, or get our hands on it, it is better discarded as primitive and archaic. Mary was full of holy fear before the angel who announced this amazing news to her, and now, after some time to reflect, she bursts forth in adoration for the God who makes known mysteries while laying low the learned and mighty and raising up the humble and despised. She does not understand it completely—she does not have to. As Norman Maclean said so beautifully in his novella *A River Runs Through It*, “We can love completely without complete understanding.”

And so we end this Advent season with a mystery. How comfortable are you with that? The Bible does not tell us how comfortable Mary was with the mystery revealed to her, but it does tell us she lived it out and believed. Do you believe what has been spoken to you from the Lord? Have you made room for the Christ-child in your own life? Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, a priest of God, did not believe relatively basic news from the same angel who visited Mary about the conception of his own son. His reward for his lack of faith was to live nine months as a mute. Mary, on the other hand, walked a middle path, neither refusing to trust the word of the Lord nor prying arrogantly into divine mysteries. When told of a miraculous conception, she did not lose her voice but found it. “I am the servant of the Lord,” she said. “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Will you lose your voice this year, or find it?

A Prayer for Christmas Eve: Father, as Advent 2023 draws to a close, I pray that you will make known to me this coming year the mystery hidden for generations but now made known to your saints, which is Christ in us, the hope of glory. Help me to not only believe but to live out this great hope. As I awake on Christmas morning, may I rejoice in the blessing of being your child, forgiving and forgiven because of the Advent of Jesus Christ. May it be to me this coming year according to your word. Amen.

Christmas Eve

By Christina Rossetti

Christmas hath darkness
Brighter than the blazing noon,
Christmas hath a chillness
Warmer than the heat of June,
Christmas hath a beauty
Lovelier than the world can show;
For Christmas bringeth Jesus,
Brought to us so low.

Earth, strike up your music,
Birds that sing and bells that ring;
Heaven hath answering music
For all angels soon to sing:
Earth, put on your whitest
Bridal robe of spotless snow:
For Christmas bringeth Jesus,
Brought for us so low.

Word Made Flesh

By Jym Gregory

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

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

Bone, sinews, eternal Spirit.

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

Supernatural hand withdrawn; nature accommodates.

Cells divide and divide again.

Blastocyst becomes embryo and embryo a fetus.

A quickening.

Messiah, cradled within the holy virgin.

Day gives way to day, week to week. A young soul
magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God her Savior. He who
created all things, who fills the universe; grows.

Fateful day approaches.

A decree, a census, a journey to ancestral lands. The
allotment of Judah, Bethlehem Ephrathah: "House of
Bread." Home of kings.

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

Shepherds tend their flocks. Angelic choirs assemble.

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

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

Jesus, son of Mary. Word made flesh.

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

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

-J. Gregory