



2017 Advent Devotional

H E C A M E





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Forward

Melissa Lowther, Ministry Associate

A Gospel movement is a big dream. When we think about what it would look like for thousands of people to meet Christ and be growing as disciples, we realize that this is a vision bigger than us. This is beyond what we can accomplish in our own strength.

And when we think about our own lives – the stress, the pain, the anxiety, the things we can't control – we recognize that fixing them is beyond our individual ability. We are not able to restore the broken pieces of our lives.

We rely on a God who can enter into our world to rescue us and to bring about His mission of reconciliation. We need a God who does not shy away from our mess, but comes close and steps in. When God joins with human flesh and becomes an eternal man, that is a clear indication that he is *all in*. He loves us enough to become one of us and he will be with us forever.

In this year's Advent devotional, we reflect on times when God showed up in the midst of people's need. He met Adam & Eve in the garden. He came to Abraham when his wife was barren. He revealed himself to Moses through a burning bush. He spoke to Israel through the prophets. He came to Mary as a baby. He comes to us every day through the Spirit and he will come again one day in final victory and glory. Throughout Scripture, God promises to be present with his people and God remembers (that is, acts on) his covenant.

May you be encouraged and filled with hope as you read each entry this season. Some include a simple action step that will help you respond to what God is teaching you through the passage that day.

No matter what your life circumstances look like right now and no matter how overwhelming it may be to imagine what God could do on the North Shore and around the world, may we be comforted by the fact that *He came* and He's here to stay.

Special thanks to:

*Betsy Crowe, editor; Steve Dagley, cover art;
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DECEMBER 3

Genesis 3:8-21

Mark Horvath

In an instant, it all went so wrong. Joy-filled songs that filled creation suddenly went silent, replaced by a spreading death. Our parents, the pinnacle of the LORD God's creation, disobeyed, and unleashed unimaginable consequences.

In today's passage, Adam and the woman have already disobeyed the LORD God and begun to experience the consequences. Their innocence lost, they are filled with shame. When they hear the LORD God in the garden, they hide themselves. The LORD must call out "Where are you?" Adam answers, telling God of their nakedness, their new-found shame, their need to hide from Him. The LORD asks the question, did they disobey Him? Man blames woman blames serpent.

The LORD God then explains the results of their choices to all three. For Adam and Eve, their once harmonious lives will now be characterized by frustration, pain and struggle. They and their descendants must now die, spiritually and physically.

To the serpent, the LORD God pronounces eternal shame and dishonor. But more importantly for us, He promises that from the woman's offspring will come one who, though wounded in the doing, will bring about the serpent's own destruction.

Fast forward through the centuries to a tiny town, in a tiny country, in the humblest surroundings, and the birth of a baby. This baby is the one who will fulfill the prophecy, the one who will grow into that man who will finally crush the head of the serpent, and rescue us from the ancient curse. He will bear the curses Himself to remove them from us, to restore our humanity and open the way back to the garden. Glory, what a Savior.

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Hebrews 2:14-15)

DECEMBER 4

Genesis 12:1-7

Wendy Murray

Two details about God's saving movements are embedded in this passage about Abraham's call. The first is the summons to *leave*: "Leave your country, your people, your father's household and go . . ." The injunction to pull up stakes precedes stepping into new possibility. It brings to mind Jesus' early invitation to his fishermen followers, Andrew and Peter: "Come, follow me. . . . At once they *left their nets* and followed him" (Mark 1:17-18, emphasis added).

The second detail comes through knowing who Abraham, in fact, was. Yes, he was God's chosen "Father of Nations," but we learn in due course that he was also a deceiver and a coward, as revealed when he allowed his wife to be taken by the foreign King Abimalech in order to save himself (Genesis 20).

It's not unusual in the Old Testament narratives for the protagonists to have less than stellar character, while the antagonists - such as King Abimalech in Abraham's story - possess the moral high ground. Even so, Paul calls Abraham "holy" and "righteous" (Romans 11:16, Romans 4). Paul makes it clear that Abraham's holiness resides not in his character but in that sacred space wherein he acts, where he obeys in faith. In his singular willingness to pull up stakes, to "leave," without certainty of the outcome, authentic faith found its foothold. This is where God comes down and changes things.

Before Abraham received his blessing he had to pack his mules. His obedience was the ground where God's saving movement gathered strength and advanced. And God's great advance culminated in a stunning denouement, another scenario involving mules and obedience, on a road to Bethlehem. Strength upon strength, from old to new, the Scriptures bear witness to God's movements when ordinary people - the likes of Abraham and you and me - give him a foothold to advance his saving purpose.

What stakes might God be asking you to pull up? If there are none you can see, ask God to show you. Then be ready.

DECEMBER 5

Exodus 3:1-10

Brian Indrelie

Moses had been trained to be royalty, yet when God came to him near mount Horeb, he was a shepherd. Although raised with all the education and privilege befitting a prince, he knew that he and his people were slaves. More than that, he had since become a fugitive as well, and thus while tending flocks was far less than he had once believed was his destiny, it seemed like the best things could be.

Yet God came, and told him to take off his sandals, which is a bit more meaningful than it might at first seem. In ancient times slaves would never take off their shoes in the presence of their masters, for they would soon go out again to do his bidding. Yet a son would take off his shoes, for as the heir he was at home with his father. Hence God broke radically into Moses' world to remind him that despite all appearances, he was not a slave, but a son and an heir, and that God did indeed have a great destiny for him.

Though during four hundred years of slavery it may have seemed as if God had forgotten the promises he made to Abraham, his coming to Moses proved that he had not forgotten his people. The proof of this claim was that the God who always has been and always will be came to be with Moses, and would thereafter stay with his people in fire and cloud until they were delivered to the promised land. This advent season, we are reminded that despite the winter doldrums we often experience and the deep disappointments we all face in life, God came to us in Jesus Christ, and proved despite all appearances that we are royalty, and have a great destiny. Thus when we face feelings of inadequacy for the things we know God is calling us to do, may we remind ourselves that his continual presence with us in the Spirit provides the adequacy we need.

DECEMBER 6

Leviticus 26:9-13

Natalie Crowsom

When it rains it pours. No doubt we've all experienced times in life that seem to confirm this statement. We've encountered blessing after blessing or unrelenting hardships. One person seems to get every illness under the sun. Someone else gets a pay raise, finds \$100 on the sidewalk, and wins a free car...all in one day.

In Leviticus 26, Israel is instructed how to live when they enter the Promised Land. If they keep the commands they will have blessings heaped upon them. They will be so fruitful that they will still be eating last year's bounty when a new harvest comes in (Lev. 26:10). Similarly, if they don't keep the commands, curses will hound them and destroy them, even drive them out of the land.

It's easy to read this chapter and jump to conclusions about God's character. It seems to tell us to obey God or else we'll really be in for it. Keep the law so that God will love and bless you. But the key to the chapter is in verse 13. God is the one who pursued Israel. He freed them from slavery and showed them grace *before* they ever committed themselves to obey him. His commitment to his people precedes and drives the relationship. Obedience is always a response to God's infinite love and grace.

His love is ultimately shown through the promise of verses 11 and 12. His promise to dwell (or "pitch his tent") with us is a sign of his radical commitment to his creation, which literally comes to life in Jesus. Because Jesus came to walk among us and take the curse of our sin, we can truly say, with the apostle Paul, that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

Choose one perfectly good item that you own (not junk) and gift it to someone else. Do this as a reminder that 1) all blessings come from God and 2) in response to his grace we can be open-handed with our lives.

DECEMBER 7

Joshua 1:1-9

Tom L.

Who Will Be with You Wherever You Go?

My five-year-old son didn't like school very much. Because we live on an island, in a Muslim country, in Africa, he was different than all the other kids, and it's hard to be different. For him, each day of school was a test of courage. So, on the way to school we would do the only thing we could think of to find courage. We would pray and we would recite this verse from Joshua.

"Who will be with you wherever you go?" I asked him each day.

"For the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." He would answer. And the Lord would give him courage.

God gave Joshua a difficult task. "Go over this Jordan...into the land that I am giving." It was a tremendous task. But God gave Joshua what he needed most—Himself. "I will never leave you or forsake you." Three times He told Joshua, "Be strong and courageous!" These were not empty words, because He told Joshua where to find courage. "Be careful to do all the law...meditate on it day and night." Living by God's word means living with the presence and power of God. This is why Joshua could be strong and courageous, instead of frightened or dismayed. The LORD was with him.

At Advent, we remember the coming of one greater than Joshua. If God was with Joshua, how much more is He with us? Jesus has come! He is the presence of God with us, by the gift of the Holy Spirit. So be strong and courageous. Do not fear. Do not be dismayed. For the LORD your God will be with you, wherever you go! He is with us!

Think of an area of your life where you have fear or worries. Ask God to give you courage to face these fears through the power of the Holy Spirit. Memorize Joshua 1:9 and pray it as you face your fears!

DECEMBER 8

Judges 6:11-16

Richard Wallace

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. George Santayana's famous aphorism is an appropriate summary for the book of Judges. The Israelites are stuck in a downward spiral. They forget God, following idols instead > God withdraws his protection from them and a foreign army invades > The people remember God and cry out to him > God is merciful and sends a judge to rescue them > The people forget God again.

In the fifth iteration of this cycle, we meet Gideon cowering away in a winepress to avoid the Midianites, when the angel of the Lord appears to him with a curious greeting, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Gideon objects to both parts of this greeting.

First, he doubts that the Lord is with him because of the mess Israel is in. If the God who rescued them from Egypt was with them, surely they wouldn't be in this mess. Second, he doubts he is a mighty warrior, instead calling himself the runt of a not very impressive litter.

We can often think like Gideon, and be stuck in our own downward spirals. When life has hit us hard and sent us spinning, it's easy to doubt that God is actually with us. But perhaps God is doing something we aren't seeing. While we are looking for our outward situations to change, God is working inwards, to change us from people who want to hide, to brave warriors. The evidence that God is with Gideon is that Gideon is transformed to deal with his situation.

We also need to remember our history. God is a rescuing God. Jesus came into the world, as the ultimate rescuing judge, to rescue us from our downward spiral of disobedience, and to transform us into brave warriors able to face any situation.

Think of a situation in which you long to see God act. Pray that you'd know God with you as he changes you, equipping you for whatever you need to face it.

DECEMBER 9

Isaiah 7:13-17

Steve Hopkins

I'm a terrible one to ask for directions. I ALWAYS know where I am going. How about you? Same thing with signs. Signs tell us the direction we are headed. I usually ignore them. Such is the attitude of Ahaz, when confronted with a big problem.

King Rezin and Pekah marched against Jerusalem, which was ruled by Ahaz, King of Judah. God told Isaiah to give King Ahaz a message that King Rezin and Pekah would not prevail, because their combined power was nothing compared to God's. God even invites Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz will not. He has already decided to make a military alliance with the king of Assyria, and so is not willing to follow God's directions, which brings us to this passage:

“Then Isaiah said, ‘Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?’” (v.13)

God promises a great sign anyway:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (v.14)

Immanuel means “God with us.” What a beautiful sign, that God would come to earth and be with us. The sign points us in the direction to remember that God is with us, always.

Christmas, which will soon be here, is a celebration of when “God with us” became a reality. Take time to recognize that God is still with us, and to ask directions and look for the signs.

Often in our lives, we feel that we are about to be beaten by a problem, a situation. Our natural instinct is to take it into our own hands, and not look for what God wants us to do.

We can do something different. When we are confronted with a challenge, big or small, seek out that sign from God as to how to proceed.

DECEMBER 10

Isaiah 9:2-7

Jeff Arthurs

A.W. Tozer said that the most important fact about us is our concept of God. Maybe that concept is most pertinent when we suffer. Do you see him then as forgetful, absent, or calloused?

Isaiah was facing suffering as Assyria devastated the northern section of his country, and he quaked as the superpower threatened Jerusalem in the south, his city, so God gave him a reminder and vision to expand his concept of God.

First, the prophet remembered the past: “In the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them” (v. 4). Isaiah was referring to the story of Gideon who delivered Israel from Midian. Remember? Gideon was *vastly* outnumbered, but he won the battle with 300 soldiers. So we remember the past—crossing the Red Sea, Gideon and little band of soldiers, Elijah on Mt. Carmel, and the poor woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment. Remember *your* past. Raise an “Ebenezer” to recount his faithfulness.

Isaiah also remembered the future: “Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning” (v. 5). The Assyrian soldiers dipped their swords in blood and dyed their garments red. Isaiah says that these trappings of war will be burned. He’s remembering the future—the victory God has promised when the lion will lie down with the lamb. When we suffer, we find joy in remembering the future—the “second advent,” Jesus’ return to earth. Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

Then comes the linchpin in Isaiah’s expanded vision of God—a child will be born: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace” (vv. 6-7). Peace and joy are possible even in suffering because God worked in the past, he will work in the future, and he sent his son to save us. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

Pause to remember God’s faithfulness in the past. Make a physical reminder, an Ebenezer.

DECEMBER 11

Isaiah 35

Jason Strzepek

When I was a little boy I always looked forward to Christmas. Sometime each autumn, catalogs full of new and interesting toys would magically arrive at our home. My friends and I would spend hours poring over them and fantasizing about what we hoped would be under the tree on Christmas morning.

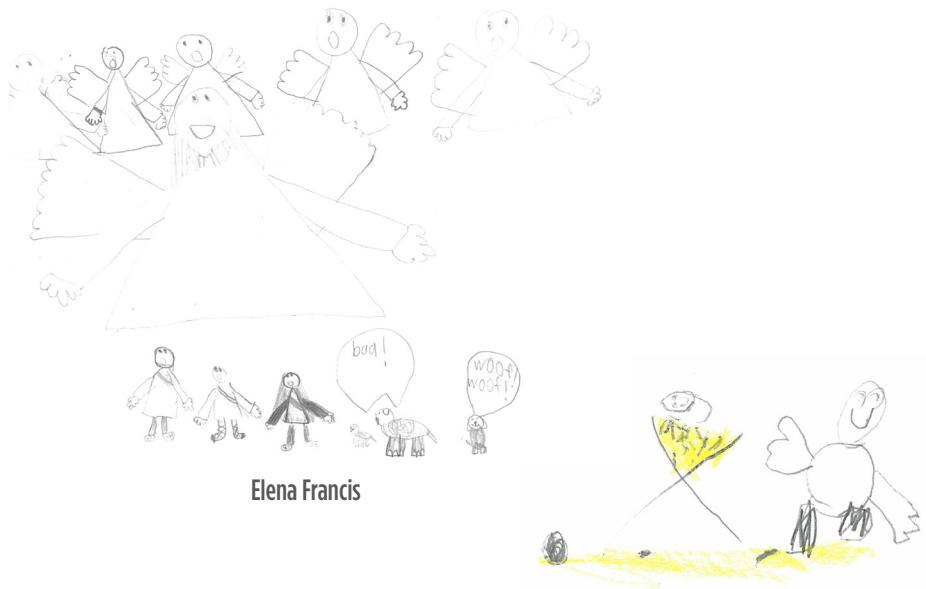
In Isaiah 35, God gives a picture of something better - the true happiness, peace and joy he has prepared for his people. When times are tough, people need something to look forward to. Through Isaiah, God faithfully reminds his people that they have a happy future even though their current situation might be less than they hoped for. He redirects them to hope in Him and not to give up. He proclaims to the exhausted, the feeble and the anxious that he will make all things right (v. 3-4) – that justice will prevail – he will save his people and they will live happily ever after without sorrow or sighing (v. 5, 10).

Jesus is the center of this hope, as he proved by doing the things described in v. 5-6: opening the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, healing the lame and loosing the tongue of the mute so they could glorify God in freedom and be all they were created to be. Jesus showed through his gracious and powerful actions that he is able to right wrongs and make things new. (Matt 9:27-31, Luke 5:17-39, Mark 7:31-37, John 5:1-8, 3:16, 1 John 3:16).

In John 16:33 God reminds us: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” As you interact with those around you this Christmas season, remember and highlight the true hope of Christmas.



Beth Melillo

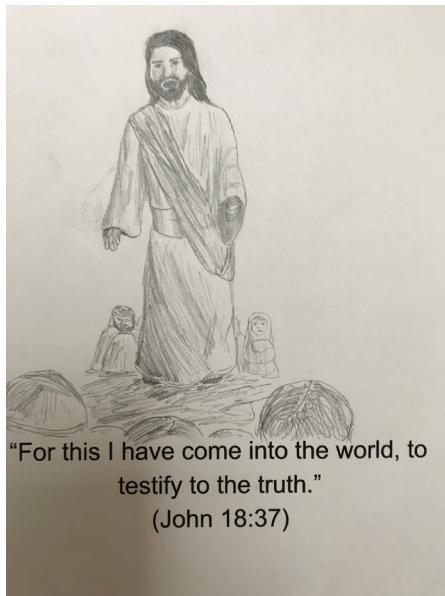


Elena Francis

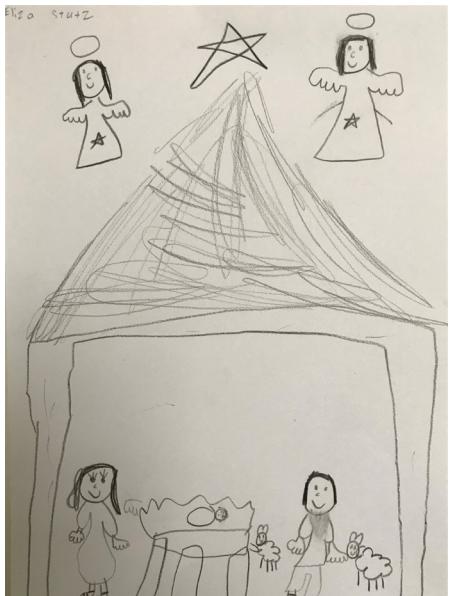
Devon Francis



Susie Stutz



Jason Stutz



Eliza Stutz

What consequences are you reaping today for yesterday's disobedience? As God's child, where is your Father currently exposing you to painful discipline? Maybe your finances look bleak because you've idolized possessions. Maybe a close family relationship is strained, forcing everyone in your house to walk on eggshells, and you know your less-than-gracious speech was a major contributor. In the despair of discipline, it's hard to believe in the gracious intentions of God—not only because the darkness is deep, but because of the sneaking suspicious that you "deserve this."

Israel found themselves in precisely this position during their exile in Babylon. Thrust out of Jerusalem, and marginalized in a foreign land, their confidence in God's promises waned (Is. 40:27). Far from being victims of unfortunate historical circumstances, the discipline of exile was entirely their own doing: they had been called repeatedly to return to God and had refused, receiving the discipline about which they had been clearly warned. God was not mocked, and "they reaped what they sowed" (Gal. 6:7).

But, even in their painful discipline, *God came*. Isaiah, in a vision of the future, announced God's comfort to his exiles: "Comfort, comfort my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity is pardoned" (Is. 40:1-2). Even in discipline, God's ultimate intention was comfort and forgiveness. Israel's sin had not derailed God's faithfulness. His grace hadn't wavered. His people would return to Jerusalem, through a straight path in the desert, and "the glory of the Lord would be revealed" (Is. 40:3; 4). And the Lord wanted them to know this *before* they went into exile. God's tender love precedes, pervades, and follows His discipline. The comfort and forgiveness He promised would ultimately be provided in His own Son, Jesus Christ.

Where do you need to repent for failing to see God's comfort, amidst his discipline? Write out a prayer of repentance to God, and know the comfort of his tender intentions.

DECEMBER 13

Micah 5:2-5a

Tess Wallace

Over the holidays, many of us won't check our bank balance or look at the calories on the box of Christmas cookies, despite wanting to be in control of our money or weight. This widespread human tendency to intentionally avoid negative information has been termed "The Ostrich Problem" by psychologists, based on the old belief that ostriches stick their heads underground when they sense danger.

The book of Micah is full of dire warnings about God's judgement resulting from the people's corruption, idolatry and sin, culminating in the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem (1:2-9; 3:12). But the people of Israel have their heads in the sand. Their self-appointed prophets deny that God would bring any such disaster, instead proclaiming a message of peace to anyone who gave them food and drink (2:6-7; 3:5).

Yet, despite the Israelites' refusal to listen to God, and the impending judgement they faced, we see glimmers of hope throughout the book as God promises deliverance for a remnant of his people. Today's passage begins with a big surprise: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah..." This tiny village, the hometown of King David, will be the birthplace of a new and greater Shepherd-King, Jesus. Until that time, Israel will be scattered without a leader, but God, in his covenant faithfulness, promises to once again gather, protect and forgive his people. Not only will the flock return, but they will dwell securely, under Jesus' authority, majesty and power.

The peace that Jesus brings is not like the fake peace of the false prophets' message that ignored the problem of the people's sin. True peace can only be experienced by first owning the depth of our sin, but then realizing the greatest surprise, that God loves us so much that he came into our world as the Prince of Peace, to gather, secure and bring wholeness to his people.

Are there areas of your life that you don't speak to God about? Bring these before him today, knowing that even amidst our brokenness, "he himself is our peace" (Eph 2:14).

DECEMBER 14

Luke 1:26-38

Scott Gibson

I Am the Lord's Servant

The story is scandalous. We read it as a sweet narrative about a young woman who'd bear the Son of God. But wait a minute! She's betrothed, promised to a man whose name is Joseph. This stage of the courting process could only be broken by divorce.

Gabriel told Mary that God would overshadow her—like in the creation, he would rest upon her and she would conceive.

This is not like the stories of the pagan gods who would have sexual intercourse with their followers. Instead, this is a virgin birth—Mary remained a virgin until after Jesus' birth. This is truly miraculous!

This is no mere sweet story. It's the interference of God in the lives of men and women with the greatest news they've ever heard—the gospel. It's surprising. It's unsettling. It's amazing. It's scandalous.

The angel told Mary to name the boy Jesus. This was the same name the angel told Joseph to name him, a common name of the period. Jesus means “God who saves.” And, he will be “great,” says the angel – more magnificent than anything or anyone else.

Jesus is the king, in heaven and on earth. He is the inheritor of the throne of king David on earth. But he is also the Son of the Most High, Son of God, king of heaven.

Mary lets us in on a secret of what it means to live in light of God's work in our lives. Mary simply and beautifully said yes to God. Literally she said, “Let it be done to me according to your word...” She didn't argue. She didn't resist. She said yes, even though she surely knew some of the consequences of doing so. She says, “I am the Lord's servant” (vs. 38).

DECEMBER 15

Matthew 1:18-25

Ben Crelin

What's in a Name?

Names are important. Each has a meaning. Do you know why your parents named you? What does it mean? Matthew answers the question, “Who is the Messiah and why did he come?” by giving us two names: Jesus and Immanuel.

The name Jesus means “Yahweh saves” (Yahweh is God’s personal name). The Messiah will save His people from their sin. Jesus’ ministry was not first and foremost as a traveling medic, a political liberator, or a religious guru. Jesus’ earthly mission was primarily to reconcile God’s people to Himself. Incredibly, Jesus’ name echoes Psalm 130:8, “And Yahweh will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” In our passage today, Jesus’ name signals that He is the same redeeming God of the Old Testament!

Then Matthew says that many will call Jesus another name, Immanuel, “God with us.” Now, we have no record that this was his street name – no one ever addressed him as, “Hey Immanuel!” Yet if challenged to describe what Jesus means to you in three words, you could hardly do better than “God with us.” In fact, Immanuel is *how* God saved us! Our salvation required God himself to become one of us through the virgin birth of a young, poor woman named Mary. God took our human nature into his divinity, and thereby signaled his mission to ultimately restore it. For God to save us, he had to be fully with us. He had to share our nature so that he could take our sin upon himself. Jesus’ work of salvation began in the incarnation only to be sealed with his blood on the cross and completed in his resurrection and his coming return. So these two names, Jesus and Immanuel, actually give us one thought: Yahweh saves us by being with us.

Today, read Psalm 130 and reflect on how God has entered into our depths to save us by being with us. Reflect on both your darkest and happiest moments and how God is with you.

DECEMBER 16

Luke 2:1-7

Hope Edwards

Fairy-stories capture our imagination. They express truths and arouse longings that correspond to our world. Their origination and re-telling are bridges from the seen to unseen, tangible to intangible, natural to divine. The ancient Greeks had their pantheon: at the helm sat Zeus, the sky lord of lightning bolts; Poseidon controlled the illusive deep waters; Hades directed the dead. Nineteenth-century Grim Brothers penned popular tales: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow-White. We have our own Hollywood fairy-stories: Viking god Thor leaves his Asgard throne; Superman rescues the world with god-like strength; Star Wars showcases the mystic battle between good and evil forces.

The incarnation of Jesus is also fairy-story. But quite differently than others, it is *the* true fairy-story. God authors the ultimate fairy-tale in the Birth of Christ. God came to earth as man. Luke packs in several details to demonstrate the historicity of the incarnation: the time of Jesus' birth—during Caesar Augustus' census and Syrian Quirinius' governorship; the birthplace—Bethlehem in Judea, which is the City of David; his human lineage—legally the son of Joseph, descendant of David, and physically the son of Mary. He also includes the shockingly humble conditions of the event: Jesus breathed his first breaths in the dense stench of hay and manure, was tightly wrapped in strips of spare cloth, and was laid in an animal feeding trough.

Luke emphasizes the incarnation is part of ordinary history, but is also so much more. The unseen became seen; the intangible, tangible; and the divine, human. C. S. Lewis describes it well: "For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact." In the incarnation, all our smaller fairy-stories—from Greek gods to Hollywood's fantastical epics—have actually become real and true. The incarnation fulfills our deepest longings: God has come to be with us.

Reflect today on your favorite fairy-story. What longings does it evoke in you? How does Jesus' historical incarnation resemble or differ from the tale? Thank God his incarnation satisfies your deepest longings.

DECEMBER 17

Luke 2:8-20

Rebecca Feins

On a certain night about two thousand years ago, there were shepherds out in the fields, taking care of their sheep. That's what shepherds do after all. They had absolutely no idea that the savior of the world had been born in a nearby town. They could have been left in the dark, but God decided otherwise. With shining glory and singing angels, He let the shepherds in on the greatest secret of all: Jesus, the long-awaited messiah, had been born.

Nothing would have changed if God had not sent the angels to deliver the message about Jesus. The shepherds would have kept tending their sheep and missed the Son of the God of the universe being born. God still sends messages. Though not usually through angels, He can speak through someone you know, a song, something you read...and especially through His word.

God's messages often call us to action. The shepherds left their routine sheep-watching and went to Jesus. Are we willing to leave our routine every day to follow what He wants us to do? We need to ask God to help us know what He wants us to do. When they had seen Jesus, the shepherds went and spread the message that God had given them, and how they had seen and known for themselves it was true. We can do the same. We only have to remember that God gives messages to whomever He chooses, whether that be shepherds, prophets, or even us.

As the shepherds were out telling everyone about Jesus, Mary was still in the stable. She pondered in her heart all that had happened. Sometimes we forget that it is just as important to dwell upon Him yourself as to tell others about Him. Jesus is waiting for you. He wants you to know Him better. Pray and ask God to help you overcome whatever it is holding you back from Him. Continuously remind yourself of Jesus, and what He has done for you. Treasure Him and ponder these things in your heart.

DECEMBER 18

Matthew 2:1-12

Nanette Maden

We know the magi arrived bearing gifts after Jesus' birth. Our crèche sets include three wise men with Jesus in the manger as if they had arrived within days of his birth. However, scripture and historical accounts indicate these men traveled a very long distance and may have actually arrived when Jesus was a toddler. While reading this scripture passage, I am struck by their commitment and effort in searching out the messiah and their persistence in following the star.

The wise men traveled expectantly bearing gifts that were often given to honor a king or deity in the ancient world. When they finally arrived and encountered Jesus, they bowed down and worshipped him. "Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh" (v. 11, NIV).

Will we travel expectantly in our search for Christ through this season of Advent? Will we set our eyes on Him and not be distracted and worn down by the worldly celebrations of this season? And, considering it's Jesus' birthday celebration, what will we give Him? I'm reminded of the well-known Christmas carol, *The Little Drummer Boy*: "I have no gift to bring, I played my drum for Him . . . I played my best for Him . . . Then He smiled at me . . . me and my drum."

As an act of worship, we can give our "treasure" this Christmas and beyond. We can offer forgiveness to someone who has done us wrong, give the gift of love to someone who has behaved badly, extend kindness to those who struggle physically or emotionally, and give generously to those in financial need. We can commit to serving in order to meet the needs of our church or share the hope of Christ to those who feel hopeless. Like the wise men that came from the east, give from the abundance of the "wealth" that's been given to you by God.

DECEMBER 19

John 1:14-18

Kristin Gelinas

Throughout history, God had desired to dwell with and among His people. In the beginning, He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. He later went before the Israelites in a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. He allowed His presence to settle over the tabernacle that was set up in the middle of Israel's encampment and then, later, in the temple in Jerusalem.

God's glory among His people had to be limited, a symbol, a foreshadowing of things to come. The people could not get near Him—they could not see Him, they could not touch Him—so great was His glory, so great was their sin.

Then one night, over 2000 years ago, everything changed. The Son of God shed his royal robes, divine privileges, and eternal home, and he slipped into our skin, descended into our world, and took on our nature. He came and pitched his tent right here among us.

Now we have seen Him. Though no one has ever seen God, Jesus—the one and only Son of the Father, God-in-Flesh—has made him known. He is the image of the invisible God. What once was obscured in a cloud of smoke or tucked away behind the veil of the temple is now revealed in the full light of day. “Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity! Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel” (Charles Wesley).

Ours is a God who is *with* us. He shows up. He comes to His people.

So just as the Israelites arranged their tents strategically around the tabernacle, making the worship of God the literal center of their communal life, let us pitch our own tents around this one who has come to dwell (literally, “to tabernacle”) among us.

What is one way you have seen the glory or received the grace of Jesus? Consider writing this down and then sharing it with someone today, as a means of witnessing to His presence in your life.

DECEMBER 20

Mark 10:35-45

Steve Waldron

What does a disciple of Jesus act like? A couple of brothers known as the “Sons of Thunder” thought they knew. James and John wanted the best seats when the glorious kingdom was restored to Israel. They knew how to push their way to the front of a line, especially if vengeance was involved. When a village rejected Jesus, the thunder brothers wanted to command fire to come down from heaven and burn up the village (Luke 9:54). Jesus didn’t take them up on their offer.

When God’s people had first decided that they wanted a king, the prophet Samuel warned them that it was a bad idea (1 Samuel 8). A king would take their land, seize their sons and daughters, and enslave them. Still, they wanted a king so they could be like the nations around them, to have security and certainty and a reputation. A king could give them a permanent army, an effective government, and a symbol of their national greatness. When they insisted on this plan, God told Samuel that this meant they had rejected God.

When Jesus came teaching and healing people and driving out demons, people were amazed at his authority. They thought he might be the king they needed. But Jesus had a different plan. After the incident with James and John, Jesus told his friends that the king of God’s people would not be like the kings among the nations. Jesus came to serve people. He prepared meals, he washed feet, he blessed children, he healed people. That wasn’t some sort of trick to get people to like him. By dying for his friends, he showed that this was who he was. The king of God’s people would not be like the kings of the other nations, and his people wouldn’t be like the nations around them either.

Follow Jesus by doing one thing he did to serve others today: Serve someone food or drinks, bring comfort to someone who is sick or distressed, care for a child.

DECEMBER 21

Luke 19:1-10

Sarah Bartley

The crowd grows thicker every time he visits. All kinds of people pack the streets. Some want to hear the good Teacher. Others will press in for healing. We heard about that blind man - healed with just a few words. Maybe there will be a repeat. And the children! They climb right up into his lap to play. How will I get anywhere today to...

Now what is that? Wait, is that really - Zacchaeus climbing a tree like a child? I guess even he wants to see the Teacher. What makes Zacchaeus think that someone like Jesus will have time for him - the way he takes a cut of people's tax money! What could he be after?

But what is this? It's Jesus. And he is looking up into Zacchaeus' tree!

Is that a smile? His face is so... kind. Does he not know? Zacchaeus is wealthy at our expense. Our food is served at his dinner parties to people who don't know what it is like to be hungry...

"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

With crowds so eager to see him, why is Jesus going home with that greedy thief?

"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Could this be? Zacchaeus turning over a new leaf - at such cost? And Jesus has made him our brother? Now that's something new. Healing a blind person seemed far-fetched, but changing Zacchaeus heart - how has he done that!?

1. What is the miracle in this story?
2. What is Zacchaeus turning from? What is he turning to?
3. In what aspects of community life do we need this kind of change? Will we respond to Jesus like Zacchaeus did?

DECEMBER 22

Matthew 28:16-20

Lianna Sours

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We read these words of Jesus and while we might understand quickly the concepts of *go*, *baptize* and *teach*, this word *behold* is unfamiliar to us.

My mother, who loves the ocean, but lives about two hours away from the coast, will say to me every once in a while, “You’re too busy if a week has gone by and you haven’t seen the ocean.” Sometimes I will remember this when I have the option of taking a route to get to work that goes by the ocean or the alternate route that stays inland. I might choose to drive by the ocean so I can at least tell my mother that I saw the ocean, but just seeing the ocean from my car isn’t what she really wants me to do. She wants me to stop, to look, smell, hear and feel the ocean. She wants me not just to see the ocean, but she wants me to behold the ocean.

Earlier in the book of Matthew we are given an introduction to God as Immanuel, a God whose very name means He is with us. Here at the end of the book Jesus is giving the disciples this promise of himself with them always and he tells them to behold this promise. He is saying to his disciples, don’t just drive by this promise. Behold that I am with you. Gaze upon it. Don’t just notice it, but let it sink in and impact you. You won’t be able to see me anymore, but I am still here.

Consider an area of your life where you are struggling and ask yourself what difference it would make to behold the reality that God is with you.

DECEMBER 23

Acts 17:24-31

Laura Range

When I first learned about idol worship in Sunday School, I was mystified. How could ancient people carve a piece of wood one minute, then worship it the next? It seemed especially incredible that the Israelites, who had real encounters with the living Creator, could worship anything human hands had made.

While I can't imagine worshipping a figurine, modern people look for security and a sense of well-being in many things besides God - things we think we can control. That's the appeal of an idol, isn't it? You make it - you control it. It does things for you.

Think about those ancient idols:

They have eyes, but can't see; ears but can't hear;
a mouth, but can't speak; hands, but can't do anything.

Graven images can't represent God, and for an incredible reason: when God wanted to put his image somewhere, he chose to stamp it on people. It is we who are created in God's image, and "in him we live and move and have our being." Read through Acts 17:24-31 and underline God's actions. No idol can do any of these things!

At Christmas, we come face to face with the fact that we have betrayed God's image stamped in us - so badly that it could only be salvaged if God Himself came and bore it, from start to finish, without fault or failure. Because Jesus was the perfect image of God among us, we can be restored as image-bearers of God, who do not need to find any other idols to take His place in our lives.

1. Reflect on these prompts from Tim Keller:

"To whom or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect out of life? What would really make you happy?"

2. Identify and confess to God any possible idols you have identified. Ask Him to help you find what you need and seek in Him.

DECEMBER 24

Galatians 4:1-7

Terry Sherman

While sitting on the same bed, reading Page 101 of the same *Precious Moments: Stories from the Bible* book, on the same day, April 14, 1991 and 1994, 3½-year-olds Lindsey and Cindy Sherman, when told by me that SOMEDAY they could pray the prayer I read them on the page and ask Jesus to be their Savior, said, “I want to do it NOW!” They both received God’s gift by faith even at that early age and have gone on as adults to grow in His grace beautifully.

For the Israelites, “The Great Someday” was a far-off dream of Paradise restored, fellowship with their sovereign God, foreshadowed by Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 when the promise would be initially fulfilled and the Messiah would come as in Matthew 1:18-25. Galatians 4:1-7 describes the before and after scenario of those who were slaves to the law because of sin, but are now set free from that bondage and have become sons of God and heirs of the promise by faith. God’s precise timing and purpose of sending His Son to earth as a baby, GIFTED them and us with the full rights of sons. There was and is no reason to go back to the legalism of trying to earn our sonship.

What can we say about this glorious undeserved gift of becoming children of God by His free gift of grace? How shall we then live if we are heirs of such blessings while still living in the world?

Don’t squelch the “Abba, Father” cries of the Holy Spirit in your heart by your own misguided attempts to be holy and good! Don’t say, “Someday, when I’m older, better, smarter...” There’s no reason to be slaves anymore! We have been given fullness in Christ! *Now* is the day of salvation, so we can be who we truly are in Christ *today*...especially as we anticipate the second coming of Christ while celebrating the first coming tomorrow. Like my daughters...determine to do it NOW!

DECEMBER 25

Revelation 4:1-8

Bobby Warrenburg

“Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’” Revelation 4:8

“I had no idea it would be this hard...” At some point in life we all say that. Maybe at the start of a new job, our first year into marriage, the early days following the birth of a child. Life gives us pain and frustration that we didn’t expect. And in moments like these it’s natural to wonder, “Where in the world is God? And why don’t you come and get me out of this?” One of the profound themes of the Bible is that God faithfully and relentlessly “comes” – seldom on our terms, or according to our timetable – but he always shows up...just when he means to.

The book of Revelation is written to help us see things the way they really are. That’s why “doors” are always opening up (4:1, 3:8) and visions are cast, because God wants us to see who’s really in charge of the universe. By seeing heavenly things, we learn to live better in our world. And one of the themes that heaven is constantly repeating is that God is the One “...who was, and is, and is to come.” Genesis through Revelation is a historical record of God mercifully and terribly showing up at just the right time. “Adam, where are you?” “Has no one condemned you?” “You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting.” “Peace be with you!” God always comes.

When the curtain on this present age is finally closed – or shall I say finally opened? – the evidence will show that God faithfully, gloriously, and beyond all-expectation *personally* comes to us. So we may say to Him, “Oh, I knew that you’d finally come!” And the Bible says, “He’s been coming, dear child, all along, at just the right times.” May you find peace this year in the coming of “Immanuel; God with us” here, now and forever.

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS

CHRISTIANS HAVE FOUND COURAGE, PEACE,
AND HOPE IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF "IMMANUEL;
GOD WITH US" MAY YOU FIND THAT IN
WHATSOEVER CHALLENGE OR BLESSING YOU FACE
THIS CHRISTMAS.

- BOBBY

May we meditate on the
truth that "He came" and be in
awe that God's Son showed up in the
midst of our darkness 2,000 years ago,
and today as well!
Many Christmas,
Ben

Christmas,
Joy to the World
Rob!

May the reality that Christ came
fill you with love, hope, peace, and
joy this season!

- Melissa

Merry Christmas!
Ruth

May your Christmas
season be filled with
hope and joy as
you celebrate the
arrival of Jesus!
- Ryan

He came to dwell
among us ... to be sin
for us so that in Him
we might become the
righteousness of God
Immanuel!

Ted

May we keep Jesus
close to our hearts
as we celebrate
Him throughout this
Christmas Season.
Gwen

REJOICE! EMANUEL,
GOD IS WITH US!!
HAVE A BLESSED ADVENT
& CHRISTMAS SEASON.
Yours in Christ,
PETER

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

I hope you take time
to enjoy and find
rest in the celebration
of our Savior.

Joyfully,
Kim