



NORTH SHORE

COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH

# 2018 Advent Devotional

COME

*Thou Long-Expected*

*Jesus*



# Forward

*Melissa Lowther, Ministry Associate*

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Advent is a season of longing. We long to see family and friends for the upcoming Christmas holiday. We long for a respite from work. We long to give and receive gifts. And perhaps we long for greater things: hope in the midst of hardship; love for our difficult neighbor; joy in the midst of despair; peace on earth.

The good news of Advent is that it carries a promise - the promise of forgiveness; the promise of a new beginning; the promise of a Savior. He is the one who will satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. He is the one we wait for with anticipation.

We live in this strange space where our Savior has already come, but his Kingdom is not yet fully realized. We believe He will come again to ultimately make all things right in the world and in our hearts. But, how do we live today in between the first and second Advent?

As we read and reflect on Scripture throughout this devotional, may we learn what it looks like to live in the “already, but not yet” world. May the longings of our hearts be settled by our Savior who has come. May we rest in the presence of God with us. And may we look forward with expectation to our Jesus who will come again.

***Special thanks to:***

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Shame and blame, dread and doubt, hang on Adam as a weighty stone on a suspended thread. His sin has found him out, and with it comes inner condemnation, a testament to a broken relationship and a betrayal of trust. He has nowhere to hide as the trees refuse to conspire with the traitor against their Maker. Eden is uncharacteristically quiet as sounding steps announce the imminent, ominous, and obvious. Then the voice. Dread, shame, and doubt. The question, *where are you?* haunts the hiding Adam, obliging him to surrender. Then, blame. Adam faults his wife for his sin, and indirectly, God the Giver (Gen 3:12). Eve, in turn, accuses the serpent. One sinful act estranges man from God, his next neighbor, himself, and creation. The fall is radical and total.

But Genesis 3:15 forcefully breaks forth as a beacon of hope and light that beams with promise and pardon. In what is called the protoevangelium, that is, the first proclaimed Gospel, God pledges to shatter sin and separation, shame and fear, with His love. He will not leave humanity in self-ruin. He will come and save us. In the battle of cosmic significance, the woman's Seed shall crush the Serpent's skull. At the cost of His life. For the lethal snake shall deal His heel a fatal blow, sniffing out His light of life. And yet, His victory is not despite, but through His death. As a result, humanity triumphs over evil because the Victor, the Seed of the woman, is one of us!

Genesis 3:15 announces His coming, He whose steps we formerly dreaded. We don't notice Him until He is with us, wrapped in humility and clad in humanity, our humanity! He is with us, but also, for us. No more shame, blame, dread, or doubt. God has descended and found us, for the Seed of the woman is also the Son of God. Immanuel, the eternally blessed with-us-God has come to save Adam's seed. In Him is faith and forgiveness, light and delight for everyone who believes. Rejoice o man, for your God, is here!

## DECEMBER 3

Isaiah 40:1-5

*Kirby Francis*

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### Our Comfort for Christmas

Let's say you were to put "Comfort" at the top of your wish list this Christmas. How might your friends and family interpret that? Fluffy pajamas, cushy slippers, and perhaps a few dozen pounds of chocolate?

Through Isaiah, and later John the Baptist, the Lord has something quite different on offer by way of a gift of comfort: repentance. Far less cuddly, perhaps, but of eternal value in comforting a sinful people.

Isaiah is writing to a nation which will know hardship, war, and exile from the presence of the Lord. In fact, the message of the prophet in v.2 is that His people have been in a period of military enlistment - bearing the burden of conflict as covenant punishment for their sin. Ezekiel, a later prophet, saw a vision of the Lord's presence abandoning Jerusalem. Hardly tidings of comfort!

The voice of comfort is that of a herald, crying out that a level road will be prepared for the approaching King. The path to Jerusalem is mostly uphill, and passes through difficult terrain. This is a King who is returning, and who brings with Him those from "all flesh" who are longing for His glory to return, and remain with His people forever.

Here is the comfort God offers in Christmas. Your King has born double punishment for your sins. He has returned from death to life, and will one day return from heaven, when men and women from all nations will behold His glory, and live with Him in the New Jerusalem forever.

As you look back on this year, reflect on where the path of your life has been crooked, haughty, or in the depths. Through the gift of repentance, God can speak comfort into the wilderness of your heart. Ask the Lord to make your heart a well-traveled route of Christ's holiness and presence. Find comfort from our God in the knowledge that, because of His Son's death and resurrection, our iniquity is pardoned.

## DECEMBER 4

Isaiah 52:7-10

*Taylor Bradford*

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The blister that had formed on the sole of my left foot burst as my boot made contact with uneven ground. As we hiked farther up, I tried to ignore the pulsing of the raw, open wound rubbing against my woolen sock by pointing out towering pines and critters that crossed the path.

The pain, however, did not subside but began to burn, leaving me wincing with each step. When we finally reached the bald-faced peak, I removed my boots to uncover the burning and bruised feet that had carried me that day. As we rested, all pain disappeared for the moments that we spent marveling at the beauty in front of us: the changing colors, the birds flying overhead, and the cool breeze. It was magnificent.

But, was I marveling at the right thing?

We tend to idolize the mountains. We survey the rolling hills and imagine what it would be like to explore the rocks and roots that shape the landscapes. However, it is not until we set foot on the trail that we realize the energy that must be exerted to accomplish such a task. And once we have conquered the challenge of a mountain, it is not the sore feet that we praise.

But God does.

Isaiah 52:7 states, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news...” This verse calls out the beauty of the feet that persevere through challenging times in order to bring good news to those who need to hear. We should proclaim God’s goodness not only because of the beauty that is seen from the mountaintop, but for the processes that bring us there. God has given each one of us unique ways to proclaim and glorify His name.

So take off your shoes. Peel away the sweaty socks. And ask yourself these questions:

1. Where have my feet taken me?
2. Where is God calling me to walk?
3. Who needs to hear the good news I have been given to bring?

Imagine yourself in a meeting, discussing a complicated dilemma or a thorny problem. Then imagine someone realizes a new fact that helps to resolve the issue easily. She exclaims, “Hey everyone, listen to this... this is a game changer!” Or, imagine watching a close game and there is a pass/hit/score that greatly increases the chances that your team will win the game. You, your neighbor, and your relatives then shout with joy about this dramatic change in the game.

In the first part of the book of Isaiah, the prophet emphasizes the reasons for God’s judgment on the people of Israel. Through their pride and idolatry, they had rejected the LORD. As a result, they were taken into the miserable conditions of exile. But, chapter 40 marks a dramatic change; Isaiah shifts the emphasis from judgment to God’s words of comfort. He announces that the end of judgment has come and that the LORD will restore Israel.

In verse 9, God tells them to go up on a mountain and shout the good news that the ultimate Game Changer is coming! In verse 10, the picture is of a mighty and victorious warrior. But then in verse 11, the picture is of a gentle, caring shepherd who shields and protects the vulnerable lambs. Through these two pictures, Isaiah urges the people to put their hope in this deliverer-shepherd and to rejoice over the comfort and victory to come.

Friends, we have this hope of the end of judgment on us and our sins if we trust in the atoning work of the long-expected Jesus! So, stand up, shout, and bellow out a big, “thank you, Lord!” (assuming you aren’t on the train or others aren’t in the next room sleeping!)

Then, ask the mighty shepherd-king right now to change the hearts of 2-3 people close to you who don’t yet know Him, and to give you an opportunity during this season to share with them naturally and joyfully the great news of His salvation.

## DECEMBER 6

Isaiah 11:1-10

Nick Cotton

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Timothy Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* states, “If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol.” Individually and culturally we fall into this trap, just like the Israelites did during Isaiah’s ministry. The Israelites had traded the glory of the Lord for the desires of their own flesh (Rom 1:21-25), and Isaiah proclaimed God’s coming judgment upon them.

Yet in the midst of judgment, Isaiah describes what God has in store for his chosen: the world brought back into alignment with Him as it was at creation. “The wolf will live with the lamb...they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain...” (v. 6 & 9) and “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious” (v. 10). God continues with the promise of a Messiah, the Root of Jesse, who will have the Lord’s Spirit and will judge based on men’s hearts, not their external facade. Thanks be to God that Jesus Christ is our Messiah! The one who spread his arms on the cross for us out of love. Our Lord came with greater mercy than we could hope from Isaiah’s words, “with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked,” (v. 4) despite having gone astray (Isa. 53:6). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

And what is the result? “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as waters cover the sea” (v. 9). This is our vision at NSCBC: that the North Shore will be united in knowledge and love for Christ.

Pray today that God will move so powerfully on the North Shore that we will see his knowledge cover our communities, and pray with audacity, knowing that we are praying for what God has already promised to bring.

If you have watched *The Crown* on Netflix, you probably remember the opening credits where, for a whole luxurious minute, we see tendrils of molten gold and shadowy shapes slowly coming together to form the crown. The interwoven orchestral theme, in my mind, perfectly captures Elizabeth II, a young wife and mother, learning to bear the weight of the Crown in her demanding new role as Queen.

Today's passage also takes place in the context of a coronation (6:11). Only Zechariah's crown is not to be placed on a king or queen, but on Joshua the high priest. This dramatic act is a sign of things to come, and points to the One whom God will raise up to build his temple, and who will rule as a priest on his throne. "The Branch" is none other than the promised Messiah, our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who would "remove the sin of this land in a single day" (3:9). This long-expected Messiah who not only stood in our place and sacrificially bore our sin, but is now reigning at the right hand of God, finally and permanently unites these two offices of high priest and king, bearing the weight of the glory of both.

As believers, we are to obey the Lord Jesus as our King, but we also enter His kingdom through his sacrifice. Today, Jesus is carrying on this work of building a spiritual house, His church, to be a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). Through Christ, we all have direct access to God's presence and have been given the priestly work of daily offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2), whatever our vocation. All believers also rule and reign with Christ; we have been given authority to minister to one another, and to fight and ultimately defeat sin, so that we may declare the praises of our eternal Priest-King.

Are you trusting in both Jesus' kingly rule and priestly mediation? As a priest in his service, how can you serve God and your neighbor through your work today?

The prophet Micah wrote of God's judgment on Israel; but he also spoke of the hope that God had promised: "Israel will be abandoned until...." There would be violence, uncertainty and economic instability under the rule of foreign powers over Israel; there would seem to be no hope for many years. Then into that time of chaos and humiliation God would send a great Ruler...born in a humble place, through and to humble people. In the genealogy of Jesus are Rahab, a prostitute (mother of Boaz); Ruth, a Moabite (mother of Obed, who was the father of Jesse—the father of David, a shepherd and the youngest in his family); Bathsheba, an adulteress (mother of Solomon); Mary, an unmarried teenager. And the birthplace, Bethlehem Ephrathah, was a small, insignificant town southwest of Jerusalem.

God would provide a Ruler from "of old, from ancient times." John tells us in Revelation that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End; there never was a time when Jesus didn't exist. Though this reality is too immense for our finite minds to grasp, God was assuring his people that the ruler he would raise up would be far greater and more powerful than all the foreign rulers oppressing and misusing them now.

This Ruler would "shepherd His flock in the strength...majesty of the name of the LORD His God." He would not only bring the peace of salvation to the people of His day, but *all* who believe in Him would live securely because "His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth." He not only would *bring peace*; "He Himself is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14).

Consider how this ruler from insignificant origin has changed the world forever, and changed your own life. Who are some other seemingly "insignificant" people who were/are used greatly by God in your life? Do you believe you could be one of these in someone else's life?

## DECEMBER 9

### Malachi 3:1-6

*Ben Friedman*

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In late 2013, Stephanie and I counted down the days until our wedding. Though I eagerly anticipated the joy and intimacy we'd share together, it only took a month of marriage to realize that my longings were decidedly rose-colored. Intimacy and joy abounded, but my daily experience was more like being thrust into a fire than anything else, as the Lord began using my marriage to expose and expunge my sin.

In the days of the prophet Malachi, Israel plodded along in the jaded boredom and depression of unmet expectations, following their return from exile. They had no king, their boundaries had shrunk, and the temple they'd rebuilt lacked the felt presence of the Lord. They longed for a powerful return of their God, many sank into despair, even questioning God's seeming disregard for justice: "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord," they lamented, and "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17).

The Lord's response paralleled my early experience of marriage. The longing was good, and would be fulfilled, but God's long-expected coming would be more like a refiner's fire than anything else! "The Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord almighty" (3:1). "But," he continued, "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 fuller's soap" (3:2).

Jesus is this covenant messenger we desire; he is the Lord who will "suddenly come into his temple". But encountering him requires passing through a refiner's fire. God will have no alloys in heaven, it's been said, and Christ is gracious enough not only to save us, but to bind himself to us and refine us until we are fit for heaven, and able to "bring offerings in righteousness" on earth (3:3).

Meditate on one area of your life that needs "refining" and pray that Christ would come afresh this Advent to do just that.

## DECEMBER 10

John 1:1-8

Tom L.

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Mwandroni lika de likalima, likalima lika na Mungu, na likalima lika Mungu.

*John 1:1 in the island language has only been translated within the past year and what a joy it is to finally read these words.*

The theme of this devotional is “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.” It speaks to the longing we who believe feel at the coming of our Savior; our Deliverer, our Rest. But what about people who don’t believe? Why would they want Jesus to come? For the Muslims on the islands where we serve, Jesus is one prophet of many who came and left only to be replaced by their prophet. Why should they long for Jesus? John 1 explains why all who seek God long for Jesus.

“In the beginning was the Word...” Everyone wants to understand. We might seek understanding in any number of places, but the Word of God is eternal and true. It even created us. To know God’s Word is to understand. “In him was life...” All of us long for a full, meaningful life. Some seek this in the wrong places, but here we read that true life is only found in the Word. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” The Word of God gives us hope. Everyone wants hope. The world may seek to substitute many other things for hope, but true hope is only found in the light. Understanding. Life. Hope—who doesn’t seek these things?

The men I meet with seek these things, but they are not sure yet where to find them. When we studied the words of John 1 together, they were challenged to see that all these things—understanding, life, hope—are only to be found in one place: Jesus, the eternal Word of God. Will they believe it? Do you?

Understanding. Life. Hope. Take a moment to reflect, “Do I seek these things in Jesus or by other means? Repent of other means and look again to Jesus.

## DECEMBER 11

John 1:9-18

*Lianna Sours*

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Each Christmas, our thoughts are drawn to the basic, common, human experience of birth. John tells us that God Most High was made flesh - like us. God Most High came to dwell with man - like us. Such a profound mystery that, just like us, God experienced a basic, common, human birth.

John tells us that, in some ways, Jesus became so much like any of us that no one had any real clue of who he was. "...and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him." "He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him." Jesus became so completely one of us that if you just looked at him in passing, he looked like anyone else.

Yet John also draws our attention to another birth: "...to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." For those willing to look deeper and see Jesus for who he was, there was a chance to receive from him the completely uncommon and unheard of gift - birth into God's own family, sharing the sonship of God that belongs to Jesus.

There were a few in Jesus' own time who were able to glimpse the miracle. John the Baptist knew that Jesus not only surpassed him, but existed before he did, even though Jesus was born later (vs. 15). John the apostle came to see that Jesus was "the true light that gives light to everyone...the Word became flesh...the one and only Son, who is God himself."

John invites us, too, to consider (again or for the first time) the wonder of Jesus' birth. All that is common and plain about being a human, Jesus took on, so that all that is uncommon and glorious about being a child of God could be taken on by you and me. This, for sure, is grace upon grace.

Beginnings matter. The beginning of a story is where the writer gives us a frame to understand what's to come: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

Mark is no different. Right from the start he calls what he's writing a "gospel" (v. 1). The word for "gospel" in Greek literally means "good news," so Mark wants us to remember as we read: *this is news*. The essence of news is that it's already happened, but even though the gospel is news we often treat it like advice; things we have to do to become better people. This robs Christianity of its power and uniqueness. Almost all other religions are essentially advice: "Here's what you've got to do to reach God. Say these prayers, dress this way, perform these rituals." Christianity says, "Good news! Here's what God has done to reach you."

But what news were the original readers of Mark waiting for? Notice how he quotes Isaiah in v. 2-3. In the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah was speaking to an exiled people; Israelites who were waiting for God to come and bring them home with acts of power like they experienced in the Exodus. Skip all the way to Mark's time and they were still waiting, exiles even in the Promised Land. They weren't waiting for advice on how to get out, they were waiting for God to come and rescue them!

Just like the Israelites, people today don't need to hear any more advice, they need to hear good news. And Mark announces here at the beginning that our wait for God is over, the long-expected Lord has come, and his name is Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. He'll lead us out of our exile, but in a way none of us could ever have imagined.

What do you do with advice? You get busy working.

What do you do with news? You announce it!

What is one way that you can announce the good news to someone this Advent season?

## DECEMBER 13

Luke 1:5-25

*Nate Sidmore*

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The description of Zechariah and Elizabeth as “righteous before God” has always stood out to me. What does it take to get a write-up like that?! Luke goes on to depict them as “walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” How is that possible? What kind of lifestyle does it take?

It’s no accident that very soon after this description, Luke says that Zechariah was “serving as priest before God when his division was on duty.” It’s a detail easily passed over, but likely was part of what stood behind Luke’s lofty depiction just two verses prior. Zechariah was more or less simply doing his job. And being “advanced in years” (v7), he’d been doing it faithfully for a long time.

Faithfulness is all over this passage. God takes a deeply personal interest in Elizabeth’s long years of childless shame, and proves himself faithful in the miraculous gift of a son to her, who was the forbearer to the promised Messiah. His mission: calling the disobedient back to faithfulness. John himself was told “he must not drink wine or strong drink” (v15); a calling to which he needed to prove faithful.

Depending on what we have been given by God to bear, faithfulness can be a tremendous challenge. Consider Elizabeth, enduring the constant behind-the-back murmuring and looks of disgust year after wearying year from people who assumed her barrenness was the result of some hidden sin.

What sustained Elizabeth and Zechariah through such struggle? They clung to a God who had proven faithful to generations before them. Like this faithful couple, the proof of God’s faithfulness unveiled in the birth of Jesus can lift us up and compel us to faithfully carry out that which we’ve been given to do or to bear.

Consider a relationship, responsibility or burden that God has given you. Have you been faithful in it? May you be encouraged to carry it out with faithfulness, because you know God has been and will continue to be faithful to you.



Elena Francis, 9 years old

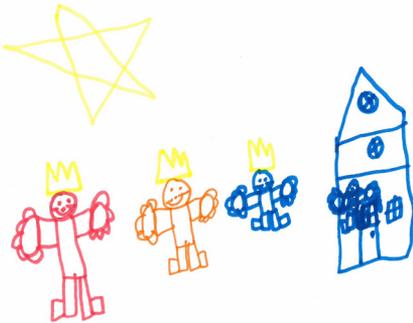


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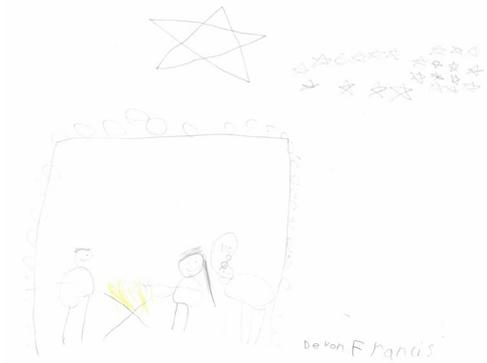
Evan Range, 8 years old



Callia Range, 4 years old



Nathaniel Bajema, 7 years old



Devon Francis, 7 years old



Max Alcott, 6 years old

## DECEMBER 14

### Leviticus 26:9-13

*Jean McKenna*

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In the midst of an Old Testament book that spells out God's law in great detail comes a prediction and promise from God that is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

In Leviticus 26, God gives Moses instructions and promises for the Israelites who have escaped from slavery in Egypt; great promises, considering what they had endured: "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I brought you out of Egypt so you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians, and enabled you to walk with your heads held high." The full realization of these promises of God's direct presence with his people and complete deliverance from slavery comes to us in Jesus Himself.

As we anticipate the coming of Jesus again this Advent season, we are all too aware of the chaos in the world today. "I will grant peace in the land" (Lev. 26:6). God sent Jesus to bring complete peace to his world. As Christians, we know this has not fully happened, but we know for sure that what is coming is greater than life as we know it now, and we can be sure that God will fulfill all his promises to us, when Jesus returns again to earth.

God said, "If you do not obey my commandments, I will punish you." Blessings for obedience (Lev. 26 1-13). Curses for disobedience (Lev. 26: 14-39). It's up to us. There are consequences for our actions, but God has provided salvation for all. Jesus bore the curse.

We may wonder during these difficult times, "Where is God?" Well, as He promised, He is here among us. We look forward, with renewed hope and faith, that others will hear The News, and join in the celebration. We are here to share the Good News - Christ is born!

Start the day with a prayer asking God to help you choose obedience, and end the day by thanking him for helping you do so.

These lyrics from a song in the early 70's captured perfectly the anti-authority mood of that era:

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign  
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind  
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?

This could also describe the ethos of King Ahaz of Judah around 734 B.C., as he rejected an offered sign from God in order to continue in his alliance with Assyria. This ethos also describes one half of our long-standing ambivalence with signs of all types, the other half being our occasional insistence on "a sign" from God rather than believing what we have witnessed with our own eyes, as demonstrated by the Pharisees' demand in Matthew 16 for "a sign" from Jesus, who rebuked their hypocritical demand.

So how do we react to the "signs" from the Lord, whether offered or demanded? Often our tendency is to demand a sign – for example, that a friend is ready to hear and receive the Gospel message, and so we stay silent as we wait for a sign that it's "the right time". Then we want to ignore the signs He offers, such as when that friend suffers a personal loss that cries out for the love and comfort that only Jesus can offer, but we meekly demur that "I'll keep you in my prayers" – and never go any further.

So what should we do with "signs"? Let us first start by acknowledging that, as the lyrics above suggest, there is "everywhere a sign". Then make a conscious effort to look for the signs He is offering us on a daily basis. Look for where the Lord is already at work - in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces. Join Him by committing to pray regularly throughout this Advent season that He will show you one person with whom you can share His greatest sign of all - Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. Can't you read the sign?

This last June, when our son Nathan married his fiancée Kristyn their future lives were filled with unknown possibilities. For the young girl Mary, this would not have been the case at all. Mary would have known exactly what the parameters of her life would be. She would always live with her husband's family, would work extremely hard every day of her life and bear children — as many as she was able. But then Gabriel comes blasting in and tells her she is going to have a child. Her whole life is turned upside down with one sentence. Many of us have experienced these life-shattering moments. The doctor calls you in for unexpected test results, the phone rings in the middle of the night, a pink slip shows up on your desk. All future plans are upended.

Scripture records other people's responses to life-shattering moments. The response is usually something like "Wait. I think you have the wrong person." But Mary's first response is to *wonder*. She works to understand. "How is this possible?" There is no hint of reprimand given to Mary for questioning. Scripture commends searching and seeking...and wondering.

The angel responds with enough detail for her to take the next step forward. She then *willingly yields under the bigger perspective of God's purposes*. "May it be to me as you have said." This is not only a very brave statement for a teenage girl to make but it also echoes the words of her great-great-great grandfather David and foreshadows the words of her Savior. "Not my will, but yours."

We are all ordinary Marys swept up into God's redemptive plan. We don't know what that will mean for us. For Mary, it meant joy as well as great heartache. But as we say "yes" to God, we surrender ourselves to whatever it means to give birth to love.

Mary prayed her questions and sought God's perspective. Use these tools to help you move forward in surrendering to life-changing moments.

Before a baby is born they are able to communicate very effectively with their mother. Some mothers claim to be able to decode the meaning of each different movement, perhaps a kick for “I’m hungry” and two jabs for “I’m uncomfortable.” But how would you interpret an unborn baby leaping up and down?

In today’s reading, Mary’s cousin Elizabeth received a message from her unborn child unlike any other. At the sound of Mary’s greeting the baby John leaped for joy in Elizabeth’s womb. This is remarkable, first that Elizabeth would know about Mary’s child before Mary tells her, and second that one unborn child could rejoice at the presence of another unborn child. Such things are only possible by the Holy Spirit (v. 41).

The Holy Spirit filling people was not a common event in the Bible up until this time, but the prophet Joel had said that when the Messiah came, God would pour out his Spirit on all people: young and old, male and female (Joel 2:28). This passage is a picture of that, with the Holy Spirit coming upon an old woman and on a very young boy.

The coming of Jesus signifies a new period for the children of God. A time when all, not just the few, would be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit equips all God’s people in a huge range of ways, but one way common to all is that He causes us to respond with joy to Jesus!

Advent can be a busy and stressful season. We might grumble about the weather or dark afternoons. But Advent is to be a time of joy! We have a wonderful savior who has done wonderful things for us. He has also given us the great gift of the Holy Spirit so that all of us, young and old, can respond to him with praise.

Spend time today enjoying this gift! Follow the example of Elizabeth and John by expressing your joy that Jesus came to earth, and truly celebrate his presence with you!

What do we value in ourselves and others? Mary's song of praise gives us insight into God's value system. Coming from her visit to her cousin Elizabeth soon after she learned that she would become the mother of God's Deliverer, it became one of the first hymns in the early Christian church. Known as the Magnificat from its first word in Latin translation, it shows us God's perspective on people – so different from the way we tend to view things.

Mary was the child of a family of little renown – not someone we would expect to make an impact on the world – yet God “looked on the humble estate of his servant” and bestowed on her a blessing enshrined in all the ancient creeds of the church – Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary.” We regard achievements and status as marks of blessing, but God “has scattered those whose pride wells up from the sheer arrogance of their hearts.” We honor those who hold power, but history is full of places where God “has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up those of lowly position.” We value material prosperity (or at least comfort), but he “has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty.”

For hundreds of years, God's people had expected Him to fulfill His “promise to their ancestors” by sending a Deliverer. But the way God chose to do so – through entering the world through a seemingly insignificant mother – and the values of the kingdom that Jesus brought were very different from what most people expected. The Magnificat reminds us that God's values are not the same as what human cultures value – humility, not pride, servanthood, not human power, and reliance on God as the giver, rather than security in our prosperity. What do you value? How do you measure yourself? How would your outlook on yourself and others be different if you saw people the way Mary's song does?

## DECEMBER 19

Luke 1:57-66

*Liz Arthurs*

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Do you ever find it difficult to be on the receiving end of grace? There's just something in me (maybe in all of us?) that would prefer not to need grace, much less *receive* it.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had apparently given up on the hope of ever being blessed with a child...so much so, that when the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that they would have a son (1:13) and name him John (which means "The Lord is gracious"), Zechariah had his ability to speak taken away because of his unbelief (1:20).

I wonder what those nine months were like for him? Nine months of silent contemplation. He apparently could neither hear nor speak (1:62)...a gift to enable Zechariah to meditate on his gracious God, who would use Zechariah's own son to pave the way for the salvation that he himself needed. Nine quiet months to learn to receive grace, as he watched his baby prophet-son grow in his wife's womb. Nine months to think about God's answer to his prayer (1:13)—not only for a son but also his life-long prayer for God to keep His promise of sending the Messiah to deliver His people. Nine months to realize that his own miracle-son would be the prophet Elijah that was predicted in Malachi 4:5-6.

Even after the safe delivery of his son, when Zechariah's neighbors and relatives were rejoicing with his wife because of the mercy God had shown to her (1:58), he was still stuck in his cocoon of silence. On the eighth day, when the baby was brought into the covenant through circumcision, it was time to give him a name. I can imagine Zechariah weeping as he wrote on that tablet, "His name is John." His name is "The Lord is gracious."

Where in our lives are we stuck in unbelief? Where do we need to learn to receive God's grace? Let's ask God to show us and to enable us to proclaim "The Lord is gracious" over our need.

I suspect we all have them—stories of our family members who’ve come before us. It could be how your parents met or how your great grandparents came from the old country. Research shows that knowledge of family history correlates with lower anxiety, stronger familial cohesion, and better self-esteem. As humans, we need to understand ourselves within the context of a larger narrative.

In today’s passage, Zechariah breaks into song at his son’s circumcision. This occasion, in and of itself, was a big deal—he and his wife Elizabeth were over 80 years old and had never been able to conceive. But there’s more to the story: less than a year before, Zechariah the priest had been chosen to carry the incense and the prayers for the redemption of Israel and the coming of the Messiah into the Holy of Holies. After the prayer had been offered, he saw an angel who said, “... your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.”

Stunning - and more clear in the Greek - is that the prayer the angel declares answered is not the decades-old prayer for a child, but the centuries-old prayer for the redemption of Israel, for the coming of the Messiah. As is often the case, we see God at work both *personally* and *corporately* at the same time.

After 400 years of silence from God, and months of silence from Zechariah, a song bursts forth. The story of Zechariah’s son is woven into all of redemptive history as the priest praises God for a gracious gift to him personally, and the deliverance for Israel corporately. Like Zechariah, your story is more than the love and/or brokenness of your own family. You have been grafted into the family of God; like Zechariah, God’s song of redemption is your family history as well.

The next time you talk to a family member, retell stories of God’s faithfulness to your family and to the Church.

If you've ever been taught Bible history you may recall that the nation of Israel split. Civil war. The northern kingdom was called Israel, and the southern was called Judah. Isaiah has a message for the North, in fact, for the northernmost part of the North—Zebulun and Naphtali (v. 1). You see, God had allowed the bully nation Assyria to conquer the North and deport its people, replacing them with other people groups from similarly conquered nations. So, the people of the North saw their families torn apart and their villages burned. Their economy tanked and they lived hand to mouth. As verse 1 says, it was a time of “gloom” and “anguish.” But there was hope:

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light.

Light in the darkness? Hope in anguish? Isaiah offered hope by remembering the past, the “day of Midian” (v. 4). This refers to the story of Gideon and the vast army of Midianites. Isaiah seems to say—“Remember your history, Israel. Don't be gloomy because of the size of the conquering army. God saved Gideon with a measly band of 300 men. Remember your past.”

And remember the future also, even though it has not yet occurred. Isaiah's future-remembrance comes in verse 5:

For every boot of the trampling warrior . . .  
And every garment rolled in blood  
Will be burned as fuel for the fire.

Boots and bloody garments were the accoutrements of war. Captains in the Assyrian army, not foot soldiers, wore boots. They dipped their swords in blood and dyed their garments purple-red. These tools of oppression will be burned. Remember, and take hope. Walk by faith, not by sight: victory in the future will come because the Son is born (v. 7).

Name one thing that causes gloom and anguish for you. Now remember one act of God's faithfulness in the past. Also remember the future, the Second Advent, when he will make all things right.

## DECEMBER 22

Luke 2:1-20

Sarah Bartley

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The story is as familiar as the creche under the tree - stable, manger, family. The scene is dressed up for Christmas cards, wrapping paper, and pageants. But look again: people waited for thousands of years and the Savior finally arrives in an animal's feeding trough.

*The setting is both vulnerable and liberated*

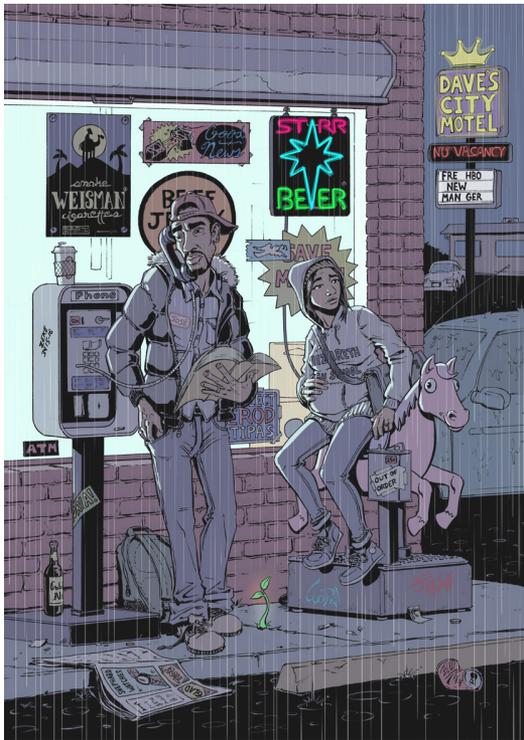
The scene opens on Jesus' family compelled to travel for a Census. From the outset we read hints of political power flexing its muscles. The setting anticipates Jesus' death at the hands of Roman rule. For those unsettled by injustice, take heart! It was into just such a setting that Jesus was born. It foreshadows as well the community Jesus would establish - a people called from across the range of political and religious affiliations into a new kind of community. Subject in birth and death to an oppressive regime, Jesus calls people to take up citizenship in his Kingdom of peace.

*The setting is both humble and exploding with joy*

For the Creator of the universe, Jesus' entrance into the world is strikingly humble. Our Lord was born in an animal shelter, placed in a manger, and first visited by shepherds. The scene also explodes with joy as an army of angels praise God. The setting anticipates the life he would live - equally at home in the carpenter's shop as the fishing boat, stunning religious leaders with theological depth and teaching the crowds. He healed both the leper and the tax collector. While people celebrate comfort and ease, in the manger Jesus is celebrated in poverty.

*Respond with wonder*

Though the setting of Jesus' birth should stun us, it likely feels familiar. Many artists have aimed to recapture the wonder of a humble Savior. Take time to reflect on these images (next page) and allow yourself to be compelled anew by the birth, life, and death of Jesus.



José y María (Everett Patterson, 2014)



Flight to Egypt (Fritz Eichenberg, 1953)

#### No Ordinary Baby

Having grown up in a home that celebrated Christmas, I had almost believed that the account of Jesus's birth is one that I can tell even when awoken from the deepest of slumbers. Recently, I have come to realize that nothing could be further from the truth! God has graciously drawn me to take a closer look at the account, and indeed, there is still much more for me and all of us to learn from it.

The account in Matthew 1:18-25 begins with a perplexed Joseph whose life has been turned upside down. His fiancée is pregnant and by all accounts, it seems as though she has committed adultery. In the Jewish tradition, betrothal was as good as marriage before the wedding takes place and to have one's fiancée with child is a scandal. Joseph ponders how to appropriately go about dealing with it.

God graciously reveals Himself and His ordained plans to Joseph which removes the doubts that could not stop flooding his mind. He makes it known to him that the Child Mary bears is of the Holy Spirit. All this time, God has been at work to bring forth the birth of Christ in fulfillment of what He declared centuries ago by the Prophet Isaiah.

As we go along, we notice that even before Jesus is born, He is already bringing a sudden change in people's lives beginning with his foster parents. Yahweh, who in days of old (Exodus 13:21-22, 29:43-46, 33:1-11, 1 Kings 6:13-14), accommodated Himself amidst the stiff-necked people of Israel to guide and protect them, has broken forth in time, now come to dwell in human flesh, to liberate them and ultimately, the world from their sins.

"Banish all thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes," N.T. Wright writes. He is no ordinary baby, and because He is not, He demands full attention and certainly, our full allegiance.

What would change in your life if you embraced the identity of Jesus?

Oftentimes when we think of Christmas, it is easy to forget the fear that prevailed in first century Judea, and the threat that Jesus posed to the powerful kingdoms of that time. It is no mistake that Matthew relates not the serene birth story, but the later one about the wise men who worshipped Jesus, and a king who would kill the innocents of Bethlehem in order to destroy him.

This story no doubt recalls the story of Moses' birth and the massacre of innocents in Egypt which he escaped, a parallel Matthew belabors throughout his gospel. In Moses' day, the Egyptians feared their gods and the Hebrew people, and the Hebrews feared the Egyptians. Whether it was because their power was threatened by Moses' message or because they feared the wrath of the Egyptians as a result of it, both sides were characterized by anger, and almost no one greeted the new order God was about to bring with joy.

This order, summarized in the ten commandments, calls us to selfless love of God and the other who is made in his image, and always threatens the power of those who rely on fear and anger to impose their will. So too, Jesus threatened the order of his own world. The Herodians and the Romans feared losing power, the Hellenists feared the wrath of the Romans, the Sadducees feared losing their authority, the Zealots stirred up anger against the Romans, and the Pharisees retreated into cold, self-righteous indifference. None were interested in serving a kingdom not of this world based upon love of God and neighbor, even though many of them claimed to serve God.

So too, in our cultural moment, there are both religious and secular voices all around us calling us to fear and anger, and offering solace in serving false messiahs. This Christmas, let us resist calls to fear, taking active comfort in God's love for us. Let us respond to anger with love, and show those around us a kingdom not of this world.

“Two men stared out from prison bars, one saw the mud, the other saw the stars.” So wrote the well-known American writer and motivational speaker Dale Carnegie. We are hope-shaped creatures. We are formed by a vision of the world to come. If our vision is empty (mud), then our lives will lack a resilience and purpose in the face of grief and disappointment (“prison bars”). But if our future is full of “stars,” then we can meet the unavoidable limitations of life with patience and hope. Our future Hope matters for how we labor now.

Paul wanted the Thessalonian church to grieve with hope. He allows a place for grief. He recognizes loss. This world crosses our plans for a love that lasts forever and a justice that never fails. We lose the ones we love. But we don't grieve as those without hope. Our Hope is a Person. Our Hope came to us in history. Our Hope is the certainty that the King who died and rose, will “come again” to fulfil his gracious reign. And “we will always be with the Lord.”

The first Advent of Christ points to the final Advent - and our lives are framed between these two poles. What's one thing you find daunting about the year to come: is it a job, friendship, child, or a nagging sense of your own inadequacy? Is it the bereavement over someone you love who is now “asleep”? Jesus came under the worst conditions to break us out of the “prison bars” of sin and eternal death. How much more, will he come again to bring the glorious reign he intended from the beginning. See your life between these two Comings. Christian, your future is “stars,” not “mud.” And your certainty that this future is assured and coming is Christ - the same today, yesterday, and forever. Hallelujah and Merry Christmas!



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