



The Light of
CHRISTMAS

A collection of Advent devotional readings for 2017

*Jeff Elliott, Senior Pastor
New Horizons Fellowship*

*Dennis Rowe, Senior Pastor
Dunfee Missionary Church*

*Pat Ryan, Senior Pastor
Northside Missionary Church*

*Kent Scantlin, Associate Pastor
Northside Missionary Church*

*Steven Showers, Pastor
Missionary Church*

*Ken Sistrunk, Senior Pastor
North Manchester Missionary Church*

*Bob Smith, Senior Pastor
Harvester Missionary Church*

Advent Readings on Hope

Sunday, November 26th

Read: Romans 15:13

A Prayer for Hope

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

The theme for this week is hope. It is my prayer that as you read this week you will discover what Paul means when he wishes that his readers “overflow with hope”. To me hope is a word that only has meaning in the midst of a difficult circumstance. After all if things are good we don’t really say that we hope they will get better. I don’t know what your circumstances are right now but I do know that you can have hope.

Hope in Scripture refers to the ultimate hope we have for the redemption and restoration of the earth and God’s people. This promise is the big picture of all of Scripture. It also occurs over 180 times in more than half of its books. It even appears in those bleak minor prophets where the theme is often one of God’s judgment on a nation or people. [Micah 7:7]

Hope during Advent is an anticipation of the world-changing event of Christ’s birth. Isn’t it an amazing thing that a hope-bringing event that happened 2,000 years ago is the most popular holiday still today? I don’t believe it is an accident that God sent His Son to bring us hope and still today our culture celebrates it.

Prayer focus: Pray that God would fill you with hope and then rejoice that you have it both in the good and bad circumstances of life.

-Pastor Jeff Elliott

Monday, November 27th

Read: Hebrews 6:13-20

A Christmas Anchor

I’m not a sailor. Nor does it seem that I am able to fix a broken computer. How are those two thoughts related? The website in front of me said I could use the broken computer on my lap as a “boat anchor.” That doesn’t seem to be a very appropriate use for it; nor very cost effective. I don’t know much about boat anchors but I’m fairly certain that a computer is not the proper device.

My visit to a website to help me fix my computer makes it the second time today that I’ve run across something being talked about as an anchor. This morning it was in Hebrews 6:19 “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” It is striking that hope could be spoken of as an anchor. An anchor can be a good thing or a bad thing. It is a bad thing if it is something dragging us down or holding us back and it is a good thing if it is a fixed source of reference for truth or hope.

The author Hebrews uses the image of an anchor of hope as a symbol of the surety we can have in the promise of God. Isn’t it just like God to transform an image of something that weighs us down and turn it into something that we can have unfailing trust in? We can be unsure of a lot of things in our world today but we have a “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (ESV) through the child born in the manger.

I’m sure my computer will be fixed...eventually; but I’m even more sure that I can use hope as an anchor today!

Prayer focus: Think about, thank God for and take comfort in the image of an “anchor of hope”; its surety, steadfastness and uncompromising promise that God will fulfill all He has said He would. Because God sent His Son into the world we were give a sure and certain hope

-Pastor Jeff Elliott

Tuesday, November 28th

Read: Psalm 46:1-11

Fleeing to Hope

As I read through those verses in Hebrews again I saw that the word “hope” also appeared in verse 18. It paints another exciting image with the words, “we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us”. Usually when we think of the word “fleeing” we think of escaping or running from something. The author of Hebrews doesn’t mind that image but also suggests that we can flee to something. I don’t know that I have ever used the word that way (maybe we can write it off to translation?). Other versions translate the word “hope” to “refuge” here. While the phrase has similar meanings with either word, the word “refuge” carries some subtext. In English there is a insinuation in the word refuge that one must seek a new place and an old one must be left in order to remain secure; that one’s welfare is at risk in remaining where they are. This is certainly true about us remaining in the sinful state that we find ourselves from birth. We can also be certain that God is our “refuge and strength” whom we can flee to in the hour of deepest need.

The chorus of worship song “Forever Reign” repeats the phrase “I’m running to your arms”. Perhaps today you should listen to the song and allow the words to become your prayer: “You are good...you are love...you are light...you are hope...you are peace...you are truth...you are joy...you are life”. Whichever of those most minister to you today allow the refuge of the Spirit of Christ to strengthen and surround you and become the refuge you need.

Prayer focus: Flee to the refuge we have in Jesus. Whatever trouble or persecutions are awaiting you this week, begin in this hour, in this moment to seek the refuge you may need to face it.

-Pastor Jeff Elliott

Wednesday, November 29th

Read: Zechariah 9:9-17

A Prisoner of Hope?

Not only does this passage contain the prophecy about Jesus’ Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem it also contains a very interesting phrase in verse 12: “Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope”. What an odd but ultimately powerful way to describe the people of God. The ESV Study Bible describes the setting of Zechariah like this: “Nearly 20 years after their return from the Babylonian exile in the time of Cyrus, discouragement dogged God’s people, replacing their earlier enthusiasm...Zechariah addressed such discouragement by reminding his hearers that, though hidden, God’s envoys were watching everything, and that when the time was right, he would act to reorder the universe”. While it must have felt to them in the midst of their discouragement that they were prisoners, the prophet Zechariah uses the imagery to describe them as prisoners of hope. They were confused about their identity.

We are also confused by our identity in the world. Christians have moved from a majority in our country to a minority and it has made us uncomfortable; maybe enough that we feel like prisoners in our own country. It may feel like you are a prisoner of changing times and cultural values but ultimately you are not a prisoner of the law of sin but have now been rescued from the body of death [Rom 7:23-25].

Action step: Are you acting like a prisoner of hope or just acting like a prisoner? The power of the Spirit in you is greater than any in the world [1 John 4:4]. Stop acting like a prisoner in the place God has determined that you should live [Acts 17:26] and start living like a prisoner of hope; a child of the most high God; a co-heir with Christ [Rom 8:17] and act like God has asked you to help Him run the place.

-Pastor Jeff Elliott

Thursday, November 30th

Read: Is 63:11-14

Veil or Vale?

Your familiar with the hymn “The Solid Rock”. It’s inevitable that it comes to your mind as we think about hope. I want to focus on the line “in every high and stormy gale my anchor holds within the veil”. Most who study this song would suggest that the word “veil” refers to either the veil in the temple that Hebrews seems to refer to (6:19) or a “veil” between heaven and earth assuring us that we have hope of eternal life. These are both very reasonable and acceptable interpretations of that line of the song.

However, sometimes I like to explore different possibilities...it occurred to me that maybe over time there has been a misspelling of veil. What if this is a homonym and the writer of the hymn meant “my anchor holds with the v-a-l-e”? While it’s not a word we used very often a vale is a shortened form of the word “valley”; or river land between two ranges of hills. What if the anchor holds us in the valley; a symbol of a place of peace with a river meandering through it? What if the anchor of our faith-hope in Christ, held us in a valley of peace when a storm is on the horizon?

It is very possible that you have experienced this peace in the midst of trouble and others have remarked to you their astonishment at your seeming peace. These moments are opportunities. Opportunities to share about the “hope that you have” (1 Pet 3:15). Courageously take advantage of all those opportunities!

Prayer focus: When the mountains are looming in the distance, thank God that you have found peace in the valley.

Action step: Share with someone the reason your hope brings you peace.

-Pastor Jeff Elliott

Friday, December 1

Hope

Matthew quotes from the Old Testament book of Isaiah in chapter twelve verse twenty one of his gospel account saying, “In his [Jesus] name the nations will put their hope.”

Google defines hope as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.”

What was Israel hoping that the messiah would do for them? *see John 6:15 & Acts 1:6 New Living Translation*

Did Jesus come for this reason? *see Mark 10:45; John 10:10; 1 John 3:8*

In the present day, as a person who is seeking after Jesus, do you have an accurate understanding or expectation of what Jesus can do for you? What do you hope that Jesus will do for you?

-Pastor Steven Showers

Saturday, December 2

Hope

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4

We are inundated with messaging every day. Buy this, believe that, post a picture of it and wait for the affirming comments or “likes” to come rolling in.

Can I ask you something? Where does your hope come from?

I'm not looking for the typical Sunday School answer. I'm asking you to evaluate your day to day rhythms in light of the verse from Romans 15:4

Does your "feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen" come from things that you buy, a title that you hold, kids that you chauffeur around, a political victory, or the response that you get to a social media post?

Or does your hope come by way of developing endurance in your faith walk and drawing encouragement from reading and studying the Bible?

-Pastor Steven Showers

Advent Readings on Love

Sunday, December 3

Love

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 1 John 4:10

God made the first move. Did you notice that? He loves you and that love led Him to set a plan in motion.

God Loved. His love led to action. The action produced a solution and that solution is your salvation.

Jesus, the Son of God, left heavens throne room and entered the world as a helpless baby. Sent here by the Father to be "an atoning sacrifice for" your "sins."

In this season of planning and preparation for Christmas celebrations, remember that God loved and because of His love, He made the first move *towards you*.

-Pastor Steven Showers

Monday, December 4

Love

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 1 John 4:9

Our kids range from six to newborn. The oldest ones draw or paint pictures quite regularly and gift them to us. They are incredibly proud of their artwork. To us it may look like a bunch of random scribbles or it might be a picture of a purple cat. To them however, it is the very best that they have to give.

God proved His love for you by giving you the best that He had to offer. He didn't give something that was used, something that was expired, or something that was cheap (either by price or quality). He gave from the best of what He had to give.

This Christmas season, what would it look like for you to love God and love others out of your best?

-Pastor Steven Showers

Tuesday, December 5

Love

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4:7b-8

As we strive to shine the light of the Gospel in an ever-darkening world, we should love others in a way that mirrors the kind of love that God has graciously shown to us.

As you move through your day today (or tomorrow if you are reading this at night), ask God to help you look for opportunities to show love to those that you come into contact with.

At the end of the day consider these questions: Did you recognize and seize opportunities to show love to others? Were you selective in who you chose to show love to? Was it natural to show love, or did it seem unnatural?

Spend a few moments talking to God through prayer about your experience today.

-Pastor Steven Showers

Wednesday, December 6

A Love Devotion

Jeremiah 31:3 “The Lord has appeared to us in the past, saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love...”

The Hymn entitled, “**The Love of God**” was written by Frederick Lehman as he sat on an empty lemon box and scratched the beautiful lyrics of this 100 year old hymn. The theme of this hymn is the unmatched depth of God’s Love for those whom he has created.

Advent and Christmas is about the preparation and the celebration of that awesome reality. Jesus came to bring reconciliation between ourselves and God. God’s love is indeed and everlasting love.

However, the third verse to this hymn was not written by Lehman but rather comes from an ancient Jewish poem, called Haddamut. The poem itself is in the form of an acrostic, and has over ninety couplets. It was composed, in the year 1096, by Rabbi Mayer, son of Isaac Nehorai, who was a cantor in the city of Worms, Germany. Throughout the poem, the theme of God’s eternal love and concern for His people is evident.

Verse Three says: “Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made, Were ev’ry stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade, To write the love of God above, Would drain the ocean dry, Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Tho stretched from sky to sky.”

Beloved, the love of God is immeasurable. It far exceeds our ability to understand, explain, or comprehend. **We do however have the ability to receive it, as we look to the Christ Child, whose name is Jesus.** Rejoice in His love this Advent, then share His love with those around you.

-Pastor Dennis Rowe

Thursday, December 7

A Love Devotion

Matthew 14:32: “And when they climbed into the boat the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him saying, “Truly you are the son of God.”

The Hymn written by James Rowe (a distant relative of mine) entitled, "**Love Lifted Me**" Relates the following truths; "I was sinking deep in sin, Far from the peaceful shore, Very deeply stained within, Sinking to rise no more; But the master of the sea heard my despairing cry, From the water's lifted me now safe am I."

I can certainly relate to that truth. When I was a small boy perhaps about five years of age I was at the Pokagon State Park Water toboggan with some family friends. I rode on the back of a much older boy down the toboggan track and remember thinking this was a bad idea as we skipped out into the Lake.

When we had expended all our forward motion, I vividly remember sinking into the water (I could not swim). Panic set in and I flailed in the water until my friend's father reached out and grabbed me from the depth of the lake. I was shaken, but ok.

Beloved, life can be hard, it can be overwhelming where we feel as though we are drowning in the streams of life. But there is one who can reach out and save us from crushing waves of life. He is the Messiah, the Christ Child come, he was born so that we may have everlasting life, and a rock solid foundation from which to live our lives. Jesus is the love that has lifted us up, who has covered our sins, and enables us to walk in Love and Grace. With God's help may we do so this Advent day.

-Pastor Dennis Rowe

Friday, December 8

A Love Devotion

1 John 4:9-10. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

When I was growing up we had a certain routine we followed as we prepared for Christmas. We would set up our tree very early in the season. As gifts were purchased they were wrapped and then placed under the tree. We placed a plastic wreath on the front door, and we placed various Santa Claus' around the house.

As a child looking at the lights on the tree as they glowed was always mesmerizing. Often time we would sleep downstairs on the floor in front of our stove to stay warm. We would watch the lights and stare at the presents and fall asleep. My brothers and I enjoyed our "Advent" very much.

However, we never really understood what this period called, "Advent" was really all about. We set up our tree, and place our decorations. But, we missed the truth, that Advent was a time to focus on God entering the world as a human. To prepare our hearts for this unique celebration of God's "Advent" into our world.

The Famous Evangelist and Hymn writer, Charles Wesley wrote "**Love Divine, All Loves Excelling**. In the first verse he writes: "Love Divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n to earth come down." These words reflect the truths as recorded in Holy Scripture that Jesus came that we might have life through Him. So among the various decorations and activities of Advent, be sure to remember that "It's about God's Love, being shown to each of us through the Baby Jesus.

-Pastor Dennis Rowe

Saturday, December 9

A Love Devotion

Micah 5:2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, through you are small among the clans’ of Judah,, out of you will come for me who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

It always amazes me that our Lord Jesus who is the Christ, came to us from Heaven and entered our world, not at the height of acclaim or power. But instead humbled himself and was born from a young virgin named Mary. That he was born relatively poor, and lived a humble life. Yet in the fulness of time he began his public ministry.

However it began in a humble city called Bethlehem. In 1910, William Neidlinger wrote the Hymn: **“The Birthday of a King.”** The second verse says; “Twas’ a humble birthplace but oh, how much God gave to us that day, From the manger bed what a path was led, what a perfect holy way. Alleluia, O how the angels sang. Alleluia, O how the angels sang. Alleluia! How it rang! And the sky was bright with a holy light, ‘twas the birthday of a King.”

When I was a boy and we would travel to Markle Indiana, I was always fascinated by the sign on the edge of town. **“Home of 1102 Happy people and 4 Grouches.”** I always enjoyed that sign and wondered who were the four grouches who lived in Markle. I am sure I will never know who they are.

However, what happened at Bethlehem in fulfilling the Prophecy of the coming Messiah will always be told in music and in story. Because the expression of love that night, the humble love expressed to us will never be forgotten. As we approach Advent: Share some practical expression of love, as a proper way to celebrate our Lord’s Advent. *-Pastor Dennis Rowe*

Advent Readings on Joy

Sunday, December 10

A Joy Devotion

Advent reminds us to reflect on the Joy of the Lord. Henry Van Dyke’s brilliant hymn **”Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”**, likewise all nature fills us with joy, is caused fundamentally by our recognition of God as the giver”.

We experience joy on many levels during the Advent Season. We express joy for God’s Creation, His Grace and Love, we bask in the joy of God as He delights in us, and we experience our own joy as we reflect on all God has done for us and through us.

Beloved, we have all heard this thought over and over again, but it’s worth repeating: we rush through life too quickly to stop and be filled with joy. We allow the busyness of daily activities: phone calls we have to make, the laundry we need to fold, the paper we need to write, to be our focus.

This is the beauty of Advent: to stop and reflect, to look around, and being filled with joy and gratitude at the world God has given us.

It’s a season where we have people to call, trees to decorate , and parties to host, and more so than anything, even when it seems to be crumbling around us, it’s a world redeemed by Christ. What can we raise to our Savior but an outburst of joy?

Why not play a game as a family seeking who can pause and notice with sincerity the Joys the Lord has brought into our lives this Advent Season. Remember to count them one by one.

-Pastor Dennis Rowe

Monday, December 11

A Joy Devotion

John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of Grace and Truth.”

There are many things we know concerning Jesus’ life. His exact date of birth is not one of them. We know that Jesus was crucified on Passover, and that the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. Some have reasoned that Jesus’ birth may have occurred on another Jewish holiday, the Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot.

Although we cannot know for sure, we do know that it would be in keeping with God’s way of working to send His Son—the Word made flesh who “dwelt” (“tabernacled”) among us (John 1:14)—on the Feast of Tabernacles. Sukkot was a time when observant Jews lived in temporary dwellings and listened to the Word of the Lord being read (Deut. 31:10-13).

For Jews, Sukkot is “**the time of our rejoicing.**” For all of us, our time of rejoicing is the birth of Christ, who brings the joy of salvation to all the world.

The traditional German Carol “**How Great our Joy**” says it well! Vs. 4 “This gift of God we’ll cherish well, That ever joy our heart shall fill. How great our joy! Great our Joy! Joy, Joy, Joy, Praise we the Lord in heaven on High.”

Beloved, that is the Greatest Joy of Advent! That God has come to tabernacle with us. This advent day, why let us reflect and rejoice that Lord of Host has come down to redeem us.

-Pastor Dennis Rowe

Tuesday, December 12

Read Luke 1:39-45

Blessing and Joy

Today’s Scripture talks about the first encounter that Elizabeth had with Mary after John the Baptist was conceived. It is so hard for me to understand some of the Jewish culture in Scripture because many of their customs are foreign to me. One of these customs is in regard to their greetings. In my culture we just say, “hello” or “good morning”. In their culture they often have blessings attached to them. One of their most common greetings was “Shalom” which simply means “peace”. Many times they would add another word to their traditional greeting. An example of this would be “Shalom aleikhem” which simply means “peace unto you”. We do not know the exact words that Mary used when she greeted Elizabeth but we do know that this greeting produced positive reaction from both the mother and the baby, John, that was inside her. The reaction that the baby had was one of Joy. Mary had blessed Elizabeth and her baby and that had produced joy in them.

The challenge for us today is to look for ways to bless others. We can become vessels that God will use to bring joy to others around us.

Prayer focus: Ask God for opportunities to bless others during this season. Remember that the ultimate blessing is sharing the life-saving message of the Gospel with another.

Action step: Write down names of people that you believe God wants you to bless. Then ask Him for ways in which you can bless them. This can be with a card, a timely phone call or even an e-mail.

-Pastor Ken Sistrunk

Wednesday, December 13

Read Psalm 98:4-9

Joy To The World

One of my favorite hymns of Christmas is **Joy To The World**. I have been singing this hymn almost exclusively during the holiday season for as long as I can remember. I was surprised to hear that the author, Isaac Watts, did not intend to this to be a Christmas hymn at all. The lyrics were written by him as part of a series of songs that he received inspiration from the book of Psalms and he published them in his work titled: The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament (1719).

The challenge for us today is to take a break from "Christmas" and focus on worshipping our God with joy. Everything about our culture will try to refocus you on all the trimmings of our Christmas celebration and will pull you farther away from having God as the center of all that you do. It is when our focus gets diverted that we lose our joy.

Prayer focus: Find a quiet place and drown out all of the noise around you. Then, start praising him aloud until all you feel is the joy that the messiah has brought us.

Action Step: Take a look at the hymn "Joy To The World" with fresh eyes. It is so easy to get into a rut during this season of the year and forget what the celebration is all about. Read each verse as a prayer for yourself and others that they may be filled with the joy that Christ has brought us.

-Pastor Ken Sistrunk

Thursday, December 14

Read I Peter 1:8-9

The Joy Test

The hymnist, Isaac Watts, who wrote Joy To The World was considered by many of his day to be a radical. He often complained about the manner in which many in the church sang like they were singing funeral dirges. He is quoted as saying, "To see the dull indifference, the negligent and thoughtless air that sits upon the faces of a whole assembly, while the psalm (song) is upon their lips, might even tempt a charitable observer to suspect the fervency of their inward religion."

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/poets/isaac-watts.html>

His songs differed from those of his contemporaries in that they were livelier and more upbeat. He was often criticized by others who were made uncomfortable by this. This style caused a lot of turmoil in churches until it became a revolution and eventually won out in most Christian churches. Do people see joy in us? They should. However, it is so easy to get distracted and to give in routine and dullness.

The challenge for us today is to examine ourselves to see if others are seeing the joy that we have in Christ. Do they see the inexpressible and glorious joy that we have because of our salvation?

Prayer focus: Ask God to remind you of earlier days when you first accepted Christ as your savior. Ask Him to give you that joy that you had when your faith was fresh and new.

Action Step: Ask three people who know you if joy is evident in your daily interactions with others. Take their input to heart and allow God to refresh the vibrancy that you once had for Him.

-Pastor Ken Sistrunk

Friday, December 15

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

Joy in Hardship

The shepherds had it proclaimed to them in Luke 2:10 that the birth of the Messiah was to be good news of great joy for all of the people. However, for many of us, this season does not seem like good news nor is it a great joy due to all of the busyness that surrounds this season. One of my favorite hymns depicting the shepherd's story is While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks. It was first published in 1700 in a collaborated effort by two poets of the day. One of the poets who wrote this great hymn was Nahum Tate. Nahum had a rough life and died at the early age of 53 as a bankrupt alcoholic. The irony here is that it is possible to know the message regarding the joy that we have in Christ and yet still live in a hurricane of shame and regret.

The challenge for us today is to examine ourselves and to throw off anything that is hindering our joy to radiate in our lives. What benefit is it to us to know that Christ came to give us joy and to live handcuffed with shame and regret.

Prayer focus: Ask God to set you free today from the past.

Action Step: Make a list of anything that is stealing your joy and offer this list up to our merciful God who became flesh nearly 2000 years ago to give us good news of great joy. Then tear up this list and claim the promise given to the shepherds so many years ago!

-Pastor Ken Sistrunk

Saturday, December 16

Read Luke 2:8-12

The Gospel of Joy

Have you ever received a message that made you so happy that you cried? I remember when my first child was born. There had been complications with the birth and my wife had to be taken into the operating room for an emergency caesarian surgery. The doctor had wanted to give me the good news personally but I had stepped out of our hospital room and we had barely missed each other. The doctor then had to proceed to his next patient and what should have been minutes became over an hour. The excessive wait led me to consider the worse. This led me to leave my room and go up to the nurse's station to inquire what had become of my wife and child. The nurse at the station announced to me that my wife and baby daughter were both resting and doing well. This was good news and the beginning of the joy that my daughter has brought me for these last 26 years.

The shepherds who heard the good news spoken to them by the angels had this same joy given to them. It was a message that mankind had longed to hear. They finally had the message delivered to them that the messiah of mankind had been born.

The challenge for us today is to allow this good news to become our source of joy today.

Prayer focus: Ask God to remove any hardness of heart that is produced by allowing circumstances to cause us to worry. We do not know the future but we do know that nearly 2000 years ago the messiah was born. This good news gives us great joy!

Action step: Make a conscious effort to remind people of why we celebrate Christmas. Remind them that it isn't about the presents or the gatherings, it is about Jesus Christ!

-Pastor Ken Sistrunk

Advent Readings on Peace

Sunday, December 17

Read Isaiah 26

Put Christ back in

It seems every year there is a bit of a skirmish between those who want Christ to be very prominent in the Christmas season and those who ignore Christ and focus on what the first group would call a secular celebration of Christmas. People will be butting heads over whether or not it is right to have a nativity display on public land; if children in a public school can sing “Silent Night” or if they must stick with “Santa is Coming to Town.” Some will say we need to put Christ back into Christmas and others who say we need to keep religion separate from all public celebrations. We live in a diverse and divisive society. My advice to you is not to get your feathers flustered over the issue.

The Isaiah passage for today’s reading may not seem like a Christmas passage, but it is. The passage makes a very clear distinction between those who are God’s people and those who are not. Quite a distinction; just like what we see today, or at least what we should see today. There should be a very clear distinction between God’s people and those who ignore God. The distinction shouldn’t simply be that we wish people “merry Christmas” instead of “happy holidays.” It needs to be more than writing Christmas instead of xmas. I am all for putting Christ back in Christmas, but I am even more for putting Christ back in the daily living of His people; then Christ will be in the Christmas season, because His people bring Him in. That will happen when we live out v.3 of Isaiah 26; make sure your mind is set by your dependence on and trust in Christ, not distracted by those who want to keep Him out of Christmas celebrations.

Prayer focus: Thank God for the peace He gives as we depend on Him and trust in Him. Ask Him to help you trust Him more and to settle your heart as you learn to depend on Him rather than the surrounding circumstances.

Action step: Tell someone today how Christ has brought peace into your life.

-Pastor Pat Ryan

Monday, December 18

Read Isaiah 53

Painful peace

Three years ago today I was in the middle of my second round of radiation treatments. They had found two tumors inside my skull, one crowding in on my brain stem and another growing behind my right eye. God led us to radiation treatments instead of two brain surgeries so I went in, had a mask placed over my head and fastened to a table while they shot the tumors with radiation for 45 minutes. The actual radiation wasn’t as bad as all the tests and appointments of finding the tumors and preparing everything for the radiation treatments. I had a hard time grasping peace and living in peace through all of that. Every year as I go in for my annual MRI scan and Dr. appointment to check on condition of the tumors, peace gets a little shaky once again. So far every check-up has confirmed the radiation did what they had hoped; in fact, it has done more than they hoped.

When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple for dedication, Simeon came up to them and said, “Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed—and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” Joseph and Mary would have been very familiar with the writings of Isaiah; it was a main part of their Bible. Did the words of Isaiah 53 come to their minds? Was the peace of their hearts shaken? Did they understand their new Son came as the suffering Servant Isaiah wrote about? Isaiah 53 is the fuller reality of what we celebrate at Christmas, the birth of our Savior. The One who “...was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace

was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds.” His pain was to bring us peace with God, and He has done more than you hoped.

Prayer focus: Thank God for His fuller plan of our forgiveness and peace which is ours because Jesus came and took the suffering and pain for our sin, to bring us peace.

Action step: Call or visit someone you know who is going through a tough time; encourage them, pray with them, bring them something to brighten their day.

-Pastor Pat Ryan

Tuesday, December 19

Read Psalm 34

He went that way!

For many summers my wife and I used to take groups of middle and high school students on camping trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota and Quetico Provincial Park in Canada. These are wilderness areas where we canoed for a week, traveling during the days and setting up camp each night somewhere along the way. Early one morning there was a commotion in our camp; a bear came and stole our food pack. I was a little away from the campsite but quickly arrived to hear my wife tell me “A bear got our food and he went that way!” I could see the bushes moving as the bear ran through the underbrush with our food pack, so I ran after it. (I am a city boy; no one ever told me don’t chase a hungry bear.) I remember running after the bear thinking I must be nuts, but the adrenalin was flowing and he had the food we needed so I ran after him. We wouldn’t have gotten the food back if we sat there whining about the food being stolen. I will skip all the details, but we pursued the bear and got our food back (thanks to two sixth grade girls; I do get an assist on this though). To not get the food back would have been a disaster.

We are all on a trip through this thing we call life. Sometimes as we go along we end up in a bit of a commotion and we lose something; the adrenalin is flowing and we are not at peace, we are upset. We have a decision to make. Are we going to sit whining and complaining, or are we going to pursue what we need, peace?

Psalm 34 is clear that what we need is an active relationship with God; verse 14 tells us, “Turn away from evil and do what is good; seek peace and pursue it.” Pretty clear.

Christmas is about God pursuing peace with us. Luke 2:14 tells us part of God’s message to the shepherds and all mankind, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people He favors!” God took the initiative; He came to us; He pursued peace with us. What are you pursuing?

Prayer focus: Ask God to show you if there are any areas or people with whom you lack peace. Ask Him how to pursue peace and to help you do it.

Action step: Contact those you need to pursue peace with; lay your weapons down and share the love of Christ with them this Advent season.

-Pastor Pat Ryan

Wednesday, December 20

Read John 14:19-31

Coming and going

Everyone can make you happy; some by coming, others by going. We all know people who seem to light up a room; they bring life and energy to all those around them. We love being with those people. We leave feeling better about ourselves, better about life. They make life better. They leave us feeling better because they were with us.

We all also know people who seem to suck the life out of us. They are difficult for us to be with. They require enormous amounts of energy to be with. It seems they like to be negative or argumentative. They leave us feeling drained and sometimes mad and upset.

The 13th through 17th chapter of John records the time Jesus had alone with His disciples just before He was betrayed – by one of His own disciples. For a little over three years they had received life and energy from being with Jesus. It was all about to be intensely tested. But before their world blew up in their face Jesus tells them, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Your heart must not be troubled or fearful.” Their hearts were about to be quite troubled and they would be so fearful they fled for their lives and hid behind locked doors. Three days later their world would be shaken again as they realized Jesus had really been resurrected from the dead. Forty days later He would leave again, but by then they had come to know the peace He had left them; and they went on to change the world.

You have the opportunity to be someone who lifts people up or brings them down; you can bring energy and peace or promote division and frustration. Jesus left His peace for all His followers, not only the 11 disciples with Him that night. Live in His peace and not the emotion of the circumstance you find yourself in. When you are facing tough challenges it may take you a while to get your bearings again, but get them. Then bring the peace of Jesus with you and change someone’s world by bringing His peace with you into every situation.

Prayer focus: Ask God to help you live in His peace rather than the circumstances around you. Ask Him to lead you to let His peace transform the way you interact with others.

Action step: Complain less. Encourage and uplift everyone you meet today.

-Pastor Pat Ryan

Thursday, December 21

Read Isaiah 9:1-7

What’s in a name?

I am known by many names and titles; Pat, Patrick, husband, brother, dad, Mr. Ryan, Pastor, Reverend, neighbor, Papa, Papaw, grandpa, friend, Matt (at Starbucks and other places where they can’t seem to understand what I say), Mr. Oberlin (some of the Cub Scout dad’s think I am the other grandpa) and probably a few other names as well. Each of these reflects a role or a misunderstanding of who I am. The first thirteen on the list are by people who actually know the real me in varying degrees of intimacy. The last two are from people who don’t really know me or who misunderstand who I am.

Matthew 1 tells us that Joseph was instructed to name the expected child Jesus; a few verses later we are told He is Immanuel, which is also attached to the Messiah in Isaiah 7. In Isaiah 9 we see several more titles for the Messiah, “...He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”

All of these names are wonderfully descriptive; Immanuel meaning God with us; Jesus meaning God saves; Eternal Father because He will never leave us or deny us; Mighty God because He is the supreme God, there is none greater or higher or stronger; Prince of Peace because He is the one that brings us what we all need, peace with God. Romans 5:1 tells us, “...we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is great news.

Prayer focus: Thank God that He gave us such a wonderful gift when He gave us Jesus. If you have not come to know peace with God through Jesus talk to your pastor and he will help you come to a relationship with Jesus.

Action step: Get some paper and write out what each of the names and descriptions of our Savior means for you as you live out each day. -Pastor Pat Ryan

Friday, December 22

Read Luke 2:25-32

Simeon's Song

Peace is a rare thing in almost any day and age. It is just as allusive today as it was back when Jesus was born. But two people stick out to me in the birth narrative that are rare indeed. They found peace in a world filled with heartache and sorrow and strife. Both would be considered minor players in the advent story; but maybe not as minor as we might think.

The first piece of the puzzle for me is found in the life of Simeon. Luke mentions him in the second chapter. He does not tell us what Simeon's occupation was. We think occupation is important, but it does not concern God greatly. We do not know where he lived, who his relatives were, what he looked like, if he was rich or poor, well respected or not well respected. But we are told he was a righteous man. Some translations use the word "devout". I wish it could be said of God's people today that they are righteous and waiting for the consolation of God's people.

Here is a man who teaches us the secret to lasting peace. He was close to God so God was close to him. He had a special revelation given by God. So he makes his way to the temple to behold a child. Upon seeing Jesus he proclaims, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation." (V.29-30). The word for salvation is an interesting one. In the Greek, the word Simeon used was "soterion," which means "one fitted to save." In other words, he was the one fitted to do what no one else could do. And he found peace.

Prayer focus: Pray that God would give you a peace that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. Open our eyes, Lord, that we can see real Peace!

-Pastor Mark Beers

Saturday, December 23

Read Luke 2:36-38

Anna's Song

We have another relatively unknown person who played a minor role in the birth of our Lord. Her name is Anna and Luke introduces us to her in the second chapter. Here is a woman who was certainly least of all the little people of the Christmas story. She was widowed. She was old, probably 105 years old, judging from Luke's figures. Yet, from what Luke tells us, she understood more about the full significance of the coming of Jesus Christ than any of the others who appear in this narrative. And she too found peace in the midst of a world filled with strife.

What was it that Anna understood about the coming of Jesus Christ? She understood that this infant Jesus was to become the redeemer that God had promised to Israel. We know that because she announced His birth to all in Jerusalem who, like herself, was looking for that redemption. Perhaps that was the secret to her peace. She was content to focus on what she had and not on what she did not have. Like any elderly person she could have easily rehearsed all the things she had lost over the years. But instead she focused on the coming of the Messiah and it brought her peace.

Christmas is not merely the story of the birth of a helpless baby in a stable, as beautiful as that may be, not the wonder of the shepherds, not the gifts of the wise men, not the singing of the angel chorus. The heart of Christmas lies in the fact that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Prayer focus: Pray that you can look beyond all the trappings of a holiday and find the one who brings meaning into your life every day of the year.

-Pastor Mark Beers

Advent Readings on Jesus

Sunday, December 24

Read Luke 2:7

The Innkeeper's Dilemma

In the first week of June 1944, the German general, Rommel was strengthening his fortifications of the beaches of western France against the imminent Allied invasion of Hitler's Europe. This was the Rommel who had gained fame as a military strategist in North Africa, and he was convinced that in this stage of the war, if the Allies should ever gain a foothold in France, the war would be lost for Germany. Yet his wife's birthday was on June 6, and he had a birthday present for her. Consequently, he left the front on the fifth of June and was in Berlin with his family when the Allied invasion came the next day. Here was a man who sensed the importance of the greatest single invasion in the history of the world and yet missed it. Even more tragic are those who miss that first Christmas.

With this being Christmas week, let's ponder a few people who missed Christmas. You couldn't get any closer and yet miss it than the Innkeeper. The Bible does not mention his name. Perhaps by the time the story of the birth of Jesus was put into writing no one could remember his name. As you read Luke 2:7 the text implies of the existence of this man. He was simply too busy to notice what was going on right under his own nose. He shouldn't have missed it since he was so close. But miss it he did. Today is one of the busiest shopping days of the year. It is the last chance to get the perfect gift. It is so easy to get wrapped in the hysteria of Christmas that we miss the simplicity of the birth of the Son of God.

Prayer focus: Pray that God would help you to slow down enough to ponder the simplicity of Jesus' birth. Lord, help us not be one of those who will miss Christmas this year!

-Pastor Mark Beers

Monday, December 25

Read Matthew 2:1-8

Herod's Dilemma

The second man to miss Christmas was Herod. He was the king of Judea, or, as we should more accurately say, an under-king of a border province of the far-flung Roman Empire. There was nothing likeable about Herod. He was a sly old fox, guilty of many murders, including at least one wife and three sons. He knew the traditions of Israel, but he only half-believed them, if he believed them at all. Still he missed Christmas.

Matthew is the one to tell us about him. Herod was at home in Jerusalem when news reached him that wise men had come from the East. They were asking where they could find the king of the Jews, the one born recently. Herod had no one like that in his palace. There were no recent births that he was aware of. Besides, he was aware that the wise men were talking about the Messiah, and he knew of no Messiah. Talk like that was dangerous. "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."(V.8) It was a sly maneuver, meant for murder not worship. He missed Christmas not because of business but because of self-interest. Does this describe you? I do not mean the question to be insulting, but isn't it true that many people miss practically everything good in life through self-interest? That is not only true of friendships, love, good times and happiness but it is also true of Jesus. If you have even a little of Herod's spirit then perhaps we should pay attention to what Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to

gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36) Your real self-interest lies in finding the one who loved you and died to be your Savior.

Prayer focus: Pray that God would open your eyes to see your own self-interest. Lord, don't let another Christmas pass while we seek only our own interests!

-Pastor Mark Beers

Tuesday, December 26

Read Matthew 2:4-5

The Religious Dilemma

Trapped within the text of the story of king Herod is what I believe is the saddest of all the people who missed Christmas. Of all the people who dotted the face of the earth, the religious people ought to have been the ones who got it. But oddly enough they too missed Christmas.

These religious leaders were the ones that Herod consulted as he sought to destroy Jesus. These were the chief priests and the scribes. They had a great head knowledge of the subject. They could tell Herod exactly where the Messiah was to be born. They were well versed enough with the prophets to know that Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem in Judea. Yet they did not leave their homes to investigate his arrival.

What was it that caused this group to miss Christmas? We don't know for certain, of course. But it may well have been pride in the fact that Herod had called them instead of others and that they had been able to produce the right answer to the question. We see this in the religious world today. There are sectors of the church in which almost any Bible question will receive a right answer. Yet in many of those places there is no hunger for God and thus no vital, joyous, and rewarding reality of the presence of Christ.

Prayer focus: Lord Jesus, only you can lead us to God. Keep us from wandering aimlessly through this life, substituting knowledge about you for a relationship with you. As we stand with you, listening, we can sense the Father's immense love for you. Persuade our hearts that the Father desires to enfold us in the same love that He has for his Son. Let us not be like the Innkeeper, Herod and the religious leaders we find in the scriptures. Lord Jesus, awaken our hearts to seek you. Amen.

-Pastor Mark Beers

Wednesday, December 27

Read Matthew 20:20-28

Jesus Came to Serve and Be Our Ransom

Why did Jesus come? Why did the Son of God take on human nature? Over these last 5 days of the year, we will look at what Jesus said about why he came. We'll look at a few of his purpose statements.

In Matthew 20:28, he is crystal-clear: he came to serve. We had a need, and he came to meet that need.

He didn't come to be served (though he could have rightfully done so). But quite the reverse. In fact, he says, he came to render the ultimate service: to give his life. The giving of his life was part of the plan from the beginning; he came precisely TO DIE.

And it wasn't just a gesture; his sinless death was NECESSARY for you to be forgiven your sins, for you to be ransomed from hell, for you to overcome death, for you to gain eternal life. If he doesn't die, you don't live. His birth means nothing to us apart from his sinless death.

God the Father said of Jesus before his birth,
"My righteous Servant will justify many,
and He will carry their iniquities.

Therefore I will give Him the many as a portion,
and He will receive the mighty as spoil,
because He submitted Himself to death,
and was counted among the rebels;
yet He bore the sin of many
and interceded for the rebels.” (Isaiah 53:11-12 HCSB)

Prayer focus: Thank Jesus for his servant attitude and for the ransom he willingly paid for you with his life. Ask him to give you a servant attitude.

-Pastor Kent Scantlin

Thursday, December 28

Read Mark 1:32-39

Jesus Came to Preach the Good News

Why did Jesus come? He came to preach (38) to inform, to reveal. A sample of his preaching is found in v. 15: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!” (HCSB).

Isn't it nice when people care enough to give you helpful information? “You've got something in your teeth.” “Your gas tank is hanging open.” “That lane is much faster.” “Your child is playing in the toilet.” “Socks first; then shoes.”

Praise God that he gives us helpful information. Praise him that he is a revealing God. He didn't have to point out our sin. He could've let us trip on down to hell. But he revealed our problem, its punishment, and its payment in Jesus. Jesus came to die, but his death would just look like any other execution if no one is told what it means. And so he came not only to die, but also to preach—to explain the significance of his death and how to be saved by means of it.

Jesus came that they might know, and that you might know, that he is the means by which you may enter God's kingdom, if you will repent and believe.

The preaching and revealing mission of Jesus has now become the Church's mission. Many people have either misinformation or no information about their sin-problem, their consequent hell-punishment, or the payment of Jesus that can save them from their sin and from hell. The Church now preaches and reveals and witnesses and tells.

Prayer focus: Praise God that he revealed himself to you in Jesus Christ. Ask him to help you be a part of his mission to let others know about the good news of Jesus Christ.

-Pastor Kent Scantlin

Friday, December 29

Read Luke 5:27-32

Jesus Came to Save Sinners

According to today's Scripture, who is Jesus most interested in? What group of people? For whom does he say he came?

The answer is “sinners.” He didn't come for the righteous (those who have it all together); he came for sinners. It's ironic, then, that many people today think they are too bad for Jesus, that Jesus wouldn't want them because of the things they've done. If you think you're too wicked for Jesus, you are wrong!

Jesus uses doctors as an illustration. Idealistically speaking, doctors are most interested in, most invested in, and feel most obligated to, the sick. They walk into a room, and they're looking for the weak and the sick, not the strong and healthy. Jesus is like that. He didn't come for the superlatives, the role models, the all-put-together. Jesus came for sinners. He came for the wicked, the vile, the violent, the victims-turned-victimizers, the screwed-up, the failures.

Can you wrap your head around that? Jesus came for sinners. Some think that means he came for a middle group—the group in between the perfect people and the really wicked. They think he came for “respectable sinners,” whoever that is. Those who try hard but mess up sometimes. That's who Jesus came for, they think. But the bad apples, the really bad apples, they're a lost cause. That's reading into the text something Jesus didn't mean. Jesus came for sinners. Period. For the bad apples, and the lost causes.

Prayer focus: Praise Jesus for saving you. Pray that you will have his heart for ALL those who don't yet trust in him.

-Pastor Kent Scantlin

Saturday, December 30

Read Luke 5:27-32

Jesus Came to Save Sinners (Part 2)

Why did Jesus come? He said that he came for sinners. And what he SAID is clearly backed up by what he DID. 1) He made a tax collector one of his disciples. In Jesus' day, tax collectors were dishonorable people, not only in reputation but in practice as well. 2) He attended a party where all the guests are sinners. Many of Levi's (dishonorable) associates were in attendance, and they brought their immoral friends. The makeup of the party was such that the Pharisees complained that Jesus shouldn't have attended such a shindig.

My favorite scene in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) is this very party. In the movie, Levi (known as Matthew) is surprised yet delighted that Jesus actually comes. In trying to find a place for Jesus to sit, Matthew commands a painted woman to move, but Jesus: “No, no, no. Don't move. I'll sit there,” and he sits beside the woman. Jesus is all compassion and grace. Several say, “Rabbi, we want to hear your words.” “Please, speak to us.” Jesus responds with, “I'd like to tell you a story,” proceeding to tell “The Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32), of the disrespectful son who squanders his father's inheritance and then returns to his dad ashamed, and of that dad who incredibly, joyfully celebrates his return.

It is a powerful scene, and true-to-form as to Jesus' character and life. Brennan Manning writes: “Here is revelation bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and even used car salesmen. Jesus not only talks with these people but dines with them . . .” (*The Ragamuffin Gospel* 23).

Prayer focus: Praise him for coming for you.

-Pastor Kent Scantlin

Jesus Came to Seek and Save the Lost

In today's passage Jesus goes after another despised tax collector, Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was open to Jesus, and since he knew what Jesus stood for, he was probably open to God as well. But we see that the people were not open to Zacchaeus. It was of no matter, however, for Jesus was open to Zacchaeus. Jesus will go to any home where he is welcome.

And what a transformation is wrought in Zacchaeus! In first-century Palestine, tax collectors were quite literally in it for the money. And now money is precisely what he's willing to part with. When money was his god, he used people (8). Now that God is his God, he uses money to help people—to help the poor and to redress financial wrongs he had committed against specific people.

Zacchaeus was lost, but unlike some lost things, no one was trying to find him or recover him. His community preferred he stayed lost because they considered him a lost cause. But Jesus isn't that way. He seeks the lost, even the lost causes, in order to save them, and Jesus' mission has become the Church's mission.

Is there a person you can't stand? Someone that you think of as a hopeless cause? Think about them in a different light for a moment: What if they were changed? What if they came to the point where they loved Jesus Christ, worshiped God, and were loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled? What if they were humble, selfless, and penitent? Jesus seeks and saves, and with salvation comes transformation. Don't give up on the lost, and don't bypass the "lost causes."

Prayer focus: Pray for at least one sinner you've given up on.

-Pastor Kent Scantlin