



*With glorious
anticipation,
we tell*
THE
STORY
again!

2019 Advent Devotional
First Baptist Church

With Glorious Anticipation, We Tell the Story Again!

A Devotional Advent booklet by the people of FBC Frankfort

December 2019

Introduction

Once again, we present to you the Advent Devotional written by First Baptist Church, Frankfort, members. With glorious anticipation, we tell the story again. It is a story worth telling again and again. Thanks to all who told the story through their personal reflections.

The weekly advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, will guide us through the month to Christmas. Each Sunday's devotional is written by a member of the ministerial staff with the lectionary gospel reading from Luke. On each Saturday we offer for your reflection, the lyrics of one of the anthems that will be presented in worship on Sunday, December 15.

Here we go...again.

First Week of Advent – HOPE

“the hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight”

Sunday, December 1

Luke 21:25-36

Keith Stillwell

With my broken elbow in a sling, we drove from Selma to Marion to meet the group of Civil Riders and volunteers. Phyllis Boozer, CBF Northeast Coordinator, was my patient and kind driver. We missed supper after sitting in the emergency room for some six hours.

She asked me a question I haven't stopped thinking about, “Are you a patient person?”

“I don't know,” I answered. “Maybe I'm good at pretending to be patient.”

Am I a patient person? It was a long wait in the hospital, but I wasn't in pain. I guessed the staff was busy doing the best they could. In the room next to me I heard a child crying. Across from me an elderly lady was being attended. They both needed attention. Others came and went. I, at least, acted like I was a patient. I have since thrown a few tantrums, spilling and dropping things with only one hand. I look forward to Christmas but enjoy the anticipation of the Advent season. However, when life situations weigh heavy on me, I want them resolved quickly. So, I guess, sometimes I'm patient, sometimes not. In my life, I've had the luxury of being patient, if I wanted.

On our ride, retracing the Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery, we passed the site of slave auctions, the lynching museum, the Pettus bridge where marchers were beaten, the Marion church where Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot, and the church where four little girls were killed in a bombing on a Sunday. White pastors told Martin Luther King, Jr. to be patient. His letter from the Birmingham jail told us that he didn't have the luxury of being patient.

Maybe patience is not always what we need. What we need instead is hope. Hope that with Jesus and the courage to follow during times of “distress” and “confusion,” we can create a better way.

“Come Lord Jesus!”

Monday, December 2

Isaiah 40:1-5

Dwight Lovan

Are you ever just blank on what to say? Sometimes I procrastinate, but that was not the issue with this devotional. When I write a devotional I want it to be about a very personal experience, and with this one I have struggled to find one. It is a shame because this is such a meaningful Bible passage. It is not one I have dwelled on before which is also a shame. It provides a description of a life with God, and of having a life of discipleship: comfort, forgiveness, God with us as we experience the valleys of life and the mountainous challenges before us. God makes the valleys shallow and the mountains less imposing.

With this amazing passage before me I continued to struggle to make it personal. It finally dawned on me these words were describing my life and journey in hope with Jesus. Loss of love, loss of loved ones, days straying along the wrong path, health issues, and problems I never thought would be there for me, but trying my best to never lose hope. Not because of anything I was doing but what had been done for me from the beginning. Meeting the Comforter, Forgiver, and Companion who has been with me all the way.

My prayer is simple: Thank You Lord for giving me a life of hope, and may others know You have such a life for them.

Tuesday, December 3

John 1:1-18

Hope Mitchell

What's the greatest gift someone has ever given you?

If you really stop to think about life's best gifts, they aren't usually things at all, but rather a feeling a gift leaves with us. Now, I might be a little partial, but I think some of the best gifts come with hope. It could be good news, a token of affection, a surprise opportunity... but if you really consider the essence of what you gained, I'm going to guess most of the time it's hope.

As children of God we have been given many gifts, John 1:17 tells us "for the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Moses gave us the gift of the law, a gift for gauging the God's divine nature and his impossible standards but its focus on obedience and the consequences for not complying, offered few good, long term solutions for a very flawed mankind.

It was the gift of Jesus Christ, bringing with him grace upon grace - the free and unmerited favor of God, which brings us hope. Grace rescues an imperfect mankind from themselves and offers the hope of salvation. Jesus, God's humanity realized for mankind, brought grace to every situation and all he asks of us in return is to do likewise.

Wednesday, December 4

Luke 1:5-25

Melissa May

Until

We wait.

We wait.

We wait to become.

We wait to discover.

We wait to complete.

We wait.

And in the waiting, Father,

we hope.

We hope in the coming of the Christ

as Your incarnate son,

as the Everlasting Life.

May this hope ever brighten our present

for it is the light shining in our darkness,

shattering our darkness,

liberating us from our fears,

whispering to our hearts that we are
never,
ever
alone
or abandoned.

May we feel the healing of this hope,
this hope so essential
to our Journey,
 this hope so essential
 to everlasting Life,
this hope that is the foundation of our peace.

May this hope, Lord,
be a living hope
as alive as Your son.

May this hope
mold us
and shape us
until we become,
 until we discover,
 until we complete.

And, Father, may this hope,
like the star that shone over Bethlehem,
the star the wise men so zealously sought,

grow ever brighter in our hearts until
its brilliant beams fill the world with
Your glorious light.

Thursday, December 5

Luke 1:26-38

Gary Forman

Two of the greatest news events of all time; the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the visit to the Virgin Mary in the Galilean village of Nazareth by the angel Gabriel, to tell of the great news that she would bear God's Son.

Not your typical way of finding out you are expecting a baby, no less that the child you will bear would be named Jesus (Savior) and called "Son of the Highest" who will "rule over the house of Jacob forever, no end ever, to his kingdom". Also, not to mention, she had "never slept with a man".

The greatest "hope" of all time resided in Mary. She didn't go through a period as many of us did, wondering if she was "expecting". No Doctor visits, no ultrasounds, no blood tests....just told straight up she would be the mother of the Savior of humankind. What amazing news and how incredible that Mary had the strength, trust and faith to accept without fully understanding she was to play this principle role in bringing to earth God's greatest gift.

Although the prophecy of the Old Testament would not be completely fulfilled until the birth of Jesus some months later in the little town of Bethlehem, the beginning of God's plan for the salvation of humankind was on this night in the village of Nazareth.

Thank you Lord that this wondrous gift that was given on Christmas Day in Bethlehem was preceded by Mary's act of faith and obedience to the news the child she would bear would be the Son of God.

Friday, December 6

Luke 1:57-66

Larry Cleveland

Elizabeth was the wife of Zechariah, cousin of Mary, and mother of John the Baptist. She was unable to have children and was well beyond child-bearing years when amazingly she conceived a son. Zechariah had been earlier visited by the angel Gabriel and told this would

occur and that the child should be named John. Zechariah was understandably skeptical to the point of disbelief, and was, as the result, made mute, Gabriel telling Zechariah he would be “mute and not able to speak” until the words were fulfilled because he did not believe. The things Gabriel foretold did come to pass, and when it came time to name the child, it was presumed he would be named after his father. Elizabeth, however, insisted that the child be named John, resulting in those gathered turning to Zechariah who affirmed his wife by writing on a tablet, “his name is John”. Upon doing so, his ability to speak was restored. The child matured and “waxed strong in spirit”, and eventually assumed the ministry which would earn him the name, “John the Baptist,” about whom Jesus would say, “Truly, I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11).

This passage is a great example of the value of patience. I myself am not a patient person, having been known to have said, “Come on, let’s go,” to a microwave oven. However, as this passage shows, waiting and having faith can bring great unexpected blessings. I suppose it also says something about the value of a good name, but that will be reserved for another day.

Saturday, December 7

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light: the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above, while mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love. O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all the earth!

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today! We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

Second Week of Advent – PEACE

“veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity”

Sunday, December 8

Luke 3:1-6

Richard Summers

In verse 3 our scripture says “...the word of God came to John...” Indeed God spoke to John and he responded by giving his life, preparing the way for our Lord. The greater miracle going on concurrently was the Word (capital W) had come veiled in flesh in the person of Jesus for all of us! The question that faces us each day is how are we responding to the Word of God coming to us?

Sometimes a word or phrase from a scripture passage or a hymn will strike me with incredible force. Such was the case several years ago while singing the hymn “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” The second stanza phrase “Veiled in flesh the God-head see” stunned me! The ramifications of that thought are mind blowing. Creator and Sustainer of the universe veiled Himself in flesh. In flesh and bone, with organs, muscle, and blood. Yet within that human body was the God-head! Why? Why would the One who could speak worlds into being, who created all the stars of the sky, who knows the intricacies of the smallest molecule do such a thing? The only answer, the ONLY answer, is love!

Today as we begin the second week of Advent we focus on peace. What incredible peace can be found in such love. I can have peace through any circumstance in life, because I know the God of all creation loves me enough to veil Himself in flesh. He came veiled in flesh some 2,000 years ago, and now comes by His Spirit. How will I respond to His coming today? How will you?

May the great love of Christ lead you into perfect peace. May we share that love and peace with others!

Monday, December 9

Isaiah 9:6-7

Cindy Fogg

With the hustle and bustle of today’s hectic lifestyle, we have evolved into a culture of “instant gratification.” I confess having my piping hot coffee waiting for me at the Starbucks mobile counter or binge watching my favorite show whenever and wherever I want is certainly

satisfying. And with just a “one-click” option, I can have most anything delivered at my doorstep just 24 hours later. The concept of waiting seems to be more difficult these days. While all these “instant” options are intended to make our lives “easier,” has it made us more anxious or taken away the appreciation that comes with anticipation?

I often think about what life might have been like in the days leading up to and throughout Christ’s time on earth. I wonder what the people of Judah thought when Isaiah shared his prophetic vision about the Messiah as he attempted to bring a sense of peace to an area in turmoil.

The carefully selected titles Isaiah used to describe our Savior must have been difficult for them to grasp, at first, as they thought about what Eternal Life and the promise of Peace really meant. I can only imagine the level of anticipation they felt about His coming, without knowing when he might arrive or even how he would appear.

While the day-to-day expectation of “instants” have become the norm, we can find peace in knowing how this prophecy was fulfilled with Christ’s birth and his reign on earth. Much like the people of Judah, we await his return to our world in turmoil, not based on our “instant” timeline but on His, so we might enjoy eternal life and unending peace.

Tuesday, December 10

Isaiah 11:1-9

Tony Sholar

When I was a child, I could hardly wait in anticipation of Christmas, i.e. Santa Claus. I never thought in terms of the advent of Santa Claus, or for that matter, the Easter Bunny or the tooth fairy. When I was older and I became actively involved in the life of the church, I began learning about the seasons of the church. It was then I was able to understand Advent as primarily a non-secular term in Christianity meaning the coming of the Christ—both birth and second coming.

Advent to me is much more than anticipation of the Christ child. It is the fulfillment of the prophesy of Isaiah, 700 years earlier, and the realization that God’s promises are fulfilled in God’s time. It is further evidence that God never loses his love for us no matter the sins of preceding generations. My reading of the first 5 verses of Isaiah 11:1-9 tell us that God will not forsake us. He will send salvation for us through the lineage of David who will embody the spirit of God with the attendant wisdom and understanding. Judgment will not be by the standards of humans—not what he sees or hears—but with the righteousness and equity of God.

I believe Isaiah 11:6-9 tells us that understanding Advent is to know the coming Spirit of God is Peace beyond our comprehension. Peace, being greater than lack of strife and suffering. Peace of living without fear because of our knowledge of the Lord.

Wednesday, December 11

Micah 5:2-5

Doug Hendrix

The prophet Micah witnessed great upheaval in Judah. It was a time of war and fear. Unfortunately for the citizens of Judah, Micah told them they must be patient and wait. The Messiah would come in his own time. Micah isn't the only prophet that tells us we must wait for things to come; waiting is a common theme in the Bible.

When I was a child, the march to Christmas didn't begin officially until we received the J.C. Penney Christmas book, usually in October. My sisters and I would spend hours poring over the pages and marking the gifts we wanted. Then we waited. Now that I'm an adult, I still wait for Christmas. I enjoy giving and receiving material gifts, but now I wait for the serenity and calmness that come with the birth of Jesus, which leads us to a better future and way of life.

The people during Micah's time prayed for relief from war and uncertainty. While my cares are not so stark, I will pray for relief from worry, a deeper understanding of God's will for me, and to enjoy the holiday season. And patience. I will pray for that as well.

Thursday, December 12

Luke 1:67-80

Jeff Fogg

As a youngster, I was usually unsettled or in a hurry. I was in a hurry to get out of class, in a hurry for recess, or waiting impatiently for the weekend to come so my brother and I could run the hills surrounding my home. When I grew up, this trend continued. As a young man, I was constantly attempting to juggle work, family and other things while not fully committing to any of the areas. Upon accepting Christ as my personal savior, my angst or lack of calm began to change.

In Luke 1:68, Zechariah prophesized, "Praise be to the Lord, God of Israel because he has come to his people and redeemed them".

As I have grown in my calendar years, I have begun to slow down and listen to what the Lord tries to tell me. My spiritual journey continues to develop, and I pray I have the calmness and inner peace needed to fully hear and understand what the Lord is teaching me. As Scripture tells us in Luke 1:78-79, "because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." With this knowledge and my faith, I know I will never walk alone.

Friday, December 13

Luke 2:12-15

Jaime McKown

“On earth peace among those whom he favors!”

To join the likes of the favored, Mary and Moses, boy Jesus and young Samuel, what a gift the Lord has given to us! Today I'm thanking God for offering us the peace that passes understanding. With the arrival of the Christ-child, God begins to make it possible for each of us to enjoy God's favor. I am ashamed to say I forget this hope of peace from time to time, but I trust that though I'm unfaithful, God is faithful to remind me and refresh my memory through gentle reminders. Sometimes it's a chaotic moment in my home, but I feel unexplainable patience and calm. Thank you God! Other times it's a friend experiencing great sadness and my not-so-empathetic-self is overcome with a gentle spirit and calm presence. Thank you God! The angel and heavenly hosts were making a grand announcement, and I am comforted each year with this time of remembering that peace is among us. I wonder how God's peace is shared in your life. How might we join the heavenly hosts in giving glory to God and sharing peace?

Saturday, December 14

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King; peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies; with th'angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!” Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King!”

Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord; late in time behold Him come, offspring of a virgin's womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th'incarnate Deity, pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King!”

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings. Mild He lays his glory by, born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth. Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King!”

Third Week of Advent - JOY

"O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant"

Sunday, December 15

Luke 3:7-18

Marcus Pernell

I can't help but draw toward this question of "What should we do?" Being called out by our friend John, the crowds ask this question three times. John provides them with three distinct answers: to share, to collect what you need, and to be content. These answers turn into expectations and questions about John's identity. He then points them toward the coming of Christ. The Good News is proclaimed, joy is shared.

For this Advent season, I'll also ask: *What should we do?* We need to *share* ourselves with others. This includes our resources, our time, our ears to listen, and even our physical presence. Likewise, we ought to *collect* only what we need. For instance, having extra holiday money is wonderful, which I'd think the tax collectors in this passage would agree with. However, how could we use those extra wages? We may buy clothes for someone who has none, or even a cooked meal for a person who hasn't eaten. Lastly, we need to *be content* with what we have. Things are nice, but they are just things in the end.

How do these instructions relate to the idea of joy? It's the joy of sharing the love of God in ways which bear good fruit. It's the joy that takes initiative, actively choosing to do something. It's the kind of joy that celebrates and points to the coming of Christ.

What will you choose to do this Advent season?

Monday, December 16

Romans 15:7-13

Beverly Lovan

Seven years ago, Dwight and I arrived in Frankfort. Dwight had established work relationships, but I knew no one. Finding a church was high on our list of priorities and we visited First Baptist Frankfort at the recommendation of our former pastor. As "outsiders" we felt exposed and vulnerable. This church and its people welcomed us with open arms, smiles and a genuine interest in wanting to include us in worship and in service. It was easy to see and feel that love, joy and peace was truly present in the hearts of our new faith family. Because of the unity we

share as believers of Jesus Christ, we can confidently share the gospel message of hope our world so desperately needs to hear.

A Facebook post reminds us that when Jesus said, “love your neighbor,” he meant your democrat, republican, gay, black, Muslim, Asian, the person you are angry with, your waitress/waiter, the homeless, your co-worker, your ex-spouse, the atheist, the addict, and the immigrant neighbor. Love.

Our world needs hope more now than ever. May your heart be filled with joy and peace so that the Holy Spirit working through you will overflow and you will burn with desire to share God’s message of hope with others!

Tuesday, December 17

Isaiah 35:1-2, 10

Kara Johnson

Today’s scripture reading grabbed me in the very first phrase, “The desert and the parched land will be glad...” Whoa. I couldn’t quite wrap my head around the desert and parched land being glad. The definition of parched is *dried out with heat* and *extremely thirsty*. I could understand an area lush with fertile soil, green trees dripping with ripe fruits, and flowers bursting with color to be glad, but it’s harder to imagine the parched land to be glad. As humans, I believe that is where we (or at least I) often fail.

Our joy in the Lord needs to be present at all times, during our lush moments *and* during our parched times. It is easy to be glad and thankful when all feels right in our own little world, but how many of us strive to find joy in our moments of darkness? Are we celebrating joy in God’s gifts when we feel alone, weak, or fearful?

I’d like to offer a challenge:

Let us consciously seek joy.

Let us be mindful of our delight in God each day.

Let us take time to acknowledge pleasure in our lush moments.

Let us pursue joyfulness in our parched times.

O come, all ye faithful, and BE joyful!

Wednesday, December 18

Philippians 4:4-7

Joe Manning

The Apostle Paul wrote this book to the Philippians from a prison cell. His own death was close at hand, and Paul knew it.

With these two facts in mind, Joy is constant in the book of Philippians. Forms of “joy” and “rejoice” occur 16 times in this short letter. The word Rejoice is repeated in verse 4. It is two of the eleven words in this verse.

Perhaps easier said than done at times, Paul tells us in verse 6 to not be anxious about anything, but to bring to God whatever is on our mind. Nothing is too big nor too small to bring to God. We can bring everything to Him in prayer. When we do we receive a peace so strong, we can't even understand it. What a promise!!

So, the lifeline to peace is prayer. “Christian Joy” does not depend upon a happy ending. It depends upon an unshakeable confidence in the providence of God. God is going to turn whatever happens for good. Hold onto this idea.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for this wonderful book that talks about rejoicing and being joyful throughout its entirety. May we always be aware that you are near us. Thank You, Lord, that we feel unexplainable peace when we come to you in prayer. In Christ's Name, Amen

Thursday, December 19

Luke 1:46-55

Lena Columbia

“Mary's Song,” as this scripture is often referred to, are the thoughts of Mary as she prepares for the role of Mother of the Savior, Jesus Christ. How daunting it would be to know you would be carrying, delivering, and raising God's Son to adulthood, only to give him back to the Lord when the time came. To have him take on the heavy burden of our sins. To know that she, herself, would be recognized for all generations to come as the “Holy Mother” and the “Blessed Mother of Christ.”

As a young woman, barely out of her own childhood, she was hand-picked by God for this awesome task. If you or I were to be given this undertaking, would we, could we, respond with the simple humbleness, unquestioning faith, and loving strength of this young woman?

I imagine what it would feel like to have been told I would be carrying the Son of God, that my child would someday shoulder our sins, as well as a huge and very heavy cross. That his kingship would include a crown of thorns. What kind of mother would it take to raise such a son? One with more devotion, more love and more courage than I could dream of.

Mary greeted her son with such joy in that tiny stable and then shared him with the world. How can we ever thank her?

Friday, December 20

Luke 2:8-11

Adam Columbia

This particular passage from Luke is one of my favorites, whether I am reading it from the Bible myself or hearing it read during a Christmas service. The delivery from God through one of his angels of the greatest news the world had ever heard is, in my mind, still the greatest news event in Christian history.

In today's world, we struggle with the negativity and disgust presented to us in all the different formats available. Even as technology advances, we continue to communicate fear, disgust, hate, and other indifferences amongst the human population.

God's gift of His Son, Jesus, on that faithful day was given as hope to the world through the shepherds' ears that we all should not live in fear, but live in the great news that our Savior has come to save us. This great news is just as important, if not more important, today as we struggle within our world communities. Our Lord continues to give us the great news every day that Jesus is here for us and is the Savior to all.

Let's remember this great news is available to us year round and provides us continued hope that our Savior was born to bring heavenly glory to all those who believe in Him.

Saturday, December 21

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem! Come and behold Him, born the King of angels! O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal, lo, He shuns not the virgin’s womb; Son of the Father, begotten, not created. O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation, O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above! Glory to God, all glory in the highest! O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning, Jesus, to Thee be all glory given; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing! O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Fourth Week of Advent – LOVE

“when kings and princes are home, when shepherds are back with their flock”

Sunday, December 22

Luke 1:39-45

Jenny Luscher

Have you ever really thought about Mary’s visit to Elizabeth? Most art envisions it as a meeting of two very obviously expecting women embracing. But is that really right?

Mary had just received the annunciation from Gabriel and now she was harrying off to see her cousin Elizabeth. Although the Bible doesn’t tell us exactly where Elizabeth lived, tradition holds it was in the Judean hill country in a village called Ein Karem, a 90-mile walk from Nazareth. This journey isn’t really a hop, skip, and jump away, but was a manageable walk or ride that may have taken between 5 and 12 days.

Luke tells us Mary left right away to visit Elizabeth, which means Mary would have arrived well before there were any physical signs she was expecting and there were no messengers sent ahead to spread the news. Considering this, Elizabeth’s reaction is truly amazing.

When Mary spoke her greeting, the child inside Elizabeth leaped with joy. Had Elizabeth felt the baby move before, or was this the first time? We don’t know, but we are told that because of the child’s recognition of the Lord’s presence in Mary, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

According to Luke, Mary had not spoken of her miraculous visitation by Gabriel or the holy promise given to her. But through the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth realizes what has occurred. Her joy overflows and she cannot contain it all inside, because God has touched her life with His awe inspiring promise. Although Elizabeth was blessed to receive the Holy Spirit, she tells Mary, “Blessed is she who has believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

All this came about because of a promise spoken and believed.

I pray we will all enter the mystery of Christmas with the joy and awestruck amazement of Elizabeth, believing God’s word to be true, and live our lives in the light of this belief.

Monday, December 23

John 3:16-17

Janie Forman

I have heard that John 3:16 is the most familiar verse in the Bible and I don't doubt that it is so. As a very young girl, I memorized this verse from the King James Version of the Bible, not really understanding the words "begotten", "whosoever", and "perish", but I did understand the words "God so loved the world" and that included me! As the words of this verse were repeated many times throughout my life they became imprinted on my heart and were no doubt some of the seeds that sprouted into the desire to know God more deeply. As I learned from the account earlier in John chapter 3 about Nicodemus wanting to understand who Jesus was and what his miracles and teachings really meant, I have realized that without faith (being willing to believe in things not seen) a person will never hope to understand.

John 3:16-17, tells of the greatest gift ever given—God's only Son! Because He loves us so very much, God wants us to have a whole and everlasting life with Him. God didn't send His Son to the earth to tell us how bad we are, but to help us learn to be who we were created to be!

During the last few days leading up to our celebration of this wonderful gift, may we not forget that each day of the year we have the privilege of doing "The Work of Christmas" by following the example of Jesus to love others as God first loved us.

Tuesday, December 24

Matthew 1:18-24

Dianne Stillwell

Christmas Eve. The night before Christmas. All is calm...or is it?

Many of the smaller details leading right up to the birth of Jesus are not mentioned in scripture. We are left to our own wonderings and imagination. So, on this night, let's take a few quiet moments and put ourselves into the narrative scene, imagining this holy night.

Oh, little town of Bethlehem. How do you envision it? A long, tiresome journey to this small town, completed by a young couple with the task of taking part in the census. One near the end of pregnancy. The other accompanying her and providing safety for both. What were the streets like upon arrival into this small town? Who did they meet? Did they know anyone there? What were people busy doing? What were the sights, the sounds, the smells upon their arrival in Bethlehem?

Were they exhausted from their travels? Hungry, too? Did they plan to get in, be counted, and return back home as quickly as possible? Were people helpful to them? Were they ignored?

Who led them to shelter? What was on their minds? Did they sense something was about to happen? When did they realize their plans would have to change? Had they prepared adequately enough for this moment? Where were they? Did they have everything they needed? Did they have questions? Were they by themselves? Were they scared? Excited? Worried? Hopeful?

Were the labor pains excruciating? Did Joseph know how to help his young wife? What did he say to her? What did she say to him? Did they talk at all? Were they overwhelmed with the task ahead of them? Did they fully understand their roles in this story? Do we fully understand our roles in this story? I have so many questions, and I am sure you do too. Take some time and just wonder....

These moments before Jesus' birth are left to our own imagination. I like to think that is a blessing. However you envision these moments, we know they are divine and holy. So, sit with them a few moments on this special day, Christmas Eve. For from this precious moment on, our lives are never to be the same.

Christ is coming! Don't miss this opportunity to be present with this sweet Holy Family.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the precious gifts of stillness and wondering. For it is in these moments that we see glimpses of you. Thank you for sight into this redemptive story and the chance to envision your perfect love for all of humanity. Our lives are forever changed and we are humbly grateful. We await your coming...

Wednesday, December 25

Luke 2:1-7

Keith Felton

The great Holy Surprise is that the God of Creation would become flesh and dwell among us! Christmas is filled with ironies and surprises. Think about how the powerful King Herod was scared of a baby born to an impoverished and unwed teenager. The heavenly host of angels appeared to lowly shepherds and not to Caesar or other political or religious elites. The modest manger cradled the God of the universe. The Star led the Magi to a lowly animal stall and not to the palace of a king. When we step back and look at the incredible contrasts in the Christmas story that are all taking place at once, it is then we can begin to appreciate multiple messages of the incarnation. God is saying that salvation does not arrive on a 'silver platter' but in the messiness of our lives. Sometimes the greatest strengths are found in the most humbling of places and people. God uses individuals who, in the world's eyes, may not seem likely or worthy. God continued to surprise the world with Jesus. On the surface, the cross would never be seen as a way to be victorious. It was the ultimate picture of defeat, yet God demonstrated His love for us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us which gave us forgiveness. The

empty tomb may have been the greatest surprise of the entire Jesus story! My suggestion for us is that we be watchful this Christmas of our surprising God. God may just surprise us in some circumstance of life. Embrace God's surprises which are always wrapped in love.

Thursday, December 26

Luke 2:16-20

Laura Columbia

A few things strike me about this passage. First, that God sent His angels to mere shepherds to notify them of Jesus's birth. Jesus spent his entire ministry hanging out with the least, the lost and the last; so, it is very fitting his birth was attended by people considered to be the lowest of the social class of the time. Also, according to Google, the word "shepherd" is used over 200 times in the Bible. I believe the shepherds in this birth narrative are yet one more reminder that HE is *our* shepherd and we are His sheep. And that He loves us unconditionally, no matter what our social or economic circumstances may be. He loves us so much that He sent His only son to save us from our sins – I can't think of a greater love than that.

Finally, I wonder how Mary truly felt. Certainly, after traveling so far on a donkey and just giving birth in a stable, she must have been completely exhausted, mentally and physically! I'm also not sure how I would have reacted to having a bunch of strange men show up, wanting to see my newly born child?! However, I am certain both she and Joseph had to have felt the Lord was with them. Their amount of faith is something to aspire to – trusting God in a time of great uncertainty and even in a time of fearfulness.

So, what does this mean for us now, the day after Christmas? This can certainly be a hard time of year for many people. Illness, loss of friends or loved ones, worries about jobs or money – these things can rob us of the true meaning of Christmas. I pray if you are struggling through this holiday season, you remember God loves you and is always with you. And that you are able to go into the New Year knowing you are loved, and with feelings of peace and hope. May God bless you.

Friday, December 27

Matthew 2:1-12

Gary Scott

It is interesting to me how the two characters in this part of the Birth narrative approach the birth of Jesus in opposite directions. The Magi (or as we call them, the Wise Men), were scholars and mystics from the area of Persia who play a major role in the verification of the

nativity. They had been observing astrology, signs, and studying historic texts like the prophet Micah for a long time, anticipating a significant event. They weren't Jewish, likely Zoroastrian (an ancient and monotheistic religion centered on the battle between Good and Evil). They were so certain of the prophecy, they were compelled to make a journey of several months over arduous terrain (think Ashland to Paducah through desert on camels). Obviously they were men of means and authority, and after finally reaching Jesus in Bethlehem, they knelt before Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in acknowledgement of his royal status.

Then they went home—never to be heard from again.

Contrast Herod, who approached the news of a newborn King with fear, anxiety, anger, and finally deceit. His only motive for finding Jesus was to eliminate any threat to his reign.

Of course we know the rest of the Bible story. While it would certainly have been refreshing to be welcomed to the area by King Herod after the long journey, the Magi ultimately were not drawn into the scheme. We also know Herod unsuccessfully tried to eliminate the threat by ordering the killing of male children in Bethlehem. But again, God intervened with guidance in both situations.

The actions and contrasts in this part of the Birth narrative are clear—the triumph of good over evil and God's guiding hand are certainly message enough to absorb. However, I find myself musing about other facets of the story. One intriguing aspect is that the "good guys" were not Jewish—a theme which occurs numerous times in the Bible (consider Rahab, Boaz, Bathsheba) where Jesus' lineage and existence was dependent on someone other than the "chosen ones". Some cite this as an early signal that Jesus' love and grace would be for every person, and not just a select group.

Another compelling thought is that I would like to have read a verse which said, "And the Magi spread the Word to all they met on their way, and the words of their encounter with Jesus were recorded in the scrolls." But alas, there is no such record. It is obvious that their sole purpose was to validate Micah's prophecy and Jesus' royalty.

Finally, I am drawn to recall Henry VanDyke's wonderful story of *The Fourth Wise Man*, who also traveled to worship Jesus and bring gifts of precious stones. However, along the way he encountered several situations of need and peril, and he slowly traded and sold his gift items to save and help others—a precursor to Jesus' message of helping "the least of these."

Certainly none of us will model the Herod character, and while we may aspire to the excitement of the star discovery and travel of the Magi, our role is different. We can be thankful for the Magi's journey and validation, but our job is to live and share the Good News here and now. I believe we are called to act more like VanDyke's Wise Man, whose interaction with others was just as Jesus desires.

Saturday, December 28

“The Work of Christmas”

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the pris’ner, to rebuild the nations; to bring peace among brothers, to make music from the heart.

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins.

Words by Howard Thurman

Copyright 2014 by Beckenhorst Press, Inc./ CCLI # 403620