

brought to the light



**2025 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
BY THE PEOPLE OF
MARVIN METHODIST CHURCH**

Foreword

Once again, now for the seventh year, Marvin Methodist Church presents Advent Devotionals written by the laity of Marvin Methodist Church. Our theme and title: Brought to the Light. What an inspiring theme.

I dedicate this edition to one of our writers who died in October, Dr. Donald Richard “Dick” Knarr. Dick and I became friends several years ago. If you have read the devotionals over the past years, you may recall some of Dick’s offerings—they were uniformly remarkable, inspiring, provoking, and glorious. I rest in knowing that Dick is seeing Jesus, face to face, worshiping and awestruck by the Shekinah glory of the triune God.

If something you read in this devotional book inspires you, provokes you, leads you to think in a new way, feel free to let the writer know. An email or phone number for texts is provided.

Advent 2025 begins our journey through Year A of the Lectionary. I’ve added the Nativity Story in Luke to the verses. After all, one of our goals is to get “ready” for Christmas.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to lead this project under the direction of Pastor Marc Donaldson. As Marc would lead us to say, “Come, Holy Spirit”!

May your Advent be filled with wonder and awe, with a new song in your heart and mind, as we are brought to the Light, that is Christ Jesus. Born a baby to die for our sins, defeat death, and bring us into a relationship with God. Merry Christmas!

If you want to try your hand at writing, we are always looking for new writers. Please email me and let me know. Lent is just around the corner.

God’s deepest blessings on you and those you love.

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Acknowledgments

This devotional guide was written and produced by members of Marvin Methodist Church in Tyler, Texas. It is meant for the reader to use during the twenty-nine days of Advent, beginning November 27 and ending on December 25. The scripture passages were taken partly from the Revised Common Lectionary furnished by the Vanderbilt Divinity School (Year A), with additional selected passages.

Each day provides the reader the selection of scripture to read and a devotional. Some raise questions, some end in prayer. All point to the powerful message of Jesus in the prophetic voices of the Psalmists and Prophets, in the letters of the first followers of Jesus, in the Gospel accounts of His birth, and ultimately in His life, His death and resurrection. For, you see, there is no Christmas story without the rest of the story. There is no Christmas story without the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

Thanks to our contributing writers—all twenty-seven of them: Catherine Gaertner, Jan McCauley, Chris Hill, Christy Hill, Rosie Niebuhr, Regina Childress, Laura Jackson, Laurie Tuttle, Heather Jones, Danielle Strain, Jake Strain, Debbi Hill, Charles Hill, Randy Cook, Shawn Odendhal, Janie Pritchard, Dale Ross, Paul Breedlove, John Durbin, David Ward, Mac Griffith, Mike Simpson, Peggy Berry, Kathy Willis, Karen McBee, Louise Dyer, and John Berry. John Berry again spearheaded the project this year. Special thanks to Pastor Marc Donaldson for his counsel and leadership on this project, to Cyndi Behrend and Danielle Strain for their design work and publishing expertise (outstanding as usual), and to many other members of the staff and volunteers of Marvin Methodist Church for help in printing and assembling the devotional books.

Most of all, thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for setting this world in motion, knowing that these days would open opportunities for us to wonder at it all.

May God be glorified and may you be blessed. Come Holy Spirit! Work in us this day and every day!

The First Day of Advent
Thursday, November 27, 2025
James 4: 1-10

What Do You Want For Christmas?

As we consider the Christmas season, our minds turn to buying gifts for our friends and family, and then turn to letting those friends and family members know what we want for Christmas. Then Christmas morning comes and we get to enjoy (endure?) our children and grandchildren opening presents. While our minds long for a relaxing and pleasant time where everyone is happy, taking turns opening their gifts, often the scene devolves into an argument about a sibling receiving what another sibling wanted, shouts of “That’s Not Fair” returned with shouts of “You Should be Grateful”, and on and on.

I know that the early Christians did not celebrate Christmas morning with gifts under a tree. Still, James has words that apply to the unpleasant scene I mentioned above, because James knows both our human nature and the grace of God. James comments on the causes of fights, quarrels, covetousness, wrong motives and the double mindedness of humans. Generally, the cause is friendship with the world, which in turn, causes enmity against God. James also knows the solution to our plight—more and more grace as we submit to God, resist the devil, purify our hearts and remove double-mindedness. It’s so easy to read this passage and understand these words. It’s not so easy to remove our love for things of this world, remove thoughts of comparing ourselves to others, and having the mindset of submission.

So why does Advent start with such a downer lesson? Why couldn’t we concentrate on the beautiful story of the baby born in Bethlehem, surrounded by angels announcing his birth, shepherds leaving their flocks to worship him, magi bringing him gifts and Mary pondering these things in her heart? Why are we not to focus on what we want for Christmas, but to focus on worshiping God alone? Why indeed?

This is difficult for me. Am I too comfortable in this world? Do I enjoy it too much? Am I prone to arguing, coveting,

wanting what I don’t have, comparing my plight to others who appear to be more fortunate? Or am I so content in my circumstances, that I am happy to just sit back and gloat?

This passage hits me right between the eyes. As difficult as it is, my instructions are to make God the focus of my desires, my thought, my wants. Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (vs 10). There you go. That’s the solution.

May our Advent focus not be on ourselves, what we want, and the unfairness when others get what we “deserve”, rather, let us focus on that purest of light, which is Jesus Christ. Instead of considering what we have or don’t have, ponder on how that Glorious Light left the Right Hand of God, entered the world as a baby, miraculously born of a virgin, and how Jesus brought the Kingdom of God to us, right here and right now, ready for us to grab it and not let go.

Merry Christmas everyone. Let’s begin this journey together.

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Friday, November 28, 2025

Psalm 122

Peace Within Our Walls

This psalm is believed to be a song of ascent written by David for the Israelites as they traveled to the temple in Jerusalem. It begins by rejoicing in their ability to worship together in the Lord's house and continues with praying for peace in Jerusalem.

As the old saying goes, you don't know what you have until it's gone. During the Covid lockdown when isolation was the norm and congregating with large groups was denied, everyone realized how important communal worship really is. As hard as everyone tried with livestream videos of the service online and facetime phone calls, there is no substitute for worshipping together. Warm handshakes, voices singing hymns all around you, kneeling at the communion rail together, were all dearly missed. When the guidelines finally relaxed enough to congregate in person, the opening words of this psalm expressed the joy we were all feeling:

*I rejoiced with those who said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."* Psalm 122:1

Although David refers to Jerusalem later in the psalm, his prayers apply to the church today, as well. David wrote:

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
"May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels."
For the sake of my family and friends,
I will say, "Peace be within you."
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your prosperity.* Psalm 122:6-9

Without having peace within the church, how are we to focus on the Lord? We cannot worship and bring new

believers to the Lord if we are bickering amongst ourselves. Much like rowing a boat, if the oars are not pulling the same direction, the boat cannot go forward. As we have peace within the church, it will prosper for the Lord.

This Advent season while you worship, look around and be thankful for the togetherness and the shared purpose of our Church family.

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Saturday, November 29, 2025
Genesis 6:11-22

What's Obedience?

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks. I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them." Noah did everything just as God commanded him. Genesis 6:11-22

When I reflect how I viewed this story as a child to how I see it now, the last line is what sticks with me most, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him."

The enormity of that line isn't lost on me. Noah did EVERYTHING, not just some things. When I think of the things God has called me to do...how have I responded?

Honestly, I've done it with a clause that says, "I'll do it, but I'll do it my way or what makes sense or the most convenient for me."

I am so challenged by Noah that he did just as God commanded him. He may have had reservations, been afraid to make a mistake, or even afraid of being mocked or made fun of, but he did it anyway. These scriptures don't tell us how Noah was feeling, but we can only imagine if we think about how we would've responded in his position.

There will be times in our life that we may be called to do something that makes little to no sense. We've got to resist the temptation to begrudgingly dig our heels in and instead, choose to put our faith into action. If we don't and focus on what others think, we miss out on the opportunity to have a life-changing encounter with our God. Our pastors challenge us to experience God's presence, and we have to listen to God's voice and not the voice of the world.

How do we accomplish this? We regularly examine our life for things that are inviting sin into our world. The noise of our lives drowns out the things that alert us to the issue. Then before we know it, the day-to-day rhythms of life flood our lives causing us to put our spiritual disciplines on the back burner ultimately causing destruction.

Noah heard and recognized God's voice. I wholeheartedly believe that the same God that spoke to Noah then, is the same God that speaks to us like this today. This isn't the last example of God asking an ordinary person to do extraordinary things.

In these verses, God is making it clear that this is happening at His hand. God has given Noah very detailed, explicit instructions to follow. God holds the same standards for us today as he did for Noah back then.

As we enter this Advent season and gearing up for new beginnings in 2026, what is God calling you into? What fears or worries do you have that can hinder you from pursuing it? Remember, God can be fully trusted. He is merciful and just. He graciously gives us a chance to make things right by confessing and repenting. He always rewards those who choose to walk closely with him in righteous obedience.

The older I get, I find myself saying, "where has the time gone? How is it Christmas already? Time truly is short, and we can squander it living to do what feels good at the moment, or I can live with my heart, mind, and actions focused on God. Just like in today's scriptures, one path leads to death, and one path leads to life. My prayer for you this season is that you will Behold Christ. Choose Him and abundant life daily.

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Sunday, November 30, 2025
The First Sunday in Advent
Romans 13:11-14

The Call to Action

As you read this passage, listen for the trumpets being blown calling you to action. Go ahead, I'll wait because I want you to hear the summons.

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

I view Paul as a no nonsense type of guy – he does not want to hear my latest knock-knock joke (and I don't blame him). But he is very interested to hear and see what I am doing to live according to God's plan for my life. Why do I say this...well, look at these verses.

First of all, there is the call to "wake from sleep". Do not take this as a gentle nudge that "it's time to get up", like we used to do 100 times every school morning with our daughter when she was a teenager. No, this is warning that if we have been backsliding in our Christ-like behavior, we need to stop it – NOW!

Why?

Because the final stage of our salvation comes closer every day – the day of Christ's return and our time with Him forever – and we need to be in our best form for that event!

Paul is very specific in his expectations when he tells us to cast off those things that are dark and, thus, bring darkness into our lives – addictions, sexual impropriety, relationship issues. Instead, he says we are to "put on the

Lord Jesus Christ”.

What does that mean, Paul, I’ve never worn another person before so can you give me a little help here? This metaphor draws our thoughts to the clothing we wear daily. When others look at us, they see us clothed in the apparel we have selected for the day. Likewise, there is nothing closer to us on any given day than the clothes we are wearing. Therefore, when we “put on Jesus”, we are modeling how a Christian walks, talks and behaves for others to experience, because we are allowing the Holy Spirit to guide our actions, thoughts and behaviors. There is no room for unholiness (or ways of the flesh) in our mind and therefore in our actions.

The night (darkness) is indeed gone and the day (light) is where we dwell. And our “clothes” have already been laid out for us – did you catch that – we are to wear “the armor of light”. As we are told (by Paul) in Ephesians 6:11– “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil”. As we respond to this call to **action**, we are properly attired to do battle with whatever comes our way. For we are conquerors through the One who holds us in His hands and saves us!

Amen!

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Monday, December 1, 2025

Psalm 124

The Lord is On Our Side

A song of ascents. Of David.

*If the Lord had not been on our side—
let Israel say—*

*if the Lord had not been on our side
when people attacked us,
they would have swallowed us alive
when their anger flared against us;
the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,
the raging waters
would have swept us away.*

*Praise be to the Lord,
who has not let us be torn by their teeth.*

*We have escaped like a bird
from the fowler’s snare;
the snare has been broken,
and we have escaped.*

*Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 124*

Oh, David. Truly a “man after God’s own heart”. Through all of David’s gigantic shortcomings and gigantic failures, he had gigantic faith. He knew he and his people must rely on God’s strength and protection above all else.

His descriptors are very serious, and the consequences should give anyone pause. They were a successful people and free while David led them and reminded them. Future generations failed to acknowledge the Lord and the torrent came.

In the footsteps of those who came before us, it is now up to us to encourage those around us to have faith to acknowledge the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Lord, protect us from the fowler’s snare!

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Tuesday, December 2, 2025

Hebrews 11:32-40

Assurance About What We Do Not See

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Hebrews 11:39-40

The book of Hebrews is written to encourage Jewish believers in Christ to hold steadfast to their faith and persevere through difficult times. To prove this point in Chapter 11, the author starts with the "Hall of Faith" – a list of heroes in the pre-Christian era who trusted God despite hardship – and did remarkable things. They looked forward to a future that would not be realized until the coming of Christ.

When Hebrews was written, Christians were beginning to turn away from Christ amid the religious, political, and societal pressures of the time. They were tempted to revert to their old Jewish practices. They needed to be reminded of the power and majesty of God, and of his promise of something better which was fulfilled by Christ. These people needed hope in things to come so they would continue in their journey with Christ.

What are your struggles? Your health, family, job, finances, the unrest in our country, the political climate in the world, something else? Your struggles are of no less importance than those of the early Christians, or the early Israelites. Look back at what God has brought you through thus far. Don't you think he will do the same for you now?

We are called to cling to our faith and follow God's instructions, believing that he will see us through. If you don't know what God's instructions for you are, try Wesley's Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience. (And maybe add a little prayer, too.)

Verse 40 in Chapter 11 says that God has planned something better for us. Sometimes having something to look forward to helps me put today in perspective. Isn't that why Jesus came? To be our perspective?

Thought for the day: What are three struggles in the past year that I could not handle on my own and that God brought me through?

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Wednesday, December 3, 2025

Matthew 24:36-44

While We Wait

Waiting is a season of hope mixed with uncertainty, where anticipation and anxiety dance to a song filled with joy and longing. As followers of Christ, we live in the tension between these emotions while we await His promised return, trusting that the day will arrive, but not knowing when.

In a sin-ruined world where instant gratification reigns, we tend to wait anxiously – longing for the day our Savior will snatch us away from this wicked worldly system that is determined to distract and destroy us. At times, impatience prevails. Our will is weakened by the siren call of quick comfort that promises to satisfy our primal cravings for pleasure, power and position, and we succumb to the destructive desires of our own sinful nature.

Emmanuel entered the muddled mess of our fallen world to endure our suffering and bear the burden of our sin. He came proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven, where the poor and powerless can find rest and peace, and with His hands He delivered healing, freedom, and life to all who called upon His name.

To His followers, He spoke of the day to come when sin and sickness would be no more. Evil would finally be vanquished. He told of signs and seasons that would point to that glorious day and assured those who trust His words that His return would be sudden but evident, like lightning filling the sky.

Those who study His teachings will find that an obsessive preoccupation with the specific day of His return was not His desired response from those following His message. The continued proclamation of His Kingdom, accompanied by the fruit of His Spirit alive in His followers, is the intended focus for those who await His return.

In our waiting, liturgical rhythms such as Advent help train us for lives of obedience to His ways, wherein we are

empowered to resist the pull to conform to the ways of this world. By immersing ourselves in the life and story of Jesus Christ, our hearts are awakened to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Jesus Christ will return.

While we wait, may we live our lives surrendered to His call and keep proclaiming the good news of His Kingdom by loving the least, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned.

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Thursday, December 4, 2025

Isaiah 4:2-6

The Branch of the Lord

In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion. He will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain. Isaiah 4:2-6

Advent is a time of anticipation, waiting and celebration. The First Advent is a celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Second Advent is a period of anticipation awaiting Christ's ultimate return as King and the culmination of God's plan for us and all humanity. Advent is a period of hope and reassurance, that despite the trials and tribulations of this world, God is sovereign, and He is present in our lives. He is our refuge and our hope. We are encouraged to stay committed to the Lord and our faith, even in the face of adversity and uncertainty.

Our devotional scripture today comes from Isaiah, who speaks to us of Christ's Second Advent, 700 years before Christ's birth. Isaiah was a major Old Testament prophet of the Lord who began his ministry around 740 BC. His prophecies were directed primarily to the people of Judah during the period of the divided kingdom. He foresaw and prophesied the coming of Babylonian captivity because of Judah's idolatry and departure from the Lord. He prophesied God's judgment against Judah's enemy nations. Isaiah prophesied both the First Advent, Christ's birth (Isaiah 7:14), and the Second Advent, His return as

King, as did Prophets Daniel, Zechariah, Amos, Jeremiah, and Joel. The Hebrew Scriptures indicate that the Promised One would appear, be cut down, and then reappear in victory. In the New Testament, Christ referred to His return in glory, particularly in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. Isaiah's warnings of destruction were tempered by the hope and the promise of redemption, restoration, and protection through the Lord.

Today's devotional refers to the kingdom of Judah at a time prior to their exile to Babylon and is a prophecy of **hope and reassurance**. Despite the trials that are to happen to them: exile, death, destruction, Isaiah's prophecy in Verse 2 speaks of the "Branch of the Lord", pointing to the Messiah, Jesus Christ who will bring "beauty and glory", and prosperity and blessings bestowed by God. Those faithful to the Lord will be rewarded.

In verses 3 and 4, Isaiah speaks of **restoration**, "those being left in Zion" will be cleansed by a spirit of judgment and fire, and then "will be called Holy". They will be sanctified and set apart for God's purposes. The prophet Zechariah (3:8) also spoke of "My Servant, the Branch", bringing cleansing and restoration to the people of Israel. Those faithful to the Lord will be restored.

In Verse 5, after cleansing, Isaiah states that the Lord, his Glory, the Shekinah glory, will return to form a canopy over everything, serving as a shelter, a refuge, or a sanctuary from affliction, persecution and divine wrath. In Verse 6, he echoed Psalm 91:1-2, that the Lord is "my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust". Those with steadfast faith in the Lord will be protected.

Isaiah 4:2-6 reminds us of God's faithfulness and the assurance of His presence and protection. Isaiah's words were reassuring and a comfort to His people. Despite their own sinfulness and the trouble ahead, the Lord will keep His promises and fulfill His covenants. As we await His final Advent, let the peace of the Lord blanket us. Seek His presence daily through the Holy Spirit, prayer, worship, and the Word. Call on Him in times of need. And give Him praise and thanksgiving for His steadfast love and protection.

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Friday, December 5, 2025

Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19

King of Kings

*May the glory of the king
shine brightly forever;
like the sun in the sky.*

*Let him make nations prosper
and learn to praise him. Psalm 72:17*

Psalm 72 was written as a coronation prayer for Solomon. He succeeded his father David and reigned over Israel during its Golden Age. The prayer asks God to imbue the new king with the qualities of righteousness and justice. We know that Solomon asked God for wisdom to rule the kingdom well, and that started with a respect for the Lord and a desire to follow his ways. A godly rule will demand justice for all the people, dignity for the vulnerable, safety from threats, and accountability for all those in positions of authority. For many years, this was true of Solomon's reign. But being human, he fell short of this goal, as did successive kings, until at last, Israel was conquered.

But this psalm also contains a message about the coming Messiah, one who will rule with righteousness and bring peace to all the world. We know that Jesus came to save the lost, heal the sick and dying, and establish a relationship with everyone who believes in him. He is the King of Righteousness and the Prince of Peace, and he will reign over a kingdom that will have no end.

In a world that sees violence and bloodshed every day, hatred shouted in the streets and written online, we long to see that promised kingdom. The good news is that we can enter that kingdom by inviting Jesus into our hearts.

During this Advent season, may we surrender ourselves to Jesus and let him firmly root himself in our hearts. Let us share this good news with others so they can discover this kingdom of peace and righteousness here and now, and throughout eternity.

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Saturday, December 6, 2025

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort in the Coming King

*"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned..."*

A voice cries:

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

Isaiah 40:1-5

1. The God Who Speaks Comfort

The first word of Advent in Isaiah's prophecy is not repent or prepare—it is comfort. In the quiet after judgment, God breaks the silence with compassion. His people have suffered long exile; they have known failure, loss, and distance from His presence. Yet here, the Lord speaks as a Father who cannot forget His children: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."

God's comfort does not ignore sin—it heals it. "Her iniquity is pardoned." These words reach forward to Bethlehem and Calvary, where the Word made flesh would carry our iniquity finally. The comfort of Advent is not sentimental, it is redemptive. It is the deep sigh of relief that comes when grace meets guilt and mercy overcomes judgment.

I have always been intrigued by the fact that the Old Testament has 39 Books and ends with the message of God through the Prophet Malachi preaching repentance, judgment and hope, and just like Isaiah had chapters of judgment and hope up to chapter 39, now Chapter 40 bursts open with passages full of comfort and hope. So,

then we come to the 40th book of the bible, Matthew, which brings us even closer to the promise of hope fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.

2. Preparing the Way of the Lord

*"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness
prepare the way of the Lord.'"*

Isaiah 40:3

The wilderness in Scripture is often a place of testing and purification. Israel wandered there for forty years; John the Baptist cried out there, calling for hearts to be made ready.

Advent invites us into that wilderness—a place free of distraction, where we can hear God's voice again. The prophet's imagery of leveling mountains and raising valleys reminds us that God comes not to those who have it all together, but to those who make room for Him in humility. Humility is the key to knowing God intimately. Pride must be lowered; despair must be lifted by God's Mercy; crooked ways must be made straight through repentance, humility, and grace.

The Puritan John Flavel described humility as the believer's right understanding of his own sinfulness and dependence on God's mercy: "They that know God will be humble; and they that know themselves cannot be proud."

This is the inner work of Advent—to prepare a highway for our God through the desert of our own hearts.

3. The Word That Endures

*"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like
the flower of the field.*

*The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever."*

Isaiah 40:6–8

Here, Isaiah reminds us of the fragility of life. Human strength, wealth, and glory—so dazzling in their season—wither like grass. Yet in this fleeting world, one thing endures: The Word of our God. We can take great comfort in knowing that the Word of God proceeds from the eternal, immutable, unchanging, Holy God who says to us

with love: Comfort, Ye My People.

This promise anchors Advent hope. Empires rise and fall; kings come and go; yet the promise spoken in Isaiah stands unbroken fulfilled in Christ, the living Word who came to dwell among us. The child born in Bethlehem was the eternal Word through whom all things were made, now clothed in humility and grace.

When we feel uncertain or afraid, this verse steadies us: God's Word still stands. His promises remain strong, unaffected by our shortcomings or the decline of the world. They remain as sure as the rising of the Sun.

4. The Shepherd Who Comes

*"Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him...
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young."*

Isaiah 40:10–11

What a tender contrast: the Lord who comes "with might" also comes with mercy. The conquering King is also the compassionate Shepherd. His strong arm subdues the powers of evil, but the same arm gathers His lambs and carries them close to His heart.

This is the mystery of Advent: this infinite, mighty God becomes an infant; the eternal Ruler of heaven stoops to cradle the weary. He is sovereign and gentle—enough to save, loving enough to stay.

In a world of fear, destruction and confusion, this Shepherd still calls to His sheep. He does not drive them, He leads them. He does not break the bruised reed, He binds it up. It shows the tender, merciful; character of Christ toward those who are sick, weak, failing, discouraged and lost. Advent comfort is found here—in the arms of Christ who gathers us, holds us, and carries us home.

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Sunday, December 7, 2025

Matthew 3:1-12

Preparing the Way—John the Baptist

The gospel of Matthew shows that Jesus is the Messiah of the Old Testament and that his mission is to bring the Kingdom of God to all.

Since Malachi, there had not been a prophet for 300 years. In Matthew 3, we have a familiar story to all Christians of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness by the Jordan River. He exhorted all to repent of their sins and be baptized.

*“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance,
but he who is coming after me is mightier than I,
and I am not fit to remove his sandals; He will baptize
you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* Matthew 3:11

John the Baptist was attracting multitudes from the cities and all parts of the country to hear his message to repent and be baptized. However, some came for other reasons (Pharisees and Sadducees). John recognized them for who they really were (vs 7) and warned them not to rely on their heritage for their salvation.

Remember, God sees our heart. Who do we rely on for our salvation? What are the fruits of our salvation?

Today we live in a society, not unlike the one of John the Baptist. We have many gods: self-importance, money, success, and many, many more. Sometimes it seems that our pride controls our every thought. Who and what do I put on the throne of God?

John the Baptist preached repentance, but also judgment (vs. 12) and the coming of Jesus to provide eternal salvation for all.

There is a prayer my Discipleship Band prays every time we meet. I would like to share it with you. It was written by J. D. Walt, from Ephesians 3:18.

Heavenly Father, we pray that out of your glorious riches you would strengthen us with your power through your

Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And we pray that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses all knowledge that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Monday, December 8, 2025

Psalms 21

Trust

*For the king trusts in the Lord;
through the unfailing love of the Most High
he will not be shaken. Psalm 21:7*

Trust in the Lord. I asked Google "How many times does the phrase 'Trust in the Lord' appear in the Bible?" Our new friend AI gave a wonderfully vague answer because it all comes down to the translation. But one tidbit was that the word 'Trust' is used the most in the book of Psalms, between 40-60 times (depending on the translation). But what is trust? And what is it to trust in the Lord?

Psalm 21 is the second half of a call to the Lord with Psalm 20. That Psalm is a petition for victory in one of the battles David fought to secure Israel as a nation. Psalm 21 is the victory song after the battle. Both of these, according to researchers and scholars, are sung in worship. They are also Messianic, foreshadowing Christ's reign.

But what does that have to do with us? We are not charging into battle with swords and armor, looking to vanquish enemies from our land. But we are in a battle.

This past spring, my husband and I acted on a God nudge. We have a student that was in an untenable situation. Medical neglect, emotional abuse, substance abuse in the house was pushing this young man to a point of desperation. A place where his choice was to leave the house and live in an imaginary vehicle. I heard the story first, took Seth to my husband and made him tell it again, and I began working with our school counselors and resource officers to find out what we could legally do. He was 17 so he could leave home without parents' permission and not be considered a runaway. CPS was not really interested because of his age. Easter weekend, he packed up everything he owned and moved in with us. We all were trusting the Lord would clear the path and protect us from enemies.

This young man needed \$24,000 in dental work. That is outrageous on so many levels. That a parent would neglect their child to the point that the only option is pulling 6 teeth and having 12 root canals is simply unbelievable to me. We put out the call to the community of Kilgore and our friends. There is a benevolent group in Kilgore that offered to cover some of the costs. A dentist in town did all of the clock work pro bono. We set up a go fund me and raised \$7000 to pay for his bridge work. And now, Seth has a confident smile and his health is in a much more secure place. We stepped out in the trust of the Lord.

The other thing that was happening in his life at this time is something that some overlook. A month before his mother told Seth to figure out where to live because he wasn't staying there, he had started to go to church with some of his friends. This church is a new one planted a few years ago by two of our high school teachers. And Seth doesn't want to miss anything, God is working in his life and the devil didn't like it. Evil tried to derail Seth from his new path but I recognized God's nudge in my life and stepped in that gap. There will be victory in the battle. Christ will claim victory in the world. Seth hasn't made a profession of faith yet, but his life is now on a path of hope. He has seen first-hand what people will do for someone they do not know, what people are willing to do because God says 'do it'. That has changed him. And us. Let trust change you.

Prayer for the day "Open my eyes Lord, that I may find the place I can step up and trust in you."

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Tuesday, December 9, 2025
Isaiah 41:14-20

Never Forsaken

In the verses of today's devotional, God is promising the Israelites that He will deliver and protect them as they leave Babylon. They have been in bondage for 70 years and fear attack by other nations as they make their way back to Israel.

God declares to them that He will be their redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, by protecting them from harm. He declares that He will answer their pleas and not forsake them. This is the key promise. As we celebrate Advent, we see God's hand in not only not forsaking Israel but all mankind.

While the Israelites had God in the temple to worship and sacrifice to, there were no personal relationships with individuals. At Advent, we celebrate God's love and commitment to all people by His sending Jesus, the Savior and Redeemer. Jesus, the Messiah, created a path for a personal relationship with God which had not been available to the Israelites.

Now we can go directly to Jesus, our Redeemer, for strength and comfort in troubled times. God has literally moved His kingdom from heaven to earth. Praise God for His promises, provision, and protection.

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Wednesday, December 10, 2025
Genesis 15: 1-18

Fear Not and Fulfill God's Purposes

So, most of us are familiar with this story about God's covenant with Abram. God comes to Abram in a vision and says "Fear not Abram. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." After Abram expresses doubts about having an heir, God promises that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. God establishes a formal covenant with Abram, confirming His promises of land and countless descendants. It's a beautiful story full of imagery and some big lessons.

I love the very first verse of Genesis 15. I actually looked it up to see how many times it says "fear not" or "do not be afraid" or some version close to that in the Bible. Google says it's 75 to 100 times for those exact phrases, but that number grows to 365 or so when you add in "do not worry" and other similar phrases. So, "Fear not, for I am your shield". What a powerful statement. The Almighty God is Abram's shield! He is his protector and defender. What else could he possibly need? Then God tells Abram "Your reward will be very great." He received God's covenant promise as a powerful reminder of God's commitment to His people but God himself was Abram's real reward, the reward of his faith was his relationship with God.

As we mark the days waiting again for the birth of the Christ child, we remember Abram's story because it speaks to the powerful themes of God's divine covenant promises that He will never break and His perfect timing as we wait for the blessed day. As we learn to wait patiently (a challenging lesson for some of us), we grow in faith and character, preparing us for the blessings to come. We are blessed with God's assurance in uncertainty knowing that as with Abram, He is our shield and protector too, guarding us from harm and guiding us through life's challenges.

Abram's journey with God started with obedience. When we follow His lead, even without all the details, we position ourselves to receive His blessings and fulfill His

purposes. The covenant ceremony in Genesis 15 involved sacrifices, foreshadowing Christ's death and resurrection. As we near the birth, we must also look past it and fully realize the enormous cost of our salvation and the great depth of God's love for us, calling us to live lives of gratitude and devotion, even as we celebrate the arrival of the baby.

*Gracious Heavenly Father,
Thank you for being our shield. Thank you for your
promises to us and thank you most of all for the
wondrous arrival of your Son that we celebrate. You gave
up so much for us and it hurts to imagine your hurt
knowing what He would face. Thank you for loving us that
much and for continuing to love us every day. We love
you Lord. Amen.*

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Thursday, December 11, 2025

Ruth 1:6-18

The Not-So-Ordinary Ordinary

Throughout the Bible, we see God's subtle but sovereign hand at work in the ordinary details of life. The story of Ruth is no exception. Within the story of Ruth, we read a foreshadowing of the coming Messiah, as well as the true meaning of Christmas. Within today's scripture, we read about the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the birth of Obed.

Although these might seem like ordinary details of life, they are anything but ordinary. Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner from a people who were historical enemies of Israel. Ruth was married to Mahlon, an Israelite man who moved to Moab with his parents, Elimelech and Naomi. While living in Moab, both Mahlon and Elimelech died and after their deaths, Ruth returns to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. In what seems like a chance encounter, Ruth catches the eye of Boaz, a kinsman of Ruth's deceased husband. Ruth and Boaz marry, and they conceive Obed. This may not seem like anything out of the ordinary, but as we read in Matthew 1:5-6, Obed is the father of Jesse, who is the father of King David, who is a direct ancestor of Jesus. Through Ruth, a foreigner and enemy of Israel, Jesus was a part of the royal line of the house of Israel.

The story of Ruth demonstrates that oftentimes God uses the ordinary details in the lives of ordinary people to achieve His extraordinary plans. Ruth's lineage reveals several profound truths about God's plan, demonstrating that his purposes unfold in unexpected ways and through unlikely people. Ruth's story is a testament to God's providence, redemption, and grace, and her inclusion in the ancestry of King David and, ultimately, Jesus Christ reveals a God whose plan is anything but ordinary.

I pray that during this Advent season, we celebrate the extraordinary things that God does in the ordinary details of our lives and that we meditate on the miracle of the incarnation. "Come, Thou long expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free; from our fears and sins release us. Let us find our rest in Thee."

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Friday, December 12, 2025

Ruth 4:13-17

The Circuitous Blessing

So much of Ruth chapter 4 strikes me as odd at first glance. All the way down to the blessings given. Boaz is no doubt a good man and Ruth and Naomi are both women to be admired for their perseverance and faith. I love how when Boaz made the decision to redeem Ruth by buying Naomi's land he does the right thing. He approaches the relative who has the closer claim and gives him the opportunity to be the guardian redeemer. We do not know much about this man, but he is eager to fulfill his duties... until he hears the catch. This piece of land comes with a wife! Boaz failed to mention that part. This relative gives the understandable reason he "cannot redeem it because it might endanger his own estate." I'm imagining a wife at home who would not have been too pleased with the new addition to the family.

When Boaz does buy the property and acquires (NIV's word not mine) Ruth, people offer the blessings of "may his home be like that of Rachel and Leah and his family like that of Perez, who Tamar bore to Judah." A little research into the lives of Rachel, Leah, Perez, and Tamar might make you question the "blessing" of these "blessings"! When we read the Bible stories of their lives we read about the deception and strife of Jacob and his relationships with Rachel and Leah. When we read about Perez we read of the scandal surrounding his birth. But what about the blessings that came through these hardships. Through Rachel and Leah came the family of Israel and through Tamar eventually came the Messiah, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

When Boaz redeemed Ruth in Ruth 4:13-17 her mother in-law, Naomi, was redeemed as well. Ruth bearing a son meant Naomi's position in society and security in her old age after the loss of her husband and sons was secure. And to top it off, this son would be part of the lineage of David, and in turn, Jesus. A greater blessing than Naomi was hoping for or imagining after deep heartache and suffering.

God used long and hard situations to bring about the redemption of the world. What could He be doing in and through your struggle?

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Saturday, December 13, 2025

1 Samuel 2:1-8

Gratitude: Not a Trend, a Transformation

Learning from Hannah's Heart of Thanksgiving

I'm always intrigued when I see people recognize Biblical truths without necessarily realizing that what they're living out comes straight from Scripture. Jess Sims, one of my favorite fitness coaches, ends every workout with a reflection that sticks with me. After she encourages exercisers to be thankful for the opportunity and ability to work out, she says, "It's not cliché, it's not corny, it's certainly not a trend. It's called gratitude, and when practiced consistently, it will change your life."

I don't know Sims' faith story. If she is a Christian, she does not share that during her classes. But she's right about this: Gratitude does change your life. It changes your outlook, your relationships, and your response to both joy and hardship. It reorients your heart from scarcity to abundance, from striving to surrender. Gratitude is not a temporary feeling; it's a spiritual posture.

When we read the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel, we see this kind of gratitude lived out in the most beautiful and perhaps the most challenging way. Hannah longed for a child for years. She prayed through her pain, and God finally granted her the son she so deeply desired. But what stands out is what Hannah did next: she thanked God...abundantly.

Her prayer in 1 Samuel 2 is one of the most powerful songs of thanksgiving in Scripture. It's full of joy, reverence, and recognition that all things - life, strength, and blessing - come from the Lord. But Hannah didn't just thank God with her words; she thanked Him with her actions. She fulfilled her promise and gave her beloved son, Samuel, to God's service.

What an act of gratitude and faith! Imagine how hard it must have been to hand over the very thing she had prayed for with tears. Yet her heart overflowed with thanksgiving, not resentment. She knew that God's gifts are meant to be used for His glory, not our grasping.

Hannah's story reminds us that gratitude isn't only about saying "thank you" when life goes our way, it's about trusting God enough to offer back to Him the blessings He's given us. Gratitude transforms our desires, our priorities, and even our sacrifices.

Today, take a moment to pause and practice that kind of gratitude. Thank God not only for what He's done, but also for who He is, and ask Him to help you live out that gratitude in action.

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Sunday, December 14, 2025

Psalms 146: 5-10

Being Defined

Oppressed. Hungry. Imprisoned. Blind. Bowed down.
Foreigner. Fatherless. Widow.

Have any of those words ever defined you?

*He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.*

He. He made you. He remains faithful to you.

Oppressed. Hungry. Imprisoned. Blind. Bowed down.
Foreigner. Fatherless. Widow.

How about those you love or ones you care for through
ministry? Do any of those words define those you care
for or about? Do they define those you feel sympathy for?
Empathy for? Do any of those words define them?

*He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.*

He. He made them. He remains faithful to them.

Oppressed. Hungry. Imprisoned. Blind. Bowed down.
Foreigner. Fatherless. Widow.

Or... What about those you might struggle to see? Struggle
to feel compassion for? Do any of those words define
them? Define their challenges and trials?

*He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.*

He. He made them. He remains faithful to them.

Can you even imagine the weight of those defining words
without the hope that can only come through God? How
do you live through oppression, hunger, death of loved
ones, and so many more trials without Him?

But... Blessed are those whose hope is in the Lord their
God. The Lord my God. The Lord your God.

The Lord reigns forever, for all generations.

In this season of Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of
our Christ, help us to remember to praise the Lord for all
the defining words He places on our heads, minds, and
hearts. Let us remember that He is the Maker of us all and
worthy of all our praise!

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Monday, December 15, 2024

Acts 5:12-16

More Than Temporary Healing

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed. Acts 5:12-16

In Acts 5:12-16, we see an incredible display of God's power working through the apostles as they perform signs and wonders among the people. These acts weren't just impressive sights; they served as divine confirmation of the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Because of these miracles, multitudes of people were drawn to Him and their lives were forever changed by God's grace.

Today, this passage challenges us to nurture our faith in God's ability to bring healing and renewal, not only in the lives of others but also within ourselves and our communities. It highlights how important fellowship, mutual support, and being living examples of God's love and power truly are. Just as the early church's faith and unity led many to Christ, our own lives and testimonies can serve as powerful catalysts to bring others closer to Him.

It's easy to find ourselves longing for the kind of dramatic miracles we read about. Why can't we bring sick and dying to Erwin Street and have them healed by the apostles? Why don't we have the ability to bring our loved ones to "Solomon's Colonnade" to be healed? But maybe we need to ask ourselves, are we sometimes so caught up in our daily routines and personal struggles that we miss the miracles happening all around us? Are our spiritual eyes clouded by distraction or complacency, preventing us from

seeing God's ongoing work? Miracles of grace, provision, and transformation happen constantly, often in quiet, unseen ways. Perhaps it's time for us to shift our perspective, to look beyond our limited view and recognize the abundant evidence of God's activity in our lives every day.

God is still at work, restoring, healing, and transforming. The real question is, are we aware of His presence? Are we open to witnessing His miracles, or are we missing them because our focus is elsewhere? When we learn to see with spiritual eyes, we realize that we are surrounded by divine interventions. Surrounded by blessings and acts of grace that can deepen our faith and gratitude.

And while the apostles' miracles often involved physical healing, they mainly pointed to a deeper spiritual truth. Physical signs are captivating, but they can also distract us from God's main goal, which is to heal the whole person; body, mind, and spirit. Every physical healing recorded in Scripture was temporary. The blind who saw, the lame who walked, all faced death in the end. But spiritual healing, an inward renewal, offers eternal life which was Christ's goal all along. When God transforms our spirit, He makes us whole from within. That inner change is what truly lasts and defines us.

God's greatest desire is to mend the wounds of the soul, our darkness, despair, and brokenness. This is where His work begins, and where real, lasting change happens. While physical healing remains part of His compassion, the deepest need of humanity is spiritual transformation. When this inward healing occurs, it naturally attracts others and leads to the growth of His church.

Acts 5:12-16 reminds us of the faith, unity, and divine power that characterized the early church. It calls us to strengthen our bonds with one another, trust wholeheartedly in God's miraculous abilities, and live courageously as witnesses of His love. As we reflect on the apostles' ministry, let's be inspired to live out our faith authentically, seeing beyond appearances to recognize God's ongoing work around and within us. Maybe it's time to open our spiritual eyes to the daily miracles happening in our lives so we can better appreciate His grace and more effectively share His love with a world longing for hope and healing.

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Tuesday, December 16, 2025

Psalm 42

Hunger and Thirst for God— Our Hope and Deliverer

While the author of the Psalm is uncertain, many believe it was David.

Overview Our friend, and very human, David, begins the Psalm with praise for God. Yet David is experiencing great hardship, suffering and persecution. He's likely in exile from Jerusalem and the Temple. His enemies mock him, questioning "Where is your God?" as David prays and trusts in Him. David expresses a deep yearning for God – as a deer pants for water. He ends the Psalm praising God and putting his hope in Him.

Dive Deeper From the beginning to the end of the Bible water is life. In Genesis 1:1-2 God created the heavens and earth and "darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." In Revelation 22:17 it states, "Come! Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life."

A deer needs water as a natural way to cool its body when overheated or to recover its breath after exertion like running from a predator. The Hebrew term translates it as a desperate need for something vital.

David knows God is what he needs – from the depths of his soul he cries out. A metaphor for how desperate one may feel when one has a vital thirst for water. "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me" (verse 7). A waterfall is powerful, cascading, thundering, majestic, driven by a force of nature, "consuming" David in his analogy. Just as God is vital to our soul, water is vital for life- our body and our soul!

Our David shares with God what God already knows. He is downcast and disturbed. He is mourning. He pours out his soul to God (verse 4). In our own humanness this is exactly what God wants from me and from you! Trust Him. He knows our hearts yet wants us to pour out our souls as

we open ourselves for what God would choose to reveal about Himself. As we trust Him.

Jump In! Consider, as I am, your own soul and yearning for God. As you drink water. Enjoy a view of the ocean or a lake. Feel thirsty after a workout. Cry out to God to fill your soul with living water (John 4:10), from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12:3), as in us a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Praise God!

For Reference The psalmist mentions praying specifically from Mount Mizar, a peak in the Mount Hermon range. The Jordan River begins at Mount Hermon, the northernmost boundary of Palestine, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. This stands some 9,000 feet above the Mediterranean Sea. Melting snow and rain from Mount Hermon sends water cascading into the Jordan River and into the Sea of Galilee.

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Wednesday, December 17, 2025

Luke 3:23-38

The Genealogies of Jesus or Who's Your Daddy?

This scripture is the genealogy of Jesus the "Son of man" according to Luke.

If you ask most people "tell me about your family "you will likely get the same answer..." which one?" You see, each of us has a father's story and a mother's story. The Bible tells us two stories about the lineage of Jesus. Although they mix and mingle, they tell two different stories to two different ancient audiences.

Jesus' lineage is recorded in Matthew 1:1-17 and starts with Abraham, goes through King David and ends with Joseph. It establishes Jesus in the Line of David and the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah would be born from the "Lineage of David." Clearly Matthew was written for a Jewish audience that was looking for the Messiah, The King of the Jews. The Jewish audience, being patriarchal, would expect Joseph to be the ending point of the genealogy, even though Jesus is not born from Joseph.

Luke tells a different story to a different audience. Most scholars think that although Luke starts with Joseph the phrase "as was supposed" suggests that he is actually using Mary's lineage. The two lines merge with the family of David as we see David's son Solomon through Joseph and David's son Nathan through Mary. Luke then continues until he ultimately shows Jesus as the Son of Adam. Why would he do that? As we said he was writing to a different audience, Gentiles.

We come to the wonderful place in scripture where we consider the fact that Jesus was BOTH the Messiah, the King of the Jews, and the Son of Man (Adam). Both fully God and fully Man, tempted as we are and yet without blemish! At this season of Advent as we celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, we ponder The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the World! Amen and Praise God!

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Thursday, December 18, 2025

Luke 1:26-38

Greetings

"Greetings, you have been sued."

"Greetings, you have been subpoenaed for jury duty."

"Greetings, your presence in Court is required on the ____ day of _____, _____."

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The LORD is with you."

The word "Greetings" has interesting connotations to those of us in the legal profession. Often "Greetings" is followed by bad news (a lawsuit) or inconvenient news (jury duty, court appearance). Following the "Greetings" will be reason to fear. Commands to file an answer to the allegations against you on a short deadline and the dread of expense and time and trouble, with an uncertain outcome, start to dance in your mind, increase your blood pressure, and generate anxiety in your heart. A multitude of "what ifs" race through your mind and you are troubled. You feel anything but highly favored.

Contrast this "Greetings" with the "Greetings" from the angel Gabriel to young Mary. There is a strong similarity, but that similarity is quickly resolved into contentment and wonder. Upon hearing her special angelic greeting, Mary is greatly troubled. I think you could say she was scared out of her mind and anxious at what was happening. I wonder if she even heard Gabriel say, "The LORD is with you." Those two words of "Fear Not", words that generally accompany a visit from an angel bringing God's greetings to a mere mortal, provide some quick relief and assurance. As the angel spoke, Mary began to understand, as much as any young woman could understand. The angel foretells the birth of Jesus to this young virgin. Her question of "how can this be" is quickly answered. It makes perfect sense and it makes no sense at all. And with the foretelling, there is a prophesy: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." Finally, "For no word from God will ever fail."

Mary's answer belies her young age. After this short encounter with Gabriel, her fear is gone. As she listens to each word from Gabriel, about the who, what, when, where and how of this history changing event, the greatest event of all time and for all time, Mary's response is perfect. "I am the LORD'S servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Gabriel, having accomplished this greeting and having heard Mary's perfect response, leaves. Mission Accomplished.

Mary's perfect response is a function of many attributes that we are to emulate. She is wise and learned. She knows the history of her people. She knows what it means to hear of Jacob and his descendants, David and his throne. She is familiar with the promises made in the prophets and psalms. Her heart is open and soft. It is not hard and closed. There is no cynicism in Mary. She hears, she questions the how, she receives the answer, she believes, she understands, she responds. Her humility encompasses all of her.

There are always lessons to draw from this beautiful encounter. Will you understand that the LORD is also with you? Do you likewise understand that you are the LORD'S servant? Can you bring yourself to avoid anxiety when faced with an encounter that you do not understand? That frightens you? Can you find the blessing? Can you accept the instructions of our LORD without hesitation? Can you put aside your ideas and affirm "May your word to me, Mighty God, be fulfilled."

Greetings.

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Friday, December 19, 2025

Luke 1:39-45

Salutation

And it came to pass, that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:41

"There you are."

The intonation of the greeting inferred, "I am expected."

This informal greeting creates a feeling of "warm acceptance."

I am desired. I am safe.

In my early development of Spiritual Insight, I experienced several initial introductions to people who eventually became my spiritual developers who greeted me with just such acknowledgment. "There you are." Oddly, my unscripted response was always, "Yes, I am here."

First century Mediterranean salutations were not flippant grunts of hurried acknowledgment. Strong's Greek Concordance instructs, "Public greetings indicated social status; omission was an insult. Within the synagogue and marketplace, elaborate greetings distinguished between the **respected and the common.**"

Hear, such a salutation:

"Hail Mary, you are highly favored, the LORD is with you, blessed among women." Mary, troubled at this salutation, cast about in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

"Listen...conceive in womb...son...name, JESUS, ...throne of David...Kingdom, no end."

Mary identified herself in order to curb the blows of the message receiving, "I am from Nazareth. I am a maiden, promised wife to Joseph. **Common.**"

Mary trembled as this Respected Man of Authority stood before her, casting forth a prophecy, fresh and yet familiar. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel".

"I am addressed by a man of Authority? Who is this? Who am I?"

The lesser becomes the Mighty. The under becomes the Over. The Kingdom of God activated.

The Scene and words disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

Kairos does not mind Chronos principles.

For Mary, THE WORD settled. THE BEING as divine. BECAUSE Mary answered in her heart, Let it Be according to THE WORD.

Divine Pronouncement Guides.

Had not this Man of Authority said also, "Listen, your cousin, Elizabeth, has conceived in her old age. She was called barren?" Mary again felt a familiar prophecy ring, "Sing, O barren woman, you who have never borne a child; burst into song, shout for joy."

"And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country, with haste. She pondered, "Is it possible, our roles are established. Our sons, Messiah ministers?" The Story, bigger, broader than two women deciphered in their meeting. Each woman buried in age and culture could not acknowledge the eternal message of the encounter. Could it be they were chosen?

"For with God, nothing shall be impossible. For the Word of God will not fail."

"And Mary entered into the house and saluted Elizabeth. And it came to pass that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost."

And she spake with a **megaphonic Spiritual Voice**,
"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why does the mother of my LORD appear to me? As soon as I heard your SALUTATION, the babe in me, leaped in my womb."

In that moment, when "Jove recognizes Jove," there is worship and splendour.

"My soul now magnifies the LORD and sings His Praise.

For His Mercy reaches out to me with hope and grace.

O the Glory of His Light, O the Power of His might.

My soul now magnifies the LORD. My Spirit rejoices in God!"

(Joseph Martin TIDINGS OF JOY)

Steven Furtick preached in a sermon, "God is looking for two people who are carrying the purpose of Jesus to bump into each other. When expectation meets expectation, faith starts to grow."

Come Holy Spirit, Come. Impregnate us with the Salvation of Jesus, now.

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Saturday, December 20, 2025

Luke 1:46–46

The Magnificat—Mary's Song of Praise

*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit
rejoices in God my Savior. Luke 1:46–47*

As Christmas draws near, it's the perfect time to ponder Mary's Magnificat—her song of praise. Read the entire passage and notice how her lyrics reveal humility, wisdom, and steadfast faith.

Mary's song shows remarkable knowledge of Scripture and deep trust in God, especially for someone so young. Her words echo the psalms and mirror Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. She places her personal story within God's sweeping story of redemption, focusing on mercy, remembrance, and promise.

Mary sang the Magnificat while visiting her relative Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. The song follows this scene:

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.'" (Luke 1:41–45 NIV)

Imagine Mary hearing this declaration! She must have been amazed at the confirmation of her calling and the impact her child would have on humankind. John leaped with joy; Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit as she recognized Jesus as her Lord; both responded to Christ's presence.

Their time together surely nourished Mary's faith. She likely left Elizabeth's home feeling strengthened—her confusion and overwhelm lifted—and her heart more aligned with God's purposes.

Mary's lyrics anticipate the values Jesus would later teach—blessings for the poor, hungry, and humble

(Luke 6:20–26). She even hints at divine justice overturning worldly power. In every line, she celebrates God's steadfast commitment to redeem His people.

Mary could have dwelled on fear, shame, or uncertainty. Her circumstances were daunting and her reputation at risk. Yet she chose to magnify God instead—to praise Him as Mighty, Merciful, and Majestic.

The word Magnificat comes from the Latin opening of her song, "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," meaning "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary sang with joy because she trusted the God who saves and keeps His promises.

Within her song we hear three resounding themes:

- **Exaltation.** Lifting high and glorifying the name of our holy God.
- **Reversal.** The proud brought low and the humble lifted up.
- **Fulfillment.** God's covenant with Israel realized through the coming of Christ.

I wrote a prayer inspired by Mary's Magnificat. I invite you to pray it along with me.

My Soul Rejoices

Father,
I long to widen
the window of Your glory—
to gaze upon the grace
that pours like sunlight,
unearned,
yet freely given.
You delight to use me—
frail, flawed,
a vessel for Your radiant love.
May others glimpse
Your reflection in me
and lift Your holy name
in praise.
Holy One—
pure strength, eternal light—
You alone
deserve all praise.
I stand in awe

beneath Your mercy's reach,
one soul among many
in a long line of believers
who have sung
of Your faithfulness.

Your mighty arm
reveals Your tender heart.
You set right
what is wrong.
You bring justice
through divine reversal.

You breathe worth
into the overlooked,
and set a table of abundance
for the hungry,
while withholding
the overflowing cornucopia
from the proud
and self-satisfied.

Your gift of Jesus
is Your embrace—
to every beloved child,
Your grace.

You heap mercy upon mercy,
fulfilling every promise spoken,
from Abraham
to this very breath.

You have delivered salvation,
and my soul
rejoices in You.

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Sunday, December 21, 2025

Luke 2:1-20

The Multiple Purposes of the Census

Today's verses are very familiar to most of us. If you were raised in a church-going family, ever attended a Christmas pageant or Christmas Eve church service, you've probably read or heard these words many times. That's why it's easy to skip over some of them, to get to "the good stuff." A little further in we see Baby Jesus lying in the manger, visited by shepherds and angels. But it is often best to tarry—to wait—upon each passage of God's Word because they ALL can have deep meaning for us. So, while we read Luke 2:1-20 today, just four days until Christmas, let's pause on verses 1-3.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered each to his own town. Luke 1:1-3

Luke's account of Jesus' birth is the only Gospel that gives us these details. These three verses give great insight into the political powers and conflicts that were unfolding as the world moved from B.C. to A.D. First, it's apparent that Caesar Augustus, Rome's first Emperor following the murder of Julius Caesar and the end of the Roman Republic, considered himself ruler of the world. Some translations indicate this declaration of "all the world" may be more accurately translated as "the Roman Empire," but either way, under Caesar Augustus this edict covered a lot of people.

Why did the Emperor want all the citizens of his far-flung empire to be registered? Today, we assume this was in preparation for a tax, and some Bible translations use the word "taxed" instead of "registered." This is because in the original texts the same word could be used for both; at times, it was even used to describe how kings determined the number of men available for military service.

That concept leads us back to the Old Testament. When God had Moses lead the Israelites from Egypt into the Promised Land, He wanted them always to remember that

HE alone was the key to their salvation from slavery and future protection. In Exodus 30:11-16, the Lord gave Moses very specific instructions about how a census was to be conducted. Key to this practice was that each man, 20 years and older, who was counted was to give the exact same amount (a half shekel) to the Temple as an atonement offering to God.

The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD's offering to make atonement for your lives. You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, so as to make atonement for your lives.

Exodus 30:14-15

There it is; the importance of focusing on words we often skip! Joseph is now headed toward Bethlehem to be counted, with his very pregnant young wife Mary carrying the final ultimate atonement for all of us inside her. God's son will pay, not a half shekel, but pay His life to atone for my sin and your sin. Notice also that just like with the amount of the atonement money, each of us is worth exactly the same in God's eyes. We are each worth the cost of His one and only son.

It is worth noting that this census, which forced Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem, was not ordered by a Jewish leader or by anyone who probably knew anything about the Lord's mandate through Moses. It was ordered by a polytheistic dictator who wanted an accurate accounting of how many men were now under his control, so he could tax them, command them or both, at some time in the future. But God used this political leader's order to fulfill His promises made hundreds of years before about exactly where the Messiah would be born. (Micah 5: 2-4) In the words of J.D. Walt, "Everything that happens is not God's will, but He has a will in everything that happens." Our God can and will use our circumstances (and Caesar's orders) to fulfill His promises.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for Your gift of Jesus as our perfect atonement. Amen.

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Monday, December 22, 2025

Luke 2: 8-14

Midnight Clear

I have sung in church choirs since I was a child. One thing I find fascinating is how the text of a hymn can take on a new meaning when a composer changes the music. This happened when rehearsing an arrangement of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" with the Marvin Chancel Choir last year. The arranger incorporated some of the traditional tune of this carol as well as new melodic lines in a minor key. The musical change drew my attention to the words of the carol.

Our scripture passage for today is reflected in the first verse of this carol written by Edmund H. Sears.

Verse 1

It came upon a midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
From heaven's all gracious king"
The world in silent stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

Verses 3 & 4 of this carol reflect both reality for us in our lives here on earth and hope for our lives to come.

Verse 3

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing; –
Oh, rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing!

I faced a disappointment last year in the Advent season. This text invited me to rest with my sadness. "...rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing." I wonder how many times I push on through my sorrow instead of

resting with God. Then I might hear God's comforting words to me: "My child, look for the glad and golden hours to come."

Verse 4

For lo! The days are hastening on,
By prophet seen of old,
When with the ever-circling years
Shall come the time foretold
When Peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

What a picture the hymn writer conveys with these words—peace flinging its splendors over the world. God's generosity will shower us with peace at Jesus' return as the troubles of this world fade away.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we look with anticipation for the day when we will give back the song which the angels sang. We will worship you with full hearts as the shepherds did on that first Christmas.

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Tuesday, December 23, 2025

Luke 2:25–38

Seeing Jesus

We see God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit at work in these passages of scripture. Here, we realize the more we seek to know God, the more intimate He becomes with us. What joy and love Simeon and Anna felt when God told them they would one day see the Messiah! What a wonderful gift from God! Simeon and Anna were a part of the faithful Jewish remnant that looked for their Messiah.

In our scriptures we see Simeon, Joseph, and Mary in the Temple. Why were Joseph and Mary in the Temple? Forty days after the first male child in a Jewish family was born, the parents were to go to the Temple for purification rites. The ceremony of **Pidyon Ha Ben** or **Redemption of the Firstborn Son** ritual required the father to pay a sum of money to the priest in order to redeem his firstborn son. According to Jewish Law, the firstborn son was consecrated to God, and his birth was a reminder of how the firstborn Israelites were spared during the Passover in Egypt. To release the son from this obligation, the parents had to perform this ritual. This ceremony was also accompanied by a purification of the baby and the mother to God. The mother was considered unclean after giving birth and had to wait 40 days before she could enter the Temple bringing an offering and be purified. Jesus's family was poor and could not provide a lamb but they were able to purchase two turtledoves and offer them as a sacrifice to God.

The Holy Spirit brought Simeon into the Temple to provide the purification rites. When Simeon took Jesus into his arms, he then began to praise God. The "consolation of Israel" is the messianic hope and prayer that was answered when he saw Jesus in the Temple. He was able to see the Salvation of God. Simeon then began to sing. It is a **worship** hymn as he blesses God for keeping His promise and sending the Messiah. His song is also a **salvation** hymn where he has seen the death of Christ which releases to the blessings of the next life. Simeon's song is also a **missionary** song which is unusual for a devout Jew because Salvation goes out to the Gentiles.

Jesus has brought his light to the world, all the world.

Joseph and Mary were filled with amazement at the things Simeon said about Jesus. Notice that Luke calls them “Joseph and his mother” not His father and mother. The mother, of course, is Mary.

Simeon then stops praising and begins prophesying. In this message, he has three images: the stone, the sign, and the sword. The stone is Jesus, the rock of our Salvation. The sign means a miracle, a revelation of divine truth that Jesus Christ is God’s miracle. The large sword is only for Mary who would have to suffer as the mother of Jesus. The prophecy of Simeon was finally fulfilled when Jesus looked down from the cross and said “Woman, behold thy Son”. That was the final time the sword pierced her soul.

The prophetess, Anna, which means Grace, walked up and began singing a song of praise when she saw Jesus although it was not recorded. She was a godly widow who had a special gift of declaring and interpreting God’s messages. She was married seven years and then her husband died. She was at least eighty-four years old. She then moved from the tribe of Asher and remained in the Temple waiting for God’s promise to her, the Messiah. She spread the Good News among the other faithful members who were waiting for the redemption of Israel.

The most important question for anyone to answer:

What do you think of Jesus Christ?

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Wednesday, December 24, 2025

Psalm 96

A New Song

*Sing to the Lord a new song,
Sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name.*

Psalm 96: 1-4

If you have sung in church choir, then you’ve sung multiple settings of Psalm 96, a majestic text that inspires majestic music. Interestingly, this exhortation to sing a **new** song is a reprise of an **old** song, David’s *Psalm of Thanksgiving* found in 1 Chronicles 16:7-36, which was sung when the ark of God was moved into the tent David prepared for it in Jerusalem. If you have read the Old Testament (or if you have seen *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*) then you may recall the ark contained the tablets by which God delivered the ten commandments to Moses. For Israel, the ark contained the actual presence of God. To make a long story short: when they honored that, battles were won; when they dishonored it, battles were lost. They lost a lot. David’s return of the ark to Jerusalem (and the return of God’s presence to their holiest place) symbolized God’s renewed favor.

You may be asking yourself, “Why is he prattling on about the Old Testament on Christmas Eve?” Well, Psalm 96 is one of those golden threads weaving through and connecting the Old and New Testaments into a beautiful, single tapestry to tell the whole of God’s story. It turns an old Hebrew song of thanksgiving into a new song of praise for all people. Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Declare his glory among the nations (or “heathens” for KJV fans)!! Tell his marvelous deeds among all peoples!!! Let the heavens be glad, the earth rejoice, the seas resound, the fields celebrate, the trees shout for joy!!!! Why? Because He is coming and will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with His faithfulness— a perfect song to sing when God’s presence returned to Mount Zion and when the great I AM becomes Immanuel— God with us.

Reading Psalm 96 in light of the Nativity is a study in contrasts: The Lord is great and feared above all gods – yet, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Lord made the heavens and the earth – yet, there was no room for them in the inn. Splendor and majesty are before him – yet, she wrapped him in swaddling cloths. Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary – yet, she laid him in a manger. Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength – yet, the world did not know him. Let the whole earth tremble before him – yet, he came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:9-13.)

One of my favorite Advent activities is participating in a traditional nine lessons and carols worship service. The service opens with Once in Royal David's City, a carol that captures the spirit of both the babe in the manger and the God of Psalm 96. It begins sparsely with a single child singing the inspired words of Irish poet, Cecil Frances Alexander:

*Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed;
Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child.*

Next, the choir joins the child:

*He came down to earth from heaven,
who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall;
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
lived on earth our Savior holy.*

Then, the congregation joins the singing:

*And our eyes at last shall see him,
through his own redeeming love,
For that child so dear and gentle,
is our Lord in heaven above;
And he leads his children on,
to the place where he is gone.*

Finally, the orchestra or organ swells and everyone rides

the wave of glorious sound to the climatic final verse:

*Not in that poor lowly stable, with the oxen standing by,
We shall see him; but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high;
Where like stars his children crowned,
all in white shall wait around.*

This wondrous gift, friends, is reason to sing a new song!
Jesus Christ is our new song!

Randy Cook
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Christmas Day
Thursday, December 25, 2025
Psalms 97

What Did You Get For Christmas?

Our Advent Devotionals started with a loaded question: What do you want for Christmas? Our Christmas Day devotional concludes with another loaded question: What did you get for Christmas?

We have shared the beautiful Nativity of Jesus. We have been brought to the light—whether that light be a candle flickering on a table, the light of a wondrous star pointing to Bethlehem, the light of glory of the heavenly hosts singing praises to God announcing the birth to the shepherds, or the two references of light in Psalm 97, in verse 4 as lightning lighting up the world or in verse 11 as light shining on the righteous. We have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in that light, as we recount the host of angels appearing to the shepherds, the Magnificat of Mary, the star traveling across the skies to that place above Bethlehem. We have experienced the eternal happiness of knowing, once again, how much our God, the creator of the universe, loved us that He sacrificed His only Son by sending Him to this earth, knowing that the crucifixion would follow the birth. We pondered with Mary as we imagined her holding the baby, nursing Him, cuddling Him.

The LORD reigns. Let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. 97:1. This is the gift we all received. We received the confidence that the LORD does indeed reign. This very earth, this very ground on which Jesus walked, was never the same after He came to earth and walked among men and women. And while it is easy to imagine that Jesus created the earth and all that is in it, do we apply that same thought to the very ground that we walk upon.

There is no stopping Jesus. His foes are consumed, the heavens proclaim his righteousness and all people see his glory. It is inescapable.

Yet there is the downside to this proclamation of righteousness and display of glory. All who worship idols are put to shame.

It's easy to be awed by visions of the Glory of God, the heavens proclaiming his righteousness, the evidence of God's creation both in the stillness of that small voice, or in the display of lightning followed by loud peals of thunder. We are awed and we meet God in all places. All of the heavens and earth display his majesty.

Yet, there is that nagging downside—the shame of worshiping idols. And for me, it is a shame. It's a downright shame. I know what the object of my true worship should be. I see the proclamation of the power of Jesus in lives, in nature, in profound truths of faith, in worship, in scripture. Yet I am still prone to make idols of pride, intellect, possessions, experiences, a wide variety of things that do not have eternal significance but are worldly pleasures that tend to separate me from God.

I received many nice things for Christmas. They are things made by man. I must not let them become idols, even as I enjoy them. Most of all, I received a renewed vision of hating evil, standing in faith knowing that God delivers me from the hand of the wicked and accepting that Holy Light that shines on the righteous. I am renewed. Everyday.

Merry Christmas everyone. We began this journey together. Now let's continue this journey together.

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