

Advent Reflections

2025



DSBC
DESERT SPRINGS BIBLE CHURCH

Introduction

Advent is a season when the Church slows down to wait, to hope, and to prepare, remembering Jesus' birth and looking ahead to his return. It's a time to open our hearts again to Immanuel, God with us, and to receive his presence in deeper, quieter ways.

This year, we invite you to join the DSBC community in turning our attention toward Jesus. Each day, you'll find a short reflection written by someone in our church family. We're deeply grateful for the more than a dozen contributors from DSBC who offered their voices to this project, and for those who invested time editing and compiling these reflections so our church could journey through Advent together.

Consider setting aside 15 minutes to read the Scripture, sit with the reflection, and listen for the Spirit's gentle nudge. Notice what stirs in you, what encourages you, what challenges you—and don't rush past it. You may want to jot down a few thoughts as a way of marking your journey through the season.

However you choose to engage, remember that this is not an assignment. It's an invitation from the God who draws near. May you be blessed as you enter this Advent season.

-Team DSBC

This guide has twenty four reflections and is designed to start on December 1st.

Day 1

So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

- Genesis 3:14-15

A specter of hopelessness and hardship looms over our local communities right now. Families are struggling to put food on the table, healthcare costs are becoming untenable, and housing instability is rising rapidly. Yet those in seats of power seem unbothered at best or, at worst, are just making things more difficult. Churches are being put to the test on their willingness to help. Most are willing to directly help or connect them with those who can, but some are not so benevolent, and so the specter of hopelessness grows.

It is in difficult times like these that we desperately want to see God's promise breaking through, His hope filling our hearts, and His love wrapping us in a safe embrace. In the book of Hebrews we are reminded that God says, *"I will never leave you and I will never abandon you."* He is able to cover over the failure of humanity and to have His grace shine through. God's love can bring calm in the middle of the storms of hardship, and we can see His redemption win through the struggle.

Not only does God's grace provide comfort and peace, this transformative love inspires others to listen to Jesus' words

and act upon them, to help fulfill God's promises to His people, to be His hands and feet, and to break through the constant noise of hopelessness in our world, not only with our words, but with our actions.

We see this in programs like Tackle Hunger. People in our communities came together to set up food pantries to help fill the gaps when SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants & Children) benefits were pulled back. Non-profit organizations buy medical debt and write it off for those struggling to make payments for life-saving procedures. We see programs like Angel Tree, which provides clothes, toys, and a sense of security and normalcy for children this Christmas season.

Instead of seeing only hopelessness in our communities, we can look for opportunities to help, to share God's love and light—not just through words, but through action.

For those of us in the midst of hopelessness, know that you are loved deeply by the Creator of the universe, and there is nothing that will stop Him from breaking through the walls of your hardship and covering you with His peace and joy. Seek Him out in the small wins, in the quiet victories, and soon you will find Him working in ways you never knew possible. There are people close by who also care for you, who are willing to support you. Reach out and know you are loved and you are not alone.

Tony Smith

Day 2

Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, 'God with us.' -Matthew 1:23

When I was a child, I was taught that God was with me. I didn't really understand what that meant in everyday life, though. He was available to me through prayer, I was taught, as long as I confessed my sins first so He could hear me. God with me—but a little bit beyond my grasp. I thought He looked upon me with pity and frustration a lot of the time. After all, I was a sinful soul. This concept was tempered as I read verses about God's love for me, but there was still a heavy bent toward His *disappointment*.

Then I discovered God's love for me—His genuine delight and joy, His boundless,

never-ending, non-judgmental love for me, personally! This discovery came about as I learned and practiced Imaginative Prayer. I spent time with Jesus—Immanuel—in my imagination and found Him to be available to me at any moment; ready to talk, to hold or comfort me; to speak to me of things I needed to change; available to love me and enjoy my company. What an incredible discovery! I knew I could trust His presence and His words because they lined up with Scripture.

I don't always understand how God works in the world—why He allows trauma, abuse, pain, and suffering. I don't understand why He allows difficulties in my own life. But

the thing I have come to know, as solid as the earth beneath my feet, is that He loves me and is always with me. When I am going through a stressful time, a difficult time, or a time of pain or confusion, I may not understand what is happening or why it is being allowed in my life, but I know that Jesus/God/Spirit are always with me. They are available to walk with me through it all. I find great comfort in this truth!

As we enter the early days of Advent 2025, there is a lot going on in our world and in our nation. Things seem chaotic, frightening, and unknown. I don't know what the future holds, but I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus—Immanuel—is always with me. How is God being Immanuel with you? Notice how He is near this Advent season.

Sharon Hornbeck

Day 3

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish.... The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. You shall multiply the nation. You shall increase their gladness. They will be glad in Your presence, as with the gladness of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. -Isaiah 9:1-3

I appreciate how seasonal Advent and Christmas cover reality with tinsel and hide anguish under carols, parties, and gifts. I know life hasn't changed, but for a month, I have permission to ignore reality.

Sadly, even though Christmas has deep roots in Christian traditions, the hope embedded in those ancient traditions is pulled out with my seasonal decorations and then returned to the garage by January 1st, along with the tinsel, lights, and lawn decorations. My expectations for this year will be the same—or at least I assumed so.

The prophet Isaiah is calling me to consider an abiding hope rather than my normal seasonal hope. He offers me hope amid the gloom, anguish, and darkness, rather than a superficial hope that denies those realities. I would not claim the level of anguish the Israelites experienced. They were in captivity, cut off from their national hope given by Abraham and Moses. Then Isaiah came offering them hope, while they were overwhelmed by gloom, anguish, and darkness. However, he does not offer the

hope of a restored national identity and prosperity. Rather, the hope he offers is the sustaining presence of God. “They will be glad in Your presence, as with the gladness of harvest...”

I am overwhelmed by the gloom and anguish of my world. For much of my life, I have struggled with the fact that God does not replace my dark, painful reality with a peaceful, happy, and abundant one. In previous years, I turned away from the gloom, pain, and confusion, embracing the artificial tinsel-covered Christmas season. But not this year.

The prophetic promise of God’s presence has enlightened my reality. My perspective has been shifting for several years, from wanting God to change my circumstances to finding hope in God’s presence now. My goal is to honestly face my circumstances knowing that God has not abandoned me to gloom, anguish, and darkness. Rather, I face my reality knowing God is with me. Prayer is that relational conversation between friends facing and responding to the world as it is. My hope is not to ignore the darkness for one month; rather, I am longing for the sustaining hope of God’s presence for the whole year and in every situation.

Roger Hornbeck

Day 4

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace**. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*
-Isaiah 9:6-7

Advent is a season of anticipation. I look forward in anticipation to the Second Coming of Christ; I also look back, joining through time with my brothers and sisters thousands of years ago, connecting with their anticipation of the arrival of the Savior. What sort of messiah were they expecting?

Isaiah 9 describes some of the qualities to expect from the messiah: "... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." I see a powerful, wise messiah, capable of eternal, peaceful rule. I gravitate most towards the last title, "Prince of Peace." When I think of any tales of "chosen ones" or foretold heroes, whether classic or contemporary, I see many of those qualities as well.

Most of the time, human messiahs bring a peace that is the result of destroying their enemies. All of the "bad guys" are eliminated. Human, fallible, false messiahs usher in peace as uniformity through conquest, and, in many cases, as vengeance.

And into this expectation arrives Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. Instead of marching orders, his commands are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37,39). He commands his followers to love their enemies, and then does the unthinkable for a Messiah: He is slain. Executed. Brutally, publicly, shamefully.

The difficult thing about the command of enemy love is that it promises your enemies will still be around.

And if that sounds impossible, wait until you hear what Jesus does next: He rises from the dead.

He defeats the ultimate enemy. And the resurrected messiah Jesus’ first greeting to his grieving friends? “Peace to you!” (Luke 24:36).

Holding on to human-forced peace only brings fear. “What if someone disrupts? What if so-and-so returns to get their revenge?” The peace of Jesus is a freedom to love our enemies. It’s a freedom to rest in the ultimate security, the ultimate peace, of Christ’s final and eternal victory over death. As the Psalmist says, “The LORD is for me; I will not be afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?” (Psalm 118:6). The Peace of Christ can be with me, with you, wherever you are, whenever you are, and whoever you are.

Ryan Gentry

Day 5

But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity . . . And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. This One will be our peace. -Micah 5:2-5

Small beginnings. Obscure plans. No fanfare. No pomp and circumstance. Unimpressive, one might say. The God who hung the stars in place and calls them all by name, who keeps the worlds in orbit, gathered Themselves to devise a plan for the salvation of humanity and this is what They came up with? Let it be a baby, They said, a helpless infant born in the most unseen village in the most hidden of places—a barn. Let the God become human, like one of them, susceptible to everything they experience. Let this God-Man quietly and gently lead the way back to the Father. It really is an absurd plan!

But isn't this just like our surprising God? He speaks through a donkey, uses the most unlikely of people to work His will, drowns an entire army in the sea, and chooses a nobody to create a people for Himself. It seems He/They are in the business of the absurd, the surprising! The surprising story didn't end in Bethlehem. This God-Man, come to save His people, lived an unassuming life for 30 years. No one heard of Him. He wasn't the up-and-coming

guy on the horizon, sure to dazzle the known world with feats of strength and power, ready to topple the Roman empire. No, instead He came quietly, gently, open and humble. Unassuming. Like Bethlehem.

There's something about Bethlehem that makes me feel seen. I'll never be a famous star or the sought-after teacher or the one who has a following. But I know that God sees me in my ordinariness—in my quiet, unassuming life. And just like God did with that small town, He invites me to offer what I have to the world. He will make what He will of my gift, just like He did with Bethlehem. All I have to do is be available.

*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.*

Sharon Hornbeck

Day 6

I am certain that I will see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart be courageous. Wait for the Lord. -Psalm 27:13-14

During Advent, we join with Christians all over the world waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Advent offers the opportunity to slow down with God and notice what it is like to wait on Him. As humans, we are familiar with waiting—with the anxiety, loneliness, and suffering a long period of waiting can bring.

David, the writer of Psalm 27, waited for years for God to fulfill His promise to establish him as king of Israel. Meanwhile, King Saul tried to kill David multiple times. When Saul was hunting David, he had the opportunity to take Saul's life. David's companions argued that he should kill Saul, so God would fulfill His promise to David. How often we want to take matters into our own hands to escape the waiting, or to avoid the discomfort waiting brings!

David felt clear conviction from God that he should not harm Saul. He trusted God to preserve David's life and keep His promise. Waiting on God, listening to God's Spirit within him, and acting according to his conscience required strength and courage. David speaks from his experiences and urges listeners to "wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart be courageous. Wait for the LORD."

David's courage can feel super-human to us, but David was very human and made terrible mistakes with lasting painful consequences. The difference for David was his confidence in and experience of God's presence and character. Earlier in Psalm 27, David begs God to hear him; to reveal His face to him; not to leave him; to show him His way; to lead him on a level path; to protect him from his enemies; and to allow him to dwell in the house of the LORD so he can gaze on the LORD's beauty. He believed God was with him and asked God to make Himself known to him when it felt experientially like God was far away or not in control.

During Advent, we worship God as Immanuel, "God with us." What would it be like to wait while holding onto the truth that God is with you? Could it make all the difference to remind yourself with David that the LORD has been your Helper and has shown Himself to be trustworthy? What if waiting on God with courage looked like a terrible mix of hope, fear, faith, or even desperation, while clinging to the belief that God will never leave you or abandon you? Where may God be inviting you to wait *with* Him and *on* Him with courage?

Jess Meeks

Day 7

*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than
watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen
wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for
with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full
redemption. -Psalm 130:5-7*

My favorite Christmas carol is “O Holy Night”:

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

(Chills! Every time!)

The song builds from abject despair to stunning salvation, where the only fitting response is to fall to our knees in gratitude and deep relief. Why is the relief so profound, and the “new and glorious morn” so meaningful?

When the psalmist wrote these words, Israel was still waiting for their promised savior. They had no story of angels or shepherds to comfort them. They were in the middle of the long, dark night, wearily clutching a promise from God.

Scripture repeatedly tells us two things: “Do not be afraid,” and “Wait.” Taken together, these two messages create a third: *Hold on. Hang in there. I’m coming.*

Have you ever had to be somewhere *really* dark, and wait? In those moments, the darkness becomes more than an absence of light—it's a weight pressing from all sides. Your chest tightens, your muscles stiffen, and your senses heighten. Your body channels every effort into *watching* and *waiting*, willing the first rays of light to shatter the darkness and relieve you from the terrible weight of waiting.

To be a watchman during the psalmist's time must've been a tough gig—they were the last line of defense between marauders and their people. Their absolute vigilance was critical for their safety and that of their loved ones. They watched and waited with their whole being, keeping their eyes on the east, because the rising sun is a certainty. It *will* come. Then, they can breathe.

The psalmist implores Israel to put their hope in the Lord because God's faithfulness is a certainty, as much as the rising sun. The act of waiting is an act of faith, but it is also an act of trust.

Paul repeats this in Romans 8:23-25: "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Do not be afraid, for with the Lord is unfailing love. Wait, because with Him is full redemption. Hold on, because He *is* coming.

Monika Morris

Day 8

While standing guard on the watchtower, I waited for the Lord's answer, before explaining the reason for my complaint. Then the Lord told me: "I will give you my message in the form of a vision. Write it clearly enough to be read at a glance. At the time I have decided, my words will come true. You can trust what I say about the future. It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—it will happen! I, the Lord, refuse to accept anyone who is proud. Only those who live by faith are acceptable to me."

-Habakkuk 2:1-4

A major influence in my life used to say, "The three most important words in the English language aren't 'I love you,' or 'I am sorry,' they are 'write it down.'" It's humorous, but there's truth to it. The *when* (timing) is important when we chronicle something—if we do it right away we increase the odds of remembering it accurately later. *Where* we write something down (the format) is important too—there's a big difference between writing on a gum wrapper vs. inscribing a stone tablet. *Why* we write (the posture of the heart) also matters—taking notes when someone tells you something is a sign of honor. It shows your commitment not only to remember their words, but to follow through as they intended.

In this Scripture, Habakkuk was in a posture of active waiting—not like waiting at a bus stop, but waiting like a server in a high-end restaurant. He was in his assigned place, positioned for service, poised and attentive to what

God would say to him. Incidentally, Habakkuk was waiting for God to respond to a heated accusation that he had made *to* God, *about* God! I'd be watching intently (and nervously) too!

God initially responded by instructing him to write down what He was about to say so that it could be clearly understood, not just by Habakkuk, but by others as well. Before unleashing the full weight of His correction on Habakkuk (check out verses 5-20—yikes!) God led with comfort—reminding him that help was on the way. He then added a warning that was worded in such a way that it wasn't aimed at Habakkuk specifically, but inclusive of all humanity: *an unregulated ego is a shortcut to disaster.*

When our egos become unchecked enough to criticize God's behaviors; when we become suspicious of His timing; assert that our wisdom is superior to His wisdom; and ruminate on our way over His way, the Bible says that we are without integrity—that our souls are not right. BUT it also says that the righteous (those in right standing with God) will live by faith. There's hope for us yet.

Thank you, Habakkuk, for reminding us to watch with eager anticipation. What God is about to say to us is worth writing down.

Heidi Moran

Day 9

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him. - Lamentations 3:22-24

This portion of Scripture helps us reflect on God's love, kindness, faithfulness, and mercy. It is a great Scripture to meditate on daily during Advent, and it encourages believers to reflect on the significance of Christ's birth and the anticipation of His return in the Second Coming. It can help us understand the entire story of the Bible: creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration, reminding us of God's commitment to human beings, even when we don't deserve it.

God created heaven and earth and human beings, and He found it very beautiful. This stunning work of creation was distorted by the fall of humanity. In His mercy, rooted in love for humanity, God had a plan to redeem humans. The birth of Christ fulfilled this plan.

We are still in the redemption period of our time, and because of the sinful nature of human beings, we need God's mercy daily. As much as we desire to do good, we often find ourselves falling from God's grace. Lamentations 3:22:24 reminds us that God is faithful, His love is eternal, and He renews His mercies for us daily. We can trust him.

God's mercy, love, and faithfulness are not only revealed in times of our shortcomings, but also as we suffer the

consequences of sin. God planned to settle humans in a beautiful, free life without struggles. However, after sin, we live in a life full of many struggles. This Scripture encourages us to hope in God when facing them..

I have undeservingly experienced God's love, faithfulness, and mercy, revealed to me through many ways: salvation at a young age of 12; a call to His service; being delivered from an aggressive DVT clot; comfort from miscarriages and stillbirths; and then, the blessing of a child.

Recently, my family and I have had a profound experience of God's mercy. We had a tough summer economically, as I was going through an unpaid internship. This would have put us in a poor credit situation and negatively impacted our future housing prospects. But by the mercies of God, we were saved from that situation, still holding to God's renewed mercy daily.

The last portion of this Scripture encourages us to put our hope in God. This has helped me draw closer to God through prayer. Instead of allowing myself to get caught in anxiety and depression, by the grace of God and with a pure (not perfect) heart, I go to God in all kinds of prayers (Philippians 4:6). And indeed, God is faithful. He loves us now and eternally, and He is merciful. We can thank God for salvation through Christ, hope in Him in this life, and trust Him for eternal life when Christ shall return and restore everything to the "perfect" original plan.

Mary Mwangi

Day 10

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the river to the ends of the earth.
-Zechariah 9:9-10*

How curious that when Zechariah prophesied to his people the promise of their coming king, who would make all things right, he included the detail that this humble king would be riding on a donkey colt—not storming in on a chariot or warhorse, but quietly arriving, proclaiming peace to all.

As I meditated on this passage, and the rather odd detail of this coming king riding on a donkey colt, I thought of how the bookends of Jesus' story were ones of humility.

He entered our world meek and lowly, born in a stable, laid in the feeding trough of animals, his family far from home and without any resources.

Then he entered the week of his death unpretentiously on a common young donkey.

What does this humility say to us?

In our world where power is expressed by flexing muscles of intimidation and dominance, I find great comfort in the refuge of a savior who shows true strength in humility.

In our world where wars and divisions dominate our news, I find relief in the reminder that Jesus is the prince of peace.

How can we stay focused on this humility and message of peace that our savior brought to us when he entered our world? How can we sing “Silent night, Holy night” and keep that holiness with us when we walk back into the chaos of our lives?

This season, let us meditate on how we can reflect the humility of Jesus and be the peacemakers he called us to be.

Dear Jesus, teach us how to enter every arena of our lives with the confident humility of your presence, and the steadfast assurance that you are the king of our hearts. May your peace guide us in every conversation and flow from us to every person we interact with. We pray for the transformation of our homes, our communities, and our world to reflect the kindness, peace, and love you proclaimed with your life.

Robin Crow

Dec 11

*In the sixth month (of Elizabeth's pregnancy), the angel Gabriel was sent by God . . . to a virgin named Mary . . . And the angel said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." Then the angel told her, "**Do not be afraid**, Mary. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High . . . and His kingdom will have no end. The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. And consider your relative Elizabeth. Even she has conceived a son in her old age . . . **For nothing will be impossible with God.**" - Luke 1:26-37*

Can we pause for just a moment and take in this scene? It is so familiar, but it should grip us with awe and amazement! I wonder where Mary is in her family home. What is she doing? Perhaps she hears a sound or sees a flash of light and turns around to see an angel. How do you imagine she responds to seeing this heavenly creature? The passage implies that Mary is afraid. "*Do not be afraid, Mary.*" Consider what this moment is like for her. Sit with Mary in her confusion and fear.

Notice now how Mary moves through her fear and keeps her focus on God. Even when the plan seems ridiculous and impossible, Mary stays in the conversation. Her legitimate concerns are eased when Gabriel tells of her cousin's miraculous pregnancy. His final words end the questioning: "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" Those words bring Mary a sense of surety so that

she can respond, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said.”* I marvel at Mary’s complete way of being available and responding to the Lord’s invitation.

Where do you need to hear the words, *“Do not be afraid”*? Has your world taken a sudden turn and you don’t recognize your life anymore? Is there a relationship you are afraid of losing? Are you at the end of your resources and don’t know how you will make it? Is life wearing you down and you aren’t sure you want to keep going? Maybe Mary has a word for you today. Maybe Gabriel needs to remind you that you are not alone; the God of the impossible sees you. The Divine has entered our world and offers hope and His Presence. Immanuel—God With Us—is with you in your fear, your confusion, your anxiety. He promises never to leave us or forsake us. We are never alone. Let Mary lead the way out of your fear and into God’s embrace.

Sharon Hornbeck

Day 12

And Mary said: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he has looked with favor on the humble condition of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and his name is holy. His mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him. - Luke 1:46-50

In this passage, Mary was with Elizabeth, who, by the nature of their conversation, was someone Mary felt close to, spiritually and emotionally. This was Mary's opportunity to cut loose to someone she loved and trusted about what she was going through. She was, after all, the embodiment of what is likely the most celebrated miracle in human history, and it would be natural to be a bit self-focused at a time like that!

Here she was, face-to-face with Elizabeth, who had just loudly exclaimed how blessed Mary and her child were; how amazed she was that Mary would come to visit her; how Mary was going to see great things fulfilled in her life because of what God had spoken over her.

But did she talk about how freaked out she was or how special she felt? Surprisingly, no.

Growing up hearing these Scripture verses, I often pictured Mary looking down at her belly with an overwhelmed yet soft gaze, head tilted, hands on her stomach, reflecting on the astonishing condition in which she found herself. But in reading through what she said, her emphasis was magnifying (enlarging, focusing, detailing, highlighting,

etc.) who *God* is. She had every reason to be introspective and yet...

The order in which her words came was:

- God's greatness magnified
- Her humble condition recognized
- The impact this would have on the world identified

It's easy in our own major life events to get that order reversed:

- What do others think?
- How do I feel about this?
- Hey God, do you want in on this?

Maybe if the Angel Gabriel were personally delivering our life-altering news, we might be more like Mary, but I'm not convinced we would. Mary was chosen for a reason—her heart was trained on the Lordship and goodness of God. When Gabriel appeared to her, he called her “favored woman.” Was it the assignment that made her favored, or the condition of her heart? Because Gabriel went on to say, “You have found favor with God,” which implies that the favor came before the pregnancy. In a world where it is largely encouraged to be self-focused and obsessed about public perception, Mary's gift to us this Christmas is a reminder to magnify God. In all things. Our words will run out long before His goodness does.

Heidi Moran

Day 13

And she gave birth to her first born son, and she wrapped him in swaddling cloth, and she placed him in a feeding trough, because there was no room in the inn. - Luke 2:7

Life experiences often frame how we approach Scripture. At times, our most undesired earthly experiences enhance the reading of God's words in the most profound ways.

Luke 2:7 takes on new meaning for me after my experience of childbirth in a busy government hospital in Borneo. The maternity ward was overflowing with undocumented migrants who had nowhere else to go to give birth. There were too many people, too much noise, not enough medical staff, and not enough beds for birthing mothers. It was hard to get any help. In the midst of this chaos, we welcomed Carissa into the world, in an overcrowded hospital where staff were too busy to notice her arrival until crowning. I had no bed to lie in after the delivery. I cried, thinking of the condition of her birth. We moved from the US four weeks before she was born. It could have been much different.

Yet, God's grace came in the most unexpected way. Lying alone in the delivery room (as father was not allowed until birth was imminent), God's voice directed me to meditate on Jesus' birth—laid in a manger, surrounded by the sight and sound of animals, in a barn. The "manger," unlike the familiar scene of a cozy wooden bassinet, was most likely a feeding trough, hewn out of stone with straw as bedding

(Miriam Feinberg Vamosh, *The Authentic Manger Challenge*).

The word “manger” also occurs four times in the gospel of Luke, three times in the birth scene in Luke 2. In Luke 2:12, it was even the “sign” for the shepherds to identify the Messiah (the word here *semeion*, “a sign, miracle, an indication,” is often associated with the supernatural)! It was where they would find the anointed Davidic king, the chosen one who came to save and redeem God’s people. The Promised King did not arrive with a crown or a scepter, but laid low in the manger!

I can only imagine the extent of God's love coming to us in such a way. God’s extraordinary gift of life and love came in the most domestic and unassuming way. He sent his only begotten Son, to be born and placed in a feeding trough, witnessed by Mary and Joseph, in the company of domesticated animals.

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

As we enter into the Advent season, may our eyes be opened to the myriad ways God’s extraordinary love is expressed in the mundane of our ordinary lives.

Beng Cher Beh

Day 14

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him “Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). - Matthew 1:20-23

Joseph was a good man, faithful to the law. Scandal would not touch him, until it did. He and Mary were legally bound to each other during their engagement, when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant.

No way was he going to go ahead with the marriage and face the scandal of her pregnancy. No way was he going to raise another man's child as his own. He came up with a plan that would clear him and protect Mary, at least as much as possible, by quietly divorcing her. It was logical, it was lawful, it was the least painful plan for both of them.

Then the angel stepped in and ruined his plans with the hardest, craziest news—instructions to proceed with marriage plans, because this scandalous baby would save the people from their sins. And Joseph, who had every right, legally and morally, to free himself from his commitment, chose to obey the angelic command.

Mary, though gladly willing to submit to her own angelic revelation, did not have the option to move on with the life she had planned. Joseph did, but gave up his good and predictable life, married Mary, endured the scandal, and loved Jesus as his own son.

An angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream and ordered him to take his family to Egypt. Later, the angel told him to bring them back to Israel. The Bible does not record one word spoken by Joseph.

He must have been bewildered, likely exhausted by the life he did not sign up for, but he was an obedient man of action, a good and faithful husband and father.

It is almost certain that Joseph did not live long enough to see Jesus' miracles and ministry. He did not live to see the man he adopted as his own son crucified or resurrected. He played his part, obediently placing his puzzle pieces without ever seeing, in this life, the completed puzzle.

He never saw Jesus save His people from their sins.

I have not had an angelic, dreamy visitation. But I have lived in situations that certainly didn't fit my life plan. Do I ask, *Why?* I do, and maybe Joseph did, too. Maybe he was cautious about going to sleep, in case that angel popped up and gave him even more instructions. But he was obedient, even when it was hard.

Sometimes God's guidance doesn't make sense. Often, I don't pray with hands open, ready to obey, but with a presentation of my wish list, including instructions on how to accomplish what I want. But God loves me anyway, and is more than worthy of my obedience. When I obey, who but God knows the goodness that will follow?

Marcia Thomas

Day 15

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!' -Luke 2:8-14

Growing up, I went to a Lutheran school and church, but there was also an evangelical church and a Presbyterian one in the mix. Which meant, from the ages of four to fourteen, one certainty: So. Many. *Christmas pageants*.

And there was a healthy market for non-traditional scripts. I played a role in every unconventional, loosely Christmas-related scenario: a cranky Moses, some kind of railroad conductor—and, one glorious year, I got to be Mary, lovingly cradling a Cabbage Patch Jesus.

But amidst all the logic-defying plots and cassette-tracked songs, there was one constant: the annunciation to the shepherds. Read by the smallest child in the cast, the words would hang in the air, cutting through the haze of secondary storylines and seasonal distraction, revealing the real reason for the season—like a star piercing the darkest night.

This is a concise and familiar distillation of the Christmas story—the heavens declare that Jesus has arrived. But the annunciation also provides a fascinating parallel, or “callback,” to the creation story in Genesis. There is darkness in the world, which is cosmically interrupted by a divine light. That light is spoken into existence by God. God’s voice is made manifest into matter. God’s ability to harness chaos into order is put on display; the arrival of Jesus is the restoration of God’s peaceful order on Earth.

I love these passages in conversation with one another. Literal angels in earth’s atmosphere, illuminating the sky, singing the crescendo of God’s long-awaited promise. And who is the audience for the world’s first Christmas pageant? Unwitting shepherds.

And how does the all-powerful Creator enter the world? As a soft, squishy baby.

Mary, tucked away by a manger, doesn’t see the spectacle but feels its weight in her arms. She receives the shepherds’ story, and her response is remarkable: “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (v. 19). I, too, am often moved by the magnitude of God’s love and power to the point where all I can do is be still, heart full, and whisper, “*Wow.*”

No matter how many pageants I’ve seen or how many times I’ve heard Luke 2, my breath still catches as I’m transported to those silent hills—standing in awe and wonder at the collision between heaven and earth.

Profound awe, profound joy. Profound wonder, and tender gratitude. For unto us, a son is born. Unto us, a son is given. And his name is Wonderful.

Monika Morris

Day 16

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it. -John 1:1-5

John famously starts his account of the good news (or gospel) with a bold move. He creatively echoes Genesis 1:1 with the familiar phrase, "In the beginning..." in his account of the good news that Jesus makes all things new. His gospel writing evokes the mystery and wonder of creation as God makes all things new—both from the beginning of time, and in his own lifetime.

Mystery and wonder are good words that describe the Christmas season as well. It's a beautiful thing to see Christmas morning through a child's eyes. As we get older, we often forget to enjoy life with the same carefree wonder, until children remind us of what we are missing with their exuberant excitement for the day. The Genesis narrative unfolds the mystery and wonder of how God created a place for humanity to dwell with him. From the beginning, the Bible reveals God's desire to be with us. His eternal presence is still with us today as Jesus' gift to us through His Spirit.

John draws our minds back to the creation narrative. Genesis describes the earth as formless and void, with darkness covering the surface, until God says, "Let there be light." John says that Jesus' life was the light of men. The light of Jesus has been shining in the darkness since His birth.

How fitting that we celebrate Jesus' birth with lights! Often, the most memorable and beautiful thing about the Christmas season is the lights. Sitting in the glow of twinkling Christmas lights or burning candles can evoke memories that often flood us with emotions of both quiet, peaceful times of reflection, and joyful celebrations.

Jesus is the light that continues to flood us with joy. His presence in the beginning grounds us in a narrative and a mystery that is bigger than we could have imagined. His presence in us through His Spirit is the source of all peace and joy. He is the light in this dark world, bringing us hope for the future.

Take a moment today and light a candle to symbolize God's presence with you. As you sit, ponder the flame, as you remember God's offer of covenant love and friendship, even considering you part of His family. Bring your awareness to His overwhelming gift of love for you and the peace for your soul He offers. Remember, too, He wants to be with you even as you go about your day; He delights in you and longs to be with you as a constant companion and beloved friend.

Susan Elliott

Day 17

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. -John 1:14-18

In the opening to his Gospel, John introduces Jesus as the “Word” who was with God at the beginning, and is God. By verse 14, John describes Jesus, God the Word, becoming human and making his “dwelling,” or home, among us.

The Triune God, whose very existence is beyond our understanding, became like one of us and made his home with us. John goes on to say that Jesus came, offering grace and truth. Jesus, who is in the closest relationship with the Father, came to make God known to us.

Pause there. The infinite God—Maker of the universe, Lover of your soul, Author and Word of truth—desired that *you* would know Him.

Jesus himself offers *to you* “grace upon grace.” Grace is unmerited favor (*“For by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift*

of God”), salvation (“I have come to seek and save the lost”), and empowerment in the Holy Spirit (“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”). Jesus is the Word, and these are God’s words to you.

This Jesus, born 2000 years ago, lived a human life among other humans, loved them, explained who God is to them, and revealed Himself to be God when He rose again after death, ascending to be with the Father. This same Jesus says *to you*, “I will never leave you, or forsake you.”

In John 14:23, Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

As humans, we are easily caught up in our day-to-day responsibilities and relationships. Fully human as well as fully God, Jesus understands this about us and experienced what we do. Jesus built rhythms into His own life to remember that God the Father and Spirit were with Him: He retreated to the wilderness to pray, He meditated on God’s Word, He listened for His Father’s voice, and He lived in step with the Spirit.

Advent encourages us to slow down and consider the incredible reality of God’s invitation to us—to know God, to receive God’s grace, and to become more aware that the Triune God dwells in the hearts of those who believe in Jesus. God has made His home with you. How do you experience God “dwelling” with you today?

Jess Meeks

Day 18

But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted. Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God. -Galatians 4:4-7

In this season of Advent, a time of reflection, a time of hope as our king is born, I remember that Jesus was born so that we can experience relationship with our Father. God loved His people so much that He sent his son to live and, ultimately, die for us, so that we can have access to our Father—to live the life we were not capable of living, so that we can have conversations, fellowship, hope and peace with God. No longer are we slaves to our sin! Our chains are broken, for we are now adopted heirs to His kingdom. We are no longer slaves! We are no longer ALONE! He is with us.

He came so that we may have access not only to God the Father, but God the Spirit, our great mentor, guide, and comforter, in life. He came to hold our hands and walk with us during those hard times. He came to celebrate and dance with us during those great moments in life.

Why? Why do this for us? In a word, LOVE! Love for His people of all shapes, sizes, colors, and walks of life. When I think about His expressions of love, I often think, *Why send a baby? Why not send Jesus as a fully-grown man?* There is the idea that Jesus was brought to us to experience the life we live, to live this life correctly, to identify with us, and to identify with our struggles. But was there something else, some other reason? I started thinking about how people express love, and children came to mind. Children are one of the most powerful expressions of a couple's love for each other. They are a physical reminder of love. When children are born it does something to the parents. They look differently at their partners.

Their love for that person is taken to a new level. They feel connected in a way that neither partner ever thought was possible. Picturing the baby Jesus laying in the manger, I feel this was a similar expression of God's love for us. He created life for us to show how much He loved us and to give us a physical image of our relationship with Him. In this light, my love for God is taken to a new level and intensity. That love drives me to live and love as He does. In this Advent season, let us be inspired to love others, have hope, and remember we are not ALONE. God loves us! Praise GOD!

Marcos Alcalá

Day 19

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. -Philippians 2:5-11

In the 1990s, a simple question became a cultural phenomenon in the Christian world: *What would Jesus do?* People made bracelets and t-shirts to remind themselves to consider this question, using the initials WWJD. It's a good thing to ponder during this Christmas season.

Today's Scripture encourages us to "Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus." That's a bold thought. How can we do that? The NRSV translates this verse, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

One way to adopt Jesus' attitude is simply to ask God for help. James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us, "Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). What a beautiful promise! As you navigate this Christmas season, ask God for his perspective. Ask him for his thoughts on your plans to celebrate Jesus' birth. If

we take the time to listen, we can hear his heartbeat in all of creation, and his still, small voice speaks to us when we remove the noise, busyness, and distractions from our lives. The more we practice asking God for his perspective, the easier it is for us to consider what Jesus might do.

Another part of adopting a new mindset lies in our ability to take on a new perspective. We all view life through very different lenses, often depending on our background, and it's difficult to see from any other perspective. When Jesus says, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," he isn't suggesting we should feel bad about things we have done. The Greek word for repent literally means "rethink your thinking." Perhaps some of the things we have been thinking don't reflect God's heart for the world, but rather our own selfish ambition. When we adopt our own way of being in the world that doesn't align with the values of God's Kingdom, we actually set up our own rival kingdom, and God won't allow that for long. Romans 12:2 reminds us, "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God."

As you practice renewing your mind this season, be patient with yourself. Consider taking on Jesus' own perspective on our celebrations as you rethink your thinking about his gift of love and perfect delight in you. Perhaps it will become a new habit to practice throughout the next year. Ask God for his love to flow through you as you consider his perspective and gift of perfect love through Jesus for the world.

Susan Elliott

Day 20

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you—Silvanus, Timothy, and I—did not become “Yes and no.” On the contrary, in him it is always “Yes.” For every one of God’s promises is “Yes” in him. Therefore, through him we also say “Amen” to the glory of God. Now it is God who strengthens us together with you in Christ, and who has anointed us. He has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a down payment.
- 2 Corinthians 1:19–22

As we continue to unwrap the gifts of the Christmas season that God has for us, we should ponder the gift that God’s Spirit is to us. Our text today explains that He is a current and available presence as a down payment for our life in the Kingdom of God here and now and in the life to come. God’s Spirit is often a forgotten or neglected part of the Christian life, but a gift to be treasured.

The concept of the Trinity (our God is three in one) is often difficult to explain. Our Christian faith has long acknowledged that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons but one God. These three persons of the Godhead have existed in perfect covenant love and unity since before time began. All were present in Genesis as the creation account unfolded. Baxter Kruger describes their relationship well in his book entitled *The Great Dance*.

What a beautiful picture of our God! What's even better is that we are invited into that dance with them.

The gift of the Holy Spirit comes to those who trust God for his salvation or rescue. He was promised as a seal or deposit that God would send to his followers after Jesus left the earth. (You can read all about it in the book of Acts.) It's part of the new covenant relationship that seals us as his children (Rom 8:16). God's Spirit helps us to live like Jesus did, enabling us to have his heart of love for others. It's the same Spirit that anointed Jesus for his earthly ministry and was present with him as he walked this earth.

The Spirit is in constant communion with the Father and is a present helper, reminding us of all God is doing in the world and how we can join in with him. What a gift for those who follow in the footsteps of Jesus to have a helper and a constant companion to teach us the way of wisdom and love. He gives us each a spiritual gift to invite us into being part of what God is doing in the world. The word *gift* is a great way to describe God's Spirit.

Susan Elliott

Day 21

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. -Romans 8:22-25

As I write this in late October 2025, my first thought was to look back at the reflection I wrote in October 2023. Then it had been 18 months since Russia's mass invasion in Ukraine, and the Gaza region had erupted just weeks before, first with the Hamas-led attack on Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking 251 hostages, then Israel's response. Fast forward to 2025 and the war in Ukraine rages on with over 135,000 casualties. In Gaza we could breathe a brief sigh of relief with the release of the 20 remaining living hostages held there, and hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, though the ceasefire hangs by a thread.

In America, tension has escalated to heights I do not recall in my lifetime, with the increase in mass shootings and attacks on political leaders. Our political sphere remains so divided. As I write this, the government has been shut down for a near record number of days, federal employees are going without pay, and people who depend on government assistance are going without. Even Mother Nature seems in turmoil, lurching from hurricanes to

droughts and fires that have destroyed communities and taken human lives, most recently hurricane Melissa wreaking destruction in the Caribbean.

All this weighs on my heart, and I struggle to maintain balance: caring enough without becoming overwhelmed with sadness, anger, frustration, and blaming others, as I try not to become calloused and indifferent.

Tragically, this is nothing new. We see this in Paul's words in today's text in which he validates the suffering of the believers in Rome while reminding them of the hope they have in Jesus.

The analogy of a woman enduring the pain of childbirth in anticipation of the coming of a newborn is a powerful reminder of the calling I have as a believer in Jesus: to do His will, not mine, as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10). I am challenged to judge myself before judging others (Matt 7:1-5), and to love those I find unlikeable (Matt 5:44-45). I am called to be "salt and light" (Matt 5:13-14) and a "maker of peace" (Matt 5:9; Rom 12:18) so I will be called a "son of my Father" (Matt 5:9).

Ultimately, I am reminded I am not in a battle of "flesh and blood," but a spiritual battle (Eph 6:12). I am called to persevere and run the race and "fight the good fight" to be the best example of the love Jesus has shown me by extending love to those I encounter each and every day (1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Tim 4:7-8).

Jeff Bauer

Day 22

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works. - Titus 2:11-14

Today's Scripture begins with the words, "...the grace of God has appeared." Have you ever thought about the concept of grace, what it is, or what it looks like? It is one of the many gifts we can unwrap this season. It might take some time to notice it, but when you make a habit of looking for it, it seems to pop up everywhere. However, our awareness of God often takes time and some focused attention. More often than not, the things in life that speak the loudest are the ones that get our attention. But God usually speaks through a still, small voice rather than through the chaos of our busy days. Let's take a moment to ponder this grace that has appeared for our salvation.

Dallas Willard says grace is "God acting in our life to accomplish what we cannot do on our own." It is God's provision to meet our needs. And better than anyone else, God knows our needs. He also knows how we try to meet our own needs out of our own resources. As we think

about all of the things we cannot do for ourselves in this broken world, during this Christmas season of hope, we primarily think of Jesus. He appeared! The grace of God has appeared. That is a gift we get to savor every day of the year. He came to show us how to live in our earthly bodies the way he made us to thrive best, filled with love towards God and others. He demonstrated how it is possible to rely on God for the strength we need to do that. But it's God's activity in our lives that helps us accomplish what we cannot do on our own. What a gift that God sent Jesus to this earth to do for us what we can't do for ourselves.

The text continues to say that this grace (Jesus) appeared, "bringing salvation for all people." This term salvation means *rescue*. Another gift we can unwrap this season is the gift that Jesus came to rescue us. He rescues us from our own selfish ways and shows us how to really love others by demonstrating his own perfect love. Jesus shows us what true human flourishing looks like as we rest in God's perfect love. This kind of unconditional love is the perfect gift. Take some time today to consider the gift of love God has given you.

Susan Elliott

Day 23

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. -Philippians 4:4-7

I hate feeling alone. If you know me, this might surprise you. I am quiet by nature and find myself overwhelmed by groups. Yet, loneliness is different. Loneliness happens both in groups and in isolation. The experience of loneliness is hard to nail down. There is the loneliness of being physically alone. However, there is another experience of loneliness. This experience is more about how I see myself. It's the fear that I don't belong, that I'm not seen, and that I'm not valuable, depriving me of the life-giving experience of being with others.

My experience of loneliness also impacts my relationship with God. My tradition taught that God was always present and saw everything I did. I was commonly told (when I was being bad) that God could see what I was doing, and He was not happy. Others taught that, even though He is always present, He is not perceivable and that prayer is a one-way communication. I talked, hoping He would listen.

College exposed me to the voices of diverse Christian traditions spanning 2,000 years of church history. Many of those voices claimed to have a relationship with God, which included conversations and a deep sense of God's love for them and His desire to be with them. Brother Lawrence's short reflection, "The Practice of the Presence of God," was life-changing for me. He was a simple person. He washed dishes in a monastery and took care of the monks. He didn't have the luxury of spending an hour in prayer, but that didn't stop him; He prayed while washing the dishes or tending the garden. He claimed that God was near and approachable for him.

The promise that God is near is relationally rich. Yes, I still bring my needs, concerns, and fears to Him. Now, however, I speak and then listen. There is a relationship in which He makes His presence known through whispers in my mind, stirring me physically, and giving me images. Ultimately, I am not alone. I have a companion who stays closer than any friend and wants to be with me! I am not alone. I have a compassionate God who comforts me in my grief, encourages me in my struggles, and challenges me to be like Him. Because God is near, He hears my prayers and guards my heart, freeing me to share my concerns and requests with Him.

Roger Hornbeck

Day 24

Therefore, brothers and sisters be patient until the Lord's coming . . . strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near." -James 5:7-9

I have always enjoyed the anticipation of Christmas morning! I had an older sister who would sneak into the living room when we were little and unwrap all the presents to see what everyone was getting, then wrap them all up again. I didn't find out about this until we were well into our adult years. I think I could say she wasn't very patient when it came to waiting for Christmas!

James tells us that we should be patient as we wait in anticipation for the Lord's return. He goes on to assure us that practicing patience in this way will strengthen our hearts. There are days when my heart needs to be strengthened. I can find strength because I hope in the promises of God.

Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength. Isaiah 40:31

Those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame. Isaiah 49:23b

What are the promises of God that give me hope? The promise that there will be a day when Jesus will restore all things to good, when He will make all things right. The

promise that He will “bring good news to the afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners . . . He will comfort all who mourn and strengthen those who are fainting.” The promise that in Jesus, all things will one day be restored.

That is the day I long for, the day I am eager to see arrive. Advent is more than the celebration of Jesus being born on earth. Advent is the beginning! The beginning of the Hope that has come to set us free and reconcile us to the Father. The hope that this life is not the end. The hope that the struggles and heartaches, the brokenness and pain we experience now is not all there is. There is more! This is where I find the strength to carry on.

As you enter Christmas morning this year, I invite you to think beyond the baby in the manger. Consider the hope and the promises the birth of Jesus offers. What are the promises of God you are most anticipating? Pause now to thank Him for those promises and let your heart be strengthened.

Sharon Hornbeck

