

A detailed sketch by Leonardo da Vinci depicting the Virgin Mary seated, holding the Christ Child on her lap. The Christ Child is reaching out towards John the Baptist, who is seated to the right. The background is a textured, brownish-gold wash.

December 2023

Only Jesus

Readings, Reflections and Prayers
for Advent and Christmas

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Sketch by Leonardo da Vinci (c. 1500)

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Monday, December 4: Luke 1:1-25

Why do we celebrate Advent? The word "Advent" literally means "The coming ..." It's a time of waiting and anticipation of the coming, the birth, of Jesus. Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for Christmas. This week we reflect on the theme of **HOPE**. How does Jesus bring **hope** to our hurting, broken world?

Catherine Marshall writes, "*God is the only one who can make the valley of trouble a door of **hope**.*"

As we prepare for Jesus' birth, a key person in the Advent story is John the Baptist. John's story is intertwined with Jesus'. John's mother, Elizabeth, is an older relative of Mary, Jesus' mother (Luke 1:36). John will prepare the way for Jesus' ministry by calling people to repentance and faith.

The story of the angel of the Lord appearing to Zechariah reminds us of God's call to Abraham: an elderly, childless couple will have a baby who will be a key part of God's salvation story. Zechariah, like Abraham's wife Sarah, has a difficult time believing the promise. We can appreciate his scepticism.

Zechariah and Elizabeth remind us that:

- being "*upright in the sight of the God, observing all the Lord's commands and regulations*" is good (1:6). It pleases the Lord.
- While life generally goes well when I am faithful to God, even godly people have struggles (1:7).
- Even people of faith struggle with trusting God, being patient, and waiting for His timing (1:18).
- God longs to save His people – including me, my family, friends, and neighbours (1:16-17).
- God can and does work in our hearts and lives in miraculous ways.

Which of these points do I need to reflect on and remember most?

What else do I learn about God, His work, and His mission from this story?

*Almighty and merciful God, the fountain of all goodness,
you know the thought of our hearts.
We confess to you that we have sinned against you, and done evil in your sight.
Wash us, we pray, from the stains of our past sins.
Give us grace and power to put away all hurtful things;
so we may bring forth the fruits of repentance.
O eternal Light, shine into our hearts.
O eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil.
O eternal Power, be our support.
Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance.
Eternal Grace, have mercy upon us.
Help us to seek your face with all our hearts, and minds, and strength.
In the end, bring us, by your infinite mercy, into your holy presence.
So strengthen our weakness that, following in the footsteps of your blessed Son,
we may obtain your mercy, and enter your promised joy.
Amen.*

Meuin, 8th century

Tuesday, December 5: Luke 1:26-40

God's interventions in history are often mind-boggling. God sometimes works totally 'outside the box' of what we might expect. Sometimes He even allows us to experience a crisis or two.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, the news of a baby was great. Married for years, trying to have a child for years, this news of expectation and hope was fantastic. Their dreams were coming true.

For Mary, still single, the news of a baby was "*greatly troubling*" (1:29). This is not 2023 Canada when many different forms of family, marriage, pregnancy, are all good. This was an ultra-traditional culture where extra-marital and pre-marital sex was forbidden. Only a married couple, only after marriage, had sexual relations. For a woman to be pregnant before marriage (even by her fiancé) was absolutely unacceptable.

A single Mom could not work. She had only two options: become a beggar or support herself by prostitution.

Mary is engaged, but not yet married. She's pregnant. Joseph knows he isn't the father. No one will believe her story of divine conception (it never happened before; it hasn't happened since). Everyone would assume Mary is an immoral woman. No wonder she hurries out of town, ASAP (1:39-40).

Where are Mary's mother and father? They're never mentioned. Perhaps they're already dead. Perhaps they were unsupportive (although they're not even mentioned later, either). Whatever the circumstances with Mary's parents, this young woman is alone in the world, in a desperate situation.

How does Mary react to this crisis? She is confused. Perplexed. Stressed. She hears God's call, but questions how it could be true. She has the freedom to say, 'Yes' or 'No'. She ponders the invitation in her heart. Then her response is from a full heart: she says 'Yes' to God. Where does her hope come from? Even though the future looks bleak, she is willing to step out in faith and believe God's promise, "*Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God*" (1:30).

How do I react in a crisis? Where does my hope come from? Do I need to hear, "Don't be afraid ..."?

How do we respond when we sense God calling us? Is He calling us to help someone? To call someone? To give a little more than usual? To volunteer somehow? To change our routine? To step out in faith? To share our faith with someone? To invite a friend to church over Advent/Christmas? To give a gift through a programme like Canadian Baptist Ministries' *Hopeful Gifts for Change* (<https://hopefulgifts.ca/>)?

God may be inviting us to be and do things we can't believe possible. It is OK to be a bit perplexed. But God's promise to us, as people saved by Jesus, is "*Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God.*"

Sarah Theborge writes, "*Love may cost you dearly. It did for Mary. And it may break your heart. It did for Mary. But in the end, it will save the world. It did for Mary ... and for us.*" This Advent, can you say, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said ...*" (whatever "it" may be God is calling you to) (1:38). Pray that as your prayer.

*O Lord, I am your servant.
May it be to me as you have said.
Help me do your will.
You are the author and creator of peace, love, and mercy.
Soften our hard and steely hearts, warm our icy and frozen hearts.
May we genuinely wish one another well.
May we be the true disciples of Jesus Christ.
Give us grace even now to begin to display that heavenly life
in which there is no disagreement or animosity,
but peace and love on all hands, one towards another.
Amen.*

Adapted from Ludovicus Vives (1492-1540)

Wednesday, December 6: Luke 1:39-56

A traditional Irish greeting to a pregnant woman is "*God bless both of you.*" This is precisely Elizabeth's greeting to Mary (1:42). How did Elizabeth know Mary was pregnant? The Holy Spirit somehow told her (1:41). And Elizabeth's baby, who we will know as John the Baptist, jumped for joy in her womb. It is true that Mary is "*blessed among women*" (1:42), but perhaps more profound is Elizabeth's comment: "*You are*

blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (1:45).

Mary believes what the Lord says will actually come to pass. Do I? Why? Why not?

Mary's song (1:46-55) is a wonderful song of hope, praise, and thanksgiving. One writer reflects, *"This glorious prayer is charged with dynamite. It points to a society in which nobody wants to have too much while others have too little. The hungry are fed and the lowly are raised up. Lord, may I never be seduced by sweet devotion while I have more than I need and others have less."* Mary's words are not a sweet lullaby. She prays God will tear down the wealthy powerbrokers of the world and feed the hungry. She is praying for a revolution in an unjust social order that rewarded millionaires and marginalized the poor.

Jesus will not come to pat the privileged on the back. He will come to shake them up. Jesus will begin His ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to **the poor**. He has sent me to proclaim that **captives** will be released, that the **blind** will see, that the **oppressed** will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come"* (Luke 4:18-19).

To a wealthy mover-and-shaker, Jesus says, *"If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"* (Matthew 19:21). He may not literally ask us to give away everything, but He certainly calls us to humility, compassion, and generosity. The Kingdom of God calls us to mercy, kindness, grace, justice, blessing, and hope.

"Sometimes I want to ask God why He allows poverty, famine and injustice in the world when He could just do something about it," muses one writer. *"But I'm afraid He might ask me the same question."*

In the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:9-14), we pray, *"Your Kingdom come and your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven."* Do we really mean that? If we do, we are praying that *"He will show mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him"* (1:50). That's good. But we are also praying that, with His mighty arm, *"He will scatter the proud and haughty ones. He will bring down princes from their thrones and exalt the humble. He will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away with empty hands"* (1:51-53).

If you dare, do pray that God's kingdom will come on earth, more and more, as it in heaven. That's a prayer of hope. Hope for a change in the whole order of things as we know it.

How can we do something about it? In what small way can you be merciful (1:50)? Lift up the humble (1:52)? Help the poor and hungry (1:53)? How can we be the grace of God to our world? How can we be the blessing of God to people? How can we be Good News? How can we be people who bring hope?

*O King of glory and Lord of grace, who said,
"Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world":
be victorious in us your servants.
Without you we can do nothing.
Grant your compassion to go before us,
in all our undertakings.
May your compassion come behind us;
in our endings.
May your compassion go out from us,
to those beside us and behind us.
May we be the Good News of Jesus to those you have given to us.
May your will be done in us as it is in heaven.
Your will is our salvation, our glory, and our joy.
May your salvation come upon all people,
through your Spirit and through our faithful obedience.
Amen and Amen*

Alcuin (735-804)

Thursday, December 7: Isaiah 40:1-17

This coming Sunday we reflect on **PEACE**. The time of waiting for the Messiah was tough. Reading the prophets, there were violence, poverty, dishonesty, war, injustice, racism, and more. They were troubled times (a lot like ours). Through it all, God promises His **peace**. His **peace** that passes all understanding

Isaiah 40 is one of many promises about the coming Messiah. This vision from God anticipates the coming of both John the Baptist (40:3-8) and Jesus (40:9-11). This good news of the coming of God (40:9), the Lord (40:10), the good Shepherd (40:11) – Jesus – is for **"ALL people together"** (40:5). The Jewish people thought of salvation in Jewish-privilege terms: God would save them, Israel, and only them. The rest of us were "Gentile dogs," doomed for destruction. However, God's good news is for **ALL** people of **ALL** nations. God's Kingdom is coming for **ALL** people of **ALL** nations, today, too (Jesus was not a white European).

The "highway" picks up a theme in [Isaiah 35:1-10](#). Isaiah talks about the return of Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. But Isaiah's words have a dual or triple meaning. Is this prophecy referring to:

- The return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon? **or**
- Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection? **or**
- Jesus' second coming at the end of history?
- Certainly, the immediate context was the exile in Babylon. This is what Isaiah's readers heard.
- It clearly refers to the birth of Jesus. John the Baptist uses these verses as his motto.
- Ultimately, the complete fulfillment of this will only happen when Jesus returns again, in glory and judgment (especially if you choose to read on through Isaiah 40:12-31).

Note that the coming of Jesus does not take us out of the wilderness right away (40:3). We are still on a journey from Babylon (evil/pain/life in this fallen world) to Jerusalem (a metaphor for eternal life in His presence, Revelation 21). Jesus gets us through the valley of the shadows (Psalm 23:4), but does not magically airlift us into Paradise. Walking with Jesus is a matter of following Him along the way of life, often through dark places and tough times. There are words of encouragement here:

1. God is with you in the wilderness getting you through it (40:3-5). He is with you in the wild places – lifting up your deep valleys and lowering your steep mountains, smoothing the roughest spots and helping you through the trackless landscape.
2. God is your shepherd (40:10-11, see [Psalm 23](#), [John 10:1-16](#)). He tends His flock – including you, and including ALL His people – gathering, protecting, caring, feeding, doing the best for us.

This Advent, as we go through our challenges, reflect on the good news in Isaiah 40:3-5 and 10-11. How are these images encouraging to you, today? How can they bring you peace?

Think about the tenderness of the images in 40:11. Have you ever thought of yourself as one of the "lambs" in this picture? What does that mean for you? How can this give you peace?

God is the God of **ALL** people. Who needs the encouragement of this good news today? Can you share it?

*Spirit of God, with your holy breath you cleanse our hearts and minds.
You comfort us when we are in sorrow.
You lead us when we wander from the way.
You kindle us when we are cold.
You bring us together when we are at odds.
You enrich us with many and various gifts.
We pray you would daily increase those gifts which you've entrusted to us.
With your light before us and within us, may we pass through this world
without stumbling and without straying, serving you and only you.
Amen.*

Erasmus (1466-1536)

Friday, December 8: Luke 3:1-18

John the Baptist uses Isaiah 40:3-5 (yesterday's reading) as his motto. Like the Old Testament prophets, John speaks to the evil and corruption of his day. He also points forward to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus (John is often listed as the last prophet. John is the final prophet before Jesus comes, God-Himself-with-us. Jesus changes everything.).

John is brutally honest with those who have no genuine faith in or love for God. He is especially hard on those who think they're saved simply because they're Jewish or because they follow the religious rituals and rules. John challenges them to repent (radically change the direction of their lives), truly believe in God, and live their faith. Ethnicity and religiosity don't matter to God. All their good deeds don't matter. They are only be saved by faith in God. Inevitably, true faith will show itself by living in godly ways and a life of grace, peace, compassion, and love. These people's evil lives reveal their lack of genuine faith.

People of God have used symbolic washing – baptism – as a symbol of God's forgiveness and spiritual cleansing for centuries ([Leviticus 16:1-4](#), [2 Kings 5:1-14](#), [Ezekiel 36:24-32](#)). John the Baptist is following in a long Jewish tradition as he comes preaching baptism as a sign of repentance and forgiveness.

John's message about the difference between his baptism and Jesus' baptism is important. Jesus' coming is radically different. Jesus is not going to be just another Old Testament prophet like John:

- Jesus' status will be different (*"the thongs of his sandals I am not worthy to untie"*). Jesus will be a King, but not an earthly king. He will be King of Heaven come to earth, God-with-us.
- Jesus' power will be different. John preaches, filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives the gift of His Spirit ([Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)).
- Jesus' judgment will be different. John can warn about evil and judgment to come. Jesus actually IS the righteous Judge who brings justice and sets things right.

Jesus, God-with-us, brings us **peace** with God. It is good for us to humble ourselves before God and ask Him to help us see issues in our lives. In what ways do we put other priorities before God? In what ways are we deliberately disobedient to God? Honestly confess your sins to God. Jesus has paid the price for every one of them. Be thankful. Rejoice. Be blessed by His gift of forgiveness.

Jesus, God with us, also brings us **peace** with other people. We are called to forgive others as God has forgiven us ([Matthew 6:12-15](#)). Who can you bless with the gift of forgiveness today? When you let go, you bless the other person. You also bless yourself. Instead of hanging on to the anger, bitterness, and ulcers, you let them all go. You experience a tremendous sense of joy, peace, and release. You sleep better. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual health improves, too.

Let it go. Forgive them. Bless them. And bless yourself with the inner peace of a clean heart.

*Lord God Almighty, we pray for your great mercy.
Guide us better than we have guided ourselves,
towards you and your kingdom.
Guide us better than we can ourselves,
to your will, the need of our soul.
Help us focus our minds toward your will.
Strengthen us against the temptations of the devil.
Put from us all lust, and every unrighteousness.
Shield us against our foes, seen and unseen.
Teach us to do your will, that we may love you before all things.
For you are our Maker and our Redeemer,
our Help and our Comfort, our Trust, and our Hope.
Praise and glory be to you now, ever and ever, world without end.
Amen.*

King Alfred of Wessex (849-901)

Saturday, December 9: Matthew 1:1-17

No one is just a name. Every person is uniquely created by and beloved by God.

We often skip Matthew 1. Most of these people we've never heard of. Most of their names are recorded nowhere else. But each of these folks was a real, living, breathing, precious person, beloved by God. Each is God's beloved child. Just like you. Just like me. There is no unimportant person.

Note a couple of things:

- Each of these people is an indispensable part of God's plan. Even though some names are not well known, these people are important parts of God's mission. We may feel we don't have much to offer. We're not famous. But only God knows what you can do for His Kingdom. You are an important part of His family. Use what you have to serve Him. It will be significant.
- Some of these people are well known – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon. The men from David through Josiah, were kings of Judah. Curiously, none are perfect examples of faithfulness. Abraham lapsed in faith, passing his wife off as his sister (twice); he fathered a child with a servant. David lusted after and committed adultery with Bathsheba; he arranged a murder. Solomon was lured away by other gods. God used these imperfect people in His perfect mission. No matter what's in your past, what you've done, or where you've been, as you confess your sins, repent, and recommit yourself to Him, God can use you.
- Some of these characters were downright evil. But God oversees history. He is fulfilling His plan and His purpose, despite us. God will save His people and express His love no matter what. No matter the obstacles we are up against, God can overcome them. It may take time. We may get frustrated. We may get impatient. Keep trusting. Keep hope. Know God's peace.
- By looking back, we can be encouraged today. We are God's children – Jesus' brothers and sisters (John 1:12). This family tree is our family tree. These are your spiritual ancestors. When God leads us into strange new challenges, we can study our forefather Abraham, and be encouraged. When we are up against giants, we can reflect on our forefather David, and be at peace. When we need wisdom, we can ask God for it as your ancestor Solomon did. Draw strength from your spiritual heritage.

You are as important to God as any person in this list. Thank Him.

The people you love are just as important to God as any person on this list. Pray for those you love, that they might know that they are God's beloved child.

*Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us.
Thank you for all the pain and insults you endured for us.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend, and Brother,
may we know you more clearly.
May we love you more dearly.
And may we follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.*

Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Sunday, December 10: Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas card pictures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus are delightfully idyllic. Everything is peaceful and wonderful. But think of the heart-breaking crisis Joseph faces. Joseph has to ask himself awful questions: *Has Mary been unfaithful? Who is the father? Should I divorce her? What will happen to the child? How*

can I save her from disgrace? What about me? What will people think of me? What should I do?

Advent and Christmas are not all about sweetness and light, love and joy, warm fuzzies and hot apple pie.

What does Joseph do? He doesn't panic. He prays. He waits for God. There is a model here for us as we face difficult decisions and deal with doubts: pray. Talk with God about it. Wait. He will answer.

What do we know about Joseph? We know he had a deep love for God that allowed him to hear God's wisdom. We know he loved Mary so much he put aside his doubts about her, moved forward, and married her. We know he faced great difficulty and danger because of this child (he had to flee with Mary and the boy to Egypt within the first couple of years). We know he allowed himself to be regarded as the father of her child, knowing he wasn't. All of that was very, very difficult.

God gave Joseph **peace**, even amid crisis after crisis.

Frank Doyle adds, *"Joseph is the least quotable of all the saints: the Gospels do not record a single word he said. Yet he was the rocklike foundation of the family, the unflappable, faithful, quiet father, who must have loomed huge in the mind of Jesus."*

We know about Joseph through what **he did** not what **he said**. Here was a person who, to the best of our knowledge, never talked the talk. But he walked the walk with integrity, determination, faithfulness, hope, peace, and love.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, *"True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice."* How are Joseph actions a practical demonstration of this principle?

What can we learn from Joseph? How can he inspire us?

*O Lord, who desires to be called 'Love', give me love,
that I may love you more than I love myself.
I care not at all what I do with myself,
so long as I'm doing what is pleasing in your sight.
Grant me, O Father, to be your faithful servant.
Speak to my heart – your servant's heart – and give peace to my soul.
Teach me to speak often with you in prayer.
Thank you that you can take from me all my disquiet, anxiety, and worry.
O Lord, my God, my Father,
have pity on my weakness and forgive all my sins.
Give me your peace. Give me your joy.
May it be to your great glory that, in humility and thankful love,
I serve you today and all days.
Amen.*

William of Saint Thierry (1085-1148)

Monday, December 11: Revelation 4

Advent and Christmas lead us into the heart of God. God loves His creation so much He gives us His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

An angel, explaining how Jesus' birth would fulfill the words of Isaiah from hundreds of years ago, says to Joseph, *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" – which means, 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23).*

Jesus' birth doesn't come out of the blue. It's a critical chapter in the story of God's salvation. Ever since the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God has been saving people. He saves them through the Exodus. He

saves them from exile in Babylon. Despite the stubborn disobedience of His people, God delivers His people. With the arrival of Jesus, God Himself with us, the story moves to a whole different level. Jesus will be the One who will carry all our sinfulness and evil to the cross. He will save us, once and for all, forever.

Revelation 4-7 give us a glimpse into the character of our amazing God. This incredible God loves us so much, He is willing *"to make himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness; and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross."* (Philippians 2:7-8).

John sees the universe as a series of concentric circles of worshipping humans, angels, and other creatures. What is at the centre? The Lord God Almighty. What is He doing? He is governing the whole of creation and history. God rules the universe. God is the Lord of time and space. Everything in all of creation belongs to God. Everything is in His hands.

This has ethical implications for how I live my life. The Earth is the Lord's; it is not mine. He holds me – us – responsible for how I/we use it. Jesus uses a parable of a landowner (God) and tenants (us). How should we, the tenants, treat God's creation? I need to reflect on my "footprints" in God's creation. I need to reflect on the choices I make and how I live. I will be accountable to God for how I live in His world.

This also has implications for me as I live my life for Jesus: wherever I go, I am walking on Jesus' land and dealing with His people, whom He created and loves. That is an invitation to wise stewardship. It also challenges me to treat EVERY person as God's beloved creation. How then should I live?

The fact that God is King is also a reminder of His power and presence: *"Whatever power or influence Satan and his demonic hosts exert over places or people is usurped, illegitimate, bogus and ultimately doomed. The universe belongs to the Lord"* (Christopher Wright). God's power is greater than Satan's, everywhere in creation. That can be a tremendous encouragement to me in tough times. How then should I live?

Advent and Christmas invite us to celebrate that God's light, His Son, comes into the darkness of the world.

Whatever "darkness" you face, God is there with you. Pray. Know His hope and His peace.

*Lord of my heart, give me vision to inspire me,
that working or resting, I may always think of you.
Lord of my heart, give me light to guide me,
that at home or abroad, I may always walk in your way.
Lord of my heart, give me wisdom to direct me,
that thinking or acting, I may always discern right from wrong.
Lord of my heart, give me courage to strengthen me,
that among friends or enemies, I may always proclaim your justice.
Lord of my heart, give me trust to console me,
that hungry or well fed, I may always rely on your mercy.
Lord of my heart, save me from empty praise,
that I may always boast of you.
Lord of my heart, save me from worldly wealth,
that I may always look to the riches of heaven.
Lord of my heart, save me from strength at arms,
that I may always seek your protection.
Lord of my heart, save me from vain knowledge,
that I may always study your word.
Lord of my heart, save me from unnatural pleasures,
that I may always find joy in your wonderful creation.
Heart of my own heart, what ever befall me,
rule over my thoughts and feelings, my words and actions.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Tuesday, December 12: Revelation 5

What is the purpose of life? The Westminster Catechism (1647) says our purpose is "*to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.*" In other words, our task is to love/worship/glorify God, AND enjoy His love. Of course, our love for God also shows in our love for our neighbour, too.

Jesus said the greatest commandments are love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, AND to love our neighbour as ourselves. That's what life is all about.

Revelation 5 gives us a glimpse of **who Jesus is** and what **His purpose** in life was. Revelation 5 helps us see Jesus as "*the Lamb who was slain.*" Jesus, fully God, loved us (His neighbours) so much He died for us.

The scroll in this passage refers to the whole purpose of God throughout history. Since the beginning, God has been saving us, His people. The only One who can open the scroll's seals is the One who fulfills its story, Jesus. Jesus' birth is central to God's story of salvation. The climax is Jesus' death on the cross, the once-for-all atonement for our salvation. The paradox of Jesus' birth is that He was born to die.

- **Jesus' death on the cross is redemptive.** Jesus "*purchased men for God*" (5:9). Humanity will not simply go down the drain. By faith in Jesus' death, we have eternal life now and forever.
- **Jesus' death on the cross is universal.** Jesus' death fulfills God's promise to Abram that He will bless ALL nations. Jesus saves people "*from every tribe and language and people and nation*" (5:9).
- **Jesus' death on the cross is victorious.** Through the death of Jesus, God has achieved complete victory over all that opposes Him. On the cross and at the end of history, the Lamb wins. We share in the Kingdom of God as Jesus reigns over us and all of creation through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' cross is the climax, the turning point of history. But the cross is not the end. Jesus rises triumphantly from the dead on the third day. He proves God's power and victory over all evil, even death itself.

As we move through Advent, keep in mind the bigger picture of what Jesus' birth is all about. It is about God bringing the whole story of salvation together in one person, Jesus. Ultimately Jesus, God-with-Us, will die on the cross so all people, everywhere and everywhen, might be part of this eternal celebration. Jesus will rise from the dead, proving God's power, and opening the door to eternal life for all of us who believe.

Spend time this Advent worshipping Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb upon the throne. "*Jesus is the God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair*" (Blaise Pascal).

Reflect upon our purpose: to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength AND to love our neighbour as ourselves. What is Jesus, the Lamb upon the throne, saying to me?

*Lord, how much juice you can squeeze from a single grape.
How much water you can draw from a single well.
How great a fire you can candle from a tiny spark.
How great a tree you can grow from a tiny seed.
My soul is so dry that by itself cannot pray;
yet you can squeeze from it the juice of a thousand prayers.
My soul is so parched that by itself cannot love;
yet you can draw from it boundless love for you and for my neighbor.
My soul is so cold that by itself it has no joy;
yet you can light the fire of heavenly joy within me.
My soul is so feeble that by itself has no faith;
yet by your power my faith grows to a great height.
Thank you for prayer, for love, for joy, for faith;
Let me always be prayerful, loving, joyful, faithful.
Amen.*

Guigo the Carthusian (12th century)

Wednesday, December 13: Revelation 6

This coming Sunday, we reflect on **LOVE**: the Lord has done marvellous things for us. Out of His incredible love for us, He has saved us.

God loves us – desperately. He gave us Himself in His Son. Through the cross, Jesus dealt with all the sin in the universe. There is no sin He cannot forgive. His death on the cross paid the price for it all.

We no longer need to

- Feel guilt or fear punishment. We're now right with God ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#), [1 Peter 2:24](#)).
- Be controlled by our evil impulses or sin. Jesus paid the price for our freedom so we can freely love and serve God ([Mark 10:45](#), [Ephesians 1:7](#)).
- Be separated from God. All barriers are removed. We can come to God freely ([Romans 5:10-11](#)).
- Feel guilty or ashamed. We are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb ([1 John 1:7-2:2](#)).

This is great news.

Revelation 6 helps us see the cosmic forces of evil. There is evil in the world. It's not just that a few people are bad people. We all struggle with temptation and evil. Deep, dark forces are at work. This chapter is not one to be fearful of, unless you are one of those Satanic forces causing havoc in creation (which you're not). Ultimately the Lamb-that-was-slain, the Lamb-on-the-throne, Jesus, will destroy all that is evil. The cross, the climax of God's salvation story, is the great cosmic victory of God through Christ.

"God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."(Colossians 2:13-15)

Ultimately all evil forces will be totally destroyed. Jesus has won the war. That is good news. Of course, there are still battles to be fought: Satan, sin, and evil are not going down without a final fight.

This Advent, remember Christmas is one chapter in God's big story of love, destroying evil once-and-for-all. It is a beginning, but it is not the end. Ultimately Advent and Christmas lead us forward to freedom, the true freedom that only comes through knowing Jesus, the true freedom of being forgiven and loved by God, the true freedom of rediscovering who were created to be: people who love God and love our neighbours.

Even though there are only a handful of shopping days left until Christmas, don't lose your focus. Remember the "reason for the season." Find your real meaning, fulfillment, and joy through knowing Jesus.

*I want to give glory to the Guardian of heaven.
I want to praise the Architect of creation and His wisdom of mind.
We celebrate the Father of glory, Maker of all wonders,
for all He has done.
Our Father, the holy Creator, fashioned heaven as a roof for his children.
Then the eternal Guardian of mankind, our Saviour,
adorned the earth below, a land for all people.
He sustains us, supports us, empowers us, enfolds us,
Grants us food and shelter, peace and joy, friends and family.
We praise your name,
Almighty King, everlasting Lord,
our Saviour, our King,
Holy Spirit of love.
Amen.*

Adapted from Caedmon (7th century)

Thursday, December 14: Revelation 7

I'm checking my Christmas list and checking it twice. I **THINK** I've got everything done. If I don't, does it really matter? My little problems on this particular Christmas really don't matter a whole lot.

Advent and Christmas invite us into the grand narrative of God's action in creation. Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, invites us to think about the BIG picture of what Christmas is really all about:

- *Sin should be punished and sinners – you and I – forgiven.*
- *Evil should be defeated and humanity – you and I – liberated.*
- *Enemies – you and I – should be reconciled to one another and to God.*
- *Creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its creator.*

"And all of these led to the cross of Christ. The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's mission – as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: 'Yet not as I will, but as you will' (Matthew 26:39). So as we get our minds around the biblical concept of salvation, let us make room for all the Bible teaches. Salvation is not just a theory, a doctrine, or a merely subjective state or experience. Salvation is what God has done.

"Biblical salvation is the historic reality that God sent his Son into the world and his Son willingly gave up his life on the cross in fulfillment of that mission. It was the unfathomable determination of the saving love of God that led to those six hours on a Friday outside Jerusalem; to that bleeding body stretched on two pieces of wood; to a torn curtain and a quaking earth; to that awful cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46); and to that triumphant shout of achievement, 'It is finished.' (John 19:30).

"For it was indeed on the cross that Jesus accomplished the mission of God, for 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19)."

Why bring this up a week before Christmas? Because Christmas has a central purpose in God's plan. Christmas is the beginning of the end of God's story of love, the story of salvation.

Christmas is about the birth of the Saviour, Jesus. Salvation is the purpose of Christmas – your salvation, my salvation, and salvation for all who receive His invitation through repentance and faith. It's all about God's love and amazing grace.

Our response to Jesus' birth at Christmas, to His crucifixion on Good Friday, to His resurrection on Easter Sunday should be to fall down in worship before Him.

We love God at Christmas, because He first loved us.

*"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.
Amen. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever. Amen."*

In our busyness this Christmas season, we don't want to forget what it's all about – salvation for you, your family, friends, and all creation. Christmas, with its grand music, wonderful Scriptures, and out-of-the-ordinary sights, smells, and tastes is a great time to enjoy God's love and to express our love to God, through worship.

- How can we express our worship to Him today?
- How can we share this good news with those around us?
- How can we share the love of God in practical ways with neighbours, friends, and family?

*My soul's desire is to praise my Father, my Creator.
 My soul's desire is to praise my Saviour, my Jesus, my King.
 My soul's desire is to celebrate the Spirit, alive and moving in my being.
 My soul's desire is to see the face of God, and to rest in his presence.
 My soul's desire is to know the wonder of God's love.
 My soul's desire is to know the power of the cross.
 My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness, and to share Christ's risen life.
 My soul's desire is to study the Word and to learn the ways of God.
 My soul's desire is to imitate my Saviour, and to sing His praises always.
 My soul's desire is to follow His Spirit where He leads me.
 My soul's desire is to know His Presence and His Power.
 My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
 and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
 Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires,
 and you alone can satisfy those desires.
 Amen*

Celtic Prayer

Friday, December 15: Isaiah 61:1-5

What is Christmas? Christmas is the time when we celebrate the coming of our Saviour, Jesus, who brings us hope. We are forgiven. We have peace with God. It's a time to reflect on the wonders of God's love. It's a time to experience joy, knowing our lives are safe in His hands: He is with us.

Isaiah 61:1-2 is the text with which Jesus will begin his public ministry ([Luke 4:14-21](#)). In His – in God's – mind, this is a text that speaks about the coming of the Saviour. Jesus Himself claims this as His own mission statement. Compare this with Mary's song of praise in [Luke 1:46-55](#).

As we read through this chapter, what is our impression of the coming of the Messiah?

- Will His advent be a time of sadness? Gloom? Despair? Fear?
- Or will it be a time of joy? Celebration? Re-creating what is right and good?

"Fundamentally, our Lord's message was Himself," say J. Sidlow Baxter. "He did not come merely to preach a Gospel; He himself is that Gospel. He did not come merely to give bread; He said, 'I am the bread.' He did not come merely to shed light; He said, 'I am the light.' He did not come merely to show the door; He said, 'I am the door.' He did not come merely to name a shepherd; He said, 'I am the shepherd.' He did not come merely to point the way; He said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'"

Reflect on your recent readings from Revelation 4-7 about the purpose of Christmas. Christmas is the fulfillment of God's love, shown to us through the death of Jesus.

- How is Jesus' coming a source of joy?
- How does it bring us peace with God?
- How does it reveal God's love?

How are you including a celebration of Jesus in your Christmas? How can you tell the story of His purpose and love (not only of His birth) this season? How can that enrich your Christmas?

Moving deeper, one Christian musician asks, *"Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you."* (There is still time to give through practical campaigns like Canadian Baptist Ministries' *Hopeful Gifts for Change* (www.hopefulgifts.ca).

Jesus' passion is people know Him as Saviour and know His love and justice. How can we value both?

*Lord Jesus, through the power of your cross, save me.
Lord Jesus, through your broken body,
forgive my sins and make me holy.
Lord Jesus, through your blood shed for me,
restore my soul and wash me clean.
Lord Jesus, through the power of your cross, comfort me.
Good Jesus, never let me be separated from you;
from the deadly enemy protect me.
In the hour of death, comfort and call me.
May I come to you,
that with the saints I may sing your praise, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Adapted from *Anima Christi* (14th century)

Saturday, December 16: 1 John 4:7-21

A picture is worth a thousand words, they say. If that's true, then an actual in-person demonstration must be worth a thousand pictures or ten thousand words.

How do we know what **love** looks like? Acts like? Lives like? We know it by looking at God. By looking to Jesus. He gives us an in-person demonstration of what authentic love actually lives like.

John writes, *"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins ..."*

Love, in the Bible, is not a warm, fuzzy emotion. Love is a deliberate choice, leading to action, to put the needs of others before my own. It's an other-focused commitment to **DO** what is right and good.

How do Jesus' actions model that kind of self-giving, sacrificial love? How are we blessed by that?

However, John then turns to face us, and says, *"Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us"* (1 John 4:9-12).

Is this even remotely possible? John believes it is, because God has given us His Spirit: *"God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us ... God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect"* (1 John 4:13, 16-17).

We might want to protest. This is not fair. It's one thing – one wonderful thing – that God loves us so much. It's quite another to expect us to love other people with the same kind of love.

John, however, is relentless in his call to follow Jesus' example: *"If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a brother or sister (including biological relatives, but also Christian brothers/sisters, friends, and even non-Christian neighbours), that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their neighbours"* (1 John 4:20-21). Hmm.

What is God saying to you?

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves.
When our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little.
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess,
we have lost our thirst for the waters of life.
Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity.
In our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord,
to dare more boldly,
to venture on wilder seas where storms will show Your mastery.
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes.
Push back the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.
This we ask in the name of our Captain, who is Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596)

Sunday, December 17: John 14:1-14

Buckingham Palace has 775 rooms. These include 19 state rooms, 52 royal and guest bedrooms, 188 staff bedrooms, 92 offices and 78 bathrooms. I think the King has more than enough room to handle a few guests, now and then. Maybe, next time you're in London, you should see if he could put you up?

God, our true King, loves us. That's the great good news of Advent and Christmas.

In John 14, Jesus reminds us of God's great love for us – He is preparing for us an eternal future with Himself. Jesus uses the metaphor of "his Father's house" to describe our eternal destiny. Most likely this doesn't refer to a literal "mansion" or "palace" like Buckingham Palace. We have no idea of what that this "house" will be like other than it will be very, very good.

The only other time Jesus refers to "his Father's house" is referring to the Temple ([Luke 2:49](#), [John 2:16](#)). The whole point of the Temple is that it's where heaven and Earth meet, where God is physically present with His people. So the wonderful future Jesus is talking about is a reality when we are personally with God forever. And there is room for everyone in this new reality.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life," says Jesus. "No one can come to the Father except through me" (14:6). Some people are offended by the exclusivity of Jesus' claim. It seems narrow and arrogant in a multi-faith world. However, if Jesus really is who He says He is – uniquely God Himself with us – then HE is different from anyone else. It makes sense that He, and only He, is the way to truly knowing God.

Jesus is the perfect expression and embodiment of God's amazing grace and love. The One who is the way, truth, and life – Jesus – is far from arrogant. He is the One who washed His disciples' feet and told them to likewise. He gave His life for all people on the cross and challenges us to take up our cross and follow Him. Far from being narrow, He invites all people to come as equals into His Kingdom.

Advent and Christmas are about God's love, shown to us, in and through Jesus. How can we model our lives after His?

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
who crossed from this world to the Father,
You love those who are in Your world.
O Lord Jesus Christ,
make my mind cross from earthly to heavenly things.
Help me despise those things that are evil.
Help me desire only what is good.
Help me to hold lightly to those things which are passing away.
Help me hold strongly to those things that are eternal.
Kindle the fire of your love within my heart
so others are warmed by your love burning within me.
O God, who condescended to wash of the feet of your disciples,
purify my heart by pouring upon it the blessing of your Holy Spirit.
In all things and above all things may I love you,
my Lord, my Jesus, my King.
Amen.*

Adapted from *Anglo-Saxon Prayer Book* (10th century)

Monday, December 18: John 14:15-31

When I was a child, my parents took my brother and I to Europe. We had rented a small camper van in the UK, then crossed the channel and drove around Europe. Poor Mom. This was before GPS-es, so she was trying to navigate by maps. Poor Dad. Driving a British van on the Continent, the driver was on the curb.

I remember being in Cologne, Germany. We were trying to get to the cathedral. In desperation, Mom or Dad asked a local how to get there. Thankfully he spoke pretty good English. Instead of just giving us verbal directions, however, he said, "Follow me!" He got in his car and guided us right to the front door of the cathedral. Having him navigate the winding, medieval streets of Cologne with us was amazing.

In John 14, Jesus reminds us of God's great love for us – He is preparing an eternal future with Himself for us. He promises to be with us, every moment of every day. We don't navigate life on our own. The Creator of the universe and our loving Saviour is with us, guiding us, always. That's amazing. That's good news.

The good news is about eternal life with God in the future, but also the presence and power of God with us today. He blesses us with the gift of the Holy Spirit, His personal presence in our lives, every moment of every day. The good news is also that we live as God's chosen, beloved people right now. Yes, we have a future hope of being in God's presence. Through the Spirit, that's also a present reality now and forever.

Jesus also emphasizes that love is lived out in obedience to God and His commands (He says this three times, in 14:15, 21 and 23 – and negatively in 14:24). As John mentioned in 1 John 4, since God loves us so passionately and profoundly, we also ought to love one another, in practical, tangible ways. *Love,* says Dr. Karl Menninger, *"cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it."*

If we really believe God is the loving Creator of the universe – that Jesus is the loving Saviour of the world – then we should recognize that His commands are wise (after all He made us and knows us inside out) and good (He desires what is best for us). We should love to obey His commands for our own good. And we should obey them because we love their author and Creator.

- Why do we find these commands irritating?
- Why do we struggle to live them?
- What does it mean to you, that Jesus is with you always?

Jesus' promise is that the Holy Spirit will be born in us and fill us. He will help us in the ongoing challenge of living Jesus' commands to love one another. He knows it's hard to live as He desires us to live. His Spirit helps us. 'What is Jesus saying to you? How is Spirit inviting you to love, in Jesus' name?

*Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my thoughts may all be holy.
Act in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my work, too, may be holy.
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,
that I love but what is holy.
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit,
to defend all that is holy.
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,
that I always may be holy.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Tuesday, December 19: Philippians 4:4-9

Christmas is about **HOPE, PEACE, LOVE, and JOY**. **Joy** comes through knowing Jesus, our Saviour, Redeemer, Companion, Lord, and Guide through life.

Paul is writing this letter to his friends in Philippi from prison in Rome. Ancient Roman prisons were NOT nice places to be. Today we're going to reread a wonderful passage on joy.

During his suffering, Paul encourages us to stay joyful. Paul is an inspiring and challenging example of someone who is going through tough times, and yet finds joy in His relationship with Jesus.

"Joy does not simply happen to us," Henri Nouwen observes. *"We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day."*

- Read through this passage a few times. Reflect on what Paul is saying.
- Paul is in prison. How are his words challenging and inspiring?
- How can you be a more joyful person?

Richard Foster comments, *"Joy, not grit, is the hallmark of holy obedience. We need to be light-hearted in what we do to avoid taking ourselves too seriously. It is a cheerful revolt against self and pride."*

Sometimes we do take ourselves too seriously. When our faith is in Jesus, we can walk a bit more lightly and laugh a bit more. Our primary identity is as children of God. We are always safe in His care.

"Be faithful in little things," adds Mother Teresa, *"for in them our strength lies. We may not be able to give much but we can always give joy that springs from a heart that is in love with God."*

How can our lives reflect the joy that springs for a heart in love with God?

*God, be in my head, and in my understanding;
Jesus, be in my eyes, and in my looking;
Holy Spirit, be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
Holy Spirit, be in my heart, and in my thinking;
Jesus be in my beginning, and in my journeying;
God be at my end, and at my departing.
Amen*

Adapted from *Old Sarum Primer* (13th Century)

Wednesday, December 20: James 1:1-18

What do you do when you are feeling stressed? How do you handle it when you're struggling?

The hope, peace, love, and **joy** of Christmas invite us to come to Jesus. Jesus is God with us. Paul writes,

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see – such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

"Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross" (Colossians 1:15-20).

The idea that God could save the world through the birth of a child is completely illogical. God should come with billions of dollars, great armies, fiery tweets, social media storms, and powerful weapons. Instead God comes in humility, with love, with mercy, with forgiveness, with grace, and with compassion.

Every great military empire has faded into the dust. The Kingdom of God and Jesus' church have thrived and grown through servanthood, love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion, not power and violence. It shouldn't work. It's a miracle. But miracles **are** God's business. That's a key message of Christmas.

As we read James 1, James' message is counterintuitive, too: *"When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great **joy**"* (1:2). That doesn't seem right, does it?

As you read through James' reasoning, what do you think?

Have you noticed we actually grow most during the most difficult times? When we overcome our greatest challenges we realize we mature the most ... and, paradoxically, enjoy ourselves the most.

Eugene Peterson writes, *"The gospel message says: 'You don't live in a mechanistic world ruled by necessity; you don't live in a random world ruled by chance; you live in a world ruled by the God of Exodus and Easter. He will do things in you that neither you nor your friends would have supposed possible ...'"* That's good news for us to hear. God is very much with us. Nothing is impossible with Him (Luke 1:37).

This is our good news. *"I am convinced,"* writes Paul, *"that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39).

"Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession" (James 1:17-18).

*O, Son of God, perform a miracle for me: change my heart.
You, whose crimson blood redeems mankind, purify my heart.
It is you who makes the sun bright and the ice sparkle.
You make the rivers flow and the salmon leap.
Your skilled hand makes the nut tree blossom, and the wheat turn golden.
Your Spirit composes the songs of the birds and the buzz of the bees.
Your creation is a million wondrous miracles, beautiful to behold.
I ask of just one more miracle:
take my heart, my soul, my life,
and make it the place
where the fire of your Spirit burns forever bright.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Thursday, December 21: John 1:1-14

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God became a person, just like us. "This is what incarnation means," writes Frederick Buechner, "It is untheological. It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity, it is the way things are."

Unlike other religions, which talk about transcending the material world, rejecting our physical lives, and becoming wholly "spiritual," God, in Jesus, meets us where we are in all our real world physical messy-ness. He meets and cares for us in the material world. God, in Jesus, walks with us in the messiness of real life.

"Incarnation," Buechner continues, "means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. We are saved here. And what is saved is not some diaphanous distillation of our bodies and our earth, but our bodies and our earth themselves. Jerusalem becomes the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:2). Our bodies are sown perishable and raised imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42)."

Is this important? Yes. Jesus' coming means you have a God and Saviour who understands the challenges of our lives. He knows pain, frustration, hunger, heat, loneliness, heartache, sorrow, cold, joy, hunger, grief, pleasure, anger, betrayal, and love. Jesus can help us because He has been here and done this.

Jesus' coming among us is also important because He affirms everything you are is important to God – not just your soul, but also your body, mind, heart, and relationships. He created them all. He cares about them all. You can bring your aches, joys, cares, hopes, worries, goals, warts, celebrations, and concerns about all of your life and person to God. It's all important to Him.

Paul prays, *"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with **joy** and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit"* (Romans 15:13).

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
make me worthy to understand the profound mystery of your holy incarnation,
which you have worked for our sake and for our salvation.
Truly there is nothing so great and wonderful as this,
that you, my God, who are the creator of all things,
should become a creature,
so that we should become reunited with God.
You have humbled yourself and made yourself small
that we might be made mighty.
You've taken the form of a servant,
so that you might confer upon us a royal and divine beauty.
Lord give me a glimpse of what the wonder of your incarnation means.
Lord give me a passion to love others as you do.
Amen.*

Adapted from Angela of Foligno (1248-1309)

Friday, December 22: John 1:15-34

Who is Jesus? How does John the Baptist describe Him?

Consider these quotes about Jesus as you read John 1 today ...

"I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions the distance of infinity ... I search in vain in history to find anyone similar to Jesus Christ. Neither history, nor humanity, nor the ages, nor nature, offer

me anything with which I am able to compare Christ or explain his gospel. Here everything is extraordinary ... Everything in Christ astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and his will confounds me ... Between him and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creation of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions would die for Him.” (Napoleon Bonaparte)

"Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander the Great, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of school, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.” (Theologian, Philip Schaff)

"The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity – hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory – because at the Father's will Jesus became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later He might hang on a cross.” (Theologian, J.I. Packer)

"Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, 'God, you don't know what it's like. You don't understand. You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't have a clue how much this hurts.' The cross is God's way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, 'Me too.'" (Pastor, Rob Bell)

*My soul longs for you, my God, my King, my Saviour.
Today I turn to you from the depths of my heart.
May your holy presence remove all dangers from my soul and body.
May your many graces fill the inmost recesses of my heart,
and inflame it with your divine love.
O most sweet Jesus,
turn your face towards me.
Today, with all the power of my soul I cry out to you.
May all that is beautiful and good in all of creation praise you for me.
May all creation bless your holy name.
You are our protection in time and eternity.
You are the consoling presence and power of God.
And you are our Saviour and Sustainer.
Amen*

adapted from Henry Suso (1295-1366)

Saturday, December 23: Luke 2:1-7

What is Christmas all about? Especially in challenging political times, how is Jesus' coming good news for us?

During the horrors of World War II, C.S. Lewis gave a series of talks about Christianity on BBC radio (later he published these in the book, *Mere Christianity*). Lewis sums up Christmas and Christianity in one memorable sentence: *"The Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God."*

The invitation of Christmas is to find new life – a whole new identity and purpose – in and through Jesus. In the midst of the tough times, in Jesus, God comes to us, to give us new life. We rediscover the purpose for which He created us: to love God and to love our neighbour in His name. To know His good news and to be His good news. God became a man to enable us to become the sons and daughters of God.

As we read in John 1 a couple of days ago, *"He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't*

recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God” (John 1:11-13).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a contemporary of Lewis', was a German theologian. He was arrested by the Nazis for helping Jews and imprisoned in a concentration camp. What might Christmas mean in Germany during World War 2? How could a Christian understand “good tidings of great joy” which had supposedly arrived with the birth of Christ in that difficult environment?

Bonhoeffer didn't see Christmas as a confusing contradiction in a world of evil, but as a profound message of hope and joy for those living under oppression. He wrote, *"For the great and powerful of this world, there are only two places in which their courage fails them, of which they are afraid deep down in their souls, from which they shy away. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No powerful person dares to approach the manger, and this even includes King Herod. For this is where thrones shake, the mighty fall, the prominent perish, because God is with the lowly. Here the rich come to nothing, because God is with the poor and hungry, but the rich and satisfied he sends away empty. Before Mary, the maid, before the manger of Christ, before God in lowliness, the powerful come to naught; they have no right, no hope; they are judged."* (see Mary's song, Luke 1:46-55)

Jesus comes with a promise of hope, peace, love, and joy. Will we let Him into our hearts? *"The only real blind person at Christmas-time is he who has not Christ in his heart."* (Helen Keller)

*O God, my Father,
looking up at the shining stars of the cold December sky,
I remember the patient mother and the rock-hewn manger in lowly Bethlehem
where lay cradled your Love for the world.
In the shadows of the silent stall I stand beside the Christ.
Speak to my soul as I wait and pray.
Let the trusting, loving spirit of the Child
steal into my life until it calms my fears and soothes my pain.
In willing surrender and passionate longing
let me take the Christ child to my heart,
and henceforth I may live as he lived,
love as he loved,
and follow in his footsteps,
bring help to the needy,
courage to the weak,
comfort to the sorrowing,
and hope to the lost.
Amen.*

Anonymous

Sunday, December 24: Luke 2:1-14

The Magi (from the distant Parthian Empire) will have to travel long dangerous caravan routes to find Jesus.

The residents of Bethlehem and the shepherds on the nearby hills, don't have to go anywhere: Christmas came to them. Jesus was born in their town. They only had to wander over to the next street to find Him. Did most of them bother? Did they even notice?

We have read this story in Luke so often it ceases to amaze us. But try to imagine it in fresh ways. Imagine the life of a shepherd. It's a tough life, cold and thankless. It's a meagre life, poor paying and low status. It's a dull life, monotonous and boring. It's a lonely life, cut off from all but a few fellow shepherds. "Fun" would be laughing at the same old jokes over the same fire with same old guys.

Suddenly all heaven breaks loose. None of us can even begin to comprehend what it is like for an angel of the Lord to appear, surrounded by the radiance of the Lord's glory. Then to have the angel speak. His words are that the hopes of the prophets are finally fulfilled: *"I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David."* Then to have the angel joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying, *"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*

"Two things stand out in the story of the shepherds. First, any day may become a special day if we have the heart to see its wonders. Second, any town will become all the more marvellous to the person who seeks for evidences of God's presence among the most familiar byways" (Charles Allen and Charles Wallis).

- What wonders do you see today?
- What evidence of God's presence do you see in your familiar byways today?
- Where is God at work in our town?

Look at things with new eyes, eagerly seeking evidence of God's work in your life and among us. Praise God and give thanks.

*O God, whose mighty Son was born in Bethlehem those long days ago,
lead us to that same poor place where Mary laid her tiny child.
And as we look on in wonder and praise,
make us welcome him in all new life,
see him in the poor,
and care for his handiwork:
the earth, the sky, and the sea.
O God, bless us again in your great love.
We pray for this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Anonymous

Monday, December 25: Luke 2:8-20

Martin Luther writes, *"There are some of us who think to ourselves, 'If I had only been there. How quick I would have been to help the baby. I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger.' Yes, we would. We say that because we know how great Christ is, but if we had been there at that time, we would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem."*

That observation hurts, doesn't it? Many of us, like most of the residents of Bethlehem, would have missed Jesus' birth. We would have been so busy. Mary and Joseph were so poor. They were Middle Eastern migrants "from away." They should go back where they came from. They're not one of us. They aren't our problem. Other people will help, right?

Luther goes on to ask this hard question: *"So why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbour."*

In our rushing about what are we missing? **Who** are we missing? Is there someone we could call? Encourage? Forgive? Help? Get together with? Pray with? What about Middle Eastern migrants "from away"? Do we ever think, "They're not one of us"? "They should go back where they came from"? "Someone else will help, right"?

"I tell you the truth," Jesus says, *"when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me"* ("It" is any loving act of justice or mercy, see [Matthew 25:31-46](#)). Christmas is a great time to come alongside someone who is struggling, someone you have lost contact with, someone who

needs some love, someone who needs your forgiveness, and to make a difference in the name of Jesus.

Loving our neighbour is not something we ought to limit to Christmas. We all have opportunities to care for people in the name of Jesus throughout the year. Maybe one of your "New Year's Resolutions" can be to keep the spirit of God's love, grace, care, and compassion going all year around. How might you do that?

Support a ministry (like Canadian Baptist Ministries or another ministry of care and compassion) on an ongoing basis? Help out at the Soup Kitchen? Call a shut-in regularly? Mentor a child/youth? Call a lonely person weekly/monthly? Encourage someone with a smile? Get to know some of our new Canadian families?

You don't have to do it all. Just do one thing to share God's love ...

*Loving Father, help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and the wisdom of the wise men.
Close the door of hate
and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift
and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings
and teach us to be merry with clean hearts.
May Christmas morning make us happy to be your children
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake.
Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Tuesday, December 26: Luke 2:21-35

On the 8th day after his birth, every Jewish boy is to be circumcised and named. Circumcision is an ongoing symbol of God's covenant promise to Abraham ([Genesis 17](#)). This covenant included blessings for Abraham and his descendants that they would be a blessing to all nations ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)). They were to be a missional people, sharing God's miraculous love with the world. Unfortunately, over the centuries the people of God – Jewish and Christian – have struggled to put that "be-a-blessing-to-others" mandate into practice.

Mary and Joseph bring their baby boy to the Temple on the 8th day. In accordance with tradition, Mary and Joseph's son is circumcised and named "Jesus," the name given before he was conceived ([Luke 1:31](#)).

At a later time, a firstborn son was presented to God in the Temple and offered to Him as a gift. Then the parents would symbolically "buy back," or redeem, the child through an offering ([Exodus 13:1-16](#); [Numbers 18:15-16](#)). Through this symbolic act, the parents would acknowledge their child belongs to God, who alone has the power to give life. They recognize their child is a God's gift, given back to them as a blessing.

And they remember how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

For 40 days after the birth of a son, the mother was ceremonially unclean and could not enter the Temple area. So this story, from Luke 2:22 on, takes place at the end of those 40 days. In accordance with the law, the family goes to the Temple to present Jesus to the Lord and offer a sacrifice of redemption.

As Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple to fulfill these requirements, they meet Simeon. Simeon is old. He has been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of praying. He has lived through hard times in Israel: Roman occupation, brutal taxes, and systemic corruption and racism. He has much to complain about. But rather than dwelling on his disappointments, Simeon chooses to look to God's future with hope. Nothing is

so bleak as a day without a tomorrow; Simeon has hope for tomorrow. Simeon refuses to lose his hope in God's love, mercy, grace, and power. Patiently, he waits. Stubbornly, he keeps the faith.

Can Simeon be an inspiration to you?

Note Simeon's prophetic words: Jesus has come for **ALL** nations, **ALL** peoples, and **ALL** cultures (as in Abraham's call and Revelation 4-7). Jesus is a new start for Abraham's mission to be a blessing to **ALL** people (Genesis 12:1-3). Salvation is not just for Jewish people (that's good news for all of us non-Jews).

Jesus has come to with good news to **everyone** – no matter what their ethnic background, ability, age, gender, income, or life experience. How is that encouraging for the year ahead?

Echoing the words of Isaiah 9 and John 1, Simeon describes Jesus as our light in the darkness. What does light do? Light makes darkness disappear. Light calms our fears. Light reveals mysteries. Light helps us find our way. Light provides warmth. Light allows us to see and be seen by other people and build good relationships. Light does not allow things to stay hidden. Light is comforting. *"God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all ... if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin"* (1 John 1:5-7).

How can we walk in His light today and every day, this Christmas and in the year ahead?

*Dearest God,
please never let me crowd my life full to the brim
so that, like the keeper of Bethlehem's inn,
I find I have no room for Him.
Instead, let my heart's door be ever open,
ready to welcome the newborn King.
Never let my life be filled with fear, jealousy, or rage,
So that like, Herod and his friends
I put up walls to push Jesus away.
Let me offer the best I have to Him, who gives me everything.
Amen*

Rosalyn Hart Finch

Wednesday, December 27: Luke 2:36-38

Hope. Peace. Love. Joy. These qualities just seem to flow from Anna.

As I get older (none of us getting any younger!), I hope I can age gracefully. Like Anna, I hope I can model the hope, peace, love, and joy of Jesus more and more.

I appreciate this poem about Anna from Ivan Kauffman. As you read his thoughts, think about what the birth of Jesus means to you ...

"The Prophet is old and stooped over, her face covered with wrinkles, like Mother Teresa. Her eyes are bright and clear, like a child's. She is beaming with excitement and obviously has something important to tell us. Her voice is quiet and peaceful, but also convinced and powerful. As she speaks she constantly looks up, searching for the next word which produced gaps in her speech, as age has produced gaps in her teeth. The boundary between the present and eternity has long begun to dissolve for her. Anna the Prophet:

*"He's here. What we're waiting for.
His parents came to the temple this morning. Cutest little thing.
Every baby, we always wondered, is this the one?
Then we'd say, 'Maybe the next one.'*

The Romans told us to stop. They said, 'We're it. Get used to it.'
But all they had was soldiers, what could they do?
Make work for the grave diggers.
If that's all there is, why bother?
We don't need more dead bodies to bury.
We need people to pray.
It's the only thing that works.
I'm eighty-four years old.
People ask me why I don't give up.
I say, 'I'm waiting.'
They say, 'What for?'
I say, 'The same thing you are.'
That's why you can't get on a train if you don't have a ticket.
You wouldn't know when to get off.
People don't understand that.
They say, 'What you see is what you get.'
But what you see is what you're looking for.
Forget about the pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by stuff. Dreams never turn out the way we think.
There's got to be real babies. Somebody you can feel their heartbeat. Change their diapers.

"People who pray understand.
The others mostly stand around and argue. Whoever changed anything by arguing?
The prayers, they're up to Yahweh. Who knows what Yahweh can do?
This should make even the sourpusses happy.
Well, it's time for me to go now.
But you – you stay and have a party.
Sing a lot.
Kiss the girls, be happy.
It's gonna be a great time."

We have so much to rejoice in. *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you **out of darkness into his wonderful light**. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy ... Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us"* (1 Peter 2:9-12).

Lord, help me to be person who flows with the grace of God in these days.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen.

attributed to Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Thursday, December 28: Matthew 2:1-12

A friend of mine is agitated. He insists we have to “keep Christ in Christmas” by saying “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays.” He gets angry – really angry – when people do say “Happy Holidays.” “IT’s a war on Christmas!” he complains. That friend also seems to be always busy, always grumpy, and not much fun to be around at Christmastime (or any other time of the year). He makes sure his words say, “Keep Christ in Christmas,” but he’s so unpleasant, I wonder if, in his heart, he’s missing out on Jesus?

Unfortunately, my friend seems to know little of Jesus’ hope, peace, love, or joy in his own life. He certainly doesn’t model those virtues in his relationships. Most people avoid him.

We can say “Merry Christmas” all we want. But do we actually know Jesus?

I love the Magi because these travelers from far away Persia (modern day Iran), find Jesus. The local religious Jewish people miss Jesus, God’s gift of love and grace, completely. The religious Jews are “keeping the faith” but are stressed, angry, and miserable. Rather like my friend, their doctrine is great, but they seem to be missing actually knowing God. In contrast, these Iranians, coming from a foreign land and a foreign religion, meet God in Jesus. Their lives are transformed by meeting Jesus.

Every time I read this passage, I’m reminded of a simple hymn by James Fast. It gives me pause to think:

*Wise men seeking Jesus, traveled from afar,
Guided on their journey by a beauteous star.
But if we desire Him, He is close at hand;
For our native country is our Holy Land.*

*Prayerful souls may find Him by our quiet lakes,
Meet Him on our hillsides when the morning breaks.
In our fertile cornfields while the sheaves are bound,
In our busy markets Jesus may be found.*

*He is more than near us, if we love Him well;
For He seeketh ever in our hearts to dwell.*

- Have I missed Jesus this Christmas?
- How can I organize my life so I can spend time, daily, with Jesus?
- How might I need to change things up so I have more time for Him?
- How can I let Jesus dwell in my heart?

*Child of glory, Child of Mary, Child of God,
born in the stable, the King of all:
you came to our wasteland,
and in our place you suffered.
Draw near to us today as we call to you.
Bless to us this day of joy.
Open to us heaven’s generous gates.
Help us sing the joys of your glory, with all the angels of heaven.
Amen*

Ray Simpson

Friday, December 29: Matthew 2:13-18

Tom Wright, Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, writes, “I was once preaching at a big Christmas service where a well-known historian, famous for his skepticism toward Christianity, had been persuaded to attend by his family. Afterwards, he approached me, all smiles. ‘I finally worked out,’ he declared, ‘why

people like Christmas.'

'Really?' I said. 'Do tell me.'

'A baby threatens no one,' he said, 'so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all.'

"I was dumbfounded. At the heart of the Christmas story is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around that he kills a whole village full of other babies in order to try to get rid of him. At the heart of the Christmas story is a baby who, if only the Roman Emperor knew it, will be Lord of the whole world. Within a generation his followers will be persecuted by the Empire as a danger to good order. Whatever else you say about Jesus, from his birth onwards, people certainly found him a threat. He upset their power games, and suffered the usual fate of people who do that.

"In fact, the shadow of the cross falls over the story from this moment on. Jesus is born with a price on his head. Plots are hatched; angels have to warn Joseph; they only just escape from Bethlehem in time. Herod the Great, who thought nothing of killing members of his own family, including his own beloved wife, when he suspected them of scheming against him, and who gave orders when dying that the leading citizens of Jericho should be slaughtered so that people would be weeping at his funeral – this Herod would not bat an eyelid at the thought of killing lots of little babies in case one of them should be regarded as a royal pretender. As his power increased, so had his paranoia – a not unfamiliar progression, as dictators round the world have shown from that day to this.

"The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born, then, in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Banish all the thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head..."

Does this part of the Christmas story disturb you? It should. It's meant to. It's a harsh reminder of the very evil that Jesus has come into the world to save us from.

As we approach a new year, with whatever it brings, Jesus will be with us in the midst of it. For people going through hard times, knowing we have a God who understands suffering is comforting. He knows, first hand, what we are going through. And He walks through it with us.

"No point in arriving in comfort, when the world is a misery; no point in having easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice." says Wright. "If Jesus is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be where the pain is." Jesus is where the struggles (and the blessings) are. Thank you, Lord.

*May the Strength of God guide us.
May the Power of God preserve us.
May the Wisdom of God instruct us.
May the Hand of God protect us.
May the Way of God direct us.
May the Shield of God defend us.
May the Angels of God guard us against the snares of the evil one.
May Christ be with us.
May Christ be before us.
May Christ be in us,
Christ be over all.
May your Grace, Lord, always be ours,
This day, O Lord, and forevermore.
Amen.*

Attributed to Patrick (390-460)

Saturday, December 30: Matthew 2:19-23

Abraham Lincoln wrote, *"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day."*

Moving into a New Year invites us to think about new beginnings. And to pray.

The BIG event Old Testament Jews kept looking back to for inspiration and encouragement was the Exodus. During the Exodus, God miraculously delivered them from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. Every year the annual feast of Passover retells this Exodus story of God's provision, power, and salvation. God saved them. But, though God had saved His people to be a blessing, the Israelites consistently fell short:

- They felt short in their devotion to God (for example, making a golden calf to worship after God had miraculously led them through the Red Sea).
- They fell short in their love for their neighbours, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Now Jesus comes out of Egypt (he, Mary, and Joseph have been refugees there. God has a heart for refugees. That's good to remember). It's a new beginning. A new Exodus. This is not coincidental, it is a deliberate reworking of the whole Exodus-deliverance-salvation story.

We have been brought out of slavery to sin and bondage to evil. We have been saved by the blood of a spotless lamb, Jesus. We are in the true Promised Land, a "state" of salvation. We are safe in God's hands, today and for all eternity. How do we live in this Promised Land of new life in Jesus?

Jesus will show us how we can:

- Live a life of faithful devotion to God. Determine to walk humbly, as a student, with Jesus. Make it a goal to learn from and be more like Jesus.
- Love your neighbour as yourself. Ask Jesus to help you act justly and love mercy in new ways.

New Years' Resolutions are great. But we have to come up with some specific strategies to implement our desire to faithfully follow Jesus. It helps to ask a trusted friend to hold us accountable.

- Will you read/pray every day? What? (these guides can help) When? Where?
- Will you be part of a small group or class? Which one? When will you begin (this week?)?
- Is there a practical ministry of service/volunteer work you can be part of? Which? When?

Is God calling you to reach out to a specific person in mercy and love? Who?

What will you do about it?

*Father, thank you for Jesus, your son, our Saviour.
Grant us, O Spirit, to know that which is worth knowing,
to love that which is worth loving,
to praise that which can bear with praise.
Father, help us to disavow what in your sight is unworthy,
and to prize what to you is precious,
Above all, Father, son, and Spirit.
Help us to search out and to do what is well pleasing to you always, all days.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Sunday, December 31: Isaiah 42:1-7 (one service at 11 a.m.)

As we reflect on Christmas and try to figure out what it means for us, what does Jesus' birth mean for us?

For many, Christmas is a “warm, fuzzy” time of year. We love the lights, music, food, and gatherings.

But Christmas is now over. The decorations are going away. We are moving into a long, cold, dark, hard January and February. What does Jesus’ coming mean for us as we move into a New Year? As we head into the depths of a Canadian winter?

Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah – Jesus – do speak about His birth. Isaiah talks about His being born to a virgin (Isaiah 7:14). Micah talks about Him being born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). But the prophets are more interested in WHO Jesus is and what He will DO as God’s Anointed One (“Anointed One” is the literal translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah” and the Greek word “Christ”).

One of the ways the Messiah, Jesus, is described by God in Isaiah is as God’s “Servant.” As God’s Son, Jesus will do God’s perfect will, providing hope, healing, and salvation for us all through His life, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection.

In Isaiah 42:1-7, God introduces us to His Servant, the Messiah, Jesus.

- What qualities of character do we notice?
- What does the Servant/Messiah/Jesus do?

Read this passage in *The Message* translation:

God says, *“Take a good look at my servant. I’m backing him to the hilt. He’s the one I chose, and I couldn’t be more pleased with him. I’ve bathed him with my Spirit, my life. He’ll set everything right among the nations. He won’t call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won’t brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won’t disregard the small and insignificant, but he’ll steadily and firmly set things right. He won’t tire out and quit. He won’t be stopped until he’s finished his work—to set things right on earth. Far-flung ocean islands wait expectantly for his teaching.”*

“This is God’s Message, the God who created the cosmos, stretched out the skies, laid out the earth and all that grows from it, Who breathes life into earth’s people, makes them alive with his own life: ‘I am God. I have called you to live right and well. I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe. I have set you among my people to bind them to me, and provided you as a lighthouse to the nations, to make a start at bringing people into the open, into light: opening blind eyes, releasing prisoners from dungeons, and emptying the dark prisons.’”

As we enter a New Year, know that this amazing Saviour will be with you, every moment of every day.

*O consuming Fire, Spirit of Love,
reproduce within me those gracious qualities of Jesus,
that I may be the love of God to those around me –
through the power of Your Spirit,
in the name of Jesus,
for the glory of the King of Kings,
Amen.*

adapted from Elizabeth of the Trinity (12th century)

Monday, January 1: Isaiah 43:1-7

Welcome to 2024. How are you feeling about that? How are you thinking about the year ahead? Are you excited? Apprehensive? Hopeful? Fearful? Anticipating good things? Stressed out? Happy? Worried?

God says to us (in *The Message* translation):

“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you.

*I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end –
Because I am God, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Savior.
I paid a huge price for you:
all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in!
That's how much you mean to me!
That's how much I love you!
I'd sell off the whole world to get you back,
trade the creation just for you."*

In fact, God gives His one and only Son, Jesus, to save us.

As you begin 2024, know that the God who created the universe loves you. He will never leave you. He will walk with you through the dark valleys. He will rejoice with you in the good times. He will guide you.

He calls you by name. You are His. Today. And every day.

*Our Father, grant that in the days of this New Year
we may feel your love,
the love that surrounds us,
the love that will not let us go but will ever bring us back:
back to your side, back to your will, back to your way.
It is in that way – your way – that we would walk, O Lord,
for though all we like sheep have gone astray, like sheep we are tired –
tired of missing your path and stumbling along paths of our own choosing.
Like sheep we would return to the fold.
We would come back to you,
confessing that we are not proud of the mistakes we have made,
not too proud of our record as we look back over the last year.
We are conscious not of our triumphs and success but of our failures.
We are in no boastful mood, O Lord, as we look into a new year.
We seek your forgiveness for our stupidity and our obstinacy,
for the blindness of our hearts,
for the wrong choices that grieved you and subtracted from our own happiness.
Forgive us, Father.
Humbly and gratefully we open our hearts to receive your miracle of grace.
We thank you for the fresh strong wind of your Spirit
which comes to bring us refreshment, cleansing, and perfect peace.
Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Tuesday, January 2: Isaiah 43:5-13

Following Jesus in 2023 was a challenge. Following Jesus in 2024 will almost certainly be a challenge, too.

Our Good News of great joy is that Jesus will be with us no matter what difficulties we may face.

Jesus was not just a cute little baby in a manger. Jesus is our Mighty God, our Everlasting Father, our Wonderful Counselor, our Prince of Peace, with us, personally, powerfully, and ever-present, every moment of every day.

"So don't be afraid: I'm with you." God says to us.

I'll round up all your scattered children, pull them in from east and west.

I'll send orders north and south:

'Send them back. Return my sons from distant lands,

my daughters from faraway places.

I want them back, every last one who bears my name,

every man, woman, and child

Whom I created for my glory,

yes, personally formed and made each one." "...

"I, yes I, am God.

I'm the only Savior there is.

I spoke, I saved, I told you what existed

long before these upstart gods appeared on the scene.

And you know it, you're my witnesses,

you're the evidence.

Yes, I am God.

I've always been God and I always will be God.

No one can take anything from me.

I make; who can unmake it?"

- God is with you today. Tomorrow. And the next day.
- His Spirit is within you. Be encouraged.

Spend time today, talking with the God who loves you. You can tell Him anything and everything that is going on in your life. Be honest. And listen. Ask God, through His Spirit, to speak to your heart ...

Spirit of Christ, stir me.

Spirit of Christ, move me.

Spirit of Christ, fill me.

Spirit of Christ, seal me.

Seal my soul as Your own, that Your reflection in me may be a light for all to see.

We beg You, all-merciful Father through Jesus, Your only-begotten Son,

made man for our sake, crucified and glorified for us,

to send upon us from Your treasure-house, your Holy Spirit:

the Spirit of wisdom,

enabling us to come in faith to you;

the Spirit of understanding:

to enlighten our perceptions;

the Spirit of prudence,

helping us to follow in Your footsteps;

the Spirit of strength:

to withstand our adversary's onslaught;

the Spirit of knowledge:

to distinguish good from evil;

the Spirit of holiness:

to clothe ourselves with love and mercy;

the Spirit of faithfulness:

to withdraw from all ill-doing and live quietly in awe of Your eternal majesty..

These are the things for which we petition.

*Grant them for the honor of Your holy name, to which,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory,
thanksgiving, praise, and lordship for ever and ever.*

Amen.

Wednesday, January 3: Isaiah 53:1-6

We love the Christmas stories of Baby Jesus in the manger. Of sheep and cattle gathered around the infant. Of angels and shepherds and magi from the East.

But the prophets spend much more time looking forward to who Jesus will grow up to be. He will be the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. He is God Himself, come among us.

He will also be rejected, abused, and treated harshly by His own people.

Isaiah has amazingly clear visions of how Jesus will be treated as an adult, by those who say they love God.

- How is Isaiah's vision a clear foretelling of how Jesus will be treated?
- What is the Good News for us in Isaiah 53:1-6?
- What does Jesus' suffering accomplish for us?

As we begin 2024, we are saved, forgiven, restored, and blessed because of Jesus.

Be thankful. And be encouraged. You can face this year with confidence. The risen Lord Jesus is with you every moment of every day.

*Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world.
Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.
Let nothing trouble you.
Let nothing frighten you.
All things are passing.
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
He who possesses God lacks nothing.
God alone suffices.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Thursday, January 4: Isaiah 53:7-12

We are saved by Jesus. Our sins are forgiven by Jesus. Our lives are safe in the hands of Jesus.

We can face today, tomorrow, and every day in this New Year with confidence, because Jesus is with us.

On the one hand, it may seem strange to read these prophecies about Jesus' suffering and death immediately after Christmas. We have just been celebrating the hope, peace, love, and joy of the birth of a wonderful baby boy.

On the other hand, Jesus was born to be our Saviour. And God knows this journey will lead Jesus into conflict with the political powers, religious authorities, and ordinary people of His day.

Jesus will tell us all that "*All of you, like sheep, have strayed away. You have left God's paths to follow your own*" (53:5 – yesterday). We don't like to hear that. We're pretty sure we've got life all figured out. We're pretty sure our way is the right way. We haven't gone astray. Jesus has. Right?

These verses ask us to look into our own hearts. What evil is in our own souls? What wrong thoughts are in our own minds? How do we stray from God's paths?

What might you need to pray about?

As we begin a New Year, may God help us to follow His way. May we follow His word.

*God, you know our hearts,
and you see our temptations and struggles.
Have pity on us and deliver us from the sins
which make war upon our souls.
You are all-powerful, and we are weak and erring.
Faithful God, our trust is in you.
Deliver us from the bondage of evil,
and grant that we be your devoted servants, from now on,
serving you in the freedom of holy love, for Jesus Christ's sake.
Amen.*

Eugène Bersier (1830-1903)

Friday, January 5: Isaiah 55:1-7

"Hey there! All who are thirsty, come to the water!" is how Eugene Peterson translates this passage in The Message translation. "Are you penniless? Come anyway – buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money – everything's free! Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?

"Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words.

"I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love. I set him up as a witness to the nations, made him a prince and leader of the nations, And now I'm doing it to you: You'll summon nations you've never heard of, and nations who've never heard of you will come running to you because of me, your GOD, because The Holy of Israel has honored you."

We are invited to come to Jesus. To taste and see that the Lord is good.

God's gift of new life – eternal life now and hereafter – is free. There is no cost. We don't earn our salvation. We don't work for God's grace. The gift of life that comes through Jesus is God's free gift of love, mercy, and grace to us. Accept His gift of amazing grace. And join the party!

This year, how can we come closer to God?

How can we listen better to his life-giving, life-nourishing words?

Isaiah goes on to say, *"Seek GOD while he's here to be found, pray to him while he's close at hand. Let the wicked abandon their way of life and the evil their way of thinking. Let them come back to GOD, who is merciful, come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness."*

God loves to speak with us. He loves it when we pray with Him.

God loves it when we come back to Him and try to follow His ways. He freely forgives us.

God is a God of amazing grace, amazing love, and amazing new life.

*O, You who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
I lift my heart to You.
Guide me in the Way this day,
enlighten me with the Truth,
and grant me the more abundant Life
which You alone can give.
This I ask, not that I may selfishly get good or glory for myself,
but that I may do good to others and so glorify Your name.
Amen.*

Saturday, January 6: Isaiah 55:8-13

In *The Message* translation, God says, "I don't think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work. For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think."

It's probably a good thing that God doesn't think the way I think or work the way I work. I do wish that I could think the way God thinks. And it would be great to be able to work the way God works.

Much of our journey through life is learning to let the Holy Spirit shape our thoughts, attitudes, values, and actions to be more and more like Jesus. In 2024, we can pray to become a bit more like Jesus each day.

God goes on to say, "Just as rain and snow descend from the skies and don't go back until they've watered the earth, doing their work of making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, so will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed. They'll do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete the assignment I gave them."

As we spend time reading Scripture this year, we can pray that God's Word will shape us in this process of drawing closer to God and becoming more like Jesus.

"So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thornbushes, but stately pines—monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God."

Sometimes we think of faith as hard work. It's drudgery. In fact, God wants our relationship with Jesus to make life joyful. This year, ask the Spirit to give you joy. Take time to count your blessings. Be thankful. Play joyful music. Get together with positive, joy-filled friends. Every now and then, treat yourself to something extra special, to celebrate the joy of the Lord.

*Thank You, thank You, thank You, generous God.
You have injected life with joy,
thus we know laughter.
You have dabbed creation with color,
thus we enjoy beauty.
You have whistled a divine tune into the rhythm of life,
thus we hear music.
You have filled our minds with questions,
thus we appreciate mystery.
You have entered our hearts with compassion,
thus we experience faith.
Thank You, God, Thank You. Thank You.
Give us joy, O Lord. Give us joy.
Amen*

Sunday, January 7: Psalm 32

How do we live wisely and well in 2024?

Isaiah has been reminding us of the hard realities of sin and evil in our world. Jesus came, was rejected and abused. He was killed. Yet, through His death and resurrection, He destroyed the power of sin and death. We have new life, new hope, new peace, new love, and new joy thanks to Jesus.

In a similar way, David, in Psalm 32, reminds us of the realities of sin. He warns us of the consequences of disobeying God. And he tells us that, in general, life goes better when we follow God.

David is not just talking about abstract theological principles.

He knows this from personal experience. David became an expert in the whole topic of sin. He sinned by not doing his duty as king, by lusting after Bathsheba, by committing adultery, by arranging for a murder, by lying about his sins, and many more less-than-noble things. He knows firsthand that life goes very badly when you disobey God. They go even worse when you lie about them.

However, David also knows from personal experience that when you own up to your mistakes, take responsibility, confess your sin, repent, and try to live according to God's ways, life, in general, goes much, much better.

He always has lots and lots of problems. But he faces them with God as his constant companion. He will go through the darkest valleys knowing God's presence, comfort, and strength.

Read through Psalm 32 a couple of times. What is God saying to you? Here it is from *The Message*:

*Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be—
you get a fresh start,
your slate's wiped clean.*

*Count yourself lucky—
God holds nothing against you
and you're holding nothing back from him.*

*When I kept it all inside,
my bones turned to powder,
my words became daylong groans.*

*The pressure never let up;
all the juices of my life dried up.*

*Then I let it all out;
I said, "I'll come clean about my failures to God."*

*Suddenly the pressure was gone—
my guilt dissolved,
my sin disappeared.*

*These things add up. Every one of us needs to pray;
when all hell breaks loose and the dam bursts
we'll be on high ground, untouched.*

*God's my island hideaway,
keeps danger far from the shore,
throws garlands of hosannas around my neck.*

*Let me give you some good advice;
I'm looking you in the eye
and giving it to you straight:*

*"Don't be ornery like a horse or mule
that needs bit and bridle
to stay on track."*

*God-defiers are always in trouble;
God-affirmers find themselves loved
every time they turn around.*

*Celebrate God.
Sing together—everyone!
All you honest hearts, raise the roof!*

Is there anything you need to confess to God? How might you need to repent, or change direction?

Will you do it?

*Let us go forth
in the goodness of our merciful Father,
in the gentleness of our brother Jesus,
in the radiance of his Holy Spirit,
in the faith of the apostles,
in the joyful praise of the angels,
in the holiness of the saints,
in the courage of the martyrs,*

*Let us go forth
in the wisdom of our all-seeing Father,
in the patience of our all-loving Brother,
in the learning of the apostles,
in the gracious guidance of the angels,
in the patience of the saints,
in the self-control of the martyrs.
Such is the path for all servants of Christ,
the path from death to eternal life.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer