

Daily Devotionals for

Advent

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Come, thou long-expected Jesus!

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

The History behind the Hymn

For countless Christians around the world, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” signals the beginning of Advent. It was first published in 1744 in Charles Wesley’s Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord, a little collection so popular that it was reprinted 20 times during Wesley’s lifetime. This hymn is now sung in the Advent season rather than during the nativity of Christ and is included in most denominational hymnals.

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” has the quality of a petition—a prayer that implores Christ to be among us. Imperative verbs are used six times in the two stanzas found in the hymnal: “Come, thou long-expected Jesus”; “From our fears and sins release us”; “Let us find our rest in thee”; “Now thy gracious kingdom bring”; “Rule in all our hearts alone”; “Raise us to thy glorious throne.” The effect of these petitions is a tone of supplication; Israel’s deep longing for their Promised Messiah!

Notice the repetition of the word “born,” which appears four times. Each time “born” is sung, an aspect of Jesus’ mission to a troubled world is revealed: “Born to set thy people free,”; “Born thy people to deliver,”; “Born a child and yet a king.”; “Born to reign in us forever.”

Although we live in a different time than Charles Wesley, the longings of people’s hearts are just as deep. We long for security, love, relationships, and meaning. To those who open themselves up to its message, this hymn identifies with that longing at the deepest levels of our existence. Where there is no longing, there can be little meaning. Therefore, hope is central to the Christian experience.

And where will our longing, our hopeful waiting lead us? Where is the ultimate home of our hope? In the final line, Wesley takes us there: “Raise us to thy glorious throne.”



Advent is from the Latin word “adventus,” which means “coming”! It begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve, December 24.

For Christians, Christmas is more than the celebration of the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago; it is the anticipation of that day when Jesus will come again, not as a weak and vulnerable baby boy with no place to lay His head, but as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, having been crowned by God the Father with glory, honor, and praise.

Advent is also a spiritual journey for all who truly believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. The Scripture readings for each day walk us through those thousands of years of hope, that moment of the ultimate gift of God’s love, that unconditional peace of knowing our sins are forgiven, and that everlasting joy of knowing our eternal destiny is settled forever!

As we see our world drowning in chaos and confusion, and with wickedness and evil being manifested before us, unashamedly, let us begin this advent season with a sense of penitence and contrition for the unconfessed sins in our own hearts, and then for God’s people around the world so that even unbelievers would see their need of a Savior; the One whose birth even they will celebrate, albeit in selfishness.

The Advent wreath is a wonderful tool to help parents tell the real Christmas story to their children. The wreath is an evergreen circle with five candles, four around the wreath and one in the center.

- The circle of the wreath reminds us of God's eternity – He has no beginning or end.
- The green of the wreath speaks of the hope that we have in God, the hope of newness of eternal life.
- Candles symbolize the light of God coming into the world through the birth of His son.
- The four outer candles represent the period of waiting during the four Sundays of Advent, which symbolize the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ.
 - The Prophecy Candle – (purple) the candle of hope – Romans 15:12-13
 - The Bethlehem Candle – (purple) the candle of peace – Luke 3:4-6
 - The Shepherd Candle – (pink) the candle of Joy – Luke 2:7-15
 - The Angel Candle – (purple) the candle of love – John 3:16-17
- The fifth candle is the Christ Candle – (white) – John 1:29

As the candles are lighted over the four-week period, it also symbolizes how the demonic darkness of fear and utter hopelessness of this world, as well as the guilt and remorse for our sins, recede to the degree that the Light of the Word is allowed to shine. The flame of each new candle reminds us that something is happening; God is at work, and more is yet to come.

Linda and I join you in this journey, and we pray that God will reveal Himself afresh and anew unto you as you make room for His Son in your heart! – Pastor Wayne



**This is an Advent symbol of Jesus from
Revelation 1:8 and Revelation 22:13**

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega [the first
and the last, the beginning and the end],'
says the Lord God, who is and who was and
who is to come, the Almighty"
(See also Isaiah 44:6)*

The blue letter is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, and the purple is the last letter of the Greek alphabet, Omega. Not only does this symbolize the One who has come and will come again, it also emphasizes the continuity of God's work throughout the Old and New Testaments.



**SUNDAY
TO BE READ AT HOME**

Week One: Hope (To be read at home)

What is hope? Modern culture tells us it is a “maybe,” a kind of unsure optimism. But in Scripture, hope is an indication of certainty. “Hope” means “a strong and confident expectation.” The Israelites were hoping for a savior, their messiah. God had promised a messiah and they believed it. They didn’t know when or who, but they were waiting.

Zechariah was a Levite in the nation of Israel. He worked in the temple and was a God-fearing man. He and his wife, Elizabeth, were childless in a culture where children were considered to be a sign of God’s blessing. Zechariah had prayed and prayed to God, asking for a child, but God had not sent one. As Zechariah stood in the Holy of Holies that day, preparing to offer the sacrifices for the people, an angel appeared to him with a message from God:

Fear not, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you

and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord his God. He is never to take wine or fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go before the Lord to make ready a people.

But when Zechariah heard Gabriel's words, his first reaction was not hope. It was doubt. He asked the angel, "But how can this be? I am an old man!" The angel responded I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

Elizabeth did become pregnant, and Zechariah found himself wholeheartedly living in hope, in confident expectation that God would give him a son and that the long-awaited Messiah was soon to follow. Today we too can live with Zechariah's hope. We can live with the certainty and the confident expectation that Christ not only came to this world as a baby so long ago, but he will return and everything that God has promised will come true. What hope!

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
(To be conducted at church)
The lighting of
The Prophecy Candle
the candle of hope

Read Romans 15:12-13

As we begin the Christmas season, let's review the Old Testament prophecies that foretold the coming of a Savior. In Matthew 1:22-23, the gospel writer said,

"Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

Matthew was quoting a specific prophecy from Isaiah that was made more than 700 years earlier. In Isaiah 7:14, God spoke through His prophet and said:

"Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

Mary did conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, and she did bear a Son whom she named Immanuel. This one event should assure us that whatever God has said He will do, as the Great "I AM", He has the power to do, even if that means a virgin girl would need to conceive and give birth to a Son.

Prophecy is not the “foretelling” of the future, but rather it is the “forth-telling” of what God has already ordained to be.

As we light the prophecy candle, may we allow the flame to enlighten our understanding of God’s Word regarding the prophecies that have already been fulfilled, and warm our hearts regarding the prophecies yet to be fulfilled, including the imminent return of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Like God’s people before the first coming of Christ, we now look ahead to the time when Christ, our Lamb and our Shepherd, will finish his work of redemption, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

A Prayer of Hope

“Dear God, as we light this candle, we hope for your coming as our Good Shepherd. Please gather us in your arms, feed us with spiritual food, wipe away every tear from our eyes, and let your face shine, that we may be saved. Come, our Shepherd! Amen.”





MONDAY
Exodus 19:1-6

Whether it is a couple pledging their love and loyalty “in sickness and in health” or rejoicing in tears together as they hold their precious child for the first time, relationships imply commitment, and intimate relationships require it! If that “first trust” is ever broken, it is almost humanly impossible to restore it.

Having been miraculously delivered from their bondage in Egypt, the Israelites were only three months into their wilderness journey when God made His intentions known to His people. God had been near them along the way, leading them by the pillars of cloud and fire, sending manna and meat for their nourishment and water for their refreshment. In essence, God was proving Himself faithful to them!

Then God instructed Moses to remind the people of what He had done for them and then to explicitly tell them: *“If you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!”*

God's invitation to the Hebrews was for them to become His "peculiar treasure," and that would mean more of a commitment to Him than a casual friendship. It would require a commitment to a shared future, a shared hope, a shared trust, and a shared love.

In sending Jesus Christ into the world to be our Savior, God was inviting us to that closer, intimate relationship with Him as well. In fact, in 1st Peter 2:9, Peter used those same terms to describe the purpose of our salvation: *"For ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light!"*

As you begin this advent season, evaluate your own personal intimacy with God. Is your relationship with Him more of a casual friendship, someone who is good to know if you ever need him, or is it based upon that mutual commitment. God extended His personal invitation to you 2000 years ago in a barn in Bethlehem. What is your answer to Him?

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a wise man, I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give Him--give my heart.*



TUESDAY
Hosea 11:1-4

Commitment is not a word in our vocabulary today, simply because we have been taught to hold out until we have exhausted all other options. That might be fine if we were considering a date for a casual event, but not if we are choosing a Savior for eternity.

God chose the people of Israel to be His “peculiar” treasure like a husband and wife choose each other; it was a relationship of commitment and trust. Sadly, Israel didn’t make the same commitment to God as God made to them, and that lack of commitment led the people away from that level of intimacy God desired to have with them. Usually, it required a major crisis to remind them of God’s faithfulness to them, even when they had not been faithful to Him.

As every parent knows, a broken heart is the price we often pay to have the opportunity to demonstrate our unconditional love to and for our children. Even when they are disappointing or willfully disobedient to us, our commitment to them remains, and so is God’s commitment to us as His children.

You already know the level of God's commitment to you – *"greater love hath no man than this"* - but God didn't stop showing His love for us at the cross: He continues to prove Himself faithful to us through His divine provision, protection, purpose, and direction. He feeds us from His word; He nourishes us through prayer and praise and He warms us through our fellowship with other believers.

But what is the level of your commitment to Him? Years ago, someone said, "If you don't feel as close to God as you once did – who moved?" If you want to draw closer to God during this advent season, turn to Him! You will not find the finger of condemnation, but you will find His arms of consolation, and I can assure you, having run to those arms many times, they are arms of love!

*Nearer, still nearer, nothing I bring,
Naught as an offering to Jesus, my king;
Only my sinful, now contrite heart.
Grant me the cleansing Thy blood doth impart.
Grant me the cleansing Thy blood doth impart.*

Challenge:

- Ask each family member to make individual commitments to each other for the next month.
- Make them age-appropriate, but hard enough to require discipline and determination.
- Ask each family member to make their own individual commitments unto the Lord, such as to pray, read the Bible, share the gospel.



WEDNESDAY
Micah 4:1-5

Micah was a truth-teller – he loved his people enough to tell them the truth. Israel was facing certain defeat at the hands of the mighty Assyrian army, and Micah knew their only chance for survival was to put their trust in God. Yet their worship had become hollow and void of truth. Micah bravely called the people to give account for their failures, and he painted a picture of what their lives could be if they would return unto God!

Advent can be a truth-telling time if we allow it to be. Sadly, most of us get so caught up in the holiday that we forget it should be a holy day. In fact, the word “Christmas” is a combination of the words “Christ” and “Mass” – and according to the Roman Catholic Church, it means “Christ’s Death,” and it always includes the observance of communion.

Even though Protestants still continue to call the observance “Christmas,” they have interpreted it to mean “Christ-worship”; the recognition of His birth, for sure, but also the purpose for His birth, His life, His death, His resurrection, and His promise of a soon return.

Advent should be a time of truth for us, a chance to refocus our lives and to repent of those areas where we have “merged with the world.” If the Prophet Micah came to you today and said: *“Return to God”*, what would that mean to you? Truth-tellers are hard to listen to, but I urge you to let Micah be that truth-teller in your life today!

CHRISTMAS

When I was but a youngster, Christmas meant one thing. That I'd be getting lots of toys that day.
I learned a whole lot different, when my mother sat me down, and taught me spell Christmas, this way.
“C” is for the Christ-Child, born upon this day.
“H” for herald angels in the night
“R” means our Redeemer
“I” means Israel
“S” is for the star that shone so bright
“T” is for three wise men; they who traveled far
“M” is for the manger where He lay
“A’s” for all He stands for
“S” means shepherd’s cane
And that’s why there’s a Christmas Day
And that’s why there’s a Christmas Day

Songwriters: ARNOLD, EDDY / CARSON, JENNY LOU
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THURSDAY
Micah 4:1-5

Where are you from? How you answer that question gives people an insight into your past. It might explain your accent or your cultural heritage or point to your favorite foods. It could also evoke some preconceived notions about you— notions that can only be overcome through a personal relationship.

When we hear the word “Bethlehem,” we think of the birthplace of Jesus, for that is the context of our history. But when the prophet Micah identified Bethlehem as the place from which the Savior would come, the Hebrews would have connected it to the birthplace of King David.

David was the youngest and smallest of Jesse’s boys! To look at him, one would have assumed that he was more equipped to tend sheep than to lead a nation. But God had told Samuel when he went to look for a king, not to look on the “outward” appearance, for God was looking at his heart! When a man’s heart is right with God, and his life is yielded unto His use, it doesn’t matter one whit about his size or ability or his pedigree. God can take the weakest among us and make us strong enough for Him to use!

As we look at some of the men God used to introduce His plan for our redemption, we can see these truths:

- Who we are is not nearly as important as who God is creating us to be.
- Where we are from is not nearly as important as where God sends us.
- What we have done in the past is not nearly as important as what He wants to do in us and through us in the future.
- Hearing the accolades of praise from men is not nearly as important as hearing those words from our Lord – *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant!”*
- Obedience to God is never the most popular decision to make; it brings conviction upon those who aren’t willing to make that choice.
- The greatest ability God is looking for in those He chooses to use in His kingdom’s work is available – leave the rest up to Him.



ONE SOLITARY LIFE

Dr. James Allan Francis

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years, He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life



FRIDAY
Micah 6:6-8

In premarital counseling, I ask the couple to write out the “expectations” they have of each other. It is very interesting to see their lack of absolute honesty and transparency in this exercise, for either they haven’t thought about it, or they have assumed their partner already knows, or they are afraid to express their true feelings for fear of being rejected. But as we all know, those unexpressed expectations will soon surface, and then comes the conflict.

As a wise person once said, “Unspoken expectations are disappointments waiting to happen.” The wise person with whom I’ve shared almost 60 years said: **“Lower your expectations! Then you won’t be totally disappointed, and you might even be surprised!”**

In Micah 6:8, God was perfectly clear about what He expects of His people: that we will do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Are these things always easy to do? Of course not! Nor are they one-time accomplishments to be completed and checked off a list, but they can help us understand God’s heart, and shape our own hearts as we put them into practice.



SATURDAY
Psalm 85:1-7

The anguish of a broken relationship is not only heart-breaking, it is also gut-wrenching. Whether it's the disappointment of unmet expectations, the hurt of betrayal or an unexpected breakup, our hearts take a beating. Even though the normal response is "anger," amidst the pain, there is underlying desire for forgiveness and reconciliation!

Sometimes – with a lot of hard work and trust – those kinds of relationships can be restored. Sometimes, even when only one person wants to work it out the relationship can be restored; most of the time it won't be. In that case, perhaps the best one can hope for is an amicable friendship for all involved. Whatever the situation, one thing seems certain: We have to face the hurt before we can begin to heal.

The psalmist speaks of this sad reality with longing. The love God once showed his people had seemingly disappeared. The close bond the people had felt with Him had slipped away. The psalmist's cries are our cries: *"How long?" "Will you be angry forever?" "Will you not come back?"* The words are plaintive: *"Please, can I have another chance?"*

In the Lord's Prayer, we say these words: *"Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!"* Translation: "Lord, you have the same mercy upon me that I show to others!"

If you sense God's presence has diminished in your life, and it seems like He is angry with you today, He may be holding up a mirror of your own heart. Make a list of those whom you need to forgive, and get about it! It doesn't matter what they did or didn't do, or even if they were right or wrong, good or bad or indifferent. If you will release them through your forgiveness, God may use that to break their hearts.

Too many people missed the Messiah because their hearts were so filled with hate and anger, they had no place for His love to be revealed. God will not share His heart with anyone or anything. Make your choice!



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
(To be conducted at church)
The lighting of
The Bethlehem Candle
the candle of peace

Read Luke 3:4-6

As we re-light the first purple candle, we remember the meaning of the word “advent” is “coming” or “visit”! We are preparing for the Advent of Christ at Christmas; walking through those historical steps, and taking our time so we can understand and cherish every memory of them.

- We remember Israel’s hope for the coming of God’s Messiah to save, forgive and to restore.
- We remember our own need for a Savior to save us from our sins and to restore our broken relationship with God.
- We are reminded of our hope for the second coming of Christ, and to prepare our hearts for His soon return.

By lighting one candle each week, we pause to think upon the birth of Christ, event by event. Last week we focused upon the prophecies regarding His coming; how many of those prophecies were fulfilled in His birth, His life, His death and His resurrection, and how the rest of them will be fulfilled when He returns.

Seeing how God kept His promise to the people of Israel encourages us to believe God will keep His promises to us.

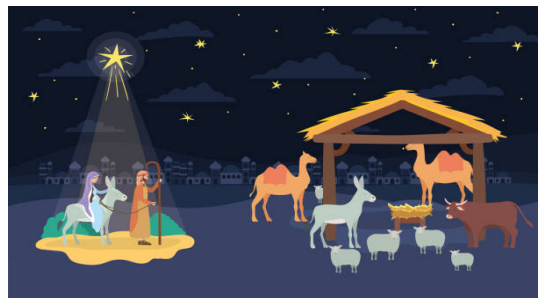
Today we focus on the coming of Christ who brings us peace. As we light the Bethlehem candle, and read the Holy Scriptures, may our joy over our Lord's first coming overflow our hearts, and may our anticipation for Christ's second coming be renewed.

- Read Psalm 130:1-8
- Read Jeremiah 31:31-34
- Read Luke 1:68-79

We light this candle because, like God's people centuries ago, we also need a Savior who will forgive our sins. The purple color reminds us of the seriousness of our sin and our great need for God's forgiveness.

Prayer of Hope

Dear God, as we light this candle, we recognize our sin and our need for a savior. We wait for your forgiveness in Christ. We long to be purified so that we might present ourselves to You in righteousness. Come, Our Savior! Amen!





MONDAY
Psalm 85:8-13

Anytime problems arise it's easy to question the nature of a relationship. Is the pain worth it? Can we really work things out? What if I get hurt again? And yet, when your heart is invested and the love you feel is real and deep, all you can do is to make yourself vulnerable again, reach out in humility and pray for healing to come along.

The analogy doesn't fit perfectly, but much of the same can be said of our relationship with God. God pursued that intimacy with us, in love, hoping we would respond to Him in love, and do whatever we needed to do to keep that relationship healthy! Right now, even at this moment, before we read another word, we need to seek God's forgiveness for the times we have neglected the One whose love for us has never changed!

We never know for sure what reconciliation will look like – with the Lord or with others, but we certainly know where it begins. Love and faithfulness meet when righteousness and peace kiss. I wonder if that's why our mothers told us kids to “kiss and make up!” After the embrace, the healing begins.



TUESDAY
Mark 1:1-8

In the midst of life's struggles, when we feel lost, broken or alone, Jesus comes to bring us hope and to give us second chances. To the truly repentant, this "good news" is almost more than we can believe: Is it true? Is it true for me?

The Gospel of Mark doesn't begin at the manger, but with the story of John the Baptist. John is calling the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The people have been waiting for four-hundred years for God to come and help them, and now, John says, the long-anticipated Messiah is here.

The news is almost more than the weary people dare to believe. But John's call will lead to salvation for them—and for us: **Repent, for the one is coming who will forgive your sins.**



WEDNESDAY
Isaiah 40:1-2

When Jesus told His disciples they should not shun the little children, “*for such was the Kingdom of God,*” no doubt He knew the joy of holding out His arms and having a little child jump up into them. No matter what is going on in our lives, a child’s hug is a like a shot of adrenalin, and even though the hug may be only for a second, the memories linger throughout the day, bringing joy to our hearts and a smile across our face.

A child in Nicaragua stole Linda’s heart. When she learned that Linda was coming, her mother said the child lived each day in the anticipation of seeing her “nana” again. It was a “Kodak” moment to see them run toward each other and embrace! Body pain was gone, worries vanished, and fears subsided, all from the hug from a little child.

Our time of daily devotions should be like that. Rather than “finding” the time to spend with the Lord, we should live in the anticipation of that appointed time with Him every day, and then run into His arms and cherish every precious moment of it. Those few moments can make an eternal difference in our lives and those we love.



THURSDAY
Isaiah 40:3-5

Every year about this time, the mailbox is filled with envelopes telling us: “You may already be a winner,” and even though we doubt it, our dreams of finding that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow forces us to open the envelope to see. The gullible truly believe their ship will come in one day or their rich uncle will die and leave them his fortune.

The prophet Isaiah isn’t telling the people of Israel they’ve won the lottery. He’s bearing an even more enticing message: *“Your exile is over! Soon you will see the glory of the Lord.”*

Many folks who win the lottery lose their minds, discover more relatives than they ever thought they had, lose their children through the canker of riches; their marriages through the ruin of wealth, and their own lives through the pursuit of pleasure. But I’ve never seen anyone who truly received Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord lose anything! The lie of the huckster is that you can have your joy today with no money down and an easy-pay-plan. The promise of God is that He will show us the pathway to perfect peace and the price of entry has already been paid.



FRIDAY
Isaiah 40:9-11

Waiting! It doesn't matter if it's for a baby to come, a check to arrive, the doctor to call or the traffic light to change, waiting can be one of the most challenging things we do. Even with all the modern, time-saving gadgets, and with the information super-highway at our fingertips, we still get bored "waiting" – even for only a few moments!

Isaiah's people were waiting, too – they were waiting for some sign from God that He had not abandoned them. Their beloved Jerusalem was in ruins and their beloved people were living in exile! Their prayers were seemingly unheard by God, and they needed something to give them hope.

The prophet spoke these words of promise: **THE LORD IS COMING!** He is strong, able to defeat every foe and every enemy. Yet He is gentle, ready to gather God's people into His arms and to shelter them from harm.

Our times of waiting can be wasted in worry or they can be invested in worship. Which one do you really think is the most profitable?



SATURDAY
Psalm 27:1-5

If you could have only one thing this Christmas, what would it be? Good health? Family harmony? World peace? Today, many people try to “buy a feeling!” They think if they give their loved ones the tangible things they want, perhaps the intangible will be returned. Not!

David wished for one thing: to be fully immersed in God’s beauty and truth. *“One thing I asked of the Lord: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and to behold the beauty of the Lord!”* Can you imagine being immersed in truth? Can you imagine what it will be like to behold the beauty of the Lord?

If we pursued that kind of intimacy with the Lord, our lives would be at such peace, we could sleep all night, free from worry and doubt, and face each new day with the joy of the Lord as our strength.

Psychologists say that Christmas is the most stressful time in our lives. Like rats chasing their tails, we become so consumed with the chore of buying things to give to others, we forfeit the peace of mind and heart that Jesus Christ died to give to us! Stop it!

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
(To be conducted at church)
The lighting of
The Shepherd's Candle
the candle of joy

Read Luke 2:7-15

As we re-light the first two purple candles, we remember the meaning of Advent. Advent is a word that means “coming” or “visit”.

We are preparing for the Advent at Christmas; walking through those historical steps, and taking time so we can understand and cherish every memory of them.

- We remember Israel's hope for the coming of God's Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore.
- We remember our hope for a Savior to save us from our sins and restore our broken relationship with God.
- We are reminded of our hope for the second coming of Christ, and to prepare our hearts for His soon return.

By lighting one candle each week, we remember the birth of Christ, event by event. Over the last two weeks we have focused on the prophecies regarding His coming, the many prophecies that were fulfilled at His birth, and how the balance of them will be fulfilled when He returns.

Seeing how God kept His promise to the people of Israel encourages us to believe God will keep His promise to us, and we look forward to the day He comes again.

Today we remember the Lord Who is our Shepherd.

As we light the Shepherd's candle, and read the Holy Scriptures, may our joy over our Lord's first coming overflow in our hearts, and may our anticipation for Christ's second coming be renewed.

- Read Psalm 126:1-6
- Read Zephaniah 3:14-20
- Read Philippians 4:4-7

We light this candle because, like God's people centuries ago, we know that God has come in Christ and that Christ will come again. We rejoice in God's work in history and in the future. The pink color means joy!

Prayer of Hope

Dear God, as we light this candle, we rejoice. We know the first act of the Christmas story ended with the birth of Jesus the Messiah. And we know that He will soon come again in all of His glory. So even though the story isn't over, we rejoice in our hope. We wait for You, rejoicing! Amen!



MONDAY
Philippians 1:3-6

Making bread at home is messy, but it is good! Once the ingredients are mixed, the lump of dough is kneaded until everything has blended together. Then it is allowed to rise for a few minutes before it is put in the oven and baked into something yummy for the tummy!

Paul told his fellow believers that God, who had begun a good work in them, would be faithful to bring it to completeness. Once they accepted the basic principles of salvation by grace, through faith, God would “knead” them through trials and temptations; allowing that grace to penetrate into every area of their lives. Then He would allow them to “grow up” in their understanding of their faith, so they could survive the fires of persecution.

No matter where we are in that process, God isn’t finished with us yet, and He won’t be until we are completely conformed to the image of Christ. But the promise is that God will finish what He has started. Our purpose is to remain pliable, like “dough,” until that process is complete. Even if your life is a “mess” right now, yield to Him – He is “kneading” you to let you now how much you “need” Him!



TUESDAY

Philippians 4:4-6

The message of Advent is the Lord is near!
*Therefore, “be anxious for nothing”, but let the
“peace of God guard our hearts and minds!”*

With less than two weeks until Christmas, I’m sure many hearts and minds are filled with anxiety.

As we continue to celebrate the first advent of our Lord, and look forward with great anticipation for his second advent, perhaps you could be His forerunner today in someone’s life. You and I know “the Lord is near,” and we can sense His presence, but what about that person who lost a loved one in the last year and will face their first Christmas alone, or that dad and mom who, through no fault of their own, won’t have the resources to express their love to their children? What about those in our community who will not have enough food to eat?

Ask the Lord to reveal someone unto you who needs to know **“the Lord is near!”** Use good discernment, but let them know God is the one who sent you to let them know He has not forgotten them. Try it today! You will be surprised at the joy that swells up in your own heart.



WEDNESDAY
Malachi 3:17-18

In Malachi's day, the people questioned God's love. Yes, He had allowed them to return to their land, but the city was in ruins, and they faced many years of hard work in rebuilding their lives.

God spoke through the prophet, saying: *"I have loved you."* But the people still questioned Him: *"How have you loved us?"* (Malachi 1:2) In their depression, they needed to see God's love in action.

Have you ever questioned God's love? When the issues of life seem to be robbing of us of life, or when the unexpected happens and we are caught off guard, or even when our dreams and desires are not fully accomplished, even though we have worked hard and trusted God, are we not prone to wonder if God loves us?

In Malachi 3:17, God said, *"On the day when I act, I will spare them as parents spare their children."* There are times when our children "doubt" our love, especially when everything doesn't go their way. But we don't abandon them when they question our love, we just wait until they put aside their selfishness long enough to see it!



THURSDAY
Psalm 42:1-8

Where is your God? Has anyone ever asked you that? Perhaps you suffered a severe crisis of life, and those who mocked your trust and faith in God taunted you in such a way.

Psalm 42 was written during the time the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon. Day after day their captives would laugh and mock them: *"Where is your God now?" "Why has he abandoned you?" "Is He not powerful enough to deliver you?"*

Prisoners of war have said it was their memories of their past that kept them alive each day and gave them hope for the future. In Psalm 42, the writer remembered how wonderful it was to worship in that temple; how they went in joyful procession up those temple steps, and into the worship of God. And then he says: *"As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for You, O God."*

In many ways, the unbelieving world could ask us that same question today. In light of the darkness and depravity of our day, where is our God? Why does he allow for such evil and barbaric behavior?

According to biblical prophecy, even darker days are ahead, and our freedom to worship God and express our Christian Faith could be limited, if not forbidden. Should that happen today, what would be in your museum of memories to give you the strength you need to remain faithful unto God, and to remain assured of God's love? Would you remember the great worship services of your past? Would your children?

For many people, that dark day has already come, and all they have left is their memory. In leading the chapel services in the nursing homes, senior adults would talk about how they "used to" gather around the piano at their home or their church and sing until their voices were gone. Many of these precious ones have lost their immediate memory, but not their past. Just start playing one of their favorite hymns, and you will see their minds come alive, their voices raised, and their hands and feet move.

Create a memory in the lives of your children today by stirring the memory of a senior adult! Give them a recording of their favorite worship music and watch their faces. Then you will understand Psalm 42.



FRIDAY
Psalm 86:11-13

About right now, to have an undivided heart would be nothing short of a miracle. While I'm not a scrooge, if we allow him, Satan can use this season to pull our hearts in every direction as we are told to "buy this product," "eat this food," "come to the party," or "attend this event!" If we yield to that pressure, the happiness we are looking for will always be just out of reach!

In Psalm 86 the psalmist asks for an undivided heart. If God granted you an undivided heart, what would that mean for you? Perhaps a few moments of peace with your spouse or your children, or maybe a time to do what you have always wanted to do during Christmas, but chose to do what everyone else expected you to do!

When we give everyone in our lives a little piece of our heart, we will always have a divided heart, and there will never be enough of our heart to go around. But, when we give our heart unto the Lord, and allow Him to determine with whom He will share, we will find a peace like we have never known before, and He will love all the others through us.



SATURDAY
Lamentations 3:22-26

***T**his I call to mind, and therefore I have hope! It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not; they are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness.*

What makes these words so meaningful is to know that they were spoken as a lament, bemoaning the fall of the City of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the very moment the people of God had every right to doubt His love and faithfulness – but they didn't!

I'm sure there were those who said the writers' words were good poetry, but they were not based in reality. It was over! Jerusalem was gone! But the poet remained steadfast in his trust in the one who had been steadfast in his love toward them. For had it not been in God's will, Jerusalem would not have fallen.

What a word of counsel for us today! For when we cannot comprehend what God is doing in the world today, and how it fits into His eternal plan for our redemption, we must learn to trust in who He is, for that has not changed, and it never will. Every day is a day that the Lord hath made, and we must rejoice in it.

The History behind the Hymn

"Great is Thy Faithfulness" was written in 1925 by Thomas Chisholm. Born in a log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky, Chisholm became a Christian when he was 27 and entered the ministry when he was 36, though poor health forced him to retire after just one year. During the rest of his life, Chisholm worked as an insurance agent, but he also wrote 1,200 poems, including several published hymns.

Toward the end of his life, Chisholm said, "My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness."

Each new day, God gives us the chance to prove His faithfulness, and throughout history, He's never once been proven wrong, for His mercies are new every morning, no matter what.

*Great Is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father!
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.
Great Is Thy faithfulness, Great Is Thy faithfulness,
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy Faithfulness, Lord unto me!*

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
(To Be Conducted at the Church)
The Lighting of the
Angel Candle
the candle of love

Read John 3:16-17

As we re-light the two purple candles and the pink candle, we remember the meaning of Advent is coming" or "visit"!

We are preparing for the Advent of Christ at Christmas; walking through those historical steps, and taking our time so we can understand and cherish every memory of them.

- We remember Israel's hope for the coming of God's Messiah to save, to forgive, and to restore.
- We remember our own need for a Savior to save us from our sins and to restore our broken relationship with God.
- We are reminded of our hope for the second coming of Christ, and to prepare our hearts for His soon return.

By lighting one candle each week, we remember the birth of Christ event by event. For the last three weeks, we have focused on the prophecies regarding His coming, and how many of those prophecies were fulfilled in His birth, His life, His death, and His resurrection.

We have also seen how the rest of those prophecies will be fulfilled when He returns. Seeing how God kept His promises to Israel encourages us to believe God will keep His promises to us.

Today we focus on the coming of Christ – the evidence of God’s love. As we light the Angel’s Candle and read the Holy Scriptures, may our joy over our Lord’s first coming overflow in our hearts, and may our anticipation for Christ’s second coming be renewed.

- Read Psalm 89:1-4, 19-37, 46-52
- Read Isaiah 9:1-7
- Read Luke 1:26-38

We light this candle because, like God’s people centuries ago, we need a Savior who will forgive our sins. The purple color reminds us of how serious we are in looking forward to the son’s birth.

Prayer of Hope

Dear God, as we light this candle, we look ahead with hope to the birth of Your Son – the Son of David, the Son of Mary. May we be prepared to welcome Him with open arms and open hearts. O come now, Son of David! Amen!



MONDAY

Isaiah 43:1-7

It's amazing how three words can change our whole attitude of life, especially when they are said by the right people at the right time, and we know they are true. Those three words are "I love you," and when they are conveyed to us through the Word of God, they have the power to radically transform our lives.

God speaks those words over and over in Scripture. But perhaps never so powerfully and tenderly as in Isaiah 43: *"You are precious in my sight, and I love you."* God reminded His people, that even though they were in exile for their disobedience to Him, they still belonged to Him, and He loved them.

Isaiah proclaims that God will be with them as they pass through the waters, and that their offspring will be gathered from east, west, north, and south. If they listen closely, they can hear the words: *"I love you. I have called you by name. You are mine."*

God's power is in these three words—for Israel, and for us. If we truly hear them, and receive them, we can be reminded that we belong to God, and our future is in His loving hands.



TUESDAY
Luke 1:26-38

A very popular preacher likes to use the word “favor” to indicate the release of God’s blessings. He is prone to say, “We must get ourselves in the place of God’s favor if we want to receive His blessings.”

While that might make a good motivational message, it implies that we must do something to earn God’s favor, but that is not according to Scripture. Mary is portrayed as an obedient, believing and worshipful young woman, but that isn’t why God chose her to be the mother of Jesus. When the angel came to her and told her of her assignment, she was not seeking it, nor did she ever expect to receive it. All Mary could do was to respond humbly: *“Here I am Lord, let it be unto me according to your word!”*

If God’s favor was extended to you today, how do you think it would be manifested? Would you expect some kind of temporal blessing, or new opportunity of ministry, or an answer to your prayer? Or, would you expect an angel to come into your bedroom and give you an assignment that no one would believe, an assignment that would drastically change your life, but would also change the whole world?

God delights in giving out those ‘life-changing’ assignments. Should one of those come along today, what would be your response? Like Mary, our first response would be in doubt – surely God is not calling me to do that – surely there are other folks who are more qualified to do that!

If the Catholics have made too much of Mary, perhaps we evangelicals have made too little of her. Mary, who was probably no more than 14-years old, gives us the example of what our response to God should be, when He “favors” us with our assignment. “Let it be unto me according to thy word!”

Can you say that to the Lord today? Whatever assignment He gives to you, do it with all your might, and all for His glory. If not you, then who? If not now, then when? Someone is waiting on you to show them God’s favor.





WEDNESDAY
John 3:16-17

Someone said John 3:16 is the whole Bible in one verse! No doubt it still is the most quoted verse in the Bible, and it does contain the essential elements of God's plan for our redemption. When it is read in the context of our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus, we can get a good picture of Incarnation: God sending His Son, not to condemn the world for not believing in Him, but to save the world so they would believe in Him.

Love is the central theme of God's actions regarding our salvation. Contrary to the gospel presentations today, God's gift of eternal life was not just the promise of a future with Him in heaven, but rather it was that we might have a full and fruitful life with Him on this earth.

When we stop to consider the incredible gift of God's Son to be our Savior, certainly it must mean more to us than our "get out of hell" card when we die. Our eternal life with God begins the moment we are truly born again, and as we observe how He makes our lives so much more meaningful and purposeful than they were before, we can't wait to see what He has in store for us in the future! That's the joy of advent!



THURSDAY
Luke 1:46-55

After the baby inside of Elizabeth leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's voice, Mary broke out in song, praising God for His gracious actions to redeem the world.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

As Scripture does so many times, the writer wrote this song in the "past tense", yet they describe God's actions in "the future." What Luke is trying to tell us, through Mary's song, that God's promises are "yea"; what He ordained in eternity past will come true before eternity future.

Truth be told, even at this time of the year, we are often more sad-hearted than we are filled with joy. The world promises happiness, and in some cases, it delivers, temporarily. But when the music stops and reality sets in, we realize we were even sadder than we were before.

If you want joy, real joy, everlasting joy, let Jesus come into your heart!



FRIDAY
Psalm 96:1-3, 10-13

The Lord is coming. His arrival is so close we can almost taste it. The psalmist invites us to sing and rejoice at the universal reign of God. The nations witness it. All of creation—heaven and earth, field and forest, sea and dry land—are called to join in praise of the Lord.

While this psalm is linked more with our Lord's second advent, it stills refers to "His coming!" In that day, He will come to judge the world in truth and in righteousness. For now, we wait and we watch for the signs of His coming. We long for the day when we will see the culmination of our salvation and "thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth, even as it is now in heaven!"





SATURDAY
Zephaniah 3:14-20

In this obscure passage from Zephaniah, God made an incredible promise to His people: *“I will bring you home.”* The writer is referring to days of King Josiah in Judah, but if we will allow them, they will give us a fresh promise for today.

“Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.” There will come a day when there is no more judgment, no more fear, no more hunger and want. God will gather His people around Him again, and all will be well. What more could we want?

The thought of going home stirs up all kinds of feelings, and sadly for many, they are not all good. For many, “home” was not what it should have been, and certainly not what God intended. For others, the journey over the hills and through the woods, often confused with the thump, thump, thump of the interstate highway, is filled with joy and anticipation of seeing family and friends, and smelling that aroma of home!

One day we all will be “going home” to be with the Lord, forever. Maybe even today!



Christmas Day

Luke 2:1-20

Of all the characters in the Christmas story, the lowly shepherds were the most amazing to me. Why? Shepherds were outcasts among the people. They were considered “unclean”, and therefore not welcome in the temple services – other than to bring the lambs, of course! But God used them as the first people to go and tell the *“good news of great joy for all people.”*

Having been inspired by a choir of angels, the shepherds walked to the city of Bethlehem, where they found Mary and Joseph and the child, lying in a manger. Upon seeing the family, they bore witness to what the angels told them about this child, starting first with the parents.

Eventually the shepherds return to their sheep, glorifying and praising God for all they have seen and heard. If God can use a band of lowly shepherds to bring good news of great joy, what do you suppose God might want to do this Christmas through the likes of us? Be that unlikely voice of God’s word to someone today!

Christmas Day

The Lighting of the Christ Candle

Read John 1:29

Our waiting is over – Christmas Day is here. As we relight the three purple candles, and the pink candle, we now celebrate the birth of Christ our Savior and Lord.

- The first purple candle was the Prophecy candle; the candle of hope.
- The second purple candle was the Bethlehem candle: the candle of peace.
- The third candle, which is pink, was the Shepherds candle, the candle of joy.
- The fourth candle, the last purple one, was the Angel candle, the candle of love.
- Today we light the fifth candle, the white one, which is the candle of Christ. Jesus Christ, the light of the world has come into our hearts and we rejoice in knowing our sins are forgiven and we are assured of heaven.

As we light the center candle, may we joyously celebrate the good news of Christ's birth, as well as the joy that filled our hearts, when He was "born again" in us.

- Read Micah 5:1-5
- Read Luke 2:1-20
- Read Psalm 145

We light this candle with great joy and celebration, because Christ is born in Bethlehem. God's Son has come into the world to be our Savior! And he will come again in glory.

And on this Christmas morning, we join the angels in singing, "Christ the Savior is born!" We join those who are living in the darkness of sin, in thanking God for giving us this light, and we pray for the day when "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."

*Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King.
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit,
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.*

Prayer of Joy and Adoration

Dear God, as we light this candle, we rejoice in the birth of Your Son. May we worship Him, welcome Him, and make room for Him in our hearts. O come, let us adore Him! Amen!

The Miracles Dreams
Susie M. Best

That night when in the Judean skies
The mystic star dispensed its light,
A blind man moved in his sleep —
And dreamed that he had sight!

That night when shepherds heard the song
Of hosts angelic choring near,
A deaf man stirred in slumber's spell —
And dreamed that he could hear!

. . .

That night when o'er the new born babe
The tender Mary rose to lean,
A loathsome leper smiled in sleep —
And dreamed that he was clean!

That night when to the mother's breast
The tender little king was held secure,
A harlot slept a happy sleep —
And dreamed that she was pure!

That night when in the manger lay
The sanctified who came to save,
A man moved in the sleep of death —
And dreamed there was no grave!

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