

A night sky with a bright star and a mountain range. The star is the brightest, with a cross-shaped lens flare. The background is a dark blue night sky filled with many small stars. In the lower portion of the image, the dark silhouettes of a mountain range are visible against the lighter blue of the sky.

*To You, O Lord,
I Give my Life.*

-Psalm 25

Advent Devotions

2022

Psalm 25

Teach Me Your Paths

*To You, O LORD,
I lift up my soul.
O my God, in You I trust;
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.
Indeed, none who wait for You shall be
put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are
wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know Your ways, O LORD;
teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
for You are the God of my salva-
tion; for You I wait all the day
long.
Remember Your mercy, O LORD, and
Your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth or
my transgressions;
according to Your steadfast love
remember me,
for the sake of Your goodness, O
LORD!
Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore He instructs sinners in
the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble His way.
All the paths of the LORD are steadfast
love and faithfulness,
for those who keep His covenant
and His testimonies.*

*For Your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
Who is the man who fears the LORD?
Him will He instruct in the way
that he should choose.
His soul shall abide in well-being,
and his offspring shall inherit the
land.
The friendship of the LORD is for those
who fear Him,
and He makes known to them His
covenant.
My eyes are ever toward the LORD,
for He will pluck my feet out of the
net.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
The troubles of my heart are enlarged;
bring me out of my distresses.
Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they
hate me.
Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me!
Let me not be put to shame, for I
take refuge in You.
May integrity and uprightness preserve
me, for I wait for You.
Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all his troubles.*

These devotions have been written by various members of Grace and by the former deacons. We hope that you will use these devotions during your Advent journey. The theme for Advent 2022 comes from Psalm 25, “To You, O Lord, I Give my Life.”

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Sunday, November 27

Suggested Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. - Romans 13:8

The ability to love - nothing less - is the force that Jesus Christ unleashed in the world by His resurrection. Can you imagine how much the problems in and of this world would be diminished if we all interacted in love?

And love must start with us, as Christians, through knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Through Christ we have the power to love. He gives us this ability. And oh, the changes love can make!

We have an obligation to love others even when we don't feel like it. If in our encounters with others, our first thought was to love, how different outcomes would be, and how many problems would be resolved. Each day, as we put on our clothing, imagine putting on Christ. He will wake us up to the innumerable opportunities every day to love.

The time is now. Living in Christ every day is the way to love others, and Christ grants us that power. Next time someone irritates you, say, in traffic or in a store, try first to think of how you could show love to that person. Maybe say a prayer for them if you don't have the opportunity to smile or say something nice. Clothe yourself in love today.

Prayer: Dear Lord, You showed us the powerful example of love by dying on the cross to save us from our sins. Help us every day, starting now, to first remember the immense love You showed us and then to show love to others each and every day. Give us the power to love. In Your holy Name, Amen.

Monday, November 28

Suggested Readings: Psalm 124; Genesis 8:1-19; Romans 6:1-11

For the death He died He died to sin, once and for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. - Romans 6:10-11

Paul tells us in Romans 5 that Christ saved us even while we were sinners. And we are saved by grace, not by keeping the law. Even so, Paul tells us to avoid sin, though God's grace and forgiveness are always larger than our sin.

In baptism we have been baptized into Christ's death and united with Him. We were born into the sin of Adam and the death that brings. But with baptism in Christ, we have conquered death through the death and resurrection of Christ. This implies that we should live in a different way than we used to.

So when the tempter prowls around trying to entice us with sin and wrongdoing we are to say no. Sin and death no longer have power over us. We must remind ourselves of whom we are: children of the Savior, not children of the sinner. Just as Christ died to sin, we are to resist sin day by day, and this is the new life we are to live.

So in our life with Christ, we are very much alive to live life as a joyful child of God. Praise be to God for the freedom to live as redeemed children of the Savior.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for coming to earth to teach us to live as Your children. Thank You for suffering and dying on the cross, exhibiting the perfect love of the Father, and giving us the gift of eternal life. Help us each day to die to sin and to live joyfully as Your disciples in this world. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29

Suggested Readings: Psalm 124; Genesis 9:1-17; Hebrews 11:32-40

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped! Our help is in the name of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. - Psalm 124:7-8

The Psalm starts with the phrase, “If it had not been the LORD who was on our side.” This is an ‘if’ that is really not an ‘if.’ We should never be uncertain as to whether the Lord is on our side. He is always on our side when we keep His paths and walk in His ways, asking Him for help.

We are many times disobedient and have no ability to save ourselves. It is His action which saves us from sin and death.

Our lives are so full of trials and pitfalls but when we look back at the past, we are then aware of the divine protection of the Lord. We have been rescued time and time again from dangers, the ‘floods and raging waters’ and the ‘teeth of predators’ and in retrospect, we are convinced of the presence of the Lord.

Just as a bird cannot escape the snare, the soul cannot escape temptation, but God can bring us out and work our rescue - God delivers us, whatever the trial in our life that has ensnared us. The hand that was nailed to the cross reaches down and sets us free.

So with the Psalmist we can praise God by professing that our help is in the name of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth! Alleluia!

Prayer: Dear Lord, so many temptations ensnare us in the world. Through sin, Your beautiful creation became a place with danger and traps for sinful mankind. Help us every day to remember that our help comes from You. Your love for us is beyond our understanding, but we praise Your holy Name, knowing that you cradle us in Your arms and protect us from all snares. Help us as we share this wonderful Good News with others, in this world that needs You. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

Suggested Readings: Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 24:23-35

Read Matthew 24:23-35

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” Matthew 24:32-33

Watch the Signs

After Matthew’s grim and rather frightening predictions of great tribulation, false prophets leading people astray, and nature gone haywire, the gospel writer suddenly evokes the peaceful image of a fig tree in springtime. Tiny green leaves emerge and grow larger, branches become tender, and fruit begins to form. It is God’s miraculous way of continually bringing and sustaining life on earth, revealing His tenderness and constant care for us and all creation.

From the fig tree, we are told to learn a lesson. What can a fig tree teach us? One lesson might be to pay close attention to the signs God gives us, whether it be figs ripening, the sad face of a friend, or international news about fires, floods, and famines. Another could be that humans are closely tied to nature and God expects us to be good stewards, fully aware that how we live can have disastrous effects on this good earth.

A third lesson might be that even when calamity strikes, God continues to show His steadfast love in bringing new life and new hope to His people. In fact when things seem to have reached rock bottom, as bad as we can imagine, even then Jesus Christ is near us, “at the very gates.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to be attentive and mindful of the signs, to amend our lives in accordance with the messages we receive, and to be confident that God in Christ is close by when we need Him. Amen.

Thursday, December 1

Suggested Readings: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth will be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel. It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. When the Lord's promise has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all there will be a canopy. There will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain. (NASB)

We're in the Advent season, a time when we look forward to Jesus' coming to us at Christmas. This is also a time to look forward to Jesus' second coming. Today's verses from Isaiah, written between 740-681 BC do just that. Jesus is the Branch, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. When we look at the discouraging content of the news, we can remember God's promise here: the day will come when all the filth of sin is consumed in the fire of God's love and God will create a Jerusalem filled with you and me—made holy through the love of Jesus. (And remember, God keeps His promises.)

These verses from Psalm 72 from the Jerusalem Bible describe the new Jerusalem:

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*God, give your own justice to the king,
your own righteousness to the royal son, so that he may rule your people
rightly and your poor with justice.*

*Let the mountains and hills
bring a message of peace for the people.
Uprightly he will defend the poorest,
he will save the children of those in need, and crush their oppressors...*

*In his days virtue will flourish,
a universal peace till the moon is no more; his empire shall stretch
from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth...*

*He will free the poor man who calls to him, and those who need help,
he will have pity on the poor and feeble,
and save the lives of those in need.*

*And Lord, haste the day when our faith shall be sight, when the clouds
are rolled back as a scroll, the trumpet shall sound, and the Lord shall
descend! Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for loving us. Enable us to spread your love to others today. Amen.

*He will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage,
their lives will be precious in his sight...*

*Prayer will be offered for him constantly,
blessings invoked on him all day long...*

*Blessed be his name forever,
enduring as long as the sun!
May every race in the world be blessed in him,
and all the nations call him blessed!*

*Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel,
who alone performs these marvels!
Blessed forever be his glorious name,
May the whole world be filled with his
glory! Amen, Amen!*

Friday, December 2

Suggested Readings: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 30:19-26; Acts 13:16-25

O people of Zion who dwell in Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. The Lord will show you favor and answer you when he hears your cry for help. The Lord may give you bread of adversity and water of affliction, but he who teaches you shall no longer be hidden from sight, but with your own eyes you shall see him always. If you stray from the road to the right or the left you shall hear with your own ears a voice behind you saying, This is the way, follow it...The Lord will give you rain for the seed you sow, and as the produce of your land he will give you heavy crops of corn in plenty...On each high mountain and each lofty hill shall be streams of running water, on the day of massacre when the highest in the land fall. The moon shall shine with the brightness like the sun's, and the sun with seven times his wonted brightness, seven days light in one, on the day when the Lord binds up the broken limbs of his people and heals their wounds. (Excerpted from Isaiah 30: 19-26, NEB)

Isaiah wrote this over 2,700 years ago; he's talking to his fellow Israelites as well as looking into the future, to the last days when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom. The people of Israel were suffering under Assyrian captivity, and here Isaiah offers them hope: the Lord will be hidden no longer. This is a message for us, too: when we are suffering or worried about the future, we can trust in our Savior's guidance and support. Isaiah offers a picture of abundance set in an agricultural society; for us, we can have an abundant life for ourselves today. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10). Jesus said he was the good Shepherd, and the "they" are his sheep (us).

As Paul says, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body." (2 Corinthians 4:8 NIV)

When we are going through hard times, we can remember Isaiah's words in verse 15: "In repentance and rest you will be saved. In quietness and

trust is your strength.” Then we know, God’s got this! And we rest our worries and fears in the merciful love of Jesus. And along the way, we can walk in God’s abundance, no matter what our outward circumstances may be.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your love and guidance and support. Help us to trust you in all circumstances, for you know what is the best for us. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

Suggested Readings: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Isaiah 40:1-11; John 1:19-28

Read Isaiah 40: 1-11

Isaiah wrote these words over 200 years before the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem and exiled the people. There, they were servants of the Babylonian emperor, away from their destroyed homeland, without hope for the future. Yet here Isaiah tells them to take comfort, God knows the situation and will act. More than waiting, they are to act—to level the ground for the arrival of their king! (This is one way the ancient peoples marked the approach of a king.) There *is* hope for their future!

Israel's hurt was deep, but God's comfort was deeper. They were still God's people, and He cares for them. That's true for us, too. Likewise, we need to turn to God's loving comfort in times of trouble and despair. We are not alone and hopeless. After all, Christmas is coming! Jesus is coming! We are living in the in-between times, between the time Jesus suffered, died, arose and ascended into heaven, and the time when he will return to make all things new. As baptized believers, we now know some of God's blessings, but when Jesus returns, we will realize the fullness of those blessings.

He calls all of us to repent of our sins and rely on Him for forgiveness and strength. And such strength! We can “mount up on wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.” This Christmas, we can celebrate both Jesus' coming 2000 years ago as we look forward to His return.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for your many, many blessings. Your love is amazing! Enable us to rely on your grace and strength each day. Amen.

Sunday, December 4

Suggested Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

The Greatest Gift

Read 2 Peter 1: 3-8

As we look forward to Christmas and the gifts we will give and receive, let's stop a moment and reflect on the greatest gift ever given us: Jesus' presence in our hearts. Just think—the God of all creation, who made the heavens, the earth, and all that is in it, wants to dwell within our hearts, to make us “participants of the divine nature” as it says in our text.

Really? God wants to live in *my* heart? This selfish heart of mine, that's full of all kinds of worries, thoughts and feelings that are so very *un-God-like*? The Bible says yes, precisely. How can that be?

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus shone with God's glory, visible to his disciples. This is the same glory that God wants to dwell in our hearts, to help us grow into the fullness of our beings—the person God created us to be. That's why Peter says here, “you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.” It's all part of Jesus' commandment to love each other as God loves us.

But this isn't something we can do on our own. Only by yielding our hearts to the grace and love of the Holy Spirit can we begin to approach God's glory. And our loving God *yearns* for each of us to do just that. Our journey begins with our baptism, and as we learn (over and over!) to yield to God's loving care, we come to realize that God's “divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness.”

The journey isn't easy. We may have to go through illness, losses, pain, struggles, worries, fears. But the Holy Spirit is with us every step of the way. When we seek God, we find Him, and when we find Him, He

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changes us into His likeness. He empowers us to bring light into darkness, wisdom into chaos. As the hymn says, “No storm can shake my inmost calm when to that Rock I’m clinging/Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing!”

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for Your fantastic gift of Jesus and Your love. Come dwell in my heart, Lord Jesus, and guide my thoughts, words, and steps today. Amen.

Monday, December 5

Suggested Readings: Psalm 21; Isaiah 24:1-16a; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

“As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”

When I read this, I imagine Paul speaking directly to the Thessalonians and asking them to reflect on what they are doing in their lives to please God. It seems to me that Paul is saying we should always take note of what we are doing, good or evil, and review where we are with the Lord in our lives.

What happens when you review where you are with the Lord in your life? Some of us may need to even add the Lord to their life, if He is not already present. If He is present in your life, and you love Him, identify more ways you can please Him.

What are some ways to please God?

- 1.No one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.
- 2.Learn to control your own body in ways that are honorable and holy.
- 3.Lead a quiet life and mind your own business, so your daily life will win the respect of outsiders and you won't be dependent on others.
- 4.Treat everyone you meet as if you were meeting God. This is what God would love you to do.

He who rejects this instruction does not reject man, but rejects God.

~1 Thessalonians 4:8

Tuesday, December 6

Suggested Readings: Psalm 21; Isaiah 41:14-20; Romans 15:14-21

Isaiah 41:15-20

See, I will make you into a threshing sledge,

*new and sharp, with many teeth.
You will thresh the mountains and crush them,*

*and reduce the hills to chaff.
¹⁶ You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up,
and a gale will blow them away.*

*But you will rejoice in the Lord
and glory in the Holy One of Israel.*

¹⁷ *“The poor and needy search for water,*

*but there is none;
their tongues are parched with thirst.*

*But I the Lord will answer them;
I, the God of Israel, will not*

forsake them.

¹⁸ *I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water,*

and the parched ground into springs.

¹⁹ *I will put in the desert
the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle
and the olive.*

*I will set junipers in the wasteland,
the fir and the cypress together,*

²⁰ *so that people may see and know,
may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,*

that the Holy One of Israel has created it.

Just as written all through the Old Testament of the Bible, God shows He loves you and will not forsake you. Trust in Him in all things, for you are His child. Trust Him especially at times when things seem hopeless to you. We find we cannot do all things given to us and become frustrated at the trials we face on earth. God tell us to put all our trust in Him and He'll see us through life trials.

How many times have you been in a situation where you see no way to solve it? This could have involved arguments at home, at work, with family or friends. You are at a standstill and have to ask God to help you. Finally, accept that His will be done. Trust is important in our relationship with God.

We do not always see God's reason for the way things happen but we have to trust God's results will lead us through life's situations to the glory of God.

Wednesday, December 7

Suggested Readings: Psalm 21; Genesis 15:1-18; Matthew 12:33-37

Matthew 12:33-37

³³ “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.³⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.³⁶ But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Do you find it very difficult to be nice to someone who is not kind to you? Do you ask yourself why people are sometimes so rude and unhappy to others? Why should I be kind to someone whose words and actions are so negative and hurtful? Do you then avoid those people because you don't want to deal with them? You do not speak to them and avoid them whenever possible?

You could try to talk to them in another situation to find out why they are negative and unhappy. Are they being treated badly and now have developed that type of attitude? Maybe by talking to them you can help them to feel better because you show them you are concerned about them. A lot of the time just listening to someone leads them to talk about how they feel.

You do not have to solve their problems just be available to listen which is, most times, helpful. More people just want someone to listen to them and understand how they feel. Trust in the Holy Spirit to help you listen attentively.

God says we are all his children and He wants us to love each other.

Thursday, December 8

Suggested Readings: Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 1:6-18; 2 Peter 3:1-10

2 Peter 3:1-10

“Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. ²I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. ³Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” ⁵But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. ⁸But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”

This passage tells about scoffers who will come to sway you, from God's words, on a final day on earth.

Have you ever heard someone say the Bible is just a book of human stories and doesn't prove there is a God? Man constantly is trying to prove there is no God when everything around us shows otherwise. The Bible states that the last day of the earth will come like a thief in the night.

We must always be prepared on a daily basis for the final day, because we don't know when it will come and if we will be with God in heaven for eternity. We will no longer be of body but of spirit with our Lord in heaven. If we believe the message of Jesus Christ, love God here on earth and all his children, we will secure a place with God in heaven.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, continue to give us the Grace to be one of your beloved children here on earth. Amen.

Friday, December 9

Suggested Readings: Psalm 146:5-10; Ruth 4:13-17; 2 Peter 3:11-18

Ruth 4:17—And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

As I was reading the story in the book of Ruth, I began thinking this isn't the easiest of the Bible stories to grasp. So I did what Joyce Rea told us to do at the first *Touched by Grace*, when you are out of answers, “Pray.”

Then as I prayed my thoughts were “You once thought of challenges like these as a blessing not a burden.” As easy as that would have been to ignore, it would not go away. Then it dawned on me that this is the answer. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, had lost her husband and both sons. She was left with only her two daughters-in-law in the land of Moab. She told the two girls, who were Moabites to stay in their land and find new husbands while she returned to her homeland of Bethlehem – Judah. One of the girls left while Ruth's decision was to stay with Naomi to take care of her.

Her words to Naomi concerning this are well known – “I shall go where you go, your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God.” As we see in the story, Ruth, while working in the fields, caught the eye of Boaz and became his wife. The child they conceived was Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth had taken the burden of caring for Naomi who was getting on in years, because she chose and this is where God led her to be. That burden became a blessing – she was the great-grandmother of David, the greatest King in Israel's history, but most importantly she is part of the lineage of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. You could not get more blessed than that.

All of us have times in our lives when we are handed a burden. But through prayer we are lead through that maze to what becomes an absolute blessing. Gary actually came in while we were talking about this. He said that the dental event was at first a burden and when it all came together so beautifully, he got home and felt as blessed as he ever had.

Saturday, December 10

Suggested Readings: Psalm 146:5-10; 1 Samuel 2:1-8; Luke 3:1-18

Luke 3:11- And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."

As I was trying to finish this up, the pastor had a sermon on generosity, saying that "one cannot give what one does not have." We have just been able to come out of the Covid pandemic which came at a time when we were all unprepared for these events. Gathering was not allowed for some time, then attendance was limited to twelve families per church service. And though we are still nearly one half the pre-Covid attendance numbers, the congregation has responded generously. This is most remarkable because the world around us seems to be on the verge of another epidemic: greed.

John the Baptist tells here that we should share; that when we have abundance, it is really on loan from God. We are taught "The love of money is the root of much evil." Greed could easily be defined as the "love of material goods (money)."

Dr. John MacArthur, a California evangelist, once said that our primary goal in life should be to please God. Knowing how much it pleases us for someone to do something special for our children, how much would we expect it to please God when we help His children.

Also, at that same time, the LWML had their quilts on display, reminding me of another time. Almost fifty years ago, I was an active member of the Whiteville, NC Jaycees. We were gathering gifts from local merchants. One on my list was Todd Furniture. I could not think of anything that a furniture store would have for a needy family at Christmas. But I asked anyway. Mr. Todd's son, Lionel, said that he had some things, but I would have to come back the next day. He had for us a large box. Upon delivering to this family, I discovered about twelve shipping quilts that he had sent out to be cleaned. The family seemed to treasure this gift more than the normal items such as clothes, toys etc.

I then realized that facing winter, twelve clean, usable quilts is a great gift. I learned that in giving a gift, I should give what the recipient wants or needs, not what I would want or need.

Sunday, December 11

Suggested Readings: Isaiah 35; James 5:7-11; Matthew 11:2-15

James 5:11—Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

We are reminded here of the saints of old who not only accepted the hardships that came from the earthly view of nonbelievers toward believers, but felt they were blessed to suffer for God. And they would be rewarded so greatly that it was worth the wait.

I am personally reminded of a dear friend of my family who has suffered many physical hardships beginning with a birth defect. None of them seemed to get to him. My brother asked me several months ago “When was the last time you heard Jerry complain?”

My answer was “I don’t know if I remember ever hearing him complain.” My brother then said, “He may not know how.”

I tried to get in a visit to him as often as possible. Once when he was losing his ability to walk without his walker, he told us that it wasn’t so bad, he had more time to read scriptures and pray. And that he never tired of talking with Jesus and it seemed to him that Jesus never got tired of listening.

Later when his infirmities had finally taken their toll on his body, he returned home from the hospital not being able to walk. He said “I’ve been walking for eighty-one years, maybe I’ve walked enough.”

Many times in my life when negative things happen to me, I’ve wished that I could handle things as well as he did.

Maybe, with all his issues, he was simply stronger than I.

Monday, December 12

Suggested Readings: Psalm 42; Isaiah 29:17-24; Acts 5:12-16

Acts 5:13-14 - None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.

The apostles were following the great commission and adding to the numbers who were choosing to become followers. I remember several years ago I was asked to be the moderator for a Sunday school class about the great commission. In those days I tried to add something from outside, a line of poetry, a song title, etc. to underscore the lesson. For this lesson I had chosen the Neil Young song, "In the Fields of Opportunity it's Plowing Time Again." But as I was searching through the Bible to find support for my notes, I stumbled across Jesus telling His disciples "The harvest is bountiful but the workers are few," which I thought might be more appropriate.

Let us fast forward past the pandemic, the commission has not changed. We are still asked to make disciples of all nations.

One Monday morning recently I was on my way to Grace Church to clean the coffee pots. I stopped at my local convenience store and was kidding with the franchise owner about washing pots. A lady in the checkout line became interested in our conversation. So, I invited her to join us any Sunday at 8:30 AM or 11 AM. She seemed visibly moved that someone would ask her to go to their church. She said she could not remember the last time she was asked.

We know that Americans today, especially in cities, are greatly unchurched. We blame them for not attending. Maybe the problem is we are not asking often enough. It is time for us to act. "In the fields of opportunity, it's plowing time again. And the harvest is bountiful but the workers are few." Maybe the problem is the workers fear rejection. But the only way to success in this is like the lady who pled her case until the judge relented.

Tuesday, December 13

Suggested Readings: Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Jude 1:17-25

Today I am skipping the recommended readings to tell a personal story that happened several years ago. I feel that as we age, sometimes the stories of our lives that should be told to future generations get pushed to the back burner and maybe eventually get lost.

Several years ago, a child was telling me how excited she was that Christmas was nearly here. When I asked her why, she said, "I'll get lots of presents." I mentioned that I thought the most important part was that someone loves us enough to give us presents.

My answer concerned me greatly. Because I have always believed that Jesus is the main reason for Christmas. I mean, my Christmas decorations included a child in a manger with the caption "Jesus is the reason." It was there from Thanksgiving till twelfth night. Two or three years ago I decided if He was the reason from Thanksgiving until twelfth night, He was also the reason from twelfth night until Thanksgiving. So now He is on the door year round.

So, I asked a former pastor of mine if I had told this child wrong. Surprisingly, he said that I had been exactly right and asked me if I knew the most important Christmas verse in the Bible. I thought for a while, but could not decide which I thought was most important.

His answer was "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

So the greatest love of all gave us the greatest gift of all (Jesus). Jesus came to earth to conquer sin and death. Now, as believers we not only can have everlasting life, but everlasting life in heaven in the presence of God, the giver, and Jesus the gift, surrounded by this greatest love of all.

Wednesday, December 14

Suggested Readings: Psalm 42; Zechariah 8:1-17; Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34

Running Ahead

Please read the text, King James Version, Joshua 6. Notice how Joshua ordered his army to follow exact instructions to fight the battle of Jericho.

Every day contained a specific plan.

The Lord gave him orders that would probably seem strange or unnecessary to us today.

Because they took one day at a time and followed orders precisely, they were able to successfully take over the city.

Can you imagine what would have happened if they had decided to alter the plans and run ahead of God's?

We should strive for such patience and not run ahead of Christ's plans for our lives.

Trust and obey. His way is always best. That is my prayer for all.

Thursday, December 15

Suggested Readings: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Galatians 3:23-29

Paul's writings in the Bible never fail to impress me how clearly and concisely he expresses what being a disciple of Christ is ultimately about. Today's passage connects the Old Testament's focus on the law with the New Testament's focus on faith and instructs disciples as to how God the Father intends for them to work together. This scripture ties His message up so neatly that this should often be top-of-mind for any disciple when asked to explain Christian teaching on salvation. Salvation thru Jesus becomes manifest beginning with the season of Advent.

This scripture amazes me on several levels. Firstly, it's the simplicity of it. This scripture (Ephesians 2:8-9 also comes to mind) cuts through the complexity that human minds have heaped onto the message of salvation thru Jesus Christ over the centuries. When I am equally amazed at the amount of time (literally decades) it took me to cut thru all that human-created mumbo jumbo, I am somewhat comforted by the realization that flawed human interpretations certainly didn't make finding the truth any easier!

And the difficulty of that process demonstrates the equally amazing, essential, and truthful lesson: It wasn't anything that sprung from my own limited human nature (and that of several others) that got me to the understanding that salvation is Jesus' gift to us. The Holy Spirit has been at work for some time (as I said, literally decades) nurturing faith within me. I can be stubborn and that's probably why it took Him so long. But "I" finally got there, though it wasn't anything that I did to come to faith in Jesus as my Savior.

Sola Gratia. Sola Fide. Solus Christus. Sola Scriptura. Soli Deo Gloria.

May you and your loved ones enjoy a peaceful, joyous, and blessed Christmas season!

Friday, December 16

Suggested Readings: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:18-22; Galatians 4:1-7

Read Galatians 4: 1-7

Am I really saved? Am I doing enough? Will God even recognize my good works on Judgement Day? These are the type of questions that are born out of the Law, which always demands and never gives. The Law frightens us; its commands leave us with no excuse and its threats leave us with no escape. However, the Gospel --God's promise of grace--demands nothing from us, but gives everything to us, including our works of righteousness done in faith.

The Law held us captive and enslaved under the fear of death and damnation.....which lasts until Christ comes. This is where we read verses 4 & 5 of the reading for today.

"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."

This is our adoption through Christ by God to make us free from the law we were once slaves to and now we can call God our dear Father. By His grace alone are we free from sin through one life of this baby Jesus we celebrate not just once a year, but every day. And from now on until Judgement day we are given to trust Christ Jesus and His Gospel. As Luther says, "The Law says, do this and it never gets done. Grace says "believe in this and everything gets done".

Prayer: We are ever thankful dear Father for the blessing of your Grace through Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

Suggested Readings: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 2 Samuel 7:23-29; John 3:31-36

A lament, Israel has been ravaged! Foreign powers have prevailed and the people now cry out for God to have mercy on them. As so often took place, the Israelites had turned away from trusting in the God who had made His home among them, to trusting in the gods of other nations, they very nations God had cleared from before them as they entered the promised land.

David's desire to build a house for the NAME of the LORD was met instead with a promise from God. In wonder and amazement, David humbly returns his thanks to God for the promise that God would build a house for him, that his kingdom would last for all eternity. Despite the ravages that would come through unfaithfulness of His people, God would steadfastly keep that promise.

And God was faithful, for His Son, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise, Jesus Christ, rules triumphant for all eternity. Mark carefully the words of John, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

And believing in the Son, we are led to share the love He has held for us from before creation.

Prayer: Father, As we approach our time of joyful celebration of the birth of your Son, Jesus, our LORD and Savior, fill us with Your truth as to why He came, and why He left. In the Holy Name of Jesus, Amen.

Sunday, December 18

Suggested Readings: Isaiah 7:10-17; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Again, the LORD spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." Then Isaiah said, "Now hear, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God Also?" (Isaiah 7:10-17)

The words of God are a stark reminder that He is both seeking justice and mercy for all, one day returning to judge His people. Although we worship a loving God Who extends extraordinary forgiveness, it would be prudent to remember that we are both fearfully and wonderfully made. Listening to and obeying Gods commands brings many blessings to our lives and draws us nearer to Him. In this Advent season, it is crucial to reflect on the full scope of Jesus: His love, teachings, forgiveness, judgment and grace. Through the guided words of the LORD, we can rest assured that He has us, in every area of life.

Prayer: Father, may we be humbled in remembering that You are both a savior and a judge, providing eternal life for us through You. Thank you for your endless grace and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ, our LORD. Amen.

Monday, December 19

Suggested Readings: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 17:15-22; Galatians 4:8-20

Two Old Women, Two Sons, and Two Kings!

Today, we read about Hannah, a woman who lived in the time of the judges in Israel, a woman, who to her shame in that society, was barren and in advanced age. In earnest prayer before God, she pleaded for a child, and God heard her prayer and blessed her with a son. In her deep gratitude, she dedicated him to the LORD, and once he was weaned, she presented him to the High Priest, Eli, for lifelong service to the LORD. In her prayer, she declared that God is the source of all power and blessing. Samuel became leader of Israel and prophet of God. He eventually anointed Saul as the first king over Israel, an earthly king, selected to heed and obey Word of the LORD, as revealed through Samuel.

Many years later, as shared in Luke, chapter 1, we read about another old woman, Elizabeth. She too, was barren, and miraculously, in her old age, was selected by God to bear a son, whose name, John, was given by God through his angel Gabriel. From the pronouncement of his coming birth, John was to be set aside for a special ministry. He was to become the one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the LORD.", the prophet to announce that the time of the coming of Messiah was at hand. The plan that God has first announced in the Garden of Eden was now coming to fruition, in the fullness of time, God's time.

Prayer: Father, as we come to You today, open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to receive through Your Word, every blessing, that our faith may grow stronger each day while we wait for your Son's coming in glory. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

Suggested Readings: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 21:1-21; Galatians 4:21-5:1

At an advanced age, Abraham received the promise from God - He would father a son. As time passed, his wife, Sarai, who was barren, convinced him to father a son by her servant, Hagar, to take matters into his own hands.

That son was Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son, and in that culture, the one who would inherit a double portion of his father's estate. But this was not to be; Ishmael was not the child promised to Abraham and Sarai. He was not God's chosen one, nor was his mother the one to bear that child of promise.

That blessing was to be Sarah's, and the child she would miraculously conceive at her greatly advanced age was to be named Isaac, for laughter!

As we look at this story, can we see God laughing at the foolish plans of mankind? At our incredible blindness at our thinking that we know all that there is to know? That God is not necessary because our 'Science' tells us the facts of our existence?

Yes, Sarah (her new name) bore Isaac, the child of God's promise. God promised to make a great nation of Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son, but God's first-born, and His only Son, would come from the child of promise, Isaac. And His Son, would set us free from sin and death.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Suggested Readings: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Genesis 37:2-11; Matthew 1:1-17

Two Women and Two Men

We return today to Hannah, barren until old age, and then miraculously blessed with the birth of a son, through her husband. Hannah, in joyful song said, “He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

Hannah’ son would go on to anoint Saul, the first king of Israel, and then David, the man after God’s own heart. He is the one to whom God gave strength, the one through whose family line God promised to bring forth His own Son.

Years later, another miraculous birth occurred, this not of natural means, as was the birth of Hannah’s child, but instead, One born of the Holy Spirit. And Mary sang, “My soul doth magnify the LORD, for He has regarded His handmaiden.”

This child, this Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed King of Kings, would redeem His people from their captivity to sin and death. God is faithful in His keeping His promises, promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to David, to Mary. Through David’s lineage, from the beginning, God’s plan for man’s redemption was brought forth.

Prayer: Father, we come to You in joyful thanksgiving for Your steadfast love, Your love which endures forever. We thank You, Father, that what You ordain, You will bring to fruition. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

Suggested Readings: Luke 1:46b-55; Isaiah 33:17-22; Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20

Devotion 1:

Yes, God chooses us to be His. This fact alone separates Christianity from all other religions where they choose “a god.”

Repeatedly, verses talk about being a lowly servant of God and about God selecting lowly servants such as Mary to accomplish His “big plan”.

Personally, for me, the feeling of being God’s servant comes daily as my career was in hospitality (by definition “making people happy”). So being God’s servant is a part of my basic life. The fact that He would choose a lowly person like me to “do His work” delights me! I did not need ten certifications to even apply.

All I needed was to understand the simple truth that God has a plan of servitude for me. We lowly folks are God’s chosen people!

Devotion 2:

Mary's Song

Read Luke 1: 46b-55

Have you ever had good news that caused you to become so totally overtaken that you felt like you could bust wide open and shout for joy, maybe even tear up and cry with a happy heart. When I read the Magnificat of Mary in Luke 1, one can only feel the mixed blessed praise that she shares with her Creator. She is experiencing God's wonderful grace and promise that she has been chosen to give birth to the Savior of the world as a lowly humble young woman.

The joy that Mary feels is a joy that has been shared for over two thousand years and to this day is felt by all Christians throughout the world, that through God's divine intervention we are benefactors of this wonderful birth that has become God incarnate.

Continues next page

We can only imagine the excitement and also the responsibility that Mary felt at this time. Blessed at God's call to her, yet a tremendous responsibility, but she is so willing to carry out God's plan for her and is so grateful for the opportunity. From her lowly peasant lifestyle God lifts Mary up to a height even the rich and influential could not fathom. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, our Lord lifts us up, granting us dignity and honor, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation.

We, too, are lifted up to praise and honor our Father in heaven as Mary does in her song.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, We praise You for the life that Mary gave birth to. May we share the praise and joy for the Christ Child Whose life is our salvation and hope. Amen.

Friday, December 23

Suggested Readings: Luke 1:46b-55; 2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29; Galatians 3:6-14

Mary's Song - 2

Yesterday we talked about the glorious and exciting joy in Mary's heart as she expressed it with a most open and glad heart. God had given her the greatest news and gift of all and that is knowing that she would be giving birth to the Savior of the world.

With this blessing comes a great responsibility and certain concerns. She's not married. How do you raise the "Savior of the world"? What is ahead with this special gift? Am I truly worthy of this responsibility? Why me Lord????

Remember Thomas had to see the wound in Christ's side before he believed this was the risen Lord. It is stated in Hebrews in defining faith as "assurance of things hoped for, proof of things not seen."

Mary is a person who possesses that kind of faith and it is the kind of faith to which God calls us. The richest blessings go to those who believe God's promise - who walk in faith.

While it is an honor for Mary to be chosen as the mother of the Lord, the honor is not without difficult times. Her baby is "set for the falling and rising of Israel, but a sword will pierce through (Mary's) own soul" (Luke 2: 34-35). The woman who will cradle her newborn in a feeding trough will also see her Son die on a cross.

Luke 1:46 "My Soul Magnifies The Lord"



Schedule for Advent and Christmas Worship

Advent Midweek Services

Service with Holy Communion - 12:00 PM

Dates: November 30, December 7, 14 & 21

Advent Midweek Services at 7 PM

Simple Suppers at 6 PM before Worship

Dates: November 30, December 7, 14 & 21

Longest Night Service

Saturday, December 17 at 4:30 PM

Christmas Eve Services - December 24

Family Candlelight Service - 5:30 PM

Candlelight Service - 8:30 PM

Christmas Day Worship

One Service at 10 AM





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