

THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS



Advent
2021

AND THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVERCOME IT

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Mark your calendars...

- ◆ A Tuba Christmas with Dylan at 9:00am worship service on December 19
- ◆ Children's Christmas Pageant at 11:15am worship service on December 19
- ◆ Blue Christmas Service, December 21 at 7:30pm on Zoom (for those who are dealing with grief, loss, pain, or anything difficult during this season)
- ◆ Christmas Eve Services December 24
 - ★ 4:30 (traditional service)
 - ★ 7:30 (traditional with choir)
 - ★ 9:30 (contemplative with communion)
- ◆ December 26 and January 2 are one worship service at 10:00am

To the Readers, Listeners, Disciples, and Beloveds of God:

Light plays an important role all the year round, but especially in this season. The twinkle of Christmas lights, the flicker of a candle, the sunrise on snow... a good reading lamp as you sit down to read through this devotional! Our theme this year is a “Light in the Darkness”- celebrating the light of Christ that we witness in these dark winter days whether it be in church, in our homes, in our schools or work places, out in the community, or in our hearts.

Again we are so thankful for your collective creativity in composing this devotion book. Reflections include songs, videos, and other online components as well as the traditional written entries. Make sure you pass on a copy to a friend who might need a pick me up, or someone who is looking for the light of Christ in their life this season.

Finally, a suggestion that might deepen your reading practice. Try lighting a candle (or using a battery powered candle, or even just a special lamp you turn on) before reading the daily selection each day. The small act of having a special ‘light of Christ’ may help center you and prepare your heart for the Holy Spirit to do its work! Taking that small moment to slow down, especially in a month filled with all the Christmas activities built up from last year as well... might be just what we all need to see that the light does indeed shine through the darkness.

In peace,

Pastor Lauren & the Discipleship Commission

If you have questions about our church community or would like to be in touch with one of the pastors, we encourage you to reach out, and lean in to that nudge from God. You can find our contact information on our website: www.eypc.org.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.

by Debbie Suits

This passage brings up several images for me; the Christmas star shining brightly above the stable; a white arched shape at the end of a very black tunnel; and edges of light seen as you walk out of a dense forest. It is a metaphor that lightness/whiteness is good, pure and positive while darkness/blackness is bad, evil or otherwise negative. We shape language around ideas that dark is evil/bad and white is good/pure and in doing so, we are shaped by these ideas. It permeates our lives. Ultimately, these values enhance our culture's racism. We must acknowledge that some biblical language can be hurtful, and we need to be aware and take this seriously.

What should we do with biblical rituals filled with images of light and dark as good and evil, especially in respect to Advent? We need to evolve and expand our vocabulary for images of good and evil. We need to acknowledge the negative connotation of white/light and welcome darkness. It is important for us to acknowledge the necessity of darkness to co-exist with the light. Christ is found in both light and dark; the comfort of darkness as a refugee is fleeing in a time of unrest; darkness allowing us to see the wonder of creation far outside our own world in the night sky. Often, hope is born in the dark, as we cling to hope, peace, joy and love to get us through.

Advent is waiting for the light, but we wait in the dark.

Song for today: Light in the Darkness | Limitless Kids Coventry

Prayer for today: Lord of All, guide us to seeking you in the light and in the dark places in the world and in ourselves. Where there is hurt, let there be healing. Where there is blindness or disregard, let there be sight. Let compassion mark our days as you open us to see your glory, peace and love for us all. In this season of waiting, work in us and through us. Amen.

Here my cry, O God, listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

by Pat Burrows

When we moved to Chicagoland, away from our home and friends and the life we had built for 30 some years, there were days when it could have been the end of the earth. It was a lonely season of disconnect in a life that had previously had purpose and people in it. Some days it worked to pretend it was an adventure. Some days it just didn't. Those feelings of disconnect return in loss and grief; sitting in hospital rooms; when life's changes are not what I would have chosen: Times when my heart, like the psalmist's, is faint.

The end of this passage- "*Lead me to a rock that is higher than I*" - calls to my mind an actual rock at nearly the end of the earth. On a mission trip in Kijabe, Kenya, I found myself on a walk that ended at a rocky cliff overlooking the Great Rift Valley. The view was breathtaking. It was vast. From our perch, we could see forever. It was impossible not to be affected by where we were. As we stood there quietly taking it all in, an actual breeze whispered up a narrow path in front of us. I still remember the goosebumps that came with it. It was, for me, an unmistakable moment of Presence, on a rock at nearly the end of the earth.

Those feelings of deep connection to the Holy return when small humans call me Grammie; when old or new friends step in close on tender days; and always when I catch a glimpse of creation only God could make: Times when God raises me up above the burdens of the day...to "a rock that is higher than I."

All of Creation positively shimmers with God's presence. It's true at the ends of the earth and true where you're sitting as you read this. Look up if you're able and allow your heart to take in the view. Where is God being revealed? On days when this feels beyond your reach, days when your heart is faint... take a breath and consider for a moment that God who made you, loves you without condition. Not an if/when/then love but now and always. There is nothing on earth or in heaven that can separate you from that love. May it be so.

Song for today: You Raise Me Up | BYU Vocal Point

Prayer for today: Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I... and allow my heart to take in the view. Amen.

and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

by Rick Raley



[original woodcarving. 12x9" in mixed woods. Rick Raley. 2020.]

Suggested practice: Say the prayer below while viewing this heart.
Then lift a name in prayer for each section of the heart.

Song for today: The Heart of Christmas | Matthew West

Prayer for today: Lord, you fit creation together in perfect beauty and made humankind in your image. Give me vision to see the Holy in myself and in others who seem different than me. In this season of Advent and always, let all creation glorify you. Amen.

Dear friends, now we are God's children, and it hasn't yet appeared what we will be. We know that when Jesus appears we will be like him because we'll see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves even as he is pure..

By T.O.W.N. 1st—2nd grade kids

Note to the reader: This devotion was written during our mid-week programming for kids (TOWN). This group is ages 1st-2nd grade, and the interviewer/editor is Pastor Lauren. The brilliant theologians are: Evan Dykes, Eleanor L., Hannah McMyler, Brooks Mowry, and Melody Smith.

Pastor Lauren (PL): We have read through this scripture two times... what are your favorite words that stick out to you?

Kids: “Friends,” “God,” “Life”

PL: Who are God’s children?

Kids: “Everyone in the whole world.” “God respects everybody.”

PL: When we are in the season of Advent, we are trying to prepare, to get ready, for the birth of Jesus. What is one thing, one action we can do to get ready?

Kids: “Be good.” “Be loving!” “Be nice!” “Be grateful!”

PL: For a fun question... how do you get ready for Christmas around your house?

Kids: “Eat cookies and decorate.” “Set up the Christmas tree.”
“Decorate the whole house, even outside!”

PL: If you had to tell someone the most important thing about Christmas, what would you say?

Kids: “It’s God’s birthday!” “Jesus is born!”

Song for today: Happy Birthday Jesus | Redline Kids

A Prayer for today: God, mother and father of us all, we are your children, and we thank you for your love. Help us to be good, loving, nice, and grateful. Help us to keep the words “Jesus is born” on our lips. Help us to think of you while we get ready for your birthday. Amen.

Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

By Rich E. Peterson

Like the psalmist, my unconditional commitment to my Lord and savior is pure faith and confession to my true God, who grants me grace and love always. David is my favorite character in the Bible besides, of course, my God and savior.

Personally, I relate to David's entire existence. He is real to me. He sinned and then became as contrite as any biblical icon. Painful personal battles struck him down and tormented him many times in his life. I totally relate to that unbelievable feeling of dread. But, as David sings out and recovers through prayer and confession, my life had similar paths. In music is his peace. In song is my relief. Music and verse have healed me many times over. Through poetry and music, David's faith, strength, and hope in God almighty, were restored many times over.

We all wait for the hope of the Lord. Hope, trust, and faith are our path to the Lord's unfailing love. We rejoice and praise our Lord for restoring our human lives.

Song for today: Is He Worthy? | West Coast Choir

Prayer for today: Thank you, Lord, for the psalmist who gives voice to our human failings and to our joys and always points us back to you, the source of our hope. In Jesus name, Amen.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

By Dr. Caroline Wolfe

I opened my choir folder a few Sundays ago for the first time in a very long time and found a bulletin stuck in it that was dated March 8, 2020. “Wow,” I thought, “how little we knew on that day of what was coming our way with the pandemic and how we would not be together again for such a long time.” And as I contemplated it I thought about how faithful God has been in so many ways through these difficult months, keeping our church community strong and connected. Would I have been able to trust in the future God plans for me if I had realized on that last Sunday together in 2020 what was coming? I have recently been contemplating a quote from Richard Rohr which says “The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is control.” In this season of Advent, I pray for the faith to release my need to control and to open my spirit to the promises of God.

Song for today: Great Is Thy Faithfulness | The Tabernacle Choir

Prayer for today: God, you have been faithful through the ages and you have been faithful to me. Thank you for the reminders to release worries of the moment, loosen my grip on the future, and trust more fully in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

By Jennifer Parker Wrzeszcz

Did you know that a tree's root system can spread two or three times wider than its canopy? (Thank you, Morton Arboretum Gateway to Tree Science placard.) I didn't know that. I thought they went deeper, not wider. This fact made me think about the image in today's scripture verse.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, uses one of Isaiah's metaphors for Israel to describe Jesus – Root of Jesse. At the time the letter to the Romans was written there was division in the faith community between the Jewish Christians – the people who came to believe in Christ through Jesus' own Jewish roots – and the Gentile Christians – those who believed in the Good News of Christ but were never Jewish. Paul affirmed, as had Jesus, that God's love expands far beyond any one group's identity. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians are embraced in the divine family tree; all the "in" group and all of the "out" group are part of God's beloved family. The roots of the Creator's divine compassion, welcome and mercy are so much wider than what we can see or even imagine!

In our modern era, where division runs rampant, and we so often divide people into "in" and "out" groups – whether through immigration status, gender identity, political affiliation, racial/ethnic make-up, sexual orientation, economic standing, or religious participation – let us remember that the roots of God's love, made visible in the life of Jesus, stretch far wider than we can comprehend. And, as disciples of Christ, the Root of Jesse, we are called to extend God's love, just as expansively, so that all may find their hope in the Lord of Life.

Song for today: Would You Harbor Me | Sweet Honey in the Rock

Prayer for today: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

By Bill Shepard

“May the peace of Christ be with you!”

“And also with you!”

We are certainly familiar with the Passing of the Peace – it’s a part of the liturgy that we say every Sunday! Yet, our offering of Christ’s peace differs from what Jesus offers in this passage from the book of John. What we offer our neighbors on Sunday is like a greeting – at best a kind of wish that Christ’s peace might be bestowed. Jesus offers true peace as a gift, but not as the world might give. His peace is real, and immediate.

This past summer, my wife was in the hospital, and I found myself seeking peace. Normally, I put my trust in the doctors, but sometimes their reassurances are inadequate to the task. They told me they each had a preferred course of action, but they were in conflict. One might lead to a massive heart attack, the other to permanent paralysis. Even though they had been in practice for decades, they had no prior experience in this situation, and no research to guide them. They told me they would have to “go with their gut”.

Staring into the darkness, my heart was troubled. I wondered where I should place my trust. What should I do? Then I recalled this passage, and how Jesus offers peace as a gift. I remembered Jesus’ words to not let my heart be troubled, and to not be afraid. I realized in whom I should place my trust. Jesus gave me his peace, and an inner rest to my spirit.

Song for today: I Will Fear No More | The Afters

Prayer for today: Jesus, You bring light into our darkness and peace into our anguish and rest to our weariness. Thank you for finding us when we most need you. Help me today and every day to breathe deeply and place my trust in you. Amen

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth...He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

By Angie Udelhofen

In searching for artwork of Zechariah and Elizabeth, I came across this very complex and interesting painting by British artist Stanley Spencer: *Zacharias and Elizabeth* 1913–14. It presents more than one scene and of different times put together so that the entire story can be seen at one time. In the foreground is Zechariah being visited by the Archangel Gabriel while he's making a sacrifice by burning incense. Gabriel tells him that although his wife Elizabeth is too old to have children, she will bear a son, given to her by God, who will become John the Baptist. Then, Zechariah is repeated in the background of the painting: behind a wood and metal fence standing next to Elizabeth with outstretched arms. And yet again, Elizabeth appears behind the wall, separating the two scenes, with only her upper body visible. These are times of waiting. Two additional figures are also in the painting. One is of a gardener who resembles both Jesus and John the Baptist, seen at the right, dragging an ivy branch: a symbol of everlasting life and Resurrection. Lastly, there is an unidentified woman wearing a dark dress kneeling behind a gravestone while touching the curved dividing wall with her right hand. What might she symbolize? Predict?



God heard and answered Zechariah's prayers and prepared a way for us, God's people, the way of the Lord. What a strange way to have John the Baptist enter the world who would then prepare the way for Jesus. Both Zechariah and Joseph must have wondered "Why me, Lord?" as angels shared God's plans for them and who their sons would become. God's plans may seem hard for us to understand, but we have seen God has it all figured out and loves us beyond measure. We have everlasting life through Jesus! Hallelujah!

Song for today: A Strange Way to Save the World | 4Him

Prayer for today: Thank you God for preparing a way for us to be with you, to have everlasting life. We see time and again how you show us you hear our prayers through your Word and our lives. May we trust in your plans for us, even when they might seem "strange". Your love knows no bounds! Hallelujah! Amen.

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

By Nancy Peterson

The book of Psalms has always been my favorite. I consider it the “heart” of the Bible. Consider this: if you place the Bible upright on its spine and open to the middle of the book, you will always arrive at the book of Psalms. It is a book of prayerful joys, lamentations and grief. I guess it covers every human emotion, which is why I consider it so important. We need to know that God wants us to be in communication with Him no matter where we are in our lives.

This verse may be one of the shortest in this Advent devotional, but I believe it packs so much in its few lines.

As a society and world, we have been struggling in trying times for too long now. We have become divisive and judgmental. But we who are faithful have placed our trust in our Lord who promises peace. We have pivoted to find new ways to worship together (on line or in person) to celebrate God’s peace. We have again brought our children together to celebrate God’s peace through VBS, Sunday School and mid-week programs. We have continued to reach out to those in need in our communities to celebrate God’s peace.

For those like me, we have relied on God’s peace and have turned our hearts to the Lord, to see us through times of difficulty, only possible through the deep prayers of friends in the YPC community and the Lord’s blessings.

So, my dear friends and congregants, let us raise our hearts to our good Lord at this blessed time of the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord!! He is our hope and peace.

Song for today: Give Me Your Peace | Gateway Worship

Prayer for today: God, you promise peace to your people. Speak peace now, Lord, over the places of division and discord and need in our communities, our nation, and the world. Let your peace wash over us in the season of Advent and draw us back to you. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

By Ann Raley

Wow, these verses drew me in because every word seems to matter. I am by no means a theologian, but if you participated in last year's Advent devotional series, you may perhaps recall that I enjoy diving into the meaning of words and trying to unpack them. That kind of activity helps me to grow in my understanding of who God is. So, let's see where this exploration leads.

"Justified" is definitely a theological term and means "the state of being made right with God." How does that happen? It comes through saying, "Yes, I believe" that Jesus' purpose on earth was demonstrated through his crucifixion and resurrection. God's perfect love meant sacrificing his own Son so that we could have a future with God in eternity. When we believe, when we have faith that Jesus' death was necessary to put us into right relationship with God, then we can also know without a doubt that we have a place in heaven.

God is perfect--we are not. God's perfect plan through Jesus is to provide us with a way to be in community with God, both in this life and in eternity. Jesus is that gateway to God, giving us amazing, grace-filled access to God, now and forever. We do not deserve it--that's where the grace comes in. We also cannot earn it, but we can seek to live gratefully and extend to others "our hope of sharing the glory of God." What does that mean for you and me and how can we show it throughout Advent? It may look different for each of us, and that's where growth happens.

Song for today: Immanuel | Joshua Aaron

Prayer for today: Lord of All, You have opened Heaven to us. Let my heart open fully to you today and in this season, so that I, too, can share the glory of your presence with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

by Matt Parker Wrzeszcz

These words from the Book of Numbers form one of the familiar blessings (or benedictions) offered at the end of worship. “The Lord lift up his countenance upon you” is a request for God’s blessing on us. “The Lord make his face to shine upon you” is a reminder of how God graciously turns towards us in concern and favor. We hear these words also in Psalm 4:6 “There are many who say, "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"

The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship includes these thoughts on the **Blessing and Charge:**

The Service for the Lord’s Day concludes with a blessing in the name of the triune God, such as the priestly blessing or apostolic benediction. Because this blessing is an expression of the gospel of God’s grace and an expression of the ministry of Word and Sacrament, a pastor ordinarily speaks the blessing.

We are blessed to be a blessing to others. The charge calls the church to go forth as agents of God’s mission in the world. Because deacons are responsible for the church’s ministry of witness and service, and elders have oversight of the church’s faithfulness to God’s mission, it is fitting for a deacon or elder to speak the charge. (BCW, p. 12)

Song for today: May the Lord (Edelweiss Tune) | Children Choir Maranatha

Prayer for today: Loving God, throughout this season of Advent, we pray that you would bless and keep us in order that we might be a blessing to others. Make your face to shine upon us and be gracious to us during times of trouble and times of goodness. Lift your countenance upon us, and offer us your peace. Amen

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

By Leslie Menconi

Life changing news has just been “heralded” to me today. My life will never be the same after this meeting. I was told not to be afraid. Really? Who am I kidding? I have NEVER been this nervous--EVER.

I am “favored”? What could that possibly mean? Generations of my people have awaited the coming of the Messiah and now I, a virgin, am to conceive and bear a son that will be that Savior for all the world.

God chose ME. Is that what makes me favored? Doesn't God choose everyone according to God's purpose for the coming of God's kingdom?

---Mary

God chooses YOU. The messenger brings tidings to “not be afraid”. You, too, are favored.

Song for today: Mary, Did You Know | Clay Aiken

Prayer for today: God, who calls us to a greater purpose, in this season of Advent, grant me vision to see myself as you see me: favored. Give me a heart like Mary so that I, too, can say Yes to your claim on my life. Amen.

Do not worry about anything, rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

By T.O.W.N. 3rd-5th grade kids

Note to the reader: This devotion was written during our mid-week programming for kids (TOWN). This group is ages 3rd-5th grade, and the interviewer/editor is Pastor Lauren (PL). The brilliant theologians are: Juliana Smith, Evan Moy, Brady Mowry, Luke Kramer, Luke H., James Dykes, and Avy Cochran.

PL: What sticks out to you when you read through this passage?

Kids: **“That we shouldn’t worry, if you are worried about something, take it to God.” “It reminds me that I shouldn’t worry about the little things.” “The peace of God... we are always safe with Jesus.”**

PL: This verse is part of a letter to people who lived in an ancient city of Philippi. Today we are reading it and thinking about what wisdom it has to help us prepare for Christmas. If you were writing a letter to someone about how to get ready for Christ’s birth, what would you say?

Kids: **“Have a happy Christmas!” “Don’t forget about Christmas joy.” “Don’t think about presents, remember it’s about the big picture.”**

PL: The last part of the scripture verse says we are safe in Jesus. What does that feel like to you?

Kids: **“Like I’m at home” “It feels like I feel right now.” “It feels like peace, like being happy... zen!”**

PL: Last question- the author of this letter, an apostle named Paul, wrote letters to encourage people in their faith. Why do you think he did that? How can we encourage others?

Kids: **“He wrote it so the people who read it could encourage others.” “Yeah and we still do that. We read it and encourage others.” “We can encourage others at Christmas time with love.”**

Song for today: When We Seek Him | Shawna Edwards and Angie Killian

Prayer for today: Jesus Christ, remind us we are safe in you, and that during this time we do not need to worry about the little things... but instead we can focus on the big picture- You! Amen.

...Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

by Marjorie Morningstar

I picked this passage because, in it, Isaiah commands us to "sing." I don't have a fantastic voice, have major stage fright, yet despite it all, I love to sing, especially to the Lord.

Isaiah is basically saying, "Just wait. You'll see. When it finally happens, when Jesus is born (700 years from now), it will be so glorious that you will want to celebrate, you will want to sing."

To me, singing is one of the highest forms of prayer, because it can shut up that little voice in your head, if even for just a moment. You know that voice I am talking about, right?

When you sing to God, you are singing not just with your mouth, but with your heart. You don't just feel the music, it comes from your soul. So there is no space within you to also be angry, hating, boasting, scared, worried, envious, doubting, or even to be "thinking." For those moments when you are making music with your heart, you are opening up your soul, leaving all of that other stuff to God, and being blown away by the joy that God is sending you as a replacement for all that other stuff rumbling around in your head.

"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord." (Psalm 100). Please don't ever stop.

Song for today: I Thank God | Maverick City Music

Prayer for today: Lord, Fill me with joy that overflows my being in praise to You!
Let me always sing from my heart. Amen

Honor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

by Ann Raley

Originally, these verses were part of a ceremony to dedicate the ark in its new tabernacle setting, but they also mesh well with Advent and our anticipation of Christ's birth. Take a moment now to imagine the looks and sounds, maybe even the smells, of splendor and majesty, strength, and joy that are part of being in the presence of God. Linger over these thoughts for a few minutes. While we may come up with a variety of impressions, I am certain we would agree that the collective result is bright, colorful, and celebratory.

And yet... that baby--God's precious Son--was born in the crude setting of a manger with smelly livestock surrounding him, hardly the depiction of splendor and majesty. We also know that Jesus' years on earth were filled with hardship and suffering, leading to his crucifixion. However, people even then caught occasional displays of glory--from the heavenly host that magnificently celebrated Jesus' birth to the descending dove and voice from heaven declaring God's pleasure in God's Son, to name a few. And the story doesn't stop with these experiences: Jesus ascended triumphantly into heaven to dwell in holy community with God the Father and the Holy Spirit while remaining amazingly accessible to each of us.

As a result, we live each day expectantly and look forward during Advent to Jesus' birth. One day we will experience a royal homecoming and celebration in heaven that will surpass our wildest dreams, and we will know holy splendor, majesty, strength, and joy firsthand. Alleluia!

Song for today: For Unto Us a Child is Born - Handel | American Bach Soloists

Prayer for today: Lord of Majesty and the Manger, Fill my life with shouts of "Alleluia!" as I consider the glorious promise of Christmas and live in certainty of the royal homecoming that awaits all who love you. Alleluia! Amen.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

By Cathy Dykes with Jillian, James, and Evan

A favorite Christmas story of mine is **Great Joy** by Kate DiCamillo, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline. In this story of compassion and welcome, a young girl preparing for her church Christmas Pageant, becomes aware and concerned for a man on her street who appears to have no where to go. One day, while being hurried down the street by her mother, she spontaneously invites the man to her church pageant. As the weather changes, the girl's concern rises but then her act of kindness matters. The author of the story says: "In a dark time, doors will sometimes magically open and let us step inside to the warmth and light of a community." (Plus, there's a monkey and what story isn't made better by including a monkey?!)



My family loves how beautifully the artist reflects light and darkness in each scene, which of course, connects directly to our Advent theme of "Light in the Darkness"! This book is a perfect reflection of God's will for all, and a reminder that each of us can be a welcoming neighbor to a stranger in the darkness.

My children's thoughts about what makes this story so special.

What do you like about the Story Great Joy?

Evan: She didn't say her line until the man came to the play because she was waiting very patiently.

Jillian: After she says her line, she said it felt so right that she repeated it again, Great Joy.

What Can We Learn from this story?

Evan: Waiting is hard.

Jillian: Even the simplest good deeds can help make the world a better place.

Does anything in this story remind you of Jesus?

James: Angels, shepherds, camels... She welcomed everyone, she told her mom that they should have him over since he sleeps in the street.

Merry Christmas and may you feel moments of warmth, and light, and community throughout this Advent season!

Song for today: Do Not Be Afraid | JJ Weeks Band

Prayer for today: Dear God, give me courage to reach out to someone in need of hearing your Good News. May I be welcoming neighbor to a stranger in the darkness and share your Great Joy. Alleluia! Amen

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

By Angie Udelhofen

As we prepare for Christmas, we are filled with indescribable joy to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We are excited to celebrate with our family and friends. We feel such deep love and that love first comes from our love and faith in Christ Jesus and how he first loved us. While I have yet to physically see Christ, I believe in him and have definitely seen signs to show me my salvation is indeed in him. Of these signs, there is one that is directly related to this passage. It occurred a couple years ago.

I was blessed to witness my mom bringing this exact scripture to light. In her final days of life, my mom was no longer able to speak or open her eyes. But, when this scripture was read over her, she smiled so largely and had tears streaming from her eyes. I believe in that moment my mom was already seeing this passage coming to life, seeing Christ, and gave me the great gift of proving this. It was also affirming when I discovered this scripture passage was noted as one of her favorites in the front of her well-loved Bible. She had faith and held tight to this passage. My prayer is that all of us can do the same. This Christmas may we all rejoice and give thanks to God for this greatest gift, Salvation through Jesus Christ!! Let us celebrate the true meaning of Christmas and share this glorious joy with others!

Song for today: I Can Only Imagine | MercyMe

Prayer for today: Dear God, as we prepare for this Christmas, may our hearts be filled with gratitude and glorious joy for you have blessed us with the greatest gift, your son, Jesus Christ! Grant us eyes to “see” you as we hold onto our faith that Jesus is our Salvation.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the Shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

By Holly Kost



It was to a group of shepherds watching their flocks by night, hard-working common people, that the news of Jesus' birth was first revealed. Probably taking their sheep with them, they decided to walk to Bethlehem, to see with their own eyes, this long anticipated Messiah.

I like this scene from *The Nativity Story* (2006 movie) of the meeting of the shepherds, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. The reverence shown by the shepherds and the light emanating from Jesus creates a feeling of peace and reverence.

Why would God pick these simple workers to spread the word about the birth of his son? Perhaps it was because the kingdom of heaven is not reserved for religious insiders and kings, but for all people- the poor, the workers, the outsiders as well. Jesus is the light in the darkness for us all.

Song for today: Joy Unto The World | The Afters

Prayer for today: Loving God, thank you for the gift of Jesus and for the people who told the story. Amen.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

by Leslie Menconi

What do you have to give? Everyone has something that they CAN give but the real question is WILL YOU give it? Some have certain skills, some money, yet others the gift of time. In the Matthew passage the Magi have been following the star and when it stopped over the place where Jesus was, one version tells us that the Magi “could not contain themselves”! They were so overwhelmed with joy that they broke open their treasure chests to present their best gifts to the child Messiah. What the gifts were is not as important as the spirit in which they were given – freely and out of an abundance of love. Yes, they were lavish and symbolic gifts, but they were presented to the new King with a worshipful and open heart. So too, are the extravagant gifts you have to offer. Would YOU give your best? DO you give your best? God gave God’s very best in the gift of Jesus. Open YOUR treasure chest. You, too, have much to give. Amen.

Song for today: Only Jesus | Casting Crowns

Prayer for today: God, give us wisdom to seek you and a light for the path ahead. Let all that I have and all that I am point others to you. Amen.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

By Heidi Moy

Grace (5 years old)- Sing all over the world so you can learn more about God. Saul was bad, he was blind and then made good. A baby cries at night, but not in the morning because God wants it to be happy.

Alive & Breathing by Matt Maher

What holds your heart
 What stirs your soul
 What matters come to mind
 The cares you keep
 The thoughts you think
 It's not all wasted time
 Seek and you will find
 Joy still comes in the morning
 Hope still walks with the hurting
 If you're still alive and breathing

Chorus

Praise the Lord
 Don't stop dancing and dreaming
 There's still Good News worth repeating
 So lift your head and keep singing
 Praise the Lord

Years roll by
 We wonder why
 We lost our way from home
 Our Father finds
 The child inside
 We had left for growing old
 Awake, awake, awake my soul

Joy still comes in the morning
 Hope still walks with the hurting
 If you're still alive and breathing

Chorus

Let everything, let everything
 Let everything praise the Lord
 In the working, in the waiting
 Praise the Lord
 In the blessing, in the breaking
 Come on, praise the Lord
 In the dying, the rising
 Let it praise the Lord
 Let it praise the Lord

Chorus

Don't stop dancing and dreaming
 There's still Good News worth repeating
 So lift your head and keep singing
 Praise the Lord
 Joy still comes in the morning
 Hope still walks with the hurting
 If you're still alive and breathing

Chorus

Song for today: Alive & Breathing | Matt Maher feat. Elle Limebear

Prayer for today: Thank you, Lord, for songwriters and 5 year olds who point us to you. Stay near to us in dark nights when joyful mornings seem too far off. Restore us to dancing and dreaming and let us find our joy in you. Amen.

Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

By Greg Caraballo

When I saw this verse, I recognized it immediately. I remembered the verse and this hymn from my Catholic Confirmation Class forty-plus years ago. What caught my attention then and now is the various ways we praise the Lord. How many can you count as you read? Can you add others?

Praise Ye His Holy Name by Julia H. Johnston

Praise ye His Holy Name, The Lord
Jehovah dwelling in the light; His
wondrous works proclaim, His
wisdom and His boundless might.

Refrain: Praise Him, Praise the Lord,
Jehovah, All the earth shall
praise Him, Praise Him, O sing
His praise whose name is love,
Exalt and praise Him, Praise Him
ever glorious, over all victorious,
Praise Him, The King of kings
who reigns above.

Come to His Courts with joy, Let
alleluias rise to yonder throne;

Your noblest song employ, To
make His praise and glory known.

[Refrain]

Here let the anthem ring, Where He is
known to be the only God; And
then proclaim Him King, O'er all
the waiting earth abroad.

[Refrain]

Join all the hosts on high Who praise
Jehovah and His name adore;
And "Holy, Holy" cry,

[Refrain]

Julia Johnston wrote 500 hymns in the 1800s that still resonate. The modern day song, linked below, declares: "Sing all you people, the Lord Almighty Reigns, Sing every creature of God, come bless his name." Let praise mark your days in this season and always.

Song for today: Christmas Day | Chris Tomlin, We The Kingdom

Prayer for today: God, whose name is Love, you judge with righteousness and truth. We let our Alleluias rise to you, King of kings, who reigns above. Amen.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved.

by Margaret Schiefer

Mercy, Love, Grace....this is the divine being that calls to my soul, that feels like big T Truth, that feels like light in a dark world.

Getting wrapped up in being in control, worrying about what everyone else thinks, holding on to stuff and power – these things make life a dark struggle. They can make us feel, (because we never actually are) separated from God. Then Mercy, Love, and Grace break through, undeserved and unreserved. It's like someone turned the light on.

Sometimes the world seems a very dark place, especially if you watch the evening news! Where does Mercy, Love, Grace fit in? I think they are exactly what everyone really wants and needs. Think about the last movie, book, TV show, news story that moved you. Was it Mercy, Love, or Grace that was shown? This is what keeps me believing: everyone is made to love and flourish in Love. It is the core of being human – it is who we are, made in Love's image, whether we know it or not.

When I look for it, I see Light everywhere. People working in and for the Light. It just depends on where I focus, where I put my efforts.

So let us open our hearts to the Light....

let it fill us....

and let us be the Light.

Song for today: Be A Light | Thomas Rhett

Prayer for today: Let Mercy, Love, and Grace break through to reveal the Light of your presence as you shine in me and through me in this season and always. Amen.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.

By Tom Ebsen

The Bible states that Simeon was righteous and devout. He also had remarkable faith, waiting in hope for the Messiah, even though it had been 400 years since the Jews had a prophet speak to them. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not die before seeing with his own eyes the Christ, and that same Spirit led him to the temple that day when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to be consecrated according to Jewish Law. Imagine their surprise when Simeon took Jesus to his breast and proclaimed him to be God's salvation for the world. As fascinating as this scripture passage is I can't help wondering, as Paul Harvey would say, what is the "rest of the story"?

Did Simeon after his proclamations then try to get to know Joseph and Mary? I'm sure he wanted to know where they came from and what their plans were for the upbringing of Jesus. Did Simeon endeavor to journey to Nazareth so he could observe and be close to his Savior? The Bible does not state when Simeon dies, so could he have lived long enough to hear John the Baptist's call to repent? Was he possibly there on the day Jesus came to the Jordan to get baptized? Did he ever witness any of Jesus' ministry?

Scripture does not provide those intriguing details, or anything further on his life, but we do know that Simeon realized that God kept His promise to Simeon, and he was in peace knowing his redeemer lives! It is a peace given to me by God's grace when I hold Jesus close to my heart.

Song for today: I Know That My Redeemer Lives | Chris Eaton

Prayer for today: God, thank you for keeping your promise! My peace and faith rests in your grace given me through Jesus, my redeemer! Amen.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

by Deb Helms

While volunteering at a camp for people with disabilities, I was placed for the week with a group of five 13-15 year old boys. One of the group was Brandon, a big guy who was not too happy to be at camp. He did not speak too often, but when he did it was with a very deep Batman kind of a voice. On our first day, we went to the craft cabin to do a project, but Brandon was not interested in participating. One of the staff members enticed him by promising that he could make a spear and a shield. That sounded interesting, so in they came. The spear was made from a long stick, nearly as tall as Brandon. The counselor proceeded to sharpen it for him, which seemed like a really bad idea to me. Turns out that I was correct, Brandon wielded his spear with enthusiasm all week. He caused a few problems by poking others with it but since it was the only thing that seemed to be making him happy, he was allowed to keep it. (Alas, it was not my call.)

Another of our campers was Randy. He was the polar opposite of Brandon, slight in stature and delighted by every activity that the camp had to offer. He cheered others on with great enthusiasm and devoted himself to making positive connections with everyone he encountered. Randy tried mightily to forge a relationship with Brandon throughout the week, but Brandon was not having it. At the end of the week, Brandon's ride home arrived before Randy's ride and Randy gave it one last try. "Brandon, can I have a hug?" "No!" (Think Batman voice here) "How about a high five?" "No!" "Knuckles?" "No!" Randy threw open his arms, exposing his midsection, and said, "Spear me!" So Brandon did. (Thankfully, Brandon was not too rough.)

Randy was so determined to be in relationship with Brandon that he opened himself up to the risk of injury to make it happen. God did that same thing to us, sending Jesus into the world to reveal God's love.

Song for today: And the Glory of the Lord - Handel | The Tabernacle Choir

Prayer for today: Thank you, God, for loving us so much that you sent your Son to sacrifice himself to save us. Remind us each day of your great gift and help us to be gifts to everyone around us. Amen.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

by Pat Burrows

During this Advent journey, we've heard so many stories and wonderful insights about God's power and presence in our lives and the promise that is Christmas. We've shared prayers, music, and considered the ways the light of Christ shines in us and through us.

And all the while, Advent unfolds against the backdrop where the world says: "do more/get more/BE more than you are right now, and then you will be happy." Since joy in this 'paradigm of more' is by definition beyond our reach, the world conveniently offers us endless ways to numb pain and distract the brain (and many 'helpful suggestions' on how our money can fix what ails us).

Here, on the Eve of Christmas Eve, it's so easy to be overwhelmed with all that's left to do; or burdened by the prospect of facing Christmas Day that's different than you would choose; or to be numb, distracted, and missing out. It's time to press pause. God wants so much more for you and it starts with "Take a breath." In the verse for today, Jesus says: ABIDE in my love. So that MY JOY may be IN YOU, and YOUR JOY may be COMPLETE.

Let that settle in around you. This doesn't mean you have to leave your life. It means you shift your focus. Pause at the manger. Hear the angels. Look for the star. Breathe. Rest a moment and consider this: In Jesus, who offers joy that is complete, your life has more meaning, your well is deeper, and your horizons wider than the world can even imagine!

Before you rush off or return to whatever is next, take a moment. Abide.

Song for today: O Little Town Of Bethlehem | Jeremy Camp

Prayer for today: Gracious God, you meet us where we are and invite us into a relationship that changes everything when we say yes. Lord, put a yes in my heart today and let your perfect joy abide in me. Thank you for the gift of Jesus and the lasting Joy we find only in him. Amen.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

by Rick Sutton

I love the real meaning of Christmas and Isaiah's predictions always speak to me. It's amazing how Isaiah predicted the birth of Jesus 700 years before it happened. All four Gospels reference Isaiah's prophecy and tie it to the ministry of Jesus and His journey on Earth. Jesus drove it home when he picked up the scroll of Isaiah and read from it, saying "Today, as you listen, this scripture has been fulfilled." (Luke 4:21). He was proclaiming himself as the one who would bring the "good news" that Isaiah had spoken of in his writings 700 years earlier. He was reassuring the people of his time that Isaiah's prophecy was taking place right in front of their eyes. The poor, the rulers, and even the religious leaders- all had their own perspective and all mistakenly thought this meant that Jesus would overthrow the Romans and physically rule the land. But in reality, Jesus did something much more meaningful. He came to rescue them from themselves. This Christmas, all these generations later, we still stand in awe that God would love us so much as to cross from Heaven to Earth to dwell among us. And this belief remains to this day: Jesus came and lived and died for our sins, rescuing us from ourselves.

Song for today: Emmanuel God With Us | Chris Tomlin

Prayer for Christmas Eve: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, we lift our voices with the angels declaring: "Glory to God in the highest, on earth-peace and good will to all!" Jesus, as we welcome you again on this glorious night, give us vision to see you in the faces of our neighbors, the refugee, the stranger, and the 'other'. Align our hearts with yours and reignite our passion for justice and service. Lord, let my heart be so filled with your joy and peace and mercy, that it overflows to change the world around me. In the name of the Prince of Peace, Amen.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

by Pastor Lauren

Jesus is in the world! ... Does the world feel different this morning? Or is it my heart that feels differently about the world, knowing that Jesus is among us?

Look around you: do you see signs of Christ's birth? The arrival of our savior? (You can look also to the neighborhood, your community, the world...)

Look into your heart: do you see signs of Christ's birth? The arrival of our savior? (look to your relationships, your sense of faith, your feelings and emotions...)

Slow down! Did you actually do either of those things? Try again. I know it is Christmas, but you have time.

I offer you a thought to ponder on today: If Jesus is in the world, and the Holy Spirit is on our hearts, and God's love has come to us as the Word made flesh... is there a difference between the world feeling different and our hearts feeling different? Or, are they one in the same?

Perhaps, it is Jesus in our hearts (and in our words and in our actions) that is Jesus in the world. Perhaps, it is we who are metaphorically born this morning to go out again into the world, fresh and prepared from Advent and full of the love of God- to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

So look around today... and all days. Do you see the signs of Jesus? The glory of God? Do you see in the world and in your heart the word made flesh?

Songs for today: Joy to the World | Gabriel Trumpet Ensemble & Mormon Tabernacle Choir
Sweet Baby Jesus | Carrie Underwood

Prayer for today: Lord Jesus, you are in the world! Help me to see you, to feel you, to embody you in my heart and in all my actions. May this spirit of Christmas call me into a deeper discipleship with you. Amen.



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