



# 2018 ADVENT JOURNEY

A GIFT FROM

PIONEER & BARLOW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES

BELPRE, OHIO & BARLOW, OHIO

### Why an Advent Devotional?

It's the most wonderful time of the year! Well, according to singer-songwriter Andy Williams.

But what if you are a terrible gift-buyer? Or what if memories of tree decorating are only painful reminders of family feuds? And let's not even talk about the pressure we put on ourselves to make the holidays picture perfect!

It's pretty easy to get so wrapped up in getting everything ready that Christmas morning can sneak up on us and we end up feeling guilty for not having that warm, fuzzy feeling about baby Jesus on the one day we are supposed to be celebrating His birth!

We spend so much of the season creating our own little winter wonderlands: cookies, decorating, lights, candy, carols, parties. But what exactly are we doing to prepare spiritually? Most Christians agree that Christmas is about Jesus, yet few of our calendars reflect that priority.

### What is this Devotional?

This Advent Season, Pioneer and Barlow Presbyterian Churches are here to help. We're offering this devotional as a guide to help you prepare spiritually to celebrate the first coming of Jesus (the baby), while eagerly awaiting the second coming of Jesus (the King), even as we experience the presence of Jesus (the Holy Spirit) in and among us now.



### How Do I Use it?

We all suffer from "soul amnesia," forgetting who God is, what He's done for us from one day to the next. We must remind ourselves each year who Jesus is and why His birth is so miraculous—not because our minds don't know it, but because our hearts cease to be amazed by it! The saying goes that familiarity breeds contempt and, sadly, our hearts lose that sense of wonder.

So we invite you to allow this devotional to engage your heart, mind, body and soul as we begin the journey to Bethlehem once again.

Candles are big part of Advent tradition, and we light a candle each week to represent Hope, Preparation, Joy and Love. Their light reminds us: these holy promises overcome darkness.

So as you meditate on these devotions each day, we invite you to light a candle of your own to remind yourself that they are holy moments. You may even choose to sing a hymn or even copy a posture from the devotion: lifting hands, kneeling, or sitting with face down. However you choose to use this devotional, we pray that it will help you grow in your relationship with Jesus the Christ and with one another.

# Day 1

December 2

I find it interesting that when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans 2,000 years ago, he, like most of the early Christians, believed that Christ's return would happen very soon. As time has passed, the urgency seems to have faded. We believe that Christ will return, but probably not during our lifetime, and almost certainly not today! We have become complacent as time has passed. And this has probably had an effect on the way we live our lives. How would you live your life if you knew Christ was coming back today!?

When Paul was writing to the Romans, he wanted them to get their lives in order, because he believed the time was short. He warned them to "remove your dark deeds like dirty

clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living." And how did Paul propose that they do this? By "clothing yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ."

So here we are in 2018. Maybe Jesus won't return today - but maybe, just maybe - he will. Are you prepared? Do you have on your shining armor of right living? Believing Jesus won't come back today, this month, this year, is a dangerous game to play. Having the attitude that I'll get my life together in the future could find you in a very bad situation. Jesus warned us that no one except the Father knows the time when he will return.



So I encourage you to live every day as though it is the day Jesus will return. If he doesn't come today, you will still have a wonderful day by honoring God in all you do. And if he does come - you will be ready.

William Vocial

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, I anxiously await your return. Help me to live today in a way that honors you. Amen.*

**Romans 13:11-14**

This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity or immoral living, or in quarreling or jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't think about ways to indulge your evil desires.

# Day 2

December 3

*"May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace."*

Can you use a little peace in your life about right now? What great Christmas presents grace and peace truly are!

Many people get so busy during the Christmas season that peace is the last thing they find. Grace is reserved for the folks who really deserve it. Usually the same folk we hope to get a gift from.

But grace and peace have already been given to us. We don't have to wait until Christmas morning. We can have them right here...right now, today. We already have all the spiritual gifts we need to live our lives like followers of Jesus.



What we must do is open those gifts...just like we will do on Christmas morning! We do this by opening our hearts to God right here...right now, today in this moment. And then we use these gifts as we go throughout our day, working in partnership with the Lord. And as we do, we are promised that we are seen as blameless in His sight and able to join Him at his triumphant return when He comes again, not meek and mild, but as King of the Universe.

Pastor Richard Hastings

**1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

# Day 3

December 4

Jesus is coming.

We do not know the time, place or year. Will we be ready, will we be chosen? How do we spend our time while we wait? Are we resting or are we doing what God has chosen us to do? A natural ability to do things (God-given talents).

33: *Be on Guard (Alert), Watch, Pray...*

36: *Watch, so He doesn't find you asleep....*

I find myself thinking I need to be more like my dog Painter, a Dalmation. He lives a "spotted" life, but yet he knows to Keep Watch, Stay Alert (light sleeper), and, given a choice, to Stay by My Side.

Painter has opened my eyes to see: Jesus is near, he touches my soul, calms my fears, licks my



wounds, and loves unconditionally.

A reminder to me how God would like me to be.

Dog spelled backward is God. I think that is Awesome!! May God bless you and those you love.

Sally Vocial

**Mark 13:33-37**

And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert "The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. You, too, must keep watch! For you don't know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. Don't let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!"

# Day 4

December 5



Jesus's light came during a dark time.

Mankind, sadly, didn't respond well ~ yet the darkness did not overcome the light. Jesus was not understood by the world.

Even today, people who do reject the Gospel do so because the Word is misunderstood.

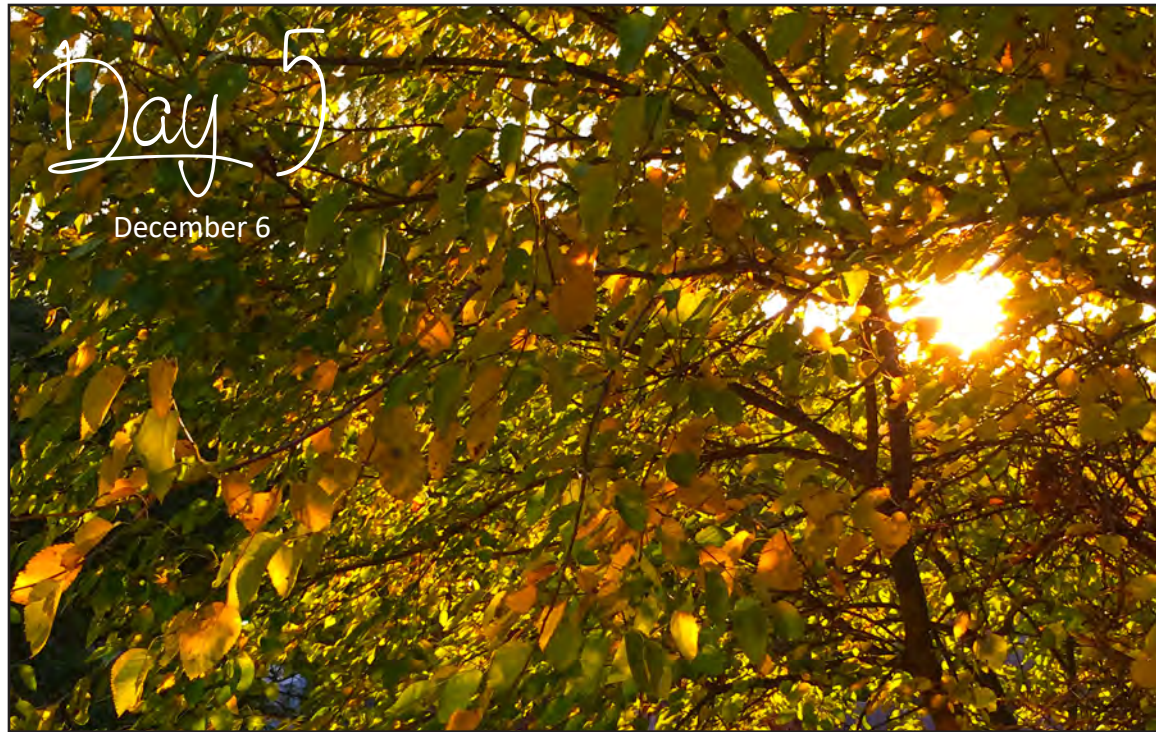
God's people are stubborn, and those who prefer darkness will not see the Word and the world for what they are.

God is good.

Jeff Brooks

**John 1:1-5**

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.



God sent John to be a witness for His Son Jesus. Whom does God send now? Why, all of us are followers of His Son Jesus!

This is our call: to be a witness to His Word. And more than that we are to be light bearers, carrying the light of Christ to every person on earth.

Sound like a big job? It does if you think you have to tell everyone. But if we just focus on being witnesses and light bearers to the people

we meet in our lives each day ~ and everyone else does the same ~ before long, the whole world would hear about Jesus and be drawn to His light.

So whom can you tell today? What can you do that will shine the Light of Christ into the darkness of our world?

If you ask God, He'll help you know!

Joyce Robson

**John 1:6-9**

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.



God is such a great and generous God... We know that we can count on Him to fulfill all His promises to us because He showed us this in Jesus!

When He came to us, as one of us, He demonstrated that He is willing to do whatever it takes to keep His word. We can trust in Him!

Linda Yost

**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

"The day will come, says the LORD, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them. "In those days and at that time I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David's line. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. In that day Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this will be its name: 'The LORD Is Our Righteousness.

# Day 7

December 8

While reading Chapter 6 in Isaiah an overwhelming sense of awe came over me. To think about being in the presence of the almighty God and to see Him sitting on His throne is so amazing!

Isaiah saw the six-winged seraphim angels flying over God's throne saying, "Holy, holy, holy." I think the angels saying holy three times was a reference to the Holy Trinity.

Isaiah was immediately overcome by his guilt of sinning against a holy and perfect God. The angel brought a live coal from the fire and touched Isaiah's lips, telling him that he was cleansed from his sins. This made me think about everything that Christ Jesus endured to purchase our redemption.

## Isaiah 6

It was in the year King Uzziah died[a] that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke. Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven." Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom should I send as a messenger to this people?" *(continued)*

God then asked whom He could send to be a missionary to preach God's word to a people that would not understand it or repent ~ an entire city that would be destroyed.

God did say, however, that there would be a seed left. This was Isaiah's hope that someone would repent.

After Isaiah was forgiven of his sinfulness, he asked God to send him.

Jesus told His disciples to go and tell all people. We don't always know the number of people we witness to who will listen and repent, but we will always pray that the Holy Spirit will convict their hearts and lead them to the saving grace of our Lord Jesus. We must always be ready to say to God, "send me."

I read this scripture to my grandchildren, Phen and Scarlett, and I am truly amazed at their beautiful illustrations. *(See opposite page)*

God is so good.

Andrea Hastings  
Phen and Scarlett

*(continued)* ... Who will go for us?" I said, "Here I am. Send me." And he said, "Yes, go, and say to this people, Listen carefully, but do not understand. Watch closely, but learn nothing.' Harden the hearts of these people. Plug their ears and shut their eyes. That way, they will not see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, nor understand with their hearts and turn to me for healing." Then I said, "Lord, how long will this go on?" And he replied, "Until their towns are empty, their houses are deserted, and the whole country is a wasteland; until the LORD has sent everyone away, and the entire land of Israel lies deserted. If even a tenth—a remnant—survive, it will be invaded again and burned. But as a terebinth or oak tree leaves a stump when it is cut down, so Israel's stump will be a holy seed."



Phen



Scarlett

# Day 8

December 9

Even if it was written in the Scriptures long ago, you can be sure it was written for us. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert to whatever he will do next.

May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus!

So, reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now you do it!

Jesus, staying true to God's purposes, reached out in a special way to the Jewish insiders so the old ancestral promises would come true for them. As a result, the non-Jewish outsiders have been able to experience mercy and to show appreciation to God.

Just think of all the Scriptures that will come true in what we do!

For instance: Then I'll join outsiders in a hymn sing, I'll sing to your name!

And this one: Outsiders and insiders, rejoice together!

*(continued on next page)*



2ND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

## Romans 15:4-13

Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled. May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. Remember that Christ came as a servant to the Jews to show that God is true to the promises he made to their ancestors. He also came so that the Gentiles might give glory to God for his mercies to them. That is what the psalmist meant when he wrote: "For this, I will praise you among the Gentiles, I will sing praises to your name." And in another place it is written, "Rejoice with his people, you Gentiles." And yet again, "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles. Praise him, all you people of the earth." And in another place Isaiah said, "The heir to David's throne will come, and he will rule over the Gentiles. They will place their hope on him." I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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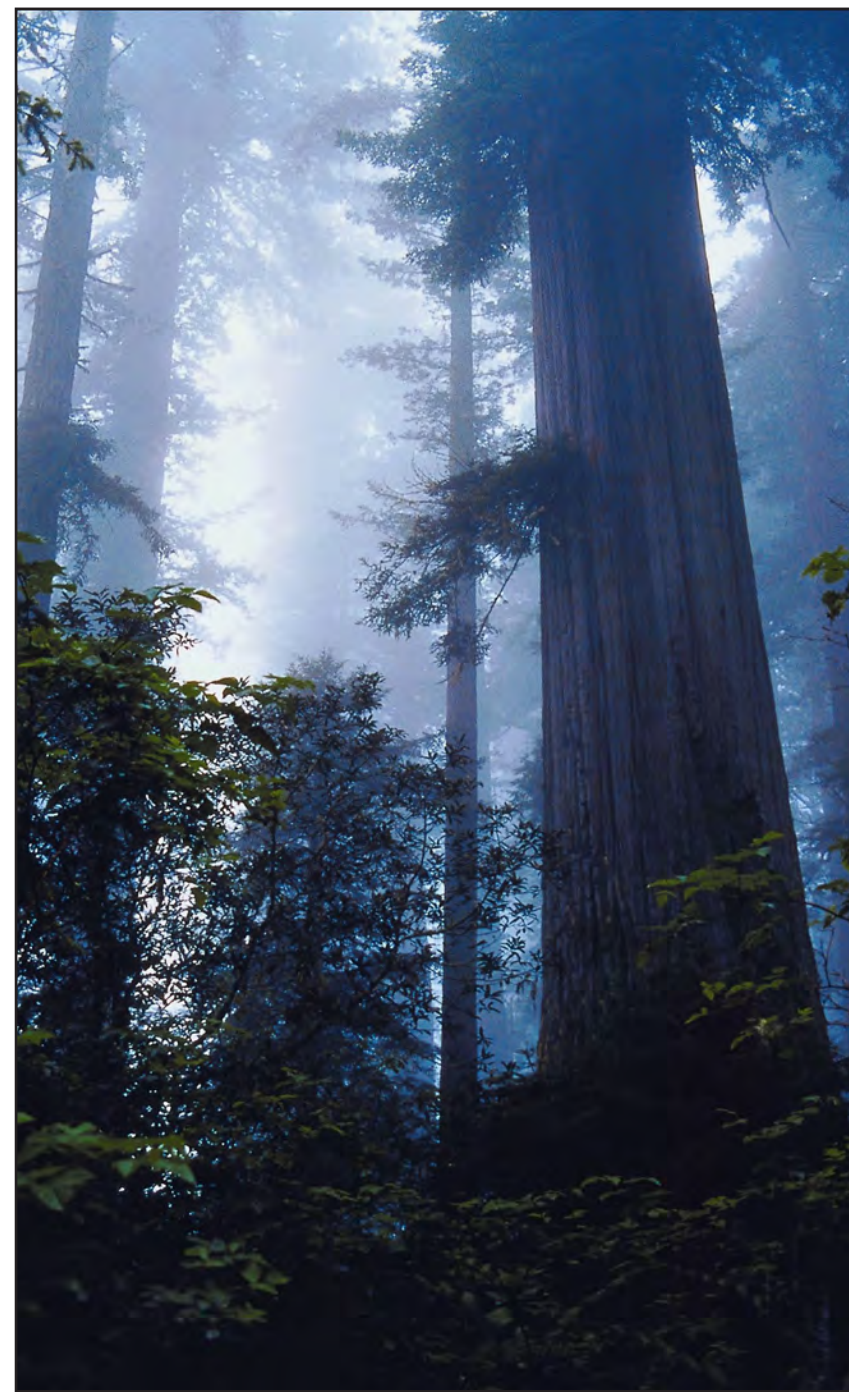
And again: People of all nations, celebrate God! All colors and races, give hearty praise!

And Isaiah's word: There's the root of our ancestor Jesse, breaking through the earth and growing tree tall, tall enough for everyone everywhere to see and take hope!

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

Personally, I've been completely satisfied with who you are and what you are doing. You seem to be well motivated and well instructed, quite capable of guiding and advising one another.

Jan Seaman





Sat down today with a heavy heart and read Psalm 43:3-5.

The thought of God’s light and truth leading to his holy mountain brought to mind Mandy’s latest picture of the untouched beauty of Alaska’s mountains around Otter Lake.

God’s untouched majesty.

Why are you downcast, my soul? Within two weeks of hearing we are losing another sister-in-law to cancer, we heard today that she has passed.

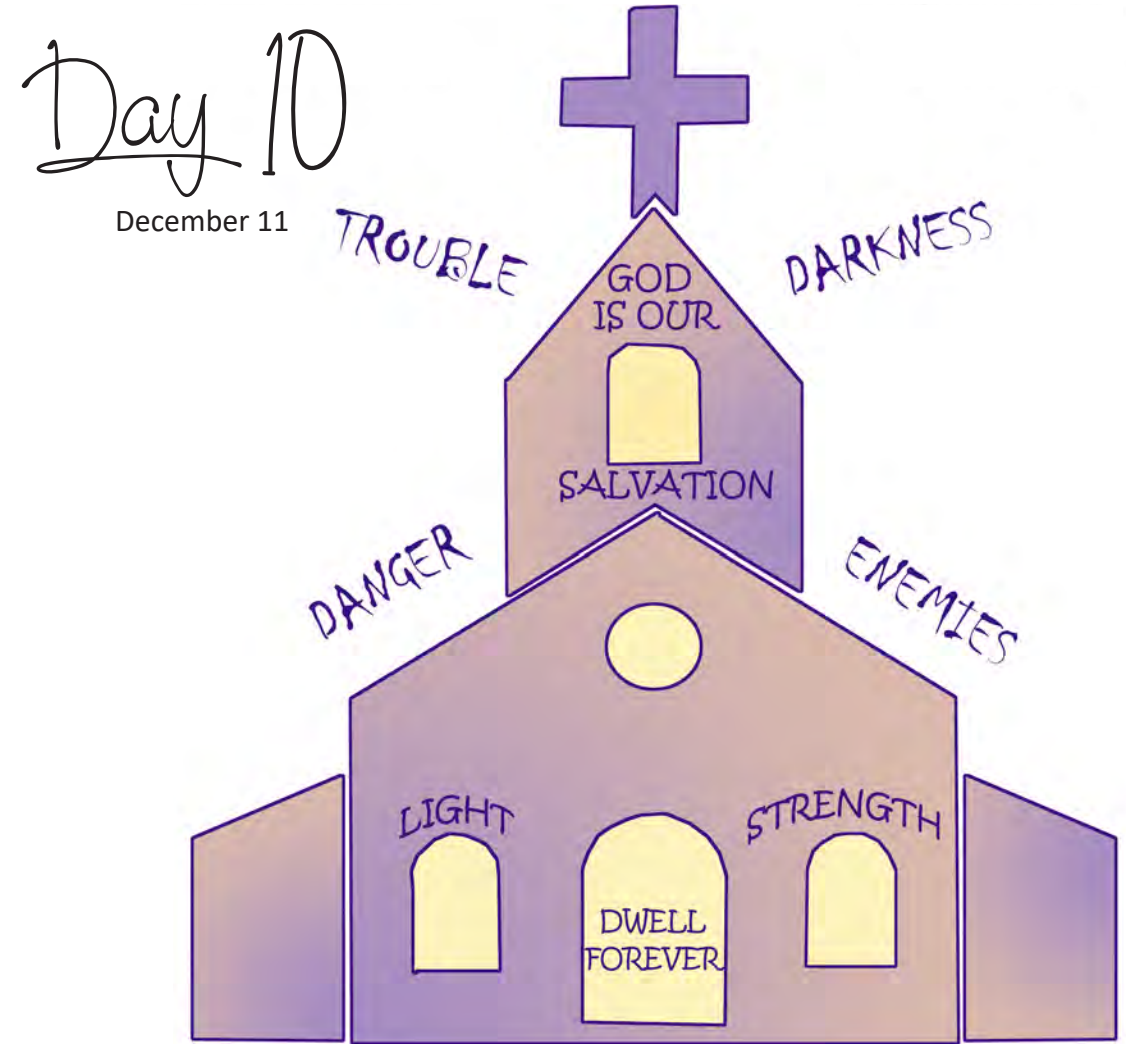
But in the mist of our sorrow, we can praise God that he has taken her to rest high on his mountain before she had many weeks of suffering and pain.

She sang his praises when we saw her only a week ago, and we had a chance to say we loved her even though we didn’t know it was to be our last goodbye.

Pam Smith

**Psalms 43:3-5**

Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me. Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live. There I will go to the altar of God, to God—the source of all my joy. I will praise you with my harp, O God, my God! Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again— my Savior and my God!



Karen Hendrickson and Sonny Place

**Psalms 27:1-4**

The LORD is my light and my salvation—so why should I be afraid? The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble? When evil people come to devour me, when my enemies and foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though a mighty army surrounds me, my heart will not be afraid. Even if I am attacked, I will remain confident. The one thing I ask of the LORD—the thing I seek most— is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD’s perfections and meditating in his Temple.





A lamp and a light, always there to guide us.

God's light is available to us all.

My heart and mind are set to obey His laws. How about yours?

Will Kegley

**Psalms 119:105-106**

Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path. I've promised it once, and I'll promise it again: I will obey your righteous regulations.



Believe in God and follow him (let him be your light).

Don't let the darkness take over you.

Without him we are in a world of darkness and gloom always looking for "worldly things" to satisfy us and never being satisfied.

Pat Martin

**John 12:35-36**

Jesus replied, "My light will shine for you just a little longer. Walk in the light while you can, so the darkness will not overtake you. Those who walk in the darkness cannot see where they are going. Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light." After saying these things, Jesus went away and was hidden from them.

# Day 13

December 14



Today's society is filled with empty words. Many people condone and even encourage sin disguised as normal and acceptable practices of our times.

Ephesians 5:5 names some of these sins; fornication, uncleanness, covetousness and idolatry. Verse 6 says that disobedience will lead to God's wrath. However, verse 14 assures of God's light in the lives of His obedient followers.

When we turn from darkness and walk as children of light, we will be blessed with goodness, righteousness and truth.

Brenda Hall

### Ephesians 5:6-14

Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins, for the anger of God will fall on all who disobey him. Don't participate in the things these people do. For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true. Carefully determine what pleases the Lord. Take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness; instead, expose them. It is shameful even to talk about the things that ungodly people do in secret. But their evil intentions will be exposed when the light shines on them, for the light makes everything visible. This is why it is said, "Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

# Day 14

December 15

We are living stones in God's spiritual temple. It is good for us to think on this passage.

We all need to come together to show others the right way.

As God's servants it is our responsibility to show others the way to the light and to continuously be there for one another.

Lora Heiss



### 1 Peter 2:5-9

And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. As the Scriptures say, "I am placing a cornerstone in Jerusalem, chosen for great honor, and anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Yes, you who trust him recognize the honor God has given him. But for those who reject him, "The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone." And, "He is the stone that makes people stumble, the rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them. But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

# Day 15

December 16

God's presence is always with us, even in the darkest of times.

His ever-shining light leads us and guides us.

And when we stay close to Him our light becomes brighter too.

Sharon Kegley



3RD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

**Isaiah 60-1-3**

"Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see. For the glory of the LORD rises to shine on you. Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the LORD rises and appears over you. All nations will come to your light; mighty kings will come to see your radiance.

# Day 16

December 17



Here we are in the 21st Century. We already know who is coming on Dec. 25. We know the wonderful gifts of teaching, forgiveness, healing, and grace that Jesus demonstrated. We also know He took our sins and died for us.

However, there are still so many who do not see Him clearly. The Apostle Paul says that God shows us Himself through Christ. We are blessed because we have this gift of seeing.

Now we celebrate the story of Jesus' birth, knowing that we are to become the storytellers, the lights, the healers who are to show God's likeness to this world. Praise be to God for His gift of Jesus!

Go out and be the light.

Sue Denes

**2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

If the Good News we preach is hidden behind a veil, it is hidden only from people who are perishing. Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God. You see, we don't go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

# Day 17

December 18

Light and Darkness. I like them both. Not what you were expecting? Hear me out; don't judge.



I like the light, the sun on my face, the warmth. I can see where I'm going and know where I've been. I can see others and they can see me, or what I want them to see. There's a certainty I feel that isn't there in the dark. In this scripture light is truth. The truth is good, right? Yet there are many conflicting sayings about truth. "The truth will set you free" but also "the truth hurts."

I like the darkness. I can't sleep when it's light. I would never look up to see stars if it were always light. Would I even know they exist? Sometimes the dark exposes things we can't see in the light. If light is truth then darkness is lies and secrets. God sees all whether light or dark.

Now, not exactly what the scripture is talking about. Good and Evil may be better terms. I am definitely good, I don't go around doing

evil things ... or do I? I guess it depends on the definition of evil. So that's not quit right either.

God is truth! God is light! God is good! God is perfect! I think I'm on to something. I can definitely say I am not perfect. I have never met anyone who is. God is perfect; we are not. This is one thing I think everyone can agree on: humans are not perfect. We are

all sinners, with varying degrees of light, dark, good, evil and imperfection. This quote has stuck with me: "don't judge me just because I don't sin the same way you do." We are all sinners, but we can walk in the light.

The difference is that we can walk with God in his light, if we don't pretend to be perfect. We use our brothers and sisters in Christ to support each other. We confess our imperfections, which brings our darkness into the light and tries to keep it there. If we strive to be more like Christ each and every day, God will forgive us and help us. He promised this through the sacrifice of his only son, Jesus, who was born to save us all, so one day we will be able to truly walk in God's light.

Kristi Nicholson

**1 John 1:4-7**

We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy. This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.

# Day 18

December 19



This scripture is one of the most recognized in the Bible.

I feel that this is the most perfect gift, as believers, we could receive. God deemed us important enough to give the life of his son to save our lives.

This scripture also talks about God being the light while evil is the dark. "Come to the light"

means "come to God." It also states to spread the Gospel.

We do this with God but it is hard to do when the world can be a very dark place. We should do God's work in the light and remove obstacles that cause darkness in our lives so we can remain in the light, with God.

Tammie Brooks

**John 3:16-21**

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.

# Day 19

December 20



In this scripture, Isaiah is comforting the people of Israel. They have suffered long enough; their sins are forgiven. We, too, suffer and have barriers and sins to overcome.

God is calling to all to prepare a way for the Lord. The Lord's glory will be revealed through Jesus Christ. We, too, must have faith in what the future holds. The Lord will be revealed to us. He will be our salvation.

People are like the grass and flowers: they wither in the dry times and fade away. We have dry times in our lives, but God will not leave us or

forsake us. The word of God will endure forever. Our personal dry times will give way to growth and beauty.

Isaiah is proclaiming the good news, telling them that God is coming to rescue them.

He will take care of them like a Shepherd cares for his sheep. He will gather the lambs together and

carry them in His arms.

He will gently lead them, just as He leads and guides us today.

Doris Ladd

**Isaiah 40:1-11**

"Comfort, comfort my people," says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned. Yes, the LORD has punished her twice over for all her sins." Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting, "Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!" A voice said, "Shout!" I asked, "What should I shout?" "Shout that people are like the grass. Their beauty fades as quickly as the flowers in a field. The grass withers and the flowers fade beneath the breath of the LORD. And so it is with people. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever." O Zion, messenger of good news, shout from the mountaintops! Shout it louder, O Jerusalem. Shout, and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah, "Your God is coming!" Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power. He will rule with a powerful arm. See, he brings his reward with him as he comes. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.

# Day 20

December 21



This is the story of the healing of the man who was blind from birth.

Here we go again! So many times the Bible points out the lack of understanding we have of God's plan through his son Jesus (God in the form of man). Jesus' followers, like so many of us today, looked at the poor, infirmed and downtrodden as people who were - are - being punished for their and their parents' sinful lives.

Where do the disciples (or we, for that matter) get off condemning anyone for being what all of us are: sinners who fall short of God's grace?

I believe that the truly faithful one in this story is the blind man. He had no clue what Jesus was doing when he started applying "spittle" to his eyes. How many of us would have stood

still for that? And when Jesus instructed him to "Go, wash at the pool of Siloam," he didn't hear "Go, wash at the pool of Siloam and your sight will be restored." No, through faith he simply, without question, did what Jesus told him to do.

Ohhhh, if only we could be as faithful, maybe our eyes would be opened to God's wonderful plan for us. Take heart, sinners, for our marvelous God of love and compassion has sent his Son to show us that it's never too late to open the door when Jesus knocks.

Love and blessings throughout this Advent Season. Yours in Christ.

Ted Gaston

**John 9:1-7**

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. "Rabbi," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents' sins?" "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world." Then he spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man's eyes. He told him, "Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "sent"). So the man went and washed and came back seeing!



This passage makes reference to Isaiah the prophet. I always find comfort in Isaiah. Our choir has sung anthems based on Isaiah scripture. For example, Isaiah 40:3 states, “A voice cries out: prepare a way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Find the song by Lloyd Larson on YouTube and really listen. Remember that John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord. We can also prepare the way by sharing our light and love for God with others. NOW is the time!

Bev Chapman

**Luke 3:1-6**

It was now the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him! The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.’”

Day 22

December 23



On my deck sits a planter studded with crystals and stones from the earth ~ clear quartz, amethyst, citrine, turquoise. So beautiful, each embedded into the planter enough to appear as if it had just been uncovered to the naked eye.

That’s beauty enough, but inside that planter grows a plain sedum plant, currently robust but soon to become lifeless as the cold and snow of winter overtake it. It is perhaps even more precious than the container that guards its roots through its annual dieback.

As I gaze at my plant, so flush with life in the crisp autumn



air, I marvel at what’s to come: a stump, and lifeless. And just like that, I am reminded of this passage from Isaiah: out of a stump will grow a shoot, a new branch that bears fruit.

And so it happens each Advent that a new shoot arises, a new hope, a new opportunity to seek peace, to be present to the gift of Christ in the world. Amen to that.

Jennifer Crow

**4TH SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment. In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD. In that day the heir to David’s throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.

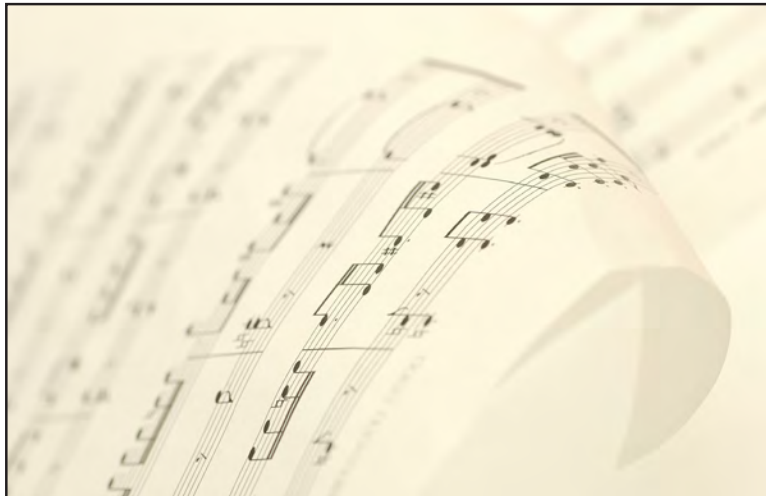
# Day 23

Christmas Eve

I randomly chose this scripture (with a prayer and my eyes closed). It begins, "Sing, Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter of Jerusalem!"

It ends, "He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." Then, in the middle, the passage states, "The Lord your God is with you."

So I feel compelled to share how choir music is revealed to me. If you ever look behind the walls in the basement, you would see hundreds of envelopes of choir music. Before pulling any pieces, I say a prayer that God will be



with me in choosing something He wants our choir to sing. Then He guides my hand to pull music. And if you have noticed, the anthem typically matches the message. Pastor Rick and I do NOT work together to match; I know we both rely on God to speak to us, and we listen!

As you approach the Christmas season, let God choose the songs He wants you to sing to glorify His name and remember the story of the baby Jesus. Ask God to be an integral part of your daily life and vow to listen to Him. Amen.

Bev Chapman

**Zephaniah 3:14-17**

Sing, O daughter of Zion, shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! For the Lord will remove his hand of judgment and will disperse the armies of your enemy. And the Lord himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will never again fear disaster. On that day the announcement in Jerusalem will be, "Cheer up, Zion! Don't be afraid! For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs."

# Day 24

Christmas Day



Each time I read this story, I am amazed at the grace with which Joseph behaved. We know that God is moving all through this story, for it defies so many cultural and purely human reactions.

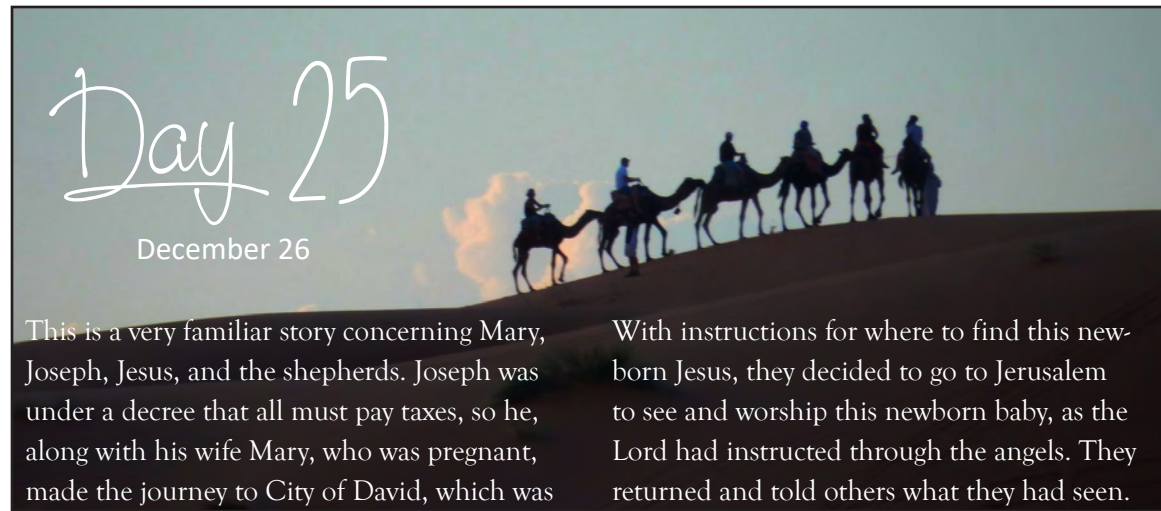
I love the references to the Old Testament that

remind us of the hints and promises that God gave to His people. They were blind to the whole story but we can look back to see that all the events of Jesus' life are part of God's mighty plan. Thanks be to God!

Sue Denes

**Matthew 1:18-25**

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.



This is a very familiar story concerning Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the shepherds. Joseph was under a decree that all must pay taxes, so he, along with his wife Mary, who was pregnant, made the journey to City of David, which was called Bethlehem.

While there, Jesus was born in a stable, and a host of angels appeared to shepherds tending sheep in the fields. Needless to say they were horrified by this appearance of an angel who told them the baby's name and where they could find him. This all took place on the day of Jesus' birth.

With instructions for where to find this newborn Jesus, they decided to go to Jerusalem to see and worship this newborn baby, as the Lord had instructed through the angels. They returned and told others what they had seen.

It is amazing to think of this story and how everything fell into place with these poor shepherds. It's even more amazing that they returned to tell everyone of the occurrence.

We must try to consider what the outcome might have been had they not mentioned it to others.

Ken Newbrough

#### Luke 2:8-20

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

## Day 26

December 27

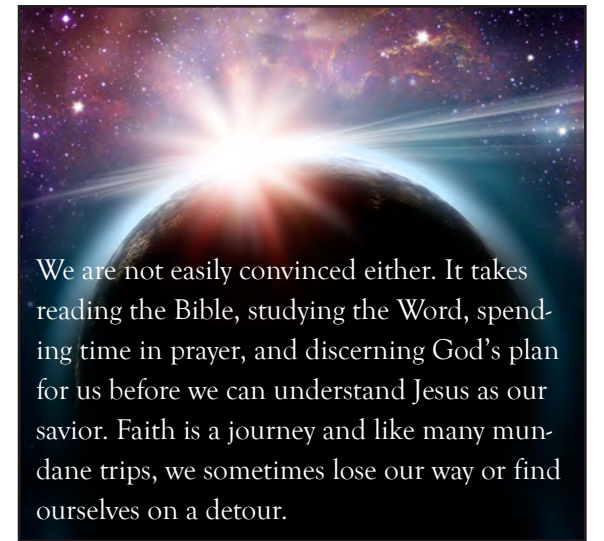
This passage reminds us of two important truths: Jesus fulfilled prophecy through his actions here on earth and in doing so he brought great light into this world.

One way we know Jesus was the true Messiah is that he brought life to prophecies of Isaiah and others. Those actions established his credentials as the Son of God, the savior of the Jewish people, and savior of all who believe in Him.

It was important for Matthew and other writers of the Gospels to point out connections with prophecy because Jesus was not the type of Messiah the Jewish people expected. They looked for an all-powerful king to deliver them from Roman persecution. Jesus did not fit their expectations. He was born in a stable, worked as a carpenter, preached love and forgiveness, and chose to die on a cross rather than lead a rebellion. It took some convincing for the Jewish people to see that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy. Many did not believe then, and others still do not believe to this day.

#### Matthew 4:14-16

This fulfilled what God said through the prophet Isaiah: "In the land of Zebulun and of Naphtali, beside the sea, beyond the Jordan River, in Galilee where so many Gentiles live, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined."



We are not easily convinced either. It takes reading the Bible, studying the Word, spending time in prayer, and discerning God's plan for us before we can understand Jesus as our savior. Faith is a journey and like many mundane trips, we sometimes lose our way or find ourselves on a detour.

But the light of Christ keeps drawing us back to the Way. That light always shines through. It lifts us from the darkness of our fear and shines into the corners of our lives we would rather not see. It is the light of love. That light leads us from despair to hope, from confusion to understanding, from hatred to compassion, and from emptiness to joy.

When Jesus was born in that stable, the light of a star came to shine over him, and that same light became brighter until its brilliance overpowered darkness once and for all. That light is our light if we choose to claim it. We just need to turn from the darkness of our lives toward the light of Jesus, and He will do the rest.

Mark Nutter



# Day 27

December 28

*Then from each black, accursed mouth  
the cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound the carols drowned  
of peace on earth, good will to men!  
And in despair I bowed my head;  
'There is no peace on earth,' I said;  
For hate is strong, and mocks the song  
of peace on earth, good will to men!*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned those words on Christmas Day in 1864. They're part of a poem, Christmas Bells, probably more familiar to you as "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." Well, most of the poem, anyway, because these two verses were removed. They're not particularly light hearted and Christmassy.

What they were, however, was tremendously meaningful for Longfellow, reflective of the times in which he lived. During this most holy Season, we'd be wise to revisit their message.

In 1864, America was about as contentious as it gets, bedeviled by the Civil War. North vs. South, Confederate vs. Union, and, worst of all, brother vs. brother. Longfellow was a poet of peace and had long supported abolitionism. He hoped for a resolution before war could overtake the land, but he didn't get his wish. Instead, he got so much more than he expected.



In 1861, the war opened and his wife was fatally burned. In 1863, his eldest son was wounded on the battlefield of that very war he lamented. The times in which he lived took a toll on this gentle, peaceful man, silencing even his poet's soul. "I can make no record of these days," he wrote. "Better leave them wrapped in silence."

But in the fall of 1864, with Abraham Lincoln's re-election and a welcome scent of peace on the wind, Longfellow renewed his hope for reconciliation and wrote Christmas Bells.

There's a message in this story for us today, I believe. Longfellow's dark times were not unlike ours, with acid-tongued rhetoric dripping from the mouths of politicians, opinion leaders, and yes, even the media. Our country today may well be dipped in despair, where no one seems able to collaborate and blame is rampant. Forget about accountability; it's always someone else's fault. Spirited rhetoric will always exist — and should. It's the vitriolic rhetoric that has no place in a civilized society. Our society.

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Like Longfellow, it's enough to strike us dumb, wrapped in silence. So I ask you this: Are we on the cusp of another Civil War, however different the battles? Is it Democrat vs. Republican, Conservative vs. Liberal, Right vs. Left, Legislative vs. Executive, Environment vs. Business, 1% vs. 99%, Christian vs. Muslim vs. Jew vs. Atheist vs. Buddhist? Where does it end?

Longfellow wrote, once the war subsided: "I have only one desire; and that is for harmony, and a frank and honest understanding between North and South." He craved unity.

I believe many voices today ARE struck dumb, as Longfellow's was, wrapped in silence. But the scent of peace that arrives as we await the birth of the Christ Child promises hope, always hope, that the silence will be broken.

Longfellow's poem didn't end on a bleak note, however poignant and stark. It ended with this:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
'God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!  
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good will to men!'*

A few months later, Lincoln was sworn in. The president said, at that historic juncture: "On this occasion four years ago, all thoughts were directed to a coming Civil War. All feared it. All tried to prevent it. Both parties opposed war. But one of them would make war rather than let the nation live. And the other would accept war, rather than let it die. ...

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right — as God gives us to see the right — let us strive on to finish the work we are in. Let us heal the nation's wounds. Let us do all possible to get and keep a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Yes, let's. It's time to break silence and, like Longfellow's bells, drown out divisive rhetoric with civility and collaboration. In this most holy of times, let us live and breathe peace on earth, good will to all.

*Lord, may I feel the pealing of bells in my heart, see them in my works, and hear them in my words. Peace on earth, good will to all.*

Jennifer Johnston Crow

### Isaiah 2:1-5

This is a vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days, the mountain of the LORD's house will be the highest of all—the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of Jacob's God; There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths." For the LORD's teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem. The LORD will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

# Day 28

December 29

Eight days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph took him to the temple to fulfill the Jewish requirements. They ran into a man named Simeon, who was a fair and just man looking forward to the liberation of Israel and the arrival of God's promised Messiah.



Simeon was in touch with the Holy Spirit, and had been assured that he would not die until he had seen the Savior. The Spirit had led him to the temple that day, and he saw Jesus in the arms of His Mother.

Simeon said, "Now, Lord and King, you can let me, your loyal servant, die in peace. You promised me that I would see with my own eyes what I am seeing now: your freedom, raised up

in the presence of all people. He is the light who reveals your message to the other nations, and He is the shining glory of Your covenant people, Israel."

The parents, Mary and Joseph, were stunned, but Simeon went on to bless them both, and gave predictions to Mary in particular.

Pat McNulty

## Luke 2:25-33

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him.