Messiah

a 2025 Advent Devotional

using the libretto & scriptures from Handel's Messiah

Pioneer Presbyterian Church
Belpre, Ohio

Welcome to Advent 2025!

This year we are preparing ourselves for Christ to be born in our hearts again through the scripture references found in George Frideric Handel's **Messiah**.

Handel's **Messiah** is an English oratorio that tells the biblical story of Jesus, from prophecy and birth to death and resurrection. Commissioned by Charles Jennens, the work was written in 1741 during a career crossroads for Handel, who was moving away from popular operas to the more economical oratorio format. Its premiere in Dublin was a charity event for local hospitals and prisoners, and its London performances later became an annual charity benefit for the Foundling Hospital.

Unlike past offerings, this year's devotional follows a prescribed set of scriptures which means they are open to individual interpretation and thinking. Please keep this in mind as you read, and if a particular devotion offers a viewpoint that doesn't align with your beliefs or life experiences, please extend grace to the author and pray about how you might find common ground with them.

The great theologian and evangelist John Wesley famously said, "We may not all believe alike but we can all love alike."

As we contemplate along with the contributors from our congregation, let us think of ways that we, too, can share the light and love of Christ in our homes, our communities, our country, and our world.

Blessings in Messiah,

Richard Hastings

November 30 – The First Sunday in Advent – Maggie Webster

"Comfort ye, my people," saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished. That her iniquity is pardoned. The Voice of him that cried in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Isaiah 40:1-3)

Remember when you were a child? Have you ever felt as if your life is falling apart? That there's so much adversity that you can't seem to handle it?

I remember the time when my mother-in-law lived with us. My father-in-law was in the nursing home, and it just wasn't safe for her to live out in the country by herself, more than 30 minutes away. Both Tom and I were working and had busy schedules with two young children.

I knew she was missing her autonomy, her home, her schedule, and her husband. But I felt adversity. Family conflict erupted over the care of both in-laws. It was a tough time.

So, consider the story of Hezekiah and the people of Judah. The people of Judah had been prospering under the rule of King Hezekiah, who had worked hard to stamp out idol worship.

After Hezekiah recovered from a deadly illness, he entertained an envoy from the Babylon king. Hezekiah showed this envoy all the wealth in his palace. Although the Babylonians didn't seem to be a threat at the time because of their own struggles, the prophet Isaiah warned Hezekiah that Babylon would become the next threat and carry everything away, including his descendants. But Hezekiah was happy that the threat wouldn't happen in his lifetime.

So, we come to Isaiah 40: 1-3, which is considered a prophetic passage offering comfort to God's people by announcing the end of their punishment (exile in Babylon) and the coming of God to restore them. It's a message of encouragement and hope, especially for those feeling abandoned.

I needed some comfort, encouragement, and hope at the time of living with my mother-in-law.

In the New Testament, the gospels identify the "voice in the wilderness" as John the Baptist. He preached repentance and prepared people's hearts for the coming of Jesus, making a spiritual path for the Lord.

So, when your life seems to be falling apart, ask God to comfort you. You may not avoid adversity, but you can find God's comfort as you face it.

December 1 – Kristi Harris

Every Valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked straight and the rough places plain.
And the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (Isaiah 40:4-5)

Upon the first reading of this scripture, my mind went straight to the literal interpretation: Clear a path for the coming of the Lord. It sounds as easy as planning a trip. If my goal is to reach my destination, I choose the shortest and fastest way to get there, no distractions. The physical terrain is not the problem for preparing a way for God. God created the mountains, valleys, deserts, and meadows with their own purposes and challenges and he could change them with one word.

The terrain we need to prepare for God is ourselves. We need to prepare our bodies, hearts, and minds. The earth can change with one word from its creator. God gave us the freedom to choose! We can choose God or ourselves with every breath, thought, word, or deed. Sometimes we choose God's way and sometimes our own. We are never going to have a clear open path in this fallen world. However, we can prepare for the Messiah.

How? We can study God's word and pray! We can ask God to change our terrain and direction. We can ask him to raise us up to do His will and to humble us when we are prideful. We can ask for the ability to see and the strength to change our own sins, the ability to recognize our burdens and the burdens of others and to act. We can ask him to use us as a vessel to deliver the Good News of the Gospel and that with God's help, we can live a life that proclaims God's Glory.

Heavenly Father, help me remove any obstacles from my body, heart, mind, and soul that prevent me from making you first in my life. I pray that the remaining obstacles will give strength, and you will use them for your plan. I pray that you can use me as a vessel to make others aware of the Good News of the Gospel. In Jesus name, Amen

December 2 – Rick Hastings

For this is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies says: In just a little while I will again shake the heavens and the earth, the oceans and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, and the treasures of all the nations will be brought to this Temple. I will fill this place with glory, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. (Haggai 2:6-7 and Malachi 3:1)

As amazing as it was that Zechariah and Elizabeth had a child, it was even more amazing that their child would be the herald for coming Messiah.

He would be the one who would prepare the way ... for The Way. He would do his best to prepare the world for the coming glory, the Messiah.

But I've noticed something with God. Things concerning the hearts of people aren't done in usual ways. What we would consider "normal" isn't necessarily the way of God.

The Messiah was not conceived in a "normal" way. He wouldn't save His people in a "normal" way. In fact, pretty much everything He **IS** is upside down from the world's perspective.

AND YET... He came. Messiah came. Just as the Lord of Heaven's Armies said that He would. He shook history to the point of splitting time, and through His life, death, and resurrection He issued in a new and glorious way for us to be in relationship with the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

Thank You, Jesus!

December 3 – Vadalyn Taylor

But who may abide the day of His coming? And who shall stand when He appeareth?
For He is like a refiner's fire, and He shall purify the sons of Levi,
that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3:2-3)

When I first read this scripture, it felt very topical. I thought about the end of days, and who would be left when the Lord finally comes. Who will have the strength and courage to stand when the Lord appears before you? The Lord *"is like a refiner's fire."* I decided to look this up, because I like to mix the scientific aspects of what the scripture might be alluding to.

Anyway, a refining fire (in metallurgy) is typically kept around 1600° C (centigrade). For those of us who are more comfortable in Fahrenheit, that's 2912° F. Comparatively, the hottest lava during eruptions only reaches a maximum of 2190° F.

The Lord will *"purify the sons of Levi."* In Exodus 32:7-10, the Lord is speaking to Moses about the people worshipping a golden calf. *"I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked [stubborn] people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."*

As we now know, the Lord's wrath burns hotter than lava. Although the Lord chose not to act in wrath against the people due to Moses' request, when Moses came down the mountain, he destroyed their idol and had them atone for their sins through violent action and sacrifice of people they were close to. The sons of Levi did as the Lord commanded through Moses, and were atoned for their sins.

Now luckily, we don't have to do that anymore. However, the lesson still stands – how far would you go to be purified by the Lord? Will you be willing to stand before Him when He comes again?

December 4 – Kim Miller

The Lord himself will give you a sign;
The Virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and we will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

The Virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,
and they will call him "Immanuel," which means God with us! (Matthew 1:34)

When I read these two bible verses, the image I see is the Lord standing tall with his arms out and a soft white light all around him. I see him announcing to all of us who are in the crowd that the Virgin Mary will give birth to a son and we shall call him Immanuel.

I see the true believers and the excitement on their faces, their hearts filled with anticipation of what is coming and what will be!

Then I immediately see the doubters, the ones who ask, "How can this be?" "How can this happen?" And, "No way that is physically possible!"

Yes, I understand this statement may be hard for us to believe, but I believe in a God that I cannot physically see – yet I know He is real and with me daily. I also see the many blessings He has given to me and to my family. This is not luck or coincidence – this is the Lord shining his love down and protecting me.

Over the past few years I have had a few people ask me how I can believe in someone I cannot see? How I can believe in someone who creates so many hardships and takes people away from us?

To them I say this: "Look at everything around you. Who created all of this? We are all born with an end date that only God knows. For some it's earlier than we would like. God has plans for each of us that only He knows about. We are not in control. He is.

Someone once asked me, don't you want to walk on streets that are paved with gold? Don't you want to live where there are no cloudy or gray skies?

I do understand others who are hurt and their disbelief, but I am so happy that Jesus was sent to us because without him we have nothing. We live in a dark, evil world, and we need God more than ever.

December 5 – Maggie Webster

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain!
O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength.
Lift it up, be not afraid! Say unto the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"
O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, arise, shine for thy light is come,
and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. (Isaiah 40:9)

The people of Judah were in exile in Babylon. They were in despair, suffering, and questioning their relationships with God. They felt abandoned and believed their defeat by the Babylonians meant God was either unwilling or unable to help them.

This scripture was a command to the City of Zion (Jerusalem) to ascend to a high mountain and shout with strength, "Here is your God!" without fear. It was a promise that God would come with power to save and care for His people.

There may be times when we feel abandoned by God. Family illness and conflict, money troubles, car troubles, and just everyday life situations. The frustration when we feel we can do nothing to help solve the world's problems causes us to fear what the future may hold.

This message is still important today. It is a good reminder to us of God's sovereignty and eternal power. We need to find our mountaintop and shout "Be not afraid!" (Or maybe just whisper it to ourselves ... until we believe it.)

The light is come, and the glory of the Lord is upon us!

December 6 – Mark Nutter

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness the people.
But the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee.
And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. (Isaiah 60:2-3)

We feel lost and alone when the light goes away. Whenever there is a power outage in the night, the very first thing we do is seek a way to light up the place where we are. We look for a candle, a flashlight, or our phone. Sudden darkness unsettles us, and we feel a sense of relief when the light comes back on. I think this need for light is built into our souls, and it goes back to the beginning of time.

From the first three verses of Genesis, the contrast between darkness and light sets out the theme of a world of chaos without the light of God. When He spoke, "Let there be light," darkness was pushed aside by light, bringing the promise of order and purpose. The light of hope overcame darkness and chaos.

ROME, ITALY, 25.02.2022: Child holds torch at the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. Photo by m.iacobucci.tiscali.it. Printed with permission for non-profit use.

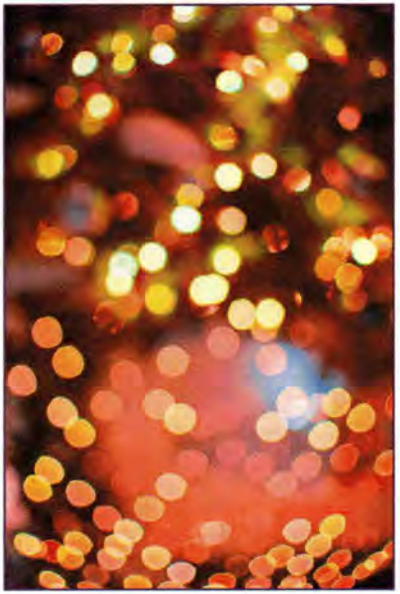
Advent reminds us that God brought a holy light into the world to help people overcome their own "gross darkness." The light appeared as a star shining in the darkness of night, leading shepherds and wise men to a humble stable and a baby sleeping in a manger. That baby was himself the light that would change the lives of the poor and the rich, the meek and the powerful, Jew and Gentile.

Isaiah's prophecy points to the coming of the Lord, who will bring light and draw nations to Himself. These verses bring us hope, expectation, and brightness to push back darkness that threatens to overcome us in this turbulent world. By setting our sight on the light of Christ's love, we are able to shine that love on others and help them push away the darkness as well.

Thanks be to God our Father for sending us his son Jesus, the light of the world.

December 7 – The Second Sunday in Advent – Sue Denes

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)



This is the season to prepare for Christmas. We put up decorations to show our joy that Christ was born. Often we use colorful lights. We marvel at the cheerful lights seen everywhere, enjoying magical, sparkling trees and delightful displays. The lights are a welcome effort to overcome the darkening evenings of December.

But read the words of the Messiah libretto above. Do we remember that light also represents God's gift of salvation through Jesus?

We who live in the present days know the gifts Christ brought. We know of His life, His teachings, His suffering for us, and His death. With joy we celebrate that Christ rose from the dead. How fortunate we are because we know we do not have to live in the shadow of death. The light is offered to all the world if we accept Jesus as God's son and believe He rose from the dead. We proclaim, with words, that there is one true God and that Jesus took our sins on Himself and forgave them.

Through His death we become children of the light. We are able to spread light to others and will be in Heaven after our earthly life is ended.

Lights at Christmas illustrate a complete story. We cheerfully put lights inside and outside our home as we wait to celebrate Christ's birth. It is often an anticipated ritual. Do you ever marvel that the light of celebration of His birth combines with the light of the gift of Salvation?

As you reflect on this season acknowledge that Jesus was born and that through Him we can be given an inner light, which goes into the future through our words and actions. Christ's light continues.

Halleluiah! Christ is born, Christ is risen, Christ lives in us, and Christ will come again. We can live in the light and shine the light this Advent season.

Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of Jesus. We are humbled by your gift of eternal life.
Help us become your light and share your message with others. Amen.

December 8 – Jocie Copen

Isaiah 9:6 says, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given."

I've read that verse more times than I can count, but it really came alive the day I adopted my son.

Sitting in that courtroom, heart pounding, I thought I was the one giving him something — a home, a name, a family. But in that sacred moment, I realized I was the one who was being given a gift.

To us a son is given.

My, those words suddenly felt holy. Not earned, not deserved — just given. A reminder that the deepest kind of love is never about perfection, it's about grace.

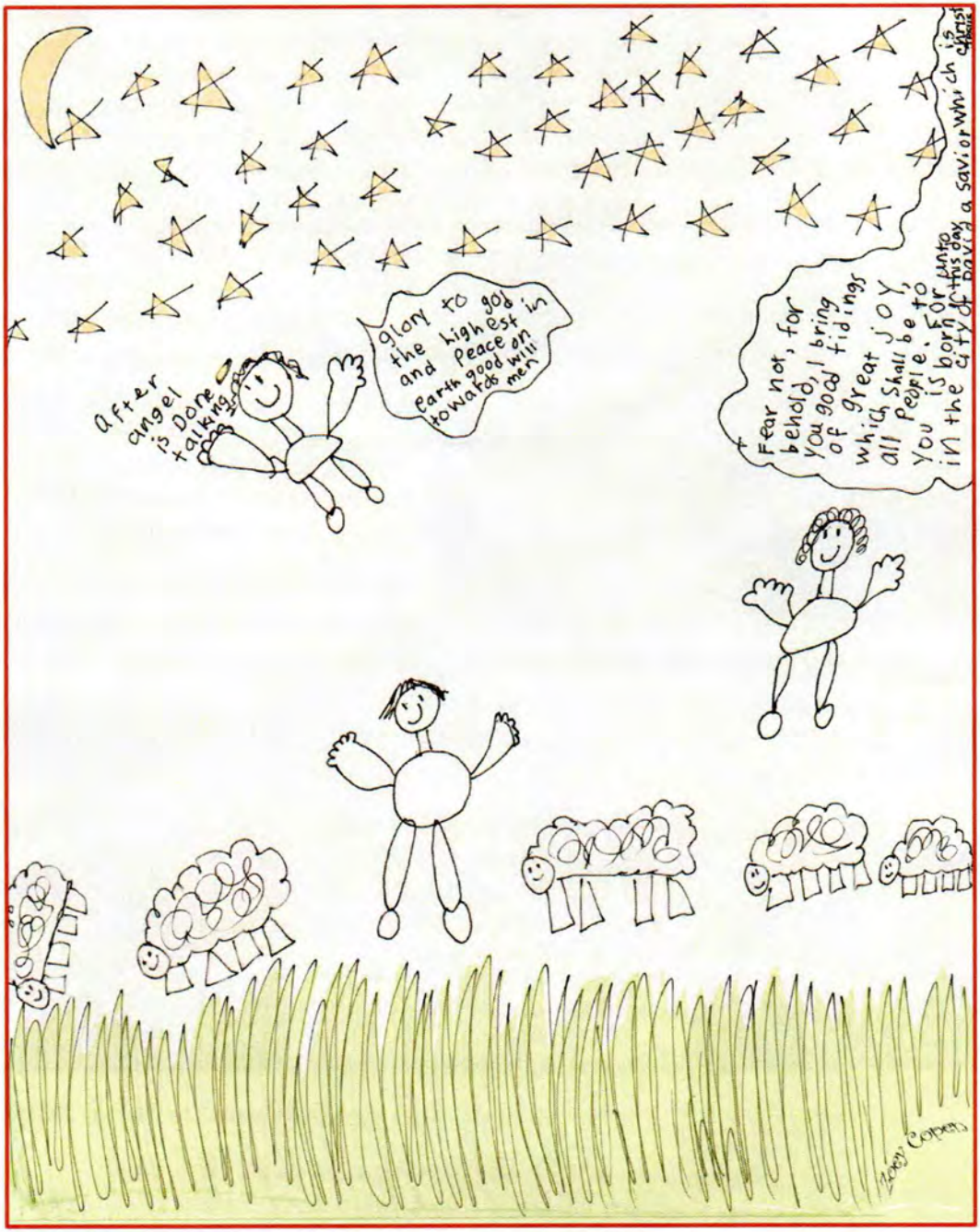
When I first became a parent, I thought I had to have it all together — to prove I could do it. But adoption has a way of showing you the truth: love doesn't start with control, it starts with surrender. It's saying yes to the unknown, trusting that God fills in the gaps with His presence.

And that's what Isaiah 9:6 has always been about — a God who gave His Son as a gift to a world that did not earn it.

That day in the courtroom, I caught a glimpse of that same love. The kind that claims you completely and says, "You are mine." Now, when I read that verse, I don't just think of Christmas or prophecy. Instead, I think of the moment I looked at my son and felt God whisper, "To you, a son is given."

And I'll never stop thanking Him for that.

December 9 – Zoey Copen



December 10 – Cindy Springer

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

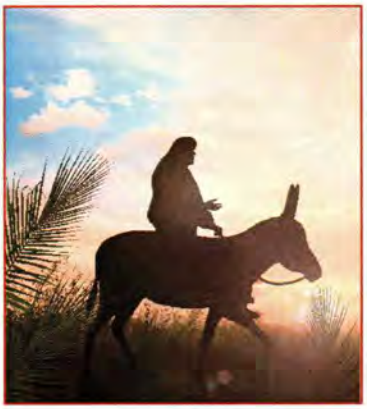
This message promises a king who will be righteous, victorious, and humble. And those promises were delivered!

Jesus' life was a testament to service: teaching, healing, and caring for others, most often the poorest and most needy. He had no use for worldly "things."

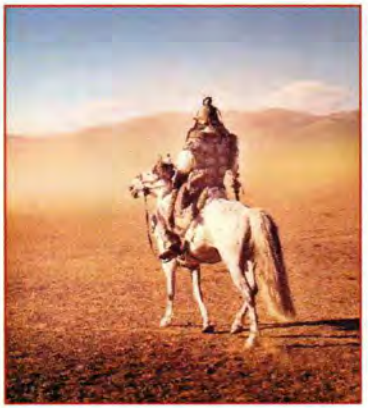
Instead, he urged us to love God and love others through simple stories and examples. These concepts can be hard to understand – both then and in our current world.

Perhaps the promises kept didn't satisfy the masses during Jesus' time in Jerusalem. Many expected a king to come into their midst riding a war horse, wielding a sword and shouting.

This king would free them from daily trials and ensure they were rewarded with worldly goods and all the benefits they deserved. When these expectations were not met, their excitement quickly waned, and disappointment and anger led to tragedy.

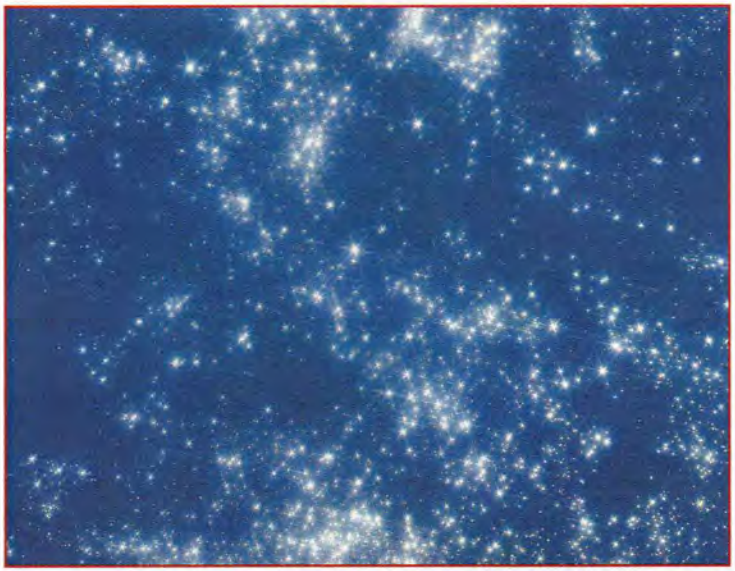


Lord, open our eyes to Your reality. Let us look beyond the pageantry and find peace. Let us look to Your word to find truth. Let us help others to find meaning. Amen.



December 11 – Tim Wilson

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.
(Isaiah 35:5-6)



As I was flipping through the notebook to pick my Advent devotional, this passage figuratively jumped off the page at me when I read the scripture. I want to share an excerpt of lyrics to one of my favorite songs:

Mary, did you know?
The blind will see. The deaf will hear. And the dead will live again. The lame will leap. The dumb will speak the praises of the Lamb.

Sound familiar? Those lyrics to *Mary Did You Know* were written in 1985 by Mark Lowry. *Messiah* was composed in 1741 by George Frideric Handel. The book of Isaiah was compiled between "700-681 BC; oral traditions may have been compiled much later, with additional content as late as early 500s BC," according to BibleGateway.com.

Talk about enduring! These words have been around for approximately 2,700 years and they still speak to us today!

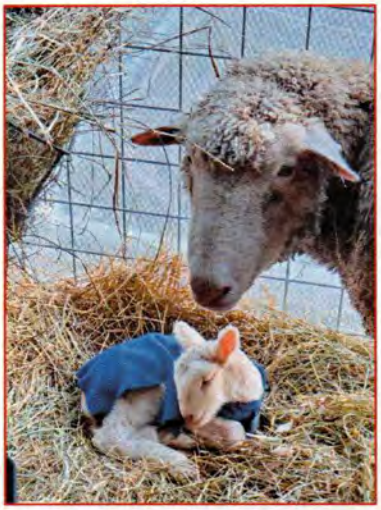
What does that say about the word of God? I believe it's that It never changes, just like Him. If you need someone you can count on, a port in the storm, a solid rock, a forever friend – seek God!

How comforting to know that, in this crazy ever-changing world, there is one thing that never changes – and He's the one in control!

Father God, you are Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.
We praise you and are thankful that you never change. Guard our hearts and calm our spirits with your never-changing presence. Guide us in navigating this ever-changing world in which we live, and help us to show your enduring love to everyone we meet. Amen.

December 12 – Jill Anderson

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(Matthew 11:28-30)



Since we have been raising sheep for several years, I now find verses like this to have a much deeper meaning.

Feeding sheep takes a lot of planning and work because the ***pasture is not always green***! In modern times, it involves rotating pastures and putting up enough hay and feed to get through the cold or dry parts of the year.

For shepherds in days of old, it meant moving flocks of sheep great distances from lowlands to highlands. They had to know the safer paths the sheep could travel and where and when the pastures would be growing – all while keeping their flock together and protected.

Newly born lambs are so incredibly vulnerable. They may start walking and nursing within half an hour of birth, but it can take a while for them to "find their legs." They tire out quickly, and they're wobbly. Both ewes and lambs need extra care, patience, warmth, and safety.

From a spiritual, allegorical viewpoint, what that means is that God has a plan for us for when going through tough times or when "the pastures aren't green." He will gather us to him for extra care and protection when it's early in our spiritual journey or when we are at our most vulnerable times.

All the meanness and worries in the world can lead to a heavy spirit. But if we put faith in God and His plan, it will help lighten the burdens, let us rest, and lead us through. He took away our sins, and His way of love and hope offers a better path to finding our own "green pastures."

December 13 – Sue Denes

...the captain of 50 and the man of rank, the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.
"I will make mere youths their officials; children will rule over them."
People will oppress each other — man against man, neighbor against neighbor.
The young will rise up against the old, the nobody against the honored. (Isaiah 3:3-5)

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. (Isaiah 50:3)

The description of the torture Jesus received always gives me pain. The words are hard to read, and the images are too vivid. The whole sequence of events that led up to His placement on the cross is a reminder of the sinful pride and power of the religious community and the cowardly actions of the onlookers. The people watching were uninformed, unbelieving, self-righteous, or unaccepting of God's vision as demonstrated by Jesus.

With grace, Jesus accepted all the humiliation and pain. Each line of the verses from Isaiah focuses on the evil treatment that Jesus would endure for us. He never complained or used His power. It describes the depth of the punishment. And yet, God was preparing a gift for us: the fulfilment of Christmas.

The words of Isaiah in this passage end with the promise of the healing of God's people. The miracle at Christmas launches the worldly life of Jesus. His years of life provided teachings, examples of healing, and demonstrations of God's presence and love. When evil rose up with great cunning, Jesus withstood the pain, humiliation, and death – followed by His resurrection so our sins would be taken away if we chose to follow Him. And, as the messages of Isaiah proclaim in later verses, the gifts of His forgiveness and our salvation are forever and ever. Amen.

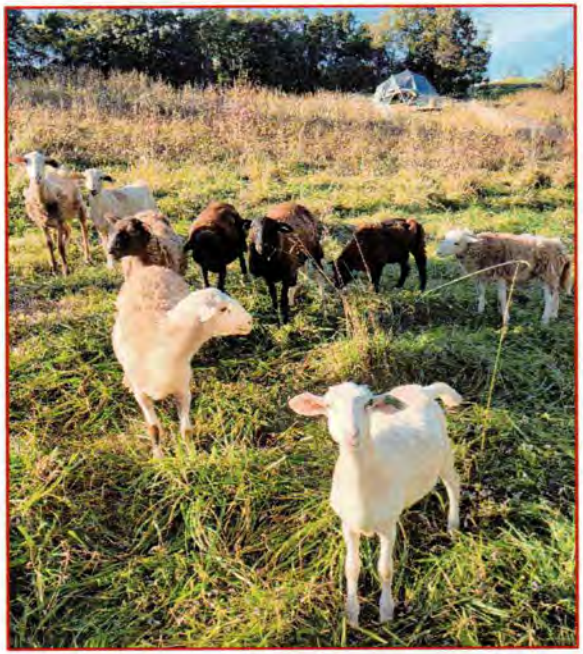
We are healed! We are freed! How can we thank God for His incredible gift?

Praise Him! Talk with Him! Follow Him! Love Him! Allelulia!

Mighty God, I am sorry Jesus had to suffer under the evil of mankind.
Your son gave His life for me, and I am grateful. Help me to hold fast to your promises,
lean into your grace, and follow your leading in my life. Amen

December 14 – The Third Sunday in Advent – Jill Anderson

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)



Sometimes our sheep get out! We have solar powered electric fences on our farm and sometimes a connection gets unclipped or deer knock them over when trying to jump them. Or we are distracted, and a gate gets left open. Some sheep get out and run amok for a while, eating the greener grass, jumping, and running gleefully. Sometimes taunting sheep groups in other pens or pastures. And often getting into small acts of mischief.

But then I come along with a soft call and a coffee can full of pellets. Probably 95% of the time they just follow me back to where they are supposed to be. The sheep always seem relieved, too, and glad to be home and back in safety. They get a big drink of water and often just want to rest after their adventures.

In my early sheep tending days, I learned the hard way not to panic if animals are out. If you run, wave your arms, and yell like a crazy person, they tend to get scared and go everywhere – except where you really want them to go. (Plus, as I get older, sprinting is not my forte!)

I think God is the same way. He loves us back into faith with lots of gentle signs and nudges, at least at first. Sometimes (if we are too stubborn or unaware) there will be a more drastic wake up call.

It's not really about authority or control. It's about wanting to protect us, give us rest, and to offer the nourishment and unburdening of soul we all need.

December 15 – Jennifer Crow

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. "He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him. Let Him deliver him, since he delights in him." (Psalm 22:7-8)

Ever been mocked? Insulted? It's common on playgrounds, in meeting rooms, behind our backs, anywhere. It's painful, humiliating, depressing, and it's likely happened to all of us once.

When I was in the 3rd grade, we were encouraged to try out for the tiny singing role of Mary in the Christmas play. I liked to sing, so, of course, I tried out dutifully. But when I opened my mouth to sing, my voice CRACKED! EVERYONE laughed, even the teacher and the aide. But not me. I felt humiliated, shamed, miserable.

My older brother did his best to make me feel better: "gosh, I *MAKE* my voice crack on purpose so I don't *HAVE* to sing." Yeah, that didn't help. The ramification? I stopped singing. **Not a note** until I was forced to sing in the 9th grade choir. But when high school beckoned, I was all for studying art, but all my friends chose voice class – their eyes were on the coveted A Cappella Choir. Peer pressure won the day, and I caved, albeit with trepidation.

But surprise! I made A Cappella and Chamber Choirs. Then West Virginia Wesleyan Concert Choir, the Larry Parsons Chorale, and the Parkersburg Choral Society. As an adult, I studied voice and sang lots of solo work. But that sense of inferiority and humiliation hung on deep into my 30s. Sometimes it still reminds – witness today's scripture reading that again brought this musical trauma front and center. I physically related to how David felt. Humiliated. Less than. A bad singer.

In the scripture passage, David describes the insulting treatment from his foes when he felt abandoned by God, and it's a miserable experience for him. Looking back now, my situation was piddly in comparison, but nevertheless the visceral experience was the same for me. Truthfully, most of us have something like this in our lives. The passage also foreshadows Jesus' suffering – for a greater purpose, for all of us. He endured it and it's arguably the best gift ever given.

So this year (all year), I urge you to consider the gift of compassion. Encourage those on journeys, especially those whose voices may crack along the way. Try channeling **your** compassion, even if it's hard or is the last thing you want to do. Build others up. Be kind. **THAT** is a gift worth offering.

This year, help me see those who suffer, who are sad, who feel humiliated, who are lost. Help me actively reach out to light their path in some way. Let me live to uplift, not to tear down. Amen.

December 16 – Maggie Webster

Thy rebuke hath broken His heart, He is full of heaviness.
He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man,
neither found He any to comfort Him.
Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow.
He was cut off out of the land of the living:
for the transgression of thy people, He was stricken.

(Psalm 69:20; Lamentations 1:12; Isaiah 53:8)

Some commentators say this passage refers to the suffering of Jesus and prophesizes His death for our sins. Some Jewish interpretations see it as the collective suffering of the Jewish people.

This is the line I noticed: "He was cut off out of the land of the living."

I think it means to die without hope, to be in a state of exile, from God or God's community.

Lamentations, from "The Message," puts it this way: "And you, passerby, look at me! Have you ever seen anything like this? Ever seen pain like my pain...".

We all know people who constantly complain; all of life causes them to lament. And we often stop listening. But what about those who genuinely suffer but are silent? Those who feel cut off from the land of the living, who are exiled.

The homeless, those with mental health issues, or others with disabilities come to mind. Do we intentionally exile them and cut them out of the land of the living?

Something to ponder.

December 17 – Andrea Hastings

Lift up your heads, oh you gates, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors,
and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is the King of Glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.
The Lord of Hosts. He is the King of Glory. (Psalm 24:7-10)

For you will not leave my soul in Sheol,
nor will you allow your Holy one to see corruption. (Psalm 16:10)

These scriptures bring great comfort to us as we go through the Christmas season. The song "Lift up your heads, you mighty Gates" is one I've heard often at funerals, and it represents the entrance into Heaven after the death of our physical bodies.

What a joyous song! The scripture is the celebration of Christ Jesus coming into His glory in heaven. In the Old Testament, David wrote this as a prophecy of Jesus, the Messiah, coming to earth, and then ascending into heaven and entering into his glory in heaven. It is a great celebration in music, thought and word.

In the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments were housed in the Ark of the Covenant, and during different religious celebrations, were part of the procession as it was carried into the synagogue.

This was the prophecy of the coming Messiah, Jesus. The hope of the coming Messiah was so joyous and anticipated by the Jewish people.

Psalm 16:10 also brings great comfort because Jesus, dying on the cross for our sins, conquered death and the grave by his resurrection three days after he was crucified for our sins. God the father did not leave him in Sheol but Jesus rose from the dead on the third day and appeared to thousands of people before he ascended back to heaven.

He loves us so much that he prepared a way for us. He died for our sins and gives us the wonderful free gift of grace, and if we accept and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Almighty God, we can one day spend eternity with him. He prepared a place for us in Heaven, the most wonderful gift we could ever be given. We praise and thank the Lord Jesus during this preparation for Christmas, and we can celebrate Jesus every day by being thankful for the wonderful gift he gave us: eternal life. Merry Christmas to all.

December 18 – Andrea Hastings

For to which of the angels did He ever say you are my son, today I have begotten you?" And again I will be to Him a Father and he shall be to me a Son?" But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, let all the angels of God worship Him." (Hebrews 5:1-6)

As a child, I took for granted all the blessings God had given me. I was raised in a very loving, kind family, a Christian family that taught me about Jesus as an infant. Every Christmas, my parents asked us to list what we wanted. I usually had one big item and maybe a few others. In the early '70s, tall skin-tight boots were in style. I wanted to be fashionable, so I asked for these. My mom tried to tell me that my legs weren't quite made for those boots, but I still wanted them.

As usual, I snooped for Christmas presents, and I found my boots hidden in Mom's closet. I opened them with great anticipation so I could try them on. I was so disappointed to see they were NOT the boots I dreamed of! Instead of soft leather that would cling tightly, they were stiff leather with a short heel and a zipper. They looked like a child's boot, certainly not the one I envisioned. Disappointed, I put them back exactly as I found them. I was glad I found them early so on Christmas, I wouldn't act as disappointed as I felt.

As we were unwrapping presents, I pretended to be surprised and tried them on. I'm sure I could've won an Oscar for my performance. My mother explained to me again why she bought different boots – because I didn't have legs that would hold them in place. Looking back, I felt like an ungrateful child. I was so blessed yet couldn't see it. Instead, I was ungrateful for the wonderful gifts, even for the boots. Looking back, I see how ungrateful I was, and I feel ashamed.

I've asked God to forgive me. And I think so many times that we are the same way about the most perfect gift God sent to us that first Christmas – Jesus! God in the flesh. He left the glory of heaven to be born in a dirty stable, complete with cobwebs, foul odors – certainly not a sterile place for the "King of Kings," who willingly came to earth so He could spend eternity with those who accept him as God's only begotten Son. How thankful I am when I think of the beauty of Heaven. Christ came here just for us because His love is so great. God loves us so much that he sent his only begotten son Jesus into the world to live a sinless life and die on the cross for our sins. It's beyond words!

This Christmas – and every day – I'm going to try to live a thankful life and praise God for all of His wonderful blessings. He gives us so many blessings every day from our families (especially our children and grandchildren), and the beautiful Earth he made for us. We are all family once we accept Christ as our Savior. We ARE the Family of God. Praise be to God!

December 19 – Sue Denes

The Lord announces the word, and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng." (Psalm 68:11)

And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!" But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: "Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." (Romans 10:15,18)

Today, let us take a little time to think of the preachers who have influenced our lives. Who do we remember as messengers of God's word? What attracted us? What did they say?

Now, broaden your focus. Who was a Godly messenger in your life who might not have been ordained or assigned a position? Think of your childhood and your teen years, too. Were there any whose actions revealed their faith? What about the middle years or an older age? Who helped you through troubled times or maybe just brought joy to your heart?

God knows the hearts and minds of people. In every age He has spoken to the world, and some heard and responded. Some absorbed the message of God's love and forgiveness and His unending grace as well as acquired a heart to speak to others. They speak and teach, in ways like Jesus, and give us examples and guide our lives. As you think about those who have served as guides for you, consider giving thanks for them.

God has reached out to His people for centuries. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul reminds us of the beauty of the brave ones who bring glad tidings, for their sound has gone to all the lands. Through prophets, disciples, teachers, pastors, and ordinary folks, in good times and bad ones, He sent His word. God also sent His Son to instruct and demonstrate His plan in human form. With thanksgiving we see we have been gifted by those who took the message into their hearts and spoke of it to others. Sometimes we even become one of those people ourselves.

Thank you, God, for your unfailing love and for those who, through the ages, have passed your message to others. May your word continue forever. Amen.

December 20 – Shirley Cox

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles." The one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. (Psalm 2:1-4) You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery. (Psalm 2:9)

This passage speaks to me about the ongoing battle between good and evil. This battle began in the Garden of Eden and still is prominent in our world today. David's song, in this Psalm, cries out his amazement that cultures and leaders of nations would purposefully try to ignore God. David then warns that those who turn their backs on God will suffer his wrath.

This battle between good and evil is still ongoing, and even more evident in our world today. Many people have turned their backs on Jesus Christ and are living ungodly lives. Their actions and beliefs do not reflect God's word, and their lives are missing purpose. God gives lives purpose!

On the day Charlie Kirk was assassinated, my eyes were opened to just how much evil there is in our society. Pure evil assassinated Charlie Kirk, who professed his beliefs based on the Bible. He was a Godly man, trying to bring others to Christ. Kirk's wife said that one of Charlie's goals was "to make Heaven more crowded." Shouldn't that be ours? Are you on the side of God, or do you fall into the Devil's hands justifying evil with a twisted version of God's word?

Charlie Kirk's assassination has ignited a movement among many young people who are accepting God as their savior. No longer are they torn between good and evil; goodness is winning. Each day we must fight to keep evil out of our lives. Pray to God, read the Bible, walk in the footsteps of Christ, and throw evil to the side!

As we approach the celebration of Jesus' birth we need to reflect on our own relationship with God. Are you a true believer, ready to profess your faith to others and live a life reflecting God's word? Or are you going to suffer the wrath of God?

December 21 – The Fourth Sunday in Advent – Angela Watkins

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. (Revelations 19:6)

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever." (Revelations 11:15)

On his robe and on his thigh, he has this name written: king of kings and lord of lords. (Revelations 19:16)

December 21st 2025
Day 22: Captain's Log

Today is the Winter Solstice for 2025, which marks the shortest day and the longest night in the Northern Hemisphere.

Historically, it symbolizes themes of rebirth and renewal, and it marks the beginning of the return of the light to the world. It's often referred to as a time of hope, a new beginning, and a turning point in the earth's cycle.

The libretto for today begins and ends with "Hallelujah!" However, in the actual scripture it also brings to life imagery of massed choirs singing all out, while angels trumpet. The voices sing to a crescendo – a term that means the loudest point reached in a gradually increasing sound.

I believe that we will hear this exact chorus the day the Good Lord welcomes us home. I'm sure the trumpets and other horns will be playing, and this day will be so shiny it might just hurt our eyes!

The scripture also mentions the sound of mighty rapids and strong thunder. Both create a picture in my mind of a beautiful West Virginia valley with bright, rushing rapids flowing down the river during an oncoming storm. That's certainly something you can hear from down low in the valley and all the way to the top of the mountain!

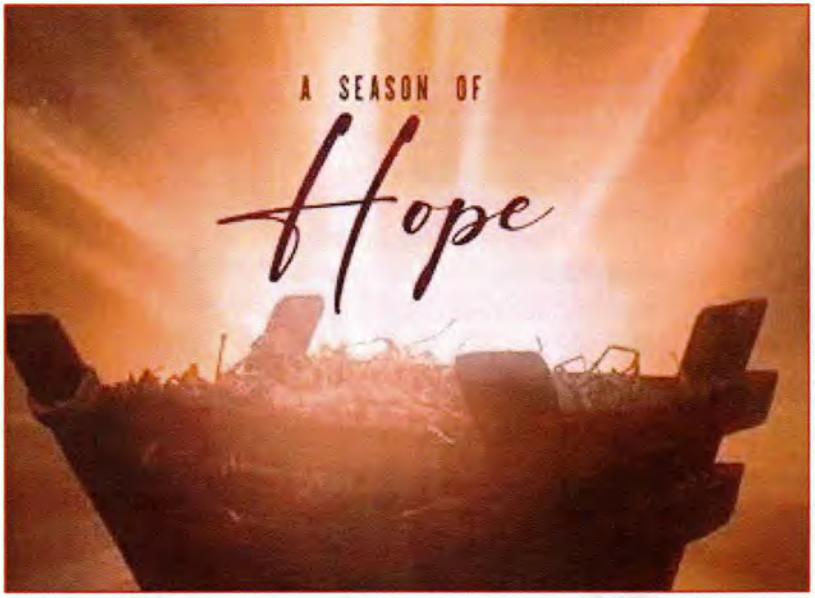
The libretto speaks solely of our Lord and Savior being omnipotent. His kingdom has come to reign forever and ever.

King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Hallelujah!

December 22 –Rick Hastings

But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last.
And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God!
For Christ has been raised from the dead.
He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. (Job 19:25-16)

So you see, just as death came into the world through a man,
now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. (1 Corinthians 15:20-21)



Do you find it odd that Job, in the midst of his trials and suffering, was given a glimpse of the glorious, resurrected, triumphant Messiah?

I did at first. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it has been in MY most desperate hours that I have felt the closest to God. It is in MY moments of greatest need that I found my deepest hope.

Our deepest need is exactly why Messiah came. Through His birth, death, and resurrection He brings HOPE, PEACE, JOY, and LOVE.

No longer are we bound by the fear of death. No longer do we need the things of this world.

Because of Messiah... We now have life eternal.

December 23 – Honeybees

In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:52-53)

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

Hello, humans. Buzzy here, one of your neighborhood honeybees. My Queen has given me the honor of conveying our hive's gratitude for planting flowers around your church.

You know, we have a very symbiotic relationship, because your flowers feed the hive and, in return, we pollinate your flowers so they bloom and spread. We also make honey, which reputable beekeepers carefully harvest to create a win for us (we thrive) and for you (you get nectar of heaven and a boost for your immune system).

Did you know that we don't want to sting you. It's deadly for us. Our stingers are barbed and stick in your skin, so if we sting, we are sacrificing our lives to protect our colony and our queen.

See, we love our hive, our queen, and the food we've stored. We have an important purpose: to help the hive survive dark, cold, freezing winters. But did you also know we bees are mindful of God and Jesus?

We know you celebrate the baby Jesus's birth at Christmas while we slumber. But also consider this: we honor his death and resurrection at Easter. Surely you know the verse: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." For us, if we sting, it brings our death, our sacrifice. And we are willing to sacrifice for our colony and queen, just as Christ willingly gave his life for you.

When you see us (and hear the humming of our beating wings), remember that the baby at Christmas and the grown man at Easter is ours, too, and we honor him with every wingbeat, every gathering of pollen, and every drop of honey. Thanks be to God! (And to us, God's honeybees.)

December 24 - Christmas Eve - David Dunfee

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who, then, is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Romans 8:31, 33, 34)

For many, these verses of scripture are deeply comforting. Paul includes the reader on his team or, more accurately, on the Lord's team, when he says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Still, for others, this set of verses can be worrying, troubling and even painful.

They remind us that God has a chosen people. God has elected some for salvation. Presbyterian tradition says this election is unconditional. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, "Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God … hath chosen in Christ … without any foresight of faith or good works."

Ephesians 1 seems to further support this belief. This can seem even more troubling. It then appears that God has chosen some people to save and, as a result, has also chosen other people for hell apart from any of their own choices, actions, or faith.

But this is not necessarily true. ALL of humanity has sinned, CHOSEN separation from God, and found themselves deserving of hell. While God has chosen some to save, he is not actively choosing to send anyone to hell. So, if he is not choosing those he saved based on any good work or faith in them, then how does he elect?

That answer would take pages to explain in detail and some understanding of names like Aquinas and Molina. However, as God desires the salvation of ALL people before the creation of the world, it would seem that God created the world wherein the greatest number of people could be saved while not violating free will.

In short, God does not send people to hell. People choose to go there. And God has chosen to save the most people possible from the beginning of the world. That choice was not based on our good works or lack thereof.

So, if you are a Presbyterian, worried about your status as one of the elect or concerned that your faith is not genuine, remember that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ *(Philippians 1:6)*.

Have peace! Know that the newborn baby lying in the manger is God's sign of his love for you.

December 25 – Christmas Day – Tom Webster

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain. And hath redeemed us to God by His blood.
To receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.
Blessing and honor, glory, and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne
and unto the Lamb, forever and ever. Amen

Remember when you were a child? That was long ago for me, but I still remember the routine:

1. No shopping until <u>after</u> Thanksgiving.
2. We will go shopping on Saturday. "You will get something practical and something that's important." (Mom said this). Dad said, "You kids need to use some of your allowance savings for presents for mom." (He always got something, too.)
3. December – Do you remember the day when the tree went up, was decorated and the presents placed underneath? (It was about two weeks before the big day when we decorated that fresh-cut tree).
4. Christmas week – the agony of the wait.
5. Christmas – eggnog, going to bed after Christmas mass on TV.
6. Get up at the crack of dawn, but my brother and I had to wait to open presents until <u>after</u> everyone else was up and we all had eaten breakfast.

Remember the Carly Simon song, "Anticipation?" *(Anticipation keeps me wa-ai-ai-ting...)* Well, it sure felt like an eternal wait! But wait a minute! Isn't that the real point of Christmas? Waiting for the eternal?

When I was a child, I thought like a child and acted like a child. In my 20s through my 40s I questioned what life was all about. After 50, I have now become obsessed with the question: What am I here for? What purpose has the good Lord determined is MY purpose? This question became more important after my second bout with COVID-19, and my dealings with my many clients who were afraid about what would happen in the future.

Please take a minute to read Chapter 21 of Revelations. John was shown by the Lord what was to become of him and all other "disciples," who truly believed in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I know that the future is provisional, and the good Lord will (or has already) decided when my purpose in life has been completed. Fear Not.