



Breathing Advent

God's Hope to a World in Need of a Savior

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INTRODUCTION: AN INVITATION TO ADVENT

For the past few years, my heart has been gently stirred toward writing an Advent devotional. Not that I have anything new to say on the subject of remembering and anticipating the arrival of the Christ child already come, but sometimes we need to rehear truth.

As John Piper said in his book *The Dawning of Indestructible Joy: Daily Readings for Advent*, “What we need are reminders about the greatness of the old truths. We need someone to say an old truth in a fresh way. Or sometimes, just to say it.”¹

With this thought in mind, my words shared here will most likely fall under the description of that final sentence. I may not cause one to marvel at the eloquence of my syntax, but I pray you will be captured again by the wonder of truth retold. The realities of joy and peace and hope cannot be taken away from those who are in Christ, but I daresay our awareness of and response to them can be lulled to sleep. If you’re anything like me, you may need to be reawakened to wonder. To have your soul stirred to the miraculous glad tidings of great joy — the presence of Immanuel come. To stay.

I invite you to join me on this journey through the month of December as we open hearts wide to receive anew this great joy that is for all people. To slow down long enough to take a few breaths of Advent hope and allow these timeless truths to sink into the depths of our souls. To make space and honor this peace that passes understanding instead of allowing it to pass us by in the glare of twinkling lights. How sad if we stand before the miracle of Christmas and feel nothing but the hustle and bustle the world throws our way. How awful if, in our busy holiday schedule, we overlook the very One whose life we profess to celebrate.

So come along and take a few moments to settle in a comfy chair with a steaming cup of your favorite beverage and a soft throw. Let’s nestle down to meet with a Savior who came and continues to come to us, shattering the darkness with the light of His perfect love.

After all, we need *reminders about the greatness of the old truths*.

Let this be your reminder.

May the wonder of Advent be birthed in your heart beginning today.

Barbara

DECEMBER 1: IN THE BEGINNING

*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.
— John 1:1-4*

Most would quote the Bible as beginning with the well-known verse from Genesis 1:1: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* However, one has to wonder if the real story starts here in John. Before the world was ever formed, **God was.** The existence of this Three-in-One Deity preceded everything else, and in this Presence was the Word. So powerful that the whole of creation came into being through Him. The Word gave life to everything, bathing it in His light and declaring it good.

One would think such a miraculous birthing of goodness would last for a long time to come, but in less than three short chapters, sin casts its shadow. As early as Genesis Chapter 3, we realize our need for a Savior. When the door cracks open to the darkness of sin, it ushers in a battle between good and evil. No longer living at peace in Eden with all of creation, mankind is now set against Satan for generations to come.

With one bite of a forbidden fruit, the world fell under a curse, and the first prophecy was set in motion:

*And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.
— Genesis 3:15*

Thus begins our sad history of disobedience and separation from our Creator.

Thus begins our need for a Savior.

Many view Genesis 3:15 as a veiled reference to the influence of Satan in the death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus. This verse, referred to as the *protoevangelium* or the *first gospel* introduces two factors previously unknown in the garden of Eden:

- 1) the curse on mankind because of the entrance of sin
- 2) God's provision for a Savior who would take the curse upon Himself

The hostility between good and evil begins at this junction.

The war against God's people ensues. The enmity between Satan and Jesus Christ commences, and the Cross and resurrection move into play.

The first cry for a Messiah rings out as Adam and Eve are banished from Eden, and this cry continues from Genesis through Malachi. Of the 929 chapters in the Old Testament, the need for a Savior is present in 927 of them. Page after page is filled with the desperate plea for deliverance.

It is astounding to realize the plan of salvation was set in place even before the first prayer for mercy was uttered. No sooner was the sickness of sin infecting Adam and Eve than the remedy was provided. Announcement of the coming of Jesus was given, and Satan was issued his eviction notice.

Because God's children are human beings — made of flesh and blood — the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives enslaved to the fear of dying.
— Hebrews 2:14-15

The world required a Savior, but not just any Savior. It needed a Savior who could become like us. One who would experience every sin and temptation and tug toward death in the natural realm in which we experience it, yet overcome it. And so He did.

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. — Hebrews 4:15

But the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil.
— 1 John 3:8b

Jesus was born to die to free us from the curse of death. The consequences of sin were nailed to the Cross as surely as were the hands of the Savior. The spiral of death set in motion with that first bite of forbidden fruit was abruptly interrupted and soundly defeated with the words: *It is finished.*

And once again, The Word breathed life into being, freeing us from the bonds of death forever.

So if Jesus died and rose again to overcome sin and death, why do we still feel the effects of the curse? Much like the disciple Peter experienced, Satan has demanded to sift us like

wheat, continuing to shake the world with hatred and divisions and wars and suffering. But, in the end, he is powerless to prevail against the people of God. Yes, he still persists in lashing out against humanity, but for those who are in Christ Jesus, we are sealed with a great and precious promise. While Satan may strike at our heel, our Head is safely seated in heaven. The serpent has received a death blow, and as Romans 16:20 tells us, the God of peace will soon crush him under our feet.

It is just one more reason for celebration this Advent season. Not only did Jesus create the world and all it contains, He then came to earth to save His children to the uttermost. And rest assured, He is coming again to deliver it, once and for all, in a triumphant arrival that will be worth the wait.

In the meantime, may the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you and keep you firmly in His care. No matter how many strikes you may take to the heel.

FOR REFLECTION

Are you ever tempted to believe you are anything other than incredibly loved by your Savior? You, as unique and quirky as you may be, were an intimate part of the plan of creation from before time began. God had you in mind when the world was created, and He had you in mind when Jesus came to earth to die for your sins.

Do you struggle to accept the forgiveness He freely extends toward you?

Set aside some time today to receive the gift of the Savior anew. Recall specific ways you have experienced His saving power in your life and record them in a favorite journal. Let them be reminders of Father's goodness. Thank God for the things from which He has freed you, and praise Him for the things He has kept you from experiencing. Then ask Him to help you continue to overcome sin so you may live a life that honors Him.

DECEMBER 2: TO WALK THE ANCIENT PATHS

From the final words of the Old Testament to the opening words of the New Testament, we step into a world that has mostly forgotten God. It has been estimated that of the 300 million people existing at that time, there was little evidence of more than limited thousands who were faithful followers of the Creator God.

Four hundred years of silence between the Old and New Testaments allowed for four hundred years of forgetfulness and neglect to take root and flourish. Plenty of time to become enmeshed in the affairs of this life. Favorable conditions to discard truth revealed in centuries past. Ample opportunity to forfeit hope to the ever-present futility of trying to make one's own way, responding more to the external religiosity of the day rather than to the inward reality of a life transformed by God's love and faithfulness.

Hmm . . . sound familiar?

When God seems slow to speak, rather than patiently wait, we all too quickly fill the silence. After all, it seems awkward to allow the lack of communication to continue. Instead of waiting for the right words to come from the all-wise One, we senselessly babble our way through life. We fill the quiet with counterfeits of, *Well, what I think God means is. . . or, I would imagine God would want you to be happy, no matter . . .* or any number of self-declared God-speak. In short, we insert our own desires into the silence — anything to take the edge off the difficult navigation of living holy through the stillness.

Please tell me I am not the only person who can get so wrapped up in asking God to speak to me that I fail to listen to what He has already said. I am sure I have at least a few partakers in this with me. Anyone . . . ?

Distracted in seeking a new word, we forfeit the ancient truths already spoken. Wanting something more in touch with our current culture, we neglect the age-worn paths which have proven effective in times past. Perhaps the crux of the matter is we don't so much want God's truth as much as we desire His stamp of approval on our life decisions, even when they run contrary to His commands.

Political correctness is not just a system now prolific in our nation; it is subtly overtaking the culture of God's people, too. One wandering life at a time. Instead of following hard after truth, we pacify ourselves with placebos the world hands out like Halloween candy to children masquerading as something they are not.

Hebrews 2:1-3 is a wake-up call warning us of the importance of our precarious position:

So we must listen carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it. For the message God delivered through angels has always stood firm, and every violation of the law and every act of disobedience was punished. So what makes us think we can escape if we ignore this great salvation that was first announced by the Lord Jesus himself and then delivered to us by those who heard Him speak?

As God's beloved children, we must listen carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it. The tides of immorality are swirling, and, much like they were in the days between Malachi and Matthew, God's people are succumbing to the undertow. Because God seems silent to our ears today, we neglect to remember the words He has already spoken.

The Church does not need a new rendition of the Bible; it needs to stand solidly on the Word that is already in place. We need to remember Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

This is the direction of God's will for us — to remember Him. And to live in ways that adhere to His Word and emulate His nature.

Are you restless today, wondering what you should do or how you should respond to a particular temptation? Do you question what you are to believe about a truth that somehow does not quite ring true? If so, I encourage you to go back to what has already been spoken. Open up the Bible and read afresh the story of Jesus.

This is what the LORD says: 'Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls.' But you reply, 'No, that's not the road we want!'
— *Jeremiah 6:16*

The Bible is filled with ageless wisdom still relevant for overcoming today's problems, but seeking it out will require both your effort and your compliance. It may lead you to a crossroads where you have to take a good, hard look at your life and answer a few honest questions about yourself. It may mean giving up some selfish desires you've been pursuing or turning from a sinful habit in your life. My prayer is that you will meet God in these moments of truth. And honor Him with your obedience.

Plant your feet in truth, dear friend, and step toward righteousness as you trust the One who keeps His covenant to a thousand generations of those who love and keep His commands.

FOR REFLECTION

This directive from Jeremiah 6:16 was spoken to Israel, yet they chose to ignore it. They stubbornly clung to their own way of living and reaped the consequences of a nation separated from God.

The same choice is before you and me today. We have the option of accepting its encouragement or not. While the choice is left to the individual, the consequences will be much more far-reaching. How you respond to truth today will play out in the lives of the people surrounding you for generations to come.

If you choose to look for God's truth with an open mind, you will see Him faithfully pull you from error and teach you the way of life. But you have to be willing to listen and to walk in the way He directs. Are you ready to do that?

What is your response to the crossroads before you today?

What steps can you take toward strengthening your footing upon the ancient paths of truth?

DECEMBER 3: AT THE FULLNESS OF TIME

At the appointed time. . .
At the fullness of time . . .
At the right time . . .

Statements about the timing of God are found all throughout Scripture.

From promises made and kept, to special celebrations, to revelations come to light, timing is everything. Because everything God does is done with purposefulness — the time, the place, the people involved. Nothing happens haphazardly.

Nothing occurs without the potential for a miracle in the making.

Whether it appears as a divine moment or not, all of it is. Right in the middle of a seemingly ordinary day, God shows up with a promise. Even if it comes in surprising and unexpected ways. And usually, it does.

Most would assume there is not much importance surrounding the birth of a babe in a cave, but there is when He is the Savior of the world. What is the significance of the timing of Jesus' arrival? That I don't know, but God does. In Galatians 4:4, Paul says Christ declared His entrance *when the fullness of time had come*.

There is a reason 400 years of silence from God were shattered with the cries of a baby born one holy night in the little burg of Bethlehem. There is a rationale as to why lowly shepherds were the first to be invited into Jesus' presence. There is a cause for why Jesus lived such an obscure and simple life here on earth. There is a purpose in why He endured suffering a criminal's death as the path to victory instead of coming as a powerful ruler with a majestic army to set the world aright. But that reason may never make complete sense to me.

I cannot see clearly enough to connect the dots on this side of eternity. But I am trusting it will all come together to form a divine masterpiece, nonetheless.

The same holds true with each of our lives. Every encounter here on earth has an eternal purpose; we just don't see the connection yet. Instead, we see random dots. Occasionally, we may string a couple together. But when it comes to recognizing things of immortal worth, most of life is lived in the oblivion of the unknown. A place where we are left to wonder about both the miracles and the unanswered prayers.

It seems most of us can relate to Mary in Luke 2:19 as she *treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*² Dot by dot, straining to make some bit of a connection between what we know of truth and grace, yet realizing there is more to see than our eyes can behold. More to our story than what has been revealed. More to life than our fleeting years of breathing upon terra firm.

So much more.

To live in a heavenly realm here on earth can be frustrating at times. Attempting to make sense of the eternal with finite eyes only reiterates how blind I still am. But it also clearly shows me how much I need to lean toward trust in the One whose eyes encompass it all. Who sees every nook and cranny of the universe — from cover to cover of time's keeping, and beyond.

We may not know what our future holds, but we can rest assured our Father does, so there's no reason to fear or to fret. He who blessed the world with Immanuel at just the right time and place in history is working toward our future with the same precision. One where all things are coming together for our good as we follow after Him.

But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. — Galatians 4:4-5

*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.
— Romans 5:6*

*He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom the work that God has done from beginning to end.
— Ecclesiastes 3:11, (BSB)³*

FOR REFLECTION

God promised a Messiah was coming to rescue the Jewish people. But what were they expecting to be rescued from? Chances are they were longing for freedom from Roman oppression, poverty, an invading and corrupt system, slavery, and the pressure to conform to Roman standards.

The same question could be asked today. What are we expecting to be rescued from? More importantly, do we recognize our liberty when it shows up in startling or seemingly delayed ways?

How do you deal with the disappointment of waiting?

How do you accept a Messiah who does not do the things you expect Him to do when you want Him to do it?

How do you fit God into your life when He does not fit into your ideas of what He should be?

DECEMBER 4: REOPENING THE GIFT OF GRACE

Grace.

This is a word well-known to Christians, summarized in the message of 2 Corinthians 5:21: *For God made Christ who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.*

In essence, grace is God's love in action toward men who deserved punishment. Christ died to save His enemies, something most of us would never consider doing. Yet that is exactly what happened on the cross of Calvary. That is God's version of grace found in Romans 5:6-11:

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

Grace is a gift brought to us by Jesus.

While most everyone would admit the sentiment of grace is a marvelous thing, it remains that — a sentiment. Until experienced on a personal level, that is. Shauna Niequist sums it up nicely in her book *Savor: We dilute the beauty of the gospel story when we divorce it from our lives, our worlds, the words and images that God is writing right now on our souls.*⁴

Grace is a gift in need of opening by the individual to experience the full wonder of its worth. It cannot be divorced or separated from a life without having its beauty diluted. Indeed, the gift deepens and grows with each personal encounter. Drawing us to our knees and toward the heart of God in ways that mere words cannot prompt.

Not surprisingly, this gift of grace shows itself raw and real in my life. It is not a neat, tidy package decorated with colored ribbons of perfect Scripture passages. No, the grace I've received comes stained with the remnants of my sin's consequences. Still fresh and dripping the gruesomeness of Calvary's sacrifice. It wades through the depths of my soul,

grasping after this rebellious daughter. Disheveled and muddied from clamoring into the pit of despair to rescue my wayward heart . . . again.

Yet, for all its wear and tear, grace still remains the most beautiful of gifts. Its offering of redemption the most enchanting of contents, all because of its very willingness to become filthy and contaminated for me.

My life has seen some ugly moments. My choices have wounded and marred my Jesus-image beyond recognition far more times than I care to admit. But the gift of grace continues to come, delving into the darkness of me. Covering my sin while unveiling the deepest recesses of my Savior's love.

Christ in me, the hope of glory. Glory beyond the smudged and broken. Splendor rising with the stretching of grace. Reaching. Drawing me out to draw me near. Uniting the best of the Godhead with the worst of humanity. With the worst of me.

Father continues to write His love story upon my heart, gracious word by gracious word. Saving and delivering me daily and for keeps. That is the gift of grace at work.

A gift that labors so I can rest and rejoice in my wonderful new relationship with God. All because my Lord Jesus Christ has converted the heart of an enemy and made me His friend.

FOR REFLECTION

When you think about the word *grace*, do you naturally internalize it and recall the many ways it has been given to you? Or are you more likely to think of it in general terms?

Take some time to reopen the gift of grace today as you remember specific moments where you have experienced God's unmerited favor in your life. Record these encounters in a journal and keep them at the forefront of your mind as you go about your day, then look for signs of God offering His amazing grace to you still. Because He does.

If you are in Christ, you no longer have to live in fear of punishment, or death, or separation from God. Jesus came to draw you near to the Father's heart. May you approach Him in humble worship as you thank Him for giving you access to His presence through the Messiah come.

DECEMBER 5: A LOOK AT THE LINEAGE

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac . . .

The remaining fifteen verses of the opening chapter of Matthew go on to list one name after another, covering forty-two generations. Forty-two lifetimes leading toward the fulfillment of God's covenant. As we peruse these names, we may recall moments in the patriarchs' lives that seemed less than stellar. Less than what one might assume would be fitting for the lineage of the King of kings.

Clearly, Jesus did not come from the most stalwart of human ancestry. These were real people with real struggles and temptations, relatives who experienced their share of defeats. The very families from which Christ descended needed His salvation just as much as the rest of humanity. In their lives, we can see ourselves and hopefully be encouraged to know that perfection is not a prerequisite for being chosen.

When God first made His covenant with Israel, He chose a simple man named Abram to be renamed and claimed as the father of a multitude. Abraham was chosen to be the first in a lineage that would bear the Savior of the world. I daresay he never fully grasped the enormity of his role in all this. I'm sure he had no idea that millions of people throughout the centuries would be privy to his story. Or that they would learn to process their faith with some guidance from his own.

God's promise to Abraham was that He would make a covenant with all of Israel through him. He vowed to bless Abraham and to make his offspring (which as yet were none) into a great nation of people. Abraham's only responsibility in this was to live with faith and obedience. And so he did.

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith – for he was like a foreigner, living in tents . . .

— Hebrews 11:8-9

These words recorded in Hebrews show a man who apparently trusted God enough to uproot his entire family. Abraham packed up his bags and livestock and struck out into the wilderness without any idea of where he was heading. Other than into God's will. Admittedly, that's some pretty strong faith, right there. One might assume Abraham

remained consistently faithful, always responding with obedience. Never wavering with moments of doubt or fear. But to draw this conclusion is to forget Abraham's frailty as a human.

While Abraham did step out in faith, sometimes he also stepped out on his own, only to find that his own will led him a bit astray. In a time of famine, he moved his family to Egypt. While there, fear prompted him to stretch the truth about his relationship with his wife to protect himself. This lie placed not only his wife but all of the pharaoh's household in jeopardy. Yet even in his mistakes, God still had Abraham's back, delivering him and his family safely.

You'd think that event would be enough for Abraham to learn God would protect him when they confronted another foreign ruler. But no, Abraham repeated the same lie to King Abimelech, and again lives were placed in danger before God delivered Abraham safely once more. (For the complete story, you can read Genesis chapters 12 and 20.)

When God promised Abraham a son, Abraham believed even though he and his wife Sarah were well beyond the years of bearing children. But after years and years of waiting for what was appearing to be an unfulfilled promise, the couple devised their own twisted scheme. In a rash attempt to assist God, they took matters into their own hands — enter Ishmael and a bitter rivalry to last for thousands of years. Although God finally fulfilled His promise by sending Isaac as a natural-born son to Abraham and Sarah, their lack of faith caused some long-term repercussions.

Waiting can test even the most faithful of folks in BIG ways, causing them to act contrary to the very beliefs by which they live.

Despite his notable failings, Abraham is still best remembered for his faith and obedience, especially in the scenario when asked to sacrifice Isaac's life. (I'm thinking he may have neglected to run this one past Sarah until after the fact.) Abraham trusted God to either resurrect Isaac or to bring a substitute sacrifice. Nevertheless, God allowed His faithfulness to be tested to the very last second before He intervened. Since the death of Isaac would have contradicted the covenant God made with Abraham (and subsequently all of Israel), Abraham's willing obedience in this event was mammoth. His faith was affecting far more than his own life.

It usually does, though we seldom think about it being so.

By faith, Abraham became the father of many nations.

By faith, Abraham rescued Lot.

By faith, Abraham overcame the enemies in his midst and prospered materially and spiritually.

By faith, Abraham built altars in remembrance and honor of God throughout his journey.

And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith. — Genesis 15:6

All of Abraham's failures fell by the wayside when they encountered God's grace, and every act of faith was credited to him as righteousness. He enjoyed the faithfulness of God's purpose and promises despite his slip-ups, experiencing moments of startling revelation throughout the years. But a lot of ordinary living took place day after day with only intermittent moments of the miraculous.

And so it is with us. The brunt of life is lived out in obeying and believing the truths we already know. Persevering through the trials and through the ordinary. Holding on to past revelation when God remains silent in the present. Moving forward in what we know for this moment. Watching, praying, standing firm, on the alert for the Keeper of covenants to show up at just the right time.

Even when we can't seem to live up to our faith, we can always choose to live by it. Willing to change course at God's word and rediscover life with the next step, and the next, and the next. Trusting that the culmination of those steps will be similar to Abraham's legacy and lead us faithfully toward Jesus.

And so a whole nation came from this one man who was as good as dead - a nation with so many people that, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, there is no way to count them. — Hebrews 11:12

FOR REFLECTION

Aren't you thankful the entirety of your life is not on public record? I sure am. I daresay the pages of my testimony would be filled with a long list of sins. Revelations of my clumsy stumbling toward holy while tripping over generous portions of God's grace.

Abraham was not afforded the same luxury as us; there are no skeletons left in his family closet. Though he was called by God and knew the Creator of the world, sometimes it failed to make much difference in his behavior. Do you ever notice the same in your own life?

Like Abraham, we have received grace to overcome our lack of faith and have been given

some pretty special promises. We have a God committed to loving us with unfailing love. A Savior who died to free us from the power of sin and death. And a Holy Spirit who has taken up residence within us to help us live a transformed life.

What are some specific ways you can begin to walk in faith with Him today?

DECEMBER 6: WHERE SPIRIT AND DUST COLLIDE

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel. — Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)⁵

In fulfillment of prophecy, the Messiah descends to bridge this union of dust and Divine. Jesus turns toward, arises with compassion, stands near, and with. He comes among His people to thwart the lies of Satan with the realness of a Savior's existence. Here — in our midst.

But He doesn't enter with the fanfare and pomp reminiscent of earthly kings. He does not descend as a conquering warrior in ways that are familiar to men. There's really nothing to make one think a babe born one night in a nondescript Israeli stable was anything other than the infant son of a humble carpenter. When you look at it from the stance of human logic, that is.

If a room is dark enough, even those with perfect vision will struggle to see.

Although all of Israel was looking and waiting for a Messiah, the darkness of living in Satan's domain had blinded them to God's ways. Most could not fathom the simpleness of Jesus' entrance into mankind's dwelling. Yet still, He came. Knowing He would be misunderstood and overlooked, rejected, and denied by the very ones He came to rescue. But come, He did . . . with eternal plans in hand.

Plans to reclaim His own and to reestablish His kingdom in the likes of you and me. Mixing Divine with the dust of the earth. Molding, shaping, creating. Making and remaking. Bringing forth beauty from this combination of dirt and Spirit breath.

Jesus Christ brought life into death's confines, shattering the shadows of darkness with the light of His presence come — again and again.

And still.

Here in our lives today.

This is the gift of Christmas past, present, and future.

This is the gift of Immanuel — God with us.

FOR REFLECTION

God has set eternity in our hearts, but sometimes we forget.

We forget, but we still *know*.

This Christmas, let's make the truth of Jesus come to earth the focus of our holiday celebration. After all, remembering God's Word isn't merely calling to mind some fantastical stories; remembering is recalling reality. Take time to read the account of Jesus' birth as told in Luke 1- 2:20, then thank God for the reality of a Savior come to you.

DECEMBER 7: A COMPETITION OR A CELEBRATION?

In the well-known movie *Christmas Vacation*, Clark Griswald's big plans for a holiday celebration turn into a massive disaster. From his desire for a colossal tree to the flashiest lights in the neighborhood and on and on — Clark's longing to outdo everyone else leaves him looking like a failure. Attempting to hold onto a positive attitude, he wrestles and struggles his way through one mishap after another. Seemingly oblivious to the turmoil he has created by insisting on doing things his own way while riding on the coattails of unrealistic expectations. At the end of the show, we see Clark still somewhat living in a dream world as he happily looks to the sky and states, "I did it!"

What about you?

The temptation to create the perfect holiday atmosphere can easily override the reason we celebrate Christmas. One can quickly be overwhelmed by the desire to have the grandest (and Pinterest approved) decorations, complete with enough lights to illuminate all of Manhattan. Decorating's not your thing? Well, maybe your efforts are poured into creating the ultimate holiday meal that would make Rachael Ray greener than the Grinch. Then there are the self-inflicted demands of making all of your neighbors' favorite holiday goodies. I mean, is it necessary to bake enough rum cake to inebriate the entire neighborhood? And let's not forget the task of finding the perfect gift to be appreciated for years to come for everyone on your endless shopping list.

As you approach the holidays, does the mantra of "Do Everything Bigger and Better" ring louder than the silver bells of Christmas in your ears? If so, then perhaps this is the year to adjust your thinking . . . and those unrealistic expectations you've placed upon yourself.

I wonder what Christmas would have looked like in the home of Mary and Martha. (If you are unfamiliar with these biblical sisters, you can read their story in Luke 10:38-42.)

I envision Martha bustling about stringing Christmas lights (which are never a mess of tangles, mind you). She prepares dinner invitations complete with handmade calligraphy using ink dyed from her own unique blend of herbs and flowers (grown in her meticulously manicured garden, of course). And she decks out the stately White Pine (or is it a Date Palm?) with color-coordinated bulbs and bows. Known as the original Martha Stewart of Bethany, her home is the envy of the neighborhood.

In contrast, I envision Mary dancing in the kitchen with mussed hair and flecks of flour sprinkled on her face. She is surrounded by giggling neighborhood children making a glorious mess and having a grand time baking sugar cookies alongside their sweet hostess. All while belting out Christmas carols in their loudest off-key voices.

As this scenario unfolds in mind's eye, it's easy to imagine which of the two sisters I'd favor hanging with for the afternoon (although I prefer the singing be on-key).

Fast forward this scene two thousand years later, and the question remains: Do I want to do everything *better*, or would I prefer to do everything *with love*?

I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.

— John 15:11-12

Throughout the Christmas season and beyond, we are called to love. Not to ceaselessly look over our shoulders and compare or compete. There's no value in that unless you want to cash in on feeling stressed out and overwhelmed and inadequate on so many levels.

We are not called to infinite achievement. It is not our mission in life to keep a spotless and perfectly decorated home with matching pillows and other necessary accouterments. There is no heavenly award given to a superstar mom whose children always have matching hats and gloves and mittens and boots. Seriously, simply keeping track of them is enough of a task — both the children and the accessories. Nor are we called to any number of things to which we overexert our time and efforts. You know, those things which find you looking for joy in all the wrong places and coming up empty-handed in the end.

Jesus has called us to love, and He has promised that in loving the way He does, we will find joy. And not just “find” joy but be filled to overflowing with its glorious contents! He goes on to tell us that a perfect love like His has the power to expel all fear. It thwarts all our concerns about feeling less than. The love of Jesus drives out our need to compete with others, and instead, draws us toward the One who makes us enough.

We may fail in being the perfect version of a spouse, or parent, or minister, or coworker, or friend, but if we love in all we do, then we really will do all things better. So let's put away the need for perfection and pull out the one-size-fits-all present as we purpose to love others during this Christmas season and throughout the coming year. After all, LOVE is the perfect gift for everyone on your list.

So here's to rejoicing instead of performing. And here's to a holiday of receiving and giving love beyond measure!

Do you want Christmas to be a competition or a celebration? I say, "Let's celebrate!" So grab your party hats and confetti and come on over.

On second thought, maybe you better leave the confetti at home, I'm still not quite over my Martha syndrome yet. That confetti might make me want to break out the vacuum cleaner before the party is ended.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you make time to purposefully set love as the highest goal this Christmas?

What things may you need to allow to go undone (or at least *less* done than in years' past) to make love a priority in your celebration?

What are some specific steps you can take toward bringing joy into your heart and into your holiday this year?

DECEMBER 8: NEAR ADVENT'S GLOW

*O LORD, how long will You forget me?
Forever?
How long will You look the other way?
How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
With sorrow in my heart every day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!
Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die . . .
But I trust in Your unfailing love.
I will rejoice because You have rescued me.
I will sing to the LORD because He is good to me.
(from Psalm 13)*

It's human to struggle. To feel forgotten by God. To encounter trial after trial and be tempted to think the enemy will somehow always have the upper hand in our lives.

It is natural to look to the past and mourn over the ruins left behind, but it takes spiritual eyes to look to the future with hope. To trust that beauty will somehow arise from the ashes. To remember that Father has not forgotten us.

Where do you look when regrets loom large and redemption seems so very far away? Do you look to your own strengths and try to muscle through the devastation? Or do you lift your eyes to seek the help of Father's countenance? Do you continue to wait for Him to notice you? Or do you cling to the realization that He already has and that He is doing something beautiful at this very moment?

No matter what it is you are waiting for, I invite you to take it to Father. To empty your heart before Him, spilling out the ugly, the marred, the broken, and hopeless. He will meet you there, beloved.

The manger tucked into the recesses of little Bethlehem proves He comes in our darkest moments with deliverance and freedom in His hands. I pray you will travel the path to His incarnation and revisit His presence alongside shepherds and angels. May you join them in experiencing the power and glory of Immanuel come to save, as you invite the Light of the world to restore the sparkle to your eyes.

He is good, and He has come for you.

waiting
holding out for holy
hoping for the Light of the World
to show up in this darkness
counting down the days to the promised deliverance
gratefully grasping for the gift of God's presence
trusting it will arrive just in time
to offer the way of salvation
to this wayward world

gasping for a breath of the Divine
longing for the birth of life to come in these moments
to bridge the gap of here and now with infinite eternal
to hope for His coming in the messiness of manger life
to know His love among the muck and mire
of this sin-soaked dwelling
wishing to be rich enough to offer a five-star hotel
but humbled and grateful that He comes to this stable
content to appear in stubble and dung
'tho He deserves all pristine and glorious
pondering this starlit night of death and life
warring for the souls of mankind

i lift my eyes to the hills where angels descend to bring
glad tidings of great joy that will be for all people
and i marvel to be chosen as one of all
breathing in this fearsome glory
i set my feet upon a timeworn path
following shepherds' footprints to the stable of old
only to find it is my own heart to which i am led

with the cadence of drummer boy's heartbeat
i join in angels' song
kneeling in awe and wonder
breathing deep the scent of straw and sweat
and the dawning of freedom
birthed with salvation's cry
i warm myself near Advent's glow

FOR REFLECTION

How do you respond to the hards of life?

Are you tempted to feel as though God has forgotten you?

Jesus invites you to bring your concerns to Him. He is aware of every struggle you are facing, and He wants to bear the load for you. He knows the longing of waiting for your deliverance, dear one. He has had His share in it from the other side. When Jesus was released to enter earth's domain, it was with great anticipation of the coming reunion with His beloved. With you.

May you rejoice over your rescue from sin's domain, and sing a song of praise to the One who has been so very good to you. I mean it. Literally. Sometime today, sing a song of praise to the Lord. Whether it is in the quiet of your car on the way home from work. Or while you're preparing dinner. Or taking a shower. Belt out a song of worship to the One who is worthy and has sacrificed His all to make you His own.

DECEMBER 9: GRACE AS A WAY OF LIFE

For whatever reason, I find myself returning to the theme of grace again today. Perhaps because it is a blessing needing to be experienced daily.

As much as I know the truth of needing grace, I don't want to need it. I dislike the idea of depending on mercy to declare me innocent. I would much rather think of myself as worthy of being found guiltless on my own merit. To be placed on the scales of justice and find them tipping in my favor because my good somehow outweighs my bad. But that is not a luxury I live. The truth is, I need grace to survive. Daily. Sometimes even hourly, or multiple times within the same hour.

Grace is wilder and freer than any gift I could possibly earn. And though I could never afford it on my own merit, I have it continually on my Savior's virtue. Never withheld. Always squandered lavishly upon one who is desperate for its strength. All because Jesus came — full of grace and truth.

Jesus came to earth and dwelt among men to extend His grace to a people who were living and dying without it. Literally.

Similar to the man in Kenny Roger's song, *Find a Little Grace*, the following lyrics tend to ring true:

*I've been too long at a fool's game,
And it's about taken its toll.
I've paid a high price for small change,
But it's not worth the price of my soul.⁶*

I can well relate to the idea of paying a high price for small change. Looking for grace in all the wrong places while attempting to somehow appease the restlessness within my heart. I scrounge about in worldly riches only to find they are vain placebos for a grace that is free for the taking. Even though it is a costly commodity.

We have been blinded by the gods of this world. Our vision has turned from trusting in the grace of a crucified Savior, pulling us along with our desires to be self-made men and women. We find it disdainful to rely on a handout from our Creator.

I'll be the first to admit I sometimes have an aversion to the Divine welfare system though I am a full-time recipient of its benefits. In trying so hard to both outrun and outwork grace, I place myself alongside the Christians to whom Paul was writing in his letter to the Galatians:

How foolish can you be? After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? — Galatians 3:3

Apparently pretty foolish, indeed, seeing how frequently I attempt to add to my salvation with good works instead of allowing grace to carry me. Trampling mercy underfoot only to stumble upon it in desperation time and again. No matter how much I think I can live without it, I find myself needing it over and over and over . . . and finding it always at the ready. Even before I am prepared to receive it.

Grace consistently stands at the ready. Always has.

No matter how many times I am tempted to be swayed in believing otherwise, God's well of grace is never going to run dry. No matter how many mistakes I make. No matter how many times sin traps me in its net. No matter how many times I overlook the generosity of my Savior. He continues to stand in my defense, extending grace upon grace on my behalf. And I am slowly coming to terms with the realization that the other shoe isn't going to drop, ever.

There's no clause for grace's removal in God's covenant with me.

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance as our way of life. — Ephesians 2:8-10 (BSB)⁷

I especially like this translation from the Berean Study Bible, reminding me that the good works are an extension of the gift of grace, all wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ. Prepared in advance for us *as our way of life*.

For Christians, grace is a way of life.

Even when I don't act as a grateful recipient of it.

Even when I fail to receive it as readily as I should.

Even though I'm still learning to walk in its freedom every day.

Grace stands at the ready.

So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. — Hebrews 4:16

FOR REFLECTION

Do you ever find yourself hesitant to receive the gift of grace, as though you are not worthy of its blessing? If so, you are most likely among the majority of Christians.

For a myriad of reasons, we balk at receiving God's grace even though it is inherent to our role as His beloved. Let me be clear in reminding you that faith is all about accepting the truths of God's Word, and God's Word tells us it is only through GRACE that we are saved. There is nothing you can do or fail to do that will increase or decrease the degree of God's love for you.

The birth of Jesus is the most gracious of gifts given to us. His death, the most merciful extension of Father's heart for us. His Spirit, the most audacious power play in the whole of Christianity as God comes alive in us!

Think of the marvelous ways grace has saved you from your sins and continues to bring life to your soul, then praise Him for the gift given through Jesus. To you.

DECEMBER 10: HIS NAME SHALL BE

*Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever . . .
The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine . . .
For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called:
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
His government and its peace will never end.
He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
For all eternity.
The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies
Will make this happen!
— Isaiah 9:1,6-7*

At just the right time, God promises the hope of the Messiah to come. In a time of great darkness, God speaks and brings the provision of comfort for those who wrestle with despair.

With a grand gesture of His passionate love and enduring faithfulness, He makes the proclamation of a Savior who will come with redemption in His hand for all mankind. Upon the shoulders of this Messiah, all the kingdoms of the world will rest. Before the majesty of this mighty Prince, all kings and peoples will bow in humble worship.

This is the wonder we celebrate at Christmas. This incredible gift of Light comes to extinguish deep darkness and to overthrow every trace of the shadow of death.

For good.

Jesus comes with the promise and the power to be Who He is — in every life who will receive Him.

He is a Wonderful Counselor, bringing wisdom to those who live in confusion and bewilderment.

He is a Mighty God who will fight on behalf of those who feel powerless and defeated.
He is an Everlasting Father to the orphan, to the abused and abandoned.
He is a Prince of Peace, bringing the comfort of His presence to those who live in turmoil and fear.
He is a Ruler who reigns with fairness and justice for all.
He is Jesus.
Immanuel.
God with us.
For all eternity.

FOR REFLECTION

Take a few moments to listen to the song *His Name Shall Be* by Matt Redman⁸ (You can find it on Youtube.) Then thank Jesus for coming to fulfill the meanings of these titles for you.

If there are specific things you want Him to change in your life, humbly ask Him to come to you in those areas and do a mighty work of power. The Lord, our God, is passionately committed to you.

He is for you, beloved. May your heart prepare Him room today.

DECEMBER 11: THE SHUNNING OF CHRIST

Several years ago, my youngest daughter and I decorated the Christmas tree together. This long-standing tradition also included the setting up of nativity scenes. Yes, that *is* plural. Somewhere along the line, we have accumulated THREE of these treasured creches. That is actually a good thing, considering the fascination my children (and now grandchildren) have had with nativity sets throughout the years.

While some folks have beautiful figurines of great value, mine are of cheap ceramic. Which means they have offered many years of “Baby Jesus and the manger” playtime. The largest set takes primary placement beneath the Christmas tree, and the other two are positioned in locations at the discretion of the chosen manger caregiver (a.k.a. whoever gets to the boxes first). To be sure, there is much rearranging that takes place throughout the weeks leading up to the actual celebration of said manger baby’s birth.

This particular year’s placement was not nearly as dramatic since there was no one fighting over – I mean, attempting to carefully place – the beloved figurines. In fact, in my haste to complete the decorating task, I rather unceremoniously emptied the contents of Nativity Set #2 with instructions for my daughter to arrange them as she pleased.

Considering to whom I was giving such unreserved rights, I should not have been surprised by the arrangement that was chosen. But still, I was caught off guard when I glanced at the set and saw Mary and Joseph with their backs firmly turned toward Baby Jesus. When I asked my daughter what on earth she was doing, she grinned and answered, “They’re shunning Him.”

I couldn’t help but smile at my daughter’s mischief. But, sadly, I had to admit her arrangement seemed appropriate considering the reality of how the Christmas season often appears to be celebrated. For though we all say that Jesus is the Reason for the Season, our actions seldom align themselves per our declaration.

In a bit of holiday silliness, the two of us came up with what we considered would be an even more appropriate rendition of the celebration of Christmas in America. We placed a few gifts in the center of a circle of shepherds and wise men and angels and animals, while baby Jesus was set off to one side. When my husband noticed our ring of gift-worshippers, he suggested we keep it that way to make a statement. Or simply to serve as a reminder of the true meaning versus our actions.

Regardless, this simple act spoke volumes to my heart and challenged me to resist getting carried away with the world's twist of all things godly. Instead, I determined to keep my focus firmly fixed on Jesus that year. Since then, the memory of our impromptu nativity set-up has remained a gentle reminder to keep Jesus in the center of my Christmas circle. Rather than confined to the edges of it.

It's tempting to shun the Christ Child amidst all the hustle and bustle of holiday preparations. It's tempting to allow the twinkle of tree lights to shine more brightly than the star that guides us consistently to Jesus. But, I pray we will never find ourselves glorifying anything or anyone more highly than the Most High. Instead of shunning Jesus, may we determine to set our hearts and our minds on things above. And not on the things of this earth.

May we shun shunning even as we turn our faces to meet and accept the greatest Gift of all — the Savior who has come to deliver us from our sins.

Mercy kissed me, even though I used to be a blasphemer, a persecutor of believers, and a scorner of what turned out to be true. I was ignorant and didn't know what I was doing. I was flooded with such incredible grace, like a river overflowing its banks, until I was full of faith and love for Jesus, the Anointed One! I can testify that the Word is true and deserves to be received by all, for Jesus Christ came into the world to bring sinners back to life—even me, the worst sinner of all! Yet I was captured by grace, so that Jesus Christ could display through me the outpouring of his Spirit as a pattern to be seen for all those who would believe in him for eternal life.

Because of this my praises rise to the King of all the universe who is indestructible, invisible, and full of glory, the only God who is worthy of the highest honors throughout all of time and throughout the eternity of eternities! Amen!

— 1 Timothy:1:13-17 (TPT)⁹

FOR REFLECTION

Do you fight the temptation to turn from the true meaning of Christmas as you're tugged toward the glow of tinsel and lights?

What are some practical ways you can keep Jesus as the center of your Christmas celebration?

It may be as simple as reading Scripture and encouraging yourself in its truths. Or it may mean you need to cut back on the gift-giving and spend your efforts and your dollars on things that pour love into the lives of others less fortunate than yourself. Regardless of

how you readjust your position, may you find yourself forever facing the steady glow of the manger's light.

DECEMBER 12: THE SHUNNING CONTINUES

In response to the our family's shunning of the Christ child that particular Christmas, my sister-in-law shared from her own experience. She jokingly quipped, "You could also have everyone more interested in petting the cow."

Such was the truth of how things turned out the first few years of her involvement with the local community's Christmas celebration. She was in charge of the live Nativity scene for which she managed to procure various farm animals to present alongside the Babe in the manger. Not surprisingly, the animals were what drew the crowd. More interest was found in petting the baby calf and laughing at the antics of a pygmy goat than in contemplating the incredible Gift of a Savior born to rescue the world.

As if that distraction was not disheartening enough, her final nativity participation in the same community was even more cringe-worthy. It was also what I surmise to be eerily reminiscent of the original version, with its own modern-day twist, of course.

Prior to the event, my sister-in-law had been assured there would be a place for her dramatists to don their costumes. She was also told there would be a spot where hot cocoa and cookies could be served. What she had not realized was that this place was merely an unlocked room located up a steep, narrow flight of stairs. Not exactly conducive to the traipsing back and forth of long-robed participants or lugging heavy boxes of costumes or the wheelchair holding her then nine-year-old daughter. Realizing the impossibility of this arrangement, in desperation, she began going door to door. She scoped out the local businesses, asking if there was a small spot where her participants could come in and drink a cup of hot cocoa while being sheltered from the cold.

Akin to the reality of the original Nativity, she received the same response as did Mary and Joseph. There was no room at the inn. Business after business closed their doors.

There's really no room for you here . . .

We can't afford to get our carpets dirtied . . .

Excuse after excuse turned the small band away. There was simply no room for Baby Jesus and His followers. No place to provide warmth from the cold night air.

Perhaps saddest of all was that my sister-in-law had been expressly informed she needed to keep the *religious* theme away from the *Santa Clause* theme.

And where exactly was jolly, old Saint Nick? Front and center in the warmth and bustle of the local shopping mall, a long line of families with children anxiously making their way toward Santa's lap to share their Christmas list.

While the Savior of the World was once again overlooked.

Placed in the margins.

Confined to the cold.

Frustrating for my sister-in-law, but fitting, really. A rude reminder of reality. A reality that places more emphasis on reindeer and mistletoe than on the humble Babe lying in a manger.

No room at the inn.

No room in our hearts.

The doors tightly shut against the Light of the World.

And we wonder why it seems so dark beneath the glow of tinsel and lights as we eagerly grasp for candy-cane placebos. All while neglecting the gift of Salvation come in human form.

Lord, open our eyes and our hearts to see and receive You into our lives. This Christmas and always, may You find a place of warmth and love to dwell among those who call You their Savior.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and dine with him, and he with Me.

— *Revelation 3:20 (BSB)*¹⁰

FOR REFLECTION

Do you ever find yourself turning a deaf ear to the Savior's appeal for a warm welcome?

Sadly, in our rush to celebrate His birth, we can get caught up in decking the halls more than in humbly receiving our King. In what ways can you show Jesus He has a place in your home this Christmas season?

Take some purposeful steps toward inviting Him into your celebration as you prepare your heart to receive its King. He has come and is coming still. When He does, will He find a place to stay with you?

DECEMBER 13: THE GOOD NEWS IS . . .

I received an email from my adult daughter. In her typical storytelling fashion, my not-so-little girl filled me in on the most recent happenings of her life with a series of good news/bad news statements. Her sentences ranged from the disappointing to the humorous as she began each with *The good news is...* and finished with *The bad news is...*

As I read and rode the emotional roller coaster of her words, I couldn't help but smile at her closing remark: *The good news is... Jesus is taking care of me. And there can't really be any bad news as long as that statement remains true.*

If I ever doubted proof of my daughter's maturity, she laid all questions to rest by expressing her confidence in Jesus. She was determined to place her trust in a God who promises to sustain and carry her through the ups and downs of life. She knew the truth, and she was able to speak it over her life and hold onto it with a faith that is grounded in her Savior's grace.

The perspective of a life held and kept by Father's goodness is what holds and keeps us through the twists and turns of this battered highway of living.

I'll admit that sometimes it is arduous to look for the seemingly obscured good when the bad is so glaringly apparent. It's hard to hold onto hope when wave after wave of disappointment and hurt crashes upon the remnants of a solid foothold of faith, threatening to dislodge it completely. It's a constant challenge to fix our eyes upon the One who remains a bulwark of safety and refuge through it all.

But it is necessary.

While the invitation to seek the Lord is general, the act of doing so is personal. Choosing to believe in God's goodness above everything else vying for attention in my life. Inviting His Presence to fill the present — no matter what seems to be warring against me. No matter how much I'm tempted to believe He has somehow gone missing.

Like the Psalmist in 27:13-14 writes, the truth is:

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; Wait, I say, on the LORD! (NKJV)¹¹

The world in which we live is not exactly a perfect image of the peace on earth to which the Bible refers to Christ bringing. The struggles and animosities which have arisen here in our own little corner of it this past year or so are enough to make one question the whole “goodwill toward men” verse. No matter that the majority of us in the USA have it much better than most everyone else on the planet.

Tweets and Facebook posts and social and national media are filled with rumors of violence and hatred but few accounts of peace and joy. If we are not careful, Christians can easily get caught up in these views of discontent and despair. We may feel abandoned to the general unrest prevalent in society **unless** we intentionally think upon the goodness and faithfulness of a Savior come to save us.

Life can be exhausting. Relationships, ever-changing circumstances, work-related stress, family crisis, sickness, abusive situations . . . the list is endless. The temptation to languish from the madness of it all bombards us as bad news continues to hit. BUT when we position ourselves to remember Father’s goodness and consider His beauty, our perspective is righted, and we are revived by the staying power of the Most High. Nourished by the goodness that remains even in a world at odds with its Creator. Maybe especially there.

No matter your current circumstance, if you are in Christ, then you can join your belief with the truth of my daughter’s sentiments.

The Good News is, Jesus is taking care of me . . .

In light of that one truth, all other news pales in comparison — no matter how bad it may seem.

But the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. . .”

— Luke 2:10

FOR REFLECTION

Good News entered the world with the birth of Jesus. And it remains to this day. In light of that truth, is there really anything that should cause us to lose sight of joy?

If you feel on the verge of losing heart, I encourage you to meditate upon these verses

from Psalm 27. Read them in the morning and before you go to bed each night. Ask God to fill your mind and your spirit with good courage that comes from Him. Whether it is nationwide revival you are praying for or an internal regeneration of your own, take heart, dear friend. This is not the end.

The King has come. And He is coming still, with goodness in His hand — for you.

DECEMBER 14: COME AND SEE

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Come, follow me.' Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter's hometown. Philip went to look for Nathanael, and told him, 'We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.' 'Nazareth!' exclaimed Nathanael. 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' 'Come and see for yourself,' Philip replied. As they approached, Jesus said, 'Now here is a genuine son of Israel — a man of complete integrity.' 'How do you know about me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus replied, "'I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you.' Then Nathanael exclaimed, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God — the King of Israel!' — John 1:43-49

Notoriously known for little, Nazareth was perhaps the last place from which Nathanael would expect the Messiah to hail. This simple village was looked upon with disdain and skepticism. It was also conspicuously not a place honored with a position in prophecy as was the little town of Bethlehem.

In typical 1 Corinthians: 1:27-28 fashion, God chose to work His miracles through mysterious means. Thwarting the wisdom of the world by running counter to its logic, God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly and despised things of the world, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast in His presence.

Choosing an unwed, teenage girl named Mary to birth the Savior of the world.

Choosing to bypass kingdom hallways for an isolated manger as Messiah's birthplace.

Choosing a simple carpenter named Joseph to raise the Son of God in the nondescript village of Nazareth.

What good could possibly come from such humble beginnings?

"Come and see," God smiles.

God's ways remain mysterious to this day. He calls us to wait upon Him as we patiently endure times of testing. He challenges us to be courageous and to place our trust in Him,

no matter how hopeless things may appear to mortal eyes. And sometimes He calls us to “Come and see” the good in the most awful of surroundings. Not to just sit by the wayside, but to activate our faith as we move toward it against all odds. To open our eyes and search for goodness coming from the least likely places.

The invitation to Nathanael remains. The same is extended to you and me today.

“Come and see,” God smiles. “Come and see.”

Jesus knew the secrets of Nathanael’s heart, as He knows ours. He sees both the hope and the doubts as we struggle through our pain. He hears the question we dare not give voice: *How can this be God’s will for my life?*

“Can anything good come from it?” we wonder in the middle of our own personal Nazareth.

“Come and see,” God smiles.

Bring your cares to Me, and we will put them together with My power, here where mankind is reconciled with Divine. Come and see the very One whom the prophets foretold. Come and see the Messiah.

What good can possibly come from this?

What good, indeed:

*It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God: our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.
— 1 Corinthians.1:30 (NIV)¹²*

Wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption — the greatest of gifts can come from the lowliest of places.

“Come and see,” God beckons.

FOR REFLECTION

Do you find yourself in an unlikely place to see the goodness of God? If so, you are in a perfect position to experience the miraculous presence of the Messiah come. Jesus

continues to show up in the most unlikely of ways, in unlikely places, to seemingly insignificant people. Which makes all of us prime for His presence.

What steps can you take toward seeing the good in your present situation?

Are there things you can do to improve it? If so, then determine to do those things today.

If, however, you are facing a trial that is beyond the help of any human efforts, rest assured you are still seen by Jesus. He knows what you are facing, and He also knows how to intervene on your behalf. Ask Him to do so, then be willing to take a step toward the good He is extending. Ask for eyes of faith to see His kingdom advancing, even if it seems like the least likely place to find Him.

Come and see, dear friend.

He is near.

Open your eyes to the wonder of Messiah come for you.

DECEMBER 15: THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS

When I turned on the computer, the headliner on the opening page of my web browser declared the controversy over the supposed *War on Christmas*. For the past decade or so, extremists have been arguing over Christmas/Holiday greetings. And all the trimmings that come along with it. Christians and atheists alike have jumped on the bandwagon in ways that are equally *not* of a festive or merry spirit. All I can do is roll my eyes at how ridiculous we all have become. Society seems bent on striving after this phony theory of entitlement that has gripped us with such fierceness. Heaven forbid anyone possibly do anything to offend me — whether intentional or unintentional — in their dress, speech, actions, thoughts, beliefs, blah, blah, blah.

But I find the greeting of “Merry Christmas!” offensive. I don’t celebrate the Christian holiday, so why am I forced to suffer from hearing a cheery religious salutation? Never mind that I will gladly receive that Christmas bonus from work (and the time off that comes along with it).

I can’t believe that person greeted me with “Happy Holidays!” Don’t they realize Jesus is the reason for the season? I can’t believe I’m forced to be persecuted for my faith in this way. Never mind that I am rude to the cashier and my fellow-shoppers in my rush to purchase Christmas paraphernalia so I can hurry home to decorate.

Seriously, things have gotten entirely out of control y’all.

That said, the war on Christmas is real. Has been since the very first breath of the Messiah was drawn.

I’m not talking about disagreements over Christmas greetings. Or whether it is appropriate for towns to have a nativity scene in the public square. Or whether one should have a Christmas tree, or whether or not to include Santa Claus in your holiday traditions. Or any host of disagreements that have arisen over the years. I’m talking about a full-fledged, all-out, satanic war against the hosts of heaven.

When rumors of Jesus’ birth made their way to the gates of hell, Satan went berserk. Desperate to keep his tight reign of sin and death over God’s beloved, he plotted in the most sinister of ways to snuff out the life of the Savior. Planting seeds of fear, Satan manipulated King Herod’s alarm at the thought of losing power. He unleashed this puppet ruler in hopes of killing the Christ child before Jesus had a chance to grow and fight back.

Summarizing Matthew 2:1-18, Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of King

Herod. At about the same time, some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, seeking this newborn king of the Jews. They had followed a shining star and were hoping it would lead them to the Messiah.

Needless to say, this news did not sit well with Herod. He called a private meeting with the wise men and asked them to let him know as soon as they discovered the child. Of course, he used the pretense of desiring to worship this new king, too. (I'm thinking he may have neglected to remember he was dealing with wise men here and not your average fellows.)

After this interview, the wise men continued to follow the star straight to the house where Jesus was. (Yes, they ended up in a house, and not at the renowned stable where they tend to make an appearance in every nativity set known to man.) The wise men worshiped Jesus and left the famed gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But God had warned them away from Herod, so they returned home via a different route.

After the wise men left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. He told Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt, where they were told to remain until the angel came again. The reason they were told to leave? Herod was going to search for the child to kill him.

Herod was furious when he realized he had been duped by the wise men.

This desperate ruler set dark measures in motion. An edict of infanticide was issued, sealing the fate of all young boys in and around Bethlehem. Can you imagine? Every little boy aged two and under was put to death.

What must Mary and Joseph have felt when they realized the extent of evil forces set against this new babe entrusted to their care? While they were warned by an angel to flee, could they have truly imagined the terror from which they were escaping?

Doors crack and give way beneath hobnailed sandals as soldiers push and shove their way into homes. Babies and toddlers are torn from cradling arms or yanked from sleeping mats to be silenced forever. Ripped from distraught mothers and run through with bloodied swords. Lifeless bodies tossed like so many rag dolls. Murder committed against an entire community's most innocent of occupants.

This is the reality of war on Christmas.

This is the world into which Jesus came, a world so set against Him that it wiped out infants in attempts to stop His coming.

And yet He came, fully knowing the reception He was to receive.

In light of my day, it is easy to forget the horror that occurred when Christ entered the world as a newborn babe.

Divinity stepped into a society occupied by His archenemy so he could teach us to pray for our persecutors. He was born into a generation crying out for deliverance from despicable atrocities occurring without a moment's notice, so He could set us free from hate. He came to a people held captive by evil rulers so He could break the bonds of sin and death. He arrived in a world under siege by satanic powers.

And in this place, He taught us how to love.

From the first inhalation of earthly air to His last breath, Jesus breathed a life of love. And in return, he was parried with hate. From the manger to the cross and through the centuries since the resurrection, God's love continues to battle against Satan's hatred and the lies it ensues. All the way to the present day argument of Merry Christmas versus Happy Holidays.

Is there a war on Christmas? Of course. But that's nothing new. It's been raging since the Messiah's birth. So why do we Christians act so shocked? Why are we surprised when those who do not believe in the gift of salvation respond to us in ways that align with their disbelief?

Instead of pressing our rights to hear *Merry Christmas* returned to us in greeting, can we instead smile in response to a *Happy Holidays*? Can we treat each other with at least a little of the love Jesus extends to us?

It would seem we still have much to learn from our Savior.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross.

— *Philippians 2:5-8 (BSB)*¹³

Yes, indeed. We still have much to learn from our Savior.

Instead of railing against, let's bow our knees before a gracious throne and weep with the masses. Let's pray for Jesus to once more descend to be with. And near. And bring healing and hope in ways only He can.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Immanuel. Descend into hearts as You descended into the atmosphere so many years ago. And make Yourself known once more. Breathe Your peace that is for all people. Stir hearts to look heavenward and open eyes to see the star pointing straight to Your presence. May Your goodness know no ends as You extend Your gift of grace to the persecuted and to the persecutor.

Save us, sweet Savior. Let mercy come to the hearts of those who are called according to Your purposes. May Your sons and daughters rise from the ashes of broken and be built into living memorials of grace. And peace. And truth.

Descend in triumph. Overturn the works of the evil one, and drive out the darkness with the light of Your eternal love. Let hope arise with Advent breath instilling life to all who look to You.

Breath of Heaven, breathe on us.

FOR REFLECTION

Where is your own heart in this war against Christmas? Are you tempted to take up an offense and respond in kind, or are you able to take a deep breath and to exhale love in place of animosity?

How is God calling you to treat others when you feel anything but loving?

What are some specific things you can adjust in your life to help you bring peace to the people around you?

DECEMBER 16: BIG STORIES START SMALL

Zacchaeus was a wee, little man . . .

If you grew up attending Sunday school class, chances are you immediately finished the rest of this line with . . . *and a wee, little man was he.*

Big stories start small, and the tale of Zacchaeus' interaction with Jesus is no exception. This man of slight stature could not even see the Messiah through the crowds of people flocking about Him. Desperate to get a glimpse of the Savior passing by, little Z. ran ahead of everyone and climbed a tree. I doubt if he expected Jesus to notice him hidden there in the branches. But not only did Jesus take note of Zacchaeus, He invited Himself over for dinner.

Jesus invites Himself into a life of smallness with BIG plans in mind.

Jesus' plan of salvation would radically reform the hated tax collector into a disciple of Christ. That one small seed of salvation took root and grew into a stalwart producer of righteousness. How else can we explain the heart transformation that caused Zacchaeus to repay everyone four times the amount of money that he had stolen from them?

A small decision to climb a tree just to get a peek at Jesus became a story big enough to be repeated throughout the centuries. Thousands upon thousands of children and adults alike can sing a song about Zacchaeus, a wee, little man whose life was changed by a big God. Today, that man known for being small is also remembered as living big for Christ.

Looking back through the pages of the Bible, it is easy for us to be enthralled with grand and miraculous stories, but that is because we have the perspective from history's side of the tale. In reality, most of these stories started with smallness.

A word spoken birthed the universe into being.

A babe in a basket floating down a river became the deliverer of an enslaved nation.

A shepherd boy grew to become the king of Israel.

Five loaves and two fish transformed into a meal for a multitude.

A mustard seed of faith and mountains move.

A tiny infant born in a manger brought salvation for all mankind.

One small, empty tomb meant the defeat of death for eternity.

In God's kingdom, the humble are exalted.

Servants reign.
The last finish first.
Small becomes BIG.

Take a lesson from Zacchaeus as you go out of your way to get a glimpse of the Savior. Who knows... today may be the very day Jesus looks at you and invites Himself over to your house with big plans in mind.

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin . . .
— Zechariah 4:10

FOR REFLECTION

In a world of big and fast and now, we sometimes want to skip over the small, slow, and steady. But that is where real growth and change occur. Whether we are looking to impact lives or to be impacted, little things matter.

One small step of obedience.
One encouraging word.
One act of kindness.
One pocketful of change.
One habit is broken.
All of these are little steps that can lead to bigger things.
Even if it starts in one life.

The kingdom of heaven is built of individuals all working together in small ways to make an impact here on Earth and for eternity. There is no such thing as a too-small gesture of genuine love, especially when it is surrendered to Jesus. He has a way of multiplying small things, you know. Don't negate the importance of giving Him the little you have.

A step forward, no matter how tiny, is still a step in the right direction. What is something you can do today to move forward in your walk with Jesus?

DECEMBER 17: SHARING OUR STORIES

A few years ago, I found myself telling my daughter a love story.

This love story was of particular interest to her because it was the one that birthed her into being. I am not sure exactly what prompted her questions. But before I knew it, and much to the delight of my youngest, I found myself retelling those long-ago moments of early love with my husband.

I am also not sure whose smile stretched further as I shared about a walk in the woods where I first realized I was falling for my future husband. I told the story of Jon scooping me up and dangling me over a water-filled creek. He looked at me with a smile that unsettled my young heart in the most peculiar of ways. I couldn't help but grin at the memories.

“It was like one of those cheesy movie moments,” I told my daughter. “You know, where the girl expectantly looks at the man, waiting for the kiss certain to come, only to have the moment somehow interrupted and the kiss put on hold. Instead of kissing me, your dad just grinned and set me back on my feet. But at least he didn't dump me in the creek!”

She laughed that I compared our story with a movie scenario, but the questions continued, and the telling did, too. When I shared about the first kiss that eventually did come about, she giggled with me over the mention that I actually heard fireworks when we kissed. True story. Which maybe loses a bit of its aura when you realize our first kiss occurred on the Fourth of July with fireworks going off in the distance. But still, it was pretty romantic. And for those of you who know Jon and me, well, suffice it to say, “romantic” is not a word that would be readily used to describe either of us. I'll take what I can get.

Perhaps the sweetest thing about our conversation was to see my daughter's face as she reaffirmed my story with the words, “That's what Dad said, too!”

Unbeknownst to me, she had apparently been grilling my husband for the same details the previous evening. I'm glad to know our stories corroborated. Although, she was a bit baffled that her Mom and Dad's love was not one of initial attraction, but rather, a love that grew over several months from a shared friendship. Still, she can't help but see its lasting truth. After more than thirty-two years of marriage, the love story continues to unfold.

And something heartwarming happened that day in the telling of it — our daughter was brought into it with us.

It's important to share your story and to invite others to join in it with you.

In retelling our stories, we are reminded of truths that are sometimes ignored or overlooked, or altogether neglected by the confines of day-to-day living. Sometimes love can get buried beneath the mundane and the duties. Sometimes the miraculous can seem dulled by the ordinariness of it all.

In the retelling of our stories, we get the opportunity to relive them in our minds and to experience the wonder all over again. And those who are listening get to experience it with us.

Psalm 107:1-3 encourages us to speak out the great things God has done as we retell the story of our redemption:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story – those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south. (NIV)¹⁴

Our stories matter because they are God's stories. The pages of our lives are filled with wonders of Who He is and the great things He has done.

This life He has written gives breath to the gospel in human form — the truth of redemption revealed in finite life through the birth of infinite love. Those who are in Christ are the pages of an eternal story. A story of flesh and blood delivered by Divine Deity. Of hidden parts and broken parts, and sinful pieces, all being made new. Transformed by Spirit power.

Our stories bring the gospel of Jesus to life in real and tangible ways.

His love becomes more than just words. Or abstract theological debate.

It is salvation in real-time.

Our stories of deliverance are complete and yet ongoing. Delivered, and delivering still. Drawn and continuing to be gathered from the four corners of the earth and grafted into one body. The body of Christ. An epic filled with tales of life after life redeemed, saved to bring life to others through the telling of their redemption.

This is why our stories are to be shared — **to bring life.**

To remind others of an unfailing love reaching beyond human concept to touch the hearts of men.

Our stories matter because they are His stories.

Stories to be treasured.

Stories to be passed from generation after generation to show that *love lasts.*

From memories of yesteryear to the reality of today's trials, *love lasts.*

And in the eternal halls of a glorious Kingdom that will be without end, *love lasts.*

Has the Lord redeemed you?

Then tell your story.

FOR REFLECTION

How long has it been since you have shared a part of your story with others?

It could be a word of praise for answered prayer or a word of encouragement for how God is sustaining you even though you are still waiting for the answer.

It could be telling your children the love story of you and your spouse.

It could be making known the path of salvation to a coworker or friend.

It could be, well, anything you deem to be a part of who you are or who you are becoming by God's grace.

Tell someone a portion of your story today, and experience again the wonder of love that is a part of it all.

DECEMBER 18: THE REVEALING

The Word *with* God *was* God.
Abiding in a profound union,
So intricately entwined,
There could be no separation.
Everything was created through Him,
And reunited with Him
Through Him yet again.
A cycle of ceaseless, consuming grace
Gave light and brought life,
Unrelenting and unconquerable.

True Light
Giving light to all.
Stepping into His own creation,
He remained unrecognizable.
So far removed from His glory dwelling.
So far removed from man's expectations of the Divine.
Misunderstood.
Rejected
By the very hearts created
To beat in communion with His own.

BUT

To all who believed Him,
To those who saw Holy in a manger
And glory on a rugged cross,
He sealed with sonship.
Securing their inheritance as His children.
The gift of rebirth
Granted to eyes opened
By this Love Light.

The Word became flesh.
Incarnate confined to human skin,
Morphing Himself
Into the masterpiece He created.

Filling the canvas of temporal here
With the eternal presence
Of unfailing love
And faithfulness.
Revealing God *with us*.

From His abundance, beggars are filled.
The blind see.
The glory of the very countenance of I AM
Reflecting on this babe's face.
Revealing God
To all
Who believe.

FOR REFLECTION

Take a few moments to ponder the wonder of God coming to Earth in human flesh. Confining His godhead to the helplessness of an infant. Placing His care in the hands of a teenage mother and simple carpenter. It's hard to understand why He would choose such a manner for His divine arrival into our atmosphere, into our lives.

From nondescript birth to a horrific death and miraculous resurrection — none of it makes sense to finite understanding. And yet, the truth of it remains more than two thousand years after. And lives still.

Thank Jesus for coming into your world and showing you the meaning of true love. Then ask Him to help you embrace it and extend it, this Christmas and always.

DECEMBER 19: WITH A WINK AND A PROMISE

Jesus said, “Come with Me to a desert place,” . . . not sure about liking that invitation, but I am sure about being there to discover dry and desperate places. Places He will bring fresh springs to. Maybe this invite comes with a wink, and it feels more like . . . a promise. Advent.¹⁵

I couldn't help but smile when I read the above statement on a friend's Facebook timeline. My friend Mark is pastor of the Village Vineyard in Beaufort, SC, and is one of the most missions-minded folks I know. From someone with several friends of diverse nationalities who are missionaries the world over, that's a pretty high compliment I'm paying him. Although I've never personally seen his passport, I imagine its pages are filled with stamps from numerous countries, one of his favorites being Sudan.

If Tony Bennett can croon about leaving his heart in San Francisco, I surmise he can only be rivaled by Mark's southern drawl humming the same tune. Exchanging the favored place to South Sudan, of course. Every time Mark recounts a story from his visits there, his eyes light up brighter than the twinkling bulbs on a Christmas tree. So when he writes about a dry and desperate place, I can't help but wonder what particular corner of the world comes to mind for him personally. South Sudan may be filled with dry and desperate places, yet God continues to draw Mark there and to show His presence in some pretty miraculous ways.

Maybe that's why my friend can notice the subtle wink of His Savior and look with hope for springs sure to come, even in desert places. Because he knows when we accept the Lord's invitation to “Come with Me,” some pretty incredible things are guaranteed to happen.

My friend's gospel-writing namesake reminds us of a time Jesus invited His disciples to come away to a deserted place so they could rest awhile. In Mark 6:31, it seems Jesus and His buddies had been bombarded by so many people that they had no leisure time for even a bite to eat. The disciples had just returned from being sent out among the people where they had experienced God's power being unleashed through them with miraculous signs and wonders. They were most likely filled with excitement and exhaustion that accompanied preaching the gospel and pouring out their efforts in this new way. After all the hubbub, they were probably overwhelmed by the commotion of the crowds who followed Jesus wherever He traveled. Knowing they were close to burnout, Christ encourages His disciples to come away to a deserted place with Him so they could rest.

But, as the disciples were soon to learn, sometimes what we really need is not so much a place to rest but an opportunity to encounter the miraculous. One more time.

Instead of finding a quiet place to debrief with Jesus, they were met by yet another press of crowds. The masses had rightly predicted where the Savior and His boatload of friends were heading. In their desire to be near Jesus, the people ran along the shore and got there ahead of Him. When Jesus saw the vast crowd gathered to meet Him, He *had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So He began teaching them many things.* (Mark 6:34)

Ever-patient and always concerned with the welfare of others, Jesus pushes off His own desires while settling Himself among the people and teaching them Kingdom principles. We aren't told how the disciples responded to meeting up with the masses yet again, but eventually, they did address Jesus:

By now the hour was already late. So the disciples came to Jesus and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is already late. Dismiss the crowd so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But Jesus told them, "You give them something to eat."
— Mark 6:35-37a (BSB)¹⁶

While the disciples were more focused on their own exhaustion (and perhaps their rumbling stomachs, as well), Jesus remained intently focused upon others. He knew the people were hungry, both physically and spiritually. This was an opportunity to supply for both of those needs. When the disciples suggested sending the crowd away so they could obtain something to eat, Jesus had a better idea. One that would provide the chance for a miracle to reveal itself to the masses and on an individual level. His response? *You give them something to eat.*

Chances are the disciples looked and saw the insurmountable goal of feeding the masses. But Jesus looked to the Father and saw the inexhaustible resources available.

No needs arise unforeseen. No challenges lie beyond the reach of Jesus' power. And the invitation to be a part of the provision is extended still. It is for those who are willing to partner with the Lord in His endeavors to care for others.

But Jesus said, 'You feed them.'
'With what?' they asked. 'We'd have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!'
'How much bread do you have?' He asked. 'Go and find out.'

They came back and reported, 'We have five loaves of bread and two fish.'
— Mark 6:37-38

The disciples must have thought the five loaves and two fish to be absurdly insufficient for feeding the surrounding crowd. Yet, they returned to Jesus with their meager supply. Never expecting the increase of mammoth proportion awaiting, they simply yielded their small offering into the waiting hands of the Messiah.

To summarize the remainder of the story: Jesus received the loaves and fishes, gave thanks, and a blessing, before breaking the bread into pieces and dividing the fish. He instructed the people to sit in an orderly fashion, then placed the meal into the hands of His disciples to be distributed. The group of 5,000 men plus their families all ate until they were satisfied, and still, there were leftovers. Twelve baskets full of bread and fish, to be precise!

All of this to prove that 5 loaves + 2 fishes + JESUS > 5,000 rumbling stomachs.

"Come with Me to a desert place," . . . not sure about liking that invitation. . .

But maybe, just maybe . . .

*This invite comes with a wink, and it feels more like . . . a promise.
Advent.*

FOR REFLECTION

Sometimes the needs staring us in the face can feel as overwhelming as feeding a crowd of 5,000+ with a handful of bread and fish. Maybe you are facing such challenges today. Be it in relationships, providing spiritual or physical care for others, or literally attempting to place food on your own family's table. Life can take us to some pretty desperate places, but how we respond to God while we are there is key to our lives with Him. And to the results we will receive.

Are you willing to place your "five loaves and two fish" into His outstretched hands?

DECEMBER 20: THIS CHRISTMAS IS FOR YOU

In these final days before Christmas, it's easy to get caught up in the frenzy of all the last-minute preparations. There's baking to be finished, cleaning to be done, that one final gift to purchase, parties to attend . . . or maybe there isn't.

Instead of rushing about to plan and celebrate, you may be experiencing the crushing loneliness of the absence of all those things. Maybe your Christmas is silent.

There's a host of reasons why Christmas can seem anything but a joyous celebration of laughter and cheer. While goodwill toward men may still be in your heart, any number of events could have occurred which have caused it to be partnered alongside grief or anger. All one needs do is read the latest headlines to see that tragedy is still alive and well at Christmas time. There are places where peace on earth seems to have surrendered to chaos. Where joy has been crushed by sadness. Where the shadow of death hovers and the silence of a loved one's absence weighs heavy.

Maybe that place is within the four corners of your own home.

Christmas may seem a glaring reminder of the unfairness of it all. How can you celebrate togetherness when there is none? When everywhere you look seems just one more reason to shake your fist at heaven and ask the age-old question: "Why?"

I wish I had the answer for you, friend. I really do. But I can't explain away the hurt. I can't rationalize my way through your pain. I can only join you in your tears and pray for grace to carry you.

While celebrating Christmas may be extremely difficult for you to navigate this year, I can't help but think that Christmas is still for you because Christmas is for those who grieve.

Yes, you read that correctly: **Christmas is for those who grieve.**

Concerning the Messiah's coming, the prophet Isaiah foretold: *The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.*¹⁷

The darkness of grief cannot stand forever before the Light of the world shining into its midst.

The priest Zechariah also prophesied of the Lord's comfort concerning Christ's birth in Luke 1:78-79: *Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.*

Sometimes we neglect to remember that the Savior of the world was born into it.

The Messiah was birthed into an oppressive world at war, where babies are murdered and women are raped and men strike each other down in battle as power struggles carry on and on. He came to a grieving world. This was Jesus' present-day life. This is where He purposefully stepped into humanity.

But the King of kings did not come in royal garb with a strong arm to conquer and overthrow, at least not in the ways one might expect:

There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected — a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised and we did not care.

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins.

He was beaten so we could be whole.

He was whipped so we could be healed.

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.

We have left God's path to follow our own.

Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all . . .

But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him and cause him grief.

Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have many descendants.

He will enjoy a long life,

And the Lord's good plan will prosper in his hands.

When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied.

And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous,

For he will bear all their sins.

(from Isaiah 53:2-6,10-11)

The Divinity of heaven stepped into an unremarkable human form to be with us in the darkness and was hated for it. He swaddled Himself in our grief and hopelessness, shrouded His holiness with our shame, and bore all the penalty for our rebellion. Yet His

acts of kindness were despised. He was beaten and killed for crimes He didn't commit, all because He is deeply committed to us. Most of the world turned their backs as if His sacrifice was a small token instead of receiving it as the grand gesture of grace amazing.

If we stopped here in the story of the Messiah, hopelessness would have the upper hand. But as we read in Isaiah 53:11, that is not the end of God's story: *When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied.*

Though the amount of suffering endured by Jesus was astounding, He deemed the reward worth it. He considered your grief worth bearing. All because he deemed you worthy of His presence.

What will you do with this gracious gift?

I pray you will invite Jesus into your Christmas. That you will make room for the Savior alongside your grief. It's okay if it might be a bit crowded in there. He can still make Himself at home because, after all, He and sorrow are familiar with each other. And in the end, you may just find that grief moves over to allow space for Jesus to get more comfortable. Even if it takes a little longer than you'd like. Our Lord is patient, and He can settle down in cramped places for a season until He can stretch out more cozily.

I hope this Christmas you make plans for a special visitor.
Even in the silence.
Even with the tears.

Prepare a room for the Savior to come, and invite Him to stay for an extended visit.

After all, this Christmas is for you.

FOR REFLECTION

If this Christmas season finds you in a difficult place, try something new. Instead of going with the same traditions, do a different thing. Invite someone to join you who may have experienced their own share of hardships this year. Or, if your community is involved in service projects for others, try getting involved in a special outreach. Most importantly, be sure to invite the presence of the Christ Child to take center stage in your heart. Even if He has to share it alongside grief.

DECEMBER 21: THE WITNESS OF WITHNESS

Presence is what makes a relationship.

God seems to get that. In fact, it's the very reason Jesus was sent to Earth. Born of an unwed, virgin teenager, He came to the lowliest of men so that every person, from every station in life, would have the opportunity to have a relationship with Him.

In Matthew 1:23, Jesus was fittingly christened Immanuel -- which means, God with us. Divine nature uniting with human nature. Salvation coming to Earth at the mere mercy of God alone. Through the precious gift of His Son. Redemption is found at the foot of a bloody cross, and an intimate relationship is offered with the rending of the temple's veil at the fingertips of the Almighty.

Immanuel came to show us the goodness of our Father and to bring freedom to captives. Freedom grounded in justice, mercy, and humble adoration of the One who teaches us the meaning of them all.

Micah 6:8 states: *He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* (BSB) ¹⁸

While this thought implies a helpful directive, without the final three words, I can't help but think we are missing the fullness of its true exhortation. And perhaps, along with the missing words, we are missing out on the only way to fully live the suggested actions, as well.

With your God.

It's those three small words in Micah 6:8 that pack a punch — the gift of our presence offered back to the Giver of Life.

The action God requires of us is not paying for the pardon of our sin. That was already signed, sealed, and delivered by Jesus' blood dripping down Calvary's cross. Instead, He asks for the gift of love itself. A gift that cannot be conjured by mere human effort but naturally emits from having a relationship with our Savior. It is a love produced as we offer our very lives into His keeping, committed to walking with God. Embracing His character and exemplifying justice, mercy, and humble thanksgiving.

John 1:14 tells us the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

Jesus Christ.

Immanuel — God with us.

God in us — uniting us by the power of His Holy Spirit.

Inviting us into the holiest relationship between God and man imaginable.

As we walk the course of our lives, let's not forget to include those final three words of Micah 6:8.

Act justly *with your God*.

Love mercy *with your God*.

And walk humbly *with your God*.

This Christmas, may we wrap our hearts around the presence of Immanuel and offer our own in return.

After all, presence is what makes a relationship.

FOR REFLECTION

Are there areas in your life you find yourself withholding from God?

Are there people to whom you are tempted to deny justice or mercy?

Today would be a perfect day to humbly admit those struggles and to take them before the throne of grace. God is so utterly in love with you, my friend, and He wants to release you to walk in the fullness of His love — with Him and toward others.

Ask Him to intervene on your behalf. You will find He is gracious enough to do so.

DECEMBER 22: UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE: CELEBRATE!

My friend Gary works at a well-known missions organization in Virginia. Daily, he is bombarded with email after email from devoted workers all over Africa requesting help to bring the hope of Jesus to the Dark Continent. Many of these emails are filled with heart-wrenching stories. Desperate pleas from brave men and women crying out on behalf of their people. The need for resources like water and food are as common as the plea for assistance with travels. Or monthly support for a missionary who is committed to taking the hope of salvation into bleak and often dangerous places.

Sometimes the responsibility of making decisions concerning so many people sits heavily upon my friend's shoulders. I see it in his countenance and hear it in his voice as he realizes he cannot possibly help every person who contacts him. There simply are not enough funds to go around, and the duty of picking and choosing how and to whom he can respond can sometimes make his tasks seem less than joyful. I daresay such is the case for most of Gary's coworkers, too.

Noticing the atmosphere around the office had grown a bit solemn, my friend decided to bring a little joy into their midst. One particular day, he bought a cake, then called everyone to join him in a meeting. A consistent thing about missions organizations is their penchant for hosting a myriad of meetings, so it was just natural for folks to make their way to Gary's gathering. I can only envision the puzzled looks from coworkers as my friend stood there smiling and passing out platefuls of cake — no other reason than a call for celebration.

This simple act of joy invited others to join in the festivities. Loads were lightened. Responsibilities eased as each person was reminded of the real reason they served. God's goodness and grace had invaded their lives and called them to share it with others. No matter the number of needs surrounding them daily. The One who bears them all was still very much present and very much deserving of being celebrated.

Luke 2:25-33 tells of a man who was given a similar invitation to celebrate. But in his case, the privilege of experiencing Jesus' presence was particularly unique:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what was customary under the Law, Simeon took Him in his arms and blessed God, saying:

*‘Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You now dismiss Your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel.’
The Child’s father and mother were amazed at what was spoken about Him. (BSB)¹⁹*

Joy showed up in the middle of an ordinary day, and Simeon was ready to embrace it. Year after year had passed, one seemingly uneventful day unfolding upon another until the Consolation of Israel appeared and was literally within his grasp. Can you imagine the joy Simeon experienced in knowing the fulfillment of God’s long-awaited promise was enfolded in his aged arms? Oh, Simeon’s strength may have waned with the passing of years, but his muscles were still firm enough to cradle their Creator. His arms remained stalwart in their ability to lift in holy wonder and praise the One who was the fulfillment of all promises, the fullness of all joy.

Despite the passing of time, the promise of consolation remains present. We would do well to remember that a call for celebration is always in order. Yet the sad reality is that we sometimes forget. If Christians who work in full-time ministry can overlook the reason they do what they do, then those of us who are working in secular jobs can, as well. It would seem a little shaking is needed to broaden our vision beyond the chaos swirling in our own lives. No matter where we live or work.

Sometimes what we really need is just a piece of cake and an invitation to come and celebrate anew the One who is the fulfillment of our joy. To look again toward Bethlehem’s glow and realize the miraculous occurring all around us still — these incredible gifts of redemption and hope and freedom flung lavishly from Divine hand. This is the reality of the world in which we live.

A world drenched in God, even though it is once again a world in waiting.

We would be wise to blow off the smokescreen of lies laid down by Satan and embrace our consolation. To remind ourselves and each other that the God of angel armies is not just behind the scenes but front and center in this battle to bring joy and peace and goodwill to all people. He will reign victorious, and all the earth will see Him and bow before Him.

But in the meantime, we need to live in full remembrance of this truth. While we wait, let’s not forget that Light has come, and life is ours — to have and to live to the uttermost.

As Tullian Tchividjian writes in his book, *Surprised By Grace: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels: The gospel doesn't make bad people good; it makes dead people alive. That's the difference between the gospel of Jesus Christ and every other world religion.*

If you are in Christ Jesus, then you are a dead man made alive. No longer bound to sin. No longer set to perish in the grave. You are made ALIVE in Christ Jesus, the Messiah.²⁰

Talk about a reason to celebrate!

If the place you're working or dwelling seems a bit devoid of joy, I encourage you to buy a cake and break out the party hats. After all, the world desperately needs a few more people who celebrate, not just at Christmas, but every day of the year.

It's time to write those party invitations and join with the shepherds who crowded around the manger of old.

It's time to worship both the newborn and the coming King as you tell everyone the good news of joy fulfilled.

In short, it's time to celebrate!

FOR REFLECTION

Are you the type of person to bring in a cake for a crowd, or are you more likely to avoid the invite altogether?

How often do you really celebrate the goodness of a faithful God?

If you are a Christian, then every day should be a party in your heart that overflows to the world around you. May you rise up with the likes of Simeon and cradle the gift of consolation and joy that is at your fingertips. Jesus has come, my friend, and He is coming still.

Are you willing to celebrate through the waiting?

DECEMBER 23: 'NUFF SAID

*Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son.
— Hebrews 1:1-2a*

The incarnation of Jesus is the perfect completion of God's syntax. No other words need to be spoken once the Word comes on the scene.

If you find yourself longing to "hear from God," perhaps the best place to listen is through the gospel pages recording Jesus' life. True to Hebrews 1:3: *The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God.*

When we read how Jesus initiated and sustained relationships with mankind, we clearly see God's will for us. How Jesus lived portrays the heart of the Father and summarizes God's desire for all of humanity, from start to finish. God put on flesh so we could be clothed with the Divine. His Word became embodied in human form to show us the way to righteousness. No longer slaves to keeping every jot and tittle of the Law in our pursuit of all things holy, now wholly released into a new and living way. One that begins and ends and continues for eternity by embracing a living, breathing Savior.

Every written word in the New Testament centers around Jesus Christ — the beginning and the end of God's redemption for the whole of creation.

If you are looking for love, purpose, direction, encouragement . . . all of these are embodied in Immanuel. God with us to show us the way to Him. In this divine blend of power and love, we experience the unification of grace and justice as only God can offer it. Through Jesus' outstretched hands, we are issued the invitation to live with ever-present hope. Free for the taking to all who will turn from their wayward lives to believe and receive it.

To live and to move in the power and love of Jesus Christ is no small thing, but it is something God asks of us. In Jesus' first words recorded in Mark, He announces: *The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!*²¹

Jesus steps into the world and makes His mission clear. His call is one of repentance and belief. The whole of the Gospel comes together here. Maybe it's not as difficult as we imagine it to be. Maybe there's not a long list of requirements to step into the way of

grace and fulfill your purpose in life, after all. Perhaps what is really needed is to stop overthinking and to return to the simplicity of Jesus.

Maybe the time promised by God has come for you at last, and your real purpose is to simply take note of His entrance.

Will you turn your heart to heaven and hear the angels announce His coming?

The Kingdom of God is near, indeed, my friend. For you see, the kingdom of God is in your midst.

God has already spoken.

He has given Jesus to a dying world, so death could be overcome once and for all. So you and I could live in the abundance of life breathed and sustained by Him.

What else is there to say?

FOR REFLECTION

As Christmas dawns upon us and draws another year to a close, do you find yourself dissatisfied by the last 365 pages turned in your life?

Are you tempted to overthink your purpose or long for something grand instead of seeing each ordinary moment as an opportunity for the miraculous?

Maybe it's time to center your thoughts once more upon Jesus, to take an in-depth look at the gospels portraying His coming and His living among mankind.

What is God asking you to do? Perhaps He is merely asking you to join with His first disciples and "repent and believe," then step by step continue to follow Him.

Will you accept His invitation?

DECEMBER 24: MEANT FOR BETTER THINGS

But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises. . . .

*But this is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.
— Hebrews 8:6,10*

This is the main point of Christmas: Jesus has come to Earth to make a better way.

A High Priest, descended from heaven's throne, came to initiate and bring to completion a perfect and eternal covenant with imperfect and mortal men.

The Messiah has come to shine the very face of God upon a people bound in darkness. Immanuel — God with us — bending low to show compassion to a people gone astray. Love reaching beyond the grasp of death to birth life into all of creation. Placing His holiness into the minds and hearts of all who will believe.

This is the gift of Christmas.

I am so very grateful Jesus chose to come as He did. In simple arrival to the simplest of men. Granting access to His presence from the very beginning. Conceived in a humble womb and birthed in a lowly stable. Welcoming shepherds and kings alike. Inviting all to come and see the marvelous gift given at God's hand. Completing a new and better covenant that is for all people — if only we will believe.

And with that belief, the miraculous gift continues:

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. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. — 2 Corinthians 4:6-7

This miraculous secret unveiled is Christ living in you.

Immanuel places the fullness of His presence in fragile, earthen vessels. Choosing to confine His glory to flesh so He can unleash that glory within us. His light shines in our

hearts. He places His ways upon our minds and gives us the power to move in His grace. Enabling us to withstand and overcome because He is alive and active in us.

This is our legacy.

This is the gift of Christmas come — the promise of better things. Marvelous things beyond our comprehension, yet still within our reach.

All because Jesus stepped into our world to make it so.

FOR REFLECTION

It's easy to get caught up in the flurry of the Christmas holidays without much thought toward the very One we celebrate. But I hope this journey through Advent has been an initiative to stir you toward remembrance and praise of the Messiah come. May you rejoice today in the gift of Immanuel — God with you. A Savior who comes to give you hope and a future and a life of better things.

Despite the challenges you may face each day, you have a High Priest committed to keeping His covenant with you. May you, in turn, pledge yourself to keep it with Him.

DECEMBER 25: WITHOUT END

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . .²²
In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. . . .²³*

*The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the
glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . .²⁴*

Jesus came in the form of a babe. He grew and lived and loved among us as a man, declaring the grace and truth of the Father, the very Lord of all creation. And in His presence here with us, He asserted: *I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*²⁵

Belief in that one statement births the most miraculous of gifts — the gift of salvation into the very body of Christ. United as one with the King of kings. The incredible presence of Christ within us, come to stay. Forever.

*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God— children born not of blood, nor of the desire or will of man, but born of God.
— John 1:11-13 (BSB)²⁶*

The presence of Immanuel — God with us — is precisely that.

God with us.

If you have joined me on this journey through Advent, I thank you for doing so, and I hope you have somehow been encouraged by at least a portion of the words you've read throughout the past twenty-five days. When I started this journey, I was nervous. Each day has been a step of faith for me as I came empty-handed before God and asked Him to meet me here. Maybe that is the very reason God urged me to write these devotional thoughts in the first place. So He could remind me of His faithfulness in not only coming to Earth through Jesus in human form but so I would see Him coming to me still. Throughout the writing of this devotional, He again showed Himself as Immanuel — God with me.

Each day I found Him here reminding me of the privilege of His presence. An honor I too often neglect, which is why celebrating Advent in this way has been so special for me. I've traveled the worn path to Bethlehem's stable again and again throughout these last few weeks. And I've allowed myself to experience anew the wonder of the Word made

flesh for me. Following the angels' greeting from the manger to the cross, I've accepted the invitation to come and drink freely from the well pouring forth from Savior's reserves. He is so very gracious and kind in sharing with the likes of me.

I hope you have found Him, too. In your day to day tasks, and in the season's rush toward Christmas, I pray you have made your way to His manger. That you have opened your eyes and your heart to experience this miraculous gift of Christ come to you. And I hope we both continue to do so. That we stay close to Savior's side and linger long in His presence, not taking our rights to His kingdom for granted.

I hope we will look to Him each day for our "daily bread" as we gain nourishment from the Bread of Life Himself. I pray we will remember this incredible secret of Christ in us and truly experience the hope of the glory He brings to each moment of every day. And I hope we will always be thankful for His coming and that we'll continue to look for it.

To look for Him.

May we long for the One who was, long before all time began. The One in whom all of creation was made and is holding together. The One who is with us here in the messy and the mundane of everyday life. The One who will come again to make all things new and regenerate a heaven and earth in which we will live with Him forever.

I hope we will always remember to never forget.

That we will fix our gaze solidly upon Jesus — the One who humbled Himself, taking on the form of a human man and submitting to an agonizing death on the cross for you and me. This Jesus is the King of all the earth, but He emptied Himself for us. Becoming a servant to make His enemies friends with God. He gave up His divine privileges for the privilege of calling us His beloved. He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might be called the children of God.

And that is what we are . . . all because of Who He is.

Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place, and gave Him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. — Philippians 2:9-10 (BSB) ²⁷

Christmas came more than two thousand years ago, but Christmas still comes every day in our hearts. The gift of Immanuel is here to stay. The Word who became flesh and dwelt

among us still lives within us now. And one day, Jesus will again return to Jerusalem to stand upon its heights and make Himself known once more.

When that day comes, every eye will see His glory and know that He is Lord.

*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. . . .
The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Let the one who hears say, 'Come!' And let the one
who is thirsty come, and the one who desires the water of life drink freely. . . .*

He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'

— Revelation 22:13,17,20 (BSB)²⁸

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

May the gift of Christmas be yours today and all year through!

FOR REFLECTION

Wherever today's Christmas finds you, be it surrounded by loved ones or grieving their absence. Whether gifts are overflowing or your home remains empty of all packages and bows. Whether your halls are decked with holly or devoid of the traditional decor, I pray your heart overflows with the love of Jesus.

Take time this day to remember the One who truly is the reason for this season of goodwill toward men. No matter your present circumstances, I pray you will find space in your heart to make room for Immanuel's presence. He has come, is here in this moment, and is coming again to set all things right. For eternity. May you cling to that hope today and find Him here — in a heart made ready to receive its King.

THE DAY AFTER: MORE THAN AN INTERVAL

Emmanuel did not come to be with us simply to create an interval where we could catch our breath before returning to the ordinary. Majesty did not don the robes of humanity to give us a change of scenery, a break from the usual pace. No, He has come to interrupt our existence. He has come to restore what was lost. He has come to transform the familiar into mystery and wonder. He has come to make all things new. This sacred pause is a catapult into uncharted territory, where the Divine collides with your story and redirects your path. You have permission to begin again.

— from *Why Shouldn't I Begin Again*, a blog post by Adela Just²⁹

As securely as the bows and tinsel are packed away with the ribbons and lights, so, too, is the Christmas spirit, which was just recently merry and bright. Marked down and sold at discount prices, there are barely any reminders of the red, green, and gold decking the aisles of department stores. Treasured ornaments are tucked away in closets. Lights are dimmed and carefully wrapped before being cloistered away in some box marked *fragile* as all signs of Christmas are removed from our dwellings.

Christmas is, after all, merely a short reprieve from life as usual.

But that is never the way God intended for Christmas to be. The birth of Glory among the souls of mankind was to be much more than a story read once and put away until the following year. Majesty did not don robes of humanity to simply come for a visit. Immanuel did not merely drop by for a short stay in the manger. He came to take up permanent residence within our lives.

To transform the fake and temporary with the authentic and eternal. For keeps.

The Light of the World has come to banish the darkness with the dawning of grace and truth. Much more than a string of lights brightening the boughs of an evergreen. He has come to make all things new. To breathe life into the barren and silent womb. To bring joy in the place of mourning and sadness. To give peace that nestles into the souls of men and never leaves.

He has come to be with us — right here in this mess of hurt and pain that we call humanity — and He plans to stay until all is made right.

Until you and I are made right.

No matter if we may think the task impossible.

After all, impossible is merely an invitation for the Holy to come and declare Himself as
Lord of all.
Lord of us.
Miracle-worker.
Soul-shaper.
Healer and Restorer.
Author and Finisher of lives.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:2 (BSB)³⁰

FOR REFLECTION

What will it require for you to invite Christ to collide with your story and redirect your path, to transform the pages of your heart and fill them with mystery and wonder?

In short, what will it take for you to allow the Spirit of Christmas to come and remain so you can celebrate all year long?

Don't let this season of Advent pass over you without breathing deeply into your soul and reviving your spirit. Let it collide with your story in the days and months ahead and redirect your path to wander to manger entrance time and again. And be awestruck with the wonder of it all.

The gift of Jesus is a package meant to be opened every day of the year. The Light of the World has come to scatter the darkness. To reflect from your eyes and move through your hands. Why not let Him?

NOTES

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Introduction

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Day 3: At the Fullness of Time

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Day 4: Reopening the Gift of Grace

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Day 6: Where Spirit and Dust Collide

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Day 9: Grace As a Way of Life

6. *Find a Little Grace* Songwriters: Jim Weatherly/Bob Welch © Cigar Music, Bright Leaf Music

7. Ephesians 2:8-10, The Berean Bible (www.Berean.Bible) [Berean Study Bible \(BSB\)](#) © 2016, 2020 by [Bible Hub](#) and [Berean.Bible](#). Used by Permission. All rights Reserved.

Day 10: His Name Shall Be

8. *His Name Shall Be*, Verses adapted from Frances Havergal hymn "Now Let Us Sing The Angels' Song" Written by: Jonas Myrin, Matt Redman Copyright© 2016 Said And Done Music/sixsteps Music/Thankyou Music/worshiptogether.com songs & Capitol CMG Paragon & Son of the Lion.

Day 11: The Shunning of Christ

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Day 12: The Shunning Continues

10. Revelation 3:20, The Berean Bible (www.Berean.Bible) [Berean Study Bible \(BSB\)](#) © 2016, 2020 by [Bible Hub](#) and [Berean.Bible](#). Used by Permission. All rights Reserved.

Day 13: The Good News Is . . .

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Day 14: Come and See

12. 1 Corinthians 1:30, Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](#)® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Day 15: The War on Christmas

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Day 17: Sharing Our Stories

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Day 19: With A Wink and a Promise

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Day 20: This Christmas is for You

17: Isaiah 9:2

Day 21: The Witness of Witness

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Day 22: Until Further Notice: Celebrate!

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Day 23: 'Nuff Said

21. Mark 1:15

Day 25: Without End

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The Day After: More Than an Interval

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