

# *Advent Devotions*

November 27 – December 31, 2011



*Written by the members of:*

## Heritage Baptist Church

A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS, EVERY MEMBER A MINISTER

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## *Introduction*

In your hands you hold the first gift of Christmas. Unwrap the cover, and inside you will discover a collection of stories and reflections from members of your church family. Their words will guide you to Bethlehem, where with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the animals of the stall, you may behold the greatest of mysteries—“the Word became flesh, and lived among us” (John 1:14).

I invite you to journey toward Bethlehem with this book in hand. Each day we’ll be guided by a scripture reading and a reflection written by someone in the Heritage family of faith. The readings come from the “Common Lectionary,” a series of scripture readings shared by Christians around the world.

At times, the text for the day may not sound “Christmasy.” But that’s the point. Advent asks the followers of Jesus to run counter to our culture by getting our hearts ready for the coming of Christ, not just the celebration of Christmas.

That is, after all, the purpose of Advent, which is a Latin word meaning “coming.” Christians have used the four weeks leading up to Christmas as a season of preparation for receiving Christ, a way of clearing out the obstacles of heart and mind which would prevent us from receiving “the one born king of the Jews”—and the One who shall return as King of kings and Lord of lords.

During Advent, we actually reflect on three “comings”—the coming of Christ into the world at Bethlehem; the coming of Christ into our hearts; and, finally, the second coming of the Sovereign Christ to reign over all. The readings will push us to reflect on both the beginning and the end of time, and to know the One who holds all the time in between the beginning and the end.

At times, the Advent readings will sound jarring or strident. They will challenge us and make us uncomfortable, as when the fiery John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness to “prepare the way of the Lord” or when Jesus scolds the Pharisees for their arrogance and pride. At other times, the readings may tug at our hearts as they stir our longing for God’s grace in our lives and in our world.

Throughout the month, we will ponder the four central themes of the coming of Christ: hope, peace, joy and love. As you reflect on the texts, ask yourself how they speak to you about God’s desire to be “born” in your life.

You may wish to read the lesson and devotional more than once each day. Start your day with a reading and allow the text to linger in the back of your mind throughout the day. Use it to stir your senses to look for signs of

God’s “coming” into your everyday routine. Re-read a lesson at mid-day, or return to it as the last thought for your day.

Allow the words to heighten your awareness of God’s desire to share in your life. Let the words rouse you and cause you to be attentive and fully awake to the mystery of God’s love. Take Jesus’ words to heart: “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!” (Mark 13:3-37).

May the words of scripture, and the reflections of this book, sharpen your sense of expectancy, and awaken you to the surprising and hopeful thing God is doing in our world. For even in our world, in our time, God announces, “I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth! Do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). May this promise fill your hearts and minds with hope.



*Michael R. Tutterow*  
*Advent, 2011*

Please note that throughout this guide you will see information about Advent sermons and events during this season, as shown below.

**Advent series: “A Christmas Carol”**

*November 27–December 24*

Music is at the heart of the Christmas season. From classical to pop, music conveys our deepest longings and hopes for this holy season. During the Sundays leading up to Christmas, we’ll tune our ears to hear the sounds of Christmas, from the plaintive tones of a prophet’s yearning to the joy of a newborn’s cry. We may even find ourselves joining the chorus of heaven in announcing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”

**Advent Series Message:**  
**“All I Want for Christmas Is...God!”**

*Sunday, November 27*

’Tis the season for making wishes and writing lists. But chances are, the things we really want for Christmas won’t be found in a mall. Hope. Peace. Joy. Love. These seem in short supply right now, making us all the more desperate for them. We live in a time much like Jesus described where all the things we counted on are falling apart. And with the prophet Isaiah, we find ourselves praying: “O that You would tear open the heavens and come down.” Advent invites us to yearn for God to set things aright again, to ache for the presence of God and God alone. Perhaps we will discover that God has not abandoned us, but is simply waiting for an invitation from us.

*Sunday, November 27*

Luke 21:5–19

I first learned about faith in a house that was old when my dad first bought it. Growing up, that house was the center of the universe. My family life orbited around that house like so many Boone-comets. I thought it would be around forever.

I guess the disciples had a similar sense about the temple. It was the center of their faith life. It was magnificent and imposing and stone. It would surely stand until the end of time.

But Jesus knew the truth of it. And a few decades later, the temple was destroyed. Further, he predicted wars and deception, persecution and disaster, betrayal and death. These are not exactly the most comforting passages in scripture. Yet in the middle of all this, Jesus says “Don’t worry.”

Now, it would have to be a pretty radical perspective to life that leads to not worrying in the midst of all that. I mean, I sometimes worry about traffic.

“For I will give you words and wisdom ... not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life.” (Luke 21:15, 18, 19 NIV)

I recently saw some photos of our old homestead and was shocked by its age and how different it looked. The past thirty-some years clearly hadn’t been gentle with it. Like the temple, our old house—where we learned about faith—is passing away.

After all, it’s not the buildings that stand the test of time; it’s the faith.

—*Ted Boone*

## ***Monday, November 28***

Matthew 21:1–11

In these verses, Jesus, who was involved with the creation of the world and every living thing in it, deliberately chooses a donkey. A donkey, “a poor man’s horse,” will carry him on a triumphant entrance into the city.

When I was in high school and wanted to make a triumphant entry to my prom, I wanted this beautiful taffeta gown (it was the 80’s!). My family was typical lower middle class and that dress cost more than a month of groceries for my entire family. Needless to say, my mother spent countless hours making the “poor man’s” version of that dress by hand. Unlike Jesus, I would not have sought it out and chosen it if I had the countless options Jesus had.

This verse speaks volumes to me about life and humility. While Jesus is riding the donkey, the people of the town gather together and celebrate by shouting praise and throwing their coats and palm leaves down for him to tread on. It wouldn’t have been any grander had it been a valiant white steed. Do you think for a second that donkey thought all those cheers were for him? He was just the poor man’s horse doing the job of a steed and was probably grateful for the opportunity. Do you think the white steed would have thought the same?

If I had gotten and worn that expensive dress, would the evening have been more grand or would I have had a better time? Of course not! It is an important lesson for us all that our worth is not defined by the cars we drive or the clothes we wear. I celebrated many things that night so many years ago: not only my prom, but the sacrifice of time a loving mother expended, and last but not least, I celebrated the fact that I was beautiful in that poor man’s dress!

Questions to ask yourself: Would I have rather been a donkey or a steed on that fateful day? When I am given a donkey and I wanted a steed, how do I react? What matters to God is our journey with him and our heart and attitude along the way. He doesn’t care how we get there, after all he made the donkey and the steed.

—*Karen Boone*

## ***Tuesday, November 29***

Matthew 21:12–22

Anger, jealousy, intrigue, violence. Is this an episode of a current reality TV show? Nope. It’s a day in the life of Jesus, specifically a day in what we call Holy Week, when He cleanses the temple of money-changers. Wait a minute— isn’t this Advent, not Lent? Why are we talking about the last week of Jesus’ life? Aren’t we preparing for His birth in Bethlehem? These questions sent me to Michael for an Advent tutorial.

I was reminded that Advent is not just about the first coming of Jesus, as a baby, but also the second coming of Jesus. This, of course, begs the question, “Will we be as mistaken about His identity this time as they were before?” In addition, the first week of Advent focuses on some apocalyptic ideas. Jesus tells of the end of things as they have been and the beginning of the new way of life. As you can see, this is far more than a “little baby in a manger” story.

So let’s talk about the symbolism in cleaning out the temple. I hate cleaning! It is so frustrating because about half way through the process, it’s a bigger mess than when I started. It’s a huge temptation to just put it back and pretend like it’s okay the way it was. But if I persevere, it is better in the end. Kind of like cleaning up or out our lives. It’s hard to stay the course and easy to pretend that it’s okay the way it is. But when we persevere and follow God’s teaching, what a marvelous new life we have. In short, we must give up the old if we want the new.

That’s not the end of this segment. Next, Jesus goes to Bethany and withers the fig tree to the amazement of His disciples. Since I’m worse at gardening than I am at cleaning, I’m going to skip the analysis of this action and concentrate on what Jesus says about the power. You can do this too if you have faith, and no doubt.

May we have faith and no doubt that Jesus Christ is who He says He is.

May we have faith and no doubt that preparing our hearts and minds for Christmas is a priority.

May we have faith and no doubt that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

One of my favorite scriptures is Luke 2:19. “And Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart.” She knew from the very first what the end would be. Another way that Advent directs us to Easter. May we be receptive to both.

—*Kaye Compton*

***Wednesday, November 30***

Matthew 21:23–32

### **The Authority of Jesus Questioned**

The chief priests and elders of the people came to Jesus and asked him, “By what Authority are you doing these things. And who gave you this authority?” Once again they missed it. They were so concerned with their reputations and how they looked to others that they missed seeing God in the flesh. It was all about them and how they looked in front of the people.

Many people still ask those same questions today, but in different ways to try and justify in their own minds their personal status or actions. Jesus is right here with us and we miss it. I miss it so many times myself. I get so

caught up in how others see me that I miss seeing God. I miss opportunities to see Jesus. From the beginning of the Bible to the end God simply wants to have a deep and personal relationship with us.

I know Jesus wants us to do what is right and holy and good. But if we are being honest, we can't. At least I can't. Yes, sometimes we do the right thing and yes sometimes we do what is good. But if we focus on what we do and who we are we miss seeing Him and we miss out on our relationship with Him.

Yes, Jesus could have played the "I AM" card if he wanted to. He could have said "The Father and I are one." But he didn't. He could have even done a great miracle right there. But he didn't. Instead, he tells them a story about a relationship. A relationship between a father and his sons.

That story is about us. It's about me. There are times when I tell God I will do something that He has asked of me and I end up not doing it. Like loving people or being kind. This happens a lot. Then there are those moments when I am moved by the Spirit and I fight against the flesh and I hear God's voice and I do what He has asked of me. I do it not because I feel obligated or commanded to, but because God is in me. My Father and I are talking and listening and sharing. Just like Jesus and his Father did. Those are good moments.

—*Scott Bonk*

## ***Thursday, December 1***

Matthew 21:33–46

### **The Parable of the Evil Tenants**

In this parable, Jesus is using some familiar imagery to illustrate a spiritual truth. The vineyard owner (God) sends his servants (prophets) to get the harvest from the tenants (religious leaders).

Instead of delivering the harvest, the tenants mistreat the servants by beating, killing or stoning them! The vineyard owner sends a second group of servants thereby giving the tenants a second chance.

The result, however, was the same as the first time. The vineyard owner then sends his Son hoping that he would get more respect from the tenants. The Son also is killed by the them!

The people listening to the parable were sure that the vineyard owner would seek retribution from the current tenants and then find new tenants who would be honorable. Jesus made it clear that God has enduring patience but that at some point, He will give the Kingdom of God to a people who will produce fruit. The religious leaders of the day knew that Jesus was speaking to them and sought ways to get rid of Him. The leaders back then felt that they were born into this status and that it could not be taken from them. Let us not take for granted our place in the Kingdom either!

We must not fall into the trap of believing that just because we live in “Christian” America, or that we go to church because our parents taught us to, that we are immune from having to be accountable to God for our own hearts. God is patient with us but we must never take our salvation for granted. During this Advent season, let us rejoice in the coming of the Christ-Child and renew our thankfulness that God shared his wisdom and truths through Jesus.

*Prayer:* Dear God, trust us with your harvest by teaching us how to share your love with others. Help us to be faithful servants and to remember that we are to be accountable to you for what is really in our hearts! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

—*Carla Branch*

## ***Friday, December 2***

Matthew 22:1–14

### **Preparing for the Advent Banquet**

This scripture tells the parable of the wedding banquet. In our passage, it is clear that the king is inviting the rich and powerful of the land to join him at the banquet to celebrate. He commands his servants to kill the fattened calves and oxen, which suggests this is the best-of-the-best party. In the end, however, those invited reject his invitation and attend to their other “business.” This enrages the king, and he sends out his troops and servants to destroy their city and invite others who will be thankful to attend the banquet (most likely the poor and lame). In the end, though, even those who show up are deemed unworthy. The king is displeased by one of the attendant’s wardrobe and has him thrown out where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is a story of anticipation and judgment. When we think of Christmas we generally think of anticipation, but rarely do we think of judgment. After all, Christmas is a time of anticipation and excitement. We look forward to spending time with family and friends. We long to share and receive presents. And we also anticipate the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. But rarely do we think of judgment when we think of Christmas.

This Christmas season, however, perhaps we should consider what aspects of judgment appear in Advent. In our anticipation we are also preparing. We are not simply waiting around, biding our time until Jesus appears. Rather, we are disciplining ourselves, holding ourselves accountable for the coming our Lord. Much like the King in this passage, Jesus prepares a feast for us and invites us to join him to celebrate the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Yet, the question is not if we will be ready, but will we attend? Will we have the courage to take up Jesus' offer to leave all behind and follow him to the table? In order to take up the offer of Jesus, we must prepare and not simply anticipate. It is not enough to appreciate the invitation; we must accept the invitation.

This Christmas, as you anticipate the coming our Lord Jesus Christ, remember that the call of Advent is also the call to prepare. It is the call to look inward and remember that we are guests at the table. Everything is prepared; everything is in place for the celebration. Are we willing to show up and give ourselves in adoration to Jesus? Or, do we have other business to attend to? Indeed, many are called, but few are chosen. May we find ourselves among the chosen this Christmas season.

—*Britt Hester*

### ***Saturday, December 3***

Matthew 22:15–22

#### **Paying Taxes to Caesar**

In this passage the Pharisees seek to “entangle” Jesus by having others pose a question about taxes. First they flatter him, but Jesus sees through the false praise immediately and calls them hypocrites. He asks to see a coin, and confirming Caesar's image on it, says, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

The most common interpretation of this passage emphasizes how Jesus used an evasive answer to avoid disloyalty to the empire and the wrath of nationalistic Jews who did not think taxes should be paid. By not really answering the question with a yes or no, he avoids a confrontation. Perhaps much could be written about why Jesus chose to avoid confrontation at this time and not others. But evading the question with a clever answer sounds more like a politician than the Messiah.

Perhaps that common interpretation misses the real point. First, let's attempt to hear the disdain in his voice when he says, “Show me the money for the tax.” Despite his lifestyle, surely Jesus already knew what the coin looked like. But he wants to treat it—money—with true contempt. “Whose likeness and inscription is on this?” he says with even more disdain, knowing the answer already.

His final answer shows that money has no place or value in God's world. It is unimportant, despite how much time we spend obsessing about it throughout our lives. God does not care. He has no need for money, and says we should feel the same. Who should care even if it goes to a pagan emperor?

Think about how much time we spend complaining about taxes in our world today, and yet we live in a democratic republic as opposed to being occupied by a foreign power with an emperor claiming himself as god.

Money and its possession still has a hold on us, and we so often place more value on mammon than our relationship with God. The message from Jesus here is clear—focus on what is important to God. All other needs are secondary. Our stewardship should be to God alone.

—Ray Robertson

### **Advent Series Message: “Blue Christmas”**

*Sunday, December 4*

Both Isaiah and John the Baptizer speak of the wilderness—the dry, barren place where we often find ourselves. It’s a “blue” place, a place where loss and emptiness can be overwhelming. But into such a place the message of hope rings all the more clear. The prophet Isaiah offers words of comfort and consolation and envisions God’s love filling in the valleys of despair and tearing down the obstacles that block our way. John preaches that “Someone is coming soon who...will baptize you with Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7-8). Someone who can renew our lives at their deepest levels and color our world with hope.

#### **6:00 p.m. Advent Celebration**

Our annual music program followed by covered-dish fellowship.

*Sunday, December 4*

Luke 1:57–68



*Luke 1:57–68—“Then came the time for Elisabeth’s child to be born, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard of the great mercy the Lord had shown her and shared her joy. When the eighth day came, they were going to circumcise the child and call him Zacharias, after his father, but his mother said, **Oh, no! He must be called John.**”*

You have to cross the Arno River on the Ponte Vecchio to see this historic painting by Raffaello Sanzio in the Pitti Palace Museum in Florence, Italy. The Florentines call it *La Madonna de la Sedullina*, “The Madonna of the Little Chair.”

Here we see Mary, hugging her child, Jesus, to her breast while his cousin John, who is a few months older, looks on.

The great childhood educator, Dr. Maria Montessori, loved this painting and displayed it in all her classrooms.

Montessori said that the two beautiful children in this painting represent the temporal and the spiritual aspects of life. She said “Our preparation to serve the child must encompass both of these dimensions.” The temporal aspect requires us to acquire much new knowledge and many new skills. The spiritual aspect requires each of us to be *transformed* into the kind of person who is capable of serving the child.

“The focus of the painting is *The Child*,” she said, “and just there, nearby, is another child, his cousin, the Prophet John the Baptist who proclaimed: ***I am not the light; I come to prepare the way for the light...***”

And pointing toward the Christ he said: ***Behold the Lamb of God...***”

Then Montessori said: “Like John, I am a voice crying in the wilderness. I cry out to say: *Do not look at Montessori, for I too have come to prepare the way.* I point to the child and say: ***Behold the child! Serve the child! Follow the child...***”

It seems to me that Dr. Montessori’s insight really applies to all of us, not just to those of us who wish to serve as teachers of young children. As we light the first candle of Advent, we look forward with anticipation and hope to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World.

We too must be *transformed* into the kind of persons who can serve this Holy Child. We too, must say: *Do not look at us, for we too have come to prepare the way.*

We must point to the Christ Child and say: ***Behold the child! Serve the child! Follow the child...***”

—*Feland Meadows*

*You may wish to listen as Goldschmidt plays “Gabriel’s Oboe” while you meditate:*  
<http://tinyurl.com/hbc120411>

***Monday, December 5***

Matthew 22:23–33

### **Majoring on the Minors**

Counting down: only 20 days until Christmas! How long is your to-do list? How many gifts do you still need to buy, and what will you get that person who has everything (there’s one in every family)? How will you manage to attend family get-togethers, friends’ celebrations, church activities? How will you *pay for it all*?

It’s easy to major on the minors. None of the above reflects the true meaning of Christmas. When the Sadducees questioned Jesus about the resurrection, they majored on minors, too.

The Sadducees seemed sincere enough when they questioned Jesus. They hit all the right notes, mentioning Moses, the revered leader of the Israelites during the Exodus and the one through whom God delivered the Law. They even seemed open to change, asking as they did about the resurrection, when, as the scripture notes, Sadducees “say there is no resurrection” (v. 23, HCSB). They even called Jesus “Rabbi” or “Teacher.”

But they were majoring on the minors, trying to fit Jesus into their box, looking for a way to trap him in controversy. Jesus went to the heart of the matter: “You are deceived, because you don’t know the Scriptures or the power of God.... He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” (v. 29, 32).

God demonstrated that he is the God of the living by coming to earth as a babe in a manger. Jesus could welcome children into his midst because he knew what it meant to be a child. The living God, who exists with no beginning and no end, came to earth to live among us, a man among men and women. Word became flesh in order to reconcile us with God and give us eternal life through faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Jesus was not side-tracked by the Sadducees’ question. He knew their hearts. How do you respond when someone comments on religion or spirituality? Do you know the Scriptures well enough to share God’s truth?

All believers receive the power of God: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). In the Great Commission, Jesus declared, “All authority [power] has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” From that power, he commissioned his followers. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:18–19).

This Advent, give yourself the gift of time in God’s word. Explore what it means to have God’s power available to you. Major on the majors and the minors will take care of themselves.

—*Jo Ann Branton*

## ***Tuesday, December 6***

Matthew 22:34–46

The season of love and hope is upon us. In this passage of scripture, Jesus gives all Christians the guidance in which to base all commandments. Love God first and then love your neighbors.

Your neighbors could mean anyone who doesn’t live in your house with you or it could possibly mean anyone outside of yourself.

Let the love shine through you during this Christmas season. Let others know that you love the Lord and that is why you celebrate Christmas. When sending cards, e-greetings, giving gifts, sharing food during this Advent season, share God’s love with them.

You may chose to use a phrase like “God’s love to you during this Christmas season” or “Christmas is our present from God”.

As you are preparing for your family, also prepare for your neighbors. Neighbors on your own street, neighbors in your community and neighbors across the ocean.

Let our prayer be that others know that we love God first and our neighbors next during Christmas and always.

—*Beth Mathison*

## **Wednesday, December 7**

Matthew 23:1–12

Lectionaries often place this gospel reading alongside an epistle lesson from Philippians 2:5- 11: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* The two passages go together well, as each helps us understand the other.

When I think of those who have taught me how to live as a follower of Jesus, many good people come to mind. They have some traits in common. They do not seek attention, but I notice them because of their delight in doing the will of God. They are warm and genuine. They continually respond to God’s grace with gratitude and a gracious spirit. Unlike the Pharisees who were accused by Jesus of “locking people out of the kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 25:13), the people I am thinking of hold the door open. They make the gospel accessible by demonstrating how it works in day-to-day living.

Frank Heintz, a member of Woodbrook Baptist Church in Baltimore where my family and I were members from 1997 until 2004, taught me much about living as a follower of Jesus. I knew that Frank worked for Baltimore Gas and Electric. I was in church with him for five years, served alongside him as a deacon, worked with him on a Habitat build, and went with him many times to take communion to homebound church members, before I learned that he was the CEO. I learned that he was the CEO when I saw his picture on the front page of the business section of *The Baltimore Sun*.

I told Frank how long it took me to realize that he was the CEO. “Frank,” I said, “I thought you were a lineman or something.” He took that as a compliment. He talked with me about the challenges of living his faith in the corporate environment and how much he enjoyed serving under

the leadership of our deacon chair, a single parent who cleaned houses to supplement her income. “She’s good,” he said, “and I’m glad they didn’t elect me as chair just because I’m the CEO of BG&E.”

—*Lamar Wadsworth*

**Thursday, December 8**

Matthew 23:13–26

### **Jesus, Religious Leaders, and First Responders**

At first glance, it would seem that Jesus is being extremely harsh and condemnatory towards the religious leaders of his day. He says “Woe to you” five times in this passage, and that’s not counting terms like “hypocrites,” “blind men” and “blind fools.” Not exactly a “feel good” message!

The common theme in Jesus’ specific criticisms is that the religious leaders have one standard for “everybody else” and excuse themselves for living by a much lower standard. Stated differently, Jesus shows that the religious leaders, in allegedly “helping” others, place demands on them that they themselves are unable or unwilling to keep. While clearly a warning for those of us who claim to be Christ-followers (“every member a MINISTER”—so ALL Christians are in effect “religious leaders”), there is a larger point that is best illustrated by looking at three different types of first responders.

“Sin” or “breaking God’s law” can be compared to an emergency event—a fire, a shooting, or a car accident. What roles do our first responders have to these types of incidents? The police usually are the ones who conduct investigations, arrest the lawbreakers, or write tickets for the people at fault. The firefighters try to address the immediate danger, but occasionally get involved with gathering evidence or other investigative work. The paramedic is usually not concerned with finding out who is to blame or what laws were broken, but nearly always focuses on saving lives or preventing further injury. In doing so, often times they have direct, personal contact with the victims and in essence become a part of their lives.

Simply put, Jesus’ words indicate that in interacting with those without our same faith or understanding of God, our response should be more like that of the paramedic (willing to get involved in a caring, helpful manner) instead of the police (enforcing the law and providing punishment but less personally involved). Many of us tend to be like the firefighter—we get involved with an immediate solution BUT often times aim at finding out “whodunit”. None of this is meant to imply that we don’t need or appreciate police officers or firefighters; we do! But again, to Christ’s words: are we supposed to have a condescending approach to those who fail to meet our definition of “the law” and be on the lookout to “arrest” or “judge”

them, or rather is our role to be one of sharing in an involved, humble, and helpful way even if we figuratively get a little close or a little bloody? The latter seems to be what Jesus expects us to do.

—*Dave Daniels*

## ***Friday, December 9***

Psalm 130

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,*

*And in his word I hope;*

*My soul waits for the Lord*

*More than those who watch for the morning (v 5–6)*

I cannot read Psalm 130 without hearing (in my head) the haunting musical rendition Sons of Korah has done. I discovered the group a few years ago through the Family Christian Bookstores when a sampler album was offered at Christmas. Psalm 130 is so relevant to Advent since it is a season of waiting.

When I was a child, I understood that Christmas was about waiting. You had to wait 364 days for the Big Day to happen, but the last month before Christmas was both an anguish and delight of waiting. Anguish since it seemed like Christmas would never arrive and delight as I imagined the various toys I might get.

Once I was grown with my own family, the stakes got higher on the Christmas countdown. It was less about what I was going to get and more about getting the “right gift” for family members, especially the kids. I would agonize trying to get the right gift at the right price and then worry right up until the gift was opened (what delight when it was right!).

The only problem with that type of waiting was it had nothing to do with Advent, a season of preparation of the heart for the coming of Jesus. As much as I enjoyed the lights and music of Christmas, the “how many more days ’til Christmas,” Christmas itself could be a letdown. Once the gifts were all opened, there was a huge pile of crumpled paper and a meal to cook.

I worried that my kids were hearing the siren call of a cultural Christmas, where “he who dies with the most toys wins.” So we focused on the giving of Christmas and the kids crafted items from the heart that would please the one who received them. They gathered up their gently used toys and we took them to Bartow Christmas or other charities. It felt better to focus on giving instead of receiving.

But what I finally realized was Christmas isn’t about receiving or giving; it’s about waiting. It’s about the feeling of watchful, hopeful waiting when something is about to happen: dawn is about to break or a thing unfolds

that will change everything. Advent comes, a baby is born, but the world doesn't change yet...but it will. And while we wait for the baby to grow up, we wait in hope.

—*Marina Robertson*

*Link for Psalm 130 More than the Watchmen:*

<http://tinyurl.com/hbc120911>

## ***Saturday, December 10***

Matthew 24:1–14

In the first verse of this passage, the disciples point out the impressive construction of the temple to Jesus. This leads to Jesus' prophesy of the destruction of the temple. At the time, the temple was under renovation begun by Herod the Great in 20 B.C. This was a lavish renovation spanning decades and no doubt the structure was awe inspiring.

Jesus' revelation had to be quite shocking to the disciples. A building of massive stones would seem to have great permanence to us, but had no real value to the savior. This renovation of the temple was not completed until A.D. 64. Six years later, it was thoroughly destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, fulfilling Jesus' prophecy.

The disciples waited until later on the Mount of Olives to ask Jesus about the prophecy. The disciples could imagine that only something as catastrophic as the end of the world could lead to destruction of the temple. But Jesus teaches us differently.

There will be many deceivers, wars, famines, and disasters. Jesus tells us these things are necessary and that they are but "the beginning of sorrows" (NKJV). These sorrows occur now but will increase in severity and frequency during the tribulation, finally ending with the triumphant return of Jesus.

So what am I to do in the meanwhile? I guess I will wait. But I hate to wait. I had to wait for a particularly long red light at Home Depot today. I almost turned around and drove the other direction. I had to wait on someone else to check out at the grocery store. I was horrified when they needed to write a check because it seems to take forever. I looked to see if the other lines would be faster. I wait for the rain during drought; allowing myself to be "troubled" (NKJV) about my pastures and yard. I have to wait to open my gifts on Christmas. But this kind of waiting is very different from the waiting of a Christian. According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, wait means:

1a: *to remain stationary in readiness or expectation*

2a: *to look forward expectantly*

This simple word definition coupled with the proclamations of Jesus tells me how to wait. I must remain steadfast in my readiness and preparation. I need not panic with the news of terrible events of our world. I must not be deceived by or betray others. I can't allow circumstances to cause me to lose my love. I must endure and finally achieve my salvation.

—*Jayson Fields*

**Advent Series Message: “Dreaming of Christmas”**

*Sunday, December 11*

The prophet Isaiah says God is doing a new thing. He envisions a change even in the landscape where they live. And later, the prophet speaks of new heavens, new earth, peace and prosperity; the end of war and conflict. Advent is the season for dreaming (and not just about a white Christmas). Isaiah reminds us that imagination plays an important role in the journey of faith. It inspires us to keep moving forward and never settle for anything less than our dreams. Imagination reminds us that with God, all things are possible and all things can become new—even us.

**5:00 p.m. Christmas Caroling**

Church members share songs of hope and joy in the community, and then return for refreshments and fellowship.

*Sunday, December 11*

John 5:30–47

I used to be puzzled by the Jews wandering in the wilderness, or those who lived during the time of Jesus. How could they witness so many miracles in person, and yet continue to fall back, to forget, and to turn away from God? If I had those Biblical miracles happening around me today, surely my faith would be rock solid, I thought.

No more. Because I have been a part of a miracle, and yet the memory fades. Doubt enters. The daily drudgery of life intervenes. Bills to pay. The miracle experience no longer seems as life-changing, and old habits return.

In this passage Jesus has words of condemnation for the Jews who did not believe in him, but they might as well be for us: “For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You study the

Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

Yes, we study the scriptures, sometimes more diligently than others. Yet that does not often bring us all the way to the ever-present Christ, to the joy of the resurrection, to the belief in new life to come. Do my words sound heretical? Perhaps. But our actions often illustrate that we fail to place our trust in Jesus and Jesus alone. If we did, our hearts, souls and minds would surely be at ease.

—Ray Robertson

## **Monday, December 12**

Matthew 24:15–31

*“Immediately after those horrible days end, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then at last, the sign of the coming of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the nations of the earth. And they will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send forth his angels with the sound of a mighty trumpet blast, and they will gather together his chosen ones from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven” (Matthew 24:29-31, New Living Translation).*

Several times this past year, a pastor warned that the world was coming to an end. Some of his followers sold possessions and waited for Jesus to come and take them somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Why do we associate Jesus’ “second coming” with our “going”?

I understand the desire to get away from the hardships of life. And it would be nice to think of Jesus coming to take us away. But I think Jesus wants to do more than that.

This haunting chapter begins with Jesus talking to His disciples about the uncertainties of the future—the things from which we would all like to flee. As they stroll through the lovely temple grounds with its amazing architecture, Jesus shocks them by warning that there will come a day when every single stone of the complex will come crashing to the ground. The very symbols of security will topple and “not one stone will be left on top of another” (Matthew 24:2).

We know what that’s like. We’ve seen the building blocks of our society and the symbols of strength crumble into a cloud of dust, too.

At such moments of calamity, it seems as if the world is coming to an end. It doesn’t have to mean the end of the world, but simply the end of life as we know it. When that time comes, we may want to be taken away from it. But instead, God will choose to come to where we are. That is, after all, the message of Christmas. He came to us.

Even in the moment that seems most God-forsaken—when the stars that once seemed so permanent fall from the sky and the sun ceases to shine with warmth and promise—God will come. Jesus said that in the midst of all the turmoil, when things seem to be at their worst, God will be coming—perhaps in a spectacular fashion as clear as the clouds above. Or perhaps, it will be something quiet and silent, like the budding of a tree at the break of winter.

The point is, in our moments of greatest weakness, we can count on God to act. Not by taking us away. But by bringing to us whatever we need. Whatever uncertainty we face, we have the assurance that we do not face it alone. That promise from Jesus is enough to give us security even when we don't know what's coming next.

So watch. Stay awake. Because whatever comes, God wants to be in it with you.

—*Michael Tutterow*

## ***Tuesday, December 13***

Psalm 85

Have you ever cajoled someone into doing something when you really needed help?

Well the Psalmist is sweet talking God. He is asking for God to forgive and forget. “Hey, let's have a laugh. Let bygones be bygones. If you do this for us, boy will we straighten up and act right.”

But making sin has its consequences. Being out of favor with God feels empty. He is your last friend.

Happiness is when the day before you is clear and clean and full of promise. Most importantly knowing that God has your back is the best feeling of all. I love the ending of this Psalm—“righteousness will go before Him, and will make His footsteps into a way.” We can follow or abandon the path but it is the path to happiness. Who wouldn't want to follow?

—*Jeanne Young*

## ***Wednesday, December 14***

Matthew 24:45–51

### **Are You Ready?**

FEMA has a very informative website on being prepared for emergencies and disasters. Their website states, “being prepared can reduce fear, anxiety, and losses that accompany disasters.” They list all kinds of things we need to be prepared for from dam failure to winter storm. We are all encouraged to: 1. Get a Kit; 2. Make a Plan; and 3. Be Informed.

Now things begin to get complicated, because you never know where you will be in the event of an emergency. So you'll need a plan for home, work or school, and your vehicle. In addition to the flashlight, radio, and extra batteries we all know we need, you'll also need a gallon of water per person per day (minimum of three days), matches, a whistle, food, can opener, cash, coins, medications, first aid kit, copies of credit cards and identification, extra clothes, etc., etc., etc. And you'll need to adjust items based on your climate and time of year. There's a lot to think about and it's difficult to be prepared for the unknown.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells the parable about the faithful and wise servant who will oversee the household and other servants while the master is away. The good servant will take this responsibility to heart and be prepared so when the master returns all will be running well in the household, as if he never left. This servant will be rewarded for his loyalty and dedication. However, an arrogant servant will take this opportunity of the master's absence to take advantage of the other servants, treating them badly and "partying" with the intention of straightening up and being prepared for the expected arrival of the master. That servant will be punished upon the master's unexpected return in spite of his excuses that if he had known when the master was coming, all would have been in order.

As Christians, we need to be prepared. But we don't need a flashlight, batteries, and jugs of water. The kit, the plan, and the information we need are found in the Bible, a prayer relationship with our Lord, and a family of faith. Reading scripture, praying, and attending worship will prepare us to be ready by living full and faithful lives. It takes diligence and work, but does not seem nearly as complicated as the instructions FEMA gives to be prepared.

—*Susan Tumlin*

## ***Thursday, December 15***

Matthew 25:1–13

*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five of them were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.*

In October, I performed the wedding of a young woman who had been a high schooler in the first church where I served as pastor. It was quite a celebration and all of us looked expectantly toward the back of the church as a string of bridesmaids made their way down the aisle. The processional ended and the back doors closed for what seemed an eternity. Then, as the music resumed, the doors opened to reveal the bride in all her splendor.

In Jesus' day, it was not the bride but the bridegroom whom everyone anticipated. A wedding was announced, but nothing more than "soon" was told to the wedding party and the guests. The bridal party would gather to prepare, and it was not uncommon for the groom to try to catch them by surprise—sometimes even by coming in the middle of the night.

Jesus takes this common custom and weaves a story around it. This is the first of three stories He will tell in this chapter, all of them linked together by the theme of endings and judgment. In this story, Jesus contrasts five wise maidens with five foolish ones. At face value they all appear the same: both sets of women come when called; all 10 bring lamps; all 10 slumber.

Only with the announcement that the groom is coming do we discover five of the women brought no additional oil for their lamps. The other maidens brought some reserves, but not enough for the other five, so they have to leave to find a late-night merchant. But while away, the groom arrives, the door is locked, and the party begins without them.

Jesus concludes by urging us to stay awake, to be prepared for His return. So what would Jesus mean with such a story?

Typically this story is used to warn "sinners" about not waiting until the last minute to start a relationship with Christ. Once the door closes, the only light you'll see will be the flames of hell!

Certainly the story does serve as a sobering reminder that there are aspects of the life of faith that cannot be bought and applied at the last minute. A poor grade awaits those who wait until the last minute to study for a semester final. A player on the bench who misses batting practice won't be ready to serve as a pinch hitter. When we've not nurtured a relationship with God that is intimate and trusting, then times of crisis will leave us alone in the dark, anxious and full of regret.

To make the most of time, we must have prepared both our skills and our character in advance. We can only deal with prolonged times of darkness when we have something in reserve to light our way.

So, how are you stockpiling some oil in your life? How much reserve do you carry with you?

In the Bible, oil often served as a symbol for devotion to God. That means knowing God, not just knowing about God. So, in what way are you storing up experiences with God? Living faithfully for the long-term requires more than right beliefs and good intentions. Without something of substance to light our way, we'll be left in the dark. And how can Jesus' followers be "the light of the world" if our lamps go out?

Oil also symbolized acts of mercy and love, kindness and compassion. As we serve and share with others, the grace of kindness flows back into our lives and gives light for even the darkest times. The foolish bridesmaids serve as a painful reminder that the oil of such kindnesses cannot be borrowed from others.

Preparation is a choice and a lifestyle adopted before the crises of life hit. We prepare not because we fear being locked out, but because we can't wait to see the bridegroom again. So we savor and store up our devotion for God. We share in acts of mercy and compassion. Because these things have the power to fuel our lives and illuminate our pathway even at the darkest times until the Bridegroom comes again.

So watch. Be ready. He's coming. Soon.

—*Michael Tutterow*

## ***Friday, December 16***

Matthew 25:14–30

### **The Parable of the Talents**

At first, it looks like this passage is all about stewardship. We've heard it taught that way for most of our lives and for good reason. But what if it's about something else, too? After all, parables almost always are.

Did you notice anything about the three servants as they were presented in the story? Was your attention drawn to one more than the others? For me, the first two seemed to pass through without incident. Everything for them went as well as it could. They were able to double the value of the property with which they had been entrusted. But when we get to the third servant, the story moves forward even though the math does not. Instead of doing like the others and investing the property of the master, the third servant buried it. Why? Because he was afraid. But afraid of what—failure, success, the master? And why was he afraid, anyway? The answer to this question reveals what I think this parable is actually about.

If we dig down deep enough under all the talk about talents and money and stewardship, we see that the source of the third servant's behavior was an inner attitude of the heart. And parables are always about the heart. When we look into the heart of the third servant, we see just what he said we would see: fear. But it's not just fear in a generic sense. It's fear of God, not reverence, not recognition that God is more than what can ever be comprehended, but actual fear. Where this kind of fear is, there can be no trust or freedom because there can be no relationship. Because he couldn't imagine a way to see God that wasn't tainted by his fear, he found himself lost and afraid in the outer darkness.

What about you? How do you see God? Is there a fearful part of you that keeps you from God? If you're like me, there is. What would it be like to experience healing from your fear?

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God is fear. It says just the opposite. 1 John 4:16–20 tells us that God is love and there is no fear in love. “Perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (1 John 4:18). And our ability to love comes from the reality that God first loved us. God’s heart is not tied up in a desire to despise us and punish us. God’s heart is set on loving us and nothing can change that. What could happen if we were all able to live in that truth? Could it shape how we see God? Could it shape all of our actions, and yes, even our stewardship?

—*Jeff Wright*

## ***Saturday, December 17***

Matthew 25:31–46

Advent is a time of preparation, of looking forward to the first coming of Jesus as the Christ Child. This Scripture, however, looks forward to time when “the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him” (v. 31, HCSB).

In this familiar passage in which sheep and goats are separated, Jesus says that those who are blessed, those who “inherit the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world,” (v. 34) fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the infirm and imprisoned.

Joseph and Mary took shelter in the manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Did they have food? Fresh water? A warm blanket? Did Mary receive any medical attention during the birth? Where did she get the swaddling clothes for the baby? Did anyone offer them so much as a kind word, or were the only “sheep” that night the wool-bearing kind?

As you finish your Christmas shopping, consider the kinds of people on your list. What are you getting for “the least of these”? Would it really hurt the kids on your list to forego a new toy or video game, donating that money instead to needy children (locally or globally)? Does your dad need another tie/robe/pair of slippers?

Pastor and author Tony Campollo said, “What do you get the person who has everything? Nothing! But you don’t have the guts to pull it off, do you?” A corollary might be, “What do you get the person who has nothing? Anything! Do you have the guts to pull it off?”

Whether you have small children at home or not, there are probably children in your extended family or circle of friends. What if we intentionally taught them that it is more blessed to give than to receive. What if we tithed from our Christmas gifts: yes, give away brand new gifts. I often

receive money at Christmas, and one year I gave all the money to a charity. I never missed it; I didn't want for anything that I needed, and someone received far more benefit than I would have from buying yet another pair of black shoes.

Baby Jesus has come and gone. From the manger to the cross to the skies. The Son of Man will return in His glory. When he looks at you, will he see a sheep or a goat? As you look at nativity scenes this year, identify with the sheep. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, help the sick and imprisoned.

And if my name is on your list, make a donation to a charity instead of buying me a gift. Thanks!

—*Jo Ann Branton*

### **Advent Series Message: “Do You Hear What I Hear?”**

*Sunday, December 18*

The angel Gabriel brings word to Mary that she would become the bearer of God's Son. Mary breaks into song about a new world that turns everything on its ear. How could an unwed pregnant teenager sing such a song? Perhaps because she first heard a promise: “The Lord is with you!” Maybe that's the message God still wants all of us to hear at Christmas, too.

### ***Sunday, December 18***

John 3:16–21

A friend of mine returned from a week of business travel through Alabama, and he told me that while driving through the state and flipping through all the radio stations, all week long, that he had come to the conclusion that nothing else mattered to Alabamians but “God and Football!”

God and Football. John 3:16 is the verse you see fans holding at football games, concerts, etc. Did you know it's even printed on the bottom of the In-N-Out Burger drink cups? It may be difficult to find a more concise statement of our faith, but that verse says and calls us to so much.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only son....” For you. For me. Kinda puts Christmas shopping in perspective. Is there a more unconditional, selfless act than that? Knowing what was to come, and to send to our world a child that would one day be a sacrifice for our salvation, is there truly anything else? Why is it such a daily struggle to trust or believe God is with us now, in everything we do, when a couple thousand years ago he had enough trust and belief in us to sacrifice his own son?

John 3:16 is the verse we all recognize and quote, but I think if we're not really careful, we can get ourselves into a bit of trouble on verses 17-21. It's the hammer behind the good news: if you don't believe, you lose; you can't have eternal life. But read the beginning of verse 17: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world..." He came to save, to love. For those who have not accepted him yet, nothing has changed. But for us, as Christians, everything changed, and our role in the world is not to condemn or judge others, but to continue to love one another and live a life that by example can draw others to God's love.

We can't change others—only God can. But we can change how we approach others, how we pray, how we live out our Christianity in small daily actions. And when we've done that successfully and others want to know what our "secret" is—that's where another life can be changed!

One of my favorite quotes is from St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." God began the Gospel with the gift of his son, and because of this, yes, we can proclaim it at football games and claim victory in everlasting life. Our ongoing challenge is to demonstrate that love with one another in how we play this game of life.

—*Kelli LaVelle*

## ***Monday, December 19***

Luke 1:1–25

God had a plan. God planned to "turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God." We know this to be true because He had been talking about it for centuries. In Jeremiah He says, "Then I will be their God, and they will be my people." In Malachi He says, "Return to Me, and I will return to you."

God designed His plan to work through people, but, when He tells people what He's up to, they almost always seem surprised. Zacharias was one of those surprised people. Zacharias was just going about his business and serving God in the Temple when—BAM—God spoke to him through the angel, Gabriel. Zacharias was a priest. He expected to talk to God, but, evidently, he did not expect God to talk back to him.

Well, God did speak. He explained how He intended to include Zacharias in His plan by letting him be the daddy of the one who would help get people ready for the coming of the Messiah. What an honor! Zacharias was so amazed that he literally could not believe his ears!

God kept His promise. John was born, and Zacharias was overjoyed.

Why did God choose to use Zacharias? I guess we will never know exactly, but we *do* know that Zacharias and his family honored God by the way they lived. They also prayed and shared with God their joys and concerns. At the time Gabriel arrived, Zacharias was working in the Temple while the people were praying.

Prayer seems to be important. Gabriel came with an answer to a specific prayer while the people were praying in general. God wants people to pray. He wants to interact with us. He wants to share in our joys and concerns, and He wants us to listen to what He has in mind.

Though I don't know if God will ever send you an "Angel-gram," I do know that prayer is one way you can join Him in His plans. He wants to be in relationship with you. He wants to hear about your joys and concerns. And, He wants you to listen to what He has to say, too.

God still has a plan. He still plans to touch hearts and to change lives. He still plans to call people ever closer to Himself. God still designs His plans to work through people. God plans to work through us!!

—*Reneé Jenkins*

## ***Tuesday, December 20***

Luke 1:26–38

Mary was approached by the angel Gabriel with the unbelievable news that she would become pregnant as a virgin, give birth to a son who is Jesus, and that he would be called the Son of the Most High. She was not certain how to respond, whether it was true, what people would think, whether she could do it. But her response was: "I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." She provided the faith and God provided the way. Her life was never the same, and the world was forever changed for the better.

We may never be approached by the angel Gabriel, or any other heavenly figure. Our lives revolve around daily responsibilities, challenges, commitments, and decisions about how to spend our resources and time. At times it seems that there are few opportunities to impact our world. Our angels in today's world might come in the form of teachers, coworkers, church leaders, family members, neighbors, or someone in need. Like Mary, we must decipher what God would have us do, and act with obedience, faith, and excitement! We must let our faith overcome our doubts and fears.

Lord, help me to have the faith to listen to the invitation of angels in my life to change the world around me, and in the process change myself forever. Amen.

—*Glen Merritt*

### **Elizabeth and Mary**

Each time I read about Mary I always wonder how she really felt about carrying the Son of God. We always talk about Mary being humble and faithful, ready to follow and obey God whatever the cost. And undoubtedly, she was all of these things. But having felt a call from God once or twice, I know what it's like to walk out a limb and wonder if I'm really doing the right thing while at the same time being absolutely terrified that I'm not. I wonder if it might have been like that for Mary. I think maybe it could have been. The first verse of our passage today says, "At that time Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea..." Maybe she was just excited to share the news, but I think she was wanting some assurance that she wasn't crazy and that this was the right thing to do.

Through God's divine leading, I'm certain, she hurried to the right place—Elizabeth's home. Elizabeth was older than Mary; probably wiser, too. She was in a similar position as Mary, carrying a miracle child of her own. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting she and her baby knew that they were in the presence of the Messiah. Elizabeth's confirmation of this baby being the Christ was exactly what Mary needed. In fact, after hearing Elizabeth say, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" Mary was overcome with exuberant joy for the gift that God had chosen her to bring.

We all need assurance from time to time. Many times we feel and hear God's call in our lives, and even though we know it's God, it really helps to have some encouragement and assurance from people that we love and respect. Elizabeth gave Mary a great gift that day. The gift of encouragement. She helped to set Mary free to enjoy what she already believed. It was so freeing that she broke into songs of praise for the gift that God had given her.

As much of a gift as it was for Mary to receive encouragement, it was equally a gift for Elizabeth to give it. *She couldn't even understand why she was so favored to receive Mary's company.* This Christmas let us be both an encourager and encouraged. We are not alone in following Christ. We are a family of God. Let us not forget that when we need it most, God sends us assurance through the people we love. We also get to share in the giving of that gift by being the ones to deliver assurance to others.

—*Jorie Wright*

**Thursday, December 22**

Luke 1:57–66

Can you imagine being struck mute after hearing you and your elderly wife are to have a baby? Zacharias was told to name the baby John. There was no reason to name him John other than the angel Gabriel telling him to do so. So when the baby was given the name John, Zechariah's voice was restored. A miracle birth and a miracle of having his voice restored. Proof that obedience to God can bring about miracles. As we celebrate the birth of Christ, listen carefully. Is God speaking to you? Is He asking you to do something? Obey Him and wait for your miracles.

—*Jim McCoy*

**Friday, December 23**

Luke 1:67–80

### **Zacharias' Song**

Zacharias, within the power of the Holy Spirit, uttered a prophecy concerning the kingdom and salvation offered in grace by the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The gospel brings light with it; in it the new day dawns. In John the Baptist it began to break, and joyously increased to the full light of perfect day. The gospel is discovering that we were utterly in the dark, and to give light to those that sit in darkness, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ shows us His wonderful plan, His tender mercies. It is reviving; it brings light to those that sit in the shadow of death, as condemned prisoners under the dominion of sin and the Law without grace and forgiveness. It is a guide to our feet in the way of peace, into that way which will bring us to peace at last, for our former selves did not know the path to peace.

John gave us the example of strong faith, vigorous love of all things holy and righteous, and of being above the fear and love of the temporal world. Thus he grew in wisdom and stature to do God's work as Christ's herald. But he lived a solitary life, until he came forward openly as the forerunner of the Messiah. John the Baptist's singular mission in life, his focused purpose on this earth, was to prepare the way of the Lord so that God at the perfect moment in history could make Himself fully known to all His people. The glorious light of His full revelation guides our feet into the way of peace, and John the Baptist ushered in the dawn.

*Prayer:* Dear God, as we see Your perfect plan, Your perfect will unfold in scriptures, we give you the glory and we bask in the light of your salvation offered through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Let us diligently seek to grow strong in His grace. Amen.

—*Randy Branch*

## **Advent Series Message: “What Child Is This?”**

### *Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion*

Jesus is born in obscurity, unknown by all except angels and shepherds. Who is this child? Why do angels sing of his birth and grizzled shepherds offer homage? And what could a child born 2000 years ago offer to us today?

***Saturday, December 24***

Matthew 1:18–25

**“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!”**

The coming of Christmas brings eager anticipation for many well-loved holiday traditions. For some, it’s the family trek into the woods to harvest their own Christmas tree with chilly cheeks and hatchets at the ready. For others, it’s the holiday baking, or the present wrapping, the writing of the lists and letters to Santa, tucked hopefully into envelopes. For still others, the tradition of Christmas caroling holds special joy.

Who doesn’t love to celebrate a joyous occasion, the arrival of a special time? In my family, we always went caroling, either in a large party complete with handheld lanterns and leather belts of sleigh bells to shake and jingle, or on our own, sometimes just my sister and me with Dad acting as chauffeur. The wonderful songs, both sacred and secular, were so much fun to sing, and the happy surprise on the faces of the families being serenaded was a special treat.

Advent has its own songs, songs of eager longing for the arrival of the Savior, songs about the yearning for peace and the fulfillment of years of anticipation and prophecy. Perhaps these songs should have more meaning for us than any Christmas carol, because we, too, are waiting, waiting for the fulfillment of the promise that there will be peace on earth, that Christ will come again. How different would our days be, in this Advent time, if instead of hearing the steady stream of Christmas songs blaring from radios and shopping mall sound systems, we listened instead to the more plaintive and contemplative songs of Advent? How would it change the way we approach each day if we thought of the possibility of the Christ actually coming to earth. Would we concentrate more on how we might further His kingdom and make this a peaceful earth in preparation for His return? Think of your favorite Advent carol. Sing it each day and let it enrich this special time of waiting with new meaning.

**“O Come, Emmanuel, Come Soon!”**

—*Suzanne Husting*

## **Advent Series Message: “Holding Hope in Your Hands”**

*Sunday, December 25*

Aged Simeon greets new parents Joseph and Mary when they visit the temple. Upon seeing their child, Simeon holds Jesus in his hands and offers a word of blessing for the holy family—and for us. Simeon knows what it is like to hold hope in our hands: fragile and delicate, yet full of promise and potential. Such hope is placed in our hands—the church. We must nurture this hope and hand it back to a hurting and yearning world.

*Sunday, December 25*

John 3:31–36

On this very special day, Sunday, December 25, 2011, as we read these verses we can know John is declaring the Lordship of Christ. He tells us Jesus is from Heaven, therefore, He is above all. Every person who has accepted Jesus gives testimony that God is real. Verse 35 emphasizes the confidence our Heavenly Father has placed in His Son Jesus. In verse 36 we are given the promise of eternal life if we believe in God’s Son, Jesus, who becomes our Savior.

Reading this scripture I am reminded of the time I put my trust in Jesus as my Savior. Even though my Mother had taught me to love Jesus, and my Sunday School teachers and others had witnessed to me, there came a time when I had to make a commitment myself. This happened on a Sunday morning when our pastor, Rev. Clarence Campbell, preached from John chapter 10. Talking to those who had been baptized that morning, he said, “You have accepted Christ as your Savior, you have the promise that God is holding you in His hand. And NOTHING can take you out of HIS hand.” At that moment I realized I was LOST. I wasn’t being held in that HAND. I wanted this more than anything. I prayed a simple prayer and went forward to publicly profess my trust in Jesus.

Since that day I have faced many challenges in life; some difficult, some happy and some sad. But I know God continues to hold me in HIS hand and nothing can ‘snatch’ me out of HIS hand. This is HIS promise!

Isn’t the Advent season a perfect time to trust Jesus Christ as your Savior? And NOTHING can ever ‘snatch’ you out of HIS hand..

—*Mozelle T. Towse*

As soon as I finished reading this passage, I was reminded very much of the French Resistance during the Second World War. At this point in the Bible, believers of the Christian faith essentially had to practice their religion discretely, or risk death, or worse still, imprisonment. The Free French were forced underground by the Nazi occupation. They had to live two lives: one in public and one in secret.

I would guess that at the time this scripture is set in, many Christians were afraid to proclaim their faith openly, and who can blame them? Imprisonment or death is a very high price to pay, even if it is one's beliefs that are on the table. This passage begins, however, with a man that is willing to die for his faith. Furthermore, he asked God to forgive his killers before he was stoned to death.

Being pelted by rocks is an unenviable way to leave this world. I would certainly not choose to go out that way. Yet, Stephen, the persecuted man in this passage, faced death with a calm demeanor. He did not worry about the pain he was about to suffer, nor about what would await him on the other side. He knelt down to pray, asked Christ to take his soul, and forgave the men who were about to murder him.

Another intriguing part of this story is the rise of Saul. A young man, he witnesses the execution of Stephen and goes on to become one of the most treacherous persecutors against Christianity. I do not know why this event seemed to trigger his hatred for Christians; perhaps he saw a way to gain power. At any rate, he killed a large number of people and imprisoned many more. Despite this, however, The Message continued to spread.

If anything, forcing the Christians underground was a mistake. Once Christianity gained a foothold, being severely persecuted likely gained sympathy for the movement. Though Saul didn't realize it, Christianity had become an idea, a belief. Though flesh is perilously mortal, beliefs are untouchable. They carry on, passed down from one generation to the next. Just when you think it has become a thing of the past, it will take new form, in new people. The bottom line is, the summary killing of people for what they believe in is foolish, because values are immortal.

So what do I take away from this passage? Stand up for what you believe in. Through the good times and the bad, never waver. Be a person of high principle. If you change your colors (or worse still, do nothing) every time you believe you are on the losing side, you are no longer a force in the universe; you are just someone else's pawn. Be yourself, and believe in yourself. Most important of all, trust in your ability to believe in God, no matter what this life throws at you.

—*Dan Robertson*

**Guidance for Trying Times**

Are you at the end of your rope, feeling that your problems and the world's problems are so overwhelming that there simply is no answer? What do the people of God do in difficult circumstances?

It is hard to imagine a more hopeless situation than that of the disciples on the night before Jesus died. He told them that one of them would betray Him, that He was going away, and they could not go with Him; and that Peter would deny Him three times.

**Hope for the Coming Glory 13:31–32** But just this distressing time was the hour of Jesus' glorification. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' death is not defeat but exaltation. It is His "lifting up," which will allow Him to draw all persons to Himself. Jesus' death is His enthronement as the "King of the Jews," and His was no earthly Kingdom. Jesus' death was also the fulfillment of His mission to Reveal the Father, and Redeem the world, so at His death, He cried, "It is finished." His death was also the first step in His return to the Father. The night of apparent defeat was the night before Jesus' glorification. We have *hope* because of who God is. Never give up on God's Redemptive power.

**"Faith for the little while" 13:33** The fulfillment of Jesus' mission was coming, but the disciples could not see it at the time. He would be separated from them, but only for a "little while." This is a time that Jesus likens to the labor that precedes birth.

Faith calls us to look on our most trying times as "a little while" that will give way to the triumph of joy. During this time, we may seek God without finding God, but that does not mean that God is absent, or that God has ceased to care for us. We can endure "the little while" in HOPE and FAITH, knowing that triumph lies on the other side of trial.

**Love: The New Commandment 13:34–35** At the table Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment to help sustain them through "the little while." Jesus' followers are to love one another as Jesus loves them, even the command to love one's enemies. John points to the quality of love that is to characterize the Christian community. The command to love as He loved us is no burden. It is a parting gift that will sustain the community of disciples through their most trying times. Betrayals, denials and failures would come, but by keeping this commandment, they will find support and encouragement until the morning dawns.

**FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE** are not just Christian virtues; they are what sustain us in our most trying times.

—*Written by Pastor Peggy W. Birmingham and submitted by her sister, Libba*

My father is a retired United Methodist Minister who spent much of his life helping people through pastoral counseling and marriage enrichment. In 2006, he had a major stroke in his right frontal lobe. He has had several falls and a fight with pneumonia since that time. This spring, at the age of 81, he came to live with us in Cartersville, and we are glad to be with him.

As a child, I remember Dad spending a few minutes early Sunday mornings writing last-minute notes on sermons—in handwriting illegible to anyone but him. I recall when a middle-age woman committed suicide, people told me that no other minister in Columbus could have done the funeral as well as Dad.

But now, he often struggles to find words. There are great moments of clarity, and periods of forgetfulness and much confusion. So after he made a couple of attempts at writing this devotion, and realizing that some of his hand-writing has become illegible to even him, we decided to try an interview instead. —*Ray Robertson*

*Ray:* In this passage, Jesus says we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. You are going through a phase in life which is often referred to as the second childhood. Does that give you a new perspective on this passage?

*Richard:* It is very similar because we have to become humble to allow other people to help us. <long pause>

*Ray:* Jesus also gives warnings about people who take advantage of children. I had an elderly neighbor who worried that when she was put in a nursing home, someone would take advantage of her, and no one would believe her, just as can happen with children. Is that another similarity?

*Richard:* It is all a part of the helplessness.

*Ray:* So when you feel helpless, what are your options?

*Richard:* It would be great if we could have a discussion group on that, to find out that it is a very common fear, and not just my fear.

*Ray:* For so many years, you were the caregiver and the provider for many people. How did having a stroke affect you?

*Richard:* After the stroke, I began to question God. Is there a God? Why is this happening? Why is it happening to me and to other people? I guess an issue in there is what can I do to regain faith. Whether it is in assisted living or wherever, we need assistance bolstering our faith at this age. I need to acknowledge that it isn't just me who has these questions. I have a lot of company.

*Ray:* Do you have any ideas on how people who have suffered strokes might be able to strengthen their faith?

*Richard:* That opens a whole new can of worms. Faith is not like some kind of magic where if I just say the words it's going to happen. I think that a term that has been coined is Easy Grace. Which is like all I've got to do is ask in Jesus' name and it will be granted to me.

*Ray:* Do you believe there's more to it than that?

*Richard:* Whatever the guy's name is (Philip Yancey), there's a book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* I would recommend a good reading.

*Ray:* What did you learn from that book?

*Richard:* Grace is more than asking for something of God and maybe turning it over to God. I would call that an immature faith.

*Ray:* What would a mature faith be?

*Richard:* It results in more action: volunteering to help those in need, building a Habitat home, giving to missions and other good causes. And the more we give, the more we sacrifice of ourselves; our time, energy...In seminary, I remember reading a book: *When God Says No*. That made an impact on me. A good example of that is when I was a hospital chaplain most of the people I visited requested me to pray. I learned somewhere along the line it was more helpful to ask them what do you want me to pray for. "Me to get well," they said.

*Ray:* Is that what you would pray most of the time?

*Richard:* Sometimes I might include a phrase, "Help us to know what we really want, and what is possible." We shouldn't pray to win the lottery. Faith is not magic...I'm tired now. Do you have enough?

—*Richard Robertson*

## ***Thursday, December 29***

John 2:1-11

### **Abundant Life**

Jesus isn't born in the Gospel of John: he is announced in the mighty Prologue (Jn 1: 1-18) as the Word that has always been with God. And so it is that Jesus' first miraculous Sign in John is less an announcement of his ministry than an acknowledgement of the power he (and possibly his mother) already knows that he possesses.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is both powerful and charismatic: no one tells him what to do or when to act, since he is on his Father's timetable, not an earthly one. In fact, when Jesus' mother suggests that the wine is running low, he responds, "My hour has not yet come." Yet Jesus does act to avert the crisis of running out of wine, which in that time would be equivalent to running out of hospitality—a grievous breach. But only the steward in charge of the party (aside from Jesus' mother and the disciples) is aware of what has happened.

Turning the water into wine at Cana is almost anticlimactic, especially compared to what follows and what the Gospel writer really intends to be the act that initiates Jesus' ministry: the cleansing of the temple.

So if this Sign does not announce Jesus' earthly ministry, most people don't even know about it, and it is not "time," why does the Gospel writer include this story and why should we care about it?

The sheer abundance of the wine is a hint of the message of abundant life that John wants people to understand is theirs in Jesus (Jn 10:10). Jesus directs the wedding servants to fill six large (20–30 gallon) jars with water, jars that would normally be used for ritual cleansing of the hands. That's around 150 gallons of water, which is an enormous amount of water for ritual purification that had nothing to do with sanitary issues! Once turned into wine, it would amount to over 750 bottles of wine today, enough for a royal wedding—more than most of us can even imagine!

This is the Jesus that is anticipated in Advent: the one who brings us unimaginably abundant life. Not abundance through the gifts and toys that are so much a part of Christmas today, but rather abundance of love, hope, joy, and peace that the Spirit brings to us through faith in the one who saves.

—*Marina Robertson*

## ***Friday, December 30***

John 4:46–54

My passage speaks of a man who has faith and asks JESUS to heal his son. JESUS tells the man to go and his son will be healed. Servants meet the man and after finding out his son is well, they also discover that JESUS healed the man's son when he spoke the words. Everyone was a believer.

First I see the FAITH the man had to ask JESUS for help.

Second I see JESUS being a healer and showing us how wonderful, loving and powerful he is if we just have enough FAITH to ask.

BUT, what it really shows me is just how big a fool I (and maybe you—you be the judge) can be when we don't trust JESUS with our everyday lives.

I don't want to offend anyone nor do I want to cut myself short, but when I look back at all the miracles that I have witnessed, I didn't even know it until, well, it was too late. There's a banner that hangs in our fellowship hall that says it all: "Faith is like walking to the edge of darkness and taking one more step."

I think of when I was a little boy and jumping off a tall rock into my father's arms not knowing if he's going to catch me or let me hit face first into the ground. Shoot, I knew he was going to catch me! Trusting GOD is a lot like that. The truth is, it's hard for me to let go and have enough faith

not to be in charge of my life. Sure I go to prayer when something is going wrong or I need GOD's help, but when things are great, I am not the first to say "Thank You JESUS." I sometimes question my faith. I ask myself...

Am I faithful enough? Could I have done the things that some of the people in the Bible were asked to do? Would my faith have been that strong? If something happened to my children could I be like the father that asked JESUS to heal them and REALLY have the faith to believe HE would?

As I grow older my ambition is not to learn more about the Bible or what is in it, but to take what I have learned, what I have experienced and try to have that unquestioning faith, that "TO KNOW, THAT I KNOW, THAT I KNOW WITHOUT A DOUBT" kinda' faith. Just like this father did. Just like JESUS had FAITH in his FATHER.

—*Mike Hickam*

## ***Saturday, December 31***

John 5:1–15

"Do you want to be healed?" Those are the most important words in this passage, just as much for us today as they were for the man laying beside the pool at Bethesda.

Most translations assume the reader knows how the pool works, because the lame man answers, "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled" and therefore he never makes it into the water in time. Some translations—often considered unreliable by modern scholars—explain the belief that an angel would occasionally stir up the waters, and while the waters were "troubled" only the first person to enter would be healed. Other scholars believe this was some type of healing pool based on a pagan god.

Regardless, the lame man was looking to any source for healing, and so his implied answer to the question is "Yes!" Jesus is God in action on earth. He does not stir up the waters and place the man in, or even lay hands upon the man. He simply says, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." The words "rise" and "walk" were the important part to the man, and he did as said, picking up his mat in the process.

The rest of the passage goes on to deal with how the man violated the legalistic rules regarding "work" on the Sabbath by picking up his mat. John later explains how this was yet another reason Jesus was crucified.

The focus on the rules of the Sabbath is no more important to us today that it was to Jesus. RISE and WALK. That is what mattered to the lame man. And those words would remain at the center of Jesus' ministry on earth and his resurrection. The words remain vital to us today. RISE and WALK as we enter this new year.

—*Ray Robertson*

## Advent Series Message: “A New Year’s Prayer”

*Sunday, January 1*

The Old Testament and Epistle readings offer prayers appropriate to the start of a new year. As we begin a new year, what might we pray for ourselves, our church, our community, our world?

**Editor’s Note:** *It has been my privilege to put together these inspirational devotions for my church during this Advent season. We have contributions from the young and old and all ages in between; from people of diverse religious and educational backgrounds. We have some in our church who look to modern scholarship for guidance with scripture, and others who question the latest research. This diversity represents our church so well, and the Baptist belief that all have access to the Bible and may interpret its meaning.*

*Following the Common Lectionary has been a struggle, as there are passages which some of us might prefer to skip, especially during a season of celebration. But each writer looked for what the scripture was saying to him or her, which is all that is needed. I’d like to thank our pastor, Michael Tutterow, for his excellent introduction. Next time, people, I promise to get you those words before we begin writing! I wish I could thank each writer individually here, but in this case I want to point out the effort by Jim McCoy, who wrote despite all he and Pat have been through with her breast cancer. Jim kept it short, direct, made his point, and got it in. To God be the glory.*

—Ray Robertson

## *At Heritage Baptist Church, we are...*

### **God-seeking.**

We believe God created us for fellowship with God, to be stewards of God's creation, and to be in relationship with one another. In our daily living, we continually affirm our need to be open to God's movement in our lives as individuals and as a congregation.

### **Christ-centered.**

We believe that Jesus Christ is God-in-the-flesh and through Jesus we are able to know and understand God more fully and completely. By the way we live, speak and serve, we seek to honor Christ and to call attention to Him through service to others, especially to "the least of these." We believe that in God's eyes children, youth, adults—female and male—are all equally loved, valued, and called by God.

### **Salvation-embracing.**

Through Jesus' suffering and His willingness to place Himself in harm's way, we see in this tragedy God's ability to turn human abuse into the means for human redemption. In turn, we attempt to preach, teach, and live by the example of Jesus.

### **Covenant-keeping.**

We believe that the Bible and faith experience provide us with evidence of God's desire to be in covenant with us and us with God. To that end, we have a church covenant which provides us with guidance as to how we relate to one another and offer our witness of Christ to others in our community and world.

### **Fellowship-minded.**

We believe in the power and hope of New Testament *koinonia*, the kind of first-century fellowship described in the book of Acts. Caring for and ministering to one another is important to us. It is our desire that every person in our fellowship have an opportunity for Christian friendship among us here.

### **Diverse.**

In addition to those coming to faith for the first time, in our church family we welcome, not only those who have a Baptist background, but also those who have come from United Methodism, the Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopalian, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the Roman Catholic tradition, as well as others. We value these other traditions and have always offered a welcome to all.

### **Imperfect.**

We recognize the human capacity for sin and error and our need for God's salvation. We encourage Jesus' model of reconciliation, forgiveness, and an understanding of and appreciation for the viewpoints of others different from our own.