

Introduction

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus
that all the world should be registered. – Luke 2:1*

Greetings and peace in the name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ! I am pleased you will be joining us this Advent season through this booklet. I hope you will find it very useful as you pray your way through Advent.

While we are on the subject of prayer, as I write this in early October, I wonder what the end of 2020 holds in store. As you read this, are things more peaceful? More chaotic? Have we gotten the pandemic under control? I can't help but ponder these things, and throw a prayer up myself.

Yet, it is amidst the uncertainty that Scripture helps us take heart. At his birth, Luke tells us, Jesus came into a world under orders for a census. This simple fact contains a transformative insight.

You see, the census wasn't a good thing for subjugated peoples in Judea. On his *Res Gestae* (Acts of Augustus) that were to be inscribed on bronze pillars in front of his mausoleum, Augustus boasts that he took a census, and follow up counts called *lustrum*. This seems innocuous enough, but don't be fooled. Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, records that during this, the subjugated Jews had to "[give] assurance of their good will to Caesar, and to the King's government; these very men [Pharisees] did not swear, being about six thousand."

Translation: the census was a time to count citizens living throughout the empire. Doing so reinforced an oppressive order that drained wealth from the people, and demanded fealty at the point of a sword. In short, Jesus came to his people in a time of terror. Despite it, he brought a freedom that continues to liberate today.

So, take heart. As you pray with us and study the word of God, let the true spirit of Advent rule. With all that we are, and despite our challenges, let us wait and watch as Christ comes to rule, for he alone is Lord.

In Christ,

Rev. Samuel Weddington

November 29

I am sure that it's no surprise to anyone that Advent and Christmastide create IMMEDIATE musical associations for me. I love to sing the traditional Advent hymns and Christmas carols. I especially love them because our church at FPC Bristol sings so joyfully on these well-known hymns. However, my own faith journey has taken me to investigate and study the lesser known carols and hymns. What I have found is that the hymns that are newer to me have focused my attention on the texts which, in turn, challenges my faith.

Hymn #160 in Glory to God, *A Stable Lamp is Lighted*, is such a hymn. With references to Luke 19:40, this is a hymn that obviously tells of the birth of our Lord: Verse 1 *A stable lamp is lighted... a barn shall harbor heaven, a stall become a shrine*. But when you read the entire text, it actually brings closure to the story of our Messiah. Verse 2 makes reference to Palm Sunday: *This child through David's city shall ride in triumph by; the palm shall strew in branches...*, Verse 3 to Good Friday: *Yet he shall be forsaken, and yielded up to die ... God's blood upon the spearhead, God's love refused again* and Verse 4 to Easter: *But now, as at the ending, the low is lifted high ... And every stone shall cry, in praises of the child by whose descent among us the worlds are reconciled*. There are few hymns that travel the complete journey with us and tell the story of Jesus, the Christ.

We celebrate with joy the birth of Jesus but it's important to remember that Jesus was born to save us and that only happens through his painful death and resurrection. I believe, in fact, that this hymn deserves to be sung at various seasons and occasions of the church and not confined to Christmastide.

So take a moment and read the Advent and Christmas hymns that you don't know as well, and allow yourself to read the texts more deeply. There is so much more for all of us than the sentimental associations of a baby in in a manger. May God bless you throughout this Advent and Christmas season with Joy, Peace, and the Love of God given to us in Jesus, Emmanuel.

Pat Flannagan

November 30

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand—Isaiah 64:8

Growing up, my mom, née Vestal, would sometimes remind me that my 4th great grandfather had been a prominent 19th century potter. Born in 1828 in Washington County, Virginia, Jessee Vestal was a member of the Great Road tradition, best known for his stoneware vessels. His masterpiece, which dates to 1849, is a large, hand-inscribed brandy jug now on display at William King Museum of Art. Its face bears his name and an original poem:

*Long and lazy
little and loud
fair and foolish
dark and proud
a splendee branda jug*

The name Vestal is of French Huguenot origin, an altered form of Vassal, which conjures the *vessel*. As dust-born creatures, God makes His home with us by pouring out His spirit into these earthly bodies. The Author of life chose Jesse of Bethlehem to establish the house of David, the earthly conduit and vessel from which Christ would be born. Jessee of Vestal's craft as sub-creator is meaningful in small but significant ways. We have no way of knowing Jessee's lyrical intent, but he was most certainly writing not *merely* about the jug itself. The final line masks some deeper muse: perhaps the man that God, in His mercy, works to redeem. Little and loud, dark and proud we may yet be; but God's work in us is, in the end, quite splendee.

This Advent season, stop to remember your spiritual inheritance—the holiest Vessel from Whom we drink. Selah.

Chase Mitchell

December 1

In dark times of the heart when hope seems far away, you may have once said to yourself, “If I can just make it until (insert event here), then everything will be okay”. Or maybe you can recall a time when you desperately longed for a heavy burden to be lifted, an unbearable illness to end, or a more competent person to step in and fix all your dumb mistakes. We have all anxiously waited for these hollow rescues, these secular advents that give us just enough strength to keep plodding through life.

These days we grasp at so many of these flimsy lifelines: a better job, a stimulus check, a reduction in active infections, a political victory, a return to in-person classes, a vaccine perhaps. If 2020 has taught us anything it’s the feelings of waiting for rescue and of longing for deliverance. Our hearts might not be yearning in the proper direction, and we might be focused on the wrong advent. Let the church sing as one and remember the true deliverance together:

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|---|---|
| <i>Come, Thou long expected Jesus</i> | <i>Born Thy people to deliver,</i> |
| <i>Born to set Thy people free;</i> | <i>Born a child and yet a King,</i> |
| <i>From our fears and sins release</i> | <i>Born to reign in us forever,</i> |
| <i>us,</i> | <i>Now Thy gracious kingdom</i> |
| <i>Let us find our rest in Thee.</i> | <i>bring.</i> |
| <i>Israel's strength and consolation,</i> | <i>By Thine own eternal Spirit</i> |
| <i>Hope of all the earth Thou art;</i> | <i>Rule in all our hearts alone;</i> |
| <i>Dear desire of every nation,</i> | <i>By Thine all sufficient merit,</i> |
| <i>Joy of every longing heart.</i> | <i>Raise us to Thy glorious throne.</i> |

(Charles Wesley, 1707 – 1788)

Laura Ong



December 2

I never expected to have botany on my mind as I prepared my heart for the Advent season, but I've found myself thinking about a story of plants for the past week that's begging to be shared. This plant story came to me through an unexpected avenue, a virtual conference session geared towards cultivating "thriving" in schools. As the presenter elaborated on an experiment he was familiar with through the work of a friend, I was struck by the ways that the metaphor extends to what I want to meditate on this Christmas.

My third-hand, unprofessional reiteration of this experiment is as follows:

Some botanists wanted to learn new things about plants, so they set up a series of experiments to test the plants' abilities to survive encounters with toxins. In the first round of experiments, they placed one plant by itself in the middle of a room and it quickly succumbed to the toxins that were introduced. In the second round, the scientists filled the room with multiple plants that were evenly spread out and only the half that weren't exposed to the toxin survived. For the final round of experiments, the scientists again filled the room with multiple plants, but they positioned the plants so that all their leaves were touching. The results of the third experiment indicated that when the plants were touching, they were able to evenly disperse the toxins throughout each plant's system and every plant survived.

So what do plants and botanists and toxins have to teach us about Christmas? First, I think it's important to consider our toxins and botanists. What poisons our systems and how are we trying to fix it? For me in this season of caution and regulation, I've found myself neglecting to ask for help and expending all my energy trying to find my own solutions. I have been the plant in the same room as others, but defeated by separation. The wonder of this experiment and Christmas, however, is the promise that true thriving is found in the midst of abiding relationships. We are designed to be like the plants in the third experiment, connected and healthy as a community. Christmas brings the reminder that God sent his only son to come and dwell among us; to be leaf to leaf with us in this very way. As 1 John:14 reminds us, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Dwelling among one another may look different this year than ever before, but my Advent prayer for all of us is that we find new ways to be leaf to leaf, to share one another's burdens and disperse that which robs us of joy, and to cultivate thriving ecosystems built upon connection and communion, on earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.

Kathryn Welch

December 3

One of the lectionary readings for advent this year comes from 1st Thessalonians 5:16-24. It's the passage that begins "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus". Advent this year will be my first without my grandmother Emmons, so it seems appropriate that something I particularly admired about her was her ability to live in the "now and not yet".

Since my grandfather died five years ago, she had longed to reunite with him. The world seemed even less like home. Still, she stayed faithful in her calling. She found ways to rejoice each day. The adage, "preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words", certainly applied to her. She was always checking up on the many nieces and nephews who looked to her as the tether to memories of their parents, long deceased; she delighted with each detail from her grandchildren or great-grandchildren's days.

Even though she slowed down, she remained active and lived independently in her home. The day she died, she had begun to pull out her Christmas décor. She anticipated this season each year with joy and expectation, even as it grew harder to be one of the last in the Sunday School circle, the last of her siblings. At the holidays, her home filled with family—even though we were far flung. This year was going to be especially hard because of the pandemic, but that didn't stop her from preparing. She would welcome whomever came to her home to join her in joyful anticipation of Jesus's birth.

When my uncle and mom arrived, finding her peacefully at rest in her bed, they also found in the kitchen a cherry cobbler. She had cut one piece out, and enjoyed it before she went up to her room. I hope that as I wait in anticipation of the Lord's return, I will do so just as my grandmother did. May we faithfully rejoice in the calling to love our neighbors, enjoy the good gifts we have on earth like family, friends, and cobbler, and at the same time diligent prepare for Jesus's coming, longing for our true home, and ready to meet the Lord when called.

Katy Stigers

December 4

This year has been a year of many changes: time, people, and even the church. Our lives change BUT God never changes. God takes note of how we handle change like when we face discomfort or different roads traveled unlike before. Maybe our roads had ruts, and we were OK with those ruts; but God will be there to help us and smooth out the ruts.

God focuses on us—we focus on things. Let us strive to look beyond ourselves and go with God.

Winston Churchill said, “To improve is to change, so to be more perfect, we need to change often.”

Let us change more TO God and less TO us. The older I become, the more I know God is in control.

Guide us O Thou Great Jehovah.

Amen.

Karen Boone



December 5

When I was a girl, my parents were missionaries in the Philippines. Filipino Christmases always felt full of wonder, mystery, and reverence. The religious element seemed far more prevalent than Santa. Once, when I was very small, my Dad carried me on his shoulders through the crowds in downtown Manila, not to watch a Christmas parade, but to watch a live performance of the nativity. I remember the greetings of “Maligayang Pasko,” or “Merry Christmas,” and the playful neighborhood caroling, and the tossing of candy and coins in the street, all of which filled me with a glowing comfort and sense of belonging.

One particular Christmas eve, my best friend and her sister—my sister’s best friend—stopped by our house unexpectedly. Their younger brother, who was just a toddler, was very sick with hemorrhagic fever, and they needed a place to stay while their parents went to the hospital. This was a serious crisis for their family, but for my sister and I, the prospect of getting to spend Christmas with our best friends thrilled us beyond measure. It confirmed what we had always hoped to be true, that these friends were our family. Our parents let us play and sing at the top of our lungs; they shared in our silliness and allowed us to celebrate in a way that felt freer than ever before. When it came time to open just one gift, my sister and I each gave up a present for our friend. Our joy was full. As the evening neared midnight, our friends’ parents arrived. Their brother was going to be okay, and they were going home.

This memory stands out as one of my truest Christmases—true because in sharing the night with our friends, both in joy and in trouble, we felt a new and surprising sense of togetherness. Even our small sacrifice of giving up a gift was, in itself, a gift. It was not some ascetic act of contrition, but an abundance of love. Our friends’ parents’ willingness to be open about their need was exemplary in its honesty and vulnerability. Our parent’s willingness to make room for a few more kids, even on a sacred family night, extended our family.

In the Advent season, we anticipate the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, of having our joy and love and peace fully realized, even—especially—in times of crisis. We long to be pulled out of our confusion, fear, and aloneness—long for the reassurance that we are safe and connected. Even in difficult times, we have cause for celebration. Prayer: *Let us know and experience Emmanuel. Let us abide in the love of God, following the example of Jesus, even in times of trouble, so that our joy may be full. Let that joy express itself in gifts of love and friendship towards our neighbors. Let us be surprised, overjoyed, and full of celebration at Your presence in our lives. Thank you. Amen.*

Maribel Story

December 6

In Matthew 2 we read that the wise men traveled to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” *His* star. They found Jesus because *his* star pointed to where he was.

During his time on earth, Jesus often talked about light. He said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

One of my favorite authors writes: “The Christmas story really is a light story. No, not the lights that decorate the city where you live, the lights that you have carefully hung on the tree in your living room, or the candles that you have placed in your windows. No, this story is about the light coming into a world that had been sadly cast into darkness. Under the burden of the shroud of rebellion and sin, the world had become a dark place. In the darkness of immorality, injustice, violence, greed, self-righteousness, thievery, racism, and a host of other ills, the world was desperate for light....”*

This 2020 world seems especially desperate for light. In Jesus, we have the light of life. Through his grace, Jesus also calls *us, his followers*, to be light: “You are the light of the world.... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16).

By God’s grace that transforms us, we can choose to look up and follow the light, just like the wise men. This Christmas season, and every other day of the coming year, may your story and mine be a light story.

Dear God, by your grace, help us to be the light that you call us to be. Let our light point to you, Jesus, to the glory of your Name.

Peggy Hill

*Tripp, Paul David. *New Morning Mercies; a Daily Gospel Devotional*. Crossway, 2014. (December 24 entry)

December 7

*There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has **just** been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: A baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger." At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: **Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.** As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over, "Let's go over to Bethlehem **as fast as we can** to see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." Luke 2:8-15 ("The Message")*

Can you imagine being one of the "shepherders" and "talking it over," each remembering a snippet of what just happened? Each one processing what they saw, heard, and felt?

Imagine night's darkness was broken by God's blazing glory and His angel proclaiming Good News. Just as quickly, the pitch black of the night returned to that field, yet the shepherders had a new perspective: the "darkness" was no more, thanks to the promise of peace embodied in a Savior just born in the neighborhood! Nothing was going to get in the Shepherders' way to see this baby wrapped in a blanket in a manger! Their lives would never be the same. The world would never be the same.

In the midst of life's darkest nights Peace, Hope, and Love await us at the manger. Let us, too, **go as fast as WE can** to see for ourselves!!

John Vann



December 8

We are often wrapped up in the materialistic season of Christmas and forget the ultimate reason we are celebrating. There are shiny gifts, delicious desserts, Christmas movies, snowmen, ugly sweaters, Santa Claus, lights, etc. These things can make the Christmas to-do list miles long. When this list becomes too long, Christmas begins to lose its purpose and becomes a stressful season of checklists, but is that really what Christmas is all about?

In the book of Luke, there were two women, Mary and Martha. One day Jesus and his disciples came to their house to stay. Martha became busy with all the preparations. I imagine her making a long mental to-do list. She needed to clean the house, prepare the food, make room for Jesus and his disciples to sleep, etc. While she was working hard, Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him teach. Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her with all the preparations. Jesus replied, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. Only one thing is important. Mary has chosen the better thing, and it will never be taken away from her." (Luke 10:41-42)

I imagine Jesus having to say Martha's name twice because she was so distracted by her to-do list and He needed her full attention. He tells her that all the extra little worries of the to-do list are unimportant. By trying to make room for Jesus, she was too distracted for Jesus. Decorating the house, making desserts, and wrapping presents are all designed to celebrate Jesus, but when they become the most important priority, we become like Martha. Jesus asks us to be like Mary and not be distracted by the little details to miss the whole picture.

The true meaning of Christmas is not about the to-do lists; instead, it is about the togetherness of celebrating an incredible God. The first Christmas did not have materialistic things but was in a stable filled with people praising God's gift to us, Jesus. God sent his Son into the world to show us love and pay the ultimate price for our sins. In this festival season, do not let the to-do list distract you from remembering the True Meaning of Christmas. I wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season!

Bailey Bechtold

December 9

No Cookies in the Freezer! by Millicent Hoffner

Every year, when Christmas was right on my heels, I engaged fully in the Grand Rush. 4 a.m. sales, 800+ cookies, half a dozen or more church activities. You get the idea. One year something happened. I felt like a crashing plane but didn't know where I'd land. Long story short, in the past few years [this was written in Dec. '06] I've spent numerous weeks in facilities for some type of mental illness. In 2005 I was hospitalized for 5 weeks, coming home 2 days before Christmas. I learned a valuable lesson. I'd had no TV, no holiday music, no decorations. My family sent flowers and a singing snowman. I considered it my "Little McAdenville."

I kept reading the Christmas story until I found a serene, quiet place. It contained no shopping ads or tales of parties and cookie-baking marathons. Our Savior was born in a humble stable. The only light was the star announcing his birth, streaming its light right on Baby Jesus. This hospital stay made me catch the real sense of Christmas. We all need to keep Jesus on our Christmas list. Christmas comes with no cookies in the freezer!

Note from Selma: Millicent is a friend of the Jenningses at Thyatira Presbyterian Church, Salisbury NC. We still receive the Thyatira newsletter. I was so touched by this piece that I clipped and filed it. Recently I "just happened" to run across it. I called and got her permission to include it, a bit condensed, in FPC's Advent booklet. She and husband Jimmy are still active at Thyatira. She is a spokesman for openness about mental illness. She has a special heart for children.

Selma Jennings

December 10

Please read Psalm 96

Since we were limited in our ability to gather together this year in response to the pandemic, I've been preparing an online Psalms Bible study almost every week. Traditionally, this 96th Psalm is read Christmas eve, but it is wonderful anytime. It comes as part of a collection of Psalms that invite our thanksgiving for what God is doing through praising, singing, and ascribing or telling others. An incredible image for me of all these things taking place is our traditional Christmas eve service of worship. Music is offered through orchestral instruments, a magnificent pipe organ, a multi-voiced choir all of which invites singing and praising. The sanctuary is packed with members, guests, individuals and families, while candles flicker and set an atmosphere of expectation. The energy and excitement for Christmas day is palpable.....but what if we can't gather together, can't offer or hear incredible music, fail to continue our heartfelt worship traditions, all because of a microscopic virus? Well, the gift for me offered in this 96th Psalm is the reminder that praise, honor and exaltation is already and will continue to be offered by creation. "The heavens are glad, the sea is roaring, the fields are exalting along with everything in them. The trees in the forest sing for joy. They know and invite me, invite us, to similarly respond knowing that the Lord is coming to judge the world with righteousness and truth. The only choice I have is... will I participate, sing, declare, tell of God's love, bring an offering and worship God, or will I simply watch it take place around me? These are the only 2 choices, especially in Advent as we wait...

.....Excuse me now, I've got to go **SING** and join in the celebration.

Dave Welch



December 11 & 12

WE LOVE JESUS & JESUS LOVES US!
WE REJOICE ON CHRISTMAS DAY FOR HIS BIRTH!
WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR ALL OUR FRIENDS WHO
SHOW US KINDNESS & JESUS'S LOVE AT
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -

Patty King

JANE IS

Michael Bryant

Scott D. Sams

THANK YOU LORD JESUS -

Chris Winter

Joyann Evans

Porter

Hilary

Violet Lansley

Deborah Whitaker

Flara Mae Turner

December 13

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. [The Son] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. – Hebrews 1:1-3 (ESV)

I come back to this thought every Christmas: We can't understand God, really. The cute little Baby in the manger is God's Son – 100% human and 100% God. Our math teachers said correctly, in the world's reality, that 100% is totality. That's not the spiritual reality, though. The Bible makes clear that Jesus was totally God and totally human. One of many mysteries of God.

When I see the nativity scenes, with Mary and Joseph looking adoringly at Baby Jesus, I reflect on what they must have been thinking. After all, they had been visited by angels (angels!), who told them that this baby would be God's Son. Were they thinking about that as they wrapped him in cloths and laid him in an animal feeding trough? Or were they just trying to get through it all?

Many accounts tell us that, although angels and prophets and Jesus himself told all those people who he was and what he had agreed to undergo, nobody could fully accept those realities at the time. I wonder if we actually do today. They worried 2,000 years ago, and we worry today, letting it slip from our consciousness who Jesus is. We sometimes forget that he's in control of every time and place, and works everything for good.

Let's look at the manger in these Holy Days and remember that the Baby we see is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" and that he "upholds the universe by the word of his power." That includes us. Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Father, through the Holy Spirit's power, let us remember every day that Jesus is in control and will supply sufficient grace for our lives. Let us live out that reality in everything we do, in this season and all year. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Dottie Havlik

December 14

In Luke 1:26-38, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary to bring news about the Messiah, who she will bring into the world. In verse 32, I stopped to ponder the angel Gabriel's words, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." I asked myself, *What does it mean that He will be "great"?* "Great" is probably the most overused word in my vocabulary and such a ubiquitous adjective in general, so it seemed unworthy to describe the *Messiah* for whom the Jews had been waiting centuries. But God reminded me of scriptures that express His greatness in *countless* ways, just a few examples being:

- **Exodus 3:14** - When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and says, "I AM WHO I AM. And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.' "
- **2 Kings 6:16-17** - The prophet Elisha's servant is struck with fear when he sees the enemy's chariots and horses, but Elisha prays and the servant's eyes are opened to see the mountain *filled* with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.
- **Isaiah 6:1** - "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple."

These stories express God's greatness more than any synonym ever could. I was trying to apply analogies from my mortal existence to the God of the universe, and those could *never* stand up to the utter greatness of God that's so fully expressed in His Word.

When we stop and seriously ponder these simple questions about God's character, we're reminded that we still haven't figured Him out. God stopped me for a reason at the word "great." He knew that in this season I needed to be renewed in my thinking. I needed to be reminded that King Jesus, *I AM*, is on the throne and firmly in control, and He is coming again one day.

Geneva King

December 15

People are running to a dead line. Hurry up! Hurry up! Time is of the essence. Only 10 more shopping days until Christmas, and the people race to the bargain counter, do away with lunch so we can get the shopping done, race down the street with the car to get to the parking place. There is a dead line; the stores will close at 6 p.m. December 24, or some such time. We are living with a dead line.

Dead line for what? Is this the one time in our life when we express love to other people? Are we afraid that unless we find the most expensive present we will not be loved by our children? Is this the ultimate end of our expression of love for the year? Dead line for what?

We live as though our faith is at an end, instead of celebrating why it began. We act as though our faith is seasonal, our faith is on the upgrade for a month, and then we will let it slide down to normal in the next few days after Christmas. We act as though this is the only time in the year when we should love our children. We act as though the amount of debts we accumulate during the Christmas is a criterion of our faith. Is this the dead line of thinking of our friends? Many people act like it.

It was a dead line, but of a different nature. God had attempted to reveal Himself in all forms of nature, laws and mankind, and finally it came to the place where He must send His only Son. This was a dead line for humanity, the opportunity to accept or reject. This was the dead line; it was God's dead line, not ours.

As we count the days to Christmas, maybe we should count our blessings instead of our worries. It is very interesting to count our blessings during the Christmas season because, all of a sudden, we realize that God is a blessing to all mankind. Let's slow down and live our faith.

Grant unto us the strength of faith we need to overcome the commercialism of the Christmas season. Amen.

**Roy Connor (father of John Connor);
reproduced from a 1967 Hollywood Sun-Tattler (FL) column**

December 16

One day during the long COVID summer of 2020, I found myself feeling melancholy. So I went to my piano and let my fingers wander over the keys. Before long a haunting tune began to emerge. All my life I have found it easy to create new tunes. But creating meaningful texts is just the opposite. So I searched for an existing text that would fit. I had four phrases each 11 syllables long, or 11-11-11-11. Not many texts have that metrical pattern. None of the texts I found made any sense – except for one. It was an Advent text about the unusual encounter between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. This text was written by Scottish poet and musician John Bell, with whom 20 years ago I had the privilege of taking a private hymn-writing lesson. There is nothing wrong with John's tune. But now that I hear John's text married to my 2020 tune, I just can't hear it any other way. I shared it with a friend who said, "Your tune captures the unsettled nature of the event—it's a good match." I hope to record this hymn and put it on our church's YouTube site for all to hear, as well as sing it for worship this Advent season.

*No wind at the window, no knock on the door;
No light from the lampstand, no foot on the floor;
No dream born of tiredness, no ghost raised by fear:
Just an angel and a woman and a voice in her ear.*

*"O Mary, O Mary, don't hide from my face.
Be glad that you're favored and filled with God's grace.
The time for redeeming the world has begun,
And you are requested to mother God's Son."*

*"This child must be born that the kingdom might come:
Salvation for many, destruction for some;
Both end and beginning, both message and sign;
Both victor and victim, both yours and divine."*

*No payment was promised, no promises made;
No wedding was dated, no blueprint displayed.
Yet Mary, consenting to what none could guess,
Replied with conviction, "Tell God I say, Yes."*

Bob Greene

December 17

Luke 2:25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation...

Simeon, a man advanced in years, had one final hope; waiting for the consolation of Israel, a promise from the Lord, delivered by the Holy Spirit.

When that hope was realized, Simeon knew this life had been made as complete, and was ready to pass to the next.

When Advent returns and we celebrate the birth of our Lord and savior, I wish to see my life and our posterity with the clarity, and simplicity that Simeon did. What Simeon recognized as "the Consolation of Israel" and "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" should serve as a consolation for me, especially during this season. Instead, will I once again be distracted by deadlines and consumed with travel plans, sidetracked by the latest flash sale? In this season of hope, during this very strange year, I want to spend more of my energy thinking about this Consolation and Light for revelation, than on the transient and temporal things of our lives and our culture. I pray that my eyes will be fixed upon the salvation that was ushered in by that infant, whose birth we celebrate during this season.

Prayer: Dear Lord, draw my thoughts and my heart to your son, whose arrival into the world we celebrate during this Advent season.

John Graham

December 18

Walking in Darkness

Isaiah 9.2: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”

It may sound curious, but it’s true: there is no season of the Church’s liturgy more counter-cultural than Advent. From its sixth-century origins, Advent has been a season of darkness, a time of solemnity. By contrast, our cultural season starts with Black Friday, which is about as far from solemnity and darkness as we can imagine, and it just gets brighter and brighter.

It wasn’t always so hard to see Advent as a season of darkness. For those of us in the northern hemisphere, the days are getting shorter, the nights swallowing more and more light as we move toward midwinter. The western church starts the season on the Sunday nearest St Andrews Day (November 30), and traditionally enjoined fasting three days a week until Christmas. Such disciplines, such physical darkness, accentuated the light to come in a way that we just can’t replicate.

So how can we mark the darkness and waiting of Advent in a season of parties and shopping and bright, bright lights? I’m not suggesting for a moment that we remove ourselves from a time of joy and love, much of which honors Jesus. But maybe this year of all years, it’s easier to walk in darkness. If we even have parties, they’ll be masked and distant; the shopping will be online; the lights will be dimmed by pandemic and civil strife and an overwhelming longing for peace.

If we walk in darkness, we’ll find that we aren’t alone; we’ll find others who are suffering, weary, and desperate for the light. With them, we wait, we fast, we yearn for Immanuel. And from the deep darkness, we’ll see just how great the Light is.

Martin Dotterweich

December 19

What was I thinking when I said I would write an Advent devotional this year? What would I say? 2020 has been a year like none other. As I pondered all that has happened, these things came to mind.

Turmoil: “Jehoshaphat cried out to the Lord and proclaimed, “You will hear and deliver us. We do not know which way to turn but our eyes are on you.”” – II Chronicles 20:9

Testing: “In this world you will have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world.” – John 16:33

Time to Trust:

“This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope,
The Lord’s lovingkindnesses never cease, For His compassions never fail,
They are new every morning.” – Lamentations 3:21-23

“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” – Proverbs 3:5

As we reflect upon the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we know that Mary and Joseph faced many unknowns. “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall have a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which means, “God with us.”” – Matthew 1:23

AMEN!

Sandra Grubbs



December 20

As I sit and think about what I want to write about for this year's advent devotion, I find myself coming back to meditate on Romans 8. Though it is such a well-read chapter, I am finding myself more and more in this season needing to return to the well-known parts of my faith. I am looking back at parts of my bible that have had highlighter marks on them since I was in middle school to find comfort, rest, and a peace that well and truly surpasses all my understanding. I have been through seasons in which I felt called to wrestle with my faith and ask complicated questions. I have been through seasons in which my faith feels tested, yet I know there will be new growth. But this season seems to be calling me back to the heart of what I know to be true, to the parts of my faith that are its foundation.

Usually I am very hesitant to use collective pronouns when talking about personal experience, but in this case I feel confident in saying the last few months of *our* lives have been nothing if not tumultuous. There have been heartaches, uncertainties, and confusion around every turn. To the point that when I turn to pray, I no longer know what to ask for. So much of my life right now feels like the wordless groan, but I find truth in the words of this chapter. All of creation groans alongside us in expectation:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” - Romans 8:22-26

We wait patiently and expectantly for the joy that is to come, and which we know we have already received through the gift that appeared on Christmas morning. Advent means *arrival*. This is *The Arrival*. Though all of creation might be groaning, the weary world rejoices, for the arrival of our salvation, our peace, our hope, and our joy is upon us.

Abby Welch

December 21

The Christmas season is “supposed to be” full of joy. Many Christmas cards arrive with wishes for Joy and Peace. What if one has suffered the loss of a family member during this month or sometime earlier? Grief and loss can grab us unexpectedly and throttle our enthusiasm for celebration of our Savior’s arrival. December 21 is a date like that for me. I lost my Mom on that date many years ago. “Get over it” some would say but how? Isn’t that too glib? What actions can a Christian take? First, put one foot in front of the other, go to church; second, read God’s Word and listen to saints you trust in the church. In the new year, Dick Ray preached on Joseph, his shabby treatment by his own jealous brothers, Joseph being sold into Egypt, and his ultimate rise to power when his brothers came years later looking for food during a famine in Canaan. This story illustrates our shortsightedness in life and death struggles.

Later, in a private conversation, Lila Ray told me a favorite verse from the same story. (Genesis 50:15) Joseph told his brothers, “you meant this for harm, but God meant this for good.” His relationship with his family was restored! This story and verse reminds us that God is in control of our lives even when we see no possible way for good and even feel harmed by our circumstances. We can be reassured that God loves us beyond our knowing and his precious love will always surprise and sustain us. On December 21, many years later, my son Matthew and his wife, Jill, presented us with their first child, our third grandchild. What an illustration of the circle of life and God’s love

Billie Whisnant

December 22

Matthew 16:13-28 Peter confessed to Christ, “You are the Christ, Son of the Living God”. Jesus replied to Peter, “Blessed are you, for the Father has revealed this to you, and upon you I will build my church.” Jesus then began teaching his disciples about His coming suffering and crucifixion when Peter spoke up again saying, “God forbid it, This shall never happen to You!” Jesus rebuked Him, “Stop being a stumbling block you are setting your mind on man’s interest, not God’s. If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.”

This reminds me of the story of the chicken and the pig who were discussing opening a restaurant together. “What should we call it?” asks the pig. The chicken replied, “I don’t know... how about Bacon and Eggs?” I am not sure what the pig said from there, but safe to say, I believe their partnership was terminated.

C. S. Lewis writes in the *Weight of Glory*, “This is my temptation: to go down to that Sea and there neither dive nor swim nor float, but only dabble and splash, careful not to get out of my depth and holding on to the lifeline which connects me with things temporal. We are like honest but reluctant taxpayers. We approve of an income tax and make our returns truthfully. But we dread a rise in the tax. We are very careful to pay no more than is necessary. And we hope that after we have paid it there will still be enough left to live on. “

Is this not us? We long to go to Christ, the vast depth of joy and knowledge, but want only the minuscule amount we can handle. It is like going to the ice cream store only to taste the free samples because we do not want to pay for the whole cone. We long for happiness, yet we are unwilling to undergo the transformation to bring about true joy. We are (as C.S. Lewis states) half-hearted creatures. Focusing on our own finite desires when infinite joy is offered, far too easily pleased. We worry that giving up everything will cost the very lives we have worked so hard to build, and we may just be right...

As we look to this Advent season, what is the cost of discipleship?

Chase Arndt

December 23

Labor. It's been a theme this year. Not only because of the literal labor I went through in early May, but 2020 has been one long, strange laborious year. What a hope filled way to start this devotional, right? ☺

I'm sure many of you can relate to struggles with new types of loneliness as in-person events have shifted to virtual ones. Or perhaps you've dealt with the anxiety and fear due to politics or increased complexities with COVID. How do we keep others safe? How do we go about our daily routines? How do we deal with financial struggles due to lack of work? How do we interact with those we care for or even begin to guess how comfortable someone is in gathering with us in person? Between those few aspects alone, we have reason to be battered and worn. As human beings designed for community, this is hard.

This season has given me real opportunity to ponder Mary's thoughts and feelings. The words the angel spoke made absolutely no sense. A baby conceived by the Holy Spirit? Seriously? How would she explain this to her friends and family? Yet, with a steady and faithful heart she responds, "I am God's servant. May it be to me according to your word." Even with her steady heart, I imagine Mary struggled with loneliness and doubt often. There was no one who could fully understand her situation. Thankfully, Elizabeth and Joseph were given signs to confirm the angel's words. But there was still the awkwardness and embarrassment of trying to explain her situation to others, first time labor anxiety, not to mention riding a donkey in your last week of pregnancy. Yikes! She had no tangible assurances, no doula, no birthing tub, hospital or hotel room. The only thing left was her faith that the Lord himself was with her. There was simply no way to rest in or know how things might go.

Mary would deliver and labor for the very Way Maker himself. In all the darkness that surrounded them in a stable, God was bringing forth his rescuing plan for us. Mary's labor was beautiful and purposeful. Through our own doubting and uncertainty, we can put our hope in the One who has cared for us too, even before our mothers' labored on our behalf. We don't have to know how things may go. As Oswald Chambers once wrote, "Faith never knows where it is being led, but it knows and loves the One who is leading." May it be so with us in this advent season!

Audrey Arndt

December 24

My mother had the wittiest and silliest sense of humor, and I like to think she passed it to me. She loved puns and word play, but she also had a mile-wide goofy streak. Some of my favorite stories about her involve times when she gave restaurants false surnames just to hear them shouted aloud, or when she'd sing to workers in drive-thrus because they reminded her of a Broadway song. But, one of the best is a Christmas story. Every year on Christmas Eve, our choir sang the same arrangement of Psalm 96.

Here is how one line was supposed to read: "Let the land and all *it* bears rejoice."

Here is how my mother would always sing it: "Let the land and all *its* bears rejoice."

She'd quietly slip that extra "s" in there, just because she liked the mental image of a bear rejoicing on Christmas. I don't remember when she started doing that, but it soon became our Christmas ritual. Whether we were sitting together in choir or if I was acolyting or in the congregation, she'd always lock eyes with me and smile, just enough so I knew she was singing about bears again.

This year is my first without that ritual. What used to be my favorite time of year is now uncharted territory since my mother lost her battle with cancer in July. That little tradition, nestled among others, has had its time. As we approach the beginning of Advent, a season of waiting and preparing for the joy of Christmas just doesn't feel right anymore. And yet...

I have often been asked if losing my mother (especially in 2020) has shaken my faith, but my response has always been the same: If I'm to survive this grief, I've *got* to believe that I will see her again.

This year is different for me, as it is and has been for so many before me; yet, I am grateful for a season to faithfully wait – both for Christ's coming and for the time that Mom and I will rejoice with the bears again.

Mary Ellis Rice

December 25

Your own reflection of Advent goes here.



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