

Prepare the Way of the Lord

A Devotion Guide

prepared by

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for the members and friends of

*Friendship United Methodist Church
Sherman, Texas*

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Introduction

It is my pleasure to offer you this devotion book for Advent, 2009. For those who have journeyed through Advent with me in the past, the format of this book will be familiar. For those who take this journey for the first time, there may be a few surprises.

The devotions contained herein will help you focus on the coming of Christ and prepare yourselves to receive the love of God as it comes in the Holy Infant. Each meditation is followed by a short prayer, intended to form the basis of your prayer life for the day. Since our faith is not vital until it results in action, each day's reflection concludes with a way in which you can act out your faith that day.

I suggest that you set aside time each day to spend in the scripture reading, reflection and prayer. Some will want to do this in private, while others may find it useful as a time of family devotion. Early morning may be a good time for some, while late evening may be better for others. Whatever model fits your routine best, I encourage you to discipline yourself to use the time daily, taking you through the journey of preparation step by step.

Even if you choose to do the devotions in private, you may want to use them as a framework for a prayer or study group in which you participate. Or you may want to form such group for this Advent season. The point is, this is your book, intended to lead you into a more meaningful celebration of the Christmas season. I hope that you find as much joy in using this book as I have found in preparing it.

Grace and Peace,

Roy

Week 1 – Prepare the Way in Our Hearts

Sunday

November 29

Luke 21:34-36

34 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

Jesus invited his followers to refocus their hearts, to cast off those things that burden the heart in their daily lives in favor of dependence on and devotion to God. By emptying out the daily concerns and diversions, they were making room for God to enter into their hearts. The way they refocused was by "watching:" living in anticipation of God's grace.

As we begin to prepare for Christmas, we all know how easy it is to get distracted by all the things that need to be done. There never seems to be enough time to get everything finished. Even our life of prayer and devotion can get interrupted by the demands on our time. Yet we also know that when we make time for God, it is always a blessing for us. When we make time for God, our whole day is refocused, enabling us to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom as we make God and God's word a priority for our daily routine. Making time is an intentional effort: no-one else will make the time for us. We must make a conscious decision that God will have a place in our Christmas preparations.

Lord, invade the busy-ness of my life during this holy season and direct my attention to you. Chase away the distractions so that I may see you in a new light. Amen.

Plan your schedule for the next four weeks to include a time each day to read, reflect, pray and act, opening up your heart to God.

Mark 4:1-9

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. ²He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' ⁹And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

The parable of the sower is one of the first that Jesus offered to the disciples. Their lack of comprehension led Jesus to explain the parable so that they (and we) can understand. The seed is God's Word and the soil is our hearts: only hearts rich and ready bring forth the fruit of God's desire. The Word of God that falls on unprepared soil cannot thrive and flourish and seldom brings forth any fruit at all.

As we move through this first week of Advent, our task is to till the soil of our hearts in order to make them rich for the planting of God's Word. We do this by looking inward and examining what's inside. That means that we take a prayerful look at what is important to us, the feelings we have toward others and the way we spend our time. It is also an opportunity for us to set our priorities and open ourselves to God's Word in a new way. If someone asked you, what would you say is in your heart: a hard path, rocks, weeds or fertile soil?

Lord, as I begin my season of preparation, help me to see the truth about myself. Plant the seed of your Word into my heart that it may flourish and grow and bring forth fruit in its season, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Plant, buy or find a flower to set on your table as a reminder of the grace God plants in your heart.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah announced a new age and a new covenant. The radical nature of this announcement cannot be taken lightly. Unlike the covenant of old, which was based on national identity and faithfulness, this new covenant was to be individual. No longer did faithfulness to God center on what happened in and with the nation Israel. In this new covenant, each person would enter into his or her own relationship with God, and God would enter into their hearts to be eternally present in their lives.

Surely we are concerned about God's relationship with the world and the faith of others inspires and uplifts us. Yet it is God's covenant with us that makes a difference in the way we live our lives. We learn from others and are guided by their counsel and advice, but faith is a private matter. There must come a time in our lives when we proclaim with John Wesley "I felt my heart strangely warmed in the realization that Christ died for me, even me." We come to understand that my faith is my responsibility: if I don't take care of my own faith and faithfulness, no-one else will. How would you express your personal faith in God?

Lord, in this season of your coming, help me to know you in a new way. Make your Word personal to me and let me know the strength of your love that saves even me. Amen.

Take a few minutes to express in writing what you understand your covenant with God to be.

Psalm 25:4-10

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.*

⁵ *Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.*

⁶ *Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.*

⁷ *Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!*

⁸ *Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.*

⁹ *He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.*

¹⁰ *All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

This Psalm is one of the great praise passages of the Bible. The Psalmist calls for God to guide him in his journey, to lead him down the proper path and to teach him God's ways. Note also that it includes a confession and a plea for forgiveness. By turning from the sins of his youth, the psalmist is emptying himself of the burdens and concerns of the past, all in anticipation of God's leading presence in the current and future moments of his life.

In order to be renewed and guided in the future, we must let go of the past. Our journey begins with our confession, emptying our hearts of the burden of guilt in order that they might be filled with grace. When we find God's forgiveness, we feel the burden of our sinfulness lifted, a weight removed from our shoulders, and discover a new freedom to embrace the joys of the moment and look hopefully to our future. Forgiveness is more than an act that secures our destiny: it frees us to know and love God in a new way. What is the guilt that you are carrying around in your heart?

*Lord, forgive me. Forgive me of the sins of my youth and sins of my adulthood; the sins I have freely committed and those I have unwittingly embraced; the things I have done and the things that I have failed to do. In your forgiveness, help me to find a new freedom as the burden of my guilt is lifted.
Amen*

Set aside some time today to sit alone, in silence, listening for the voice of God.

I Thessalonians 3:6-13

But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. ⁷For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. ⁸For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. ⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Paul's desire to see his friends at Thessalonica led him to offer them up in his prayers. Separated by distance and time and unsure that he would ever see these saints, his thoughts were of them and their well-being, of their faith and their love. He prayed that God would open their hearts to receive the grace of God without shame and without blame. His love for the people was obvious in his hope and in the words of his prayer.

While we focus our thoughts on our own need for preparation during Advent, we are also led to think of others, especially those struggling for faith and meaning in their lives. The Christmas season brings memories of those that we love, some of whom are close to us, others who are far away. We remember the love we feel for them and the joy we have in being together. We also remember their struggles for faith and the pain we all experience in our separation. Who are those people in your life and what could you do to help them in their struggles?

Lord, I always feel a bit of emptiness at Christmas, brought on by missing the love of those that I cannot be with. I pray for them, that you might enter into their lives today, to aid them in their struggle and guide them in their journey of faith, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Write a note to someone you miss to let him or her know that you are offering prayers of support and encouragement.

Friday

Matthew 5:21-24

December 4

21 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

These oft-quoted words of Jesus put his whole ministry in perspective: even more important than acts of personal devotion is the need to heal the relationships of our lives. As a part of Matthew's presentation of the Sermon on the Mount, this passage leads us to understand that our relationship with God is expressed in our relationship with others and that we are hard pressed to say we love God when we do not love those around us. Indeed, loving our neighbors seems to be a pathway to loving God.

Preparing our hearts to receive the grace of God leads us to break down the barriers that separate us from others and mend the relationships that have been broken. In this way we also begin to approach the altar of God, ready to offer the gift of our praise and receive the gift of grace. Animosity we hold toward others forms a barrier that stands between us and God. Similarly, when we carry a burden of separation from others, it is hard for us to feel the closeness of God. By bringing healing and reconciliation to our relationships with others, we are better able to understand and accept God's reconciling love. What are the relationships that you need to mend and the barriers you need to break down?

Lord, take away the anger I feel toward others and help me to find a new love for them. Then open my heart to receive your new gift of love, offered in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Do something today that will lead to the healing of a broken relationship.

Luke 21:25-28

'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Too often we read these words and focus on the horrible things that are envisioned, but this passage is not about shaping the future: it is about living our lives in the present in a manner that will enable us to see God's grace when it comes. The anticipated events struck fear in the hearts of the people, a fear of God's wrath and a fear of their physical suffering, but Jesus invited the people not to find their motivation in fear, but in the anticipation of God's grace. Instead of hanging their heads in sorrow and grief, Jesus invited them to look up and see God coming.

Throughout this week we have been reflecting on ways to prepare our hearts. Perhaps the most important means of preparation is taking our eyes off of the rocky ground of our journey in order to see the grace that comes to us. Only by focusing our eyes on the horizon can we begin to see our destination. While it is true that each journey begins with a single step, if we only focus on the steps we take, we may find ourselves running in circles. Where is your journey taking you during this Advent season?

Lord, help me to look past the fear of tomorrow and find the hope of your eternity. Instead of the rocks that litter my path, help me to see the stairs that lead to your Kingdom. In your grace, guide my steps that I may find the end of my journey in you. Amen.

Make plans today that will help you make Christmas morning a time of devotion, focusing on the grace of God.

Week 2 – Prepare the Way In Our Lives
December 6

Sunday

Luke 1:67-79

Zechariah was jubilant with the birth of his son, a gift of God's grace, long hoped for by him and his wife Elizabeth. Not only was this new son a gift to his parents: he would become God's gift to all the people of Israel, to announce the coming of God's love and grace. In the inspiration of the moment, Zechariah prophesied of the life that John would lead and the mission he was to fulfill. The envisioned ministry was that of leading the people to the kingdom of God, "to give light to those who sit in darkness and ... to guide our feet into the way of peace."

As we anticipate the birth of Jesus, we find it to be more than an occasion for sentimentality and fond memories: it is the fulfillment of God's promise. Just as John paved the way for Jesus and led people to the light of God's Kingdom, so we anticipate God's leading in our lives. In this season of preparation, we begin to open our lives to the leading of God's Spirit, knowing that God will guide our steps and lead us to new light. What does being "Led by the Spirit" mean to you? What is the darkness out of which you need to be led?

Lord, as John came long ago to announce your presence, help me hear the message of your coming again today. Help me to accept your guidance and know the strength of your Spirit as I prepare my life for your presence again. Amen.

In your worship today, listen for the voice of God that seeks to lead you.

Monday

December 7

Malachi 3:1-4

The most powerful image from this small work of the prophet Malachi is that of the refiner's fire. The fire burns hot to liquefy the precious metal and burn away that which is useless. Out of the intense, transforming heat comes the power to transform the ordinary substance of rocks into the prized metal that can be worked into a thing of beauty. In the same way, God's judgment comes to refine the righteousness of the people and burn away their sinfulness.

We often think of God's judgment as a harsh, destructive force, but Malachi helps us to understand that the purpose of judgment is purification, not destruction. The end result of God's judgment is our righteousness and lives that are rendered precious in God's sight. To prepare our lives for the Christ child means to allow God to purify us, to burn away that which conceals the goodness within our lives. But the refiner's fire doesn't always mean that we face tragedy or pain and suffering: it means that God works within us to transform the ordinary and common part of our lives into the precious gold of faith that is God's gift to us. What is the gold in your life, and what can you do to bring forth that gold?

Lord, in this season of preparation, help me to discover the gold within and reveal to me the faith that is often hidden; for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Do something today that utilizes your gifts for God's Kingdom.

Tuesday
Luke 3:1-6

December 8

John's message is simple and clear: prepare the way of the Lord. The image is that of cutting a road through the wilderness: making the path straight, raising up the low spots and cutting down the high, all to make the road smooth. Of course, we understand this to be John's ministry, announcing the arrival of God's grace, opening the door to the life and ministry of Jesus by calling people to accountability and to repentance.

Our preparation includes cutting a road for Jesus through the wilderness of our lives. To do this we focus our eyes on the destination in order to control our wandering, raise up the low places in our faith to provide added strength, and take down the obstacles that would hinder our journey. That means that we bolster the weak places in our faith by concentrating on our growth, discipline ourselves to avoid those things that distract us from our journey of faith, and that we allow God's vision to be the prime motivator for all that we do. What needs to be built up in your faith? What impediments to faith do you need to clear away?

Lord, I want to prepare a path for you, but I know that I am weak and that my efforts are sometimes inadequate. For today, give me the wisdom to know what needs to be done and the strength to do it, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Think of someone you know who is new to the Christian faith and do something today to support him or her in the journey of discovery.

Wednesday

December 9

Joshua 24:14-15

The impassioned plea of Joshua stands as an ensign for faith: the people had to choose in whom they would place their trust and whom they would serve. For Joshua, the decision was clear: he could serve none other than the God who had led them from captivity in Egypt, journeyed with them in the wilderness, and led them to the gates of the Promised Land. He chose to serve God because God had remained faithful and had given so much.

While we clearly would favor Joshua's decision and even claim that decision as our own, we must also be aware that, in spite of what we say, our actions often contradict our intentions. Knowing what to do, even wanting to do it, is only the first step in following God in our worship and in our actions. To serve God is a daily decision, as we wrestle with the choices in our lives and as we order our daily existence. This is never more true than at Christmas time, as we find so many things competing for our attention. What in your life reflects your choice to serve God?

Lord, I know that you have led me through deserts in my life. I know that you are with me even now and that you go before me into tomorrow. Give me the strength of discipline to make my actions match my intentions as I make my commitment to love and serve you today. Amen.

Do something in your home to honor God's presence with you.

Thursday

December 10

Philippians 1:3-11

In these warm and tender words of the introduction to the letter, we can plainly see Paul's love for the Christians at Philippi. His greatest desire was to see them, but his imprisonment made that impossible. In place of this journey, Paul prayed for them, for God's blessings in their lives and for their continued growth in the Spirit.

Christmas is a time of togetherness, a time to unite with friends and relatives in a spirit of joy. However, we can never see all those whom we love and we often find ourselves saddened by the barriers that separate us from them. Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves and allowing our sadness to draw us away from the joy of Christ's coming, however, we can profit from Paul's example and lift these people up in our thoughts and prayers. As we pray for them and remember the wonderful gifts of the Spirit that God has given to them, we are drawn closer to them and to God as we understand the strength of God's love. Who are those people in your life?

Lord, I pause to remember those from whom I am separated this Christmas, and the wonderful gifts that make them special to me. I ask that you would pour out special blessings on them in this day, to assure them of your love and my love, through Christ. Amen.

Write one of these persons a special note acknowledging your prayers and expressing your love.

Friday

December 11

Luke 1:39-45

In her excitement over the impending birth of her child, Mary journeyed to the home of her cousin Elizabeth to share her good news. The sight of Mary so filled Elizabeth with joy that she shouted out loud. In the impending birth of their sons, the two cousins rejoiced in their reunion, sharing the blessed hope together, for both felt the presence of God's Spirit, humbly accepting the role for which God had chosen them.

Sharing our joy with others is good for our souls and makes us feel great. The joy we share, however, often does as much and more for the one with whom we share it. Sharing our joy becomes a means by which we minister to them, drawing us and them closer to God in the realization of God's blessings and the special place we all hold in the life of God's Spirit. Who is the friend with whom you would like to share your joy, and what is the joy you would share?

Lord, as I recognize your blessings and rejoice over the gifts of your grace, I find myself wanting to tell the world of your goodness. Give me the voice to sing your praise and the opportunity to share your grace with those that I love. Amen.

Visit, call or write your best friend to share the joy of Christmas.

Saturday

December 12

Luke 15:1-7

One of the most powerful parables that Jesus taught was that of the lost sheep. As a shepherd leaves the ninety-nine who are safe in order to find the one who is lost, so God seeks out the ones who are separated from the Kingdom. This is a love that goes against conventional wisdom and defies the logic of economics, focusing on the individual rather than the masses. The shepherd and God both act because of their profound love for all, paying special attention to those who are lost and separated.

While we enjoy being with those that we love and those who are our best friends, we must never forget those who are lost. We all know people who live lives of estrangement, cut off from their families, from their friends, from their church and from their God. Preparing our lives for the gift of God's grace invites us to consider those who are estranged, to seek them out, and to invite them back into the fold. Who do you know that is lost and estranged, and what could you do to help them?

Lord, as you have remembered me, I remember the lost and offer my love for them. Help me to never forget them and teach me how to reach out to those that have wandered from your fold; for the sake of your love. Amen.

Invite an unchurched friend to worship with you tomorrow.

Week 3 – Prepare the Way In Our Service

Sunday

December 13

Luke 3:7-10

In preparing the way for Jesus, John the Baptizer called people to a sense of accountability for their actions and the lifestyle they had chosen. While he certainly confronted them with the error of their ways, he also invited them into a new life lived for the sake of and in close relationship with God. When those people heard John's message and were convinced of the truth of that message, they responded with a question: "What must we do?" Preparing the way for the Kingdom of God required them to take action.

In similar fashion, as we prepare for the coming of Jesus we become convicted of our own sinfulness and convinced of the hope that is before us. We also become aware of our own unworthiness to accept the gift of God's grace. We come to realize that we are accountable for our actions and that preparation for the gift requires us to make changes in our lifestyle. This is what repentance means: reshaping our lives in order to place ourselves in a position to accept the loving grace of God. Do you think God approves of your lifestyle? What changes do you think would please God?

Lord, I know that I am unworthy of your gift of love. I also know that if I am willing to change, you are willing to give me the ability to turn my life around. Accept my repentance even now and grant me the life-changing power of your Spirit as I prepare for your Son. Amen

Do something special for the church today.

Monday

December 14

I Corinthians 1:4-9

In his greeting to the church at Corinth, Paul praises the people for their faithfulness and their love, acknowledging the blessings God has bestowed upon them and the service they render to God, utilizing the gifts that God has given to them. Paul's appreciation for them rests in the fact that they know God has blessed them, so they, in turn, seek to bless others using their God-given abilities.

As we approach Christmas, we become aware of the many blessings God has given us in the service of others and that these blessings have led and inspired us in our journey of faith. Through understanding God's blessings, we are also able to acknowledge God's Spiritual gifts, those abilities God has given to each one of us for the up-building of the Church. Knowing those gifts leads us to find ways that we can use our gifts for the benefit of the Church and others. What is the service that you render that might lead others to give thanks for you?

Lord, as I consider your gifts, I give you thanks and pray that I might learn to use my gifts in the best way for the sake of your Kingdom. Amen.

Write a letter to someone who has been an inspiration to you, acknowledging his or her gift of service and offering your gratitude.

Tuesday

December 15

Isaiah 12:2-6

In this short canticle, Isaiah offered God a song of joy for the hope of salvation. In the midst of adversity and difficulty, the promise of God's love became a hope that lifted the people beyond their suffering and fear. When faced with the incredible love of God, which comes as grace in spite of the people's sin, Isaiah was moved to shout out the joy that this hope brought.

As we face the joy of Christmas, we, too, find ourselves moved in the realization that, even though our sinfulness often drives a wedge between us and God, God is faithful and will bring salvation. When we face adversity and pain, we may find comfort and hope in the coming of God's love. This is God's grace! It is a grace that moves us away from our fears of pain and suffering and enables us to find joy in our salvation. How would you characterize the joy that God is bringing to you this Christmas?

Lord, how can I begin to express the joy in my heart that comes from your hope? Even though I may suffer, I know that your love will guide and sustain me through all the darkness and bring me new light. O God, I praise your name! Amen.

Plan a time to sing carols with or for others.

Wednesday
Luke 3:10-11

December 16

As the people became convinced of their need to change, they asked John "What shall we do?" John's answer was simple and pragmatic: share what you have with those who are less fortunate; when your needs are met, use what you have to meet the needs of others. In this way, the people were preparing for the coming Kingdom, by focusing their attention on what they could do for others rather than on the abundance of their own blessings.

In our preparation for the Kingdom, we are led to think of those less fortunate. As we realize the blessings we have received from God, we become aware of the fact that for some, the blessings are less real. Rather than rejoicing in our abundance, John's message calls us to share our blessings in a way that gives other people a chance to know God's joy. By sharing with them, we make the grace of God a reality in their lives, and we find God's blessings in our own lives, knowing that we are serving God. Who do you know that needs to experience the blessings of God?

Lord, I like to be blessed; help me also to enjoy being a blessing. Show me those who need your blessings and lead me to share my blessings with them, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Give some food and/or clothing to someone in need as a visible sign of God's love.

Thursday

December 17

Luke 3:10, 12-13

The tax collectors also heard John's message and sought a way to make amends for their sinfulness. John's prescription was for them to be honest in their collecting, a practice not often seen in the time of Jesus. Instead of using their position to make a profit for themselves, they were invited to consider others and the needs of those others as being as important as their own needs and to treat those persons as they would like to be treated.

We are not tax collectors and we are probably not guilty of defrauding others. Yet the message of John is just as important for us: stop thinking just about yourselves and consider the needs of others, even if it means that you may have to do without. Treat others in a manner that honors them and speaks of the integrity of your relationship with God. Most of all: share God's blessings as a giver, not just as one who receives. What could you give up that would be a blessing to others?

Lord, as I consider the needs of our community in this Christmas season, I know that there is much that I can do for others. Help me to be willing to give up so that others may receive, so that your blessings might abound. Amen.

Volunteer your time this weekend to help out in the community in some way.

Friday

December 18

Luke 3:10, 14

The soldiers also heard John's message and sought to change their lives. These men were not wealthy, but they wielded much power and influence over the people and often consider themselves privileged to the better things in life. John invited them to be content with what they had and to not use their position and power to deprive others of what was rightfully theirs.

Once again, we hear the invitation of God leading us from "Give me ..." to "Give to others." It is so easy for us to fall into the trap of wanting more, especially at Christmas time. We look forward to the wonderful presents that we will receive and anticipate the joy that they will bring us. Without realizing it, we often think that we are entitled to an abundance of blessings, whether because of the sacrifices we make or the importance of our position. What would happen if, instead of buying gifts for our own family, we gave our gifts to strangers?

Lord, teach me how to share. Help me to look past the blessings that I think I deserve and use what I have to help others, that your joy may be complete in me and in them. Amen.

Give a special offering to the church and its ministry and see how it makes you feel.

Saturday

December 19

Zephania 3:14-20

The hope that Zephania brought to the people was the hope for renewal. Their Sin would be forgiven, their adversaries brought down, their oppression lifted, and their home restored. This renewal would bring new strength to the people and would result in their rejoicing. Freed from their Sin, they would experience the redemption of their God. They would become a beacon to the nations, that all might see the redeeming, renewing power of God.

God promises us renewal. As we await the birth of Jesus, we look forward to the time when we will be filled with joy once again and our lives will be renewed in the strength of God's Spirit. The burden of our Sin will be lifted and we will be freed from our oppression. Yet this renewal is not for our benefit alone, but that others might be drawn to the light of our salvation. Our joy cannot and will not be complete until we are willing to give God the credit and proclaim the wondrous beauty of God's love. What are you doing to allow God's light to shine forth from your life?

Lord, your light shines within me to bring light into my darkness; let your light also shine through me to give light to the world and draw others to the beacon of your grace, through Christ our Savior. Amen.

Volunteer your time to a special project that will help others experience God's love.

Week 4 – Prepare the Way In Our Joy

Sunday

December 19

Read: Luke 1:46-56

*And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflect: These familiar words are often referred to as the "Magnificat" of Mary, words that take the form of a hymn praising God. Of course, these words are brought forth by Mary's pregnancy. She carries a child conceived by the Holy Spirit who will be the Savior of the world. The joy of this miraculous event led her to understand that the impending salvation of the world was her own salvation as well and in her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, her praise of God pours forth.

Like Mary, we recognize that the coming of the Christ Child brings salvation to the world, but we also realize that it is our own salvation that comes as well. This global, universal event has a very personal side. We rejoice for the world and celebrate God's gift to the world, but we also celebrate the gift of God that comes into our lives as a very personal gift. We are honored that God has chosen us to receive this great gift of love!

Pray: *Lord, when I think of your gift to the world, it fills my heart with joy. When I also realize that this gift is mine, my joy is turned to jubilation! Thank you, Lord, for loving me enough to give me this wonderful gift! Amen.*

Monday

December 20

Matthew 1:18-21

It was a terrible time for Joseph. He had looked forward to the time when he and Mary would be wed and begin their life together as man and wife. But apparently she loved another, for she carried a child that was not his. In his love for her he decided to be discreet and not humiliate her any further. Then the angel came and everything changed. The assumptions that he made about his bride-to-be were wrong: the child did not belong to another man, but to God. In an instant his perspective changed and the despair brought about by his false assumption was transformed to hope and joy in the reality of God's presence.

Have you ever made assumptions about someone or some situation, only to find that you were wrong? Have you ever made assumptions about God and God's will? Assumptions always seem to get us in trouble. We think we know the truth and make decisions based on that truth. Sometimes we are right; more often we are wrong. When we are wrong we create a breeding ground for anger, animosity and broken relationships and all these stand in the way of our joy. The only way to avoid assumptions is to seek the truth: that is what Christmas is all about!

Lord in these last few days, reveal the truth to me. Let me know the truth about myself and the truth about others. More importantly, let me know and understand the truth about your love; for Christ's sake. Amen

Think of how your assumptions about another person have hurt your relationship with him or her and do something to heal that relationship.

Tuesday

December 21

Matthew 1:22-25

The truth that Joseph came to understand was the truth of God's love. That love would come through Mary, a young woman, probably still a teenager, who was just beginning to live. Mary, a virgin, would be the instrument that God chose to bring Jesus into the world. Jesus would be "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." From her womb would come the hope of all humankind. The assumption of disaster that began in Joseph and the resulting despair was transformed to extreme hope and joy in the truth of God's love.

We must not overlook the significance of Mary being a virgin. In the Hebrew culture of her day, a virgin represented unfulfilled potential. Much more than a sign of innocence and purity, Mary represents the unfulfilled hopes and dreams of humanity. Much like Joseph's assumptions stood in the way of him seeing the truth, Mary's virginity was an obstacle to new life. Just as the truth transformed Joseph's despair to joy, the consummation of Mary's life by God's Spirit transforms our shortcomings to new life. "God with us" means more than having a constant companion: it means that God is able to complete in us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

Lord, I have experienced both success and failure in my life, but only you have given me true fulfillment. As I come toward Christmas, take my failures and make them successes for your Kingdom, through Christ my joy. Amen.

Find a way to bring encouragement into the life of someone who is struggling.

Wednesday

December 22

Luke 2:1-7

Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem. It was a trip they would have preferred to pass up, but they went anyway. Nine months pregnant, already weary from the stress and struggles of beginning a new relationship, they set out on the arduous journey that would take them to a strange place. They got there and there was no place to stay. Then the time came and Jesus was born. The agony of their journey was transformed into the joy of new life. That new life was the fulfillment of God's promise and the sign of God's faithfulness. It was this gift that Mary came to treasure in her heart.

By now we are worn out. The endless parties and obligatory gatherings have taken their toll on us. The shopping, the decorating, the wrapping and the baking have left us exhausted. Our faces are fixed in a permanent smile, placed there even when we haven't felt like smiling. But there is a moment coming soon that will make it all worthwhile. It is that moment when all the work pays off in new life. It is the moment when all that we have done comes together with what God has done and we welcome God's new life into our lives. This is our hope, and the consummation of our lives is just around the corner.

Lord, I'm tired, but my life is filled with hope. I know that I will not be disappointed. Send me today the gift of patience, that my tiredness may begin to give way to the triumph of your grace; through Christ my savior. Amen.

Take a little time today to sit in front of your Christmas tree and envision the gift of love that God is bringing to you.

Thursday

December 23

Luke 2:8-14

Being a shepherd at the time Jesus was born was no picnic. Shepherds were near the bottom of the social and economic ladder, often persons who could not find a job doing anything else. So, imagine how the shepherds must have felt: an evening of watching brings forth their inclusion in the most blessed event of all times! Their fear quickly gave way to joy when they realized that this was not an accident, but a deliberate act by God: God had chosen them, lowly and cast out, to share in the salvation of the world. They were certainly justified in their joy!

Christmas is a time of emotion. For most of us, joy dominates our lives as we anticipate the blessed day. But for some it brings fear, especially those who are alone, who carry a burden of guilt, who are estranged from the ones they love, who are not ready to receive the salvation that comes in God's grace. These persons often dread the coming of Christmas because they know that they will be left out or alone. Can you imagine what it would be like to be alone at Christmas? If you were afraid of the day, what would you want most?

Lord, as I look forward to Christmas day, keep me mindful of those who dread the day. I pray for those that will be alone, apart from their families, with no-one who will share their day: may your blessings cast out their fears and grant them hope; through Christ. Amen.

Visit someone who you know is lonely.

Friday

December 24

Luke 2:15-16

The Shepherds heard the good news and knew that God cared about them. They could have sat back and reveled in the joy they had received; they could have patted each other on the back and said "Isn't this wonderful!" But somehow they knew that their joy would not be complete until they journeyed into the city to see the child with their own eyes. Isn't it funny how God offers us wonderful gifts, but makes us reach out for them in order to find the true blessing?

As we face this Christmas Eve, we are aware of how close God's grace is ... just a few more hours and it will all be accomplished. We have worked to prepare ourselves in our hearts, in our lives, in our service and in our joy. It is so close, we can almost reach out and touch it, but not quite. What do you think you need to do to make God's joy a reality in your life?

Lord, I have waited a whole month for this time. You have led me through my preparation and have revealed wonderful things to me. In these last few hours, open my eyes to see you in a new way as Christ comes again. Amen.

Go to worship tonight as your final act of preparation. If you cannot attend a service, worship in your home with someone you love.

Saturday

December 25

Luke 2:16-20

The shepherds heard the angels and made their journey. And where did it lead? Not to a palace or a luxurious hotel, but to a stable. There they found an infant child wrapped up and lying in a manger. Their waiting was fulfilled and their joy was complete ... they beheld their savior.

Our time of waiting has come to an end and God's promise is fulfilled. In the midst of all the glitz and glitter, the tinsel and the toys, we find a tiny baby just beginning life. That child will grow and will bring about a whole new understanding of life. So, too, the lessons of our preparation are given birth in our spirit, there to grow to maturity and bear fruit in our lives. Christmas is not the end, but the beginning ... a new beginning of God's love in our lives. Rejoice: your savior is born!

Lord, thank you for the gift of newness that you have given to me this day. Be born again into my life as I celebrate this Christmas day. May I find the joy of this day to be the joy of all life as I rejoice in the birth of Jesus Christ my Savior. Amen.

Don't get so caught up in the presents and the food that you forget that today is Sunday: celebrate the birth of our Lord in worship!