A Season of Hope



Out of the Darkness Into the Light

A Collection of Advent Devotions

Prepared for
The Members and Friends of

Friendship United Methodist Church
Sherman, Texas
2026

Introduction

Advent is the season of hope. As the Baby Jesus came into a world of darkness over two thousand years ago in order to bring new light, so he comes to us today. A new light shines in our darkness just as it did for Mary and Joseph, for the wisemen and for the shepherds. Yet just as no one can appreciate sight more than one who has been blind, we can truly appreciate the light only when we have felt the darkness. Thus, our journey begins in that darkness.

We begin our journey by confronting our own brokenness, knowing that the pain and frustration we feel in life today is little different from that felt by others, the saints and patriarchs, of our religious heritage. We encounter our own sense of isolation, which sometimes feels like persecution. And, yes, we even encounter our own sinfulness, the brokenness of our lives brought about by our own decisions. But we confront our darkness knowing that there is more to life than this, that God has not forgotten us and that God seeks to bring us into the new light. We hear with hope God's promise to come and deliver us.

So we wait … we wait for the coming hope, knowing that it is only a matter of time until we rejoice in God's deliverance. With great anticipation, we wait for the Christ child who will be our salvation. While we wait, we prepare ourselves, our hearts and our homes, to receive the coming king. We find our excitement rising as the reality of the gift begins to dawn in our darkness.

Then it comes. The long-awaited day finally arrives and we stand in the light of God's gift. With rejoicing we behold a new world around us, illumined by the light of God's love. We find that the darkness has passed and new light and life have come to us. We find the leading star of the wisemen and hear the Angels beckoning us to go to Bethlehem and see for ourselves this wonderful child. And somewhere along the journey we come to realize that the gift given long ago is, in fact, the gift given to us.

As you share in this devotional time, I invite you to allow these humble words to become a dialogue within your heart, conversing with your own thoughts and feelings as you move from your personal darkness into the light of God's hope. That coming hope means that we need not fear the darkness. Indeed, the ultimate act of faith rests in our willingness to trust God enough to dare journey into our darkness. As you do so, be willing to name your pain and frustration, your fear and your grief, so that God can offer you a personal gift of healing through these daily meditations.

I pray God's richest blessings upon you as you undertake this journey. May the light of God's hope come to shine upon you!

Grace and Peace,

Roy

Sunday
November 29
Isaiah 6:1-5

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

4The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

As Isaiah entered the Temple to tend to the high altar, he entered into the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary, and had an encounter with God. As God's presence loomed over him, as he beheld the vast majesty of God, Isaiah was overwhelmed by his own insignificance and unworthiness. In the brightness of God's light Isaiah saw the darkness of his own soul and that of his people: *"Woe am I"* he cried out, an expression of lament for the death of his soul and the sinfulness of his world. But God did not leave Isaiah in darkness or let his soul die. Instead, God brought forgiveness and healing.

The hope that awaits us is the hope of Isaiah, the hope for cleansing and healing. Yet we cannot be healed unless we know we are sick and we cannot be forgiven until we admit our Sin and brokenness. Therefore, our journey of faith begins where Isaiah's began, in the midst of confession. We pause on this first Sunday of Advent to confess our unworthiness, our sinfulness, and our brokenness, all in the confident hope that God will forgive us, heal us, and bring us to new light and life.

Lord of light, come into my darkness to forgive my Sin and heal my broken life. I, too, am a person of unclean lips, thoughts and deeds, and I offer my confession to you so that I may come to dwell in the Kingdom of Light that you bring, through Christ my Savior. Amen.

Monday
November 30
John 11:32-35

32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' 35Jesus began to weep.

As Jesus stood beside the tomb of Lazarus, he wept. His tears, however, were not for Lazarus, but for Mary and Martha, whose hearts were broken with the loss of their brother. They were so consumed with their grief that they even put the blame for his death on Jesus: *"If you had been here he would not have died."* Yet above the expressed anger and frustration of the two sisters arose the compassion of Jesus, who joined in their tears and shared their brokenness. In this moment of sharing the two women found new hope.

As we approach this Christmas season, our thoughts turn to those that we loved who will not be with us this year. We remember the joyous seasons of the past in which we shared love and laughter. Remembering these times reminds us of the loss we have experienced and leaves an emptiness in our hearts and a tear in our eyes. We yearn for the times that have ended, never to return again. Yet in the midst of our grief we find that we do not stand alone: God stands beside us, sharing our tears and our pain. Knowing that God is with us does not take away our grief, but sharing it with God eases our burden and begins to let us know that a new hope lies beyond the pain of our grief.

Lord, as I come into this season of joy, the pain of my grief feels even greater. I long to laugh again, but the memory of what I have lost often leaves me feeling cold and empty. I confess to you my grief so that you may share it with me. Ease my pain and fill the emptiness of my heart with hope as I look forward to the birth of your Son. Amen

Tuesday
December 1
Lamentations 2:11-12

My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city.

12 They cry to their mothers, 'Where is bread and wine?'
as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom.

As the prophet Jeremiah saw the world around him, a world wracked with pain brought by the hands of his enemies, he was moved to tears and his stomach churned within him. He saw children without bread, families torn apart, hope lost. He felt the pain of those around him who suffered under the circumstances of their exile. He saw the hollowness of their eyes as they seemed to search in vain for some relief from their suffering. He wept the tears of grief for their loss. Nevertheless, he stood firm in the hope of deliverance and called upon God to restore them to the life they once knew.

The Christmas season, more than any other season, reminds us of the pain and suffering of others. In the midst of our plenty we are made painfully aware that there are those who have nothing. We consider the hungry children, the orphans of war, the victims of abuse and neglect, the forgotten and abandoned, and our hearts wrench within us. We hope for an end to their suffering, and we pray God's blessings upon them. Yet we also remember that we are God's people, God's hands, and that healing and hope are gifts that we can truly give to others. So, our prayer is as much for ourselves as it is for them, seeking the motivation and grace in our lives to do what we can to relieve the suffering of others. Not only do we seek hope for them, we also seek to become the agents of hope.

Lord, as I look at the world around me, I, too, feel the pain of Jeremiah. There is so much need that I am overwhelmed by it, and I confess that I often turn my back on the suffering in order to ease the pain that I feel. Forgive my neglect, O Lord, and lead me to bring new hope into the suffering lives of those around me. Amen.

Wednesday
December 2
I Corinthians 4:10-13

[10]We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. [11]To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, [12]and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; [13]when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

The Apostle Paul suffered much for the sake of the gospel he sought to proclaim. In these words to the church at Corinth, we see a small part of that suffering. His efforts to do good for others resulted in his rejection, persecution and disrespect. He gave up the comforts of home, the pleasure of new clothes, even the necessity of regular meals, all for the sake of proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Under normal circumstances we would expect such suffering to lead to bitterness and cynicism, yet in Paul's words we hear a sense of joy: *"When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure."* That joy and optimism came only because what Paul envisioned in his life was not the pleasures of his own comfort, but the fulfillment of God's kingdom. Thus, in pursuit of a higher calling, the sufferings of this life were but the birth pangs of what was to come.

It is easy for us to become overwhelmed by the needs of others, even the needs of the Church. We, too, often feel like our greatest efforts go unnoticed and unrewarded and that the success of all our work is elusive. Yet in the midst of our own feelings of persecution and rejection stands the life of Jesus and the Apostles, who gladly gave up themselves in order to share the good news of new life, looking forward to what was to come rather than at what already was. They lived by hope, to see a day of glory beyond their suffering.

Lord, I confess that I often tire of my service. I feel like I do so much, but nobody notices and even fewer care. There are times when I want to quit, but then I see the baby Jesus, born into a world of pain and suffering, and I realize that my little bit of rejection pales in the face of your glory. Help me to see your vision, O Lord, not my own. Amen.

Thursday
December 3
Psalm 88:1-5

[1] O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
[2] let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.
[3] For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
[4] I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help,
[5] like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

David was a man of extremes. The glory of victory often gave way to the pain of despair, just as his moments of extreme faithfulness were often followed by acts of sinful selfishness. In this psalm, we feel the agony of his suffering, a feeling of despair in which he felt that all was lost, and that life itself was bereft of any meaning and no longer worth living. Yet we must remember that these words come to us as a prayer: more specifically, a prayer of confession. Giving expression to his feelings of despair was not, for David, an opportunity to wallow in self pity, but an opportunity to experience God's healing grace. In naming his pain, David was able to find healing for his brokenness.

In our lives we experience much pain, from many different sources. Sometimes we begin to feel that life is not worth it and we want to give up. We have lost our hope that things will ever be different. Yet in the midst of our despair, God stands ready to hear and to heal. All we have to do is open ourselves up to God's healing in order to experience new hope in our lives. Offering up our pain and despair is the first step in experiencing new life.

Lord, sometimes I feel like David, like all hope is lost. I wonder about the value my life has. I confess to you that I am sometimes filled with despair, but this is not the way I want to live. Take my despair and turn it to hope as I await the birth of your blessed son. Amen.

Friday
December 4
Luke 6:20-21

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:
'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
21 'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

The Sermon on the Mount, as told by Luke, was a complete reversal from the normal thinking of the people. In it Jesus proclaimed the blessings of suffering, of meekness, of hunger and of tears. How could these things be counted as blessings? They were, after all, not what people would choose for themselves, but were often hardships imposed upon them by the circumstances of their lives or the actions of others. Yet in them Jesus proclaimed blessings, not because it was what the people wanted, but because it opened the door for them to see and receive God's grace. Thus, those who had the least were given the most and experienced the fullness of that grace.

In our despair over life's circumstances, we often find ourselves embittered by what we don't have. As we look at others and see wealth, health and prosperity, and sometimes feel cheated and left out. Life is not fair. Why should we be the ones to suffer? Yet into our despair come the words of Jesus: *"Blessed are you…"* It seems little consolation to say that instead of these things we have blessings, but in fact, this is our hope: Jesus enters into our despair to help us see the fullness of God's love and feel an intimate connection with God's grace. This is the hope that awaits us: Jesus comes into our lives not in spite of our despair and brokenness, but because of it. We find God's blessings because we stand in need of those blessings.

Lord, I need your blessings in this season of hope. Satisfy my hunger and transform my tears so that I may know that I am truly blessed by you. Enable me to see beyond my pain and brokenness to behold the glory of your grace, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Saturday
December 5
Jonah 2:1-9

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, [2]saying,
'I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.
[3] You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
[4] Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight;
how shall I look again upon your holy temple?"
[5] The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head [6]at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.
[7] As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
[8] Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.
[9] But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!'

Jonah was sinking to the depths of the sea, lost in the waters of chaos, slipping into the emptiness of nothingness, cut off from God by his own actions. He suffered the consequences of his Sinfulness, seeking to flee from the presence of God, and he almost succeeded: almost, but not quite. Jonah discovered that even in the depths of Sheol God was present and that the mighty arm of God brought deliverance. Therefore, his lamentation over the end became a hymn of rejoicing for a new beginning. Jonah discovered that the thing he feared the most was the very means of his salvation: God had not forgotten him.

The image from Jonah's prayer offers a new hope for us. Sometimes we feel the chaos of our lives closing in around us like water, threatening to suck the very breath out of our being. Lost and alone we cry out to a God who seems remote and distant, only to find that God is there with us. No matter how dark and hopeless life may seem, God is always there, as close as our next breath of air. Reaching into our chaos and hopelessness, God's strong arm raises us up out of the dark waters and brings us back to life. This is our hope.

Lord, sometimes I feel like Jonah, like nobody cares and that you ask me to do the impossible. I run from you for fear that you will call me, yet even in my fleeing moments I find you in the dark chaos of my life. Lord, deliver my drowning soul and breathe new breath into me in this season of hope; through Christ my Lord. Amen.

Sunday
December 6
Isaiah 40:6-11

A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.
9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'
10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

In the midst of defeat and despair Isaiah proclaimed a message of hope. Like a shepherd, God will come to gather the people together, to hold them in the arms of love and security. This is the hope that God brings to the people of Judah in the midst of having been scattered by the Exile. But this is no idle wish or longing of the people: it is the sure promise of God. In fact, the promise is so sure that Isaiah is instructed to cry out the message in the wilderness and from the rooftops. Upon this promise the people of Judah could stand with certainty and conviction: God was coming to deliver them from their suffering.

As we move through this season of Advent, we hear the certainty of God's promise anew. We stand firm in the conviction that God will come to deliver us once again and that we will embrace that deliverance in the birth of the Christ Child. This is not an idle wish on our part, but a firm promise from God, as sure as the sunrise. We need not wallow in our self-pity or give in to our despair: God has not forgotten us, and God will deliver us from our suffering. Beyond our pain we live in the surety of God's love and grace.

Lord, I have cried to you out of my pain and I have confessed my weakness to you. Now I listen for the voice of hope that speaks to me in the midst of life and calls me to a new birth. Open my ears, O Lord, and let me hear your voice, through Christ my Lord. Amen.

Monday
December 7
Matthew 11:28-30

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Jesus spoke words of comfort to those who were weary. His invitation was for others to come to him and share his yoke in order to ease their burden. Using an image that his hearers would clearly understand, his invitation was to move from carrying all their burdens by themselves and let him join in the load they carried. It is important to note, however, that Jesus does not volunteer to carry the whole weight, only to assist in the lightening of the load.

While this image may be outside our normal range of experience, nevertheless, we can understand it: a load carried by two is always lighter than one borne alone. Thus, the invitation comes to us to share our burdens with Jesus and allow him to help bear the weight of them. When we pray for help, for God to heal our brokenness and ease our despair, we know that this will happen, but also that God's greatest gift is not that of taking away our burden: rather, it is God giving us the strength to bear the burdens we carry. All we have to do is be willing to share those burdens with God and let God enter into our struggles. This requires us to trust God enough to be both honest and sincere in our relationship. In this act of faith we find our hope, knowing that God waits to share our burdens, but the initiative must come from us.

Lord, I confess that sometimes I like to suffer under the weight of my burdens so that I can have an excuse for my self-pity. But the weight is heavy, Lord, and I cannot bear it alone without stumbling, so give me the humility and faith to trust you enough to share my burdens. Come, Lord Jesus, to share my yoke. Amen.

Tuesday
December 8
Isaiah 65:18-19

18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.
19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

The people of the exile wept for their home, for Jerusalem, for they had lost it. Their tears were those of grief, a grief borne in having been cut off from what was dear to them, something that they loved. The promise of God proclaimed by Isaiah was a hope that the tears of their weeping would come to an end and they would find a new joy, for what was taken away would be created anew. Beyond the distress of their grief God promised new life.

Although Christmas is a time of joy, for many people it is also a time of sadness. Memories of joyous times past often bring a sense of grief in that which was, but is no more. We also experience this grief in remembering those people dear to us with whom we once shared the holiday season. It is a bittersweet melancholy that overtakes us in the midst of these memories as we feel the emptiness in our souls. To us the hope of God comes: a hope that promises to take away our tears and lift our despair. It is a hope that comes as new birth. Just as the baby Jesus emerges into a world of darkness as new light, our hope is that God will bring us new birth in our grief and turn our tears of sadness to smiles of joy. Indeed, in this one promise is the true meaning of Christmas.

Lord, as I remember, it is easy to get lost in grief for what I have lost. I treasure these memories, for the people in them were dear to me and I do not want to lose them. So, Lord, help me to hold on to these memories and to learn from them so that I may rejoice in what was instead of mourn what is no more. Help me, then, to find new joy in what you create anew in me this Christmas, through Christ my Lord. Amen.

Wednesday
December 9
Psalm 121:1-4

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?
2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The words of the Psalmist are familiar and speak of the enduring presence of God, but beyond the comfort there is another message. The hills around Jerusalem promised safety and defense, a strong fortress in the time of attack. From the days of David through the occupation of the Roman forces in the time of Jesus, these hills were a place of security. Yet the Psalmist looks to those hills and realizes that they are not the real strength of the people. Only God can provide ultimate security. In God rests their hope and in this hope there is no need to fear whatever enemy they may face.

We need to hear the message of the Psalmist again this Christmas. In a time of war, violence, terrorism and destruction we search for answers and release. In the midst of a myriad of problems that beset our families, we search for a cure. In a world of uncertainty, we long for assurance. But the message of Christmas is the message of the Psalmist: our hope can only come from God. As we see others turning toward the latest fads and fashions, as we hear the politicians claim that they have the solution, as we listen to the ads on T.V. telling us that all we have to do is take this pill … we must pause to remember that our true help does not come from the hills to which we run when we are frightened, but from the enduring and never-failing love of God. The cure for our despair does not rest in pills, fads or political ideologies, but in our relationship with the One who created all things.

Lord, teach me to trust in your promises. Speak to me in my need. Take away my fear and fill me with confident hope in your providence and grace; through Jesus Christ my Savior. Amen.

Thursday
December 10
Isaiah 55:3

[3] *Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.*
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

The God of the Old Testament is a God of covenant. From the time of Noah, through Abraham and the Patriarchs, even to the time of David, the relationship between God and the people Israel could only be understood in light of the idea of covenant. A covenant is somewhat like a contract, in which God makes a promise to the people. But unlike a contract, a covenant is binding forever. As the initiator of the covenant, God is bound to uphold it for all time. Indeed, the definition of "righteousness" is expressed in terms of "one who upholds the covenant." Thus, Isaiah reminds the people of the righteous God, who will forever uphold the covenant and who may be trusted to complete that which has been started, constantly renewing the covenant promise with each new generation.

As we consider the meaning of Christmas, is it not a time when God renews the covenant? What God began in the birth of Jesus is reaffirmed with each new generation, each new year, as we celebrate again the birth of the Christ Child. When we kneel before the manger, is it not an act of faith, proclaiming that we trust the covenant God, who is forever righteous and will not abandon the promises made? When we sing the carols, is it not a proclamation of God's faithfulness to the people? When we light the candles, is it not an act of making the promised light of Christ our own? The covenant God is our God!

Lord, I know you are righteous and faithful. I know that your promises stand, but I do not always stand on your promises. Lift me up, O Lord, and help me trust the foundation beneath my feet, even Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Friday
December 11
Jeremiah 31:23-25

23 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel:
Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah and in its towns when I restore their fortunes: 'The LORD bless you, O abode of righteousness, O holy hill!'
24 And Judah and all its towns shall live there together, and the farmers and those who wander with their flocks.
25 I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish.

In the tradition of Isaiah, Jeremiah also proclaims a message of hope to those in Exile. His message is that of return: return to their land, return to their homes, return to their way of life. But this was more than just a return to business as usual. For the people of the Exile, Jeremiah's message proclaimed a renewal of God's covenant, a covenant that the people thought was lost and forgotten. Jeremiah assured them that even though they had strayed away from that covenant, God had not forgotten and would honor the covenant given to their ancestors. Thus, as they looked back on the power of God's deliverance from Egypt, across the Jordan into the Promised Land, on the strength of David's kingship, they could catch a vision of what was to come.

How soon we forget! In the midst of our despair we often loose sight of all those things that God has done for us in the past. Our current needs often overshadow the memory of God's grace. Yet if we will remember, if we will take the time to "count our blessings," we will also discover those other times of darkness when God came to us as a new light. In these remembrances we find a new hope, knowing that the God of our past is also the God of our present and future and that God waits to bring us into the light once again.

Lord, help me to remember. Help me to remember the darkness from which you have brought me in days past so that I may know that you still come to deliver me today. Help me to find warmth in my memories that fills my soul and leads me to embrace the new life that you have waiting for me this Christmas. Amen.

Saturday
December 12
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.

Part of Jeremiah's message was the hope of returning to the covenant, allowing the people to stand on God's promises. Indeed, this was the message of all the prophets, who called on the people to place their trust in God's faithfulness to the covenant. Yet Jeremiah takes the message one step further: this will not be a return to the old covenant, to the old way of living, to business as usual; this will be a new day and a brand new covenant. Jeremiah knew and placed his trust in a God who not only "has created" but "is creating." For this prophet, the promise of God was not restoration, but new creation. Thus, the people could look forward to even better times as they placed their hope in the new creation God was bringing.

A part of our attachment to Christmas is wrapped up in capturing the warmth and memories of the past as we sing the old familiar hymns and bring out the old decorations that hold those memories. But the promise of God is not just to maintain the old memories of the past; it is to create new memories for the future. Each Christmas brings forward the faith of our past, but the real promise of God is to create us anew for faith in future days. Thus, we look forward to Christ's birth knowing that there will be new joys, new warmth and love, new memories created again. This is the hope of Christmas: not just the same, but even better.

Lord, let me hear your promise again as I look forward to Christmas. Fill my life and my faith with new excitement as I look forward to being born again with Christ. Thank you for creating a new heart within me! Amen.

Sunday
December 13
Psalm 130:1-6

[1] *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*
[2] *Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive*
to the voice of my supplications!
[3] *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?*
[4] *But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.*
[5] *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;*
[6] *my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,*
more than those who watch for the morning.

In this beautiful Psalm, the author proclaims the mystery of faith that moves from pain and suffering to deliverance. The progression is clear: pain gives way to confession, confession to assurance, assurance to hope, hope to expectation. Thus, the Psalmist "waits." But this is not an idle time: it is a time of active anticipation, like one who waits for the sunrise, planning the day, preparing what can be done, setting things in order so that, at the first light of the day, work can begin. All this anticipation grows out of the confidence of the sunrise; as sure as the sun will rise in the morning, God's love and forgiveness will come.

Advent is the season of waiting and watching. Like the workman waiting for the dawn, we live in the anticipation of the coming of God's Son. But we do not sit idly by: we take the opportunity to make preparations so that we can reap the total benefit of the sunlight. As we anticipate the coming of Christmas, we use this time wisely, waiting in the sure hope of God's coming, knowing that wise preparations will allow us to reap the maximum benefit from God's new gift. So, having acknowledged our brokenness and made our confession, having come to trust in the grace of God, we prepare our hearts and homes for that which is surely coming: the wonderful gift of God's love.

Lord, I know that your love is coming and I trust in the grace that will soon be mine, but I fear that I may not be ready. Teach me to be a good steward of the time you have given me so that I will be prepared to receive your gift and fully embrace your son Jesus. Amen.

Monday
December 14
Isaiah 40:28-31

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel in Exile. In the devastation of their homes and their despair over the loss of their heritage, many wondered if God would honor the covenant and come to them. Even those that believed in God's deliverance wondered "when?" Underlying the prophet's message of hope, that God had not forgotten and would come, was another message: be patient; those who wait for the Lord will be renewed. Thus Isaiah's message of promise came with a reminder: God works in God's own time. Those who became impatient with God would faint and grow weary of waiting, but those who endured with patient hope would be renewed.

We are like children, impatient with the slowly moving calendar as we mark off the days until Christmas. We want to celebrate the day and enjoy that celebration now, yet God has a word for us: be patient! The time will come, perhaps even sooner than we expect, but in the meantime, we have work to do. The time of waiting is not to prolong our agony, but to give us adequate time to prepare our hearts and lives for the coming gift. Therefore we listen to the words of Isaiah as a new promise: if we trust God with patient preparation, we will reap the reward of our patience and experience complete renewal in our faith.

Lord, I know my impatience as well as you do. I also know that sometimes in my impatience I do not take the time to get ready for what is to come. But I trust you, Lord, and I want to do all that I can to get ready. Grant me the patience I need to use my time wisely as I wait for your coming. Amen.

Tuesday
December 15
Isaiah 57:14-15

[14] It shall be said, 'Build up, build up, prepare the way,
remove every obstruction from my people's way.'
[15] For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

The familiar cry of Isaiah was "Prepare the way." God was surely coming to deliver the people, but the arrival of God's love required a time of preparation. In this passage, the prophet clearly identified what was required of the people in order to prepare God's way: a contrite and humble spirit. The arrogance of self-sufficiency and the pride of one's accomplishments had to give way to the realization that life belonged to God and that only God could provide the deliverance for which they longed. Thus, the announcement of God's coming, echoed by John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus, came as an invitation to prepare the way of the Lord through meekness and humility.

As we look at this season of preparation, we hear anew the words of Isaiah. Before we concentrate on our homes, in the midst of our busy schedules, among the many demands that are placed on our lives, we need to pause and ask ourselves the question: *"Is my heart ready to receive Jesus?"* As trite as the expression has become, it is important for us to realize that without Christ, there is no Christmas. All of our decorations hung and presents bought have no meaning if the focus is on ourselves and our own need to do everything. Christmas is not about what we do, but about what God has done and is doing. We must pause to offer our own contrition and humility to God as an act of preparing ourselves for the gift of Jesus.

Lord, sometimes I get to busy with what I need to do that I forget why I am doing it. Slow me down so that I can know how powerless I am to change my own life and how powerful you are in bringing me new life, through Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday
December 16
Colossians 1:9-14

9 For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking
that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and
understanding, 10 so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you
bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be made
strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to
endure everything with patience, while joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled
you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13 He has rescued us from the power of
darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have
redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The words of Paul to the church in Colossae show the pastoral relationship that the Apostle had with these people. His concern and compassion for them is evidenced by the kindness of his words, which carry a hope for their lives, especially for their spiritual development. His unceasing prayer is for their enlightenment, for their ability to persevere and for them to bear fruit. In this they are joined with all the saints in the wonderful inheritance of the Kingdom, not just for the life to come, but also in the present moment of their lives. All this is empowered by the redemption and forgiveness brought about by Jesus.

As we anticipate the coming of Christmas, there are many things that we look forward to: uniting with friends, the warmth of giving, the joy of celebration. All these things are an important part of Christmas and certainly meant to be ours, yet the real gift that awaits us often goes unexpressed. It is the gift that Paul prayed for in the lives of the saints of Colossae: to be filled with the knowledge of God's love in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Beyond the parties, packages and pageants, we are invited to seek a much greater gift: the discernment of God's will for our lives. So, as we make our preparations, God invites us into a new and deeper relationship in order to be prepared for the new life that this revelation brings to us, uniting us with all the saints as a part of God's great Kingdom on earth and in heaven.

Lord, come into my heart in a new way today. Unite with my spirit that your will for my life may become crystal clear. Grant me the strength to persevere in my faith that I may truly bear your fruit in the world and experience the fullness of my redemption. Amen.

Thursday
December 17
Romans 8:22-25

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Paul's image is somewhat familiar and appears often in the Bible. It is the anticipation of birth: the pain of labor gives way to the blessedness of new life. For Paul, this is the struggle of all creation as well as each new saint. But ultimately the whole process is shrouded in mystery. What awaits the saints in redemption has not been fully revealed, but exists as a hope as yet unseen. The power of faith is to live in that hope with assurance and patience, waiting for the full revelation of God's glory and redemption.

Christmas comes to us in the familiar traditions and heritage of our past. Singing the same songs, hearing the same Scriptures, seeing the same sights brings a feeling of comfort to us as we reconnect with the good memories of our past and make them real once again. Yet there is always something mysterious about Christmas. Even though we have heard the story hundreds of times and can sing the carols by heart, there is still something that happens to us and we find a lump in our throat and a tear in our eye. This is a part of God's mystery, entering into our lives anew to bring about new revelation and understanding. We live in the hope that this year will be the best yet and that we will find God in a new way during this season of celebration.

Lord, come to me in a new way this year. Let me find new meaning and new hope as I hear the old familiar story. Renew your Spirit within me so that I may know more fully the mystery in which you have created me. Amen.

Friday
December 18
Luke 12:39-40

39 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Jesus used these words to prepare his disciples for the days ahead, knowing that the events of the coming weeks would leave them confused and full of doubt. Instead of casually taking each day as it came, they were invited to reflect on each moment as an opportunity to see the Son of Man and to use the promised fulfillment of the Kingdom as the lens through which the events of their lives were to be seen. By living in the constant anticipation of God's coming, they would always be ready to see God's arrival. The Church picked up on these words as a message for all time, to make each day a preparation for the fulfillment of God's kingdom and the coming of God's reign.

The arrival of Christmas is not a surprise to us. The clock and calendar remind us of the moment when it happens, and we make all our plans and preparations based on this knowledge. But when will the Son of God come into our hearts? Jesus's word to the disciples must come to us as well: live each moment in anticipation of the coming reign of God. That means looking for God's presence in each new moment of our lives, in each new event and in the eyes of each person we meet. If we live our lives in anticipation of seeing God, our vision will become clearer and our spirits more open to welcome the Christ Child whenever and wherever he arrives, sometimes in the most unlikely places. We must always be ready to see God.

Lord, teach me how to look for you in the eyes of others. Open my eyes that I may see you present in every moment of my life. Help me live in the anticipation of your reign so that I will not miss those opportunities to greet you, even in the normal moments of my life. Amen.

Saturday
December 19
Mark 1:1-3

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

The cry of John the Baptist is an echo of the words of Isaiah, carrying the same meaning to his hearers that the prophet brought to the people in Exile: God's deliverance is at hand; now is the time. It came to the people of Judea as a message of true hope as they lived under the religious oppression of the Roman occupation. John heralded the time of a new freedom, brought by God's chosen deliverer, the Messiah for whom they had waited all these years. John's message was that deliverance was not a distant hope: it was an imminent reality. The time was truly at hand, and it was vital that all preparations be made.

As we enter into the final days before Christmas, we, too, hear the urgency of John's message: the time has come. We rush around doing our last-minute shopping, wrapping our final gifts, planning our Christmas feast. It seems like the hours have flown by and there is so little time left to get ready. It is at this moment that we must pause, sit back and reflect. What is my hope for this Christmas? What do I really want to happen? When it is over, what are the memories I want to have created? What part will God play in all my celebration? Now is the time to begin making our dreams become reality. If we do not do it now, it will be too late.

Lord, there is so much that I want to happen this Christmas, but often my dreams get lost in the reality of busy schedules and the demands of others. Slow me down in this day so that I can truly be ready to receive the gift of new life in your Son. Focus my attention on this gift so that your way into my heart will be prepared. Amen.

Sunday
December 20
Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

What a surprise for Mary! The plans she had made did not include this! Her plans were to marry Joseph, settle down to an ordinary and uneventful life and enjoy her family. Yes, like every girl she hoped to have children … but now? Like this? In a single moment her life changed. She did not understand it and may have even doubted it, but she accepted it: she would give birth to the Son of the Most High. What else could she do?

We make our plans for everything to be just right. We work to ensure that all the preparations are made in the proper fashion. We don't like surprises, especially when they cause us to be diverted from the path we have chosen. Then an angel comes to us … perhaps as a lonely child or a hungry mother; perhaps as an unexpected guest. Maybe the angel comes in the form of an old friend or a recent adversary. Maybe the angel is an opportunity to participate in something we never dreamed of. But know this: angels come! They come when we least expect them and they bring an opportunity for us to participate in God's saving grace in a special way. As you go through this day, watch for your angel to come and bring you the good news of God's favor. And when the angel comes, be ready to share in a miraculous new birth!

Lord, surprises bother me and make me uncomfortable. I like for everything to go as I planned. Help me to realize that your plans are more important and that your vision is far greater than mine. Lord, surprise me today with the gift of new birth! Amen.

Monday
December 21
Matthew 1:18-21

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

If Mary was surprised, then Joseph must have been shocked! His plans did not include his fiancé giving birth to someone else's child. It was an embarrassment to him and a dishonor to his family. The best thing to do was to forget it and go their separate ways. But God had other plans. This was not about two kids and an unexpected pregnancy: it was about all creation and God's redemption. This unfortunate circumstance gave Joseph the opportunity to share in the most blessed event of all time.

God has a wonderful way of turning tragedies into blessings. What we often see as a disaster, God sees as a way to build the Kingdom. The unfortunate circumstances of our lives frequently provide the greatest opportunity for our growth in faith. Like Joseph we want to dismiss them, to put them behind us and get on with life, but in so doing we can miss God's gift of a wonderful opportunity. The hope of Christmas is that the brokenness of our lives will be healed and that from our despair will come new life. This is what we have been praying for. This is what God has promised to do. This is what we have been anticipating and for which we have been making our preparations. Instead of seeing the unfortunate circumstances of our lives as disaster, Christmas means that we can see them as the opportunity for God's greatest blessings!

What a fool I have been, O Lord! I thought that worshipping you meant that everything would go as I planned. Now I understand that it is not my plans that are important, but yours. Show me your plan today and lift me beyond the tragedies of my life to the glory of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ my Savior. Amen.

Tuesday
December 22
Matthew 2:1-6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men
from the East came to Jerusalem, [2]asking, 'Where is the child who has been born
king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay
him homage.' [3]When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all
Jerusalem with him; [4]and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the
people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. [5]They told him,
'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
[6] "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Three men set out on a journey. It was a journey that would take many days and across hundreds of miles. They did not know where they were going or exactly what they would find. All they knew was that there was a sign in the stars that called their attention to a miraculous birth for all humanity. It was a supreme act of faith, setting out on an unknown journey, trusting only the guidance of a star and the hope of something great. Because of this hope, they shared in the greatest event of all time.

Perhaps more than any other characters in the Christmas story, the wisemen teach us of faith. Their willingness to undertake such an incredible journey armed only with faith and hope sets a wonderful example for us. As we journey toward the manger, we do not know what to expect, but our faith teaches us to anticipate something great. We go to that manger, not because we know what Christmas will bring, but because we know that whatever Christmas brings will be wonderful. In this act we show our faith, making the journey simply because God beckons us to follow a star. Our efforts never go unrewarded. What we find may not be what we expect, but it is always wonderful!

Lord, show me the way. Lead me to the manger so that I may share in your gift. I trust you, knowing that you have something wonderful in store for me. Give me the faith to follow so that I don't miss this opportunity! Amen.

Wednesday
December 23
Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Surely Joseph didn't want to go. Bethlehem was a long way away. His wife was pregnant, due any day, and was certainly not up for the journey. Besides that, it was just one more way for the Romans to make his life miserable. He would rather have stayed home, but he didn't. He went. He made the effort and completed the journey. By so doing, God placed him and Mary in the right place at the right time.

One more party! One more program! One more service! How often have we said these words this Christmas season? How often have we wished to stay home and rest? How often have we found excuses to kick back instead of doing what we know we should do? We say we are *"taking care of ourselves,"* but are we really? Could it be that when we make excuses for our absence, we are actually neglecting the care of our souls? We may not want to go, we may have very good reasons for not going, but how many times do we miss out on God's blessings by staying home? When we respond to the invitation to "go" we often find ourselves in the right place at the right time. This right place is the place of God's blessing.

Lord, I'm tired. I want to be with my family. I want to relax. I don't want any more demands or expectations. I simply want to enjoy this time before Christmas. But Lord, I do want to be in the right place at the right time. I do want to be in the place of your blessing. Give energy to my tiredness and show me where you want me to be … for the sake of Christ! Amen

Thursday
December 24
Luke 2:8-16

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9]Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10]But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: [11]to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. [12]This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' [13]And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

[14] 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'
15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' [16]So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

It is the old, old story, told over and over again. We can say it in our sleep, we have heard it so many times: shepherds on a hillside, startled by the announcement of the angels; shepherds journeying to Bethlehem to visit a child; shepherds seeing the glory of God! But why tell the shepherds' story? For Luke, the shepherds represented the least, the last and the lost: the least likely recipients of God's grace; the last rung on the social ladder; those cast away by society as worth little or nothing at all. Yet these are the very ones whom God chose to include in the miraculous gift.

There is a message here: God's gift is for everyone. It is not for the pious few or the religious leaders; it is not just for the rich and famous; it is not just for those that have earned God's reward; it is not just for those that have remained faithful throughout. God's gift belongs to <u>all</u> these and many, many more. God's gift of deliverance is for all people of all time, born out of God's love for all humanity and all creation. Rejoice! Your hope has been fulfilled and your waiting has come to an end! In the darkness of the night, the savior will come!

Lord what can I say but "Thanks?" Your gift is more than I deserve and more than I expect. Your love humbles me, but it also brings me honor. I have seen a new light, for you have come into my darkness and shown me new things about myself and my world. I have come to see you in a new way. Now I worship you and celebrate your wonderful gift. Truly, you are the one who has given me hope for all my days, and I am grateful. Thank you, O God, for the gift of your Son this Christmas! Amen.

Friday
December 25
John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

The time has come! From the darkness of night has come the brightness of a new day. In the dawn of this Christmas day, we are assured of the gift of God's grace, a light that shines in our darkness that has not been overcome and never will be. Indeed, it is not the light that must defend itself from the darkness, but the darkness that is transformed into light, just as night is changed into day by the rising of the sun. This is the day for which we have waited, for which we prepared, in which we placed our hope: on this day we are assured that we need not dear the darkness that life often brings, for God has brought light into that darkness, shining from a manger in Bethlehem. That light is ours and nothing can take the light away, for Jesus Christ is born!

Lord, on this morning I join the angel chorus to sing ""Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among all." May the light you have brought to me shine in my heart this day and forever more! Amen!