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It's Advent!

This year Advent begins on Sunday, November 27, 2022. It's the arrival of the season when we prepare to welcome Baby Jesus into the world. What a plan God has for us; to take a baby from heaven and bring Him to this earth in human form, show us how to live by His example of grace, humility, kindness, acceptance, love and forgiveness, and then sacrifice Him on a cross so that we might have eternal life with Him ... if only we believe.

The Scripture passages selected are from various translations of the Bible: New International Version (NIV), The Message, (MSG), Contemporary English Version (CEV), The Passion Translation (TPT), New Living Translation (NLT), Living Bible (TLB), and Revised Standard Version (RSV). If you don't have a Bible, contact anyone in the church office who will be happy to give you one.

In this devotional we are highlighting the choices that people made, mostly during the time of Jesus' birth, but also some of our own choices. Hopefully, we can learn from these examples. God reveals Biblical truths to us as we grow closer to Him. We pray that *Choices* will reveal new truths to you to help you take the first step to accept Jesus as your Savior, or to revitalize your faith and make you a stronger Christian.

God's blessings on your journey.

The Advent wreath symbolizes spiritual aspects of preparing for Jesus' arrival. The wreath itself signifies continuous life. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life we find in Christ.

The first candle in the Advent wreath is the candle of Hope.

1 Peter 1:3 (NIV) – *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

A living hope, not one that sits there like a piece of cement, comes alive when we are going about our daily lives. It is passive when we are quietly contemplating our devotions. It is present when we are struggling. It is exciting when a scripture jumps out at us, or when we hear someone talk about their faith in words we have not contemplated before. “Aha, today hope settled in my heart exactly when I needed it!”

The meaning of the word hope can range from expect to trust. “I hope it doesn’t snow.” “I hope Santa will bring me what is on my wish list.” I had many hopes when taking on the task of writing advent devotions. I hoped I would finish them in a timely manner. I hoped my computer would do its duty and save when I punched *ctrls*. I trusted in God’s guidance when I found my fingers typing on their own. Most of all, I hoped God would give me the right words that would be meaningful for you.

The New Testament is about what it truly means to have hope as a Christian. It is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus.¹ “Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness.”² ([My Hope Is Built](#), #368). God’s hope is steadfast because Jesus died and rose again for our salvation.

Prayer: O God, you have given us confidence, hope, and faith through our salvation in Christ. I pray that eternal and real hope may rest in my heart today. Amen.

JNS

Micah 5:2-4 (NIV) - *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.’ Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”*

A prophet in the Bible is defined as a man who was called by God to proclaim the divine word to Israel. He stood alone before the king and people. (Deuteronomy 18:18). A person who answers to no one but God. A prophet is a person who speaks the real truth, God’s truth.

Jesus is our model of how to be a prophet now. Today’s prophets speak for the marginalized in our community, country and world. They challenge the status quo. How can we be God’s prophets? Think of ways you can influence the future. How can you participate in the movement for justice, freedom, and peace for all?

Consider the implications of your actions. Pick up trash along a walking path. Call someone you may have offended. Choose to write a card or email. Read a book and act on what you have learned. It only takes one little action. Remember the pebble thrown into the pond; the ripple gives off ever-larger circles. We don’t know when the ripple ends or who it will affect.

Prayer: Empowering God, May I follow your example by having compassion for all. Give me courage to speak that challenging word or step out of my comfort zone. Amen.

JNS

Daniel 9:21-23 (NLT) – *“I went on praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people, pleading with the LORD my God for Jerusalem, his holy mountain. As I was praying, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the earlier vision, came swiftly to me at the time of the evening sacrifice. He explained to me, ‘Daniel, I have come here to give you insight and understanding. The moment you began praying, a command was given. And now I am here to tell you what it was, for you are very precious to God. Listen carefully so that you can understand the meaning of your vision.’”*

Luke 1:18-20 (NLT) – *“Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.’ Then the angel said, ‘I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born.’”*

Luke 1:26b-31 (NLT) – *“God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you.’ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary,’ the angel told her, ‘for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.’”*

Daniel was praying and pleading with the Lord for himself, his people, and his country. He had been having visions including animals and horns, power and heavenly armies and daily sacrifices, and he didn’t understand any of it. Gabriel came to give Daniel wisdom to help him understand what his visions meant.

In Luke, Gabriel came to Zechariah to let him know that he and his wife Elizabeth were about to become parents, even though they were well past childbearing years. Lo and behold, what Gabriel told them actually happened and Elizabeth gave birth to John – John the Baptist. Then Gabriel appeared to Mary to let her know what God’s plans were for her; that she would become pregnant with the Son of God, Jesus.

As you can tell by the Scripture passages above, the angel, Gabriel, brought messages directly from God. In all of these passages we hear him speaking words of comfort. To Daniel, he said, *“for you are very precious to God.”* To Zechariah, *“It was he (God) who sent me to bring you this good news!”* And to Mary, *“you have found favor with God.”*

Daniel came to understand that his visions were concerning *“the time of wrath. What you have seen pertains to the very end of time.”* (Daniel 8:19b) Zechariah chose to question Gabriel about his pronouncement and Gabriel rendered him silent. Mary listened as Gabriel explained to her exactly how she could become pregnant while still a virgin. Her response was, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.”* Luke 1:38 (NLT)

Prayer: Lord, I pray that I will respond more like Mary rather than with skepticism like Zechariah. Help me to trust you in all things. Amen.

Mary Became Pregnant

Wednesday

Matthew 1:18 (NLT) - *“This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

Luke 1:26b-27a, 30-31 (NLT) - *“God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary,’ the angel told her, ‘for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.’”*

Mary must have had great faith and we know she was a humble girl by her response to the angel. She sacrificed a lot for her love of God. What would Joseph think? What would people think knowing she was pregnant before marriage? Then there was the pain of childbirth and even worse would be witnessing the death of her Son on a cross.

At least the angel talked to Joseph to explain it all to him. (You’ll read Joseph’s story tomorrow.) We don’t know what conversations happened between Mary and Joseph, but we do know that they remained a couple.

To me, Mary made the hardest choice of all – to listen to the angel sent to her by God. The angel told her that God was pleased with her and that she would give birth to a son and that *“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”* Luke 1:32-33 (NIV)

Prayer: Father, help us to have the faith of Mary. May we have the willingness to say yes when you ask us to do something. Empower us with courage to go forward no matter what anyone else thinks. We are blessed by Mary’s story. In Jesus’ Name, amen.

NLM

Matthew 1:18-24 (NIV) – *“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man, and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means ‘God with us’. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.”*

“You’re what?” “But we never...” “What did your mother and father say?” “What am I to tell MY parents?” “Okay, let’s take a while to think this through.” “I do care so much for Mary; I think the best solution would be to arrange for a quiet divorce.”

Have you ever gotten surprising news out of the blue? Was it good or bad news? Or maybe you couldn’t figure out if it was good or bad. How did you react? We often react quickly and off the cuff when hearing surprising news... especially news like Mary’s.

Joseph took time, pondering just what to do about this situation. Sometimes we, too, need to take a while to think things through. How quickly do you make decisions? How do you approach dilemmas? Do you check with Google? Do you lose sleep at night while the options stew around in your mind? Sometimes, I talk with a friend who has encountered a similar problem. And/or I pray about it. Any of these are good options, or maybe a combination of them. Joseph listened to the angel, opened his mind and heart to make the right choice.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your love. Give me patience, an open mind and a willingness to listen to you, listen to others, and trust scripture when searching for the right answer. Amen.

Mary Accepts God's Plan

Friday

Luke 1:46-55 (TPT) – *“And Mary sang this song: ‘My soul is ecstatic, overflowing with praises to God! My spirit bursts with joy over my life-giving God! For he set his tender gaze upon me, his lowly servant girl. And from here on, everyone will know that I have been favored and blessed. The Mighty One has worked a mighty miracle for me; holy is his name! Mercy kisses all who fear him, from one generation to the next. Mighty power flows from him to scatter all those who walk in pride. Powerful princes he tears from their thrones and he lifts up the lowly to take their place. Those who hunger for him will always be filled, but the smug and self-satisfied he will send away empty. Because he can never forget to show mercy, he has helped his chosen servant, Israel, keeping his promises to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’”*

This Scripture is called the Magnificat. It is Mary's beautiful song praising and thanking God for being chosen to bear Jesus, the Son of God, Immanuel.

After the angel explained to her how it would be possible that she would conceive while she was still a virgin, Mary accepted with these words: *“Yes! I will be a mother for the Lord! As his servant, I accept whatever he has for me. May everything you have told me come to pass.”* Luke 1:38 (TPT). Mary willingly obeyed.

I don't know about you, but I'm not convinced that I would have reacted the way that Mary did. First of all, I would have been very skeptical. How in the world will this happen? But we need to remember that with God ALL things are possible, even a virgin birth. Secondly, I would have wondered how my fiancée would accept this news. But God sent His angels to Joseph to let him know that this was God's plan and that he should accept Mary, pregnant and all. Then I would have worried ... a lot! After all, how do you raise the Son of God?? But Mary had great faith. She accepted the challenge. She made the choice to say “yes” to God.

Prayer: God, thank you for selecting Mary to be Jesus's mother and for sending your angels to reassure Joseph. May we all have the faith that Joseph and Mary displayed during these unforgettable circumstances. In your precious Son's Name I pray, amen.

NLM

Mary's Cousin, Elizabeth

Saturday

Luke 1:5-7 (NIV) – *“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well along in years.”*

Elizabeth likely grew up with wide scriptural knowledge and would have been exposed to even more teaching as the wife of Zechariah. Elizabeth immediately recognized God’s role in her pregnancy. She was John’s mother, nurturer and educator. God also used her to comfort and likely be a guide to Mary after she learned of the call God had placed on her life.

Women of that time basically had no choices. As Zechariah’s wife, she was a role model for the women of the community. There are times when we basically have no choices as well. We may need to take care of aging parents, or a disabled child, or even the rotten tree in our yard that is leaning close to the neighbor’s house. Oh my goodness, what do I do now? The choice we have is how we handle it. We may ignore the problem, or choose a professional to assist with the responsibility, or we may do it ourselves. Luckily, God has given us friends and family, or perhaps a counselor to help us decide what to do. We are so blessed with God’s guidance and compassion to meet challenges however we decide to act.

Prayer: Holy God, Thank you for the blessing of your care and love. May I always be listening for your words of wisdom. Amen.

JNS

The second candle in the Advent wreath is the candle of Love.

John 15:12-17 (NIV) – *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.”*

The dictionary says love is a strong affection for another arising from kinship or personal ties. Since we are all God’s children, we are kin with all people not just family, friends, and dear ones. Through Jesus, God gives us love; unconditional, all consuming love. But love is not a one way street. We can tell God we love Him while accepting God’s love for ourselves. It is imperative that we follow Jesus’s example to love one another, even when we do not agree with them, even if we do not follow their beliefs, even though they do what we consider evil. On the other side of the coin, we need to acknowledge that we too do things others do not approve of and we say malicious things.

The gospel of John tells us that Jesus chose us, just as the disciples were chosen. The disciples learned by observing Jesus healing the sick, by listening to meaningful stories, by watching how he interacted with the crowds, and by his tolerance with their human frailties (and ours). These are the attributes he taught us by example.

Prayer: On this second week of Advent, I thank you for your unfailing love for me, Holy God. Give me the strength to truly love others in that same beautiful way, without favoritism or animosity. (Speak out loud) I love you God! Amen.

JNS

Luke 1:5-7, 11-14, 18-20 (NIV) – *“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well along in years. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.’ Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.’ The angel answered, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.’”*

Zechariah’s story is one of trust and hope. Zechariah had many reasons to trust God. He came from a family of priests who had served God for generations. He had heard the stories of God’s faithfulness his whole life. The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah shows us that God can be trusted. However, when Gabriel told him of the impending child, his faith faltered. God’s timing may not be the same as ours. Do we trust God, or do we do what we want instead?

When Bob and I came to CRUMC, I assumed I would use the gifts God gave me in the same way as in our previous church. So I looked around but didn’t find the same ministries here. I was confused and sad. Then God told me, “Be patient, there will be a place for you to serve at CRUMC.” That was when my prayers were answered. I realized my time would be used differently, we chose to help with Matthew 25, be greeters and I chose to serve in Martha’s Ministry. Yay! Thank you God for guiding our path to serve you.

Prayer: Merciful God, Help me to trust in your design for my life. Be patient with my impatience and with my desire to go my own way. Amen.

JNS

Luke 15:3-7 (NLT) – *“So Jesus told them this story: ‘If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.” In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!’”*

I have made good choices in my life, but I’ve made my share of bad ones, too. I was born into a Christian family so I have known Jesus all my life, but I invited Jesus into my heart when I was a young girl of 10 years old. I stayed in church until I got married. My husband, Monte, didn’t come from a church-going family so after our wedding I made the choice that I didn’t need a church to be a Christian. Bad choice.

I read my Bible and prayed. I tried to be a good person. When we had children, I read them Bible stories every night and taught them to say their prayers. A funny thing happened. Kirsten came to me when she was about 7 and asked why she didn’t go to Sunday School. I told her that she could go if she wanted. There was a nice little church just 2 blocks away and she could go there with her friend.

I didn’t take her, I sent her. Her brother, Scott, started going soon after. Monte and I were busy up to our eyeballs with Jaycee activities, the Miss Coon Rapids Scholarship Pageant and Coon Rapids Snowflake Days. We were officers in all of them and there were so many things to do. That was our priority at the time.

But God had plans for me even if I wasn’t paying attention. He taught me many things when we were involved in the community groups. When He figured I had learned enough from them He literally dragged me back into the church. I couldn’t ignore Him; the force was too powerful. I walked into Coon Rapids United Methodist Church and it felt like I was home. Good choice. Kirsten was so happy that she came from Burnsville every Sunday to sit with her mom in the pew. Then Scott and Sophia got married and he came back, too. It was wonderful! We were only missing one.

I invited Monte every Sunday to come to church with me. He said “No” every Sunday for about 7 years. One Sunday he said “Yes” (good choice!) and I nearly fell to my knees. I had prayed for this day for so long. Now the pew held our entire family.

Monte passed away in October, 2018. Scott & Sophia moved to Lake Minnetonka and are attending Bethel UMC. Kirsten moved further north and carts Ari to her basketball games all around the country. So now sometimes I am alone again in the pew. But I have so many wonderful friends who come to sit with me that I don't feel alone.

I've taken chances and moved way outside my comfort zone when God has asked me to do things I am not comfortable doing like leading a team or giving the message during worship. I've grown a lot and things like that don't scare me any more. I love being part of the church leadership teams, being the Lay Leader, singing in the choir, facilitating Bible studies, and writing devotionals. I'm so happy that God loves me enough that He herded me back into His fold 26 years ago and keeps teaching me new things.

Prayer: God, you know me better than I know myself. You brought me from a shy girl who couldn't say her name in front of a group to become a leader in your church. Miracles aren't always spontaneous; sometimes they take many years. Thank you for the gifts that you have blessed me with. May I always use them to glorify you. Amen.

NLM

Luke 2:1-5 (NLT) – *“At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.”*

Caesar Augustus was the Roman Emperor who had the authority to issue a decree to have a census taken. The census was a military registration and also a registration for tax purposes.

I don’t believe in coincidences. I believe that every event has a reason. I have faith in the links between all things, past and present.

By issuing the decree when he did, baby Jesus was born in the city that was prophesized in the Old Testament even though his parents, Mary and Joseph, did not live there:

*“Bethlehem Ephrathah,
you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah.
But the LORD will choose one of your people to rule the nation—
someone whose family goes back to ancient times.”* Micah 5:2 (CEV)

They had to travel many miles just to pay their taxes and even though Mary was very pregnant, she needed to accompany Joseph.

Everything that happens is caused by something or someone. What happens today will have a ripple effect into the future. I see the past, present and future as connected, and I know that there is a Master Plan at work and God is in control!

Prayer: Holy One, I acknowledge that you have everything under your control to bring about the New Creation. Thank you, Father, for your care and I pray that all of our ripples have a positive effect on the future. In Jesus Name, amen.

NLM

Luke 2:6-7 (RSV) – *“And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

A manger is a trough in a stable designed to hold feed or fodder for livestock. Back in Jesus’ time, the ox and the donkey served as a livelihood and were indispensable for fieldwork. In the books of Matthew and Luke, there is no mention of donkeys, oxen, or any animals in conjunction with Jesus’ birth. Why, then, do we have animals in our nativities? In 1223, St. Francis of Assisi, a Franciscan monk, is credited with staging the first nativity scene. He got permission from Pope Honourius III to set up a manger with hay and two live animals—an ox and an ass—in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio.

In some modern nativity scenes, besides the ox, donkey, sheep, lambs and the sheepdog, there can be exotic animals, such as an elephant, representing the African continent; a camel representing Asia, and a horse, a representing Europe. Matthew wanted to convince early Christians that Jesus’ birth is for Jews and for Gentiles. This also shows that at Christmas the whole of God’s creation is considered, the human world and the animal world.

God tells us in Genesis 1:28 to subdue all that He just created. That means that God wants us to care for all of creation and to treat it responsibly. Here again when Jesus was born, God is telling us to treat all of creation with respect. That includes humankind, the land, the skies, the sea, and all creatures.

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for your incredible creation. We celebrate the diversity in our world. We ask for your divine guidance to be caretakers of everyone and everything. Amen.

JNS

Hebrews 1:14 (TLB) – *“for the angels are only spirit-messengers sent out to help and care for those who are to receive his salvation.”*

Angels are spiritual beings and act as God’s messengers. Just look at the Christmas story. Angels announced Jesus’ birth to Mary, reassured Joseph, named Jesus, announced Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, and protected Jesus by sending Joseph and Mary to Egypt. The angels were key players!

They serve us, the believers! They protect the helpless, proclaim God’s messages, and execute God’s judgment. They are under God’s authority.

Luke 2:10-14 (TLB) – *“but the angel reassured them. ‘Don’t be afraid!’ he said. ‘I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem! How will you recognize him? You will find a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger!’ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,’ they sang, ‘and peace on earth for all those pleasing him.’”*

Prayer: Lord, I believe you send angels to us even today. We see miraculous stories on the news and some of us have experienced your angels themselves! Thank you for sending your angels to watch over all of us. Amen.

NLM

Luke 2:8-12, 15-20 –(NLT) *“That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. ‘Don’t be afraid!’ he said. ‘I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.’ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.”*

An angel came to the shepherds to let them know of Jesus’ birth that night. Imagine the fear they felt! The angel assured the shepherds that what he would tell them would be good news, not bad. The shepherds listened and then they made a choice - the choice to travel to Bethlehem to see what the angels had told them about. They hurried to Bethlehem and found Baby Jesus, lying in the manger. Then the shepherds made another choice. They told everyone they saw what the angel had said and what had happened. The Messiah had been born! They shared the Good News!

Then they went back to tending their sheep, but I imagine they had lightness in their step and smiles on their faces because they were *“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”*

What if they didn’t believe the angel? Imagine if they chose not to go to Bethlehem. Just look at what they would have missed! I’m happy that they made the choices they did.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to see the possibilities, too. Let us be open to see the miracles all around us. And when we see those miracles, help us to share them with others so that they may believe and be blessed as well. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

NLM

The third candle in the Advent wreath is the candle of Joy.

John 16:19-22 (NIV) – “Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, ‘Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me”? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.’”

In the Scripture passage for today, Jesus is talking to His disciples letting them know that they will feel sadness and sorrow after His crucifixion and death, but He assures them that they will see Him again. Of course, they didn't understand what He was talking about. Jesus knew what they were thinking so He gave them the perfect analogy of a woman giving birth. Yes, we go through excruciating pain to bring a new baby into this world, but the joy we feel afterwards is worth it. It must be or there would be more single children families!

Yes, Biblical joy is much different than the momentary happiness a child feels when he opens that perfect Christmas present. We have many passages in the Bible that talk about joy or rejoice – more than 100. When Christians think about joy we often relate it to the birth of Jesus or the salvation He offers us. We see a future and know that there are wonderful things ahead for us. We look forward to Jesus's Second Coming and know that His promise will come true. We will be resurrected and enjoy eternal life with Him, if only we believe.

Many times when I am filled with joy it is when I am singing with the choir and sharing the joyous music of the cantatas! Christian music, and especially Christmas music, is filled to the brim with the joy of the season and with rejoicing hearts thanking God for all of His blessings.

At a time in this world when depression is at an all-time high, the candle of Joy offers the Light of the World that can overcome the darkest times. Our joy is a gift from God and no one can take our joy away from us. May you carry it with you this Advent season and throughout the New Year ahead.

Prayer: Holy One, our joy doesn't come from the things we have on this earth, the people around us, or how successful we are; true joy comes from you. Flood us with true joy this Christmas and help us to share our joy with others. Amen.

Luke 2:8 (NIV) – *“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.”*

The shepherds were the first to hear the good news of Jesus birth from an angel. They hurried to the stable. We are compared to sheep many times in the Bible. *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* Isaiah 53:6 (NIV). Sheep wander away from the flock, sometimes finding themselves stuck in a hole or helpless to get loose from craggy, snarly bushes. We too, tend to choose to go our own way, not thinking about the consequences of the decisions we make, or thinking only about our own wants and desires. We easily get ourselves into untenable situations in which we cannot discern a way out. What are we to do? God gives us minds to use as we encounter difficult problems. We can find a quiet place and contemplate our options. The best answer is to pray for God’s guidance.

In my reading, I learned that sheep also have the ability to build friendships with other sheep and they stick up for each other. What a wonderful comparison. Friends are gifts from God who sometimes advise us or come to our aid when we are in a pickle.

Prayer: Thank you Jesus, for sheep that serve as an example for me to follow. You are the shepherd who leads me and comes to my rescue when I fall into craggy holes. I am humbled at your willingness to take on my sins to give me eternal life. Amen.

JNS

Matthew 1:21-23 (NIV) – *“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ - which means ‘God with us.’”*

What’s in a name? It is a big part of your identity. It is the name your parents chose for you. They thought through what it will mean as you grow older. When you went to school, you may have had a nickname. Sometimes it was a derogatory name, one you didn’t like. When you become an adult, you have the opportunity to choose what you want to be called.

What name do you feel most comfortable calling the Holy One? Merciful Savior, Christ, Loving Father, Lord, Mother. For me, it varies with different circumstances. When I look out my window, or take a walk, I call God Creator. My favorite name for God is Friend; someone who loves me no matter what, someone who sits down beside me and listens, someone who cares about me. Remember, no matter what we call God, God is always there for us, every moment of every day. *“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ - which means ‘God with us.’”*

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. (pause for a deep breath). Yes, I can feel your presence with me today. Amen.

JNS

Luke 2:22-38 (NIV) - *“When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord’), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”*

God had promised Simeon he would live to see the new Messiah. Both Simeon and Anna arrived at the temple at the same time as Mary and Joseph. No one consulted his or her day planner that morning. It was a matter of God’s timing. Simeon and Anna didn’t know who Jesus was until Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple that day. Yet God directed them to be there at that particular time. God’s guidance leads us to make the right choices too. When is a good time to ask her/him to marry me? When should we talk to the parents about moving to senior living? When should I look for a new job? How do I get to the doctor when I can’t drive anymore?

I have experienced God acting in my life. Why did that teenager come asking for a job when Bob and I needed help with our yard? One day I was in a bookstore wandering around and I found myself at the “self-help” table. Soon I had a book in my hand that eventually gave me the self-confidence I had not experienced before. God led events in the Bible and He guides our lives today. Everything past and present is in God’s timing.

Prayer: O God, you are so very amazing. Why do things happen as they do? Because you are there when I rise, when I go about my day and when I lay down at night! Your timing is impeccable. Amen.

Joseph Left for Egypt

Thursday

Matthew 2:13-14, 19-23 (NIV) – *“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.”*

Yes, the people we read about in the Bible were people just like us, experiencing life as it comes. They acted when something needed to be done. ‘Get up’ - an action phrase, even a command, that Joseph recalled when he heard the angel in a dream months earlier. This time he did not hesitate; he got up and took the child and his mother home. That’s what parents do when the family is in danger.

Have you ever had an instance where you just felt you HAD to do something? A tornado approaching, someone cutting you off in traffic, seeing a dear one fall? God gives us the intelligence and compassion to keep our eyes and ears open to anticipate a necessary action (or inaction) when it is needed. Always remember, as children of God, our parent watches over us.

Prayer: Gracious God, Thank you for attending to my every move and giving me insight to do what is necessary. Amen.

JNS

Matthew 2:1-8, 12, 16 (NIV) – *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.’ And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”*

King Herod the Great was a bloodthirsty tyrant who murdered his wife, mother-in-law and 3 sons. The Roman Empire gave Herod his authority to rule the Jews, but most Jews hated him even though he referred to himself as the King of the Jews. Herod lived only for his power and personal gain. Herod’s ire was piqued when the wise men asked “where is the King of the Jews, we want to worship him.” Because he was considered a political genius, he was livid that he had been tricked so he chose to butcher the baby boys born at the time he surmised Jesus was born. Indeed, Herod was a perfect negative example of making wise choices. His decisions were made when he asked himself, “What’s best for me?” or “How can I manipulate this situation to benefit me?”

Today we hear “Just you wait, I’ll get even if it takes the rest of my life.” “I just don’t agree with what she is doing, so I’ll never speak to her again.” Does a person’s rancor change anything? In the short and the long run, who suffers from days or years of resentment? What is gained? Jesus taught us to forgive, time after time, even when it is hard.

Prayer: O God, forgive my temptation to do what is best only for me. Help me to consider others’ feelings and future outcomes when I am making choices. Thank you for your mercy to love me whatever I do. Amen.

Matthew 2:1-12 (MSG) *'After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, 'Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him.'* When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, *'Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?'* They told him, *'Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly: It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land, no longer bringing up the rear. From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.'* Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, *'Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship.'* Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: *They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh."*

Scholars, Magi, Wise Men – all are biblical titles for the learned people from the East, perhaps ancient Persia. They were experts who possessed considerable information about the movement of the stars and planets, tying them to the destiny of men and women. They studied, observed, chose to follow God's messenger, the star, and give homage to the King of the Jews.

We, too, need to study scripture, find knowledgeable people who can guide our inquiry, take note of what is happening around us, and help us make the right choices. Think about how we, as followers of Jesus, can impact our own future and the world around us. What are ways we can contribute our God-given abilities to positively impact our community? The contribution does not need to be momentous; it can be a call to a friend or writing a note. A smile for someone who needs one can make a huge difference to positively change his or her day ... or yours.

PRAYER: All-knowing God, thank you for the gift of learning and knowledge. Grant me to use the intelligence and intuition you gave me to follow the star this day ... and tomorrow. Amen.

The fourth candle in the Advent wreath is the candle of Peace.

Ephesians 2:14-18 (NLT) – “For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.”

In today’s Scripture we can see how Jesus wants us to live. He ended the hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles. By His death on the cross He brought us a new system by which to live.

These days, it is hard to find peace in our lives. We hear about the war in Ukraine, shootings of children and other innocent people. People disappearing, people rioting, people full of racism and hate. It’s hard to hear and harder still to understand.

“Our hostility toward each other was put to death.” He died on the cross to attain this ... for us! We should be at peace with each other, but we aren’t. We still discriminate on the basis of race, age, religion, economic security, where we live, who we vote for – and on and on and on.

We are called to live in peace. Let each one of us make our corner of the world just a little better. Extend a hand of friendship to someone in your neighborhood who is different from you. Smile and say “Good Morning” or “Good Afternoon” when you pass by someone when you’re walking. Give grace to the person who isn’t driving up to your standards. Sometimes we make foolish moves, too. Squelch any racist remarks or even gossip that you hear.

Colossians 3:15 (NLT) - “And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.”

Prayer: Holy One, I lift up to you people who are in conflict in any way, whether it is a war or family conflict, neighbors feuding, or friends at odds with each other. You call us to be peaceful people. Help us to rest in the peace that you offer. Amen.

Luke 2:10-14 (NIV) – *“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’”*

Hark the Herald Angels Sing (v3) #240

“Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,

born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.”

Worship always includes music whether on-line or in-person on Sunday morning. The object of religious music is to have the message of the day presented in a different way to appeal to our heartstrings and for our enrichment. The worship planners choose carefully which songs to sing to coordinate with the theme for the day.

Music is especially important at Christmas. Most of us can remember singing this old favorite when we were children, not understanding the words, like righteousness, glory, that we no more may die, or a second birth. As adults it is important that we assimilate what the words mean to us now. These words have the potential to deepen our faith. What is remarkable is that each time we sing or speak certain words, our minds can travel different directions.

I chose this hymn to write about because I hear many meaning-filled phrases. They speak of God's presence in my life at Christmas and in daily encounters with the one who dwells deep in my soul. Jesus is the light of the world bringing joy and awareness of the wonders of life itself. Every day is a new awakening. When I sing the phrase, “healing in his wings,” I envision gentle, widespread wings that encircle me when I feel discouraged. The Almighty has the capability to heal anyone who is hurting, mentally or physically. We need to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, put our humanness to the side and feel the gentle touch of the divine. Jesus came to earth to be our Savior. How amazing is that!

Prayer: Emmanuel, thank you for the gift of creative musicians who tell the Christmas story in melody and verse. Help me to listen to the words and absorb their deep meanings as I sing them this year. Amen.

The Wise Men Go the Other Way

Tuesday

Matthew 2:1-2, 7-9, 12 (NLT) – *“Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.’ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, ‘Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!’ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.”*

Herod had no intention of worshipping the Christ-child. He was deviously using the wise men to give him information. He wanted to know exactly where the baby was, not so that he could worship Him, but so that he could send his men to have Jesus killed! But King Herod did not succeed because the wise men were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. “Was it just a dream?” “Is someone trying to tell us something?” The wise men had a choice to make: return to Herod as they had planned or to return home another way. They chose to listen to their gut, or dream.

Have you ever been in that situation? You’re not sure if you should listen to your instincts. Sometimes our “instincts” are a nudging from God. I remember one morning going to work. I had several options, but I always took the most direct route. It was a 26-mile trek. One morning, I had the strong feeling that I should go another way, even though it would take me longer. What sense did that make? Why? Why should I add to my aggravation and maybe even be late for work? It didn’t make sense to me. As I was driving toward the road where I had to make the decision which way to go, I made the choice. I went the long way only to find out that evening that there was a horrendous accident on the road I normally drove. It happened that morning during rush hour traffic. Now, I’m not saying I would have been involved in the accident, I may have been, but at the very least I would have been a lot later for work if I was driving behind those involved. Everyone would have come to a halt.

So, now when I get a nudge, I listen to it. Many times we don’t know what difference our decisions make but other times our choices make a big difference to ourselves and/or to others.

Prayer: Father, thank you for keeping me safe that day and all the days that I didn’t even know I was in danger. Help me to always keep my heart open to hearing you. Amen.

NLM

Matthew 1:21 (NIV) – *“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

Jesus had numerous names attributed to Him even before He was born, and during His life: Immanuel, ruler who will shepherd my people Israel, King of the Jews, Savior, Messiah, Blasphemer and Son of God. Jesus did not choose any of those names nor did He make His own vocational choice. God chose His Son to walk the earth at a specific time in history. Jesus knew His destiny was to bring salvation to people. He knew what needed to be done and where to go on any given day. He was able to discern what was going on with those around Him, whether it was His beloved disciples, or the animosity of the temple leaders. His divinity was shown by His words and actions - how He lived each day.

Sometimes our names are the same as the roles we play: mother, father, etc. Most of the time we choose these roles, others will fall to us due to the lives we have decided upon. On busy days we know where to go and what to do, these are conscious decisions. Then there other days when we let go of our to-do lists even for an hour or two. We have the potential of being unconventional or our usual self.

When my children were little, we had a favorite book, *Free to be You and Me*. The premise is that God gives us free will to make choices about how we live our lives. God knows and loves the real you – the deep down you.

Prayer: Redeemer and friend, thank you for allowing me to be myself. I’m grateful that you still love me even when I make wrong choices. Amen.

JNS

John 1:19-20, 24-27, 29-34 (NLT) – *“This was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, ‘Who are you?’ He came right out and said, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him, ‘If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?’ John told them, ‘I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. Though his ministry follows mine, I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal.’ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, “A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.” I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel.’ Then John testified, ‘I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him. I didn’t know he was the one, but when God sent me to baptize with water, he told me, “The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.”*

John was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah and was Jesus’ cousin. The second half of Zechariah’s song in Luke 1:76-79 is a beautiful prophesy of who his son was born to be.

John was that “different” person. He lived in the wilderness and ate locusts and honey. John was a voice that called people, convicted people, warned people. He was brutally straightforward and yet so caring in the Sacrament of Baptism that he performed. He was a voice of extremes. He would walk along the Jordan River shouting to people to repent. He warned them of what would happen if they didn’t. He was brutally honest about the wrath of God. But when he spoke of Jesus, he became modest and introspective, not worthy to untie His sandals.

The people asked how they could change ... what should they do? John told them:

- Be honest
- Be content with what you have
- Give to the needy
- Don’t steal
- Don’t falsely accuse others

Sounds like some of the 10 Commandments!

We’re talking about choices. John could have said, “No”, but I believe he had no choice at all. His ministry was introduced in the Old Testament book of Isaiah talking about the “voice in the wilderness.” He was to prepare the way for Jesus, the true Messiah. It was his calling.

Prayer: Lord, help us to be as convicted as John. He knew what his calling was and it is our calling, too: to preach the Good News to others to make the world a better place. Guide us in our calling. Amen.

Ephesians 1:4-11 (NLT) – *“Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding. God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.”*

What an amazing God we have! He wanted us to be His children so He adopted us into His family. Our Father chose us to be His even before He created the world we live in. God had everything planned out before He started creating. He chose where and when everything would be.

How and why can God accept us? We are nothing but sinners. But, He had His perfect plan ready. He would send His Son into the world to die on a cross to save us from all of our sins. Jesus would be resurrected from His grave on the third day. Because He died and rose again, we are now perfect in God’s eyes; our sins are gone forever. Now we are God’s adopted children. Our Father welcomes us into His family and we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for choosing me to be your child. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to choose Jesus to come into my heart to be my Lord and Savior and my Friend. In His precious Name, Amen.

NLM

The Christ Candle

Saturday, Christmas Eve

The final candle to be lit in the Advent Wreath is the candle in the center, the Christ candle.

We prepare for Christmas in many ways. Some of us cook and bake and clean the house for guests. We put lights on the house, decorate a Christmas tree, have bright red berried holly, and maybe some fresh evergreens and decorations galore in our homes. If we're lucky we shop and wrap presents. We go to our neighbors with gifts of cookies or Christmas caroling.

We need to prepare ourselves in the same way we prepare our homes. Clean out the closets of your heart. Go to God confessing your sin. Decorate your soul by serving others. Beautify your mind with stories of the season and Scripture. Glorify God with mighty Hallelujahs!

We need to prepare ourselves in the same way we prepare our homes. Clean out the closets of your heart. Go to God confessing your sin. Decorate your soul by serving others. Go with a happy heart to volunteer or minister to a lonely neighbor. It will mean the world to both of you! Beautify your mind with stories of the season and Scripture. Glorify God with mighty Hallelujahs!

Judy and I chose to write a devotional. We pray that you have been blessed by it. We certainly have! Being in the Word, writing from our hearts, and spending more time together to complete the details have meant the world to us.

On this Christmas Eve, as we light the final candle, the Christ candle, may our hearts be stirred to revival as we contemplate the meaning of Christ's birth.

*"The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish." John 1:14 (MSG)*

Hope. Love. Joy. Peace. Christ. As we light these Advent Candles, may we see His glory this Christmas, and like the shepherds, may we go forth sharing the Good News, glorifying and praising God!

Prayer: Father, open our hearts to the Christmas and life you desire for us. Let us emulate Christ in our planning and preparations and bring all glory to You. Amen.

NLM

John 1:14 (NLT) – *“So the Word [Jesus] became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.”*

John 3:15-17 (NLT) – *“Everyone who believes in him [Jesus] will have eternal life. For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.”*

Luke 23:44-46 (NLT) – *“By this time it was about noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle. Then Jesus shouted, ‘Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!’ And with those words he breathed his last.”*

Philippians 2:9-11 (NLT) – *“God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Revelation 22:7, 20 (NLT) - *“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed are those who obey the words of prophecy written in this book.’ He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon!’ Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!”*

Jesus came into the world as a baby. He was fully human and yet fully Divine. He experienced everything that we experience, but unlike us, He never sinned. He came into the world so that we would be saved. He died on a cross with all of our sins on Him. As He died we became free! He was resurrected three days later and appeared to many people, and then He returned to His Father. But, He will return again one day. We don’t know when, so we need to be ready. He’s coming to make everything new – a new heaven and a new earth!

I remember the day I accepted the Lord into my heart for myself. I was 10 years old and at a Billy Graham Crusade. We were seated way up high in a huge stadium and I felt called. I went forward all by myself. I’m sure my mom and aunt kept their eyes on me because thousands of people went forward that day. I remember a guy handing me a lot of literature. It included a paper explaining just what I had chosen for my life – to be a child of God; to believe in His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to save me from my sins. Nothing could have held me back that day, not even my mom. I was being called in the most wonderful way.

You can accept Jesus into your heart, too, right now by praying, “Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. Please forgive me. I believe that you died on the cross to take away my sin and I know that I cannot earn my way to heaven. It is by your grace that I am saved. Thank you for your sacrifice for me. Amen.”

Prayer: Thank you, Savior, for going to the cross so that I could be forgiven for all of my sins. May I always be worthy of your sacrifice. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen.

The Weaver

My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He weaveth steadily.

Of't times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.

Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

*May God richly bless you, your family,
And our church this beautiful
Christmas Season!*

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