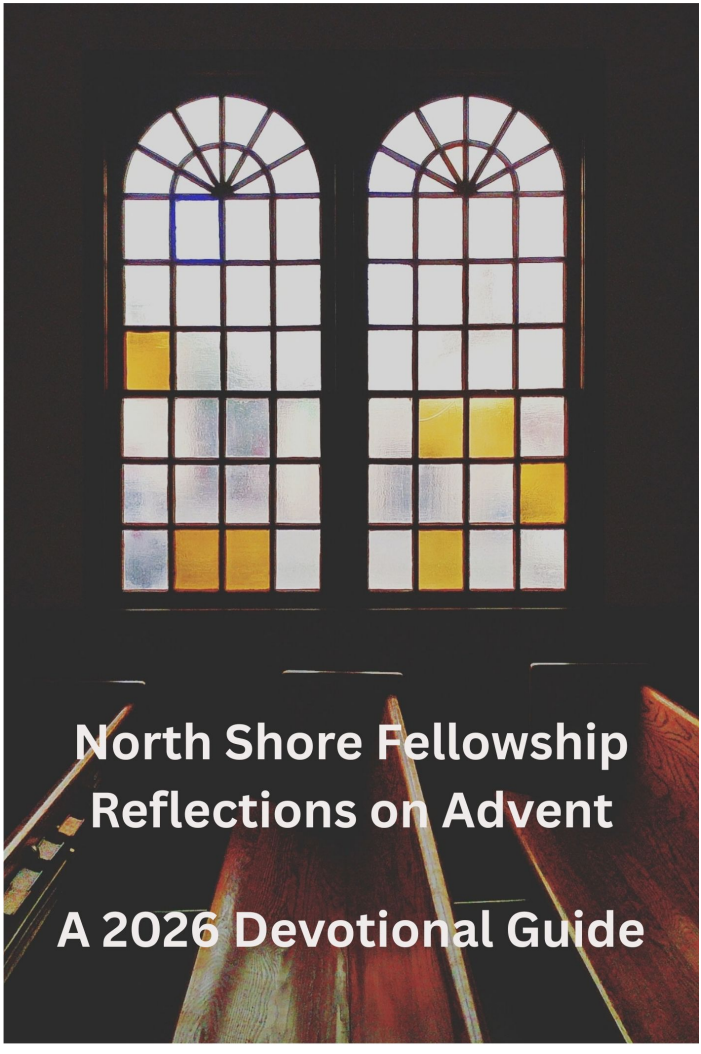


North Shore Fellowship
Reflections on Advent

A 2026 Devotional Guide

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Dear North Shore Family,

Advent is a season of waiting. For me, waiting does not come naturally. I want the manger scene, the family meal, the candlelight service, the hot chocolate on Christmas morning, and in my family, the Waffle House cheeseburger Christmas night. I'm less excited about the weeks of preparation and waiting. The Church has long known what I often forget: the waiting is not wasted time. It is where longing is shaped into hope, and hope leads us into worship.

What you are holding is a gift from your own church family – reflections written by our members who sat with a specific Scripture. The voices inside this book are ones you'll recognize – your neighbors, fellow worshipers, siblings in Christ. I think that is what makes this invitation to wait, to reflect, to hope, and to worship feel like home.

My hope is that you make this booklet part of your rhythm during Advent. I pray these pages help me – and all of us – slow down a bit and remember why we wait – Immanuel, God with us, came once in humility and will come again in glory. However you use it, remember you do not walk through this season alone. Our church family is with you, including the voices herein. Come, let's journey to the manger.

Pax Vobis in Christo,
Jerry Harwood

Creation Groans (Mark Rico)

Sunday 11/29 Romans 8:18-25

Romans 8:22 "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

There's nothing like waiting for a gift you already know you'll love. It's a good kind of wait, with certainty that links the promise to its fulfillment. But how much harder would that wait be if you had no idea when it would end?

That's where the entire universe finds itself. God's word-created, word-sustained creation is waiting. But in the meantime, it experiences pain on a cosmic scale. Volcanos suffer. The atmosphere longs. The smallest creatures are subjected to a cycle of futility. The Pleiades are in bondage to corruption. The Mariana Trench is groaning in the pains of childbirth. From rock to leaf, everything is deeply aware that nothing is as it should be. The natural world dies and decays every day, longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

You feel it too. We all groan when we wake up, groan as we pull up thorns in every day's field, and groan ourselves to sleep. Even though we who belong to Christ have also received the firstfruits of the Spirit of God, we still long to be made whole. For now, the ultimate redemption of our bodies can seem like a whisper in the night. When will the whisper become the full-throated song of morning?

And now, Advent begins. In the dark, subjected to futility.

But remember the gift. On this side of Christmas and Calvary, our treasured hope is in Christ's resurrection and the promise that we, too, will someday be revealed in all our glory. The salvation that Christ has begun in us will be completed. We will step into eternity clothed in perfection: body, mind, and soul. Because we know what's coming, our waiting itself isn't futile.

We groan, but eagerly – right along with the rest of creation.

Prayer: Oh God, who subjected the creation to futility in hope that it would be set free from its bondage to corruption, help us to wait eagerly for the renewal of all things. We feel the decline of our bodies and we see the strain of your creation. We long for death and decay to be overthrown by flourishing, imperishable life. Help us to look to your Son and hope in His resurrection. And by your Spirit, help us to rejoice even as we groan. Lord Jesus, come quickly!

The First Promise (Dick Allen)

Monday 11/30 Genesis 3:14-15

Genesis 3:14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

Winters are long and harsh in rural Michigan. On the first warm day of spring Mom agreed to let me play outside, under one condition, "Do not play in the muddy fields!"

But the temptation was too much for this ten-year-old. Within moments I was ecstatically jumping and crawling in the thawing mud when I heard, "Dickie?" "Dickie!" "Where are you? Hot cookie ready."

Lured by the promise of a hot cookie, I raced to the back porch, scrambled up the steps, and burst into the kitchen smearing clumps of mooshy mud across Mom's freshly mopped floor.

I still hear her shrieks of disgust: “Look at what you’ve done!” Banished from the kitchen and from any hope of a hot cookie, I sank onto the back steps, ashamed and muddy.

Mom’s outrage offers but a faint picture of the hostility and enmity God placed between the serpent (Satan)and the woman (humanity). God announced His judgement, against the serpent for deceiving Eve then personally promised that a Deliver will come to strike a fatal blow to Satan’s head rescuing us from sin without which you and I would still be in harmony with Satan’s Rebellion.

Heavenly Father, I praise You for Your unmerited mercy by securing my salvation despite my rebellious sinfulness. Through Jesus' death on Calvary the head of the serpent was fatally crushed, his power over me rendered inoperative. Thank You that Your Son was prepared to be bruised for my muddiness by taking the punishment I deserve. I am forever thankful and glorify Your holy name, Amen.

Later, Mom joined me on the steps with a warm hug and a fresh hot cookie.

Radiance of Glory (Phillip Arceneaux)

Tuesday 12/1 Hebrews 1:1-4

Heb 1:1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

There is no more important question than "Who is Jesus?" or the response to it. People throughout the ages have offered various thoughts. They have said He was a great man, a great prophet, and a created being that is greater than the angels. There were people in Jesus' time who spoke wrongly about who He is. Some said a great man, John the Baptist, Isaiah, or Elijah.

Jesus spoke on the importance of His identity. Already knowing the response, in Matthew 16, He asked His disciples who they say he is. They recognized Him as the Messiah. The Old Testament identifies

the Messiah's deity. The disciples have rightly said that Jesus is God in the flesh. The author of Hebrewsrightly knew who Jesus is (vs 3) as "the radiance of the glory of God."

Peter, James, and John saw that radiance (brightness) of God's glory on Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus' clothes even showed that glory that is described as "intensly white." God said He would share His glory with no one. How can this be, unless Jesus is God?

During this Advent season, let us meditate on the wonderful fact that the Master of the Universe, the Creator Himself, in an act of humiliation lived among us. A holy God dwelt in a sinful world to save sinners.

Prayer: Thank you Lord in your infiinite wisdom that You knew that only a holy God could be born to a virgin, walk out a life perfectly, and die for our sins. We honor You Jesus, this time of year, the beginning of Your humiliation, to save us, Your Elect.

Blessing for All Nations (Barry Smith)

Wednesday 12/2 Genesis 12:1-3

Genesis 12:1 Now the LORD said[fn] to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

From the time of our first parents' rebellion, the world has been divided into offspring of the serpent, those who love and worship self, and the offspring of the woman, those who love and worship God (Gen. 3:15).

However, because everyone is born dead in their trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1), no one is able to choose to become an offspring of the woman, to join with those who love and worship God. But God, who is rich in mercy and great love (Eph. 2:4), does not leave his elect trapped among the offspring of the serpent. He calls them "out of darkness and into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). That's what we see happening in Genesis 12:1-3: God calls Abram out of the darkness of idolatry and into a relationship of love and worship with himself.

The call, though, was not to Abram alone. From Abram, God would make a nation, a great nation, not great because of power or wealth, but great because of the nearness of the Lord (Deut. 4:7). And even that was not the end. God's plan to call his elect out of sin and death and into life and worship extends to the ends of the earth (Is. 49:6). And that's why Jesus was born.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus became incarnate, shared in flesh and blood, so that through his death he might destroy death, destroy the devil, and deliver the offspring of Abraham (Heb. 2:14-16).

We who have been delivered from death and made alive in Christ are recipients of God's promise to Abram to bless all the families on the earth. Let us join together in giving thanks to God for so great a salvation and in joyful worship, service, and obedience.

Prayer: Lord God, our Father in Heaven, thank you that you do not leave your elect children dead in their sins. Thank you for calling Abram out of idolatry and into a relationship of love and worship with you. Thank you that Jesus came to live in our world and die in our place. Thank you for calling us out of sin and darkness into your marvelous light. Please work in us to be grateful, to love you, to obey you, and to joyfully serve you.

The Enormous Family of Abraham (Joyce McPherson)

Thursday 12/3 Galatians 3:6-9, 14

Galatians 3:6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." 7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith...14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Hundreds of years before Christ, Abraham received the promise of descendents as numerous as the stars. Yet, he and Sarah waited for years before their first child was born. Their time of waiting was counted to them as righteousness because they trusted God.

These verses were especially comforting to me as we waited for three years for our first child. We could not afford an infertility clinic, but our entire church was praying for us. To our delight, we learned we were expecting just as Garth finished medical school. Some of you

know the rest of the story—that in time we welcomed nine children into our family!

Paul, writing to the Galatians, assured them (and us) that **we are sons and daughters of Abraham through faith**. When Jesus was born, the promise was fulfilled that all the nations would be blessed through this family. Not only did Jesus come as the promised Messiah to live a righteous life and atone for our sins on the cross, but He gave us the promised Spirit, who works in each of us. As we celebrate Advent, we are waiting with all our brothers and sisters throughout history, who trusted in God and were made part of this family as a gift. We can rest in His goodness—he provides beyond what we could think or imagine! And we are part of an enormous family....

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please impress on us anew the glory of our Savior's birth—the long-promised Messiah who makes all of us Your sons and daughters. Strengthen our faith to trust in you, especially when we are tempted to be anxious or fearful. Let us rest in your goodness and love this Advent season. In our Savior's Name, Amen.

The Throne Room of God (Margot Kapic)

Friday 12/4 2 Samuel 7:12-16

2 Samuel 7: 12 When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. 15 But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' "

This passage may be a prophecy from Nathan to King David but it is not referring to David's throne room. This is about a future king, King Jesus. Unlike David, whose days came to an end, Jesus reigns forever (Luke 1:32-33). His throne room is defined by justice and a love that will not depart from us. What amazes me most is that we get to enter this throne room anytime! We have unlimited access to God because the nature of our relationship to him is that of a father and child.

No appointment necessary.

I've been blessed with a wonderful earthly father and I do not think twice when going into his office. I enter the room with boldness and confidence (Ephesians 3:11-12) knowing I will be met with steadfast love. How much more accessible and how much more powerful is our heavenly Father? This season of Advent helps us focus our hearts and minds unto the wonder that is the coming of King Jesus. The very King whose throne is established forever loved us enough to humble himself, taking on the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7-11).

Prayer: Holy triune God, thank you that we get to enter into this throne room even now. We will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever; with our mouths we will make known your faithfulness to all generations (Psalm 89:1). May we be faithful participants in the coming of your eternal kingdom. May your throne be established forever. Amen.

A Kingdom With No End (Cary Bayless)

Saturday 12/5 Luke 1:30-33

Luke 1:30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Fear to favor, conception to kingdom, newborn to no end.

The fullness of the fulfillment of the promise of who Jesus is can be glimpsed in the angel's words to Mary in these three short verses. He is the promised Son and King, and of His reign and kingdom there will be no end.

We know the end and outcome of Jesus' work, and because of that, we can find peace and hope in the same words that were given to Mary all those years ago. We, like Mary, can rest assured that our present fears, sufferings, and pains will one day be made new through the favor, reign, and kingdom of our King—a kingdom that will have no end.

Because of grace and the finished work of King Jesus, we know the end of the story. May we pause this Advent season to reflect on the depth of the hope spoken to Mary by the angel. May we find joy in the promise of Christ, rest in His reign, and live with the hope of a kingdom that will never end.

Prayer: (breath prayer format)
Inhale: Thank you, God, for how you love us.
Exhale: Thank you, Jesus, for your kingdom with no end.
Inhale: Spirit, help us to grow in holiness.
Exhale: Keep our eyes on you this advent season and always. Amen!

Prepare the Way (St. Clair Monson)

Sunday 12/6 Isaiah 40:1-5

Isaiah 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfareis ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Our family has been in a season of a lot of uncertainties, and when I read these verses, my first reaction is that I notice myself taking a deep breath and feeling a sense of deep relief. What a beautiful picture of the heart of God as he commands for his beloved people – the Israelites - (who have rebelled against him) to be comforted, to be spoken to tenderly, and for them to know that their sins have been pardoned, their hardship will end, and that God has blessed them in abundance. I praise God that this was not only God's words for the Israelites but

true for me and you also. It is such a balm to my soul that God is one of comfort, deep deep comfort and reconciliation to a people who have been unfaithful to Him.

As I zoom out a bit to look at the context of these verses, the first 39 chapters of Isaiah really focus on the warning of God's judgments and the bad news of what is coming (exile) as a result of the Israelite's sin. Isaiah chapter 40 marks a shift where Isaiah shows the Israelites God's promise of rescue, comfort, and hope.

Verses 3 through 5 specifically shift focus to preparing the way for the Lord and point to not only the fulfillment of the Israelite's rescue from exile, but to the fulfillment of our rescue also: that the Lord is coming! As I read these verses and specifically pray about what it looks like to prepare a way for the Lord, I am reminded of my tendency (like the Israelite's) to forget the truth of God and serve other idols. I sense God asking me to lay down the idols that I serve besides him (my own sense of comfort, financial stability, making sure I am well-liked or thought highly of – to name a few) that keep my heart from serving and knowing him deeply. I hope to prepare a way for the Lord this Advent season in my own heart by calling to mind the beautiful truth of God and lay down all else that keeps me from the richness and abundance of Christ.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the gift of your son Jesus Christ and that He offers deep comfort to hurting people and is the rescuer for which we long. How would you have us prepare our hearts to celebrate you this Advent season? What rough places would you want to make smooth in our hearts? We are prone to forget the truth of who you are, just like the Israelites. Help us remember the truth of Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection in every facet of our life, and help us to lay down any idols that we serve so that our hearts can fully prepare to worship and celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus.

A People Prepared (Eddie Davis)

Monday 12/7 Luke 1:5-13, 17

Luke 1:17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

Luke begins his account of the incarnation of Jesus with the birth of His forerunner, John the Baptist, sent as a fulfilment of God's promise in Malachi 3 to make preparation before the day of the Lord. John's ministry would be to "make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (v. 17).

And what was John's message to prepare God's people to receive His Son?

Firstly, he asked them to REPENT. Repentance is much more than being sorry for doing or thinking wrongly. The Greek word for repentance, μετάνοια (metanoia), involves a comprehensive reorientation of one's outlook, values, and direction in life.

Secondly, John asked his hearers to BEAR FRUIT. The Sermon on the Mount and many of Jesus' parables make it clear that God wants us to serve others, especially the poor, sick, and needy, as part of our worship of Him. We are not saved *by* good works but *unto* good works.

Repentance will always result in bearing fruit through a life of service to others.

And thirdly, John was always careful to tell his listeners that one greater than him was coming, POINTING THEM TO JESUS. John was an important but he humbly reminded followers that there was a greater One coming. A life of repentance not only bears fruit but also must point others to Jesus Himself.

Question: How am I doing in living a life of repentance, evidenced by good works of service, that points others to Jesus as I await the second coming of Jesus?

Prayer: Father, thank you for preparing me, before the foundation of the world, for a life of repentance, service, and witness for your glory. Help me to faithfully and obediently live that life as I prepare to see your return. Amen.

By Things Deemed Weak Subverting Worldly Strong (Peter Newman)

Tuesday 12/8 Micah 5:2-5a

Micah 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

One of God's characteristic features is that he regularly employs the weak and puny, the unimpressive and unfit for his good and great purposes. Examples across the Scriptures are legion: God establishes his covenant with a near-centenarian and childless Abraham, declaring that he, in his old age and with a barren wife, would be the father of many nations. He calls Moses, a sojourning herdsman, "slow of speech and tongue" (Ex. 4:10), to pronounce judgment against Egypt and deliver his covenant people from slavery. He chooses David, a mere last-born shepherd boy from Bethlehem, to be the great King of Israel. And that's to say nothing of Jacob and Joseph and Gideon and Rahab and Mary and Jesus's fisherman-apostles! Upon any fair reading of the Scriptures, one is left with the unmistakable impression that God revels in choosing "what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" and what is "weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).

While not the central theme of this passage, this "by things deemed weak [s]ubverting worldly strong" (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book

XII) motif is evident in verse 2, where Micah prophesies that the Messiah shall "come forth" from Bethlehem, a town so small and insignificant as to be scarcely worth counting among the tribes of Judah. Being the hometown of Israel's first great shepherd-king, David, Bethlehem wasn't *wholly* unknown; it wasn't as obscure as, say, Nazareth. But it was still very much a backwater of the Augustan empire, a place of little renown. And yet it's where God's anointed Savior-King was born.

That Jesus the Messiah, who was to "be great to the ends of the earth" (vs 4), was first quietly born in Bethlehem is perfectly in keeping with the almost scandalous humility of his *whole first advent*. Think about it: the eternal Word, by whom all things came into being, freely put on human flesh and was born son of Mary and Joseph, ordinary folks from Nazareth. Upon his birth, he was placed in a manger—a feeding trough for animals—because there was no room at the inn where his parents sought lodging. Through boyhood and young adulthood, he was trained, not as a priest or nobleman, but as a carpenter. And after three years of teaching and healing and performing wonders as an itinerant God-man rabbi, he was unjustly executed on a Roman cross—hardly the coronation ceremony one would expect for he "who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old" (vs 2). But then again: "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1Cor. 1:25).

As we reflect on Jesus's first coming this Advent season, let us marvel afresh at the God who delights in accomplishing his great purposes through means the world deems weak, foolish, and insignificant. Let us also look forward in hopeful anticipation of Jesus's *second* coming, when he'll come, not in humility and weakness, but in glory and strength.

Nothing Is Impossible for God (Matt Kirstein)

Wednesday 12/9 Luke 1:26-35

Luke 1:34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

More times than I would like to admit, I find myself questioning what God is doing. I look at a situation and wonder, *How is this going to work? What is God doing? How could anything good possibly come from this?* From my limited human perspective, I often cannot see how God's plans could possibly unfold. Maybe you have asked those same questions. Thankfully, Scripture reminds us that faith does not mean having all the answers. It means trusting the One who does.

Mary understood what it was like to have questions. When Gabriel announced that she would bear the promised Messiah, her response was honest and humble. From everything Mary understood to be humanly possible, what Gabriel had told her seemed impossible. Yet her question was not born of unbelief, but of faith seeking understanding. Gabriel did not rebuke her. Instead, he pointed her beyond what she could understand to the power of God. **Nothing is impossible for God.**

What a comfort that is for us. God is not threatened by our honest questions. He does not ask us to understand His ways before we trust Him. Faith does not mean that we will always understand what God

is doing; it means trusting that He is good, faithful, and sovereign even when we cannot see how He is moving to accomplish His plan. Like Mary, we can bring our questions to Him and place ourselves in His hands. **We may not understand *how*, but we know *who*.** And because we know the One who holds tomorrow, we can trust Him with what seems impossible.

Christmas shows us that God accomplishes what is impossible for us. A virgin conceived. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh. The Creator entered His creation without ceasing to be God. But this miracle was not simply meant to amaze us—it was part of God's sovereign plan to redeem His people. Jesus came to do what we could never do for ourselves: to live in perfect righteousness, bear the judgment our sin deserved, and secure salvation for His people. **The wonder of Christmas is that God accomplished what was impossible for us—our salvation—by sending His Son to take on flesh, bear our sins, die in our place, and rise again in victory.**

During this season of Advent, as we decorate our homes, gather with family and friends, exchange gifts, and prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, may we remember that Christmas is more than a beautiful story. It reminds us that **nothing is impossible for God.** We may not understand what He is doing today or what tomorrow will bring, but we know the One who holds it all. **And because we know who He is, we can trust Him.**

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son and for reminding us that nothing is impossible for You. Forgive us when we allow what we cannot understand to keep us from trusting You. Teach us, like Mary, to receive Your Word with faith and to rest in Your goodness, sovereignty, and faithfulness. This Advent, fix our eyes upon Christ and teach us to trust You with what we cannot see. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The Lord is in Your Midst (Jess Bayless)

Thursday 12/10 Zephaniah 3:14-17

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. 17 The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

I love Christmas traditions. One tradition that I particularly love is singing Christmas songs. I love the nostalgia it brings of enjoying Christmas as a kid. Christmas carols like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" remind me of the true reason for celebrating the Advent season: the Lord Jesus came to us here on earth and He is coming again.

That's amazing news, isn't it? If we are honest, sometimes the Christmas season might not feel as light and magical as it once did. Life

gets busy and expensive, grief still remains, anxiety could be heightened, relationships might feel strained- celebrating could feel like the last thing we want to do.

The good news is, if we know Jesus, we know that the burdens we carry are not the end of the story. We can rejoice because Jesus came to us and He is coming once again. We, as Christians, can sing to the Lord and proclaim to ourselves and the world what God has done- especially this Christmas season. The passage today in Zephaniah ends with Jesus singing over us, quieting us by His love. Even when we don't feel the strength to sing, He is in our midst today and always.

Prayer: Lord, may we praise you today for your Son and your plan to save Your people. Help us to remember that You are in our midst today and always.

Mary's Song (Sarah Beth Matthews)

Friday 12/11 Luke 1:46-55

Luke 1:46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,and holy is his name.50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

I was drawn to this passage because it sounds so familiar to me. It reminds me of words I have said myself, or words I have heard from loved ones in or after a time of waiting or longing. When we were waiting and longing for our first child, we asked the Thursday Prayers at NSF to pray for us, and they did so faithfully. God mysteriously

worked in our hearts through this weak time and we experienced Him through His people. The first thing we are told that Mary did after Gabriel told her the news of Jesus, is that she went to her friend Elizabeth. I think most of us have considered the fear, insecurity, or confusion Mary may have felt when she was told she would bear the son of God. The song above is the outcome of her time with her friend, and it seems that she is leaving feeling more sure and confident in God's plan for her.

When we share in our suffering or pain, it can invite others in to not just remind us of God's steadfastness, but to give each other a glimpse of the ultimate gift: God sending his precious son, Jesus Christ, for us. If He has given us this, how could He not give us all good things? During this advent season, I invite you to bring others into your uncertainty and let them experience God's goodness here on earth and in the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. We know that you love us completely and perfectly because you have already given us everything we need. Help us to remember and remind each other of your promises and faithfulness. You are at work in and through us in our pain, longing, suffering, and waiting. Give us the strength and wisdom to share in our vulnerability together and use this unity for us to dwell more deeply with you.

A Great Light (Lorraine Forman)

Saturday 12/12 Isaiah 9:2,6-7

Isaiah 9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon[fn] his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

We had spent a beautiful day driving up the coast of Northern California. It was before smart phones and GPS. We started home later than expected and with map in hand, I discovered what appeared to be a "shortcut" over the coastal mountain range.

As we climbed, the sun disappeared. The road became narrower as the darkness descended. To our left, the steep dark mountain rose above us; to our right was a seemingly endless abyss. Then the two lanes narrowed to one, the paved road became gravel. There was nowhere to turn around and no way to back down. A sense of doom settled over us. Would the road simply end? Would we be stranded with no way down? What if another car approached from the opposite direction? The darkness, the unknown, and the danger filled us with hopelessness and fear.

Then we crested the pass.

The road widened. Paving returned. And before us the valley was glowing with glorious light. We were flooded with joy, hope, security, and a certainty that we would make it home.

As Isaiah peered down the gloomy corridor of time, he saw 700 years into the future. Beyond the darkness, he saw the birth of the Promised One-the Christ Child who was coming bringing life, salvation, justice and peace. This God-man came declaring "I Am the Light of the World". His coming would dispel the darkness, shining redemptive light for all the nations.

In our darkest moments, when the road ahead is uncertain, and fear surrounds us, when we cannot see what lies ahead, we can know for certain it isn't the end because He, in His loving kindness has shown us the path ahead and come to take us home.

Prayer: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace, thank you for pushing back the darkness, paying the ransom so we can walk in your holy light. Thank you for preparing the way before us and for the promise you will never leave nor forsake us. Thank you for providing a heavenly home for us. When we cannot see the road ahead, help us to trust the One who can.

The Word Became Flesh (John Forman)

Sunday 12/13 John 1:1-5,14

John 1:1 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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

As we anticipate the coming celebration of Christ's birth. Let's be reminded that God as the second person of the trinity became human. This Jesus (The Word) as creator of heaven and earth, assumed human nature in all aspects and presently remains fully God and man in one person for eternity.

This mysterious and miraculous event was the supreme promise of Old Testament prophets and marked a new era in the history of the

world. Jesus is the agent and sustainer of all creation and remains our source of life and light. He holds all the atoms of the universe together, including the cross upon which he died.

This Word dwelt among us and experienced all of the emotions, temptations and pains and suffering that we experience. He came from the Father to pay the penalty for our sins by His work on the cross.

As we navigate the business of the Christmas season with wrapping presents, decorating our homes, baking ,etc., let us be reminded that this Christ child is now at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us until He returns and ushers us into the New Heaven and Earth.

Prayer: Dear Jesus would you, through your Spirit hold us close as we walk through this life.

The Suffering Servant (Courtney Caroland)

Monday 12/14 Isaiah 53:3-5

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

We live in a culture that avoids pain at all costs. Why wouldn't we? Who wants to suffer or be reminded of suffering? And yet, to be human is to experience loss and suffering. We live in the gap between the way things are and the way things should be. The holidays can be a reminder of that. With so many expectations and gatherings, it can be a hard season for many—the sadness of family relationships, sickness and disease, longings that have gone unmet, relationships that have been broken, grieving the loss of a loved one, and the list goes on.

Christmas is a beautiful reminder to me of the God who is with us. He is the God who suffers and is familiar with pain. Christmas is

when God willingly chose to enter into our suffering by coming in the form of a vulnerable infant. Isaiah tells us that the coming Messiah would be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." He would bear our griefs, carry our sorrows, be wounded for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities. The God who comes to us at Christmas is not distant from our suffering. He enters into it.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in a time of intense loss and suffering, wrote in his essay "The Grace That Shaped My Life":"Who is this God looming over me? Majesty? I see no majesty. Grace? Can this be grace? I see nothing at all; dark clouds hide the face of God. Slowly the clouds lift. What I saw then was tears, a weeping God, suffering over my suffering. I had not realized that if God loves this world, God suffers; I had thoughtlessly supposed that God loved without suffering. I knew that divine love was the key. But I had not realized that the love that is the key is suffering love."

This quote was meaningful to me during a time when I felt alone struggling to understand God's role in my pain. It was comforting to be reminded that He is the God who weeps, and who suffers over our suffering. I hope this Christmas is a reminder to you, whatever circumstances you may be in, that He is the God who weeps with you, who suffers with and for you, and who loves you so deeply. So much so that He willingly enters in.

He is Emmanuel—God with us.

Prayer: God, thank you for loving us so deeply that you are willing to suffer. Jesus, thank you for being the suffering servant who is acquainted with our grief, carries our sorrows, and enters into our suffering with compassion and care. Would you help remind me, and those around me, that we are not alone. Help us to trust you and give us tangible reminders of your presence and love for us this Christmas season.

Emptied Himself (Jud Davis)

Tuesday 12/15 Philippians 2:5-11

Philippians 2: 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Many scholars believe Philippians 2:5-11 preserves an early Christian hymn, often called the *Carmen Christi*("Song of Christ"). Paul uses this beautiful confession to teach the Philippians what the Christian life looks like, tracing a great descent followed by a glorious ascent.

First comes the descent. Many hear in these verses an echo of Adam. Adam grasped after God's place; Christ did not. Though He truly

existed in the form of God, Jesus did not cling to His rights and privileges. Where Adam reached upward in pride, Christ stooped downward in humility. The eternal Son took the form of a servant and became obedient all the way to death, even death on a cross.

Then comes the ascent. Because of Christ's obedience, God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him "the name above every name". Paul is drawing on Isaiah 45:23, where the LORD declares that every knee will bow to Him alone. Remarkably, Paul applies that passage to Jesus. In the Greek Old Testament, God's covenant name, YHWH, is commonly rendered by the word *Kyrios* ("Lord"). Thus, when the early Christians confessed, "Jesus Christ is Lord," they were confessing nothing less than YHWH, the LORD.

But what does it mean that Christ "emptied Himself"? Did He cease to be God? Did He lay aside His divine attributes? The church has always answered no. As the early Christians loved to say, "Remaining what He was, He became what He was not." Christ emptied Himself not by giving up His deity, but by taking to Himself our humanity. The wonder of Christmas is that the eternal Son humbled Himself to become one of us so that He might redeem us and bring us to God.

Question: How does Christ's humility challenge your own pursuit of status, comfort, and recognition?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You as the eternal Son who humbled Yourself for our salvation. Give us hearts that gladly bow before You as LORD and teach us to walk in the humility that marked Your earthly life. As we celebrate Your coming this Christmas, help us marvel anew that You took our humanity upon Yourself so that we might share in the blessings of Your salvation. To the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Righteous King (Hugh Comer)

Wednesday 12/16 Psalm 72:1-7,17

Psalm 72:1Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! 2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! 3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! 5 May they fear you while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations! 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth! 7 In his days may the righteous flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more!

17 May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed!

We long for justice. Our world is topsy-turvy and full of uncertainty. At many times evil triumphs over good and the poor and needy are crushed.

We need a righteous king. God's judgments are not arbitrary. They are founded on and consistent with his character (his 'name'). And his character is the definition of what is good.

Jesus came as a king, but he said his kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is not marred by corruption, self-centeredness and foolhardiness. Rather, it brings *shalom*: wholeness, peace, safety and prosperity.

And Christ's kingdom brings *shalom* not only to the world but to us individually, in our weakness, rebellion and brokenness. When we see that we are poor, meek, hungry and thirsty, we receive the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:2ff).

We long to see Christ's kingdom arrive in substantial ways in our day, as we wait expectantly for his ultimate triumph in the new heavens and the new earth.

Prayer: Father, our world lives without a king, and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. May I live in faithful submission to the One True King, Jesus, and may I pray and work for the spread of his kingdom in every nook and cranny of my life today, even as I pray, 'Come Lord Jesus'

God With Us (Randy Ausdran)

Thursday 12/17 Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:20 But as he (Joseph) considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

As you consider the story of scripture from the beginning in the garden, God's desire is to be with his people. We see it in the Garden of Eden; God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day; We see it in the wilderness when God commanded the tabernacle to be built so he could dwell with his people. But the most amazing expression of God's desire to be with his people happened in the manger. Jesus coming to earth is the very embodiment of the heart of God. In his book Gentle and Lowly, Dane Ortlund captured this beautifully,

"*Jesus Christ is the very manifestation of the invisible God. In him we see heavens eternal heart walking around with two legs in time and space."*

The Son of God, who existed before time and space, who spoke the stars into being, and who sat on the throne of heaven in all his glory, willingly became part of His own creation. Jesus experienced the vulnerability of a baby, the dependency of a child, the understanding of a hard day's work. He knew pain and suffering and ultimately rejection from those he desired to be with. Jesus left heaven and came to earth, not only to be with us, but to die for us and save us from the very sins that separated us from the Father.

A beautiful part of this story is that Jesus's humanity did not end at the tomb. When He ascended into heaven, He did not leave his humanity behind. He became human and will always be. He is enthroned in heaven fully God and fully man. The Jesus that is revealed in the gospels showing compassion, who came eating and drinking with sinners, who welcomed the outcast is the exact same Jesus who is advocating for us to the father.

One day heaven and earth will come together, but until that day we can rest in the truth that we are never alone and the heart of the Father is turned toward us in love through his son Jesus.

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their god.'" — **Revelation 21:3**

Prayer: Heavenly Father, your love is endless for your people and is shown so wonderfully through your Son. Thank you for sending Jesus as a reflection of your own heart. May we believe more deeply during this advent season the truth that you desire to be with us and remind us that Jesus is currently advocating for us at your right hand. Amen

A Sign Given (Jim Suddath)

Friday 12/18 Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The verse is reasonably clear. God Himself will give a sign - A virgin will be with child, and give birth to a son, and will be called Immanuel, which means - God with us. Got it. Virgin Mary is visited by Angel Gabriel and is overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and gives birth to Jesus, the eternal Son of God in human flesh. Can we have an Old Testament verse that is more connected to the Christmas story than this one? Hello?! I think not.

Yet, when you read all of Chapter seven of Isaiah, you realize that this prophecy of the supernatural birth of Jesus is placed right in the middle of unholy alliances, civil war, arrogant pompous leadership, sadness, and defeating difficulties. What? I want my messianic prophecies to be surrounded by candy canes and chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

I am reminded that when God steps in at the darkest and most confusing times, we see His power and glory the brightest and most comforting in the deepest depths of our being. When all seems lost, God shows up big. He is never early, and He is never late. 800 years

from the giving of the prophecy, Mary has a baby in the most supernatural and glorious way. God with us - light invading darkness. Christ in us - the hope of glory.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for showing up this Christmas season. Thank you for giving us signs of your presence and love and glory. Thank you for hope when moments of confusion and despair creep in. Thank you Jesus for taking on human flesh. Amen

Zechariah's Song: The Benedictus(Herb Ward)

Saturday 12/19 Luke 1:67-79

Luke 1:72 to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days... 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

It can be so hard to wait in hope when all around us appears to be hopeless. For many, Christmas is one of the hardest times of the year. For it is so hard to feel hopeless, while all those around you are full of holiday cheer. In the *Lord of the Rings, the Return of the King,* Sam & Frodo are deep in the land of Mordor, where all hope appears gone. While Frodo is sleeping, Sam happens to look up for just a moment: *There, peering among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him*

that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. Trevin Wax, reflecting on this passage says that it speaks of "the awakening of deep hope". A hope that is not constrained by circumstance or appearances, but one which is grounded in the tender mercies of the Father.

In Zechariah's Song, the first stanzas (1:67-75) sing praise to God for the provision of his Messiah who will "deliver us from the hand of our enemies, so that we might serve him without fear". The second set of stanzas (1:76-79) begin with a direct word to his son, John the Baptizer, who will prepare the way of the Lord, proclaiming Jesus' coming to bring salvation to all of those living in the shadow of death. The Lord's tender mercy will send the Dayspring from on high as the Light of the World who will guide our feet into the way of shalom. He is the righteous branch, the Messiah, who will save his people from their sins.

QUESTION: Where in your life do you long for "deep hope"? Where do you need the Dayspring to rise in your heart and shine his light this Christmas season? The Father has shown us that we are his beloved, through his tender mercies in sending Jesus to save his people. United to him by the Holy Spirit, we are "prisoners of hope" (Zechariah 9:12) Nothing will separate us from his covenant love.

PRAYER: Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. O Dayspring on high, shine on us with the light of your salvation and restore our hope. Amen.

While We Were Still Sinners (Paul Ramsay)

Sunday 12/20 Romans 5:6-8

Romans 5:6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Like many, I was taught to re-brand my weaknesses as 'areas of growth'. Weakness is seen as an obstacle to overcome, an enemy to defeat or conceal. Frailty is frowned upon, asking for help feels like an inconvenience, and fear of failure, self-doubt, performance anxiety, and perfectionism are higher in the younger generation than ever.

Pursuing excellence isn't the problem; we were made for it. But as sinners in a world marred by the fall, success is fleeting, excellence is elusive, and rather than the fruit-filled trees of Genesis 2:9, our labor often returns the "thorns and thistles" of Genesis 3:18. Despite our best efforts to appear strong, we are beset with weakness.

The good news is that weakness is not an obstacle for God. The extraordinary truth of Romans 5:6-8 is that God showed his great love for us in that while we were still weak, at the low point of our strength, Christ died for us. Indeed, God even took on weakness himself: send-

ing his Son into the world as a baby, meek, lowly, and dependent. Thus, perhaps it is by leaning *into* our weakness rather than hiding it that we come to know our humble King most deeply.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for loving me in my weakness and for taking on weakness yourself, even unto death. When I feel the need to project strength, please help me instead to lean into my weakness, believing that your strength is made perfect in it. Show me where you are calling me this Advent season to become more acquainted with my weakness, that I might cherish you and your Son more deeply. In Jesus' name, amen.

Sorrow Shall Flee Away (Natalie Northcutt)

Monday 12/21 Isaiah 35:3-6a, 10

Isaiah 35:3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

From the beginning of time, God has cherished His creation, His people, and His Son. Once sin entered the world, everything He designed for good became thwarted by sinful nature. Instead of choosing to smite or abandon us as we deserved, He decided to weave the story of His Son as Savior into the fabric of His people, knowing there could not be a more painful sacrifice than separation from His Son. The foretelling of Jesus' coming, crucifixion, resurrection, and 2nd coming are crucial to comprehending the character of the Lord. Even in our

darkest night, we are not left alone or without hope, but reminded of the promise of a greater Savior and Redeemer, which is realized both through Jesus' birth and as we wait for his return and for all to be made right. However, not only does the Lord promise our spiritual perfection and the redemption of our sins, but the transformation of nature itself. God choosing to redeem both our physical bodies and the earth honors the weightiness of physical pain and suffering. It is an ultimate reflection of his loving-kindness to us, and an echo of the importance of Jesus as fully God and fully man.

We are His ransomed people only because the Father loves us enough to send His Son. We anticipate the birth of Jesus as a sign of this promise for transformation and healing to come. What a gift that Jesus would work through both physical and spiritual healing during his time on earth. Because we know that the Lord loves His creation, His people, and His Son, we can be encouraged when we hear the words "Fear Not" because we know the faithfulness of the God we serve, and trust that He will bring to fruition what He has promised. As we look forward to the birth of our king, let us rejoice in the hope of the curse being lifted and the promise of all pain to be undone.

Prayer: Lord, we are so grateful for your faithfulness throughout generations. You are good and true to fulfill what you have promised through the coming of Your Son and His return to make all things right. Give us strength and courage in whatever circumstances we face knowing that you will redeem all things, and you love us. Remind us of the hope that is in Your Son and encourage us as we wait for the redemption of all things. Amen.

God Claims All of His Children (Banner Brock)

Tuesday 12/22 Galatians 4:4-7

Galatians 4:4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." 7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Have you ever wondered why God has a Son? It's the kind of strange question that kids like to ask. It merits some thought, because God himself could have come to earth to redeem us, after all. It didn't *have* to be God's Son. Yet through Jesus we see how much God truly loves us. The love a parent has for her child may be the closest representation we can experience of God's love for us. All of us, whatever our story, yearn for that love.

And yet God sent and sacrificed his Son, bringing to fulfillment the great tragedy, that very same unimaginable sacrifice he spared Abraham from. Through this sacrifice and Jesus's death God reconciled us (paid our debt), showed us how much he loves us, and made us

his children! God in his infinite love is not satisfied for us to be mere followers, loyal servants, or worshipping fans – he desires for us to be his children! Through the Spirit and the Son, we experience the unyielding love of God the Father. And we are set free.

Prayer: Father, we are eternally thankful to be your children! Thank you for sending your Son that we, too, might be your children. Send your Spirit that we may live as befits your children – fully loved, fully known, and eager to follow you. Amen.

Blessed Hope (Crystal Holland)

Wednesday 12/23Titus 2:11-14

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

I am really good at being "good". I may not have a lot of marketable skills, but at the end of the day I am a "good person". I know how to do the right thing, say the right thing, and be generally well received

by the people around me. And at first glance, it might seem that by being a "good person", I am accomplishing what is being commanded in Titus 2. Yes, we are called to be good and faithful followers of Jesus, we are to desire to embody the fruits of the Spirit and to live a life in pursuit of sanctification. But when we focus solely on the outcomes of being good, we miss out on what is truly important, and begin to make things about ourselves.

Titus reminds us that it is Jesus, in the fullness of the grace of God, who appeared to bring salvation to all people. And that while we are called to live good and faithful lives, what we are ultimately longing for, where our ultimate satisfaction and hope is found, is in the person of Jesus. The one who came to give of himself, to redeem us a lawless people for his own possession. No matter how "good" we are, we are all ultimately still broken, sinful beings. And we need Jesus to enter into our stories to redeem us by his grace.

This is the beauty of advent. That we get to sit, and be still, in the blessed hope and joy that Jesus has come. The very Word by which all things were made, became creation, entering into our nature so that we might be able to renounce the world, living godly lives. Nor for our own self-righterousness or praise, but for his own. May all our "good works" be for the glory of the one who saved us: the incarnate king Jesus, who has appeared to us and who will come again.

Prayer: *Holy God, may we be a people who delight to bring you glory and praise. We thank you for the coming of Jesus, for the one who entered into our brokenness to bring us life. May our lives be lived as worship to you. Longing with great hope and expectation for the day the Son return again.*

In the Manger (Jacob Matthews)

Thursday 12/24 Luke 2:1-7

Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Our 1 year old, Hank, currently has a cold. When he gets sick, his body does not hold back from showing his symptoms: goops of snot running down his face, pale skin that makes him look more ghostly than human, and breathing through his mouth that can be heard from the opposite side of the house. If he were in a Jane Austen novel, he would definitely be characterized as having a weak constitution. When he is sick, it is clear how reliant he is on his mom and me to take care

of him, to keep him alive. Hank has almost no independence: since he was born, he has been in a position of almost total vulnerability without our care.

I believe one of–if not the most–radical claims we make as Christians is that we believe our Savior was incarnated as a needy, helpless baby. Jesus did not come to this world in power, ready to rule and take dominion. He came in a form of total reliance, one where he would have died without the care of others. We live in a culture that values independence and self-reliance: I find myself cringing at the thought of having to admit to others that I am not fully capable and ask for their help. What the incarnation can teach us is that we are not created to be autonomous, independent beings. We believe in a savior who became human in total dependence; God is calling his children out of the tyranny of self-reliance and into total dependence on Him.

Prayer: Father, thank you for your rule over our life. Help us to give up our idol of self-reliance and to fully depend on you.

Glory to God (Catherine Eldridge)

Friday 12/25 Luke 2:10-20

10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the

shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The glory! How I've longed to see it, to be in it, to fall prostrate before the glorified Christ! In Israel many years ago, our tour bus passed "The Shepherds Field," the traditional site where the angel of the Lord and the hosts of heaven appeared in glory to a handful of men watching over sheep in the middle of the night. What about me?

The glory had appeared ages before. A cloud of devouring fire on Mt. Sinai. A sentinel standing before the tabernacle in the wilderness and over the wandering people of God. Glory filled the temple in Jerusalem. One day glory would cover the whole earth, the prophets said. One night it filled the sky over a Bethlehem field. The angel of the Lord spoke out of that glory. He announced the birth of the long-promised Messiah and gave instructions to a handful of men. Amazed, awestruck, and terrified was not a state for them to bask in. (Have I been longing for that?) The angel of the Lord was not focused on them but on a newborn baby, swaddled and lying in a feeding trough for animals, somewhere in Bethlehem. The promise has arrived. The Glory has come. Go and see. Then go and tell.

Prayer: O promised Savior, arriving like every other baby, yet not an ordinary baby at all. Enable us to see the longed-for Glory right there in your manger. And send us, as the angel sent those shepherds, to go and tell.