

*Hope*

*Peace*

*Joy*

*Love*



# *The Language of Advent*

An Advent & Christmas Devotional

~ 2024 ~



# *The Language of Advent*

In 2024, First Presbyterian has chosen to focus on four themes as we traverse the Advent season on our journey to the celebration of Christmas. Those themes are represented by the candles we light each week in our Advent Wreath. They are hope, peace, joy, and love.

But it is 2024. Political divisions have left rifts not only between parties, but amongst family and friends. The resurgence of hate, especially against the Jewish community, is deeply concerning. While technology connects us to the entire world, the art of communication, the intimacy of relationship, the sense of community seems lost. Dare we have hope, enjoy peace, practice joy, and share love? Most certainly! The world into which hope, peace, joy and love was born was just as dark and distressing as our world, if not more so.

Perhaps the hymn writers felt the same when they wrote "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." (Redner/Brooks) We were made for hope, peace, joy, and love. We were made for perfect, unbroken relationship – not only with one another, but with the Creator who formed us in our mothers' wombs. The One who spoke worlds into being became Emmanuel: God with us. And "*in Him, we live and move and have our being.*" (Acts 17:28) It is by His grace and abiding in Him that we have any hope, peace, joy, or love. That's because Jesus is our Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love!

Your church staff has worked diligently to provide this booklet for your quiet time in this busy season. We pray you will find it meaningful and will use it to focus your hearts and minds on the One whose first coming we celebrate and whose second coming we eagerly anticipate. "*Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!*" (2 Corinthians 9:15)

# *Advent: The Story that Was*

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,  
the Beginning and the End."*

*Revelation 22:13*

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The story of the "Advent that Was" commences on the darkest day in human history. Adam and Eve took forbidden fruit into the hands God had crafted to serve Him and ingested the poisons of sin and death into the lives God uniquely designed to love and praise Him. Yet, amidst that darkness, the light of God's hope was given. From the womb of a woman would come One who would crush the head of darkness. (Genesis 3:15)

Sometime later, a man named Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans, was called to leave the land he lived in to trust and follow God. Abram's call in Ur echoed the promise given in the garden.

*"The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" (Genesis 12:1-3)*

*"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* (Genesis 12:3) God promised Abraham that from his descendants would come a Blessing to the nations. For the next 2000 years, God kept this promise alive. Abraham had two sons, and the promise lived on in the lineage of Isaac. (Genesis 21:12) Isaac had two sons, and God preserved the promise through the lineage of Jacob (Genesis 28:13). Jacob had


12 sons who yielded the 12 tribes of Israel. The One to be born as offspring of a woman, crush the head of the serpent, fulfill the Abrahamic promise, descend from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and be God's blessing to the nations would come from the tribe of Judah. (Genesis 49:10)

For centuries, God continued to keep his promise alive, revealing in His Scriptures a more detailed picture of the One to come. He would descend from the tribe of Judah and the house of King David. *"Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."* (II Samuel 7:16) He would be born of a virgin. *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel."* (Isaiah 7:14) His birthplace was delineated from all the towns, villages and cities of the world. The King whose Kingdom will endure forever would be born in the Judean city of Bethlehem. *"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."* (Micah 5:2) Even in the 400 years preceding the arrival of Christ, a period known as the "Silent Years" when no prophet of God spoke, God kept the promise alive.

And then, in the fulness of time, from the offspring of the woman, not the seed of a man; from the virgin womb of Mary; born in Bethlehem of Judea; came the One to fulfill God's promise to Abraham and be God's blessed Messiah for the nations. He took on flesh to defeat sin and death, crushing the head of the serpent of darkness. And the "Advent that Was" is only the beginning.

# *The Language of Advent*

*"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." Isaiah 9:6-7*



For over 50 years, Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet, ministered to God's people in the Southern Kingdom, Judea. He was God's prophet in 733 BC when the Assyrians invaded Israel, and 11 years later when the Assyrians brought death, deportation, and destruction to the Jews of the Northern Kingdom. Would the fate of the Jews of the Southern Kingdom be identical to the "10 Lost Tribes of Israel"? In this historical context, one of the most oft-quoted Advent passages was written. *"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress."* (Isaiah 9:1) In one word, God speaks the language of Advent: "Nevertheless!"

In a world filled with distress and gloom, we all need hope. Victor Frankl tells a story of lost hope from a German concentration camp. A friend in that camp had a dream that World War II would end on March 30. He believed it to be a revelation. As March 30 grew near and the news report became drearier, his friend lost hope. On March 29, the man began running a fever; on March 30, he lost consciousness; on March 31 he died. Death from the loss of hope.

To live faithfully and bear spiritual fruit in a fallen world, we need the only hope that can sustain us – God’s hope. The writer of *O Holy Night* must have understood this when he wrote:

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope – the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!”

(Capeau/Dwight)

In the familiar Advent passage in Isaiah 9, God, through the prophet Isaiah, speaks God’s language of hope. Below are a few insights on hope from this passage.

**The Language of Advent.** *“Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honor Galilee of the nations...”* (Isaiah 9:1) The Assyrian threat would not be the last word. God’s “nevertheless” arrived at the place of deepest distress. In the depth of gloom, God reminded His people of their future and destiny. And consider from whence their hope would arise: the land of Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes in the Northern Kingdom where the Assyrians invaded and conquered. The advent of hope would arise from the place of greatest defeat. Seven centuries later, Jesus would launch his Kingdom mission of eternal hope from the Galilee. (Matthew 4:12-16)

**The Power of Hope.** *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”* (Isaiah 9:2) Hope brings God’s light into our darkness of distress. God’s hope does not deny or diminish the darkness but empowers the light of perseverance in the darkness. God’s Hope shines the light of future reality amidst the present misery. *“You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before You as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.”* (Isaiah 9:3) Note the

present tense of the verbs. Isaiah's message came to people living the horrors of the Assyrians yet spoke as if their future destiny had become reality. Is Isaiah preaching a spiritual rhetoric with no real-world relevance? No. He is teaching us how to live with hope. Hope is living with confidence right now knowing God's destiny for our future is true. Hope is living the presence of the future.

**The Presence of Hope.** *“For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* (Isaiah 9:6) Our light in the darkness of distress, our confidence to live God's nevertheless, our power to live the presence of the future is a trust relationship with the One who came to be our *“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* Christ the Counselor, Champion, Prince of Peace – who loves us like a perfect and everlasting Father – is our Hope.

The language of Advent. *“Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”* (Isaiah 9:7)

## *In These Days*

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

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Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to the book of Daniel, says, "In the course of all the noise and shuffling and strutting and posing of arrogant rulers and nations that we call history, God is serenely sovereign; we can trust Him to bring all things and people under His rule." It was true in the time of Daniel when God's people had been exiled and God's promises nearly forgotten; and it was true in the fulness of time when Hope was birthed in the person of God's eternal Son. His birth account commences with three words, "*In those days...*" (Luke 2:1)

In what days? "*In those days...*" when a human ruler, Gaius Octavius Augustus Caesar, whose power knew few limits, was intent on expanding his empire at any cost. "*In those days...*" when God's people were oppressed, impoverished and disenfranchised from self-rule in their own land; when no prophet of God had spoken for over four centuries and the light of hope for a better future, much less the Messiah, barely flickered. "*In those days...*" when hatred and bitterness abounded in the hearts of the Jews, and Roman cruelty abounded against them; when the Jews' religious and political leaders either inflamed their hatred or used their power for greedy interests and political survival.



*“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.”* (Luke 2:1) The census changed Roman tax policy, further enriched the Roman Empire, and impoverished people around the world. Remarkably, “in those days,” it also compelled a young Jewish couple to make an arduous journey – the catalyst for two streams of history, Jewish and Greco-Roman, intersecting and changing the trajectory of human history forever.

The Jewish stream of history began with a family of nomads, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Formerly a nation of slaves, living among people who practiced religious polytheism and syncretism, they came to believe an historically unprecedented and sophisticated form of monotheism with the conviction that the one true God had entered a covenant relationship with them. In this covenant relationship, God promised multiple blessings: He would be their God; they would be a great nation with a promised land; and from their descendants would come the One who would be God's salvation for the nations.

For our purposes, we will date the Greco-Roman stream of history to the ancient Greeks and first Olympic Games (776 BC). The Greeks of this period established City-States, prevented the Persians from conquering Europe, and ushered in the golden years of Greek Philosophy (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle). Then came Alexander the Great, who conquered most of the known world between 336-323 BC. He died young, but his legacy lasted for centuries. Alexander's strategy for world domination was to militarily defeat a people and then inundate them with all things Greek – language, culture, and philosophical worldview. Although he conquered much of the world militarily, it was this linguistic, philosophical, and cultural conquest that left a lasting global impact.


When the Roman Empire began to expand and conquer much of the world Alexander had conquered centuries earlier, they inherited a realm connected linguistically, philosophically and culturally. Where the Greeks excelled in culture and philosophy, the Romans excelled in engineering, building roads linking much of the world. They unified a world economy with a common currency. Then they secured the Empire's power, government, commerce and the safety of its citizens by a "Pax Romana" – a peace achieved by military prowess and presence.

For millennia, the Jewish and Greco-Roman streams of history seldom intersected; until "in those days..." A decree by a cruel and powerful dictator, designed to elevate Romans and oppress the Jews, placed Mary and Joseph in the very place prophesied hundreds of years before (Micah 5:2); to fulfill God's covenant promise to Abraham thousands of years before (Genesis 12:3) and copious other Messianic prophecies. Jesus Christ, "the son of Abraham," (Matthew 1:1) came to be God's blessing and salvation to the nations.

"In those days..." two streams of history collided; making it possible for an itinerant Rabbi, born in Bethlehem of Judea, raised in Nazareth, who never travelled far from His hometown, to begin a movement that would sweep much of the world in a few centuries. Christianity would spread to Jews and Gentiles; a diversity of nations, cultures and continents; within a generation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. God had prepared to personally enter and redeem an estranged and sinful people and *"reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven."* (Colossians 1:20) Indeed, "in the course of all the noise and shuffling and strutting and posing of arrogant rulers and nations that we call history, God is serenely sovereign." (Peterson) He still is in these days!

# *A Surprising Advent and Christmas Passage*

*"Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, you, His servants; praise the name of the LORD. Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised. The LORD is exalted over all the nations, His glory above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; He seats them with princes, with the princes of His people. He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the LORD." Psalm 113*



Most Christians celebrating Advent and Christmas do not turn to Psalm 113. Of course, Jesus teaches us in His post-Resurrection encounter with Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus Road that all Scripture is about Him. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself." (Luke 24:27) While most Christians may not consider Psalm 113 an Advent or Christmas passage, it clearly anticipates the Christmas story.

Psalm 113 captures the storyline of the Bible – the pattern of God's redemptive work throughout history. The Psalmist declares "Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high?" (v. 5) God is worthy, "from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets." (v. 3) He is "exalted over all the nations, His glory above the heavens." (v. 4) Yet He is the God who "raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; He seats them with princes, with the princes of His people." (v. 7-8)

This theme saturates the story of the Bible. *“For this is what the High and Exalted One says—He who lives forever, whose name is Holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”* (Isaiah 57:15) Consider the ancient economic world. It was governed by the law of primogeniture – family wealth was passed down through the eldest son of the family. In God’s redemption story, God chose Isaac, Abraham’s younger son, instead of Ishmael, his older. Between Isaac’s twin sons, God choose Jacob, the second-born, not Esau, the first. Of Jacob’s 12 sons, Judah and his tribe were chosen over eldest son Reuben. When God chose the earthly king whose royal house and kingly lineage would endure forever, he was the runt of the litter, David, not the oldest son, Eliab.

During Biblical times, many great human empires dominated the world – the Egyptian, Hittite, and Assyrian, to name a few. These nations excelled in military conquest; maintaining power, science, and technology; and empire building. Yet of all the nations and people groups of the ancient world, God chose an insignificant group of nomads and sheep herders whose historical resumé recorded a four hundred period of slavery, and whose primary distinction was their ancestry, being the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In the climax of God’s redemption story, the God worthy of praise *“from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,”* ... *“who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth”* (Psalm 113:3,6) *“was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.”* (Apostle’s Creed) Jesus, *“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature*

*of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:6-7) The Exalted One who is holy and lives forever (Isaiah 57:15), who throughout the history, “raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (Psalm 113:7), became poor and was crucified outside the city gates of Jerusalem on the town ash heap. Psalm 113 points us to Christ. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (II Corinthians 8:9)*

This Christmas, sing the “good news of great joy” anticipated in Psalm 113 and culminated in Jesus Christ. It is God’s story and song of salvation by grace. The God “who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth” personally entered the world to redeem the heavens and the earth. (v. 6) By faith in Christ, we find happiness in God’s family.

# All Is Well

*"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

*John 16:33*

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One of my favorite Christmas songs was co-written by legendary Christian music artist Michael W. Smith. It begins,  
"All is well; all is well  
Angels and men rejoice  
For tonight, darkness fell  
Into the dawn of love's light."

Standing in the darkened church sanctuary with my friends and family, candlelight flickering in every joy-filled face, singing *Silent Night*, I can believe that all really is well. All is calm. All is bright. I want to just stay in that moment and relish it. But then the lights come on, and the candles are blown out, and we get back to the business of Christmas. There are still presents to wrap, dishes to prepare, and children to (somehow!) get to bed. Outside, horns honk, wars rage, hate abounds, and strivings do not cease. While it may be Christmas, and Christ has come, bills must still be paid, taxes will soon be due, vacation will end, school will start back, and life moves on. [Insert Charlie Brown sigh here.]

Our children's Christmas play this year follows that busyness and the way it permeates our lives at Christmas, sometimes overwhelming the "good news of great joy" that we say we're celebrating. And while decorations, food, and gifts aren't bad in and of themselves, they can become idols that replace the Christ child's rightful place on the altar of our hearts. We get so "wrapped up" (pun intended) in how

everything looks, the dishes that are on our table, or how much everything costs, and we forget why we do these things in the first place.


We forget to rest in awe that the God who created us came to be one of us. We forget to focus our hearts on the most wonderful Gift ever given. We forget to love like the One who gave His only Son. We forget to give thanks that Jesus defeated death itself and gives us the right to be called children of God. We forget to remember “the least of these.” We forget.

*“Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”* (Philippians 4:8) What is more pure, lovely, and right than the absolute perfection of God’s plan revealed in Christ Jesus? His timing was impeccable, His method without flaw, and His every promise fulfilled. And yet there is more to come! We live in the “already, but not yet” - having been given the gift of eternal life through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, but knowing that there will come a time when He will return to dry every tear, quiet every fear, and make all things new!

So, our tree may not look like the one in the home magazine. Our table may not hold every dish the celebrity chefs recommend. We may miss the mark on finding the perfect gift. If these are the focus of our Christmas celebration, then we’ve forgotten why we celebrate. But if we truly “think on these things,” then we remember “and the God of peace will be with [us]” (Philippians 4:9), and all is well.

## *Sadness and Sorrow*

*"Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings You were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about Me in the scroll— I have come to do Your will, My God.' First He said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings You did not desire, nor were You pleased with them'—though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then He said, 'Here I am, I have come to do Your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Hebrews 10:5-10*



For many people Christmas is filled with joy, laughter, and feasting. It is the best of times. But for some, it is a time of sadness and sorrow that they only want to be over. What do we say to those who are downhearted during the Christmas season? Above is a conversation that offers a word and an insight for those living with melancholy, especially as magnified by the loneliness of Christmas.

The book of Hebrews reveals a remarkable exchange that took place between God the Father and God the Son before Christ came into the world. *"Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You prepared for Me.'"* (Hebrews 10:5) Contemplate the theological and soteriological insights this exchange provides. The Son of God had never had a body. The Father prepared a body for His Son. Why? No other human being could live perfectly and die as a substitute for us. The only solution was that God become a man – fully God, fully man. Such a plan is the apex of the genius of God, yet its cost was



extravagant.


The eternal Son of God, who had known perfect spiritual community in the unity of the Trinity, would become a human being – a baby born in a cold cave. On earth, Jesus Christ would be subject to hunger, thirst, suffering and death. He took a body so that He might be the once-and-for-all sacrifice for every one of our sins. This is the “good news of great joy” proclaimed by the angels. (Luke 2:10)

Yet embedded in the Hebrews passage is another Christmas truth, especially for those who are suffering. The eternal Son of God took on a human body so that God could fully identify with all our trials. The Christmas message is that Christ is our Savior: yes, Hallelujah! But Christ is also our empathizing High Priest and eternal Friend, who understands every degree of our pain and who, as the risen, ascended Lord bears witness in His wounds that He is our fellow Sojourner in this world so filled with struggle. Jesus felt pain; experienced sorrow and loss; was despised and rejected; became the target of ridicule and false accusation; was tempted at His weakest; was betrayed by those He loved; and bore the weight of every sin ever committed, including separation from God the Father, when He was nailed to the cross. The message of Christmas is, no matter what we face, there is One who fully understands.

As Christmas approaches, remember Christ before He came into the world on the first Christmas. The Father said to Him “A body I have prepared for You.” The eternal Son of God said, “*Here I am ... I have come to do Your will.*” (Hebrews 10:7) Take great comfort in this Christmas encouragement. He said, “*Here I am... I have come to do Your will*” so that He would be Immanuel, the God who is with us.

## *Christmas Drama*

*"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:15-19*



Every Christmas there are dramatic reenactments of the Christmas story. The stage may be a church basement, with boys and girls dressed in borrowed bathrobes and leather sandals. In professional theatres, celebrity thespians may lend their voices. On the silver screen, special effects and "live action" may capture the story.

Perhaps you have watched a "professional" re-creation of the first Christmas. Most of Hollywood today would dare not take on such a project. There are few production houses that tackle anything with a Biblical theme. But years ago, you could flip through the major networks and watch several such dramas. The producers were striving for authenticity. The set was the size of a city block. Joseph looked the part. Mary was breathtakingly gorgeous. The manger held an actual child. Completing the scene were dazzling lights, fluttering angels, and the music from Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*. The show is impressive; almost every sense is engaged in the imagination of the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the drama. Every imaginable detail has been accounted for – everything except the resplendent light of God's presence, a gripping sense of awe, and a desperate need for a Savior.

Isn't this the way many of us experience Christmas? We see again. We hear again. We buy, buy, and buy again. But who do we hear and what do we see? What kind of story have we bought? Do we marvel in the light and glory of God? Are we amazed at His amazing grace? Do we ponder anything, much less praise and glorify God? Do we go and tell others what we have heard and seen? Are we humbled by the remarkable entrance of God Himself into the world to save sinners like you and me?

One small church hosted a Christmas pageant in its basement. It was not great theatre. An awkward, slightly handicapped boy was chosen as the Innkeeper. His only line was, "There is no room in the Inn." He practiced diligently so he would be prepared for his part. But when Joseph and Mary came to the Inn for help, the boy got caught up in the drama of the story. He started to recite his assigned response, "There is no room..." then startled the holy couple and everyone else by saying, "Wait a minute. Don't go! You can have my room."

Among all the dramas that depict the Christmas story, it may just be the common Christmas pageants in church basements that best capture the essence of Christmas. They remarkably portray what is possible when common, unremarkable people, trying to make their way in a dark and confusing world, suddenly encounter the light of Christ shining on and within their hearts. This Christmas, may we allow ourselves to become part of the drama. May God's wondrous act of love stop us in our tracks. May we hit our knees in gratitude for the gift of His salvation. And may the light of Christ shine in our hearts for all to see.

# *The Power of the Name*

*"This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet 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.'"*

*Matthew 1:18-21*

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What do you think the most popular names are for children? In 2023-2024, the top names for girls are Amelia, Emma and Sophia; for boys, the prevailing names are Liam, Oliver and Mateo. In the ancient world and in Biblical times, names and the naming process were a big deal. While names still hold significance today, the reason behind the significance is different.

In the ancient world, your name became the source of your identity and an indication of your purpose. Parents then, as now, had the prerogative to name their child. Not so with the naming of the eternal Son of God. The messenger from heaven was clear to Joseph: *"You are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins."* (Matthew 1:21) Think with me on the power of the name.

**Jesus knew his name.** In the ancient world, your name reflected who you were and under whose authority you lived. For example, in the Garden of Eden, God instructed

Adam to name the animals. Why? Was God tired, out of creative energy? No! God's instruction was Adam's commission of authority over God's creation. The Father chose to name Jesus because the eternal Son lived under the authority of the Father.

Jesus understood His position with perfect clarity. Jesus said, *"The one who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do what pleases Him."* (John 8:29) *"As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem."* (Luke 9:51) *"When Christ came into the world, He said... 'Here I am—it is written about Me in the scroll—I have come to do Your will, My God.'"* (Hebrews 10:5,7) Even in the anguish of Gethsemane, the cry of Jesus' heart was, *"Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done."* (Luke 22:42) Jesus knew His name.

**Jesus knew the purpose of His name.** Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. In Hebrew, Joshua literally reads "the Lord saves." While each of the biblical names, used for the eternal Son of God reflect an insight into His nature, character and work – "Rock," "Master," "Prince of Peace" – only one name was chosen at His incarnation. He is "Jesus" because He is Savior. His name reveals His purpose and captures the essence of His mission accomplished.

Jesus was born into this world to save it through His death and resurrection. He is Savior. Jesus knew His name. Jesus knew the purpose of His name. Do you know His name? In this season of the year, do you revel in this name? *"For there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12)

## *Peace on Earth (Part 1)*

*"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, 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 heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.'"*

*Luke 2:11-14*

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*"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace..."* What is this peace the angels proclaimed? Did Jesus come to usher in a global peace? If He did, His 2000-year mission on earth thus far has been a dismal failure. Ironically, the world Jesus entered had global peace – the "Pax Romana." Rome had conquered and/or killed all their enemies and ushered in an over 200-year period of "peace" (27 BC to 180 AD). But that ended with the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. So, what is this "peace on earth"?


The heavenly hosts who appeared to the shepherds that first Christmas night announced the fulfillment of a 700-year-old promise. *"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given... and He will be called... Prince of Peace."* (Isaiah 9:6-7) The Gift of the Father, born of the virgin Mary – the eternal Son of God – is peace on earth. *"He Himself is our peace."* (Ephesians 2:14) Sent from the Father, the Prince of Peace came to usher in a Kingdom of peace. (Romans 14:17) *"For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross."* (Colossians 1:19-20)

The Prince of Peace came to bring His peace on earth. It is a relational peace. *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Romans 5:1) This is why we sing, *“Hark! the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn king: peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!’”* (Wesley) It is an experiential peace. Empowered by the Spirit of peace (Galatians 5:22), under the gentle yoke of Christ (Matthew 11:29), and in the confidence of our peace with God, we can learn to live with *“the peace of God, which transcends all understanding.”* (Philippians 4:7) It is a cosmic and eternal peace. And one day the Prince of Peace, King Jesus, will come again and peace will reign in human hearts and throughout the new heavens and earth. *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, and He will reign for ever and ever.”* (Revelation 11:15)

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.”* (Luke 2:14) Christ is our peace. He came to restore peace on earth for sinners estranged from God. By faith in Christ, we are reconciled to a relationship of peace with God. Growing a relationship of trust and obedience to Christ, we can live with an experiential peace of God in a world filled with unrest. When Christ comes again, we will live in a perfectly restored Kingdom of nothing but peace and joy. Come again Lord Jesus!

## *Peace on Earth (Part 2)*

*"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7*



As I wrote in the previous devotion, Christ, the Prince of Peace, came to restore to us a relational peace with God as we anticipate the cosmic and eternal peace that will reign when King Jesus comes again. But how? How can we live experiencing the inward peace of God in a world of unrest?

**Turn down or turn off.** Turn down the volume or turn off the flow of negative news. There is no need to constantly check our phones, email, newsfeed, Facebook, Instagram, etc. for breaking news. We can delete the thread of the latest celebrity drama or conspiracy theories, and turn down the coverage of bad news on our social media or television. As Christians we should be concerned and as knowledgeable as possible about local and world news. Yet constantly filling our minds with bad news and negative and cynical rhetoric about things and people over which we have no control is an emotional recipe for fear and anxiety.

**Tune in to our spiritual condition.** Why do Christians who have peace *with* God struggle to experience the peace of God? Because of chronic peace-stealers: spiritual neglect, unchecked sinful behaviors, negative and destructive thought patterns, unhealthy coping patterns, lust, bitterness, and self-pity, just to name a few. Are you lacking in the experience of Christ's peace? Pray for the peace of God and "examine yourselves." (II Corinthians



13:5) Seek to understand why we do what we do or respond the way we do. Go deeper. Spiritually probing these questions in prayer will help reveal who or what we really trust and worship. We may spiritually discover the source of our unrest.

**Turn up the volume on gospel confidence.** By faith in Christ, we are spiritually united to Him, so that everything He has accomplished for us belongs to us as if we accomplished it. *“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is... For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”* (Colossians 3:1,3-4) At the moment of genuine faith in Christ, we are spiritually united with Him as a branch is to a vine (John 15:5); in Christ, we are declared righteous, forgiven, spiritually adopted, indwelt by His Spirit and destined to live with Him forever. We have a gospel identity. Daily, we should remind ourselves who and whose we are by the grace of God. (I Corinthians 15:10)

**Turn over to the Prince of Peace.** In whom do we believe? Who is this Jesus? This Christmas may we renew in our hearts and rehearse in our minds exactly who Christ is. He is the “Rock,” “Master,” “Savior,” “Creator of all things,” “Son of God,” “Lord of all,” “Lily of the Valley,” “Rose of Sharon,” “Lamb of God,” “Ancient of Days,” “Great High Priest,” “Suffering Servant,” “King of glory,” and “I Am!” He is the promised “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6), who came that we may know His peace. One day He is coming again to establish His cosmic and eternal Shalom. Until then, He is still able to speak into our lives, *“Peace, be still!”* (Mark 4:39; NKJV) When our world seems to be falling apart, He does not cease to rule and reign. When we fall into the same destructive thinking or sinful behaviors, His atonement is still effective. Turn over to the Prince of Peace whatever is causing unrest in your soul.

## *Mary's Response to Jesus (Part 1)*

*"And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as He promised our ancestors.'" Luke 1:46-55*

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Have you ever noticed in the Christmas story, especially as recorded in the books of Matthew and Luke, the plethora of responses from the first person to hear the news? Neither Joseph, the shepherds, or the Magi match the detailed response from Mary, the earthly mother of Jesus. One could argue she is the first Christian convert. We should not standardize any conversion, for people come to Christ uniquely; yet I suggest Mary's response to the birth of Christ is a model for our response to the good news of great joy. Mary's *Magnificat* or "song of praise" is her reaction to the angel's announcement that she would birth God's Son. Below are a few insights from her response.

**Sheer Joy.** *"And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.'" (Luke 1:46-48)* Mary's entire person was gripped by the wonder of the news and the grace given to her. And her joy is our joy. *"Though you have*

*not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:8-9)* This Advent and Christmas season, may you have moments of sheer joy, knowing you are blessed because the Lord has done great things for you. The eternal Son of God came into this sin-filled, messed-up world to live, die, and rise again. By faith in His great work, you may live forgiven; declared righteous, spiritually adopted, indwelt by His Spirit, and with the spiritual confidence that the Father loves you as He loves His eternal Son. (John 17:23)

**Genuine Fear.** *“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” (Luke 1:26-29)* Why was she afraid? Mary was terrified, as most of us would be if an angel – much less the Archangel Gabriel – visited us. Angel visitation was just as extraordinary then as now. Mary was perplexed. Why was she being told she was highly favored? She was a poor, powerless, probably teenage girl betrothed to a simple carpenter named Joseph. And Mary was troubled. While she likely had no idea the implications of the angelic announcement (she was a virgin, after all), she knew it was going to turn her life upside down.

There is a fear that creates chaos in our minds. Then there is a fear that opens us up to God, who brings His calm. This Advent and Christmas Season may we sing:

“’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
and grace my fears relieved;  
how precious did that grace appear  
the hour I first believed!” (Newton)

## *Mary's Response to Jesus (Part 2)*

*"And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as He promised our ancestors.'" Luke 1:46-55*

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How do we respond to the good news of great joy during the Christmas season? There is no standardized response to the wonder of the Incarnation, but the first person to receive the news is a helpful model for us. The danger of celebrating Advent and Christmas season each year is that we hear but not *hear*; see but not *see*. Not so with Mary when the angel Gabriel announced the gospel to her.

As we noted in Part I, Mary's response to the heavenly message was sheer joy and genuine fear. "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God...'" (Luke 1:29-30) "How will this be...?" (v. 34) "'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. The Mighty One has done great things for me.'" (v. 46-49) Below are additional insights into her receipt of God's word.

## **Mary's response was joy and fear, but also honest doubt.**

Luke 1 tells the story of two doubters. Before Mary, the angel Gabriel was sent to an old priest named Zechariah. Gabriel told Zechariah that he and his wife were going to be blessed with a son in their old age. Zechariah doubted. He asked the angel, *“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.”* (Luke 1:18) Gabriel's response was strong: *“The angel said to him, ‘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.’”* (1:19-20) When Gabriel spoke God's word to Mary, she, too, doubted. *“How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’”* (Luke 1:34) In response to Mary's doubt, Gabriel declared, *“For no word from God will ever fail.”* (1:37)

Zechariah received a strong rebuke, Mary a wonderful promise. Why such a contrast in responses? Is Gabriel moody? Does he prefer young maiden girls to old priests? No! Zechariah's doubt was a doubt born of disappointment, unrealized dreams and grief. It was an expression of unbelief: *“Old people often don't have sex much less babies; there is no way this word is true.”* In contrast, Mary's doubt was born of wonder. She understood the basic laws of biology and she knew she and Joseph had not been intimate. How could this be?

There is doubt that can settled in our spirit and lead to unbelief. In contrast, there is doubt that seeks to understand, think, and reason, remaining open to the wonder of God. Faith is not a blind leap into the hollow of metaphysics and the irrationality of religion. Faith struggles with our doubts by seeking to understand and trust God. *“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.”* (Hebrews 11:3)

**Mary's response was reverent obedience.** *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'"* (Luke 1:38) I do not think Mary was saying, "Now I understand the mystery of the Incarnation and I am good to go!" In the months, years and decades ahead, her life would be filled with confusion, disruption, sorrow and joy. Her response was as simple as it was profound – "Lord, I will trust you."

Below are a few words from John Wesley's "Covenant Prayer," which captures Mary's response and a life of reverent obedience. "I am no longer my own, but Thine. Put me to what Thou will, rank me with whom Thou will. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal."

## *The Small Things (Part 1)*

*"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)*

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Frederick Nietzsche was the son of a Christian pastor who became an atheist and influential philosopher. He held a visceral aversion to Christianity and the church. "I do not like the New Testament. I find it disturbing." "The ghostly paradox that Jesus won through weakness" he saw as an absurdity. It may be that Nietzsche understood Christianity better than many Christians.

The Christmas story is filled with irony that borders absurdity. The eternal Son of God was born in a cold, damp place which reeked of animal dung. His royal birth announcement was declared by the heavenly host to a group forbidden from temple services. Some of Jesus' first worshippers were wealthy Gentile astrologers and pagan priests, who brought exotic and expensive gifts. Jesus barely escaped the wrath of megalomaniac King Herod to become a refugee baby in Egypt.

The irony continues after His birth. Jesus grew up in a town whose reputation was well described by Nathaniel's

question, “‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’” (John 1:46) Among His original disciples (or follow-up team) was a hot-headed fisherman, brothers known as “sons of thunder,” a zealous Zionist who hated Rome, and a former tax collector who sold out his countrymen.

Jesus was born into abject poverty to a teenage mom, barely escaped death, grew up in a town in the middle of nowhere, and would spend His life on earth outside all networks of wealth and power. And yet, 75% of the world's population knows the name “Jesus;” 25% of people in the world worship Him; and for 2000 years art, architecture, music, literature, cultures, and civilizations have been shaped by Him. “The ghostly paradox that Jesus won through weakness” is not an absurdity, but the truth of the gospel.



## *The Small Things (Part 2)*

*"Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."*

*(I Corinthians 1:22-25)*

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"God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." (I Corinthians 1:27) God is not opposed to this world's wisdom, wealth, achievement or power. Used under God's authority, they are good and redemptive. Our country and world desperately need people of wealth and power who exhibit spiritual humility and use their resources for the common good.

Yet consider how God has most often worked in your life. The Bible says, "'You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.'" (Matthew 5:3; MSG) God's salvation by grace alone is received when, by faith alone, we come to know our desperate need for a Savior and our complete inability earn or deserve God's salvation. The Bible reveals God's paradigm for living in His power: "'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (II Corinthians 12:9-10)

The Gospel story may sound absurd to those who live for earthly wealth and power, but it is true. The great things


God has done for us, in us, and through us are often in the small things. This truth is revealed in my 40-year ministry. I have spent countless hours preparing and delivering sermons and lessons for 1000's of people across four churches. However, those who remember me seldomly recall what I preached; they remember when I showed up in their time of need and brokenness.

The power of Christianity is lived out in the small things like:

- Daily seeking and savoring a relationship with God through His Word and prayer
- Serving others when no one else knows
- Struggling to choose forgiveness
- Learning to give generously, quietly, and sacrificially
- Choosing to opt out of gossip and complaining and, instead, speak encouragement
- Showing up when others suffer, and listening more than speaking
- Doing whatever we are doing with all our heart as for God, not others

## *The Story of the Miracle*

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. . . . The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-3;14)*



The prologue of the gospel of John reveals and celebrates one of the central truths of the Christian faith: the miracle of the Incarnation. God personally and historically entered the world. *"No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known."* (John 1:18) This is one of the distinctive historical realities that makes the Christian faith profoundly unique. During Advent and Christmas, we read and hear the story that reveals glorious truths. Sometimes, in our familiarity, we fail to spiritually appreciate the magnificence of the miracle and the shocking way the story unfolds. Consider a sampling of the story.

God used the most powerful king of the age, Caesar Augustus, – a man who considered himself divine and whose empire would eventually reach from Britain to Africa – to prepare for the fulness of time when God would come as an infant King. His Archangel was sent to a poor, powerless, young virgin from Nazareth, a small rural village in the impoverished area of the Galilee. Joseph and Mary, the earthly parents of the Son of God, were among the poorest of the poor. After travelling 80 or 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the Savior of the world was born in an unlikely place with probably more animals present than

people. The first ears to hear the good news of great joy, the first individuals to experience Heaven's sound and light show, were sheep herders declared ceremonially unclean by the religious establishment.

As amazing as the miracle of Incarnation is, equally amazing is the story that reveals the miracle.

- The story of the miracle reveals God's salvation by grace alone, received by faith alone, in Christ alone. God personally entered the world to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. God became flesh and blood *"and made His dwelling among us"* so that *"in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord."* (John 1:14, Luke 2:10) *"Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved...not by works, so that no one can boast."* (Ephesians 2:4,5,9)
- The story of the miracle reveals that the physical/material world, even in its fallenness and brokenness, matters to God. *"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."* (Colossians 2:9) In His incarnation, Christ came to redeem all things, the spiritual and the physical/material world. *"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross."* (Colossians 1:19-20)

Therefore, God's mission for His church is a ministry of proclamation and presence; evangelism, discipleship and working to make this world a better place. We are called to share the message of Christ where we are and to the nations. Empowered by


God's Spirit in us, our mission is to care for God's creation, and battle against injustice and for God's shalom, especially among the poor, forgotten, powerless and voiceless in our communities and world.

- The story of the miracle is God's sledgehammer of judgment on such evils as racism and elitism in all forms. God's gospel is “*good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*” (Luke 2:10) Think of the variety of characters in the story: a young and poor Jewish couple, a filicidal king, a Roman governor, the most powerful ruler on earth, rough-necked sheep herders, and Gentile astrologers. They shared nothing in common except each was used in the story of the miracle.

The eternal Son of God became incarnate for our salvation and to unite people in Him. “*For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one...*” (Ephesians 2:14) Christ breaks down or makes secondary all the external things that divide Christians like race, age, nation, economics, politics, culture, and education. In Christ there are no identity-politics; no politically “blue” or “red” Christians. Instead, our identity is in Him. We are saved by God's grace alone and united in Christ. Our mission for Christ into this world is unique from and greater than our personal and social preferences or political platforms. “*There is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*” (Colossians 3:11)

# *Advent: The Story That Is (Part 1)*

*"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* Matthew 5:13-16



The eternal Father sent his Son to make the "Advent that Was" true. Now the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit so that all united by faith in Christ participate in the story of the "Advent that Is." The "Advent that Is" is God's global mission to share the message of Christ and live the ministry of Christ's presence into our life, work, play, and world. When we make the story of the "Advent that Is" our story, we become a part of His story.

Too few Christians know the history of global Christianity. Documentaries on Netflix and similar platforms often feature the many failures of Christians and the church. And they bear truth. History clearly illustrates that, when Christians and the church employ earthly means of wealth and power to accomplish Christ' missional ends, the truth of the gospel gets distorted, and the light of Christ is darkened.

What documentaries do not capture is how influential for good the Christian faith has been throughout history. Many of the first hospitals, schools of all kinds, as well as orphanages were built in the name of Christ and for God's glory. The earliest struggles for human rights, civil rights, women's rights, and prison reform; or movements against

slavery, oppression, and racism; were inspired by the Christian conviction that every person is made in God's image and, while that image is distorted, every human being, no matter how fallen, has worth and dignity. Surprising to some are many of the historic discoveries and contributions in science, art, architecture, music, medicine and free enterprise which were created for God's glory. "If you read the history books, you will discover the ones who have done the most for this present world are the ones who thought most of the world to come". CS Lewis

Believing the gospel changes us and requires that we live no longer as ourselves or for ourselves. *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."* (Galatians 2:20) The love of God and our faith in His saving work through Jesus Christ, empowered by His Spirit living in us, mandates that *"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."* 2 Corinthians 5:17; NKJV) It's the only way we will ever fulfill the purpose God created us for or fulfill the mission He has given us.

Perhaps the greatest compliment we could ever receive is like that given to Peter and John in the book of Acts. *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."* (Acts 4:13) What a testimony! May we learn to live and participate in the ongoing story of the "Advent that is."

## *Advent: The Story that Is (Part 2)*

*"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.*

*You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

*You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.*

*You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."* (Matthew 5:3-6; MSG)

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As part of the story of the "Advent that Is", how do we make His story more of our story? Below are a few thoughts for making the story of the "Advent that Is", our story.

**Live our gospel identity.** United to Christ by faith, we have a been given a new identity. We have been, are, and will forever be loved in Christ. Daily, we must preach the gospel to ourselves; reminding ourselves, "*how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ*" for us. (Ephesians 3:18)

**Cultivate spiritual humility.** "*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.*" (1 Peter 5:5) Spiritual humility is an awareness that who we are, and all we have or achieve, is by the grace of God. We cultivate spiritual humility by developing a conscious awareness that we live in the presence of the One who knows everything about us yet loves us unconditionally. Spiritual humility comes as we learn to live with a need for and a dependence upon God, unleashing the power of God's Spirit in and through us.



**Commit to a life of trust.** *“Very truly I tell you,”* Jesus says, *“unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”* (John. 12:24) What is true in the science of agriculture is true in the realm of the Spirit. When a seed dies, its potentiality explodes. Christ chose to be the Seed who died to achieve the harvest of our salvation. In our daily Christian life, it is the seed of trust in Christ which grows the harvest of life that is truly life. Jesus says, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.”* (John 15:5)

**Time with our Heavenly Father.** Commit to a daily appointment with God. Declare personal and spiritual warfare on anything that keeps you from intimate fellowship with the Almighty. The frenzied pace of life is a great enemy of our soul. “Keep them busy,” is the mantra of Hell itself. Life's pace not only steals time from spiritual devotion; it is a barrier to spiritual life. The faster we go, the more self-reliant and self-oriented we become. The spiritual disciplines are essential for a healthy spiritual and emotional life.

**Struggle to grow a large heart for people.** Do we have a heart for the spiritually lost? Do we even notice the brokenness that surrounds us? Remember the priest and Levite in The Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is very clear that they both observed the injured man, yet casually passed by on the other side of the road. (Luke 10:25-37) How could they notice, but not "see" him? An enlarging heart for others begins with our sight. Do we *really* see those around us every day?

**“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”** (Matthew 6:33) “These things” are God's good gifts to be enjoyed in this world. Pursue first things first.

Prioritize his kingdom and you will enjoy many earthly amenities. Seek earthly things first and you will never know the spiritual satisfaction of God. C. S. Lewis said it this way: "Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."

## *What Child Is This?*

*(W. Chatterton Dix)*

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*What Child is this, who, laid to rest,  
On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

*This, this is Christ, the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary!*

*Why lies He in such mean estate,  
Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading.*

*This, this is Christ, the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary!*

*So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,  
Come, peasant, king to own Him.  
The King of kings salvation brings;  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

*This, this is Christ, the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary!*



