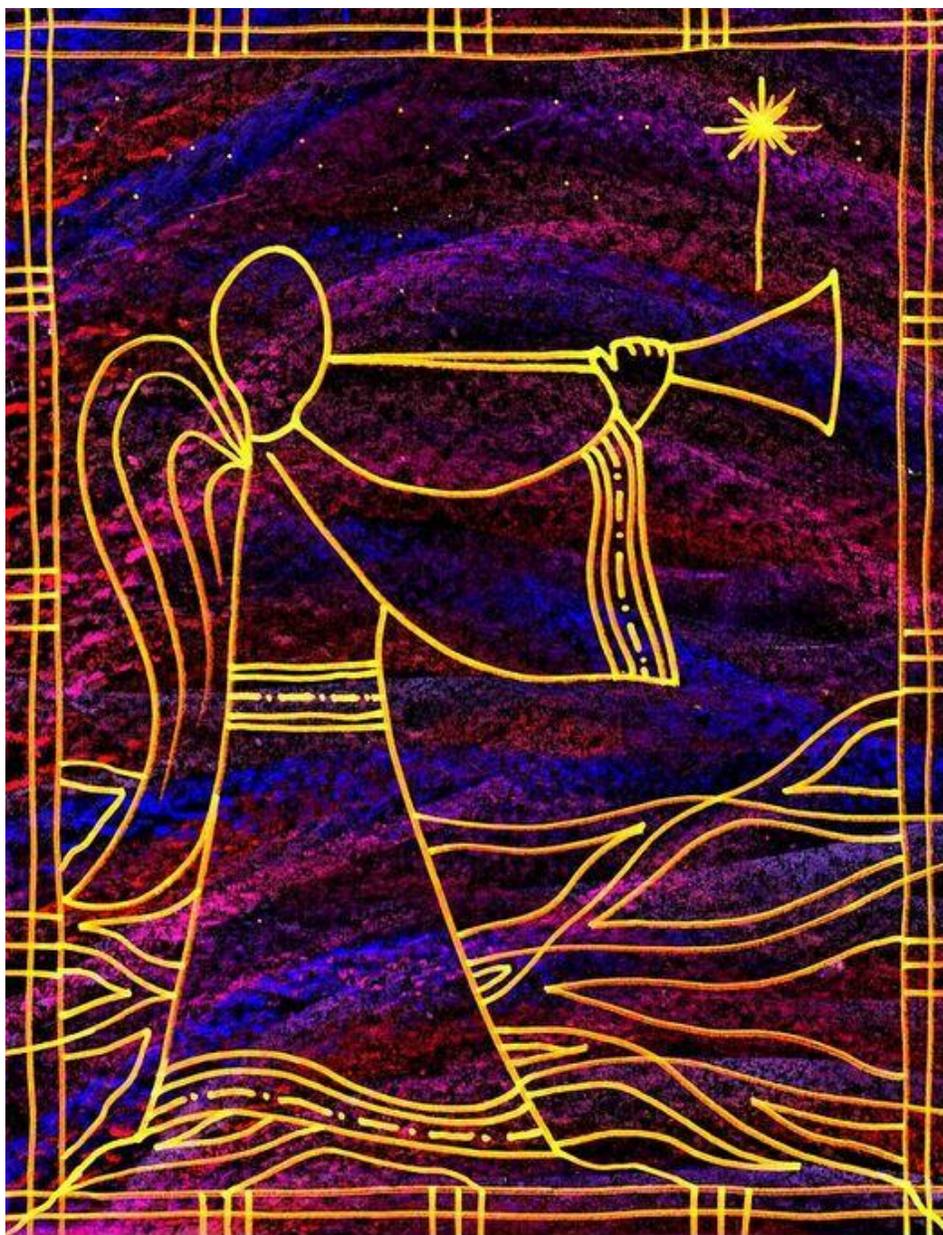


Do Not Be Afraid



Advent 2020 Devotions
written by
Marion Center Area Congregations

About this collection...

In 2014, several congregations of the Marion Center Area Ministerium created a collection of devotions for the season of Advent to share voices and perspectives as we all prepare for the coming of Christ. The collection was so well received over the past few years that we wanted to come together again to make available a new collection of voices from our brothers and sisters in Christ across the Marion Center area, all helping us to turn our focus onto the coming of Christ, both as we celebrate Christmas, and as we look ahead to the coming of Jesus in victory and the new creation.

The passages in these devotions are quite likely ones you are already hearing on Sunday mornings throughout the season of Advent. They are taken from what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary, a pattern for selecting Scripture readings through the church year in a cycle of three years. So you will see in these pages a variety of kinds of biblical books—prophets and psalms, epistles and stories. And hopefully they will fit with the Good News being shared on Sunday mornings across our community as well.

We pray that this season and these devotions are a blessing for your own faith and your own faith journey. And we give thanks to all who have offered their voices to this collection. This year we are excited to have members from seven congregations contributing.

Devotions for this booklet have come from voices in these congregations:

Creekside United Methodist Church

Grove Chapel Lutheran Church

Harmony Grove Lutheran Church

Marion Center First United Methodist Church

New Life Lutheran Church

Plumville Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian Church of Marion

Rev. Jackie Greene

Do Not Be Afraid

“The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”
- Deuteronomy 31:8

A tired 120-year-old Moses was addressing the whole of Israel. More journey was to come. More unknown was to be experienced. Fear was to be expected. He then summoned his successor, Joshua, and said the words I quoted above.

The year 2020 is winding down. Most feel that it could not come to an end quickly enough. There has been much to fear; and as the year winds down, there still is.

Yet, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

2000 years ago, the Lord went before us and was born a teeny baby. Out of this common occurrence, came the greatest hope ever. It is the one true hope of humanity. As we face unknown, hope is known. Love is known. Salvation is known.

Every year it is always a joy to read through these short devotional essays written by brothers and sisters in our area churches. In part simply because there is such a wide range of experience sharing the fact that we are not to be afraid nor should we be discouraged. So many of our writers have lived Moses’s words. So many have experienced Jesus.

My prayer as we finish 2020 and spring into the unknown of 2021, we will not be afraid. The Lord has long gone before us and he is with us. Even now. May the words of this devotion lead you into and through the promises of Jesus.

May the end days of 2020 be a blessed time of Advent.
And Merry Christmas.

Pastor Chris Enoch
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 1 - November 29

*When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those
who wait for him.*

Isaiah 64:3-4

I have to admit—I don't really like being surprised. I think it's the control factor. I like thinking I am the one calling the shots. I like the feeling (even though it's an illusion) of being "the master of my own fate," and "the captain of my soul," like the old poem goes.

But more often than I want to admit, I need the God who does the unexpected, even though it means I cannot control God or force God into a lamp to be my personal genie. The prophets keep telling us that God insists on being wonderfully, unexpectedly (and sometimes disarmingly) free to surprise us—to do "awesome deeds that we did not expect." Part of what has made this year so tough is being constantly reminded I'm not in control. But part of what we can learn from this year is that God's best work is quite often doing the things we didn't expect, but which we needed. Like even from a manger.

Pastor Steve Bond
New Life Lutheran Church

Day 2 - November 30

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Isaiah 64:6-8

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” That’s how Isaiah 64 begins. Oh that God would do great and mighty things so we can see his power and the nations can see his power. I’ve seen God’s mighty power, I’ve personally experienced God’s mighty power. I’ve seen God heal and work miracles. But then I forget what God has done. I don’t live like I serve a God who does mighty things. I allow my sinful nature to take over again and I become unclean, I fade like a leaf, I fail to call out to God when I need him.

I turn away from God time and again, falling back on my own choices, my own preference. My deeds are not what God calls me to do, but are filthy rags. And yet somehow God continues to clean me up and mold me in to the person he’s created me to be. And to be honest with you friend, that is the greatest miracle I’ve ever witnessed. My prayer for you this Advent is that in the midst of all the chaos, confusion, and mess that has been this year. You will be able to see how God is molding you to be his beloved child. How has God met you this year in all your uncleanness and how is he molding you into a beautiful piece of pottery?

Pastor Erica Wellner
Marion Center First United Methodist

Day 3 - December 1

[Jesus said:] “It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Mark 13:34-37

Much like a global pandemic snuck up on us, so can Jesus in the most unexpected ways. Maintaining faith while watching the world suffer has been quite challenging. But through the smallest, simplest things granted to me, I learned to see God's presence in the small things. Many times, we randomly think of someone, something, or feel compelled to do something. To me this is not random impulse, but is God personally coming into our hearts to show us the path of his will. Jesus' second coming could be tomorrow, or in 100 more years. And as we prepare our hearts for that coming, we must also be reminded to welcome his personal coming to our lives. Jesus is always coming into our lives through the little things, we must just see them. God has promised his sons second coming, but his presence is within us always.

Clara Marshall
Plumville Presbyterian

Day 4 - December 2

[Jesus said:] “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; or you do not know when the time will come....”

Mark 13:32-33

Let's get something straight here: “Keep alert” doesn't mean “Be afraid.” Sure, there are plenty of times in life when you need to keep alert in order to deal with something dangerous—when you're driving through a snowstorm, or staying up with a sick child hoping for a fever to break, or if you're the first-responder ready to snap into action when a call comes that there's a fire.

But sometimes the words, “Keep alert” are an invitation to stay awake with open eyes so you don't miss out on something wonderful. You tell your kids to stay awake as you stare up at the night sky waiting for shooting stars. You hold your breath waiting for the news, “The baby is born!” You watch the hand of the conductor to know when you can add your melody to the song of the marching band or choir director.

When Jesus tells his followers to “Keep alert,” it's not to make us afraid. It's so that we'll live our lives with open eyes and hopeful hearts, ready to be a part of God's new thing. So, dear friends, keep your eyes open for the wonders of God. Keep alert.

Pastor Steve Bond
New Life Lutheran Church

Day 5 - December 3

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:17-19

“But let your hand be upon the one at our right hand, and the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD, God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

After reading this Psalm, I immediately thought of the song “Mighty to Save” by Hillsong. There is one part in the song that says: “shine your light and let the whole world see, we’re singing for the glory of the Risen King. Savior, he can move the mountains, my God is mighty to save, he is mighty to save.”

Even though the world seems to be so dark right now the Lord has never left us. This is all part of His mighty plan for we were made for a time such as this. We, as the people of God, should be a light for those who do not know our Lord and Savior. Let us call upon His name.

Dear Lord, my prayer is that as we head into this advent season we would be light to others as you are a light to us, and remember that you are mighty to save. Amen.

Alyssa Battick
Creekside UMC

Day 6 - December 4

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:8-9

When Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthians, he opens it with a salutation or greeting. In this particular greeting, Paul thanks the Lord for all He has done for all the Corinthians and beyond. In these verses, Paul tells them to take a deep breath and realize that they do not have to do anything to join the heaven clique. In fact, sometimes it feels that we haven't done anything to deserve it. That's for all eternity. Ours is a God who does not give up easily. He isn't going to call it quits on us, like a half finished project or a meaningless object. We were called in his name to be a part of the movement. And if that's not something to be excited and thankful about, then I don't know what is.

Becca Martin
New Life Lutheran

Day 7 - December 5

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:1-3

The unknown can quickly take us down a path of worry, fear, and anxiety; leaving us weak, distraught and frustrated, these feelings are very real and can destroy our lives if we let them take over; our path to peace and contentment is through our loving Shepherd, who protects and provides for us, giving us comfort and peace beyond comprehension. But first we must come to Him, inviting Him to shine within us, allowing our hearts, minds and souls to be filled with his love and following His lead to the path of righteous that takes us to the road of salvation restoring our souls and receiving His gift of everlasting life!

Donna Kanouff
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 8 - December 6

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Isaiah 40:1-2

This year was not what we expected and planned for. We were forced to stay home, wear masks, use sanitizer like it's perfume. We've missed concerts, reunions, anything resembling normalcy! This year has given us an opportunity to reach out to neighbors, lost loved ones, and back to basics in our daily routines with cooking and cleaning.

With this being said, I think Isaiah is speaking to us- comfort each other, speak tenderly, most people feel troubled. Maybe thinking our past deeds are a result of this pandemic appearing. We should remember to keep our heads high and look to the Lord in both troubled times as well as in glory! Lastly, repent of sin, but do not dwell on it. God sent his son, Jesus to pay the ultimate price for all of our sins.

In closing, love your neighbor like Christ loves you and we need to strive for our every move to be a Jesus-like move to bring our Father glory.

Kassy Buente
Plumville Presbyterian

Day 9 - December 7

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

Isaiah 40:3-5

“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

As many of us know, it is much easier to walk on smooth level ground. However, if we compare the paths we walk in our lives, realistically, our lives do not always have straight, smooth pathways. There are always “speed bumps” along the way.

Disappointments, failures, illness, deaths, and other issues are always a part of life’s journey. The good news is that God is with each of us and will never leave us – through both the mountaintops and valleys in our lives.

With each mountaintop experience, take the peace and promises of that into our valleys to make them seem less impossible. Holding on to that mountaintop gets us through our valleys and less like a wilderness with uneven ground. God will give us His peace and promises that He will make our paths straight.

May God’s glory shine through us even in our valleys!

Sandy Murphy
Tanoma UMC

Day 10 - December 8

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Isaiah 40:10-11

You know someone has real authority when they don't have to keep mentioning it—you just know it by the dignified way they carry themselves.

You know someone has real strength when they don't insist on telling everyone around how powerful or showing off how muscular they are—you can see it as they bear the loads they carry.

Sometimes we get so used to bragging and bluster as substitutes for power and authority that we forget what real strength looks like. Authentic power doesn't need to advertise or intimidate. Honestly, it often looks like gentleness, of all things.

Isaiah reminds us the same about God's power. Yes, "God comes with might," but with the gentleness of a shepherd, gathering lambs in arms. God's power carries the weak, and that tells you enough.

Remember that: it will help us recognize God's gentle strength when it shows up in a manger.

Pastor Steve Bond
New Life Lutheran

Day 11 - December 9

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

Psalm 85:8-11

Oh what a promise. The promise of peace, salvation, glory, love, faithfulness, and righteousness. The day when all the wrong of this world gets righted. I love the poetry here – “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.”

Seems like a scene from a dream; a dream that seems distant from our current reality. Distant...but not impossible. For God’s promises are not necessarily all that distant. If we are in tune His Spirit, who knows what can happen in our lives this Advent? As we celebrate the child, let us live into what the child came to bring - peace, salvation, glory, love, faithfulness, and righteousness.

And what a celebration may that be!

Pastor Chris Enoch
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 12 - December 10

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:8-9

It's hard to be patient in today's society. We are used to getting everything we want on demand, from tv shows to food. We want everything to happen on our timeline. But God doesn't work that way. The way God sees time and the way it passes is not how humans do. As the passage says, "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day."

It has been more than two thousand years since God sent his Son to walk among us, and ever since then Christians have been looking forward to the day when Jesus will return. No one knows the hour or the day, despite how much we may wish Jesus to come when we are ready for Him. God wants as many as people as possible to repent and follow Him. We may be patiently waiting for Him, but never as patiently as He is waiting for us.

Mayvra Braughler
Marion Center First United Methodist

Day 13 - December 11

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Peter 3:11-13

Peter writes these words as a warning to all that we don't know the timing of Jesus' return, and we should be ever watchful and preparing to make our ascent into heaven. He urges his readers to "make every effort to live a pure and blameless life. And be at peace with God." (v. 14). Do you read Peter's letter with fear or anticipation? What are you doing in this season of joy to prepare yourself and those around you for Jesus' triumphant return?

Amanda Kanouff
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 14 – December 12

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Mark 1:4-5

Why must we confess our sins? Jesus made it clear. The confession of sin is the first step in accepting our salvation.

We can't stop sinning

Even as Christians – either unintentionally – or intentionally, we sin. Why is sin a big deal you may ask. The Bible says in Habakkuk 1:13, where the prophet references God, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” Living in a fallen world where secular music has lyrics like, “you’re holy, holy, holy...I’m high on loving you...” referencing a particular human love interest, it is easy to forget what “holy” truly means. But **God is holy**. The type of holy that is pure and devoid of evil – requiring the removal of shoes – or the avoidance of looking upon His face because to do so, would mean instant death. The supreme definition of “holy” is reserved for God alone.

Sin separates us from God

To continue in unrepented sin separates us from God, because God **cannot tolerate** sin. The Bible tells us that “the wages of sin is death.” Sin leads to death – eternal death. And eternal death is where we remain separated from God. An eternity, separated from God, is Hell.

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord

Our hope is found in the same verse, “for the wages of sin is death; **but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord**. The “gift” is our salvation. Eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord, is Heaven!

Heaven v. Hell

We will spend eternity in one of two places. The choice is ours. The repentance of sins was **so important** that God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, so hearts would be opened and ready to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Is there an unrepented sin separating you from God this Advent season? If so, repent, and choose life!

Lori Marshall
Creekside UMC

Day 15 - December 13

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God: to comfort all who mourn;

Isaiah 61:1-2

Here we get a taste of things to come. Isaiah is foreshadowing the Christ who will come as the Messiah, although he does not know the One will be Jesus. About 700 years later, In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus paraphrases these exact words. He followed that in verse 21 saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus is here...alive with us today! And he does all these things – bringing the good news of salvation; healing the brokenhearted; proclaiming freedom to prisoners and those captive to sin, and the year of jubilee.

I take refuge in the fact that He has come to do all these things. Being the complete mess that I am – my sinful self – I hear the words that I can be healed of my spiritual blindness. He has made a "day of vengeance" in which He has come and died for our salvation.

Thanks be to God!

Shelby Lemmon
New Life Lutheran Church

Day 16 - December 14

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Isaiah 61:10-11

While Advent is a time of waiting, it is also a time of preparation. If you knew Jesus was going to show up on December 25, how would you be preparing now? The description of “as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels,” seems all too appropriate.

Jesus deserves our best, and while Isaiah may reflect the best as being in forms clothing and jewels, he really gets to the point when he talks about rejoicing, exulting, righteousness and praise. These are the things that hopefully we'd greet Jesus with.

So, again, If you knew Jesus was going to show up on December 25, how would you be preparing now? And start preparing.

Pastor Chris Enoch
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 17 - December 15

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Psalm 126:1-3

This year has been one of concern and fear. What's coming next? How can we keep ourselves and loved ones safe? Those are the thoughts and prayers of so many. We know God is a loving father who cares for His children.

We have all had difficult times in our lives the joyous remembrances of the good times fill our hearts. Just as the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we can be reassured that He will help us through these troubling times also. When depressing days seem to descend on us, God can lift us up with hugs from darling great grandchildren. Laughter flows from our hearts and we are filled with joy.

Remembering that the Lord has done great things for us will flow through us like bubbling stream. When Satan tries to destroy your peace and joy remember your heavenly Father wants good for his children. He'll send these precious memories so we are filled with joy.

May you be blessed in many different ways during this Christmas season.

Marie Stumpf
Marion Center First United Methodist

Day 18 - December 16

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126:4-6

Taken in context, this Psalm was probably written to celebrate the Jewish exiles release from Babylonian captivity and return to their homeland. Just imagine their joy! They were going home!

Trials? Weeping? Why Lord?

It is true, to be a soldier in God's army, we must endure difficulty. If we were never injured, there would be no forgiving grace. Without suffering, no patience. In order to minister to the broken-hearted we must have suffered ourselves and known God's comfort. Trials make us sensitive and tender as we scatter His seed.

"The seed sown when weeping turned into sheaves of joy!" Is there a possibility that because of the trials we experienced with faith and trust, someone was introduced to our Savior and it changed their eternal destiny?

During a time of trial, Bob and I chose Psalm 126 as our psalm of expectation. We memorized and meditated on it. Image our surprise when Psalm 126 was unexpectedly read during our worship service the following Sunday. We knew we were on the right track and God would answer our prayer in His time!

During this Advent season some may have heavy hearts. Do not despair, God sent Jesus. He is our Hope, our Light, our Comforter, our Strength! Our tears can be seeds that grow into a harvest of joy because God is able to bring good out of trials & tragedy.

Bob and Jennie Henry
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 19 - December 17

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Prayer according to Webster is described as an expression, especially of devout petition, addressed to God or a deity. A formal set of words used in praying. This definition of a prayer has always bothered me – for too many people this is just something that is memorized in childhood and is repeated at certain times.

As an example, “The Lord’s Prayer.” How often do we really stop to think about the words? We are actually praying and talking to God! Do we really stop to think we are talking to Him? Or is it just a formality as the dictionary says, a part of a regular church service? Think about it line by line.

1 Thessalonians says, “pray without ceasing for this is the will of God.” I’m not a person who feels at ease praying publicly. However, I do say a prayer many times daily, thanking Him for many things in my daily life. These are, I feel sincere prayers and not prayers that are a part of a “memorized” service.

Ed Griffith
Creekside UMC

Day 20 - December 18

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

God doesn't just want you on Sundays, he wants you to need him every day and in everything you do. Not just the religious part but in everything. We can't separate our spiritual life from everything else. Spirit, body and soul.

Count on God's constant help. Our life is to be lived through God's power, not on our own.

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

You can't expect God to be the source of your peace, if the world is the source of your satisfaction.

Debi Weaver
Plumville Presbyterian

Day 21 - December 19

John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

John 1:26-28

Pride. Sometimes even the good things we do can become sources of pride. Even, Baptism. John was busy baptizing people, and no doubt some were very proud of being baptized by such a prophet. But John makes it clear, his action of baptism was just a forebearer of what was to come. Take pride all you want, but He who is coming we are “not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

And that person first appears in the form of the humblest of human mortality. A baby. May then, we all approach the coming of Jesus with a humility that understands our own unworthiness yet rejoice in the way He eventually made us worthy.

Thank you, Jesus!

Pastor Chris Enoch
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 22 - December 20

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

Luke 1:46-49

These words were spoken by Mary upon visiting her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth blesses Mary and she replies by praising God that she has the privilege of giving birth to the promised Messiah. She also declares the greatness of God for the coming of salvation. He has done a miracle in her! As a young Jewish girl being filled with His goodness, she sinks into her nothingness and she confesses that God alone is all in all!

This scripture is referred to as Mary's song or the Magnificat (which means magnify). Does your soul magnify the Lord? Do people see Christ's love and goodness in you? Are you letting God work within you to accomplish His will? We may never be able to approach Him from Mary's esteemed character as the Mother of God. Still we are called to be saints, being examples and helping others in their spiritual growth.

The song words to the Magnificat in Holden Evening Prayer are:

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you

You have looked with love on your servant here, and blessed me all my life through

Great and mighty are you, O Holy One, strong is your kindness evermore

How you favor the weak and lowly one, humbling the proud of heart

You have cast the mighty down from their thrones, and uplifted the humble of heart

You have filled the hungry with wondrous things and left the wealthy no part

Great and mighty are you, O Faithful One, strong is your justice, strong your love

As you promised to Sarah and Abraham, kindness forevermore

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you

You have looked with love on your servant here, and blessed me all my life through

This Advent season may our hearts overflow with a *magnificat* of our own, praising God for who He has always been and who He promises to always be!

Tina Stebbins
New Life Lutheran

Day 23 - December 21

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; With my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; Your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one. I have sworn to my servant David; 'I will establish your descendants forever, And build your throne for all generations'."

Psalm 98:1-4

What if I can't sing? How will I sing of your steadfast love, Lord? I know many wonderful musicians and vocalists and I always feel intimidated since I am neither of those. Oh, I see there is provision for those of us that aren't musically inclined. You have given us a mouth and we can use it to proclaim and declare your faithfulness. The focus is that we are celebrating the covenant that you have made with us for eternity as we commit our lives to following you. The method is not as important as the intent of the heart to glorify you in all your glorious splendor. Let us break forth together in a joyful eruption of praise for our Father God. Amen!

Pastor Jackie Greene
The GAP Ministries

Day 24 - December 22

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 16:25-27

2020 has been one crazy year. I don't remember if I had great hopes for this year, but it seemed as this year began that there were great hopes, like we were turning a page in history, much like we did in 2000/2001 as we started a new millennium. No one could have foreseen what 2020 held. No one that is except for the One who holds our past, present, and future.

I hope that as we finish out 2020 and head into 2021 that we will see better days. That we will see an end to the Coronavirus pandemic, that we will see an end to all the hate, fear, and vitriol that has been 2020. But no matter what 2021 and beyond holds, I will put my trust in God, just as I have throughout 2020.

This has not been an easy year for any of us. Some of us have struggled more than others. Many will continue to struggle for years to come. But if I have learned one lesson in this crazy year, it is this: God is always worth glorifying. Emmanuel, God with us, came to us so that we could better know God. I hope you have seen God at work in 2020. And I pray this Christmas that Emmanuel makes himself known to you again afresh and anew.

Pastor Erica Wellner
Marion Center First United Methodist

Day 25 - December 23

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Luke 1:30-33

“But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” - Luke 1:30-33

"Do not be afraid!" We gave our three-year-old granddaughter a play nativity set to help teach the Christmas story. As we read and acted out the story, Skylar quickly learned which figure was Baby Jesus but struggled with naming "that guy" - Joseph and "them men" (the wise men). She always recalled the angel's words to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, "Do not be afraid. "

Throughout this year many have experienced much fear - of the virus, illness, job loss, broken relationships, election outcomes, or changes in our daily routines. We wonder if anything- including ourselves- will ever be the same again. Fear can be crippling even when there is a promise of great things to come. Mary had to be overwhelmed with what the angel told her, but he started with "Do not be afraid!"

As we face challenges, we can recall the two figures from nativity story that Skylar learned first. Baby Jesus came into the world to save us and never leave us alone. Also, the words from the angel should comfort us in all that we face. "Do not be afraid. "

Lorrie Gallo
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 26 - December 24

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2-7

I'm not one to get overly excited about Christmas and what I mean is I don't like the commercialism of Christmas. I love Christmas and love why we celebrate Christmas; but I can be a bit of a hum-bug, no Christmas music, no Christmas decorations inside, or turning on the outside Christmas lights until after Thanksgiving.

I did put up the outside Christmas lights in mid-November when the weather was warm. And as I was wrapping the pre-lit garland around the railing on the porch and placing the pre-lit angel by the front door, a lightness came upon me and I was getting into the Christmas spirit. I was thinking about the joy, hope, peace, and love of Christmas.

2020 has not been anything like we expected it to be. There has been a lot of darkness in our lives, in our nation, and in our world. But there has been a lot of light, God has blessed us in so many ways this year. And His light continues to shine. Think of all the things you have been blessed with this year. In a year of darkness, we have seen a great light and that light is in Jesus Christ.

My prayer for us as we prepare to celebrate Christmas this year, is that we will see the light that is in Jesus Christ, that it will be the brightest it has ever been, and that we continue to thank Him for the blessings we have received. Jesus Christ is our light and our hope.

Have a blessed Christmas!

Pastor Becky Edwards
Creekside/Tanoma UMCs

Day 27 - December 25

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:8-12

Outcast men and boys the first to know about our Lord Jesus coming to earth. How powerful and great an honor to be picked for this special message of hope and joy in their lives.

What would I do in this situation? Would I have stayed or ran away? Some might have cowered in fear. Some may have ran. But for the ones who stayed, they got great news. Someone was going to rescue them from mighty kingdoms. But not many were looking for a baby boy. Many thought that he was going to be big and great from the start, not little and powerless for many years.

Would we have went and looked for him or just kept to the fields? I hope we all would have gone. But maybe some would say no and stay with the sheep. I would have gone to find him, my gifts may have been of little to no value. But he did not want earthly things but heavenly things. For he already had everything he needed from his father in heaven. How great a gift to all of us in this time of crisis.

May we all be joyful and unafraid in this season of hope and peace. For he is the greatest gift ever given.
Merry Christmas to all.

Lucy Eyler
Plumville Presbyterian



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