



ABC Nebraska:
**2023 Christmas
Devotional Guide**



For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given...

Isaiah 9:6



“Time’s yours.”

This is a popular phrase used by *Kansas City Chiefs* head coach Andy Reid. (The *defending* Super Bowl champion *Kansas City Chiefs*, I might add!) It’s Coach Reid’s cue for reporters to start asking him questions during press conferences. It’s short. Sweet. To the point. If not memorable.

If you don’t mind... I’m gonna take a page out of Coach Reid’s playbook: “Time’s yours.”

“Time’s yours” this Advent and Christmas season. As you go through your usual holiday routines and rituals, your rhythms and motions, your traditions and get-togethers. As you navigate the ‘most wonderful time of the year.’ *This time is yours. It is a gift from God which makes this time holy and sacred. And I hope you will make the most of it!*

It wasn’t until I was a student at a Wesleyan university that I began to fully appreciate the gift that is sacred time. Sacred time, I came to find out, is different from ordinary time because sacred time is time set apart (or ‘holy’) to remember, worship, and praise God for times when He chose to operate within time.

I learned Christians inherited from our Jewish forebears, who, in the Old Testament, were instructed by God to consecrate special ceremonies and feasts around sacred time to commemorate and remember when God did something. Whether it be once a week (cf. Exod 20:8-11) or sporadically throughout the year (cf. Exod 12:24-28; Lev 23; Nu 28-29; Deut 16:1-17), God wanted His people to deliberately set aside certain hours, days, and seasons to relive, recall, and not forget those sacred moments in their history when their God did something meaningful in service and on behalf of His people.

And it has since fascinated me that the Church, throughout the centuries, has since carried on this rich, biblical tradition; however, it is now centered and concentrated on the birth, life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return of our Lord Jesus Christ, all neatly organized in what is now known as the ‘Christian Year’ (or the ‘Church Calendar’).

Living amongst our more liturgical brothers and sisters in Christ, who follow more scrupulously the ‘Christian Year’ than admittedly most Baptists do, helped me to discover a deep appreciation and affinity for the gift and means of grace that is sacred time. It helped me to be more mindful of it and try to incorporate it, as best as I can, into my rhythms and routines. To experiment and explore ways to remember those sacred moments that return each year. But it also placed in my heart a desire to help others do the same...

This devotional was born from such a place, out of a desire myself and others across our region had to help you enhance your journey through this sacred, holy time we call Advent and Christmas. This sacred time where we remember that the God who *created* time, who is *outside* though not *distant* from time, chose to step *into* time for the sake of you and me! That, at Christmas, we remember and celebrate that God the Son, sent by God the Father, conceived by God the Holy Spirit stepped *into* time to redeem you and me! That “*when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children*” (Gal 4:4-5).

I'd like to thank all of those who contributed to the creation of this year's collection of Advent and Christmas devotions:

Pastor Richard Crooks, *First Baptist Church of Fremont*
Craig Erickson, *President of ABC NE Board*
Pastor Joy Martinez-Marshall, *First Baptist Church of Lincoln*
Pastor Blake Wilkes, *Arthur Baptist Church*
Susan Howell, *President of American Baptist Women's Ministry of NE*
Pastor Steve Wamburg, *Sunset Hills Baptist Church*
Bev Pacas, *Camp Director of Moses Merrill Camp and Conference Center*
Pastor Jim Cummings, *First Baptist Church of Union*
Pastor Brian High, *First Baptist Church of Norfolk*
Pastor TN Praveen Kumar, *Benson Baptist Church*
Brad Pope, *President of American Baptist Men's Ministry of NE*
Pastor Zau Sam, *First Kachin Baptist Church of America*
Pastor Scott Jones, *United Faith Community Church*
Greg Mamula, *Executive Minister of ABC NE*

I'd also like to especially thank Kay Johnson, our church secretary, for helping me compile, edit and publish this year's devotion. *Couldn't have done it without you!*

"Time's yours" as you make decisions and choices on when and how you will budget and use your time this holiday season. This time is a God-given gift. It's holy and sacred. And my hope and prayer is that you use the words and reflections, the thoughts and meditations, of this Advent and Christmas devotional to enhance and maximize your time this holiday season.

"Time's yours."

Pastor Taylor Shippy
Gibbon Baptist Church, Gibbon, NE



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 3, 2023

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard” - Luke 1:13

“And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” - Luke 1:30

“And the angel said to (the shepherds), “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” - Luke 2:10

“Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife.” - Matthew 1:20

Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, all were told by angels to not be afraid. They needed to hear that. We do, too. In fact, according to R.C. Sproul, “Do not be afraid” is the most repeated divine command in the Bible. It frequently is found on the lips of angels in scriptures, and the prophets, too. It is even in the words of Jesus. Of all that God commands us, such as to love one another, to not steal, murder, lie or judge—why do you suppose God thought it essential to have this one repeated so frequently in the Bible. What does that say about the kind of creatures we are? About our faith? About our understanding of who God is and his love?

Consider what all we can fear. There are many things that can cause physical harm. Many things threaten our security economically, emotionally and for our future. We live in an uncertain world, and so many things can cause a reaction of fear. The American Psychiatric Association has designated over 500 diagnoses of phobias (phobos is the Greek word for fear). We may know claustrophobia (fear of close spaces), agoraphobia (fear of open spaces), acrophobia (fear of heights), and arachnophobia (fear of spiders). Less familiar are amathophobia (fear of dust) and one you may have: trypanophobia (fear of injections). There is even a phobophobia...fear of having fears! Perhaps our timidity and inclination to fearfulness are the reasons God refers to us as the “sheep” of his pasture.

Are there times you need to hear God’s voice telling you not to fear? If so, you are in the company of some great biblical heroes. In the nativity stories, the shepherds, Zechariah, Joseph and Mary all were instructed to lay their fears to rest. Those could have arisen from seeing the intimidating splendor and might of the angels, the impossible challenges set before them, or even an awareness of their own sinfulness in the presence of the divine. Whatever the source, every one of them received assurance that the angel was bringing something good, something incredible, something in which they were invited to take part. Impossible or not, once their fears were laid to rest, these individuals all accepted the challenge they were given, and in so doing were filled with wonder and faith. Their fears were gone, in faith they joined God in his awesome plan. “Do not fear” is central to Christmas, because “Emmanuel,” God is with us.

When we live in fear we are not living in faith and have a limited view of God and his love. Charles Spurgeon wrote: “The angels never doubt Him, nor the devils either; we alone, out of all the beings that God has fashioned, dishonor Him by unbelief...” This Advent, take hold of the admonitions repeated by the angels: Do not be afraid! Why? Because the plans of God are good, and the promises of God are sure. Whatever you face in life that has you worried, uncertain or fearful, receive in your spirit the words of Jesus in Mark 5:36— “Do not fear, only believe.”

Pastor Richard Crooks
First Baptist Church, Fremont, NE



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: PART 1

Since Christmas comes at the end of the calendar year, as a child, I envisioned it as being the end of the church year. “It” (whatever ‘it’ was) is over and we would begin again in January. I would have to wait an entire year for Christmas to come again with all the falderal that accompanies this celebration which included the church program and my expectation of what the gifts were that had arrived by mail from Sears and Robuck, (yes, the mail did deliver packages even back then). It took some time for me to realize that Christmas was the beginning of a thirty-some earth year journey for the God of Creation to pay the final sacrifice for my sinful ways.

Reminiscing back to the first half of the 60’s when I was in high school, I would sing in the Methodist choir with my grandfather. He was a tenor and I attempted to follow. Grandpa did not need to follow the hymnal to sing those hymns as he had sung them many times and the verses never grew old for him. He was especially fond of the Advent hymns. Those words we sang were about the coming of a baby that would save the souls of us sinners if only we would but believe.

Angels are a numerous theme in these hymns, “Angels we have heard on high” / “Hark the herald angels sing” / “Angels from the realm of glory”. But to whom were they singing? “While by the sheep we watched at night, glad tidings brought an angel bright”. The shepherd is, for me, a much more significant theme than angels. The first news that the birth of Emmanuel, news that the birth of the Lord of the Universe becoming Incarnate was told by the angels to the lowest people on the economic ladder. Pastor Crooks of First Baptist Fremont spoke of how the veil of heaven was pulled back so that they could hear the angels singing. “Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o’er the plains”. Shepherds were chosen to receive the news. Luke 2:17 tells us “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.” The shepherds were the first followers of Christ and the first to spread the news. Christ is our shepherd, “He leadeth me beside still waters”. The lowly status of the shepherd reminds us to humble ourselves in our dealings with others.

I have become, at last, more cognizant of the words of the hymns instead of the music. Often the music is what we like and do not pay close attention to the theology of the words. All of the verses in the church’s hymnal are filled with the theology of the Bible. The words offer to us the vision of who God is, what our relationship to Him should be as well as how to worship Him. Thus, in this Advent season, I offer you these lyrics from How Great Our Joy:

*“While by the sheep we watched at night,
Glad tidings brought an angel bright.
There shall be born, so he did say,
In Bethlehem a Child today.
There shall the Child lie in a stall,
This Child who shall redeem us all,*

*This gift of God we'll cherish well,
That ever joy our hearts shall fill.*

*How great our joy!
Praise the Lord in heaven on high,
How great our joy!
Praise the Lord in heaven on high."*

Craig Erickson
President, ABC NE Board



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: PART 2

“²⁰ You see, all of creation has collapsed into emptiness, not by its own choosing, but by God’s. Still He placed within it a deep and abiding hope ²¹ that creation would one day be liberated from its slavery to corruption and experience the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²² For we know that all creation groans in unison with birthing pains up until now. ²³ And there is more; it’s not just creation—all of us are groaning together too. Though we have already tasted the firstfruits of the Spirit, we are longing for the total redemption of our bodies that comes when our adoption as children of God is complete— ²⁴ for we have been saved in this hope and for this future. But hope does not involve what we already have or see. For who goes around hoping for what he already has? ²⁵ But if we wait expectantly for things we have never seen, then we hope with true perseverance and eager anticipation.”

Romans 8: 20-25 (The Voice)

As the lights go up, as nativities make their home on fireplaces, as pasta ornaments are salvaged from boxes, and as the excitement of Christmas grows so do the reminders that this year might look different. This Advent our church is asking the question given to us by *A Sanctified Art*: How does a weary world rejoice? The weariness that comes with the holidays is real and valid. It could be your first Christmas celebration without a loved one. It might be that you are not feeling all that festive because your year has been one marked by challenges. Perhaps the heaviness you are feeling is a cumulation of all that you had hoped to complete, accomplish, or master this year only to find yourself at the starting line again. It could be the unrest in our world. Wars waging and people hurting. Whatever it might be, please know that you are not alone. The Christmas season brings its own baggage as we reflect on celebrations of the past or the changing of our family structures. This weariness should be acknowledged so that you might experience joy. These feelings are not opposites but can co-exist within the Christian hope. All of us can “groan together too.” You are not alone in these feelings. Someone sitting right next to you might be feeling the same weight of the world.

I would imagine that first Christmas was marked by such feelings. Sorrow because Mary and Joseph did not have a traditional story. Danger surrounded them as the baby was called the Messiah, a politically charged term. They were without their families while having concerns about optics. All this existed alongside the celebration of the Christ-child’s birth. The angelic chorus still sang. The shepherds hurried to see the baby. Joseph heard from the Lord in a dream inviting him to be a part of the story. The Magi show up with gifts and curiosity. Mary pondered all this in her heart as she fed the baby named Jesus.

Our hope is found in the promise of the other name given to the baby, Emmanuel—God with us. Paul writes to the church in Rome about the deep and abiding hope we have. A hope placed within us knowing we have been liberated from sin and have been reconciled back into relationship with our Creator through Jesus starting from his birth. We hope with anticipation for things to be made whole, just, and right by God. We have faith in Jesus and are a part of the Kingdom that invites outsiders and outcasts to find a home.

Wherever you find yourself at the beginning of the Christmas season, God is with you. The Holy Spirit is near to comfort, sustain, and advocate for you. Remember, though you might feel some weariness during this month, there is still hope. Christ has come and promises to return. How then will you rejoice? What intentional ways will you hope despite the weariness? May you find glimpses of joy as you prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ. I hope it looks like a reunion with a friend, a good cup of coffee, an old picture that makes you smile, a hymn that you feel in your bones, a sermon that is not too long, and most importantly the presence of the living God. May you find that God is with you through it all.

Your friend in weariness,
Pastor Joy Martinez-Marshall
First Baptist Church of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

The stress of the Christmas season can take its toll on people's nervous systems. Worry can exhaust us during this time of preparation and making sure everything is ready for Christmas. There are many things to love about Christmas but watching December events overflow the calendar can fill many with anxiety and toss in the current events of the world and it may seem paralyzing. You may think; Can I ever say no? How much will these events cost? What if I want an evening at home? I can't cancel anything this season because, well, you don't do that right? —not at Christmas! We can't possibly miss one thing everything must be experienced to its fullest. I must give my family, and my friends the best Christmas possible. I must live up to the holly jolliest standards of Christmas! Spoiler alert: you can say no.

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense, or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we feel that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations can cause a fast heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, and feeling tired. Also, restlessness, a feeling of being “on edge”. Uncontrollable feelings of worry, increased irritability, concentration difficulties, and sleep difficulties, such as problems with falling or staying asleep. Anxiety comes from our fight or flight response it's a natural emotion for survival, but it becomes a problem when it takes over the rest of your life. An estimated 31% of us adults as of 2022 are experiencing some sort of anxiety. (Maybe just from reading this so far!) Many attribute this presumed increase in anxiety to factors such as social media, poor sleep habits, lowered stigma (feeling of being disrespected), and not meeting the expectations of culture. And even though this is the season we celebrate the Prince of Peace arriving, we find ourselves in the pit of despair.

Mary the mother of Jesus knew what it was like to be anxious during a time of great joy. The angel Gabriel approached her and declared that she would become pregnant with the Son of God. He told her,

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

Though Mary was joyful—what an honor to carry God's Anointed One! —there were some struggles that she would go through, even with the promise of the Savior. Matthew 1:18–19 tells us her betrothed, Joseph, debated divorcing her since she was pregnant. He knew they hadn't slept together, so he concluded that she must have committed adultery. She was a teenage mother, a virgin, who was carrying the Son of God. Surely, she also had the nervous

anticipation of carrying a baby—in this case, a baby who was God’s Son! It makes sense then that when the angel appeared to her, his first words were “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:30).

Later after meeting Elizabeth, she declared, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:46–48).

How does she go from finding out this news that she will be caring for the son of God and raising him, (surely this is anxiety-inducing news) and responding in praise; “My soul magnifies the Lord?” I think it goes back to remembering who she is in God.

Later, Jesus Christ himself would remind his followers and us in Matthew 6:25–27:

“Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”

We might think that current concerns about anxiety and worry are a modern phenomenon, but Jesus realized the power of fear and anxiety on our bodies and souls. We must remember our value in God’s eyes. We are the only creatures made in his image. (Genesis 1:26-27) we were put in dominion over the birds of the air. The same ones that Jesus points out that the Father takes care of. How much more care is given to you who are created in his image and were created to be in community with Him, how much more does God care about you? Enough to send his only son to be the propitiation of our sin and save us!

Also, worry doesn’t accomplish anything anyway, at least not in terms of enabling us to live longer. As Jesus points out it can only take away!

John 10:10-11 says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

The thief wants to take away from your life and paralyzing anxiety is one of his tools. But Jesus came so that you may have freedom, a life lived to the fullest! But how?

1 Peter 5:6-9 says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

A few key application points for us in this passage.

1. Humble yourselves and remember who you are. Don’t let the culture define you let God whom you were made in his image be the one that defines you and live in his love.
2. Be sober-minded. This isn’t just talking about alcohol; it's talking about everything that distracts you from God. It’s what you self-medicate with when the anxiety is too much. It's what you give control to run your thoughts. Instead of dealing

with the issue, it's easier to distract yourself from it, but that doesn't make the issues and anxiety go away. Maybe for a fleeting moment but unless you choose to stand firm and put those distractions aside and look up to God, you can easily end up in an infinite loop of anxiety and distraction. But the mighty hand of God can break that loop if you let him.

3. You have a Hero. And you also have an adversary out there who wants to make you spin, clam up, focus on yourself, and your shortcomings, and keep you in that infinity loop. Be aware of this and instead cling to the Good Shepherd. What does Psalm 23 say? "Your rod and your staff comfort me." Those are both defensive and offensive weapons, He can deal with the enemy, and he can handle your biggest struggles.

4. You are not alone. Continuing in I Peter 5:9 Peter links faith and your brotherhood together. God has blessed us with a great community, the church. A community of believers who have been given gifts to help one another. It's not a weakness to seek out the help of another. That's a lie from Satan to keep you isolated to keep you in that loop of worry. But what if instead, you stepped out of that loop in faith and courage to seek help from those that God has put in your life? To seek out those who can help you walk through the hard times together. In the craziness of the Christmas season, it is important to remember to release worry and anxiety into the hands of God and this can include consulting your fellow believers, pastors, or mental health professionals, whom God has gifted to help us. It might be the greatest gift you can give your family and yourself this Christmas; to finally seek help in what you are going through. To let that peace that Christ brought with him into your life. To find yourself in that place Mary found herself in being able to praise God for her situation and no longer fear it. To find comfort and joy.

Whether trying to meet expectations of perfection or being fearful of the future, we must trust God as Mary did in her time of joy and worry. Worry adds nothing to our lives. It can steal away from our lives, But God is always there for us. What if in this Advent season, we try something radical and trust Christ and give him our worried thoughts; what if we realize that we need help dealing with anxiety instead of just staying in that infinity loop of distraction and self-medicating? What if we turn to the ones God has gifted to help us and those whom he has placed in our lives around us? Allow the Prince of Peace to give you comfort and joy this Christmas.

Pastor Blake Wilkes
Arthur Baptist Church, Arthur, NE



SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about the child, and all who heard were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” -Luke 2:17-20

I grew up in the 50s and 60s. My family was the typical family of the time. My father worked and traveled a lot. My mother was a stay-at-home mom who took care of the home and did volunteer work in the community. There were 3 children – me, my younger sister and my older brother.

Christmas was a special holiday. The house was filled with the aroma of baked cookies and cakes. The dining room table was decorated with candles and garland. We decorated the Christmas tree with ornaments that were a hodge-podge of pieces that were either handmade or had a family story to go with them. My father always waited until the last possible minute to buy a tree because he could get a good price! As a result, the tree was often a bit like a Charlie Brown tree that had one side that needed to face the wall and a trunk that was not quite straight. But it had character and once it was decorated, it was beautiful with garland, tinsel and little lights that bubbled.

On Christmas Eve, we attended a special church service in the center of town in front of our church. The ministers of the 3 churches in town (Presbyterian, Catholic and Episcopal) read the Christmas Story from the Bible. The whole town came and sang Christmas Carols while the high school band played. There was a reenactment of the Christmas story on the front lawn of the church complete with Mary arriving on a donkey.

After the service, we went home, ate dinner and opened presents. Then we went back to church for the midnight service where my sister and I sang in the choir.

While I reflect on my childhood Christmases, I realize that I remember and cherish the memories but remember few if any of the gifts. At the time, the gifts were exciting and fun to open but when I look back, they are not what stands out. What was important was being with my family and celebrating the birth of Jesus.

In Luke, the shepherds, after hearing the news of Jesus’ birth from the angels, rush to see Him. They brought no gifts but when they had seen him, they told everyone they encountered “what they had seen and heard.” They returned “glorifying God...”

In Matthew 2:11-12, the Magi came with expensive and exotic gifts but after they worshiped Jesus, they returned home to their country. There is no mention of glorifying God or spreading the good news.

So, in the Bible, the offerings that were presented were not the focus of the event and should not be our focus. The focus is on God's gift to us of the baby in the manger. The one who would bring light and joy into the world.

May your Christmas be filled with warmth and memories and joy and may your gifts to each other be your presence and your love.

Dear Lord, help us to focus on the things you have given us that matter... a loving family and friends, a loving church family and sharing the gift of YOU. Amen.

Susan Howell
President, ABWM

American Baptist

Women's
MINISTRIES

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 17, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

So Joe pulls into the parking lot of the fifth motel of the day. His wife Em is great with child, and the shocks on the car aren't what they used to be, and he knows if they hit one more pothole the baby will pop out right there, no questions asked.

The ancient Buick pulls alongside the awning over the door into the front desk. The "No Vacancy" sign is lit up, but the "v" and "a" are both dark so the sign reads, "No cancy." Joe sounds it out: "No can see." He says it out loud a few times, still under his breath, and begins to chuckle.

By then Joe's at the front desk and the help there might be the owner, but you'd never know it by looking at him. The poor guy behind the desk is making his pitch that there's no room at this inn and Joe's still chuckling over "no can see," and he holds up one finger and shakes it and says, "Wait. Before you say anything else, I want you to come and look at my wife. Just see what's going on. It'll just take a minute, I promise."

So the help (maybe the owner) checks the hip holster under his light jacket to make sure the gun's still there and follows Joe to the Buick. It's colder outside than he expects, but just looking at the woman on the passenger's side makes him whistle in amazement. "You sure you don't want an ambulance, lady?"

Em manages a smile and suddenly sucks in her breath like she wants to create a vacuum that will suck in the Buick around her. She manages another smile that turns into a grimace. "No time... NO TIME."

Joe turns pale. "Em?" But she's already turning herself sideways and telling Joe to get everything ready to catch the baby, because she's gonna push and there's not a thing he can do to stop her. On his way to giving his wife the attention she needs, Joe looks at the help and says, "Please call the police or the fire station or someone who can actually help her. I'll be worthless!"

The help (maybe the owner) says, "Anyone can see you two need help. I'll make the call right now!" and runs into the motel lobby behind the counter and dials 911. Joe is in wonder at the difference it makes for people to actually see what's going on so they understand what kind of help someone needs while he's arranging their sleeping bags and coats like he's seen it done in at least a dozen movies. Some of them were comedies, some of them were dramas and it fits because he's laughing and crying at the same time while Em who usually watches her tongue lets out a blue streak that would make most of the guys at the shop blush, and then he's laughing and crying at the same time because his wife's scream is fading and the wail announcing his first and only son has arrived is building and the red lights from the paramedic fire truck are getting closer.

Joe's jacket catches the baby and he hopes the paramedics hurry to help him figure out the mess. Em says "Let me see," and Joe scrunches the jacket around the baby a bit more tightly and thinks he will ask the first paramedic who can actually see what's going on to cut the cord. Em's voice is still surprisingly strong.

Then a paramedic shows up and asks, "Everything all right?" and Joe says, "Please, take a look for yourself," and waits while the paramedic does whatever it is he's doing and wishes he could see and understand but there's no room and once again Joe wonders why "no can see" is the theme of the night.

The paramedic says, "Here's your son. We're going to take you all to the hospital to clean up and make sure everyone's OK. Looks good from here, but let's make sure."

Joe nods and is grateful to see into the eyes of his miracle and wonders if he's looking into the eyes of Jesus for a moment and feels like he could look through the eyes of Jesus at everyone around him—Em, their new boy, the owner (maybe the help) at the motel, the paramedics who are guiding him and his son into the back of the ambulance where Em is already, the homeless guys and gals from the park across the street who checked out the commotion and are headed to the underpass five blocks away to huddle together for warmth while they sleep.

They're all so beautiful, Joe realizes. Who knew?

To love someone means to see him as God intended him. —Fyodor Dostoyevsky

We just don't see. Even more critical, we don't see the people around us – friends, family, and strangers alike – as valued image-bearers of God. Advent gives us a fresh look at Jesus. We cannot see Him as we once did, and the same applies to those around us:

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!" (2 Corinthians 5:16, 17)

Advent can be a reminder of our opportunity to reassess our view of others, and then to ask God to help us see each person we encounter with new eyes: the eyes of Christ. Who needs you to give them a fresh look this holiday season, so you see them as God intended?

Pastor Steve Wamberg
Sunset Hills Baptist Church, Omaha, NE



THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“Christmas at the Farm”

The door was always shut to the living room when we arrived at my grandparents' farm for Christmas.

The dining room table was set elegantly. Grandma Fern left no detail undone when it came to any family dinner, especially Christmas. Knowing her, the table had been set for at least 2 days in preparation for this special day. There was always fresh cut greenery from the grove of evergreen trees behind the house and candles in the center of the table. Each place setting was complete with a glittery name tag for each of us and a special Christmas figurine. Grandma's Christmas table comes flooding back to me each year as I carefully unwrap and display the wax Christmas angels that I hoped would be by my nametag every Christmas at the farm.

Christmas dinner at the farm was always a formal affair. We were all dressed up in our Christmas outfits. The candles were glowing as we began with prayer, passed the food around the table and shared stories and wondered what might be waiting for us under the tree behind the door to the living room. The kids were more than willing to help clear the table and do the dishes without even being asked in hopes of moving things along so we could get to the living room.

The time had arrived! All the adults, except grandma, made their way into the living room closing the door behind them. Grandma arranged all of her grandchildren according to age. The youngest was always the first to see beyond the closed door. Being one of the older grandchildren, I was always fourth from the last. The door was opened. Oh! Ah! Wow! There in the corner stood the most beautiful Christmas tree with sparkling lights and beautiful decorations and brightly wrapped gifts beneath it. I can still smell the pine scent of that real tree. We all took our place on the floor of the living room as grandma took her spot in her chair and grandpa brought her the family Bible. We all sat quietly with all eyes on grandma as she read us the Christmas Story from Luke 2:1-20. Grandma moved from her chair to the old pump organ from the Mennonite Church next to the tree as she played Silent Night and we all sang along.

I don't remember many of the gifts I received each Christmas, but I will always remember the family tradition that made each year one of anticipation. I will never forget that the Christmas story from the worn pages of my grandparents Bible was the most important thing for them to share with us each Christmas.

I am blessed beyond measure to have been born into a family that shared with me the greatest gift - Jesus. As we move through the season of Advent, a season of preparation. Just as my grandma prepared each year for our family Christmas, let us not only prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, but also share that story as we look to the second coming of Christ. The joy, peace, hope and salvation of Jesus Christ is the BEST NEWS for this broken world we live in.

Don't keep this wonderful story to yourself.

"I love to tell the story; 'tis pleasant to repeat
What seems each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story; for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God's own Holy Word.

I love to tell the story; For those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,
'Twill be the old, old story, that I have loved so long.

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love."*

Bev Pacas

Camp Director of Moses Merrill Camp & Conference Center



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 24, 2023

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

A DIVINE BABY

“The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God’s power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35).

What was Jesus like as a baby? The Christmas Carole “Away in a Manger” imagines the savior did not cry and “radiant beams” shone from his face! I expect there was something special about Jesus’s face, but not physical light. Let me share some thoughts to help you use your imagination to draw close to the baby Jesus. Perhaps his mother Mary might have looked back at some time and said:

As I think back on how Jesus was born and grew up, what really sticks out in my mind is the love; the pain and the joy, yes; but the love! I guess I expected that as a new mother I would experience love in a new way, but I never expected how it would be. I did expect Jesus to be an easier baby. After all, the angel said that, “The Holy Spirit would come upon me, and the power of the Most High would overshadow me. So the holy one to be born would be called the Son of God.” Well, maybe I did not expect him to come out of the womb speaking perfect Hebrew, but the crying! There is only one way that a baby expresses himself, and he knew how to express himself forcefully long before he was a preacher! But I held him and nursed him. When he was full and content, he just looked at me. He stared at my face for the longest time. I never knew a baby to be so aware. And then I could not believe it. His little baby face got such an expression of love. I don’t know if you would have noticed it, but I am his mother. It was like when Joseph would look at me, only different and more all on the face of this newborn. My heart just melted. To be loved like that just made me love him all I could.

I was so deep in thought that I did not realize what was happening. Shepherds were at the door! Joseph was letting them in! My parents had always warned me about shepherds. Rough characters like that ought to stay outside of the village with their smelly sheep. A bunch of crooks. My father used to say if our own courts refuse to accept their sworn testimony, then he would not trust them at all. Told me to stay clear of riffraff like shepherds. And here Joseph was telling me that angels had appeared to them, and he was taking my precious Jesus and handing him to this big brute of a shepherd. I said, “Joseph!” But then something happened that set me to pondering for days to come. I could not get it out of my mind. The rough handling and foul smell did not start Jesus crying again. When his little eyes could focus on that scarred and weathered face, his expression of love came back. The same love for this ugly outcast as he had for his own mother. May God forgive my jealousy. From that moment, I began to understand true love, and began to wonder just who was this child I had borne.

Oh, Jesus was a handful. Never really bad, but a handful. I remember our dear neighbor lady. Everyone just called her Grandma. She used to make sweetened figs. All the neighbor

kids loved her sweetened figs. Bless her heart, she was getting forgetful. She would start to pass out the figs and forget where she was. Would we ever hear it from the child who was short some figs! Well, one day Jesus was just a toddler, he couldn't say but a few words. I thought Jesus was okay with Grandma watching. Then, all of a sudden, he screamed so loud I thought he must have put his hand in the cook fire. I rushed in but everything seemed okay. A few of the kids were sitting there and Grandma had just given them some figs. I thought the poor dear must have left Jesus out. I was really puzzled when I looked and saw he had his fair share of figs. Jesus was pointing over at little Benjamin who did not have any. Finally I caught on. I took some of Jesus's delicious figs and gave them to his little friend; You should have heard Jesus giggle. You should have seen the look on his face.

Pastor Jim Cummings
First Baptist Church, Union, NE



CHRISTMAS EVE

Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20

Believing is trusting in the Lord. When a person trusts in the Lord, they receive a blessing. The blessing may come in many different forms.

Mary and Joseph had to do just that when they were told that they would be Jesus' parents. They had to believe and trust God in the birth of Jesus. Their trust in God would be an avenue for God's blessing. God gives peace and blessing through believing. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, and God blessed them through shepherds and angels. These shepherds and angels gave affirmation that God had blessed them with a son, the Savior of the world (Titus 3:4-70).

Everything followed according to God's plan. Believing is a prerequisite to receiving what God has given. Mary had the assurance of the impossible being true for her and His people. Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. She believed and remembered that God had spoken to her.

When God speaks forth his plans, he does so with everything already in place to fulfill His will. God simply asks you to believe Him. You will experience great blessing when you place your absolute trust in Him. Mary did this, and we should too.

We cannot possibly imagine all God has in store for us when we trust in Him. In this blessed season, pray for salvation to come to someone you know. Pray for healing of a friend or for God to provide for your needs. God has everything in place. Believe and receive a blessing from God.

Pastor Brian High
First Baptist Church, Norfolk, NE



CHRISTMAS DAY

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14

“We Are Not Home Alone – The Son of God Is with Us”

One of my all-time favorite Christmas season movies is ‘Home Alone 1 and 2.’ There is no doubt that people love to watch this movie over and over every December. While there is a long list of movies to watch for Christmas, something special about this movie thrills me and makes me and everyone feel relatable. The film has a mixture of good, bad, evil, and sweet characters. In the movie, the home-alone kid (Kevin) is left behind. Poor Kevin is at friction with his brother, uncle, and all the people in the house who are excited about Christmas. While they were having pizza for their meal, Kevin wanted cheese pizza, and there was none left; Kevin got mad at his brother, who ate Kevin’s pizza. So, Kevin charges at him, and accidentally, the milk that was left on the table gets spilled everywhere. Now, everyone is upset at him. Kevin’s mom says, we’ve had enough of you, Kevin; go to the attic; you are staying alone. Kevin wishes that all who were upset at him wished that they didn’t exist or disappear. And then the following day, because of a power outage, the alarm clock doesn’t go off, and so all the family is late to catch a flight. As they were all crazy and rushed to the airport, they forgot Kevin, and he was left home alone. Kevin wakes up and notices that his family is nowhere to be found. He jumps with excitement and says, ‘I am free, I am free...I made my family disappear.’ Kevin thinks that life seems good without his parents, and he decides to do all sorts of crazy things to have fun. Kevin thought that the discipline and rules from their parents were holding onto him.

This is today’s reality; people think that we can have a free life and without order is good. We find the signboards from time to time saying, “good without God.” We sometimes want a life without any strings attached. Later, when we find ourselves in a mess, we either blame God or cry out to God, where are you or How could this happen to me? The book of Hebrews is a masterful document written to Jews struggling with their Christian faith and evaluating Jesus. In the movie Home Alone, Kevin is struck with fear, anxiety, and loneliness. Kevin soon realizes that he is not good without his family. The good news for us today is that as we celebrate Christmas, we are reminded that the Son of God came down for us. Jesus - the Son of God who inhabited the heavenly realms with his glorious splendor, gave all that up to be part of us in every way. He who is fully God and fully human at the same time. He, who is fully divine and fully human at the same time, came to us. As John 1:1-14 highlights, the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. God did not leave us home alone; He came down for us, among us. God incarnate, God with us (Emmanuel).

In Hebrews 1:1 and 2, the author splits the time into two sections. First, he calls the time before Christ, ‘the past.’ Here, we notice the time period when God spoke and gave commandments to ancestors such as (prophets, priests, and kings). The old covenant and its messages were revealed to the prophets and to the people. In the Old Testament, in Psalm 22:1-2, King David pleads to the Lord, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day,

but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.” The Lord hears the cries of those who feel abandoned and come to be with us.

Second, the author describes “in these last days.” Two thousand years ago, God incarnate among us as Jesus, who initiated a new era, a new covenant between God and people. Every time we arrive at the season of Christmas, it is a constant reminder that our creator, sustainer of all things, “whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe,” has spoken to us.

The birth of Jesus is providential and part of a plan and purpose. This plan and purpose is to provide purification for our sins. Jesus is not just a prophet, or a messenger, or a good role model, or like a God; Jesus is The God. The author highlights, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful Word.”

Christmas is a joyful time with family and friends for everyone. It was during one of my Christmases, like Kevin, when I was home alone. I felt unfortunate watching the movie ‘Home- Alone’ staying home alone. I stopped in the middle of the movie and said God, I miss my family and friends, and I feel like an orphan in this country and as a stranger. I was reminded of the song “This Is Amazing Grace” by Phil Wickham, that I am not alone. The verses said this:

“Who brings our chaos back into order?
Who makes the orphan a son and daughter?
The King of Glory, the King of Glory...
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross
You laid down Your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You’ve done for me

The Lord answered my prayer. Shortly after, a few friends from church knocked on my door and took me out for a meal. Suppose you think that you are alone. The promise of God through his Son Jesus is “You are not alone.” Church is the place where God unites a group of believers to share our struggles and find hope through his Son, Jesus Christ. As a Church, we run together, bearing witness and sharing testimonies.

If you are alone, feeling abandoned by God, or if you have abandoned God because of your willful sin, or maybe if you think that you turned your back on God and, in turn, feel like he has turned His back on you. Beloved child of God, God has not abandoned you. You are not left home alone. I can confidently say that God fulfilled his promise through his Son Jesus. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, and that has been fulfilled, says, “Isaiah 7:14 The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin[a] will be pregnant. She will have a son, and she will name him Immanuel (God with us).” We are not Home Alone – The son of God Is with us.



Pastor TN Praveen Kumar
Benson Baptist Church, Omaha, NE

CHRISTMAS WEEK

The Apostle Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 11:2, “I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you.” Powerful words, but I think my family may have fallen short in upholding this idea when I was a youngster.

Christmas is a time of year typically filled with traditions passed down in families from year to year. But growing up in southeast Nebraska, my family didn’t have any Christmas traditions. In fact, I don’t ever remember the word “tradition” being used regarding Christmas. I mean, just because we did the same things over and over each Christmas, didn’t mean we had any traditions. Mom made her gingerbread farm each year (which was totally uneatable, by the way) and we drove around town looking at the Christmas lights after the Church Christmas program, and there was the popcorn ball and orange in the Christmas stocking on Christmas morning, and of course, there was the annual search for a Christmas tree.

Living on a farm meant most things we needed were provided for us from the land, and that included our annual Christmas tree. It was sometimes a challenge to find something that would fit the bill. Looking back, our need to self-source a tree was more tied to not being able to afford one from town, and this ended up with us getting something less than optimal (think Charlie Brown). When I was eight or nine years old, that search for a tree ended up in a way we never repeated again.

My father may have had in mind Psalms 148: 7 - 9 (“Praise the Lord ... you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars”) one particular year as we searched for a Christmas tree. Most years it was a bit difficult to find an appropriate evergreen tree on our relatively small farm. The land was duly searched each year and something was found. But one year, that search led to my father to cut down a cedar tree. Now, anyone who knows anything about trees knows that a cedar tree comes with a bunch of problems. They will practically take over an area if not controlled. They are not a tree one would want to take into a house. They are mostly brown, and drop their needles at an alarming rate, and those needles are very sharp. So, despite the Psalmist direction, it is hard to think good thoughts about cedar trees

The presents that year were not pushed under the tree very far, as to do so would result in the need to pull needles from your fingers and hands as we reached for them. I remember a Christmas morning picture of us kids sitting around the tree, (but not too close), opening our presents. And I remember that tree was out the door the next morning and then mom spent the next week or so vacuuming and hand-picking needles out of the carpet. We kids stayed away from that area of the living room. To do otherwise would have meant we would have helped pick up needles with our bare feet. In other words, our experience with the cedar Christmas tree was remembered for all the wrong reasons.

Traditions continue to be important to us, but many of them change or are modified over time. Families merge together, each with their own ideas. Friends and acquaintances influence us to

try new things. The annual search for a Christmas tree continued each year for us. but we were much more selective. The Christmas season was just as festive and meaningful. But, the cedar tree tradition was one we did not repeat, despite Paul's direction. I think he would understand.

Brad Pope
President, ABMM



FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

DECEMBER 31, 2023

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

DO NOT FEAR!

“How are you doing, mom?” I asked mom, who lives in Namtu, a small Northern Shan State city in Myanmar, every other night through Messenger Video Calls. “I do not sleep well every night because we must be ready to run whenever guns start firing or we hear the sounds of bombing and military airplanes flying over our home every night. The only thing I can do now is pray,” mom said. The fear for mom seems to be getting worse, not better. The fighting between the ethnic armed groups and the military coup has been getting worse in Kachin, Shan, Karen, and Chin states for several weeks.

Since staging a military coup on February 1, 2021, the junta security forces have carried out mass killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, and other abuses that amount to crimes against humanity. As of the report of AAPP (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners) on November 8, 2023, 4,176 people, including pro-democracy activists and civilians, have been killed, 25,386 people have been arrested, 19,660 are currently in detention, 8,025 of whom are serving sentences, and a total of 163 people who have been sentenced to death. As of the report of UNICEF on September 2023, the number of internally displaced persons has risen to more than 1.9 million out of a total population of more than 50 million. Most are in Kachin, Karen, Chin, Rakhine, and Shan states. While the loss of every human life is grievous, the Myanmar people feel that they must defend themselves against the brutality and threats to their lives. They are also fighting for their futures to avoid being thrust back into the “dark ages,” when they suffered under oppressive, exploitative, and frightening military rule for more than 60 years.

I have been in deep pain in my heart. I am with them every day and every night. I have sympathized with them. I stand in solidarity with their struggle of political crisis, pain, and suffering, including my own family—mom, siblings, and relatives.

Does God care about our suffering? What can we expect from this year’s Christmas when so much is frightening or unknown about the future? What does Christmas mean for them? What can Christmas do for them when their fear and anxiety become so great?

“But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11, NIV).

No wonder the angel told the terrified shepherds not to be afraid; we are afraid. There is no doubt that many of us appear to be emotionally overwhelmed and stressed by the rise in prices of everyday items like gas prices, energy bills, grocery costs, etc., due to the higher inflation and interest rates, things like wars, threats of terrorism, random acts of violence, and other kinds of

evil over which we have no control. We fear because we are *going* through darkness, or we are going *to go* through darkness.

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10, NIV).

Christmas is the end of all *fear* because Christ is overcoming evil. By taking away the guilt of our sins, Jesus Christ was born to take away any reason we might have to be afraid of anything else. Christmas encourages us as a promise of God’s continuous presence and provision. This is why we keep reaching out to God for help in our times of need. When we look at our suffering, losses, all that is wrong with Myanmar, Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Palestine, and the world, and all the problems and difficulties we face, we may feel hopeless, despair, and powerless. But we can look at our circumstances through the eyes of *faith*, even with so many unanswered questions and hardships. We can be grateful for how we see God *through* Christmas.

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”) (Matthew 1:23 NIV).

We are not alone because God is *Immanuel*, who is *in* us, *within* us, amidst our suffering and pains. Christmas brings us to realize our need for redemption from fear. Christmas helps us understand to rely on God rather than things and people. Christmas teaches us humility and patience. Christmas offers us hope, peace, and comfort. Most importantly, the *Immanuel* God is the co-sufferer with those hurting. Christmas will still mean *hope* that it’s going to be alright, that we will be alive and safe. Hope is born, but it comes in the midst of *real* fear. We are not to allow fear to rule our lives or take root in our hearts. We are to be *people* of faith because Christmas takes away our fear.

I pray that when mom hears “Do not fear!” she will *sleep well* and find *peace* and *hope* even amidst shootings and bombings!

Senior Pastor Zau Sam
First Kachin Baptist Church of America, Omaha, NE



NEW YEAR'S DAY

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46

What's Next???

Happy New Year and welcome to 2024. This day can bring lots of mixed emotions for all of us. It's a day where we can celebrate a new year and look forward to what this year may bring. We can set new resolutions and try to keep them until at least February. It's a time where we can hit the reset button and start fresh again. It's a time where we can celebrate God's perfect gift to us, Jesus.

On the other hand, this day can bring a time of sorrow, loneliness, and depression. It's a day where lots of people pack up their Christmas decorations, and put them away for another year. What about all the Christmas cards? Do I keep the ones with pictures, and throw the others? Do I keep them in a box until next year? Oh, the cold and snowy weather ahead. What is there to look forward to in the new year?

I don't know about you, but these emotions are real for me. I begin to ponder the following questions: What's Next? What's going to happen in this new year? Yet, in the midst of these questions, we need to remember that there is a season and time for everything. As the passage in Ecclesiastes states:

“There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity

in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-13, NIV)

Our God is sovereign and in control. He has a reason and time for everything. Even though we may experience emotions and question what’s next; God is always here working in and through us. Just as this passage in Ecclesiastes proclaims, God has made everything beautiful in its time. This season is a time for us to worship what God has done. We can look forward to this new year and celebrate with him the many blessings that have come and will come in the years ahead.

As we close the Christmas and Advent season, take a moment and think about what happens after Jesus is born. What do the shepherds do? Who arrives next? Scripture tells us that the shepherds return to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. Magi (Wise Men) arrive with gifts in their hands. They worshiped and gave glory and praise to Mary and child Jesus. Both shepherds and the magi worshiped and praised God for the wonderful things he had done in this season of time.

Let’s do the same. This new year let’s worship and praise our God for the wonderful things he has done. Let’s share his good news to others and start a new year revolution (not resolution) for him. What would it look like if this was the year more and more people came to know Jesus? Oh, the excitement of what’s next!

May God bless and keep you in this new year!

Pastor Scott Jones
United Faith Community Church, Valley, NE



As we stand at the threshold of a new year, it is natural to reflect on the past, present, and future. This collection of devotions has guided us through the journey of the Christ centered seasons of Advent to Christmas and into the new year. The hope of the Resurrection served as a golden thread woven into the beautiful tapestry of this holiday season symbolized embodied by light, hope, transformation, and renewal.

Advent is a period of anticipation and preparation. It symbolizes waiting for the arrival of something significant and is often associated with hope and expectation. We fight the darkness by slowly lighting candles one week at a time illuminating our spaces of worship, our homes, and our world. We welcome the Messiah Jesus to equally fill our lives and ask him to become more visible with each passing day. In a broader context, Advent becomes a metaphor for the various seasons of our lives when we await change, growth, or a new beginning.

In the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of anticipation. Our lives often demand immediacy, leaving little room for patience. However, Advent encourages us to embrace the beauty of waiting, to find solace in the process, and to recognize that the journey itself holds an intrinsically holy worth. As we step into a new year, Advent invites us to approach the unknown with an open heart and a hopeful mind.

The culmination of Advent brings us to Christmas, a time marked by joy, love, and generosity. The narrative of Christmas centers around the birth of Jesus Christ. Emmanuel, God with us, revealing himself to the world is a living example of God's compassion, kindness, and mercy. Just as God gave himself to us, we exchange gifts and share meals. Christmas reminds us of the power of giving. It encourages us to reflect on the ways in which we can contribute to the well-being of others, fostering a sense of community and interconnectedness. As we enter the new year, Christmas challenges us to carry that same generosity into our daily lives in our interactions with others.

The journey through Advent and Christmas finds its ultimate significance in the Resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus is the triumph of life over death, our source of hope, renewal, and the beginning of transformation. In the face of personal or collective challenges, the Resurrection offers solace and inspiration. It reminds us that even in the darkest moments, there is the potential for rebirth and renewal. As we reflect on the past year and look ahead, the Resurrection becomes a guiding light, urging us to confront adversity with resilience and to find strength in the face of life's inevitable trials.

At the heart of Advent, Christmas, and the Resurrection lies the theme of hope. Hope is the thread that weaves these narratives together, connecting the anticipation of Advent, the love of Christmas, and the transformative power of the Resurrection. As we embrace the dawn of a new year, hope becomes our compass, guiding us through the uncertainties that lie ahead.

Hope is not merely a passive expectation, a naive optimism, wishing things work out for the best. Hope is an active work that propels us forward into the Kingdom of God. It empowers us to set goals, overcome obstacles, and envision the future God intends. Our source of hope comes from Christ's birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and establishing of the New Heavens and New Earth. In the tapestry of our lives, this hope is the vibrant hue that infuses every thread with purpose and meaning. As we reflect on the past and envision the future, hope becomes our steadfast companion, reminding us that each moment is an opportunity for growth and renewal centered in Christ.

In the tapestry of Advent, Christmas, Resurrection, and hope, we find a profound reflection of the human experience. These timeless narratives invite us to embrace the beauty of

anticipation, the warmth of love, the resilience of transformation, and the guiding light of hope. As we stand on the threshold of a new year, let us carry these lessons with us, weaving them into the fabric of our lives. May the journey from anticipation to celebration, from challenge to triumph, be a source of inspiration and guidance as we navigate our way into the Kingdom of God together. In the tapestry of shared mission and ministry, may our reflections on Advent, Christmas, Resurrection, and hope illuminate the path ahead, guiding us toward a year filled with purpose, growth, and the unwavering belief that every moment holds the promise of a new beginning in Christ Jesus.

Greg Mamula

Executive Minister, Churches Helping Churches ABC Nebraska, Bellevue, NE

