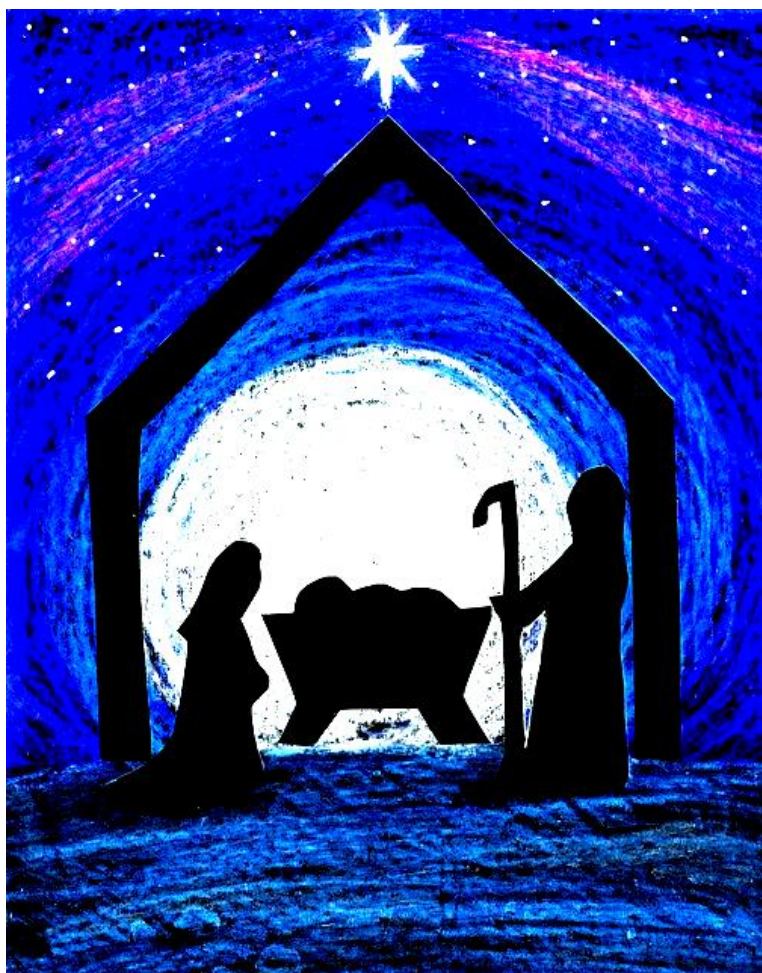


**BRECKSVILLE UNITED CHURCH OF
CHRIST**

**ADVENT TO EPIPHANY DEVOTIONAL
BOOK**

2017-2018



INTRODUCTION

***And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among
us....***

John 1:14

In all of our Sunday worship services, in addition to our Old Testament and New Testament readings, we include a "Continuing Testament." This contemporary reading amplifies the theme of our weekly Scripture texts, and reminds us that God *is* still speaking! It also reminds us that the messages contained in Holy Scripture are often more deeply and fully understood when rendered into contemporary language and imagery.

This year we are once again pleased to make available another Advent/Christmas Devotional Booklet written by members and friends of Brecksville United Church of Christ. Advent is the season in which the Church anticipates and celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ - the Divine Word made flesh. In these following pages, that Word is brought to life through the down-to-earth reflections of many different people. Our thanks to each of them for taking the time to meditate on these texts and to share their insights with us. Thanks also to those who helped gather, edit and publish their writings - especially Jon Thompson, and our wonderful Church Office Manager, Jeannette Kroeger.

I hope you will all enjoy and benefit from the following compositions and I pray that by reading and reflecting on these thoughts, we will all hear God's Still-Speaking voice more clearly, and be inspired to draw closer to the Holy One in this Holy Season.

Peace and Joy!
Pastor Dave

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Sunday, December 3, 2017

Isaiah 9:2-4

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.

"Darkness" and "Light" the power of God's light over the darkness brought back a memory of my very early childhood. In 1932 the infant son of Charles and Anne Lindbergh was kidnapped. We had no TV back then, but whenever the radio was on, reports of this kidnapping were constantly being heard. As a three year old, I listened. Word was that the kidnapper had put a ladder against the Lindbergh house and entered through the baby's bedroom on the second floor. I was terrified. My bedroom was on the second floor of our house. Each night as my mother tucked me in bed, I could imagine a ladder outside my window and someone coming into my room. I grew afraid of the dark, and each night as my mother left the room after saying my prayers with me, I would remind her to leave the hall light on. That small light eased my fear and I was soon asleep. It had overcome the darkness. How much more powerful is the light of God's love which keeps alive our hope in dark times, It calls us to be the light of the world so that others may know God. Jesus said "let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. During Advent, we prepare for the coming of the infant Jesus. At Christmas, we follow the light of the star, giving thanks for Christ who lights our way.

God of light and love, we give thanks for the gifts of your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us always to remember that we are called in His name to let our light shine as living examples of God's love for all.

Eddie O'Donnell

Monday, December 4, 2017

Isaiah 9:6-7

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.

This scripture passage arouses mixed feelings. On the one hand, it's a beautiful description of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. On the other hand, where is the "endless peace" that it refers to?

I may know the answer to that if I take a minute to reflect on my own path and faith experience. It's fairly simple: if I retain my connection to Jesus, if I maintain my trust in him, I am generally at peace. There are times when I don't do this, and that peace eludes me. The peace that is beyond all understanding is mine if I just claim it and maintain it.

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ. I pray that each one of us will know the peace of Christ, and that our troubled world finds endless peace. In Christ's name, amen.

Jon Thompson

Tuesday, December 5, 2017

Psalm 96:1-4

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised...

We are lucky. We are very lucky. We live in a great time. We live in a great country. We live in a great city. We have great families. We have a great church. We meet regularly great fellow-parishioners in our church.

Our time today is not problematic like a lot that I and many others have experienced in our lifetimes. We are not in an active war which I experienced in my youth - even though we hear of wars and rumors of wars, we have been fortunate to stay at peace. We are all the beneficiaries of our time of fantastic technological advances. The economy is booming even though many of our neighbors are suffering like my family and many others did many years ago during the 1930's depression.

But even in the darkest of times, there is always hope on the horizon. We keep receiving blessings beyond count even though we have not earned them. How can we not sing with joy like the psalmist - shout out at the top of our voices - sing praises to such a generous God. The psalmist can teach us much about appreciating our lot. Read again the Psalm and pay attention to what the psalmist said.

Let's give thanks for all we have been given. Let's sing with joy in appreciation for our blessings. Let's remember the great things done by a God who is great. Amen.

Max Roha

Wednesday, December 6, 2017

Titus 2:11-13

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is my understanding that Titus, a close friend of Paul, was sent to Corinth to instruct church leaders about following correct beliefs and living in proper ways. Although this passage itself does not herald the birth of Jesus and our celebrations of Christmas, it does convey two important life goals: living decently in our contemporary world and relying on God's Grace when we fail.

Our choices of Christmas greetings and gifts do not always seem appropriate or well received. However, metaphorically, we should try to understand that our reception of God's gifts and messages and of God's gift of Jesus ignores and misuses. How does this make God feel? Again, we take for granted God's gift of grace in forgiving our human errors and sins, but that is God's promise! We are so gifted by God.

Dear God, We are thankful that you forgive our humanness and sins and guide us as we struggle to forgive others and ourselves.

Dot Bailey

Thursday, December 7, 2017

Psalm 80: 3-5

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

Wow, those Israelites sure knew how to throw a pity party! Truth be told, it's easy to do though. It's easy to wallow in the sadness and self-pity of life's failures and disappointments. At least the Israelites had a good excuse, what with forty years of wandering in the desert. Most of our "first world" problems of today pale in comparison.

I am the king of the pity party. I remember slights and defeats far more readily than successes. Fortunately, a wise woman (who I happen to be married to) reminds me every day to find happiness in life's small moments. Even if the gratitude is as simple as "I'm glad to be home for dinner". These small moments of reflection on a daily basis really do make a difference.

Divine Creator, help me to find the small joys in my daily activities. Help me to realize the sum of these moments are the true meaning of happiness!

Matt Wolbert

Friday, December 8, 2017

Mark 13: 24-27

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

I've just got to say it -- the best thing about signing up to do these is that it forces me to stop and really *read* a section (albeit a small one) of the bible and reflect on what it means to me. I really need more reflection time in my life....

When I read all of Mark 13 (not just 24-27) it tells me that 'Dang, things get really bad before they get better.' And then you get to verse 24, when things just can't get any worse -- and we're told things will turn around. For those that persevere, it will get better -- a whole LOT better, and it will all be worth it. Just don't give up hope. Don't be fooled by those who would tell you they have a better way (or a "Really awesome, so much better, really" way). We all know what is actually right, and good, and true. Don't fall for the smoke and mirrors.

As I write this, it is the day after the elections. The number of stories I hear about people voting *against* all the hate and rhetoric this time is giving me hope. A year ago I was completely desolate - but now I realize that there has been a true silver lining. Because of how things turned out last year, I got involved in several organizations where I have had the opportunity to meet and become friends with an amazing and diverse group of people who are standing up to fight for what is right, good, and true. We are all stepping out of our comfort zones to do things we never would have considered before, I have hope. And for this, I am deeply and profoundly grateful. Amen.

Sue Maier

Saturday, December 9, 2017

Mark 13:35-37

'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.'

This passage is so relevant to our busy lives and so many of us feel like we are always awake, and never get enough sleep. I know that it is true for me, especially when I work the night shift at the hospital. Staying awake all night and then trying to stay awake the next day because there are so many things to get done !

However, I do not think that Jesus is asking us to stay awake and never get ANY sleep as that would certainly make us quite drowsy and even non-functioning. To be alert and awake to his message is what Jesus is telling us. I think his words are to alert us to focus on what is important. And certainly "the master of the house" is important. But what is the master of the house, who is the master? Think of the many times we miss or even "ignore" the things that should be important and relevant to us.

In this very busy time of the year, the chance to be awake and focus on what really matters and what should really matter to us and especially to Jesus is that we love one another and value all God's people. The Christmas season often brings that into focus and keeps us alert and awake. We just need to do that year round, every day.

Dear Heavenly Parent, May we always be alert and awake to your word and your people.

Diane Gressley

Sunday, December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40:1-2

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.

Comfort has many definitions, according to any dictionary, and I would like to share with you a few instances of comforting and being comforted in my life.

Going back a number of years, I was in an automobile accident while in college and had to drop out of school that year. During my stay in a hospital miles away from my home, several student friends came to visit with me and continued to send cards and letters of encouragement when I went home. The comfort I received from this contact with friends was immeasurable. A blanket of comfort also filled my home and continued to help me along the road to recovery. Thank you, God.

The following year my father died suddenly and we were comforted with the calls, visits and caring our friends and neighbors shared with us. Thank you, God, for filling our hearts with your love.

I have had a good life filled with the ups and downs of having a family and doing all the things we did together. I was diagnosed with cancer when I retired in 1998. I listened to the doctor, did some research and made a decision. My positive manner helped me deal with it, and I found myself comforting others in my family. Thank you again, God.

In 2001 I found that I wanted to give back and/or pay it forward. I began volunteering with a hospice, one of the most satisfying things I have ever done. Volunteers are not allowed to pass meds, feed, or lift the patients, but we can provide comfort. Comfort, a small word with big results. ►

It is one of the things that hospice wants for its patients, whether it be adjusting a pillow, getting a glass of water, putting on hand lotion, pushing a wheelchair, listening to them and/or praying with them. Thank you, God, for giving me this opportunity to comfort others.

Hello God, It's me again. Help me to continue caring and comforting others in the years ahead. May we all be "comforters". Amen

Jan Renovetz

Monday, December 11, 2017

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."

This means that when God comes to the people, there are no things in his way. There are no obstacles to overcome like mountains, water, buildings or anything. Everyone will see him and hear his message at the same time and easily. We think of this as we wait for Christmas.

The Began Family

Tuesday, December 12, 2017

Isaiah 40:6-8

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

All people living are nothing more or less than *each-other*. People are like grasses, commonly found growing about, without special care. Some people may appear to be more special and outstanding like a flower. This happens when we over admire them to the point of idolizing them. But flowers themselves have a short blossom life. Only the word of God is everlasting.

Strive to know your place on Earth that Jesus is above and all around and we, I, merely move about the grasses.

Tia Began

Wednesday, December 13, 2017

Psalm 85:8-9

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.

There are 48 words in this small passage of Psalm 85: 8-9 but 1 word stands out for me

We so desperately need peace in the hearts of all of us who live on planet earth. Those of us who attend our churches, our synagogues and our mosques are being called upon right now to support each other in our common need for peace. In our hearts we must nurture this gift we have been given so everything we do speaks to that gift. In that way it will be easier to recognize the humanity of all and put aside perceived differences to work for the common good.

Lord, we need your help to find peace in our lives as we deal with the stress of challenging situations that make us feel angry and worried.

George Snider

Thursday, December 14, 2017

Mark 1:6-8

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John the Baptist was such a controversial figure, and that is not much of a surprise. He made some different decisions, living very simply in rough clothes and on a diet most would not choose unless starving. I mean, stealing honey from wild bees is no joke. I like to think John's message was heard for its raw truth and humility, rather than because of his eccentricity. That people listened to John's calls for repentance and preparation in spite of his rough exterior, not because of it. He brought an uncomfortable message, one that stirred repentance from some and incited violence from others. John's conviction was complete, unto his death. Our job is to point to God's goodness, to do the inner work to know loving others is more important than impressing them, and then to live that out. Beware spending too much time and effort on outer appearances or personal comforts.

Help me challenge myself. May I see others' inner goodness and respond to God's call to service with humility.

Jim Demko

Friday, December 15, 2017

Isaiah 61:1-2

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 brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...

In this scripture, the writer is telling how God's anointing is enabling him to speak the words that suffering people need to hear. He's able to say just the right things at the right time, and to bring comfort, reassurance and joy where it's needed most. I am so blessed to have people in my life who have been anointed in this way for me. At one time or another, we have all been poor, brokenhearted and held captive by our damaged souls. And although these experiences are painful, they are also invaluable in the way that they connect us all to each other. Regardless of the myriad ways in which we differ, our "human condition" pulls us all to an even ground. We are in this together, so we may as well lean on each other in love!

My prayer on this day in Advent is that we all will be open to God's anointing in our lives. I pray that our eyes are opened to the poor, the brokenhearted and the prisoners in our midst. And I pray that we let go of our pride and our intellect, and allow God's message of encouragement to be spoken to those who need to hear it. Amen.

Anne Melfo

Saturday, December 16, 2017

Isaiah 61:2-3

... To comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

These words from the prophet, Isaiah, were spoken thousands of years ago and they are still very relevant today. Today our world is in terrible turmoil. Many people are in mourning for so many reasons. Nations are at war, neighbors are attacking each other, and clashing ideologies are creating hatred and distrust. People who are mentally unstable are lashing out and killing senselessly. Perhaps worst of all people are being tortured and slaughtered in the name of religion! I cannot see that it will ever end....As a grandparent I shudder to think of what my grandchildren are witnessing in their short lifetimes.

I think Isaiah's words are meant to comfort and give hope. Much of the Bible is full of timeless wisdom. There it is waiting patiently for us to "access" it.

I find great comfort in my faith. I feel saddened when people do not have a faith or belief system that they can turn to for comfort in times of mourning. I feel blessed that I was raised at BUCC, surrounded by caring adults who helped to teach me how to navigate this life. Although we are living in a tumultuous time we can receive strength and comfort in this church and with this church community. Thanks be to God!

Loving and caring God, Comfort those who mourn. Cradle those who are hopeless. Strengthen those who are weak and depressed. Bless all of your children with your enduring love. Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Jill Zedan

Sunday, December 17, 2017

Isaiah 61:10-11

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... 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.

We all face difficult times in our lives, but perhaps they can be rendered less difficult and not nearly as threatening when we simply remember to rejoice in our Lord. With God in our corner, we can do anything, and we will overcome.

Dear Lord, I rejoice in you as I contemplate difficult decisions to be made and health issues that I am facing with trepidation. I pray that you will be with me, and with all of us, as we live our daily lives and as we contend with our personal challenges. Help us to remember that you are with us, and when you are with us, victory is certain. In Jesus name, I pray, amen.

Jon Thompson

Monday, December 18, 2017

1 Thessalonians 5:15-18

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

This early letter of Paul, perhaps written with the help of Silvanus and Timothy, to the church at Thessalonika, mainly gentile converts from paganism, is one of encouragement. Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving are pointed out as being elements of Christian life. This message holds true in the present day. As we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus the Savior, we can experience joy that he was born, think about the prayer that He taught us, and give thanks for His teaching and His examples for daily living.

Dear Lord, as we look forward to the coming of your son, help us to find the joy in His coming. Help us to take time to pray that we can be more like Him. Let us remember to give thanks that He did come. There are times, like the church at Thessalonika, that we all can use some encouragement. Amen

Bob Chandler

Tuesday, December 19, 2017

John 1:6-9

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

John came "only as a witness to the light."

How are we witnessing to the light?

Do we make reasonably consistent efforts to be kind, compassionate, generous people? Do we speak up against injustice? Do we try to remember that *Jesus* is the light -- not our own egos, not our bank accounts, not fame or romantic adventures, not superiority or control over anyone or anything in this world?

I read this passage as a call to humbleness, to action, to positive engagement with everyone and everything we encounter in life. At the same time, John the Baptist told it like it was, and he was eventually imprisoned and beheaded.

What sacrifice(s) are we willing to make to testify to the light?

God of All That Is, bless us during this holy season of Advent. Fill us with humility, courage, joy, peace, faith, compassion, strength, hope, and deep love as we seek to accomplish Your will. Amen.

Dave Debick

Wednesday, December 20, 2017

Luke 1: 46-49

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."

This passage has been subtitled "the Magnificat". David Haas one of my favorite Christian composers wrote a song called "Magnificat". It expands on the joy and fullness must have been in Mary's heart.

All that I am sings of the God who brings new life to birth in me
my spirit soars on the wings of my Lord

1. My soul gives glory to the Lord, rejoicing in my saving God
who looks upon me in my state, and all the world will call me blessed
For God works marvels in my sight, and holy, holy is God's name

2. God's mercy is from age to age, on those who follow in fear
Whose arm is power and strength, and scatters all the proud of heart
Who casts the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly ones

3. God fills the starving with good things, the rich are left with empty hands
Protecting all the faithful ones, remembering Israel with mercy
the promise known to those before and to their children for ever

Heavenly Parent, we thank you for giving Mary the opportunity to bring your Son into this world to show us the way. May we, like her, be filled with the joy of your presence in our lives.

Jim Duffy

Thursday, December 21, 2017

Luke 1:26-29

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

So I've read this one five times now and I just can't get this picture out of my mind: Modern times. A teenage girl, extremely innocent for the times but trying hard to act all cool, hanging out in her bedroom focused on her phone, madly texting. Suddenly some floating guy with giant fluffy wings and pure white robes appears before her and says 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.'

She immediately snaps a picture and posts it to Instagram. Caption "Joey just sent me the most amazing prom-posal!! Should I say 'Yes?'"

I have this image in my head because I've seen way too many plays/movies where Gabriel shows up in the middle of the night - sometimes in full 'angel regalia', sometimes more modestly in robes or even modern dress, but always glowing. I've been *taught* to think like this. But what *really* happened? Did an angel even really appear, or is this how Luke decided to make the whole thing more acceptable to the reader? When I consider this, I come to believe that, if there really was a 'message', it more than likely came from within Mary as a strong, core belief, that started small, but grew to compel her. Something she knew with every fiber of her being to be true.

We all have this feeling from time to time. A feeling that compels us to do what is right, because we *know* it is right. But as humans, we can still chose to ignore this, even when that choice causes us great internal conflict. I pray that each of us learns to trust and act according to that inner voice, and to do what is right, even if it's scary. Amen.

Sue Maier

Friday, December 22, 2017

Luke 1:30-33

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."

To me, this particular passage is reassuring. Mary has just been given exciting, horrifying, and humongous news. She will give birth to Jesus. Even so, the angel tells her not to be afraid. In our lives, we will all go through large changes. They may be joyful or horrible, but we can take comfort in remembering that through it all, God and Jesus are with us. We don't need to be afraid. In the New Year that comes, I pray that everyone remembers that they are loved, cherished, and even in the scariest times, know that they are never alone.

Lyndsey Maier

Saturday, December 23, 2017

Luke 1:34-35

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. "

Miracles....How many times in your life have you heard, Yes, miracles do happen, It's a miracle!!?? What is considered a miracle? I grew up with a sandwich spread called Miracle Whip!! Go figure.

Every day we hear...It's a miracle that he/she survived. It's a miracle we met. What a miracle we got there in time. And so on.

Miracles of life can be many things indeed. We all probably have felt we have experienced one or more in our existence on Earth.

Angels....How many times in your life have you heard, I know I have a guardian Angel, He/she is such an angel. Have we ever really been touched by an angel?

Miracles and Angels....two of the many components of Faith. Believing that GOD has a plan. A plan for us all. In that plan was the birth of his Son. A true miracle, compete with Angels and a Virgin Mother. Yes, this is proof that Angels and miracles do exist in our world. We must continue to praise the Lord and count our blessings, while helping others.

We all have the power to be someone's Angel while embracing the miracle of GOD'S gifts to us all. Amen

Lynne Struck

Sunday, December 24, 2017

Luke 2:4-7

Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the Inn.

Even before his birth, our itinerant messiah was on the move. That in-utero trip alone from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 100 miles, and would have taken somewhere between eight to ten days on foot. For God's plan to be revealed, Jesus needed to travel, which he did obligingly. And no wall, city border or body of water would be able to bar his message of boundless love. It crossed ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries, as well as societal standings of wealth and education. Quite simply, the Good News would not be confined.

As a follower of Christ, you too have been chosen to transcend borders. Where will you take the message brought to us at such cost?

Lord, we thank you on this holiest of all nights for Joseph's diligence, Mary's obedience, and Jesus' selflessness. Because of this humble trinity, we have knowledge of your limitless love, and countless reasons to share it. Amen

Betsey Wilson

Monday, December 25, 2017

Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock 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 reading always makes me feel a little sentimental for the Christmases gone by. I have Charles Schultz and his creation, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," to thank for the memories. His show first aired on December 9th, 1965, when I was young and most impressionable. Charlie Brown laments to Linus, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Linus, in his simple way responds, "Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." He takes the stage in an empty auditorium, asks for the lights to be dimmed. The mood is set and he reads Luke's full passage about the Christ child's birth. The setting and message was, quiet, and thoughtful.

Linus and I were alike at that time. Besides our security blanket and thumb sucking, we searched for meaning. Our Christmas was traditional. Along with, the glow of "A Charlie Brown Christmas," playing on the television, the tree stood glittering in the front window. My parents were not wealthy but always made sure there were presents under the tree for me and my four brothers and sisters. Opening presents was always a surprise. A mixture of the practical, clothing, and the delightful, toys! One present, the best one, was always marked as being "From" Santa Claus. we didn't have a chimney but was assured he still visit, via the front door.

Besides the Christmas tree, the other prominent fixture in the living room was the manger. Setting up the manger was a time honored tradition. We carefully unraveled the figures from the worn and softened tissue paper. It was an honor for the person who found the baby Jesus figure. Jesus was set aside for Christmas Day, after all we could not have baby Jesus in the crib until he was born.►

The Three Kings were placed on the east of the living room, geographically correct for their embarkation point. They were not placed in the manger setting until the Feast of the Epiphany. Then and only then could the manger be taken down and stored away. The last symbol of Christmas for the year.

It was a balance of the meaning of Christmas. We had the gift giving. A firm belief in Santa Claus, and the manger. The manger, worn wood, with the blue light shining off the white cotton. The silent figures, shepherds, Wiseman, watching in adoration. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, being kept warm by the animals. Above them all the star, a symbol to the world a savior has come. Born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is he Messiah, the Lord. His reign needed now, more than ever. Although any generation could state that need and it be true. And that Charlie Brown is what Christmas is all about.

Ed Lusk

Tuesday, December 26, 2017

Luke 2:15-17

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child.

Merry Christmas to my church family at BUCC! All of the waiting is over. Christmas is here. Each year it seems that the preparations for Christmas begin earlier and earlier. I don't know about you, but this bugs me. Let's first celebrate Thanksgiving, and then we can break out the Christmas stuff! I guess what bothers me even more than the early start of the Christmas season is the early end of Christmas. I know people who take down their tree and forget about Christmas on December 26th. The birth of Christ should be the beginning of the celebration, not the end of it! Can we at least let it last until Epiphany before we pack up the tree and the nativity set? Let us bask in the joy of baby Jesus' arrival for a week or so, please. I think we should keep right on celebrating Jesus' birth and life right up through Mardi Gras. Lent is the time for us to take some time to get serious. So don't rush into packing up all the Christmas decorations or taking down the tree. Enjoy the fact that Jesus has arrived for just a bit longer.

**Generous and Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of your son, Jesus. May His light shine on us today and always.
Amen.**

Peace and Joy,

Bridget Sproul

Wednesday, December 27, 2017

Luke 2:18-20

And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Every time I hear Luke's account of the birth of Jesus I just think of how exciting and fascinating the whole experience was but yet in this particular passage Mary seems serenely calm...She treasured and pondered all these things in her heart. I know for me when I hear exciting and great things I want to tell everybody and call everyone. But Mary was very humble and probably also very tired from traveling and giving birth to baby Jesus. She was quite contemplative and serene despite all the chaotic blessings going on around her. Remember they are in a barn at a manger with noisy animals and then there are shepherds stopping in and trying to figure out what's going on. Moreover the shepherds were there because they had heard angels from the heavens singing glory to God in the highest. Yet Mary remained calm and probably among all the people and the animals there that night, was the most reflective.

Even today when the holidays bring a lot of excitement and gifts and messages of peace and love and joy, it can be overwhelming. But if we could all be like Mary and reflect on what was really happening that night the message of Christmas will be treasured in our hearts.

Dear Heavenly Parent, let us all treasure the gifts of Christmas and the message of Christmas forever in our hearts and be more like Mary each day. Amen.

Diane Gressley

Thursday, December 28, 2017

1 Corinthians 13:1-2

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

This verse is very appropriate in today's world, where so called Christians loudly proclaim their faith, but but do not show love for others. Intolerance , bigotry, and nationalism are on the rise under the guise of so called Christian fundamentalists values. Television evangelists living in million dollar mansions who turn away flood victims seeking refuge when they have nowhere else to go. A nation supposedly built on Christian values closing our doors to refugees fleeing for their lives from horrific situations. I was brought up believing the phrase " put up or shut up". It's time for Christians to start showing that we are practitioners of a religious faith that truly is based on love, and not hate and intolerance.

Chad Sproul

Friday, December 29, 2017

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In Understanding this scripture it is helpful to realize that Paul was working with the people of Corinth who were divided in their loyalties much like our world today. Some are loving, some are fractious and sometimes they don't get along with others.

I found that this scripture to be a challenge and a help to me in our present situation. We have moved recently and we're trying to get "organized". Getting mail to our new address is a nuisance. I'm having to remind myself that those who answer my phone calls may not speak English as their first language. They may be required to use a "script" in answering my queries, and they may not even be in the USA. Some have been very helpful and I do try to let them know that I appreciate their efforts. But at other times I have to remind myself that this person is probably in an entry position and needs me to speak clearly and to be thankful that they answered the phone.

Kindness costs no money, only effort is required – a friendly voice is easier to listen to than an uncivil voice

Lord help me to appreciate all that I have been given and to share love and kindness with others. Amen.

Caroline Chandler

Saturday, December 30, 2017

1 Corinthians 13:8-10

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

In this portion of his letter to the Christians in Corinth, St. Paul is dealing with a problem that still plagues many churches, and other communities, today: the problem of competitive *pride*. Rather than celebrating the wonderful diversity of spiritual gifts with which their church has been blessed, the Corinthians are focusing on whose gift is the “best” or “most important”. They’re kind of like a bunch of spoiled little kids at Christmas:

“I got the gift of speaking in tongues!”

“O yeah, well I got the gift of prophesy!”

“That’s nothing, I got the gift of knowledge! God must like me the best!”

So Paul, like a wise parent, reminds them [and us] what is truly important. “You know, kids, prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. But there is one great gift that *never* ends - the perfect gift of love. Now, which one of you is going to show me that you have the *most* love?”

Hopefully, our children recognize that long after the gifts we give them at Christmas have broken-down and faded-away, that the love which prompted our giving, still remains - stronger than ever. And they’ll also realize that sharing that love with one another doesn’t reduce it, but only makes it stronger!

Ever-giving Holy One, help us to see and give thanks for the beautiful and bountiful gift of your love. Inspire us this day, and every day, to find new ways to joyfully share that love with all our sisters and brothers. Amen.

Pastor Dave Shackle

Sunday, December 31, 2017

1st Corinthians: 13:11-13

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

I remember how everything was high drama when I was young. Things that happened to me NEVER happened to anyone else and I thought I would never recover from them! But my Mom, Shirley, was always there to comfort me and assure me that she was my safety net, my friend, and would love me even when it seemed no one else would. I guess in today's world this is called "unconditional love". There were conditions, as we all come to find out, but they usually made you a better person.

Perhaps that is how it is with God's love. God is Love and we are all God's children who cannot know Him fully until we meet Him. But He knows us well and is always there even when we don't think so. He accepts us, he has rules and guidelines, and as we mature with new perspective these guidelines make more and more sense. But everything is rooted in loving one another and treating others with care, concern and respect.

As I approach my 70th year I must say I was initially attracted to this Bible verse due to the phrase "for now we see in a mirror, dimly," as many things continue to get a little fuzzier! But maturity also allow us to "dim" our prejudices, our anger and our disappointments which are hallmarks of a younger time and move towards faith, hope and love --- with the greatest of these always being love.

Lord, in this noisy and disrupted world, lead us all to see more clearly the extent of your all-abiding love. Help us accept it with the grace and wisdom of an adult but enable us to share it with the enthusiasm and energy of a child. Amen.

Sherrill Witt

Monday, January 1, 2018

Galatians 4:4-7

But 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. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

In reading up on this passage, I learned that it's about either being a slave to the law or being free as a child is free. Hans Wiersma, in a commentary about preaching on this passage:

"There is no shortage of things we think we can do to make God accept us into the household of Christ: be good people, go to church, assent to the creeds, give our hearts to Jesus, and on and on and on. Here the task is anything but abstract. You expose all of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways your hearers attempt to gain the divine inheritance via obedience to the law. Then you tell them, "Good luck with that." Then you hit them with the sweet gospel: "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."

So we can drive ourselves crazy trying to adhere to every religious and scriptural law there is, or we can accept the freedom that exists because of Jesus Christ. We are under Christ, not the law.

Dear Lord, help us to simply know that we are under Christ, and while the law gives good direction and helps us to live worthy lives, it is faith that will bring us through. In Christ's name, amen.

Jon Thompson

Tuesday, January 2, 2018

Luke 2:27-32

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

This reading contains one of the first Bible passages that I [and maybe some of you] learned by heart. In Lutheran, Catholic, and other churches, the *Nunc Dimittis* is used at the conclusion of Holy Communion. In Latin, *Nunc Dimittis* means "Now you dismiss". In Luke chapter 2, old Simeon, who for years has been serving in the Jerusalem Temple, was promised that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah - God's Anointed One. So, when 8-day old Jesus is brought to the Temple for his naming and circumcision, Simeon takes the baby in his arms and says,

"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation...!"

Today, when people use the phrase, "Now I've seen it all!" they're often commenting on something weird or disturbing. In Simeon's case, however, he is expressing his profound satisfaction at seeing something wonderful and Divine. He is now content to move beyond this world, with a sense of peaceful fulfilment. In looking at and holding the baby Jesus, Simeon senses that he has finally "seen it all!"

In Holy Communion, you and I can also feel a Divine sense of fulfilment, peace and contentment. It's one of the beautiful ways in which we can take-hold of the Holy, and allow the Holy One to take hold of us.

Thank you God, for your loving Presence today, and every day! Amen.

Pastor Dave Shackle

January 3, 2018

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

The author of Ecclesiastes, Solomon, reminds us of the gift of time, whether it is in our control as human beings or not. There is a time for every event in God's plan for us. God also gave us free will for the controllable events in our lives. We have very little control, if any, in events like birth and death. Planting, sowing, killing, healing, breaking down, building up, weeping, laughing, mourning and dancing are all events that we can control and control the length of.

Killing however is a different thing entirely. In self-defense or in war, taking the life of another may be justified or even considered honorable, but at what cost? Unfortunately every day on the news we hear of violence, wars or the threat of war. Mass shootings in this country are becoming commonplace. Where does man's inhumanity to man end?

A good start is in the hymn Let There Be Peace On Earth. "Let it begin with me."

O Heavenly Father, help us to become peacemakers, globally, nationally and locally. Comfort those who are affected by violence and war. Bring us together as a human family to find common ground for peace and love for one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

David Pastor

Thursday, January 4, 2018

Ecclesiastes 3:5-8

A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

There is some thought that Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon. Whether that is true or not, the author is giving us the benefit of his wisdom. He expresses his thoughts on the rhythm of life – that life is an eternal cyclical round of events. He also mentions his ideas regarding life and what may be gained from life – that is, life's lessons. He points out that there is a time to do things, and a time to refrain from doing things. As we celebrate the birth of the Messiah, we can recognize that there are things we must do, and if we don't get everything done, that is just the way life goes. We can focus on the really important things, and not get into a frenzy about the less important things.

Dear Lord, help us to recognize that there is a time and a place for us to do the important things to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and that there just may not be enough time to do all the things we might wish to do. Amen.

Bob Chandler

Friday, January 5, 2018

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

“According to rabbinic tradition, Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age.” It is considered “wisdom literature”, giving advice on life, its problems, and meaning.

Although verse 9 questions what workers gain from their toil, verse 12 states there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. Verse 13 states that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil.

The word “toil” can have negative connotations. Drudgery, labor(ious), 9 to 5 boredom. No matter how menial work seems, to do the best a person can do results in personal satisfaction. It is a blessing to be happy and fulfilled by work.

There is power in positive thinking. To find the good in a bad situation a person may have to dig deeply, but there may be a glimmer, a kernel of hope. It is not easy when there is a conflict with a boss or co-worker. Just as in Ecclesiastes, there are times for everything.

Father, Mother God: Help us to be happy and fulfilled in our daily lives. Keep us aware of our many blessings – our health, comfort, family – in this New Year. Amen

Joy Garapic

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This image shows a full page of blank white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for writing or drawing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

*Graciously Proof Read by Pastor Dave, and Marge
Culver. Thank You!*