

November 27

Read: Genesis 1:1-3

Good Advice: Start at the Beginning

I remember once driving down Virginia Beach Boulevard on my way back to the store after an outcall. I was doing in-home consultation for an internationally recognized retailer and had completed one such consultation and was returning from Virginia Beach to Norfolk just a few minutes before rush hour turned the road into a slow moving automotive glacier.

Traffic was already picking up, and as I glanced at the side mirror I saw a small, brightly colored Ford Escort Wagon change lanes from behind me to the lane to my left, the fast lane. Just as I looked forward from the mirror I heard an awful crunch. It turns out the Ford Escort and another vehicle attempted to occupy the same space at the same time at high speed. The results were devastating.

The driver of the Escort was a woman. Her passenger, nestled in his car seat in the back was her three month old child. She survived. The baby did not.

I called a local television station shortly after the accident to find out if they had news of the accident and outcome. They had not heard about the accident yet and began asking me for details. I jumped in the middle of the accounting and the person on the phone repeatedly said, "Please, start at the beginning." They wanted to get the whole story, the big picture so they could adequately account for the details.

If you want to understand Advent, Christmas, Jesus Himself, then listen to this advice: "Please, start at the beginning." Everything we know about faith starts and ends where the Bible does, with the will and work, and wonder of God. "In the beginning, God." And ever since, God. And forever after, God. All life hinges on God's will to fill creation with the experiential knowledge of His glory. This season, and every season, start with God and go on from there.

Pastor Dale McIntire

November 28

Read: Genesis 1:26-28

Alert: Top Level Conversation

We are here allowed to be privy to an exchange by the triune God concerning "the earth project" that is to be all-important to us.

We hang on each word as the Lord says "Let us make man in our own image, according to our likeness and let them have dominion over (all living creatures)." He then did as He proposed.

He went on to give mankind instructions to be fruitful and take charge of His creation in specific ways. Soon Satan, through a serpent, caused our foreparents to believe they could question the Lord's instructions and do as they chose in spite of the fact that they were thus rebelling against the Lord.

Would the Lord simply eliminate the "man project" from His sight as a failure? Our wonderful Lord had plans that would go beyond our human ideas.

He would keep His word and punish our sins but His love was so great that His only begotten Son would be born into our race, live a holy life, then take all our sins on Himself and be punished on our behalf.

What a Lord! What a price! What a sacrifice! What a gift!

Christmas is the day we celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world. Let's welcome Him, the very Son of God, Who was willing to accept our sin burden, pay the price, and save our eternal souls if we allow Him to. Have you done it yet? If not, open yourself to the Lord now. Mean business with Him. Let Him flood your soul with peace and joy. An eternal heavenly home as well as a life of union with the Lord will be yours.

Bob Haring

Father, I am a guilty sinner. Lord Jesus, please take all my sins away, cleanse me and give me the assurance of an eternal heavenly home with You. I am here willing for You to be Lord of my life. Thank You, Lord!

November 29

Read: Genesis 2:16-17

Forgiveness

My first thought after reading this verse was that, as we read on, we know that Adam and Eve didn't listen to God and didn't obey. This was the beginning of our sinful nature. Each and every one of us is susceptible to sinning. Most of the time we don't want to sin, but because we are human, it happens. The good news is that God didn't give up on us and that's a wonderful thing! He loves us so much and wants us to be with Him for eternity, so He sent His only Son, Jesus, into the world to die on a cross and take the punishment for our sins.

As I think back over early years, a few major things (and I'm talking MAJOR) that I did (when I was a Christian in name only) must have hurt God very badly. But because of His grace, I was born again in 2005 when I was baptized and committed my life to striving for a more personal relationship with Jesus. I have since asked for forgiveness for those MAJOR things and know that he has forgiven me and doesn't even remember them! Now in my daily prayer, I always try to include a time to examine my conscience and ask God to forgive my sins and help me do better.

As we look forward to celebrating the birthday of Jesus, we should keep in mind that if He hadn't been born, we would never have our sins forgiven and would never see heaven. If you haven't committed your heart to Jesus, I hope you will think about doing that so you can be assured you will have forgiveness for your sins and eternal life with Him.

Maxine Chupurdia

Heavenly Father, I am so grateful that You sent Jesus to die for our sins so that we can enjoy eternity with You.

November 30

Read: Genesis 3:1-6

The Temptation

The serpent was cunning, sly, skilled and charming: a creation of "material", a tool of a higher agent: also known as Satan, the devil, a dragon. (Revelation 12:9)

Matthew 10:16 says he is subtle and wise. As yet, there was no principle of evil in the pure bosom of the first human pair. With only two people in the perfect world, Satan had to use an inferior creature.

In this perfect, beautiful world came the serpent, perhaps also beautiful, though in deception. Why wouldn't Eve believe his articulate sounds (permitted by God)? Eve could have thought this a heavenly messenger. Eve was new to the world, sinless and holy, with limited experience with animals, alone and a free agent, liable to temptation and seduction. She did not consider that the words of the serpent were contrary to the words of God.

God had given Adam the commandment concerning the tree of life and the tree of good and evil; she knew the prohibition and penalty. The serpent assured her exemption from punishment. She yielded to temptation and her eyes were opened. She had chosen to follow the tempter rather than the Creator.

Wow! Her desire for knowledge and the rising privilege of rank took her down. Don't we see the results of this today? People wanting to live under no one's authority...

In my own life journey there were cracks in the walls. Satan's description of "too narrow a way" and "self-determined": my way seemed harmless. Praise God - my eyes were opened to His truth when Christ came into my life.

Bernice Howard

Lord, I submit to Your will and Your Lordship.

December 1

Read: Romans 3:23

Bad News, Good News

The news starts badly with Adam and Eve making unfortunate choices in the Garden. Their attitudes and behavior were contrary to God's will, and sin entered the world and into humankind. Historically, I've regarded Genesis 3 as *bad news* even if it is part of God's Word.

Romans 3:23 followed and my discomfort continued. I disliked this scripture. I wanted to distance from it. Sought different verses. Don't mention it to me. Within earshot of this scripture, I've felt defective, dirty, ashamed, unlovable. Hopeless, even. Romans 3:23 attacked my pridefulness. Imagine that!

Eventually, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I discovered the *Good News* of Romans 3:23. I was finally able to grasp that I am the same as all other members of humanity. No more. No less. No better. No worse.

The only one not in the category of sinner in behavior or constitution is our Triune God, our Jesus, the Christ. None of us can measure up to His Glory. No, not one.

Yet because of His Glory - which comprises the sum total of all the awesome various aspects of Himself - He redeemed me/us from the pit of destruction. (Ps. 40:2) He brought me/us up out of the miry clay of my/our former life and perceptions. I am new, precious in Him, loveable. A new creation.

Amazingly, He has chosen me to be His own (John 15:17) and offered me His good plan for my eternal life. In His word, He provides me promises. He provides. He has become my all in all. As I make myself available, He leads me in *relationship* out of which everything else springs.

Jean Perkins

Precious Lord, I am grateful beyond measure that You have manifested Yourself so transformatively to this sinner.

December 2

Read: Genesis 3:15

The Remedy

A common interpretation is that this is the first reference in the Bible to Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of "He shall bruise you (Satan) on the head.". The sin of Adam and Eve set up eons of conflict and strife that we are still caught up in today. We can only be made right again with God through His Son Jesus after our original sin separated us from His presence.

A few years ago we had a major change in our congregation - our pastor of 26 years left. We had a big job ahead of us to determine who we were as a congregation and how to move forward. I was chosen as one of nine people on the search committee and we met every week for over a year.

This was an incredible experience. Every major decision that we made was unanimous. Of course we had disagreements, but every time we talked through them, listened with love to every position and opinion, prayed about it, and came to a unanimous consensus. The key was that we all knew that each and every one of us loves Jesus and had as our highest priority to be the church that He wants us to be. We trusted each other to be seeking God's will, not our own agendas. Working through differences within a shared love of Jesus and through a desire to follow God's will eliminated conflict between us.

Like the story of the Garden of Eden, I think this was a glimpse of how God's Kingdom will be when it fully arrives here on Earth.

David Laine

Lord, thank You for sending Your Son to show us the way and prevail against the Enemy where we cannot. Please guide us in showing others a glimpse of Your Kingdom here on earth through our actions and love of Jesus.

December 3

Read: Genesis 3:1-8

God's Promises

In this passage God establishes His covenant with Abram, promising to make him the father of a multitude of nations.

God's promise to Abram came with directions, a response, and concluded with a reward. Abram was directed to *"walk before Me, and be blameless."* His response was to *"fall on his face"* in worship. His reward was to *"be the father of a multitude of nations"*.

This pattern of direction, response, and reward is repeated throughout the Bible. One promise I claimed recently is Philippians 4:6-7. *"...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

In 2012 I was in Taiwan completing a 3 year project with an intense 3 week effort to bring the company up on new software. After working 20 hours a day for several days we were successful, elated, and exhausted. A few days later we were told our next project was Canada but with half the resources and time. I was devastated: huge personal sacrifices were made to succeed in Taiwan, and to think of the effort required to complete Canada was unimaginable. I was so angry I could barely think or even speak. Then Paul's words came to me and I went to my hotel room, hit my knees, and poured out all my frustration to God. Immediately after praying all my angst was removed. The peace of God truly filled my being and protected me until the end of my career.

John Hill

Father God, I praise and thank You for the promises to us in Your Word. Help me to continue to claim and apply them for my joy and Your glory.

December 4

Read: Exodus 20:1-17

Ten Commandments

My first thought is "What has the Ten Commandments to do with Christmas?" Next thought: "If everybody in the world lived by them, we wouldn't need Christmas!" Can't or won't happen, so now what?

So, what do those verses mean to me? To remind me that no matter how hard I try, I fail to keep all of them all the time. I've found a reminder to at least remember them on contact with other people.

I wear a button that reads "How may I pray for you?" As a result I have prayed with people at different times and places, but this is not the main purpose. The purpose is to keep me aware of my need to keep my witness as close as I can to the commandments.

Am I a powerful, inspiring pray-er? No, I am not - I am just trusting God for the words for a short prayer request of something specific. I end with "but may Your will be done." You see, I have a fear that what I pray for might not be the best thing to happen.

Nelda Westerlind

Lord, I pray that this action of mine might bring comfort to someone and might once in my lifetime open the door for witness to a non-believer. Amen.

December 5

Read: Matthew 22:34-40

Love the Lord Your God...

Do you ever think of a song and then get it stuck in your brain? That's what the verses for today have done to me for about three weeks in a row, I kid you not! Here's The Song: "I just wanna be a sheep, bah...I pray the Lord my soul to keep, bah... I just wanna be a sheep, bah!"

Jesus said the #1 Commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind [and as Mark 12:30 includes] and with all your strength." At the beginning of these verses it mentions the Pharisees. Another verse to The Song is "I don't wanna be a Phar-i-see...cause they're not fair, you see! I don't wanna be a Phar-i-see." That's why The Song is stuck in my brain.

My husband and I were involved with prison ministry a few years ago. The men who came to the worship services taught me what it should be like to worship the Lord as someone who truly knows what it means to be forgiven. Jesus didn't die MORE for them and LESS for me. I began to see the ground as level at the foot of the Cross.

I'm so thankful God loves me, even though He sent His Son Jesus to die for me when I and everyone else was the worst of unlovable. I don't wanna be a Pharisee, thinking my own righteousness is good enough, when I'm really just a sinner saved by grace. I just wanna be a sheep, bah... one who wants to follow the Shepherd!

Mary Freeman

Father, thank You for sending Jesus to die for me, for sending Your Spirit to dwell in me, and for Your word that teaches me to love You. Amen

December 6

Read: Isaiah 7:10-14

Hidden

Christmas is one of my favorite times of year! I love the joy, the snow, the promises, and, let's face it, the presents too.

One of my favorite things about getting a present is trying to figure out what it is before opening it. When I was young I got so good at figuring out my presents that my parents made a rule that we couldn't even touch the presents until it was time to open them.

One year my big brother decided that he was going to make his present for me unrecognizable! When it came time to open the present, I first tried to figure out what it was. It was shaped like a game or shoe box, but it didn't rattle or shake. There weren't any defining textures to the box. I could not figure out what it was! When I opened the present I found a shoe box for a pair of shoes I already owned. When I opened the box, it appeared to be empty. Then I saw it: the CD that I REALLY WANTED taped to the lid of the box!

My brother had successfully hidden what my present would be, but the Lord does not hide our present: Who the Savior is/was/will be! Isaiah 7:14 clearly points us to Jesus! Immanuel! Born of a virgin. And what's more, the Lord wants us to know of Him and to know Him personally! Praise God!

April Gustafson

Dear God, thank You for giving us a sign so that we could know the true King. Thank You for showing us Your love with the gift of Your Son! Help us to keep Him in our hearts during this beautiful season and always!

December 7

Read: Isaiah 9:1-3

His Message

Isaiah: the prince among the prophets, the prophet who sat with kings, the prophet who was preaching in a time of peace and prosperity - but all was not well.

I can't help but think of what the people of Isaiah's day were saying to Isaiah's message. Were they saying statements such as "OK, whatever, Isaiah", or "Everything is good here", or "Get off your high horse, who do you think you are, Isaiah?" Were they asking questions?

Speaking of questions: It's interesting to see how my children's questions have changed with age. Why? What if? How can we know? What would you do? Sometimes I have been able to use those questions as teaching moments. Sometimes I can remind them that the God Who created the world, The God Who knows each time a sparrow falls and the God Who knows how many hairs are on our heads knows the end from the beginning.

It would be over 100 years before the destruction of Jerusalem. It would be over 700 years before Isaiah's prophesy would be fulfilled: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined (Jesus). It has been over 2000 years since Jesus died and rose from the dead. He paid the penalty that I deserve, He made the sacrifice I can't make myself. He has promised to come back. He can handle any question that you have of Him. Remember: He knows the end from the beginning. His word confirms it.

Vance Benedix

Father, thank You for being so faithful, true and just. Thank You for being the God we can trust.

December 8

Read: Isaiah 9:1-3

...For unto us a child is born...Unto us a child is given...

As children we each knew that God wanted us to have a family of four children. We met and discovered all this, and many more of the things God had placed in our hearts which we shared in common. A year after we were married our son was born to us, and 18 months later a daughter joined our family. And we said to ourselves "We are right on schedule with God's plan for our family." We were very young.

Time passed, then doctors told us there would be no more children. After 3 months of prayer, we agreed that God's plan was adoption. Our hearts were again filled with joy for we expected the child by Christmas. Christmas passed and we were consoled that the mother had kept her baby. But nothing is impossible with God, and we were pregnant again. Rejoice! Don't stop the adoption - we will have two children this year!

Then the miscarriage, and sadness, but again consolation: a child was born on this same date, and although we were not of the same faith as the mother of the child, the Mother Superior said that God had told her the child should be our daughter. We reached down to touch her in the crib, she grabbed our fingers, and her eyes said to us "You are mine!"

She was a sickly child and none of the specialists knew what to do. God moved our family to Santa Barbara where a doctor knew the disease, and she was cured! God's miracles are often hidden in a sequence of events.

And 8 years later, another miracle: we were pregnant again. A daughter, then again a son, and our family is now six. Sons and daughters are given, all by God's plan!

Chuck Flickinger

Praise be to our heavenly Father!

December 9

Read: Isaiah 11:1-10

True Peace

In this passage Isaiah gives prophesy about Jesus. It is a rich picture of who Jesus is, what He does, and what He brings. Jesus is a Savior with such incredible attributes that He is able to judge perfectly, with righteousness and equity. Through His perfect rule He brings absolute peace.

“It’s not Christmas till somebody cries.” I have muttered these words under my breath and proclaimed them out loud many times over the years. With three daughters, tears are not uncommon in our house, but for some reason Christmas brings on the waterworks. At some point between December 20th and January 1st, it is almost guaranteed that somebody in my family is going to cry (maybe even me). The tears come from frustration, disappointment, pressure, fatigue, stress, etc. The tears come because peace is missing.

Sometimes I get frustrated with the lack of peace and would settle simply for quiet. Kind of an “I don’t care if you’re upset, just don’t bother me with it” attitude. How often do we long for quiet when we should long for peace? There is war all around the world, and I am content with a quiet news cycle for a couple of days.

Jesus does not simply bring quiet. Jesus brings peace. It is not a peace only brought about by the separation of enemies and the cessation of hostilities. It is not a truce or a cease-fire. It is a peace where through Jesus’ sovereign rule there are no more enemies for anyone! There is no one to contend with, no one to argue with, no one to suspect, no one to be on guard against, no one to attack us, and no one for us to attack. Jesus brings His perfect peace.

For me this season, “It’s Christmas and Jesus brings peace.”

John Hay

Father, Please keep my eyes on Jesus: Who He is and what He brings. Please let me know the peace that only Jesus brings.

December 10

Read: Isaiah 12:1-6

Among Us

Isaiah is entreating the Israelites to give thanks and praise to God. In verse 7 he says “Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel *among you.*”

I remember as a young child experiencing occasional bad dreams at night. I would awake from a nightmare afraid and alone. The remedy for those frightening moments was the comforting presence of my dad. He would take me in his arms and I would find comfort and the assurance that everything was going to be all right.

In Deuteronomy 31:5 God says “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” This same verse is quoted again in Hebrews 13:5. As believers we are not left alone to navigate through our struggles and challenges on our own. God, our heavenly Father, is “among us”. He is present with us to comfort and assure us that He will work everything out for our good and His glory.

No matter what you are walking through today, remember that God is among His people. He is providing strength and comfort to those who seek Him. Run to Him and rest in His arms, where you will find peace and rest.

Leanne Avery

Heavenly Father, how grateful we are that You are among us. Thank You that we can draw on the strength of Your presence in our times of need. Amen.

December 11

Read: Isaiah 40:9-11

Shout for Joy!

Tailgating and football games are great fun. Your team wins and you are in your glory. You shout it out to all who will listen because you are so proud! Then - they go on a losing streak. After a few losses you still attend the games, but no good shouts after those games. Season ends and we all move on.

That is all right. I am guilty of that one too. BUT, I have something to shout about all year long and all the time. When sad, happy, mad, or just plain confused. Surprise! You have Him too, but sometimes you just don't know it yet. Yep - His name is God and He is always there, no matter what.

We were all created different so it takes longer for some to realize He is there. I was retired (but not old!) when I realized that. Never have I been so content, trying to get to know God on a personal basis. Reading His word and asking lots of questions.

It is never too late to give it a try. Might be in for a surprise in the changes in your life. Besides - you have nothing to lose and everything to gain!

Norma Prosser

Heavenly Father, hear my prayer. I pray that all the readers of our Advent Devotional will invite You to come into their lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

December 12

Read: Isaiah 61:1

My Darkest Hour

Praying about the words of Isaiah 61:1 brought light into me, facing my darkest hour, watching my wife, Maribeth, die.

Early in August 2005, Maribeth's oncologist called me saying, "We need to see Maribeth first thing tomorrow morning.

I asked, "Why? What's happening?" The doctor told me Maribeth has brain cancer, that she had received a call from Cook County Hospital. I found Maribeth at home, in bed, crying. We both cried for some time.

Next morning an MRI showed not only brain cancer, but cancer of liver and lungs. Prior, Maribeth had breast cancer entwined in the lymph system and now spreading throughout her body. Very calmly she asked, "How long do I have?" With no treatment, 3 months; with treatment, 6 months to a year, maybe longer.

We opted for treatment. Immediately after treatment we left for Colorado to see her son and family and spend some time in the Rockies. Throughout our travels we never stopped thanking God, Who had blessed us as we had such intimate, meaningful discussions. We were never so close.

On the night before Maribeth's passing, her breathing was slow and strenuous. This was emotionally hard for me: I felt helpless. I prayed, played the piano, and cried. Finally I lay down next to Maribeth - 5:30 AM - and fell asleep. I suddenly woke at 7:30 AM; Maribeth was barely breathing. She asked me to read to her.

Reading James Dobson, God is Always Near, the last line of the first paragraph: "His presence is very near." The room lit up, Maribeth squeezed my finger, and passed on! 7:45 AM, November 14, 2005.

The Spirit of the Lord God was upon me, and though I was saddened, He showed me the Light, mended a broken heart, that I would have peace and comfort, knowing I would see Maribeth in Heaven.

Bill Doucette

December 13

Read: Zechariah 9:9-11

Hope!

As the prophet Zechariah allows God to speak through him, he gives hope on several different levels for several different time periods. Historically there was the promise of release from physical captivity (by Egypt or Babylon) which had already come to pass. There also was the foretelling of future events, when God would come as “flesh” (Jesus) and save us from eternal captivity because of our sin. This is the part where Zechariah talks about our king coming into Jerusalem on a donkey and the “covenant of blood” which was His dying on the cross for our sins. This wonderful prophecy has also come to pass. There is a reference to another type of “release from captivity” which is the future kingdom of peace, where Jesus rules. There will be no more wars and no more “prisoners of war!” This promise will happen sometime in the future.

This release from the “dungeon where there is no water” can describe a change in my life after I accepted God’s plan for me. God helped me to see that only Jesus could rescue me from the prison of sin and eternal guilt. There is no “water” (true sustaining comfort) without my “forever father”, my “forever friend”, my “perfect teacher”, and “comforting counselor”. Yes, I still have my battles, but He is there to help me. There is hope of living in eternal peace someday, in my heart. Right now I have a “place with Him” where I go, instead of going to endless substitutes or trying to escape through endless distractions, which was a prison without true hope. If I forget this, He reminds me!

Mary Boyd

Thank You, Lord, for saving me from the bondage of sin and releasing me from the captivity that comes from being separated from You. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

December 14

Read: Micah 5:2-5a

Savior, Come!

Micah is prophesying about the coming of the Lord and Savior. The 1st coming has been fulfilled; now we wait in joyful hope for His second coming.

God is awesome! His ways never change. We tend to think because life in the U.S.A. is so full of abundance that this is a rich blessing from the Lord and we should always live like this as a nation. We forget the humble beginnings; we grow away from Him in times of abundance because we do not see a need for Him. We tend to think that what is going on in the world now is a disaster, but He knew from before time that there would be a time of travail.

I often forget that I did not come to the Lord as my Savior in a time of abundance in my life. I was in a tumultuous time in my life. I was so lost, lonely, scared; I felt unlovable. There were people around me all the time but there was still a hole in my life. I was searching. Praise God that He keeps His promises, because He said that if you search for Me, you will find Me.

He is also the provider of great peace: a peace that passes all understanding. Sometimes I still question whether or not He is in control. I ask for reassurance from Him, just like a child who asks, “Mom or Dad, do you still love me?” He proves it over and over. Last summer my mom, my son and I were in an accident. I could have killed my family with a stupid decision, but God showed me that He is in charge, as my son and mom walked away with minor injuries, praise God for that!

It is easy to allow ourselves to be caught up in the world, to get discouraged, to think that He is not in control. I used to fear what was happening in the world before I was saved, but we serve a God Who knows the end from the beginning, a God of truth, Who does not change.

Jennifer Barrett

My Lord and Savior, You are awesome and worthy of praise. Lord, help us rest in the knowledge that You are the same yesterday, today and forever; You will keep all Your promises.

December 15

Read: Psalm 100

God's Faithfulness

God's faithfulness has proven throughout the years that He is Divine Providence. On the trip from Grand Marais to Calgary we've seen God's faithfulness provide all that we need, at the exact moment we need it. God has provided for us places to rest along the way and a place to stay while we search for a house. When our suburban was stolen, it was by God's grace that no personal information was taken. His grace furthermore granted the recovery of the suburban, saving us thousands of dollars.

The chaos of our own personal lives, or what goes on in the world, whether it be the natural disasters that plague the world or the political powers that ever conflict, God has shown that He is in control and gives us what we need to make it through everything.

God has been very good to us on this journey. He has blessed us mightily by giving us a wonderful church we may go to every Sunday. Even in the tiny details, God has taken care of all that we might need, whether it be the bills we must pay, the traveling expenses, or even time to simply work on school.

As we see in Psalm 100, circumstances do not determine our happiness. All that we have is a gift from God, even the ability to be happy and thankful for what He has done. Wherever we are or whatever it is that we are doing, God gives us precisely what we need. He opens our hearts to receive Him and grants us the ability to see what all He has done for us, to recognize through thankfulness His goodness, and to be joyful regardless of what may go on around us.

Jason Fincel

Heavenly Father, we thank You for making us the sheep of Your pasture. We are in awe of Your enduring love and faithfulness.

December 16

Read: Matthew 6:7-15

Thy Will Be Done...

*Our Father Who art in Heaven hallowed be Thy name,
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
On earth as it is in Heaven. (KJV)*

I recently lost a dear friend. She had a smile, a hug, and a testimony of God's love for everyone she met. All during her illness, her love for God, her family and people was foremost in her life. One thing that troubled her about dying was, in her words, "Who will tell them of God's love if I don't?"

I prayed for a miracle for her to be healed, to be an example of God's love and power. Even as she grew weaker and was losing the battle, I knew God was capable of healing her, if only He would answer my prayers and the prayers of so many others. Sadly, she lost her battle with cancer, leaving behind her family and friends.

I still have trouble reconciling God's will and her death. How could it possibly be God's will for a vibrant young mother, a beautiful Christian role model, to leave her children motherless? I didn't and still don't understand.

But the wonderful thing about my relationship with God – I don't have to understand. I can be angry and questioning. I can argue, yell, shed tears of frustration. But He is patient with me and when I am finished ranting, He reminds me to trust Him. He is in control and His will is perfect "on earth as it is in Heaven." It isn't always easy to pray – "Your will be done" – but it is a sincere form of worship, trusting God and His perfect will.

Judi Twiest

*Our Father in Heaven hallowed be Your name
Your kingdom come, Your will be done
On earth as it is in Heaven... Amen*

December 17

Read: John 1:1-5

... and the Word was God

Christ (The Word) is and has been God from the beginning. Christ was active in the work of creating all things. In Christ was life, and the life was the light of men. The light of Christ shines over the darkness but the darkness cannot extinguish the light or overcome it. Mankind can have true life as children of God.

I use and enjoy a genealogy program found on the internet. Through the program I list my ancestors as far back as I can go. I've uploaded pictures and information on my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. My wife has information about her relatives going back to the 1600's. I enjoy my connection to my ancestors and my past; together we attend family reunions.

After having accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, I became part of the family of God, which gives me the greatest joy. Whatever happens here on earth is not as important as the hope I have for a future with Christ. I have accepted the light of Christ over darkness, which brings me great contentment and peace and a desire to share the good news of Christ with others.

When one loses his earthly family, we can rely on and take comfort in our heavenly family. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to physically talk and walk with Christ. Would He still be wearing old sandals or does He now wear the latest Vibram soled hiking boots? Who else might I find in Heaven? I do expect to see an uncle who I was able to witness to. Just hours before his death, he called me and in a rough voice stated, "Randy, I got it, I've accepted the Lord." I could imagine the multitudes of angels rejoicing in Heaven as one more joined the family of God. Who else should we be inviting to join us in Heaven?

Randall Boyd

*Lord, please show us the ways we can make known to others the great light You have given in Your Son, Jesus Christ.
Amen*

December 18

Read: John 3:16-18

A God of Love

Part of my passage was John 3:16. This was a pleasant surprise. I love this verse: when I was a child, this verse was the first scripture that I memorized. These verses illustrated God's love for us by how God gave His Son to die for us, to cleanse us of our sins, and to give us eternal life.

I have many hobbies. In fact, my wife said my hobby is collecting hobbies! One of my hobbies is collecting agates. The Lake Superior agate is a semi-precious gem stone. You find them where the ground has been disturbed. Sand and gravel pits and new housing developments are good places to look.

A few years ago I was in a gravel pit. All of a sudden, a bird came flying out of nowhere and landed two feet from me! I could have reached down and touched him. The bird pretended that it had a broken wing. I'm sure you may have seen this kind of behavior before. The bird was trying to get my attention. I started to look around and sure enough, right between my feet was a young hatchling.

I gently moved back and went to a different part of the pit. I was thinking about how the parent was willing to sacrifice its life for its offspring: much like my God, Who sent His Son to die for me, so I can have everlasting life.

Every day I am in wonder of the love of my God!

David Flynn

O Lord, You are a great God. A God Who would send His own Son to die for us is truly a God of love.

December 19

Read: Luke 1:5-25

God Keeps His Promises!

God is in control and keeps His promises! In His vast wisdom, God lays out His plan, and He uses ordinary people to fulfill His purpose. Zechariah and Elizabeth could not have imagined what God had in store for them or their son, but God used John the Baptist to help prepare people for Jesus!

We are living in interesting, exciting, and challenging times. When I turn on the local or national news, the stories are often scary or heartbreaking. It can be overwhelming to see so much suffering and chaos, and I sometimes feel helpless. In times like these, I turn to God's Word and am reminded again and again that God is in control. Nothing that is happening locally or throughout the world takes Him by surprise. He knew these events would happen from the beginning of time, and in His complete goodness He provided us with a Savior in Jesus Christ to reconcile us back to Him.

God orchestrated John the Baptist to prepare people to meet Jesus. When we come to Jesus and ask for His forgiveness and accept Him as our personal Savior, the Holy Spirit comes and takes up residence in us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to share the Good News of Jesus with people who are afraid or hopeless. In this way, God is using us to be light and hope to others, when we too help prepare others to meet Jesus!

When I accepted Jesus as my Savior, my perspectives on earthly events changed. I can still be unnerved by events, but I know God is in control: of circumstances, of my life, and most importantly, my eternity.

Philip Klanderud

Dear Lord, thank You for providing us with a Savior in Jesus Christ. We might not see tomorrow, but You have already provided for it and we have nothing to fear. Amen.

December 20

Read: Luke 1:57-80

God's Plans

God's plans for each of us may not be revealed as boldly as they were for John, but they may take as long, as he lived in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance.

I believe it was God's plan all along that I would sew uniform jumpers for the children of Fountain of Christ school in Haiti (a project I've just completed). When our mission team planned the trip to Haiti I was originally going because my daughter was going, but it being her senior year, she was unable to go. But I, or more so God, decided to go anyway. God revealed to me so much joy, love and happiness in the Haitian people in spite of and in the midst of such devastation.

Early on we had the opportunity to purchase paintings from the local artist. I looked through all of them and immediately stopped at the one I knew I was to purchase. I love to sew, and here was a painting of a small Haitian courtyard with a lady at a sewing machine. It touched my heart! Of course I bought it, and it hangs in my sewing room.

In July after Pastor Dale, John and Laurie returned from Haiti, it was brought to my attention that they needed uniform jumpers made for the girls at school. Would I be interested? Ah, yeah! Here was a chance to help. So I commissioned myself to make 90 jumpers!

I cut them all out because there was no moving the ROLL of fabric. There was a trip planned to Haiti in 6 weeks and I wanted to get as many done as I could. Talk about stress! God granted me mercy and I asked for help. I prayed with my church family for strength and grace. Three fellow women of faith helped me do buttons and button holes; we were able to send 66 jumpers on that trip to Haiti. (34 more were ready by the end of October!) All for God's glory!

Valita Bockovich

December 21

Read: Luke 1-26-38

I am a Servant of the Lord

Mary was a virgin and engaged to Joseph. God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to tell her she would become pregnant and give birth to a son, who she would name Jesus. Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen, since I am a virgin?" The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you. For this reason the baby will be holy and will be called the Son of God." Mary answered the angel, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say."

Sometimes God chooses you for a job that you don't like or don't feel qualified to do. You want to say "No" but God won't take no for an answer.

About 10 years ago my friend Nancy was moving out of town. She had the movers and a moving van, but I packed her things for her. The moving van was full; the movers left. After saying our good-byes, I walked home, thinking I would never be in contact with her again.

No sooner had I walked in the door than the phone rang. I was dog-tired! All I wanted to do was collapse in a chair, but I answered the phone. It was Nancy's husband, Johnny. He was out of town on business. He told me that Nancy's son had just committed suicide. He asked me to accompany Nancy to her motel and stay with her until he could get a flight home.

The Lord started shouting in my head. I wanted to say "No." I was tired. I had never done anything like this before. I felt inadequate. The Lord made it plain to me that He had chosen me to do this whether I wanted to or not. He would give me the strength I needed physically and emotionally.

So I said "Yes" and went back to Nancy's house. She needed me. I went to her motel and I stayed with her till 2 AM, when Johnny arrived. If God chooses you, say "Yes."

Wendy Flynn

Lord, give me your strength to say "Yes."

December 22

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

Child of God

Like most of us, when Jesus traced His human ancestry He could find great men and women of faith as well as some real scoundrels. In my own family there have also been men of great virtue and godliness and some who were, well... notorious.

My grandfather, many great-great-greats back, was the Puritan pastor John Robinson. My grandmother, Eleanor Robinson, was the last generation to bear the surname (on our branch of the tree). John Robinson was a Protestant Dissenter who was forced out of England and led his congregation to Leiden, Holland, in 1609. In 1620 he put 35 of the 300 members of his congregation on a ship for the American Colonies to find a safer, more permanent home to worship as the Lord led them. That ship was the Mayflower.

While it does offer some comfort to know that in my distant past there was great love and passion for following and serving God, it makes me reflect on what my mom once told me: God has no grandchildren. Think on it. God has only sons and daughters through His own Son, Jesus. The godly passion and fervor of a distant relative, a parent, a brother or sister mean nothing to my salvation. The only thing that can save me is the faith God grants me when I place it in Jesus Christ.

Because I love Jesus, my response should be nothing less than to worship and serve with the same joy and passion that we see that believers through the ages have had in times of persecution. It may well be that in the days ahead we will need to have and demonstrate this joy and passion in the face of trial and persecution.

Though there have been many great heroes of faith born throughout the earth's history, there is only one human ever born who is worthy of worship: the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the son of David.

Laurie Hill

Lord, thank You for the examples of faithfulness You give us in Your word and in stories of Your saints through the ages. Through Your Spirit, grow us in that faith. Amen.

December 23

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Really?

As I ponder this scripture, the thought jumps out at me: How would I have responded if I was there? This young couple, Joseph and Mary, are engaged and ready for marriage. Normal scenario. But wait - Mary is pregnant! Not by her fiancé but by the Holy Spirit of God. I said - What? Are you kidding me?!? Is this for real?

Now this is getting good. Well, Joseph didn't like it and was ready to break it off. I may have supported him in that decision. This is too much to take in. Is this true?

Next day I run into Joseph and ask him, "What are you going to do?" He tells me last night he had a dream and an angel of God talked to him. The angel said that Mary's child truly was conceived of the Holy Spirit and don't fear it. Mary is going to have a son and his name will be Jesus, for he is going to save the people. The angel told him that in the writings of Isaiah this was all prophesied: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which interpreted is, God with us." Joseph told me the angel told him to marry her. Then Joseph said he woke up. He said it all was so real and I know it is true.

My understanding and faith would have been stretched. Would I have believed the dream? I don't know. I am glad the story doesn't end there - it is only the beginning. Today I believe because I have the scriptures and a faith that testify to His birth and life.

As you celebrate Christmas this year, take time to thank God for Christ's birth. For without His birth, there is no life, death and then resurrection!

John Jacobsen

God, today I thank You for the scriptures, the birth of Your Son, Jesus, and the life He has given me. Amen.

December 24

Read: Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song

Mary's wonderful song came after the angel told her that she would be the mother of Jesus, Son of the Most High. Her song extols the Lord for His holiness, His mercy, His powerful works. He is thoroughly good! He does not give us what we deserve, but He cares for even the ordinary person like me who acknowledges a need for Him. And unlike us, He is changeless! For generations He has been thus.

For over 70 years He has been so for me, day by day, week by week, year by year. I will share with you two specific times that stand out in my memory.

My dad was a pastor. As such we moved about every five years. The April of my 9th grade, I left a junior high of about 300 in Duluth and moved to a high school of about 3000. Talk about trauma! The size of the school, the number of students - none of whom I knew - I was SO afraid that first day! But God gave me a verse from Psalm 56: "At the time I am afraid, I will trust." With calmness and peace I walked those halls, knowing He was with me!

About 50 years later, I was in a coma for six days as a result of a car accident. During that time numerous MRIs were taken of my head; the doctors discovered that I had a tumor growing on my brain. It was about to cause severe damage. After I recovered from the accident it was removed. I have had none of the feared results. Praise His name for that accident - and the skill of the doctors!

Talk about the care of a loving God! Along with Mary, I praise Him, and I rejoice in Him!

Joyce Duck

Thank You, Triune God, for Your goodness, for Your abiding Presence! I live in the confidence of Your daily care! Thank You!

December 25

Read: Luke 2:1-7

The Christmas Story

This passage tells of the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger. What an inconspicuous beginning for our Savior! Yes, God took on human flesh to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. As I read these verses again and again while praying, I struggled for quite some time with what I wanted to share with you for the Advent season. Finally the Holy Spirit guided me to write the following story:

This past year has been a challenging and very sad one for me. My mother passed away on the first of Advent last year, followed shortly by her sister and several close friends and acquaintances. Yet as I read the verses in Luke, I found comfort in them and was actually able to recite the entire passage (verses 1-20) from memory. As I recited the scripture verses the memories of my childhood came flooding back into my heart, and it felt like I was receiving a gentle hug.

I can clearly recall that on Christmas Eve in the afternoon, my sister and I spent the time memorizing these 20 verses in Luke to recite later in the evening when we gathered at the Christmas tree. All six of us joined hands and bowed our heads while my sister and I told the story of Jesus' birth. We were all in awe of this miracle occurring because it spoke of the great love God had (and has) for us. After reciting the verses, we continued to hold hands and named everyone who we loved, both locally and in Germany. That was such a tradition in our family: to remember that Christmas is about Jesus' birth, demonstrating the love that God has for us, not about the presents under the tree.

Gine Meissner

*May we all remember to truly love one another just as God the Father does, especially this Advent season. In Jesus' name,
Amen.*

December 26

Read: Luke 2:8-14

Fear Not!

I grew up as an only child here in Grand Marais. I had a wonderful childhood, with the most loving parents! I always wanted my own family with lots of children. I married the guy of my dreams; he always made me laugh and feel loved. Though my husband came from a family of eight, we decided to have two children, God willing. So the day came: I was pregnant with our 1st.

We were very happy, but also a little afraid. On one visit, my doctor wanted us to go to Duluth to have a stress test, to check the baby because it was not moving around much. It took a few hours to get the baby moving, then it did not want to calm down! So we stayed a few extra hours.

The next doctor visits went well. I had some morning sickness, but eating saltine crackers helped. I had some ultrasounds, but we didn't want to know the baby's sex. Then the baby did not move again, and we repeated the stress test - same thing happened. We went home again, trying to live a normal life. I even worked up until the last week!

At the next doctor visit, I had high blood pressure and my feet were swollen, so he put me on bed rest in the hospital here in Grand Marais. I stayed here for a week, but nothing was changing, so they decided I should go to Duluth. At St. Mary's they started an IV drip to start labor. After 18 hours of hard labor, they found that my pelvis was too small and I had a C-section. I woke up with a wonderful baby boy: Christopher David Scully - 7lbs, 4 ½ oz.

The most amazing thing - I was not afraid! God put me at ease! Fear not - the angel brought great news!

Tracy Scully

Lord, when I trust in You, there is no fear.

December 27

Read: Luke 2:15-20

Good News!

The shepherds received the good news! The prophesy in Scripture was coming to pass: indeed, the Savior was born! They went to see for themselves and then went out to proclaim that the prophesy had been fulfilled.

I'm reminded that when I was a young adult, years ago, a close friend was expecting a baby. His wife was at their home in Duluth and the expectant father (my friend) was at work. He was a truck driver whose daily run was between Duluth and Thunder Bay. We became friends over CB (two way radio).

While my friend was somewhere between Grand Marais and Duluth, I received a call from the maternal grandparents asking if I knew where Ed was. I told them the approximate time we talked; the trick was to locate him and deliver the news that his wife was in labor and headed to the hospital. With the limited range of that radio system, the message needed to be relayed via numerous other radio friends over a distance of more than 120 miles.

Well, once others heard the urgency of that message, it seemed to develop a life of its own. In about half an hour I heard back that Ed had been located near Gooseberry Falls, about 40 miles from Duluth, and that he was headed directly to the hospital instead of to his terminal. He parked the fully-loaded semi outside of the Emergency department and ran inside in time to witness his daughter's birth.

This pales in comparison to the birth of our Savior, but the spreading of the Good News is spread with God's help. That child is now herself a mother who has come to know Christ... I now know that God wants me to spread His Good News with the same fervor as I did that little girl's birth.

Patrick Scully

May God find me pleasing in His sight, and bless us all this Christmas season.

December 28

Read: John 4:21-26

The Samaritan Woman

“W” has many meanings in this passage: woman, well, worship, water, and waiting. Jesus, traveling from Judea to Galilee, meets the Samaritan woman at the well in Samaria. The woman realizes that He already knows everything about her and her sinful life: she cannot hide anything from Him. Jesus is telling her that the place of worship is not important if you have the Spirit: you are to worship in Spirit and in truth. She does not understand and is awaiting the Messiah; Jesus says “It is I.” I am the Messiah!

When I was in Thailand last year teaching English, I saw many people worshipping the wrong god. They were trying to buy their way into a better life by giving money and gifts to idols but getting nowhere searching for peace in this manner. They were not experiencing true worship. They were only worshipping outwardly, not experiencing worship within. When I attended Peace Fellowship Church at the Santisuk English School on Friday or Sunday nights, that was true worship. They were worshipping in Spirit and in truth because they knew the one true God Who had saved them from their sins and could offer them the kind of everlasting peace and living water they needed. I was glad I was there to help some of my students learn about God and worship through song and Bible stories. I saw some of them become full of joy through worshipping in Spirit and in truth. What a blessing! We can only truly worship after salvation as the Spirit lives in us.

You too can experience this joy in knowing Jesus and true worship through knowing god, the Messiah. But you do not have to wait, as did the woman. He is ready and waiting for you today if you will only accept His gift of salvation. Experience true worship today by knowing God in Spirit and in truth.

Valerie Gustafson

Lord, let us worship You totally this Christmas season and always in Spirit and truth, accepting Your gift.

December 29

Read: Revelation 19:6-10

Worship God!

In this passage God, the All-Powerful, reigns as He does today. The faithful followers of Christ are invited to the wedding celebration of the Lamb to the Church: a time of joyous worship.

Many have shared in the ongoing journey of our daughter Michelle. Michelle is married and has three children. She had always been an avid runner and is very health-conscious. In July of 2015 she was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. There was nothing she did or did not do to cause it. Her cancer is a type of gene mutation. There is treatment, but no known cure. The surgeon who did the initial biopsy said she would only have seven to eight months to live. This was beyond heartbreaking.

All who know her, joined by a multitude, immediately turned to God in prayer. I have not had many memorable revelations direct from God in my life, but while home praying intensely, I heard a loud and clear voice saying repeatedly, "Everything is going to be all right." I was surprised but not startled. Of course, I didn't and don't know now if that meant she would be healed or not. Miracles do happen and God can certainly heal her if that is His will. But His purposes are not always obvious. I do know that God in His love and mercy sent His only Son to die on the cross so that we could be saved. Michelle has strong faith and has been saved through God's grace. She will be invited to the wedding banquet. There is peace and comfort in knowing this. There is still pain and suffering, but God never promised that we would be without that in this world.

It has been 15 months and Michelle's lungs are "stable". She is now undergoing treatment for cancer in her bones. Throughout this journey she and those who love her have been blessed by the love, support, and prayers of hundreds, if not thousands. We continue in hope and prayer for her healing. Please join us.

Jim Chupurdia

December 30

Read: Revelation 19:11-16

Faithful and True

The book of Revelation shares with us that Jesus Christ is coming again in great glory to establish His Kingdom and that "He will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). The imagery in Revelation of Jesus overcoming evil once and for all is amazing and beautiful, and something to look forward to!

Jesus is called Faithful and True. This reminds me of a song by Steven Curtis Chapman: "My Redeemer is Faithful and True." Following the title, the lyrics continue: "Everything He has said He will do. And every morning His mercies are new." This is a powerful reminder of promises that will hold for eternity. When I get discouraged because I've made a mistake - again - or I've fallen short - again - I'm not left there. God's mercies are new to us every day. His gift of Jesus our Savior is priceless.

Advent is a wonderful time to reflect on all God has done for us. In His word, God's ultimate love story, we see how humanity fell to sin. Humanity was in darkness until Jesus was born. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness from sin, and we have new life. And when Christ returns in glory, He will reign forever. All because He loves me. All because He loves you.

When you feel sad or discouraged, or you don't know where to turn, look to Jesus. The forgiveness and mercy Jesus has given me He will also give to you. He is faithful and true and is coming again to make all things new!

Monica Klanderud

Dear Father, thank You for loving me with an everlasting love. Help us to trust You in our circumstances and to look forward to Christ's glorious return! Amen

December 31

Read: Revelation 22:1-5

A New Creation!

What glorious promise! The city of God in the New Creation, a new Heaven and a new Earth where all is holy and pure! And from the throne of God flows the river of the water of life.

And my place there? In that holy place? I understand that there is *nothing* in myself that makes me worthy to be there. I understand that I need a Savior: Jesus. Scripture tells me that I am a new creation when I understand this and accept Jesus as my Lord. But there is work to be done that I found hard to understand. Self as I was must die...

Since I am the new creation that God worked in me, I received the gift of the Holy Spirit in me. One of His works is to transform - to *transform!* "But Pastor," I protested. "I sort of like who I am now. What if I don't like how the Holy Spirit will change me?"

"The Holy Spirit does in you what you cannot do yourself. He transforms toward the person God means you to be," Pastor replied. The implication: How could that be bad? My response - acceptance. Trust... Holy Spirit, do Your will in me. That work will never be complete in this world, but it *will* be complete in God's Kingdom.

This also is yours if you see your need and come to Jesus as Savior. It cannot be by your work. It must be the work of God: He came to the world in flesh for this purpose. I must be His new creation to enter into His New Creation.

And so must you be.

Irene Laine

Holy Spirit, do in me that which I cannot do myself. I give You thanks; I give You praise; I submit to Your power.

January 1

Read: Philippians 2:10-11

The Name that is Above Every Name

Throughout scripture God tells us of His sovereignty and that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In Romans 14:9, "*For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*" And in Isaiah 45:23-24, "*Before Me every knee will bow; by Me every tongue will swear. They will say of Me, In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength.*"

In this world it is so easy for me to believe the lie that it's all about me. Recently one of my nephews asked me how I manage to get so many things done. I asked him if he wanted to know the truth of the matter. When he said yes, I told him I pray a lot. In our culture that's not what people expect to hear, so that got his attention. It's very hard to put into words the many times situations seem baffling, frustrating and out of control. All I know for sure is when I humble myself and ask His help, everything turns out well.

One day I was putting up my chimney. I was up on two sets of scaffold with a stepladder on top of that (not real safe - I know!). I knew I only had one chance to reach out and set the last five feet of chimney without falling or dropping the chimney and ruining it. I stopped and asked Him for help, then reached out and the chimney went on perfectly. I was amazed and thanked Him for His help. I know I didn't do that by myself!

Steve McNeally

Father God, please keep me humble, to always remember that You alone are Lord over all things in Heaven, on earth and under the earth. In Jesus' name I bow my knee and confess this.