



Advent Devotional

southridgechurch.ca/advent

Welcome to Hope

Too often Christmas is a time of crazy more than calm. Our calendars get jammed. Our to-do lists get long. And if we're not careful, our credit cards get maxed.

Things quickly start feeling like they're spinning out of control.

But maybe you've already felt like things are spinning out of control. From political gong shows, to weather abnormalities, to hurts and hiccups all over the world, it's easy to feel hopeless.

But what if Christmas is supposed to change that? What if that's exactly what this season is about? What if the advent (simply means "coming") of Christ is the very thing that brings hope to this grand mess?

What if this season could be a time where we're welcome – even invited, persuaded, and enticed – to hope? To hope for ourselves and to hope for others in a way that just might change the world?

15 Days to Read & Reflect

The following pages include 15 readings, reflections and prayers – 5 days a week for 3 weeks – written and developed by members of our community.

To make the most of it, **commit to a specific time and place for 15-20 minutes each day**, Monday to Friday, to spend time with these words. The morning is an excellent time to set the tone for your day, or you may find lunch break or bedtime to be good options.

For the reflection questions, you may want to record a few thoughts in a journal to deepen the experience.

3 Weekend Exercises

For each of the next three weekends, you'll find an activity or exercise to help you, along with your family, friends or roommates, bring hope to the world around you through everyday deeds.

- **Dec 7-8:** *Southridge Special Delivery*
- **Dec 14-15:** *48-Hour Fast*
- **Dec 21-22:** *Christmas Deeds*

Welcome to hope!

Jeff Martens

Inspiration Pastor
Southridge Community Church

Wednesday, December 4

Scripture: [Luke 1:1-25](#)

Reflection: *Prepare the Way | Carrie Jones*

As winter draws near, the days become shorter and shorter. In these months, one of my spiritual practices is lighting a morning candle. There's something about starting my day with dim candle light in my dark kitchen that slows me down and symbolizes me saying *yes* to God.

I grew up in a faith tradition filled with liturgy and symbolism. Early on, I didn't appreciate it and, to be honest, I found it dry and confusing. It was lost on me. However, these days I have a fresh appreciation for symbols and liturgy. As a young girl, one of the things I did appreciate in my faith tradition was the season of Advent. During Advent, we would light a candle each Sunday, representing hope, peace, joy, and love, and on Christmas Eve, the Christ candle.

Two years ago, I was nostalgic and drawn back to this idea of Advent. My husband, Steve, made a wooden Advent wreath for me. In the month of December, we add evergreen pieces and candles to the wreath and place it on our kitchen table. It's simple and it's meaningful. On the Sundays leading up to Christmas, we share some verses and we light a candle. It's a tradition I've been drawn back to. It's one that I now share with my husband and three daughters.

The word Advent simply means "coming." During this season, we are preparing for the coming of Christ at Christmas. In today's scripture, as I think about the angel's promise and Elizabeth's pregnancy, I am reminded that God is in the business of the surprising, the unexpected and the miraculous. I'm reminded that this is as equally true today as it was in the time of Elizabeth and Zachariah. Perhaps we simply need fresh eyes to notice.

In the same way John would prepare the way for Jesus (Luke 1:17), we can also prepare our hearts for Christmas.

In the hustle and bustle of December, it's easy to prepare by decorating our homes, playing our favourite music, purchasing gifts and attending parties, parades and so on. But if we're not careful, we can get lost in all of that and miss out on the invitation to prepare our hearts.

May we fulfill the words of a favourite carol: "Let every heart prepare him room!"

Question: *How can you prepare your heart for Christmas? How can you create space for stillness, quiet, and the hope of Christ? What can you commit to that will help you prepare?*

Prayer:

Jesus, thank you that you are our source of hope, peace, joy and love. We are so grateful that you came to us. Help me to experience more of your hope. Would you give me fresh eyes to see the surprising, unexpected and miraculous all around me? I want to live a life that keeps the darkness at bay. Please make a vessel of hope and healing in this world.

Thursday, December 5

Scripture: [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Reflection: *What's in a name?* | Jeff Martens

I can remember the stress when preparing to name our first child. We felt the weight of labelling another human being with a collection of sounds; a group of syllables; a word, either common or creative that would serve as the foundation of their identity. We didn't know if it was a boy or a girl, so we had a name for either. This human being was going to be forever known as either "this" or "that." (Those weren't really our name choices, but you get the idea.)

Names matter. They signal familiarity. They carry feelings and connotations. They help navigate our relationships by distinguishing one from another. It's amazing how distinct we feel when we encounter someone whose name we know compared with the "nameless." Whether strolling the mall or finding a seat in church, there's a visceral difference when we see the person we can instantly name – even if only an acquaintance – compared to the one who is still a "stranger."

Pastor, author and theologian, Eugene Peterson, says, "Names are the very basic life-giving term in language. You say a person's name and it means something, because there's relationship then. Until there's a name, there's no relationship."

In the Hebrew tradition of the Old Testament, God was virtually unnamed. Out of reverence, people steered clear of boxing God into a single word or description. The closest they'd get was to describe him as "I AM" or "the one who is," and they would write his name as YHWH, a term without pronunciation, never to be uttered.

But at Christmas, that all changed. In the story of the coming saviour, the vaguely named God of the universe, gave himself a name: Jesus. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Not only did God put skin on, but he registered the birth certificate, as in: 'This is going to get personal. This is going to mean relationship. We're going from stranger right through acquaintance all the way to personal friend and saviour.'

So, what's in a name? There's a least one name that carries all the hope, peace, joy and love that you're longing for this Christmas and that's the name of Jesus.

Question: *How familiar is the name of Jesus to you? Has it become too familiar? As you relate to Jesus, where are you on the spectrum from stranger to acquaintance to friend?*

Prayer:

Jesus, thanks that you have a name we can call. Help me to experience you on a more personal level. I want to move beyond acquaintance to truly knowing your presence. I want to trust you more, believing yours is the only name by which we are saved.

Friday, December 6

Scripture: [Psalm 42](#)

Reflection: *God My Rock | Pat Beard*

I think that everyone, at one time or another, has experienced a “dark night of the soul.” A time when he or she felt separated from God. Prayers seemed to go nowhere; not just unanswered, but ignored. Heaven had a “Do not Disturb” sign and God was obviously busy elsewhere. I know I have had those times in the desert and they are not fun!

The author of Psalm 42 (a lament) is in a place of spiritual depression and, like many Old Testament authors, expresses that feeling in physical rather than philosophical terms. His soul “pants” for God like a deer “pants for streams of water.” References to “the heights of Hermon” and “Mount Mizar” are intended to use geographical separation to represent spiritual separation. Mournfully, he asks why God has forgotten him. The psalmist ends by crying out to “God my rock,” (which comes across as more of plea for help than a statement of faith) and chastises himself, saying: “Why, my soul, are you downcast?”

It’s important in those times of feeling separated from God to remember that it is more often the times in the desert that lead to spiritual growth and renewed faith. When everything is going great and you seem to be on track (and motoring along quite nicely, thank you) there is little motivation to effect change in your life. In the dark times, however, there is a lot of motivation to make changes, to examine your motivations and to try different ways to re-connect and re-ignite that flame of faith. Momentary separation can often lead to a strengthened, re-born relationship!

So, we should give thanks for the dark times and embrace them as opportunities for personal spiritual growth. As we put our faith in Christ, we can be confident that God sent his only son to die for us and to bring us into salvation. We need to constantly remember that God has not and will never abandon us, that he is always there for us and that he loves us unconditionally.

It may not always be easy, but it will always be true!

Question: *Can you recall times when you felt separated from God? How did you feel and how did you react? How can you make good use of these times “in the desert”?*

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your son and the unconditional love which you have shown through Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection. Help us to call on you and to walk by faith, even when it doesn’t seem to us that you are there. Provide us with the strength to persevere during those dark times so that we might use those experiences as opportunities for spiritual growth in order to develop a closer relationship with you.

Saturday/Sunday, December 7-8

Weekend Exercise: *Southridge Special Delivery*

Every year at Southridge we celebrate the Christmas season by rallying around our friends and neighbours connected to our local anchor causes of compassion and justice:

- The Southridge Shelter | *St. Catharines*
- Caribbean Workers Outreach | *Vineland*
- Low-Income Families | *Welland*

We do this through our *Southridge Special Delivery* campaign by gathering gifts for the communities supported by all three anchor causes.

Exercise: This year we are participating in a Reverse Advent Calendar, which can be found at southridgechurch.ca/reverseadvent

Follow this advent calendar every day for the next three weeks on your own or as a family, placing the money from each day in the 'Hope Lives' box, or noting beside each date how much you 'owe' and putting the money together at the end of the calendar. On days that you find yourself paying, take a moment to consider what it might feel like for someone who is not blessed to be able pay that day. Let's stand in solidarity with our neighbors as we recognize that our blessings exist so that we can share them!

Following the 'Reverse Advent Calendar', determine how much you will be giving this advent season, then bring in the money which you've collected in your 'Hope Lives' box to your location on **December 8th**.

Your gift will primarily support the anchor cause of the Southridge location that you attend:

In *St. Catharines*, this money will go to bus tickets for Southridge Shelter residents who are moving into housing, to support the need for transportation as they stabilize, as well as gift cards for their groceries.

In *Vineland*, the money will go to our Welcome Kits, which serve practical needs of our Caribbean migrant worker friends as they leave home to return to our community in the spring.

In *Welland*, the money will go to tickets for the Southridge Collective Kitchen meal program for people who can't afford to participate on certain months.

Prayer:

Jesus, we thank you for all that you've blessed us with and we thank you for the opportunity to be a blessing to others. Please use these items we've purchased to share love and hope with those who will receive them. May they help meet material needs, but also be multiplied to meet spiritual needs. We pray that these simple acts will help us to continue to grow in love and generosity. Amen.

Monday, December 9

Scripture: [Isaiah 11:1-9](#)

Reflection: *Stumped* | Nate Dirks

In January 2016, a farmer in the middle of the Kalahari Desert heard a loud ‘crack’ echoing across the dusty plains. A few kilometers away was ‘Chapman’s Baobab’, a legendary African baobab tree, over 25 meters in circumference and over 5,000 years old. It had a proud history, serving as a beacon on the flat horizon, leading travelers through the narrowest portion of the salt flats in the deadly desert. David Livingstone and other explorers had marked the baobab in their travels in the 1800s, and a large cavity in one of the trunks had served as what may have been Africa’s oldest post office, in which people left letters as they traveled by, in hopes that someone would someday find them and bring them to their loved ones.

But as the farmer listened, the groan was followed by a heavy crash; Chapman’s Baobab had split and fallen to the ground.

Five-hundred years before Jesus, the people of Israel were experiencing a far deeper sense of loss. They had been promised by God that, through the descendants of their most influential king, David, there would be a kingdom that would never end. And yet, by the time Isaiah wrote the words in this passage, they found themselves overrun and oppressed by their enemies, and their kingdom was not even a shadow of what it had been.

In the middle of this season of desperation, Isaiah received a new message: like a mighty tree that had been reduced to nothing more than a stump, God’s people seemed to have reached their end. But, Isaiah prophesied, that stump was about to produce a new, living Branch that would bear unexpected fruit, better than anything anyone had seen before.

In this season, as we are reminded of the Branch, Jesus, who came to bring new life to places which seemed past the point of no return, let’s remember that there is no area of our lives which is past revival. Jesus wants to help us produce positive, tangible, meaningful growth in our lives and in the lives of the people around us, no matter how lifeless things may appear right now.

And Chapman’s Baobab? It’s fallen trunks are covered in new sprouts.

Question: *Have you experienced the collapse of hope in your life? Where do you turn when it feels like things have fallen apart? Which promise from this passage can you cling to today, inviting God to bring new fruit into seemingly hopeless situations?*

Prayer:

Jesus, you are the fulfillment of so many promises. You are able to bring life, no matter what the current circumstances look like. Thank you that even when the hopes of your people in the past seemed like nothing more than a stump, you were alive and waiting to make yourself known. I pray that you would give me the patience to wait for you, and the confidence that you are alive in my circumstances, moving in my life, and ready to show me the new growth that you are already starting to produce.

Tuesday, December 10

Scripture: [Luke 1:26-38](#)

Reflection: *Finding Favour* | Rick Ziwers

There are numerous moments in our lives when we experience favour; when we “find favour” in how someone treats us. Maybe it’s praise from a boss, affirmation from a teacher or parent, or

the kindness of a friend. In those moments of finding favour we receive a greater sense of value, affirmation, or clarity about the impact we have in people's lives. Such an outcome strengthens the relationship, re-defines our purpose, and even generates hope.

But the opposite can also be true. When favour is lacking, relationships can be strained, a sense of direction and purpose is lost, or we become burdened by hopelessness. Ultimately, all of us hunger for the favour of others, and, I believe, for the favour of God himself.

Through the story of Mary, God helps us appreciate that "finding favour" is the gift of Christmas. In today's reading, young Mary is confronted by the angel of God who comes to her and says, "Greetings, favoured woman. The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28) Although Mary is initially confused and disturbed by the greeting, God's messenger intends to give her a new sense of value and an expectation of great news. God is with her; she has tremendous value. She will have a child, and His name will be Jesus. More importantly, the coming of Jesus will usher in a new kingdom that will never end. Mary will be the conduit to unfold God's Story because she has found favour with God.

Undoubtedly, Mary wonders at how these things will come to pass, and yet, in the end she believes all things are possible with God. She responds in confidence, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants." (Luke 1:38) Mary recognizes God's favour. As well, her favour with God actually becomes God's favour for all people. It's a beautiful story!

As we journey into the Christmas season, let's recognize the gift of Jesus as God's favour extended to all. We are the beneficiaries of God's favour. And as recipients of His favour, each of us is highly valued by God, each of us is given purpose and meaning, and each of us has reason to live hope-filled lives. All things are possible with God! At the same time, let's live with great expectation. Like Mary, let's respond with a readiness to be His servants, to eagerly extend favour to others, and to live as those who are grateful for God's favour. In this way, we become the conduits who bring hope to the world as we continue to unfold God's Story.

Question: *In what ways has God extended His favour to you? How might you extend favour to someone else today?*

Prayer:

Father God, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus your Son, inspire us today to live our lives knowing that you have found favour in each of us. Thank you for the gift of Jesus who came for each one of us. May we live with great expectation as we extend favour to those in our circle of influence. Allow us to be conduits of hope to a world needing your favour. Amen.

Wednesday, December 11

Scripture: [Luke 1:39-56](#)

Reflection: *Sharing the Mystery* | Bonnie Fowler

On New Year's Eve, the year I turned 40, like a true introvert, I was not at a party but instead was journaling about my previous year and looking forward to the next one. God interjected into my thoughts and said, "I would like you to be bigger." This invitation meant absolutely

nothing to me at the time, and, unlike Mary, I could not get clarifying answers from an angel. However, what I did was receive and accept the message and trust that it was uniquely mine. Then, unlike my introverted self, I chose to share the mysterious invitation with my family, and embrace a journey of discovering what it meant.

Who do you run to when you have news, confusion or mysterious invitations in your life?

This passage begins with Mary hurrying to her cousin Elizabeth's home. Mary has news to share, and she knows from the angel that Elizabeth has news, as well. What we see is that as soon as Mary greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth is overwhelmed with joy and pours out love and blessing over Mary. Then Mary, grounded in this loving reception from her cousin, pours out beautiful poetry that reflects her humility and her hope in the mysterious story of God; a story that begins in a beautiful relationship of acceptance and love.

God was doing something unique in each of Mary's and Elizabeth's lives, but he also invited them to journey together in the mystery of God with us. Each of us are also given this opportunity to risk sharing our particular news with someone else.

The passage ends with Mary spending three months with Elizabeth before she goes back home.

What a picture of the blessing of deep communion and unity that happens when we open up to the people that God places in our life!

Question: *Who might you need to hurry and visit? Is there someone with whom you can share an insight or invitation you sense from God? How might the blessing of sharing your news bring hope into your mysterious journey with God?*

Prayer:

Lord, help me not to run from the mysterious invitations you bring into my life. May I embrace you and trust that the message is uniquely mine. Then may I quickly run to the people you have given me in my life, so that I can share the beauty of following where you lead. When I am unsure of who to share my news with, please guide and direct me to someone with a heart that loves you. Help me to offer joy, love and blessing for those who come to me with their mysterious news. Help me to continually risk fostering deep communion and unity with others.

Thursday, December 12

Scripture: [Romans 13:8-14](#)

Reflection: *Go With the Flow | Brendon Nicholson*

There's nothing like the feeling of being prepared. Like the moment you walk into a midterm or final exam after days of preparation; you know the content and are confident you will get a good grade. You worked hard and your hard work is about to pay off in the form of an 'A.' Conversely, there is something terrible about the feeling of not being prepared. Like when the

sun was shining in the cloudless sky as you left the house, but all of a sudden, you're caught without a jacket or umbrella in a downpour.

It seems to me that, frequently, many of us spend more time with the feeling of unpreparedness when it comes to our interaction with God and the instructions and commands laid out in the pages of the Bible. Maybe we've even felt like each day is a brand-new test for which we haven't studied, or that the weather could turn at any moment, leaving us cold and soaking wet.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul offers some insight. He says, "If you love your neighbour, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law." It's as simple as that: love your neighbour and you'll have studied for the exam. Love your neighbour and you'll be appropriately dressed for whatever weather comes your way. Easy, right?

As straightforward as that thought may be, we all know that, even simply loving our neighbour can be more complicated than it sounds. Let's look at it from a different angle, though. What if "passing the test," or "being prepared," wasn't something that *we* had to *do*, but *someone* in whom we could *rest*? Paul instructed early Christians that, in order to "fulfill the requirements of God's law," they should "clothe [themselves] with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and globally recognized ecumenical teacher, puts it another way; he suggests we should *go with the flow*. Rohr says, in his book, *The Divine Dance*, that God is "the flow who flows through everything, without exception and who has done so since the beginning" and that we are innately wired to reflect God's love to the world.

This really takes the pressure off, doesn't it? Life isn't a test full of trick questions to trip us up. Each day is an opportunity to "fulfill the requirements of God's law;" to *go with the flow* and be who God created us to be, loving reflectors of God's divine love.

Question: *Are there areas in your life where you feel unequipped or underprepared to love? What practices could you put in place to remind yourself to "go with the flow?"*

Prayer:

God who cannot help but love me. God, the source of all love, may Your love be reflected through me in all I do. May I be constantly reminded to rest in You and love my neighbour. Amen.

Friday, December 13

Scripture: [Psalm 146](#)

Reflection: *The Weary World Rejoices* | Kelly Smalldon

Know that the season is often long, the weather harsh and inappropriate. There are no guarantees. Only hope, wait, and see remain. And the greatest of these is hope.
~John Blase

For me, Christmas 2016 was the worst. It was the culmination of what felt like the hardest year of my life, and I couldn't bring myself to sing "Joy to the World" or "Deck the Halls" because I

was barely keeping my head above the waves of grief and exhaustion. There was no baking, no caroling, not even a Christmas tree. (Although I DID make time to watch *Die Hard*, only because I figured John McClane, more than anyone, could relate to the Christmas I was having.) On more than one occasion I said, “I just want this year to be over.”

But that’s what happens sometimes, isn’t it? The real life, all-consuming struggles we’re facing don’t press pause on December 1st. Tragedy doesn’t consider the calendar before it hits – the terminal diagnosis meaning this will be someone’s last Christmas, the crumbling relationship leaving you alone for the holidays, the officer at your door at 3am bearing bad news, the pink slip that means gift-giving will be impossible, the addiction that has taken hold once again....

Christmas is ‘supposed’ to be joyful and peaceful and filled with love and family and fun, but often it just... isn’t. Instead, it feels like a season of despair and waiting on God to answer those prayers we sob into our pillows. Christmas carols are replaced with Christmas laments, which make it really, really hard to read the words of the psalmist when we are reminded to “Praise God as long as we live!” and that “our joy is found in hoping in Him.”

But friend, this... THIS is why Jesus came.

He was born into a (literally) messy situation, for the purpose of rescuing us from ours. Our times of greatest loss have the potential to become some of our most sacred moments when we learn to rely on Him and lean into who He is. Our prayers may feel unanswered in this season, but we can cling to His promise that He is in control and He is good – even when (especially when) it doesn’t feel like it. At those times when we don’t *feel* like praising God, we can hope for tomorrow and *choose* to praise Him in the waiting.

Question: *Can you think of a time when difficulty has brought you into a deeper relationship with God? What can you cling to on the days when praising Him feels hard? Is there someone in your life who is experiencing a ‘hopeless Christmas’? How can you support them?*

Prayer:

Jesus, thank you for coming and meeting me right where I am – whether the season is filled with joy or pain. Thank you that I don’t have to pretend with You and that You are not offended by my grief and weariness. Please help me to hold on to that hope in the seasons of waiting, and to be that beacon of hope to others who need it.

Saturday/Sunday, December 14-15

Weekend Exercise: *48-Hour Fast*

For those who’ve been around Southridge over the years, you know that one of our most transformative experiences has been our occasional “Fast for Change.” It’s consisted of weeks eating only rice and beans, experiments taking only cold showers, days without our usual transportation, or efforts to limit tech use with device fasts. All of this has been done in an effort to stand in solidarity with the poor while developing a compassionate lifestyle of prayer.

This year, we’re inviting you to try a mini *48-Hour Fast* in the midst of a season that is predominantly driven by consumption.

Exercise: Pick one (or more) of the following fasts to try this weekend. If your schedule makes the weekend an awkward time to engage in the fast, feel free to pick a 48-hour period that you can commit to during the following week.

- **Consumption Fast:** Commit to not making a single purchase for 48 hours. Do your best to not transact anything. Allow this to provide consumer reprieve in the midst of a month defined by buying. As you think of things you'd otherwise be purchasing, consider which are necessities versus luxuries and invite God to help you learn to live with less.
- **Food Fast:** Try eating one subsistence meal each day. This normally consists of a single serving of rice and beans. When you feel hunger pangs, say a prayer for those who don't know where their next meal will come from. When you fill a glass of water, thank God for its accessibility and pray for the 1 in 10 people around the world who don't have access to clean drinking water.
- **Tech Fast:** Unplug for the weekend. Unless absolutely necessary, steer clear of phones, tablets, TV and Netflix. Use the margin to read, nap, think previously "un-thunk" thoughts or have more deliberate conversations with loved ones.
- **Transportation Fast:** Try avoiding your usual method of transportation, assuming it's most convenient. If you normally drive, take the bus or walk where possible. As you do, pay attention to those who use these methods often and/or say a prayer for the well-being of our environment.
- **Hot Water Fast:** As the cold settles in, many prepare for a challenging season either on the streets or without the comforts of normal utilities. Limit your showers to 2 minutes using cold water. After drying off and warming up, say a prayer for those who don't have access to utilities like hot water.

Monday, December 16

Scripture: [Romans 15:1-13](#)

Reflection: *On the Guest List | Nate Dirks*

When my wife, Taryn, and I went to our first wedding in Africa we didn't know the couple getting married, but we were invited to come along with some friends. So, we dressed as appropriately as we could, Taryn with her shawl and head scarf neatly tied, and we walked the dusty path to the celebration.

As we arrived between the grass-thatched huts, black cauldrons were simmering with delicacies that had been cooking all night. We were greeted warmly as welcomed guests, and were brought out of the sun into the shade of the large tent. We were latecomers to the event that many people had already been at throughout the night and into the morning, but we were

seated at a table right next to that of the wedding party, where we were served delicious *seswaa* and other fine, traditional foods.

Sheepishly at first, we enjoyed the amazing meal, the displays of choreographed dancing, and words of blessing on the newlyweds, and then more freely as we savored the open invitation of our hosts to enjoy their party. And as we did so, it became our celebration as well. We were wedding crashers being treated as special company, not by accident, but as an intentional blessing by the families of the bride and groom to their newest guests.

Christmas is a reminder of something that we are all similarly called to enjoy. The invitation to be a part of God's own community that originally started as an exclusive privilege of the Jewish people. But with the advent of Jesus, that specific invitation was extended to include outsiders ('Gentiles') as well (15:9-12). Through Jesus we, observers to the party, became counted among the guests of honour, getting to bask in the joy, peace, and hope (15:13) that come only from him.

This Christmas, let's enjoy and extend the invitation which the season represents. An invitation which, as the apostle Paul says, is a reason to party (15:10)!

Question: *Can you think of a time when you were on the outside of something amazing, looking in? How did that make you feel? Why do you think Jesus opened up the invitation to you to be included in his community? What is your response to this privileged position (and invitation to celebrate!) that God has extended to you?*

Prayer:

God, I am overjoyed by your invitation, making me, an outsider, your privileged guest. I want to celebrate *with* you as I remember the birth of your son, Jesus. And I want to celebrate *you* as I practice being like Jesus in my thoughts, words, and deeds. God, I glorify you for your mercy, and in celebration I sing the praises of your name.

Tuesday, December 17

Scripture: [Isaiah 58:1-11](#)

Reflection: *When God Comes Near* | Chris Fowler

Advent is about anticipating God coming near, so near, in fact, that He takes on flesh and shows us what it means to be "God *with* us" (Isaiah 9:6). But our passage today should help us pause and reflect on how God coming near radically changes the way the world operates.

Isaiah's audience "seem(ed) eager for God to come near them" (58:2), at least on the surface. They were deeply committed to the rigorous spiritual discipline of fasting – intentionally avoiding eating for a time in order to pray. It's one thing to just say a prayer or two, but it's serious business when you're willing to forgo a meal in order tell God what's on your heart.

And yet... God is very clear that He's completely unimpressed with this overt act of religious devotion. Praise is the furthest thing from His mind when He responds to their gesture.

This is because outside of their superficial religious rituals, their lives are sending the message to God that they really don't want to see what happens when He comes. They want God to keep blessing them, but not if it means their lives have to change. They want the privileges that they currently experience at the expense of others (58:3) to remain intact more than they really want God's version of justice to break into the world.

And mercifully, God still draws near but not in the way they expect! He does so by lovingly and sharply, calling them to start loving what He loves. To love generosity more than religious fervency. To love the poor more than blessings. Because when God shows up chains are loosened, oppressed people are set free, hungry people get fed, homeless people are housed and naked people get clothed.

So this Christmas, let's long for God to come near by sharing his love and hope with those in need!

Question: *What priority changes in my life, family and church would sincerely communicate to God that I really want Him to come near?*

Prayer:

Loving God, thank You that You love us enough to show us the obstacles that hinder us from experiencing Your nearness. This advent season, may You find us willing to cooperate with you in dismantling these barriers for the sake of spreading Your blessing to everyone. We welcome every change you want to bring into our lives and world by coming near in Jesus. Amen

Wednesday, December 18

Scripture: [Luke 1:57-80](#)

Reflection: *The Light is Winning | Mike Krause*

The world is dark as I write these words. Being back in school, with a wife and four young daughters who deserve my attentiveness, and a church asking me to care for its soul(s), most days I start before dawn, while the world is dark. Most days I see the sun rise.

There is undeniable strength to the sunrise, the world effortlessly taking shape right before your eyes. A mysterious form resolves into a bicycle left on the lawn. Your hesitation at stepping into the dark solidifies into the carefree ease of lacing up your shoes for a morning run. In the slow inevitability of the dawn, another day consumes another night.

This is what I see in the words of Luke 1:78-79. Here, Zechariah marvels at the birth of his son, and of Jesus, the Son of David, saying: "In the tender compassion of our God the dawn

from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Hope is everywhere in these words. In the birth of Christ, heaven’s dawn is breaking on earth: slowly consuming the darkness, resolving our vision of God’s kingdom, exposing the deceptiveness of the shadows, solidifying our courage to step into the world. It is God’s tender compassion on display, his heart-bursting, merciful affection for creation in living colour. It is an illumination of the way of *shalom*—of love, wholeness, and reconciliation, a life of abundance, joy, and peace—and an invitation to walk with us in it, in the light. These words are the gospel.

I enjoy twitter. (I don’t know why, but I do.) One of the people I follow there has developed a reputation for reminding people, when life is hitting hard, that “the light is winning.” This is what the birth of Jesus is about, the message of Christmas, our only hope.

As I finish writing this, the world is bright. The light is winning.

Question: *Which part of the world feels darkest to you right now? What makes it hard to believe that the light is winning? Where might you be able to catch a glimpse of the breaking dawn?*

Prayer:

God, we ask for hope. Sometimes it's hard to know where to turn when things seem dark and desperate. But we believe you shine light in the darkness, you bring hope to the hopeless, and you give strength to the weary. May we have hope for forgiveness, hope for healing, hope for our relationships, and hope for our future. Please grant us the light of hope that is found in Jesus. And as we receive this gift, may we be a source of hope for others, shining your light in the world.

Note: This article was first published in the MB Seminary advent devotional, “Jesus Messiah.”

Thursday, December 19

Scripture: [Isaiah 61](#)

Reflection: *Pointing to the Messiah | Pat Beard*

One of my favourite pieces of music at Christmas time is Handel’s *Messiah*., an oratorio (an opera without all the drama) written over an amazing 24 days in the summer of 1741. *Messiah* tells the story of Jesus’ life, from birth to resurrection, using the texts of various biblical books. Although intended for Easter celebrations, it is now performed almost exclusively at Christmas time. The climax of the work, the Halleluiahs Chorus, is probably one of the most famous and most-heard musical pieces in the world, at the age of 276.

Much of *Messiah*’s lyrics comes from the Book of Isaiah. This is because much of Isaiah involves the fore-telling of the life of Christ. It uses contemporary Jewish history to talk about the coming of the long-promised Messiah, who would restore Jerusalem (and creation) to its original glory. Isaiah points to Jesus in a direct and dramatic fashion.

The 61st chapter of the book is particularly reassuring. It talks about proclaiming the “good news” (i.e., the gospel), proclaiming freedom for the captives, bestowing the oil of joy (instead of

ashes) and a garment of praise (not despair). What magnificent words of comfort! God will, through his son, “rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.”

So, at Christmas, I always benefit from knowing (and celebrating) the fact that Jesus Christ was and is the son of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the one fore-told in the Old Testament and the one we are told about in the New Testament. Christ is our gift from a God who has, for thousands of years, loved us and provided for us. Christ is the culmination of centuries of promise and the realization, today, of God’s love.

Halleluiah indeed!

Question: *Is there a particular piece of music which, for you, represents the meaning of Christmas? Do you find that celebrating Christmas through music is an essential part of the season? Why or why not?*

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you for the gift of your son! We ask that you remind us, throughout the Christmas season, that you love us and that Christ was born to die that we might live for eternity with you. Amen.

Friday, December 20

Scripture: [Psalm 25](#)

Reflection: *Hope in the Darkness* | Jill Venema

I love Christmas. I. Love. It. Of course, as a Christian, I love celebrating the surprising way God rescued us through the gift of baby Jesus. But that’s not all. I adore all the other aspects of the season: the lights, the decorations, the corny movies, the cheesy songs on the Christmas stations... I love it all. Yes, much to the dismay of my husband, I’m one of *those* people. Full disclosure: I’m also a winter person. Sorry if this contradicts your prayers, but you should know I’m praying fervently for a snowy winter. Consider yourself warned.

But despite my heartfelt adoration for this season, I find myself thinking more this year about the struggles and dark times of life. Perhaps I’m in this space because I’m approaching a milestone birthday, perhaps I’m reminded because of the conversations I’ve been having with others for which Christmas is a raw and glaring reminder of pain and loneliness.

It’s especially in these moments that I need to be reminded of the practice of turning my eyes to God in my pain. Unfortunately, this is not always my natural inclination. I’m reminded of the words from one of my favourite hymns, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I

love.” Despite my experience of God’s goodness and grace, I guard my heart and wander from Him more than I’d care to admit.

“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God...for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.” (Psalm 25:1,5)

There have been seasons in my life where those words flow effortlessly; trust feels natural and easy. And there are other seasons when, if I’m being completely honest, speaking those words is anything but natural or effortless. They’re less of a statement of how I’m feeling, and more of an expression of hopeful expectancy.

Psalm 25, and many others, give voice to the complexity of thoughts and emotions we experience. God wants us to bring it all to Him, to bring the real us; the ‘us’ that’s joyful and anxious and mourning and everything in between. As we search our hearts on this day, let us lift both our joys and our sorrows to the One who has given us reason to hope.

Question: *Where do you find yourself right now: are you tired of the busyness and social demands? Are you basking in the wonder of the season? Are you filled with heartbreak and loss? What is your honest prayer before our loving God today?*

Prayer:

Lord, we come to you on this day and honestly declare that we are often far from trusting you. We seek our own ways instead of drawing close to you. Help us in our unbelief and remind us of your never-failing love. Help us to bring all our cares and concerns to you, to take you up on your offer to carry our burdens. Renew in us the hope we have in your Son, Jesus.

Saturday & Sunday, December 21-22

Weekend Exercise: *Christmas Deeds*

In the days before Christmas, we invite you to keep it simple by extending warm hospitality through a Christmas deed.

Exercise: Perform one small act of kindness and love for someone who wouldn’t expect it, especially in the midst of the busyness of the days before Christmas. Choose from the list of examples below or be creative with your own unique gifts and talents.

- Bake cookies for a neighbour
- Bring hot chocolate to someone shoveling a driveway
- Write a letter to your sponsor child
- Visit someone elderly with a cup of tea
- Share encouragement through a Christmas card to folks in hospital/hospice
- Call a friend you haven’t spoken to for years to wish them a Merry Christmas
- Ask someone you know who doesn’t have a car whether they need a ride somewhere
- Pay for the order behind you in the drive-thru
- Give something of value that you can do without to someone who could use it
- Shovel a nearby driveway

- Invite a friend to *Christmas at Southridge*
- Use your imagination to come up with something not on this list!

Monday, December 23

Scripture: [Luke 4:14-21](#)

Reflection: *A Crystal-Clear Incarnation | Chris Fowler*

This episode marks Jesus' "coming out" party in His hometown of Nazareth where He proclaims in no uncertain terms what He's about and what "God taking on flesh" looks like. His reading that day was a portion from Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 61); an ancient vision of hope and anticipation for the Jewish people.

But as Jesus reads, his interpretation is seen as earth shattering.

Why? Not because of what he read, but what he didn't read. Jesus apparently stops his reading on purpose by proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor." But what's so interesting is that in the original passage in Isaiah, it goes on to say that the Messiah will bring "the day of vengeance of our God."

Now this may sound harsh but every 1st century oppressed Jew would be overjoyed at the thought of a military Messiah violently overthrowing the Romans to liberate them. But Jesus makes it crystal clear that that's not how this is going to work, because the truth is that He came to bring freedom, hope and love to EVERYONE – even the heathen, misguided Romans! It's not a message of violent retribution but loving redemption!

And guess what? Jesus' wide bandwidth of love and inclusion is just as scandalous today as it was then! And sometimes it's as equally difficult for us to accept that God wants to include our enemies in His family when we'd prefer them to "get what's coming to them!"

Jesus then goes on to say, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." What a declaration! That as God in the flesh He is making this radical inclusivity a reality by bringing good news to the poor, releasing prisoners and setting oppressed people free.

So what does that mean for us? That we are called to be his hands and feet in this world, incarnating the inclusive love of his kingdom for those we'd least expect to love – an incredible challenge and an even more incredible invitation.

Question: *What about this passage do you find most exciting? What do you find most challenging? Who would you least expect to be included by God today? How could you incarnate God's love to that person?*

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for Jesus, who reveals that Your agenda will always be the incarnation of Heaven on earth. Thank You for the miracle of healing and filling ordinary people like us to participate with You to express Your love in the world. May You find us willing to be shaped by Your incarnational purposes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, December 24

Scripture: [Revelation 22:6-20](#)

Reflection: *Is Today the Day?* | Mike Krause

“Is *today* the day that daddy is coming?”

“No, honey. Not today.”

“Then how many more sleeps?”

Each time I called home from New York City my wife offered the same report. Her life was an endless loop of this conversation with our five-year-old daughter, who was eagerly awaiting my return. To her, my absence was palpable. Everything was a reminder that I was missing. Her world would be uneasy until daddy was home. Her life was charged with anticipation. Every day could be the day.

That same expectation supercharges the final section of Revelation, which is both the conclusion to the book and the grand finale of the entire Bible. This section opens and closes with the same promise on the lips of Jesus: “I am coming soon” (22:7, 20)! With these words, Jesus peels back the curtain of reality. He grants us a preview of the final scene. Someday soon, this present moment, in all its brokenness, violence, and uncertainty, will disappear, chased away by Jesus’ coming, who will bring with Him a whole new creation! Every day could be the day.

Our world is missing its Saviour. If we look, we can see evidence everywhere that He is missing. Yet, unlike my daughter, we’ve become comfortable with Christ’s absence. We’ve learned to expect it, to accept it, to accommodate it. We’ve stopped noticing that Jesus is missing and stopped anticipating His return. What would it look like to live like every day could be the day?

Let’s anticipate Jesus’ coming with all the fervency with which we anticipate Christmas. Let’s long for the new creation He is bringing, a world full of hope, joy, and peace. Let’s pray with John, “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

Question: *Why is it so easy to not notice that Jesus is missing? Where has Jesus felt most absent from your life? How could you long for, look for, and invite more of His presence in the coming days? What does it look like to live in the anticipation of His return?*

Prayer:

Jesus, our world needs more of your presence, but too often we’re content even when it’s missing. Would you give us a longing for your arrival, like a child waiting for their parent to return. Thank you that we get to celebrate your coming to earth at Christmas and may we not forget to anticipate your coming again. It is the greatest hope of all. Would you saturate our gatherings, traditions and celebrations with your presence. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Note: This article was first published in the MB Seminary advent devotional, “As We Wait.”

Wednesday, December 25

Scripture: [Luke 2:1-20](#)

Reflection: *Merry Christmas | Jeff Martens*

On this Christmas morning, simply take some moments to read the passage from Luke 2, either individually or with family and friends with whom you gather. Do your best to return to the mystery and magic of that first Christmas, where a long awaited Saviour and Messiah – the one who would bring hope to life for all the world – was born in a stable.

Merry Christmas!

Prayer:

Jesus, we thank you for Christmas. We thank you for coming. We celebrate your birth and invite you to be reborn in us today. Bring fresh hope to the world in and through our everyday deeds of love for you and love for our neighbours. Thank you that, in you, hope lives.

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God...
for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.

Psalm 25:1,5