

A young girl with long brown hair is looking down at a gift wrapped in gold and green paper. She is standing in front of a Christmas tree decorated with lights and ornaments. The background is dark, with a warm, glowing light source, possibly a fireplace, creating a cozy atmosphere. The text 'UNEXPECTED GIFTS' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

UNEXPECTED
GIFTS

**Advent & Christmas
2019**

As we journey through Advent toward the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Publishing Team is proud to present this devotional to you by you.

The insights and stories you, our Church Family, have written is again wonderful and thought provoking. We are proud and honored to be a part of a congregation that continues to grow in spiritual maturity and are willing to share your wisdom out of your own life experiences.

We are privileged to have the opportunity to compile this collection of Advent devotions and hope you are as moved, impressed, pleased as we are with your offerings.

The Publishing committee thanks you for sharing your faith and wisdom with the rest of us.

Rejoice! Christ Jesus is coming!

The Publishing Committee,

Sharon Beck

Linda Dean

Joyce Seal

Carol Noe

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD

December 1, 2019

Read Isaiah 2: 1-5

"He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." Isaiah 2:4 (NIV)

I love this passage from Isaiah.

I am anxious to get there. Can you imagine no more war! If you go to Washington D.C. to see the Vietnam Wall, you will see over 58,000 names there. Man, am I ready to get on with "beating the swords," but it isn't going to be that easy. For example: April Bloomfield interviewed for the chef's position at the Spotted Pig and the owners never asked her to cook for them. The co-owner hired Bloomfield the minute he saw her scarred arms. Those scars represent a person so focused on the food and so committed to excellence that she was willing to suffer for her work.

Likewise, if you look at the arms and legs of mountain climbers you will find cuts and scrapes of all kinds. Are you so committed to any cause that it has caused you to suffer? Can you and I truly say that our commitment to Christ has caused us any serious inconvenience?

People in every generation have suffered for their allegiance to God. Even today, there are people who live in constant fear because they seek to follow Jesus. They face real threats and challenges by identifying themselves as followers of Christ. You and I live such easy lives when compared to many people who are trying to climb the "mountain of the Lord."

Advent offers us a unique opportunity to ask ourselves how far we would be willing to go, how much we would be willing to give, and what kind of sacrifice we would be willing to offer in our devotion to Christ. It is a call to offer our lives as a living sacrifice.

David Thompson

Thought of the Day: The Advent season is a perfect time to reflect on our lives and ask ourselves what we are prepared to give for the things we believe.

Prayer: Dear God, help us in every area of our lives to reflect our faith in you. Amen.

UNITY WITH OTHER BELIEVERS

December 2, 2019

Read Psalms 122

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.' For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, 'Peace be within you.'" Psalms 122: 6-8 (NIV)

Have you ever stepped out of your comfort zone with respect to your Christian traditions? Have you belonged to one denomination your entire life? Was it 'because that is what I was born into?' Has anyone ever questioned you as to why you worship as you do?

I have belonged to several Christian churches but have always felt I was serving where God wanted me at that point in my life. In every congregation, I worshiped with the body of Christ that loved the Lord. For millennium, wars have been caused by differences in how people practiced their faith traditions.

Former Arkansas governor and Baptist minister, Mike Huckabee, has a mantra, "Come, let us reason together" which paints a picture of great unity, even among differences. I believe this truly reflects a loving relationship among God's chosen people. Those who worship together, pray together and seek each other's welfare will be righteous among God. My faith is built on a relationship with God through His son Jesus the Christ. As Christ's disciple, I stand with all believers in the way, the truth and the life. I encourage you to be one with our Christian brothers and sisters, to be the hands, feet and voice with all believers bringing the good news to the world.

Mike Howell

Thought of the day: May we come together in unity for the good of His Kingdom.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you placed us here for your purpose but gave us freewill. I pray that despite the many different Christian traditions, we can come together at this Advent season as a unified body of Christ to witness to all the world. In Christ's name I pray, Amen.

WAKE UP!

December 3, 2019

Read Romans 13:11-14

“. . . Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Romans 13:11 (NLT)

You know you need to. The doctors say, “it’s a must.” In order to have that goal of longevity, you have GOT to do what they say. But, it’s hard. Every day is a struggle and there are so many hurdles to get past. Okay, I’ll start tomorrow. Sound familiar? We all do it; it’s called procrastination.

For the sake of health and family, I know what needs to be done, I strongly suggest you do what the doctor recommends. But most of the time, I’m not so good at following my own suggestions. I’ll admit, I’ve said, “Do as I say, not as I do.” more than a few times in my Christian walk. I know the things that need to happen, but it doesn’t mesh with my schedule or it doesn’t seem like much fun. I’ll get to it, eventually. Procrastination again.

God is waiting for us to wake up and put away our foolish/negative/evil ways. He knows what the deadline is...He knows when the day of Salvation will come. We all need to “WAKE UP!” and begin acting/working/walking in the ways God has taught us. We need to proclaim and act in His goodness. As Christians, we strongly believe in the salvation that is ours. However, we can’t assume we can begin to change our behaviors and attitudes tomorrow because today may be the day-the tomorrow that never comes.

Diana Reynolds

Thought for the day: Today is the day to make my Christian walk my priority.

Prayer: Dear God, please help us wake up and understand the urgency to live our lives more in Your image. Help us put on the shining armor of right living so we will be ready for You when You are ready to bring us home. Amen.

KEEP AWAKE! BE READY!

December 4, 2019

Read Matthew 24:36-44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Matthew 24:36 (NRSV)

This scripture is a warning to us to be ready for Jesus, the Son of Man, who is coming again for the second time.

What does it mean to be ready? I think it means serving Jesus daily, asking Him to come into our hearts and to let us be a Sanctuary for Him.

It can also mean doing your daily work; like your job, housework, or student work. Whatever you are doing, do it for Jesus! Be ready to help someone, a family member, friend, or neighbor.

Be ready to serve in the church. Don't wait to be asked to volunteer your services. Just ask God to inform you of the ways you can serve Him where you are. You will be amazed at your opportunities.

Be ready to pray at a moment's notice. God is willing to answer if we but ask in His Name and ask for His Will to be done.

Always be ready to give God thanks and praise, for He has done great things for us.

As I realize that the source of all that I have comes from God, I give thanks to Him, Jesus and the Holy Spirit for all my blessings daily.

Monette Walker

Thought of the Day: Am I ready?

Prayer: Dear God, help us to deepen our commitment to You, as we serve and praise You. You are always ready to hear our prayers. Help us to always be ready for Your coming into our hearts anew. Amen.

I AM WITH YOU

December 5, 2019

Read Isaiah 43:1-13

"When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you." Isaiah 43:2 (NLT)

I was a working 37-year-old teacher with two children. My husband was a busy elementary school principal. Our Methodist Church and Emmaus activities kept us busy.

One day I felt a strange buzz-shock move up my right arm. It moved to my shoulder and then across half of my face. It was very strange and because it moved across half of my face, I went straight to my doctor. After a spinal tap and many other tests, the diagnosis was Multiple Sclerosis (MS). That diagnosis was 30 years ago. I have had many MRIs showing many lesions even on my brain stem.

The scripture spoke of going through deep waters and how He will be with me. I had to endure many tightly enclosed MRIs often. There is no other way to see the brain. The scripture says, "When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown."

I have panic attacks some time. This is also a part of MS. Having been stuck inside elevators twice also adds to the panic! So tight, dark, places are not fun for me.

As I am rolled inside the MRI machine, I imagine the area around me being Jesus' arms holding me. As I listen to clink, clank, zzzz of the machine, I imagine my granddaughter dancing and Jesus saying, "Do not fear, for I am with you. You will get through this test. You will not panic." This scripture says, "When you walk through the fire you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze" (with panic). When time is up and I am finally rolled out, I always thank the Lord! "For I am the Lord your God, the Holy one of Israel" (my Savior). Isaiah 43:3.

Karen Thompson

Thought for the day: When things are tough and you are afraid, the Lord tells us, "Do not fear, for I am with you."

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, thank you for always being with me and protecting me. In Jesus' Holy Name, I pray. Amen.

MY MIND AND MY BODY

December 6, 2019

Read Hebrews 10:11-25

"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near." Hebrews 10: 24-25 (NKJV)

This scripture passage was comforting for me to read. My Lord's promise was to place His laws into my heart and mind and never remember my sins again. Additionally, He encourages me to gather with and reassure others in His name.

I grew up in a family who attended our local Methodist church every Sunday. When I started college, I attended student ministry services at first; however, I dropped out for many human excuses. Eventually, I got married and we tried to attend church after our first son was born; but again, we dropped out after a while for no other reason than our human excuses.

In 1995, my husband and I both felt a calling to expose our young children to a Christian community. We were 1,000 miles away from our nearest family members and our three children, under six years old, were mostly exposed to adults in green military uniforms. One Sunday, we walked into Mary Esther United Methodist Church and have never looked back. We realized there were many like us trying to figure this life out and follow God's Way and promises at the same time. I have learned I need other Christians to remind me of God's Way and laws which have always been in my heart and written in my mind. He will never remember my sins again. What blessings I have been given!

Teresa Schutter

Thought of the Day: His law is in my heart and written in my mind.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please continue to place friendly reminders and experiences to keep Your comforting laws in our hearts and minds. Please help us to keep living by faith and to keep you in our presence fully trusting You always. Amen.

CHRISTMAS IS COMING

December 7, 2019

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20

"The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." Zephaniah 3:17 (NRSV)

Israel has been through a disastrous time; however, a time of celebration is coming!

It was on December 6, 2006. I was weary and searching for something. I needed reassurance. I searched through some of my reading materials. It was a very small booklet. I didn't even know where it came from or how long it had been in my home. The title, My Heart—Christ's Home, by Robert Boyd Munger. Oh my, what a powerful testament to what Christ can do in your heart if you only give Him the deed to your heart. There was much I needed to do in Christ's home (my heart) so that He could reign there.

Also, there was much to be done in my home to get ready for Christmas—decorating, shopping, baking, sending greeting cards—it can be overwhelming at times! Thus, after spending time reading the powerful message of My Heart—Christ's Home, I got in my car and set out to continue shopping and doing other things in preparation for Christmas. I had a secular Christmas compact disc in my car stereo. The first words of the song to enter my consciousness were "all I want for Christmas is to know that you love me." The tears poured down my face, Jesus was singing with joy, "all I want for Christmas is to know that you love me."

Joyce Seal

Thought of the Day: What does Jesus want from me?

Prayer: Father God, please help me to always remember that all You want for Christmas and always is to know that I love You. Amen.

SEARCHING FOR PEACE?

December 8, 2019

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power.” Isaiah 11: 2 (NIV)

I grew up walking to church on Sunday with my sister. The church was a non-denominational church around the corner from where we lived. Looking back, it seemed like a usual routine. You did not argue whether you were going or not. It was safe, and our parents were glad we were going. I remember learning The Lord’s Prayer and singing songs like “This Little Light of Mine” and “Onward Christian Soldiers.” I prayed for things for our family, but not necessarily what God wanted for us. I could not understand that.

I am grateful for the experiences that I had with church, sometimes going to other denominations to see what was different. But in the past few years I have found a different vision of God through the church. When I enter church, I feel the presence of God, and there seems to be a calming effect, a peace, and a mental focus of wanting to know God more.

I grew up watching Howdy Doody, Lone Ranger, and Hopalong Cassidy. Now I want to focus more on David, Luke and John, and try to understand the words of Jesus that can influence and guide my future.

I want peace and calm that is found only on His holy mountain. Do you?

Bob Kaye

Thought of the Day: I find eternal peace and guidance by reading the Bible.

Prayer: Dear God, help us find peace and understanding in your Word. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

He Alone

December 9, 2019

Read Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19

"Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen. Psalm" 72:18-19 (NIV)

Wow! It boggles my mind how great the Lord is.

How great it is to pause and reflect on our wonderful gifts from God, such as the energy and strength to be of service.

Do you recognize God's miraculous gifts to you? What gifts has He showered you with today? God's gifts of love, compassion, grace, mercy, forgiveness, family, friends, church family, food, shelter, and health are all reasons to offer Him praise and thanksgiving.

We recognize it is God the Father alone who is the marvelous one. He alone is responsible for all good and we are to praise His Holy and glorious name.

Kevin Rogers

Thought of the Day: Am I ready for Jesus' return?

Prayer: Dear Lord, just as we look forward to celebrating your birth, may we anticipate with joy your return. Amen.

HOPE OVERFLOWING

December 10, 2019

Read Romans 15: 4-13

“And in another place Isaiah said, ‘The heir to David’s throne will come, and he will rule over the Gentiles. They will place their hope on him.’ I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:12-13 (NLT)

Our reading today tells us to accept each other just as Christ has accepted us and He will be glorified. Our faith and the Holy Spirit will give us strength to do this. It does not tell us that this is an easy thing to do.

Do I glorify God in my dealings with other people each day? I want to do this, but at times, reviewing my daily interactions, I have found that His light was not reflected in each of my dealings. When I fail to do this, I ask for His forgiveness and ask the person that I have wronged for their forgiveness as well.

I pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and remain in my heart and my head so that His peace will surround me. It makes me very sad when I do not glorify God, but Christ’s coming brings me hope.

Sue Haley

Thought of the day: Be mindful of the way I interact with others.

Prayer: Dear Father, I pray for the strength to glorify you in all I do. Amen.

HAVE YOU HEARD?

December 11, 2019

Read Matt 3:1-12

"... A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for him.'" Matthew 3:36 (NIV)

We were attending a new church after our family moved to Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington. We heard a deep baritone voice singing and it hushed the entire congregation. The clear, strong voice sang out "PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD. PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD!" These were the words of the prophet Isaiah which John the Baptist preached to the people in the wilderness of Judea. We know these things of John the Baptist: He was Jesus Christ's cousin. (Luke 1:36) He was a prophet and forerunner of Jesus Christ. (Matt 3:11) He baptized believers in the Jordan River. (Matt 3:6) Jesus said of John "... there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet, whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matt 11:11)

Jesus' proclamation may seem difficult to understand. John was very wise and could see through the Pharisees and the Sadducees for he knew their hearts weren't right. After John baptized Jesus, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:17) John died before seeing the fullness of God's plan in Christ which was His crucifixion and resurrection. Even we, who are least in the kingdom, but know of these events and understand their meaning can enter heaven and spend eternity with our Father.

Rollan Moriak

Thought of the Day: The coming of Jesus brought hope into the world.

Prayer: Dear God, help me to know and understand the sacrifice you made for me. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

WHO AM I?

December 12, 2019

Read Isaiah 62:1-12

"You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God." Isaiah 62: 3 (NIV)

This chapter is a prophecy not only for Zion, but for ALL God's people. As Jerusalem is transformed by God, we, as His people, will also be transformed.

One day we will know the presence and love of God as spouses should know the presence and love of each other. God's "watchmen" on the walls are prayer warriors who pray constantly until all God's people are restored. This paves the way for all people to accept the Lord's salvation.

On the day the Lord comes, each person will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

When we were saved, we took on the name of Christ. Our name was changed to "Christian." Each of us has a new name that only God knows. In heaven when our transformation is complete, we, like Zion, will receive a new name from God and that name will describe who we really are.

I remember a time when I found out that I had a new name that I was not aware existed. All my life I had been called Peggy. Then on my first day in first grade when the teacher called the roll, she kept asking for someone named Margaret. Finally, the only name left on her list was Margaret, and I happened to be the only one who had not responded to a name. She figured out that I was Margaret, but all I knew was that I was Peggy, not Margaret.

This chapter of Isaiah tells me that God will give me a new name in heaven. I will hear His voice when God calls me by my new name, and I will know who I really am.

Peggy Lynes

Thought of the Day: My reward is in Jesus.

Prayer: Dear God, until I get my new name in heaven, I will rejoice in Your name. Amen.

ARE YOU READY?

December 13, 2019

Read Luke 12:35-48

"You also must be ready, because The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect." Luke 12:40 (NIV)

My third grand child was born in July. The birth went great and he was a trooper! But my daughter struggled as she had with the previous two children. She got an infection after her C-section. We were not happy when we learned she would need another surgery to get rid of the infection. My daughter, myself and my son-in-law were very upset! So many people were praying for my daughter during this time and we could feel God's grace and power working! Shortly, after she found out about the second surgery, my daughter looked at me and my son-in-law and said, "Tomorrow is the first day of my healing." I saw a strength and assurance that only God could have given her.

During that time, I was very close to God and had constant conversations with Him. Due to that continual prayer in July, I was ready for the Lord's return. Am I ready now? I want to be ready every day doing what he wants me to do! Are you ready?

Karen Minks

Thought of the Day: Let me be ready for God's return at any time.

Prayer: Dear God, please make me ready for your return. Amen.

LISTEN TO ME

December 14, 2019

Read: Isaiah 51:1-8

"Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness and who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug." Isaiah 51:1 (NKJV)

"Listen to me!" What a familiar saying in our family. Two teachers and three teenagers- you can only imagine that we have uttered those words before. But do they listen? Do my students hear me? Do my children listen and heed what I am saying? Yes, they do. Maybe not to every word I say, but some of them. But when they do listen, it is pure joy to hear my words repeated in the classroom or from my children.

Why then do I not listen to God? Why does HE have to repeat himself over and over? HE knows that I struggle when I only "Hear." HE follows with "Look." Look to the rock from which you were hewn...Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you. HE provides examples of how to look to HIS past faithfulness in order to trust HIM today and tomorrow.

Frustration, discouragement, and stress will be with us throughout our days on Earth. Whether it is not being listened to, not feeling a sense of belonging, or not feeling worthy. Our precious Lord and Savior does not want us to stay in these dark places. HE is Light, Love, and Encouragement for us all. How joyful God must feel when HE hears us repeating HIS words to one another.

Laura Steele

Thought for the Day: Don't forget to listen and look for God every day!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we come to you understanding that we have not listened to you. We thank you that you don't give up on us. You know that we need constant reminders of your word, your faithfulness, and your blessings. We thank you that in the dark times, we can not only LISTEN to your word, but we can LOOK to your amazing deeds for proof of your unending love for us. Amen.

IMAGINE

December 15, 2019

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

“Say to those with fearful hearts, be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you.” Isaiah 35:4 (NLT)

Faith believes, and then sees. It is the expectation of a miracle before it occurs. The essence of the good news is that God is coming to save his people. “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”

Good Morning God! Oh, what a beautiful day! I’m sitting here quietly holding my newborn great granddaughter in my arms thinking “Oh what a miracle a new-born is, Lord.”

I can only imagine what Mary must have felt holding newborn Jesus in her young arms. I can only imagine the fear she must have felt as they fled for His safety. I can only imagine the love and joy she must have felt watching Jesus grow and become a man.

Did she know this child would someday be our savior? Did she know or understand that her son was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Did Mary know the heartaches that were to come? The pain she would endure as she watched her son die on that old rugged cross. I can’t imagine the pain this must have caused her. But she witnesses a miracle at her son’s resurrection.

Marie Kleine

Thought of the day: Expect a miracle.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for sending your only son to come as a baby and grow and teach us the way. “Blessed be Your Name.” Thank you, Lord, for holding us in the palm of your hand. Amen.

MARY'S SONG

December 16, 2019

Read Luke 1:45-55

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!" Luke 1:46 (CEB)

Mary, like the majority of young Jewish girls, was around 13 years old when she was betrothed to Joseph. By the time she would turn 14, she would be married. And yet, this young girl, a child by our standards, had such an incredible faith and trust in God. Her faith enabled her to explain her situation to her parents and trust that Joseph would not have her stoned for being pregnant before marriage. Yet, Joseph loved her enough to marry her! I'm sure it helped to have an angel do the convincing! Even with Mary's amazing faith in God, I'm sure she heard the whispers, felt the silent stares of those who walked past her or perhaps ignored her completely, and quite possibly trembled at the loud insults shouted at her for all to hear. Think for a moment of the power of Mary's words and her faith in God's strength and power in this section of scripture:

glorify/exalt the Lord [with all my heart], (I) rejoiced in my Savior [in the depths of me], I have found favor [in spite of being pregnant and unwed], Mighty One [look what God has done for me], shows mercy [even with the real probability of her being stoned because she was pregnant], has done great things for me [not being stoned/Joseph's re-commitment to her] and God's strength and power [past, present and future].

And yet, this young girl considered herself blessed and loved by a God who had proven Himself to be faithful generation after generation. She trusted God's plan for her future. We, too, are called to remember God's faithfulness and trust His plans for us. If we let Him have His way, His plan will be more wondrous than we could ever imagine!

Monique Cocanougher

Thought of the Day: Trust God's plan for me.

Prayer: Father God, thank you for calling me to trust You. Help me during my difficult moments to lift my heart with joy at the blessings You give me every day. In Your Son's precious name, Amen.

PATIENCE REWARDED

December 17, 2019

Read James 5:7-10

"Yes, be patient and take courage for the coming of the Lord is near." James 5: 8:46 (NIV)

James speaks of patience several times in only four verses. He uses the example of a farmer who waits for his harvest to ripen. Having been raised on a farm, I know how much patience that entails. When a crop is planted so many factors occur before a bountiful harvest can be reaped. Ultimately it is patience and faith that, having done what was required in the growing process, a bountiful harvest will be the result.

So it is with our Lord. During this Advent season as we patiently await His coming let us do so with great excitement, faith and wondrous awe. He is coming to bring renewed hope and joy to all the world.

SEE! He is coming! The baby in the manger-Our Hope, our Savior!

Linda Dean

Thought of the Day: Be patient. Be Brave. Hope in the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Father, all praise, honor and glory to you. Thank you so much for your Son, our Savior, our Redeemer and our Hope for the world. Amen.

MY MIRACLE

December 18, 2019

Read Matthew 11:2-11

"Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.'" Matthew 11: 4-6 (NRSV)

John the Baptist sends his disciples to go and ask Jesus if he is the Messiah. Jesus told the disciples about his many miracles as proof that he is the Messiah.

Let's think about the miracles we have experienced in our own life. These miracles need to be shared with others, as well as your reaction to this evidence. How do you use God's miracles to strengthen your faith?

Allow me to share one of my miracles. Our youngest son Chris was in a serious motorcycle wreck while traveling cross country for a job interview in Oregon. He nearly lost his leg. After eight surgeries, weeks in the hospital, and a year in a nursing home, he came home to live with us. Rehab was very slow. After 3 years, he was invited to visit a friend in Arizona and was challenged to climb a small mountain. He said, "I can do this." And he did!

When he came home, he announced that he would be leaving in two weeks to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. Six weeks into his adventure, he sent us his leg brace!

As I pen this devotional, he has walked 1800 miles plus and will be home in about four weeks. 2200 miles!! This is my miracle to share!

Penny Pike

Thought of the Day: What miracles do you have to share?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your many miracles in our lives. Help us to remember to share them with others so you may be glorified. Amen.

JESUS IS COMING

December 19, 2019

Read John 1:14-18

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14 (NIV)

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” is the crux of this devotional. God made of himself flesh as he lived among us mere mortals. He was majesty, truth, grace and pure as the driven snow while fully human at the same time. He came from the Father because he was the Father. John testifies regarding Jesus and cries out, “he comes after me but yet he is before me.” From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Would we recognize the fullness, the grace, the majesty, and the truth today if Jesus were made flesh again to dwell among us mere mortals? Would we treat Him with the splendor and royalty He is, or would we treat Him like he was treated before? Would we believe He is who He says he is? Would we welcome Him into our church and our homes? Would we welcome Him into our hearts? Would He be rejected by the world once more?

The good news is, we don't have to wonder. You see, God blessed us more than we can fathom. Jesus will return but not like before. Are you ready? Have you taken Christ Jesus as your Lord and Savior? That next time is the last time!

Kevin Rogers

Thought of the Day: Am I ready for Jesus' return?

Prayer: Dear Lord, just as we look forward to celebrating your birth, may we anticipate with joy your return. Amen.

JESUS, THE WAY HOME

December 20, 2019

Read Ezekiel 34:11-16

"I will bring them (my sheep) out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land." Ezekiel 34:13 (NRSV)

At the birth of Christ, God brought together the three wise men and the shepherds from the fields, to witness the child Jesus, to see the miracle of His birth. He took care of these people, leading them safely to the stable in Bethlehem. He took care of them, and led them until they could witness the baby Jesus. This reminds me of the prodigal son whom God returned safely home where he could make amends with his Father.

I also have hurt my family in the past. I continue to try to make amends. Some have forgiven me--others have not. God has helped me to see what I have done and how I hurt them. I know that God has forgiven me. He continues to support me, love me, provide for me, and guide me on my way. He has never forsaken me. God takes care of me and heals my pain.

Jeanne Gatlin

Thought of the Day: If you have done wrong, let God lead you down the path that will no longer hurt others, or yourself. He will always take care of you.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the gift of Your son Jesus. Please help me to continue along a good path, along YOUR path, and practice forgiveness every day, as we witness to the beauty of this special time of year. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

GOD'S GIFT

December 21, 2019

Read Acts 11:1-10

"The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God." Acts 11:1 (NIV)

As a child, my favorite day of the year was Christmas. My sister and I would sneak down the stairs to see the presents under the tree, usually around five o'clock in the morning. We were so excited. Little did we know, until we were much older, that our parents had just gotten to bed around three-thirty. We would wake them up with such enthusiasm and drag them downstairs to begin the opening of presents. With carefully choreographed shredding of wrapping paper, we would go around, one by one, each opening one gift at a time. What a day of anticipation and excitement!

Another exciting day was when I went for my driver's license exam. I was nervous, but everything went right, and I was joyful in my new-found freedom.

Imagine the thoughts of the disciples listening to Jesus tell of the things to come and the power that came over them with the Spirit descending on them. Were they happy, apprehensive, or worried about what they would receive? Don't we have some of the same feelings when wondering if God is with us? Especially the excitement felt after accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior? The gift of the Holy Spirit is crucial to every Christian's life. Jesus' mission and ministry continues through His followers.

Bob Kaye

Thought of the Day: In what way do I feel called to be Christ's witness?

Prayer: Dear Living God, please give us the courage and confidence to become a worthy witness to others from our heart, mind, and soul. In Jesus' name, Amen.

IMMANUEL

December 22, 2019

Read Isaiah 7: 10-16

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

As a child I was always supported by family and friends. They taught me all that I know. As I was growing up, they would show me how to do everything that I needed, till I reached the 'I can do it on my own' point. A child's desire to grow and do as adults do is one thing, but attaining our ultimate security and salvation is another matter. Whom will you trust? Are you in ultimate control? Can you save yourself? Those were the questions King Ahaz faced.

God promised his deliverance, but King Ahaz refused to believe, then God said through Isaiah, "Ask for a sign." Ahaz rebuffed the offer as he was lacking faith in God, but God gave a sign anyway: "The virgin will ... give birth to a son and call him Immanuel." King Ahaz sought a salvation of his own doing, refusing to trust God. Isaiah said there would be a young woman who would bravely name her son Immanuel (God with us). She trusted in God while the king trusted in his own efforts. "Immanuel" becomes a promise and a reality in hard times, at Christmas, and every other day as well.

What is the source of our hope and salvation? We can't save ourselves. God is bodily with us in Jesus. Therein our answer to our deepest needs and our salvation is Immanuel. A cry of faith come true.

Don Goodson

Thought of the day: God is with us today and every day!

Prayer: Lord, give me faith, that I may trust in your presence even in hard times. Holy Spirit, help me to rejoice that Immanuel has come. Amen.

MAKE YOUR FACE SHINE UPON US

December 23, 2019

Read Psalms 80:1-7; 17-19

"But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself." Psalms 80:17 (NRSV)

When we feel separated from God it is usually because "we" have given something or someone permission to get in between ourselves and our Creator. This separation or distance feels cold and empty; void of the warmth and the security we find in sweet communion and fellowship with our Heavenly Father. We might even ask God, "Where are You?" as if He, at some point left us. So often these times remind us of the beauty and benefits of being in His presence; free from worry, anxiety and stress. We remember His peace which surpasses all understanding. We may even begin to miss the joy of our salvation. Isn't it amazing how the same God who allows us to feel the consequences of our own actions and decisions also gives us the freedom to learn from our mistakes? Once we turn back to Him, He still loves us as if they never happened. Yes, sin has its pleasures for a season; however, in the presence of the Lord there is fullness of joy and hope forever.

James Robbins

Thought of the day: Rejoice in serving our God of second chances.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for second chances and the opportunity to self- correct from the inside out by your Spirit. Continue to increase my faith to live inside your will and not merely exist outside of it. Do not allow me to mistake the consequences of my own actions as your wrath against me but instead help me receive your love, which covers a multitude of sins and walk in forgiveness. Thank you for filling me with mercy so that I may pour out the same measure to others in the sweet fellowship and communion we share. Amen.

BIRTH OF A PROMISE

December 24, 2019

Read Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God." Isaiah 9:6 (NRSV)

In a world where darkness often seems to prevail over light, where criticism overrides compliments, where fussing seems easier than reasoning and divisions are more popular than points of agreement, we can often find ourselves living in the shadows of darkness even though we are the children of light. Even when it looked like all was lost, God never abandoned us. He was always there. At the fall of Adam, God had a plan of redemption to redeem mankind to His original intent and design. He worked through generations of men and women to keep His promise. When the birth of Jesus was near and a decree was made by Pharaoh to kill every firstborn male, God still proved his faithfulness and covenant to His people by allowing the "Birth of a Promise"; His name was and is Jesus! God pierced through our darkness with His love and light.

James Robbins

Thought of the day: Heaven and earth will pass away, but Your Word will stand forever more. Now that's a PROMISE only a God like You can keep!

Prayer: We thank you, God for continuing to give us your best when sometimes we are at our worst. Thank you for never forsaking us by always keeping to your Word. In the day of adversity and especially the days of our victories, help us focus on your Word and remember all your benefits. Amen.

HE PITCHED A TENT

Christmas Day, December 25

Read John 1:1-14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (NRSV)

He pitched a tent. The verb translated in the NRSV as “lived among us” is much better translated as “tabernacled among us.” What the Word did was pitch a tent. The Word didn’t build a temple of mortar and stone. No. The Trinity seems to have wanted something less fixed, more portable. Foxes will have their holes and birds their nests. But not God. God is not often one for settling down in a precise location where we may presume that we can have access to or even manage God.

It seems that whenever we think we have located the Christ, nailed him down as it were, he pulls up stakes and moves on, not to avoid us, but to *lead* us toward the next moment in which we can behold his glory. A bit later in the story, women will go to the tomb. They fully expect him to be there. I mean, what is more certain than a tomb? Than death? But it wasn’t a tomb after all; it was a womb, not unlike his first “tent” – Mary. He gave them the slip, born yet again. his glory settling down into wherever and whomever it wants to illumine.

I have beheld that glory, in faithful people, in those rejected and despised, in the immigrant and the aged, in babies and children, and in those beautiful people with developmental disabilities – in earthly tents that the Word chooses to shine through. So often, I find that glorious tent in the places I would never expect. Always in little towns like Bethlehem, almost never in fancy Jerusalems, in humble people like Mary, out in the wilderness, even among the weird ones like John the Baptist, almost never in kings or the powerful and mighty. Often in stables, less often in temples.

You’ll know that tent when you see it. It glows like no other. It shines like truth and invites like grace. You draw closer. The flap draws back. You are embraced. And you are given the coordinates for the tent’s next location. You recognize the location. Because you will be the tent. And He will be the glory. And the Word can become flesh yet again.

Sam Parkes

Thought of the day: Will I let Christ pitch a tent in my heart and dwell within me?

Prayer: O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel! Amen.

